

Hypatia and Chloe: California

Book 2 of the Remolding Saga

by The Other Jim Hargrove

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Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

—**The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam,**
No. 73, trans. Edward FitzGerald

***I. Hypatia:
California Dreaming***

1. Rude Awakening November 23, 1967 Boonville, CA, USA

When I found out where I was — and when — my first thought was, “*Rats! The Summer of Love is over.*” My second was, “Why am I here and now?”

Cold and hungry in Boonville, California, I had read a notice in the Post Office informing the public that it would be closed for Thanksgiving Day, 1967.

I smelled something delicious coming from a building with *Hotel* on the front and walked over to see what was happening. Despite the fact that I wasn’t dressed for the occasion, the manager greeted me with, “Here for dinner?”

“Actually, I wondered if you needed any help.”

His smile disappeared. “Sorry, no. We have all we need. If you’re looking for something, I suggest you try the shelter for Nam vets. End of town, on the right side.”

Nodding my thanks, I set off in the indicated direction. As it appeared dinner was problematical, I dipped into my backpack and retrieved two *Power Bars*, gobbling them down quickly before my taste buds could react to the insult. As the wrapper had a sell by date in 2035, prudence called for concealing them in a front pocket for later disposal. The backpack itself might attract enough attention, but there was nothing to be done about that.

The shelter smelled rank from holding too many people for too long. The harried woman who spotted me took one look and immediately asked, “Have you come to help?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued, “Can you get the room cleaned up so we can serve the meal in there?” She pointed toward the area in question.

Walking into a large expanse, I found several men — they were all men — lying around. “All right! If you want to eat Thanksgiving dinner, we need to get this room in shape. Everybody up!” Apparently what Amanda called my *command voice* was still working, as I got an immediate response. Assigning tasks, I set two men to moving the cots out of the way, another two sweeping, one just to picking up clothing from the floor. The place was a complete pigpen.

One vet still lay on his cot. I walked over to talk to him. Ignoring calls from the others to leave him alone, I shook him. “Time to get up fellah!”

Suddenly, I was off the floor with two hands wrapped around my throat. It happened too fast for any reaction. As the room began to disappear and darkness closed in, Red’s words from a time long ago, far in the future, echoed in my head. “This is a desperate situation. You have only seconds to react. The important thing to remember is that the weakest point to attack is the thumbs. First try an up sweep. If that doesn’t work, come down hard as you can, trying to break the grip.”

The upsweep worked. Falling to the floor, catching a breath, I had just a glimpse at my assailant, a young black man in late 20’s or early 30’s. His size surprised me. Expecting a giant, I confronted a slim muscular man, obviously either drunk or hungover, perhaps both. Taller than me — I stand just over 1.5 meters — and breathing heavily, he began to advance for a second try.

I kicked him as hard as I could right in the solar plexus. It was supposed to end the fight, but although he bent over in pain, he wasn’t finished. Backing away, assuming a protective

stance, I watched my opponent charge head on, like a bull trying to gore a matador. The counter was obvious: a simple pivot out of the way, with a roundhouse kick in the butt for good measure. It was more effective than planned as the young vet slammed into the wall and slumped to the floor.

That's how my future husband, Mick, saw me for the first time with another man's head cradled in my lap.

My former assailant, Chuck according to the other men, stared up at me with eyes trying to focus. "Don't try to get up," I cautioned. "You may have a concussion. Just lie here for a while."

"Are you an angel?" he asked.

"I don't think so. Why? Do you need one?"

"Yes," he replied, tears welling up in his eyes. "Can you help me?"

"Tell you what. If you meet me here tomorrow at," I looked up at the clock, which read 11:45, "at noon, and you are sober, I'll help you." Gazing into his soft brown eyes, I repeated, "Noon tomorrow. Sober. This is important. Can you do it?"

"Yes." No hesitation. A good sign.

"OK then. Now let's see if you can stand up. Be careful."

Blessed with youth, he stood, wavered a bit, then straightened up. "Good," I said. "Now help get this place ready for dinner." He wandered off in a daze, picked up a mop and bucket and began cleaning the floor. I guess when an angel appears, you do what you're told.

"That's an amazing performance."

I looked up to see a strikingly handsome man wearing a Deputy Sheriff uniform. He stood close to 2 meters, big, muscular, wearing a name tag with *O'Brien* on it. He didn't look like an O'Brien, clearly showing Hispanic ancestry with pale brown skin and dark black hair. I must have looked puzzled because he spoke again. I felt a shiver when I heard him speak in a beautiful baritone. I realized it had been quite a while since I had been with any man, much less one like this.

"Yes, I am really O'Brien," he said. "Most people call me Mick. I heard you knocked Chuck here into Never-Never Land. Mildred," he nodded at the manager, "says she'd never seen anything like it. One minute, Chuck was about to strangle you. The next he was unconscious. She called me in case there was more violence."

"The fact that Chuck is drunk and hung over has something to do with it."

"Understood. Mildred says you worked a miracle getting this place ready. She wants to thank you. Then I'd like a more extensive chat. Mind coming with me?"

As he was easily the best-looking man I'd seen in years, literally years, I was happy to comply. "Let me get my backpack."

"I'll handle that."

"No! Wait!" Too late.

"Ouch! Geez, what is that?"

“An anti-theft device. Let me disable it.” I placed my hand on the pack for five seconds. “Now.”

He gave me a strange look, hefted the bag, and indicated that I should follow him. We walked outside to his car. He held the door for me to enter. I half expected him to hold my head to make sure I didn't hit it, as I'd seen in many videos, but he motioned for me to sit up front.

“You got a name?”

“Hy... Pat Talbot. Most people call me Patty, Mick.”

“Patty Talbot. Never seen you about here before. Where you from?”

“Texas.”

“No kidding. What part?”

“Austin.”

“Humph. Hear its nice.”

“The weather is better here.”

“Been here long, in the general area, I mean?”

“Just arrived.”

“From?”

“The Summer of Love.” Sounded like a reasonable choice.

“What?”

“Big celebration with bunch of hippies in San Francisco.”

“Thought you looked like a hippie, but old for one.”

“You got that right.” He seemed to be waiting for me to say more. “I'm on the far side of 40.” In truth, I wasn't sure how old I was. My non-linear lifeline made the calculation difficult.

“Me too.”

“Where are we going?”

“Interested in Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. We're heading to the best meal in three counties.”

“I hope it isn't a long drive. I'm starving.” It was true. The two power bars were just a memory.

“Minutes,” he replied, turning off the main road up a narrow dirt track. A couple of kilometers later he pulled into an even narrower track that led thru some scrubby woods to a modest house with wonderful aromas drifting out. My stomach growled.

“Where are we?”

“At my mother's.”

“Isn't that rushing things a bit? We've hardly met.”

He let loose with a boisterous guffaw that started low and grew. A nice laugh.

“Well,” he observed finally, “you’re beautiful, mysterious, and about the right age. Mom will definitely approve.” Beautiful and mysterious set a good tone. I hoped for the best as I hopped out of the car. He grabbed my bag again, wrinkling his brow when he felt its weight again. “What you got in here?”

“I think I’ll rely on my rights under the fourth, fifth and fourteenth amendments and decline to answer.”

“Lawyer?”

“No. Is that important?”

He smiled. “Guess not. Let’s eat.”

Pushing back from the table, I said, “Señora O’Brien, that was fabulous. Easily the best *guajolote con mole* ever. Please tell me that you made it from scratch, not from a mix.”

She smiled a bit, and ignored my question to ask, “¿Hablas español?”

I smiled back. “No, *pero hablo some Spanglish.*”

She had the same laugh as her son, but it lasted longer than his. I liked it, and her too for that matter.

“Mick, I think she’s a keeper,” my mother-in-law to be observed.

Mick had the decency to blush.

“Señora, I think you may misunderstand. Mick and I just met, less than an hour before we got here. He promised me the best dinner in three counties, and I think he’s delivered. But...”

She laughed again. “We’ll see.”

Mick came to my rescue, “Can I take you somewhere, Patsy?” I started to correct the nickname, but let it go.

Misreading my hesitation, he backtracked, “Sorry, Patsy. Maybe I came on too strong.”

“No, no. It’s just that I haven’t made any arrangements.”

Now, Mama took charge. “Mick. You take her to that old herbalist, the one they call *Maid Marian*. She was looking for someone to rent her guest cottage. I call now.”

Shortly, she returned. “Mick go get the car. I need to speak to Patsy.”

Of course, I could have easily walked to the car. I was curious and a bit anxious, but she gave me a 50-watt smile.

“I know that you just met, but I know my son. I saw the way he looks at you. It’s the real thing. You’re the one he’s been waiting for. You’re special. After this short visit, I know that I like you. I hope something develops, but I understand. *Vaya con Dios.*”

Mick drove carefully in the dusky light. “Your mother,” I began.

“Yeah.”

“She’s a bit intense. At least she was back there.”

“She give you the old *you’re the one* talk?”

“Pretty much.” I chuckled. “I guess I’m not the first.”

“No. She thinks any woman I’m interested in is *the one*.”

“Are you?”

“What?”

“Interested.”

“We just met.”

“Right, but if — how shall I say it — if you are interested in getting interested, I think we can arrange something.”

“We just met.” His smile was all the encouragement I needed.

“Sure. But you did call me beautiful and mysterious. And your mother used the familiar verb form.”

“Noticed that, did you?”

“I know a little Spanish.”

“If you think Mama is intense, wait till you meet Maid Marian.”

2. Marianism

November 23, 1967
Boonville, CA, USA

The woman they called Maid Marian was almost as short as I am, but considerably older. At least 60 something, her hair was, like mine, pulled into a braided ponytail, most of it gray, with a few sprinkles of brown. Obviously in great shape, she greeted me with the intensity I had been warned about. It seemed as if she was examining me in minute detail, looking for a hidden flaw. I tried a nice smile.

“Well, I’ve been wondering when I was going to meet Wonder Woman. Lots of stories going round about you. Say you nailed Charlie a good one. He says you’re an angel that’s going to help him. That true?”

“Well, I doubt the existence of angels, so...”

She looked me over again, with renewed interest. After what seemed like forever, she extended a hand, which I shook eagerly.

“I’m happy to meet you,” I said after a bit. “I understand you have a cottage for rent.”

“Ain’t for rent exactly.”

“Oh?”

“Nope. You gotta agree to help me with the business. Then you can stay in the cottage.” She peered at me some more.

“Well, as I have no place to go right now, I’m inclined to learn more. What is the business exactly?”

“Mick didn’t tell you?”

“There was a reference to *herbalist*.”

The little pixie before me giggled. Then she looked at Mick and winked. “Yes,” she admitted, “I am a herbalist. Would you like to try one of my teas?” She moved aside to let me step past her into her house. Mick started to follow, but Marian stopped him. “We need to talk business,” she said to him. “Without you.”

I was chagrined to see such callous disregard for manners, but Mick grinned. I started to suspect what was going on as Mick shrugged and turned to go.

“Wait,” I called after him. “I need to get back to the shelter tomorrow by noon to see if Chuck is sober. We have a deal, he and I. Can I get a ride tomorrow?”

“No need,” Marian interposed. “You can use the truck. I need to pick up some supplies anyway.”

I tried to figure out what to say, but both guessed my predicament. “You don’t know how to drive, do you?” Both spoke at once.

“Never needed to before now.”

“Well, you’re in luck. Mick here is not only a Deputy Sheriff, but he’s also a certified driving instructor. Right Mick?”

“Yeah,” Mick agreed, “but not sure I should —”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She looks bright enough to learn. She’ll need a booster seat, but I got lotsa them lying around. Or there’s always the bicycle...”

Mick considered his options. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning. Elevenish?”

“OK.”

“We’ll decide about teaching you to drive later.”

I was half hoping for a good night kiss, but he simply turned away, got into the car, and drove off.

My hostess had been watching. “Don’t worry, love. I saw the way he looked at you. He’ll definitely kiss you before long.”

“Was it that obvious?” I laughed. “We just met. Maybe he’s trying to show me that he’s a true gentleman.”

“Yeah. I heard all about it. Ramona told me when she called. She’s convinced you’re *the one*.”

“I got that. Mick suggested that I wasn’t the first to be selected.”

Marian laughed in turn. “That’s for sure. The boy is getting past prime marrying age. Now let’s go inside.”

We sat at a small table in the kitchen, where we sipped chamomile tea. “One of my best sellers,” MM told me. Flavored with honey from hives on her property, it was delicious, and relaxing. I wondered just how late it was as I was growing tired. My solar-powered watch was carefully buried in the knapsack until I found out whether such items were available in 1967. I was beginning to realize that how I arrived at Boonville might be difficult to keep secret.

“You look tired. Want to get to bed early?”

“I can hang on for a bit longer. I’m a bit curious how you make a living selling herbal tea. Surely there is something more.”

“You are perceptive. Ready for the full tour?”

“Sure.”

We left the main house and moved into a large greenhouse a short distance away. The first room smelled delightful, a mixture of several herbs. I was amazed by the variety. Marian explained, “Besides the teas — there are many varieties — I supply several restaurants in the area with some flavorings, such as basil, oregano, thyme, tarragon, etc.”

“Interesting,” I replied with what I hoped showed interest in what else she had to sell. I was beginning to get an inkling of why Mick was not invited to stick around.

“Want to see the rest?”

“You bet.”

We proceeded through a locked door into a much larger room with an aroma I recognized instantly.

“Ah,” I said. “This explains a lot. I understand now why you didn’t want Mick around.”

“We call it plausible deniability. Of course, he knows what is growing here. Everyone in the Valley knows what I sell. They are my main customers.”

“How many plants do you have?”

“99. Unofficially, less than 100 is considered acceptable in Mendo.”

I looked puzzled.

“Mendocino County,” she explained. “This is our best cash crop. We think it is the best marijuana anywhere.”

“I’d be surprised. I’ve had some pretty good stuff in my time.” That was many years in the future, though. I didn’t mention that.

Marian looked at me intently. “Really. Want to compare?”

“Yes, but I don’t have any money with me.”

“I think we can come up with a free sample.”

I looked over the plants, which appeared to be at several different stages of growth. She noticed. “I’ve got special lights, timers, and such that lets me grow year-round. That’s why some plants are just getting started while others are ready to harvest. Do you know how to harvest them?”

“I’ve had some experience.”

“Good. It’s a lot of work for just me. Some of my big-time buyers are due in a couple of weeks and I want to be ready for them. This will cover the rent on the cottage. I’ll also provide meals for the two of us.”

“I hope you’re a better cook than I am.”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough. Now, let me show you the cottage, and I’ll prepare a little something to help you sleep. Know the difference between *Sativa* and *Indica*?”

“Not really.”

“Well. You’ll learn. *Indica* is very relaxing; *Sativa* is euphoric. Of course, everyone who’s into this is trying to produce the perfect hybrid.”

I found this fascinating. I had no idea there was so much science behind good old pot. I looked forward to learning more.

The cottage where I was to stay was small, but comfortable, consisting of one large room with a bed, some chairs and tables together with a tiny kitchen suitable only for preparing PB&J sandwiches or something like that. Maybe I could make coffee somehow. A separate bathroom contained a shower, toilet, and sink.

“What do you think?”

“It’ll do. I’ve stayed in smaller places, and larger.” My most recent abode, where I lived like a hermit was much smaller. Mark’s cabin was quite a bit bigger. And, of course, there was the royal suite in Tulsa as well as the Talbot home in Houston.

“Why don’t we sit on the patio?” Marian suggested.

“A great idea.”

The patio, an area that connected the main house with the cottage was very pleasant, with a couple of chaises longues where we sat. Marian — I wondered if that was her real name — produced a neatly rolled joint and a lighter, which she applied with an expert touch.

It had been a while since I'd had anything good. The garden by the cabin near Leakey needed some work. I felt a wonderful warmth seeping thru my body. As advertised, the result was very relaxing. I wondered if I would be able to get from the chair to the bed in the cottage.

We didn't speak while we smoked. I remembered the many times I had sat of the porch of Mark's cabin and watched ancient satellites soaring overhead lit by the setting sun. Here, the trees, magnificent redwoods hundreds of years old, blocked the sky. I didn't mind. Everything about the place seemed designed for quiet contemplation.

After the fifth time I yawned, my host suggested we go to bed. "Breakfast will be at eight tomorrow. Then I'll explain the work. OK?"

It sounded great.

3. *Sketchy Beginning* November 24, 1967 Boonville, CA, USA

The woman known as Maid Marian, or M&M as I thought of her, proved to be an accommodating host. First, she gave me the day off, so I could “get acquainted with the area.” Then she proposed that I look thru her closet to see if there was something I wanted to wear. As we were about the same size, I took her up on the offer.

“You do tend to stand out somewhat,” she told me. “Of course, any *brightlighter* in the area would be a sensation, but you’re the talk of the whole valley. You may want to try to blend in some more. And that *magic backpack* is a bit much. Why don’t you use one of the smaller ones lying around? I want to talk to you about that backpack, but that can wait.” *Brightlighter* I learned was the local argot for anyone not from Boonville.

I selected a flannel shirt that she told me went with my eyes and hair, together with a light jacket and extra socks. Of course, I had socks and underwear in the backpack, but I didn’t want to use any that I needn’t. I decided to keep the Merrill hiking boots I had been wearing. I was used to them, and they were nicely broken in.

When I presented myself for inspection, the result was a gratifying, “Much better. There’s some good shampoo and conditioner in the cottage bathroom,” she hinted. After living like a hermit for years, the prospect of a hot shower was more than I could pass up. It was luxurious.

Feeling much refreshed, and with nice looking hair that I let loose for a change, I waited for Mick to come by to pick me up.

I was pleased to see that he had paid as much attention to his appearance as I had. His uniform was clean and looked to have been professionally pressed. His fashionable stubble of a beard was gone, and his hair neatly coiffed. He looked fab.

“Hi, Mick,” was all I could manage. The long-suppressed hormones were raging, and I felt a delicious damp forming in the right place.

“Well,” he countered. “You clean up good, girl, as they say in Texas.”

“You too,” I replied. “Thanks for the ride into town. Shall we see how our pugnacious vet is doing this morning?”

“I’m as anxious as you to find out. The preliminary word is that he told everyone he had met an angel who told him to stop drinking and that is just what he planned to do. Didn’t realize that you were an angel.”

I laughed. “Yeah, especially as I doubt they really exist.”

“Do you?” He seemed disappointed.

Don’t screw up!

“Well, I’ve never met one. Have you?”

He had to admit that he had not.

“Want to start the driving lesson now?”

“Do you think that’s wise? I really don’t know the first thing about driving, particularly a big car like this.”

“Great! That means you don’t have any bad habits to get rid of.” He opened the door on the driver side and helped me climb up. Then he adjusted the seat for me, raising it so that I could see over the top of the steering wheel and still reach the pedals on the floor.

“OK. To start, make sure the vehicle is in *park*. See that little *P*? Now, put your foot on the brake.” I looked down and guessed the brake was on the left.

“Good,” Mick continued. “Now turn the key clockwise until the engine catches.”

I managed that part.

“Excellent. Now, switch the gear to *Drive*.”

This was the first gotcha. The shift lever would not move.

“You have to lift up on the shift to get out of park.” His voice was calm.

I passed the first pop quiz by shifting until the indicator was on *D*. “Now, slowly, let your foot off the brake.”

When I did that the car started to move. In a panic, I pushed down on the brake again and we jolted to a stop.

“That’s OK,” Mick said. “That’s a common reaction. Try to remain calm. Let’s see if you can drive us back to the main road. It’s all downhill, so you can just coast and concentrate on steering.”

With my eyes glued on the unbelievably narrow drive, I let up on the brake again and we began to head down. I tried to keep the car in the middle of the track, which was a lot harder than expected. I think we hit every bump and pothole but managed to get to the highway. I was left with a new appreciation for just how good Ron the Mechanic’s Son was with Endeavor, our solar vehicle back in the 21st century.

“I think maybe it’s time to switch drivers. While you have your foot on the brake, put the shift lever back into park.”

Whew!

Mick had a big grin on his face when he came around to my side as I slid across to the passenger seat. “There’s room for improvement, but that’s a good start. You didn’t hit anything. That drive is a bit more difficult than I remembered for someone new. You did good. You’ll be a decent *japer* before long. That’s the local *Boontling* word for driver.”

I wondered if it would be appropriate to kiss him and decided to wait.

I watched him as he drove. He looked relaxed and confident, steering with two thumbs hooked over the steering wheel on top of the crosspiece. His eyes were on the road, looking far ahead, flicking occasionally to check the various mirrors. I sat back, confident that I was in the hands of a master and watched the road with him.

It had been growing dark when we arrived yesterday, so this was the first chance to check out the scenery. We drove thru pastures on both sides, most with cattle grazing. A few gardens and one tiny vineyard broke up the monotony. The hills at the edge of the valley were covered

with trees, though obviously second growth. I suspected that the area had been heavily logged in the 19th century. All considered, though, it was a lovely bucolic spot.

The drive into town took only a few minutes. It was closer than I had thought. I realized that I could walk it easily, so Mick's offer of a ride seemed to be a chance to see me. Promising.

Mick pulled up next to the Vet shelter and we both looked astonished at the person seated on the porch. Chuck — I decided to try calling him Charles — wore clean clothes. He had shaved his beard and managed to get someone to clip his hair short. He held a large sketch book and seemed to be drawing in it as we approached.

When he saw us, he put the book away, stood up at attention, and waved. *Wow! Is this the same guy as yesterday?*

Mick was impressed. "Looks like a different person. Maybe you really are an angel, and this is a miracle."

"I guess that means that I have to get to work. I was not expecting this at all. The first step is often the most difficult." I tried to sound like I knew what I was doing, which was definitely not the case. I hoped I didn't make a mess of the young man's life. The responsibility of being an angel suddenly felt much heavier.

"Charles," I greeted him. "You look great! How are you doing?"

"Not so good, really," he admitted. "I haven't had a drink since I met you yesterday, and I would really like one."

I reached out and touched him lightly on the shoulder. "It's not easy. But this is a good beginning. Can we see your sketches?"

Mick interjected, "I've got to go Patsy. Duty calls. Let me know if you need any help. They can usually reach me on the radio in the car if I am not in my office. That's over there, by the way." He pointed to a nearby building.

"Thanks, Mick," I called after him. I restrained myself from running after him for a quick kiss.

Charles seemed unsure about showing his sketches, but I pressed. "Please? I'd like to see what you're drawing."

He just handed me the book. I opened to the last page he'd been working on and found a remarkable picture of the street, with Mick and me walking toward the porch. "Did you do this just now?"

"Well," he admitted, "I was working on the street scene when you arrived. I decided to add you quickly."

I was flabbergasted. In a matter of seconds, he had suggested the two of us with only a few lines, yet it was enough to recognize us. Mick towered over me as we walked, partially obscured by my frame. I counted the lines. There were exactly 23, yet that was enough to suggest the pair of us. Carefully, realizing that I was in the presence of true genius, I turned the pages. At the beginning of the book, I found pictures from his tour in Nam. What a difference! Instead of a bright street scene, he had rendered a village, in flames, seen from a helicopter.

Portraits of his companions took up several pages. The one of his Lieutenant, identified by the single bar on his helmet, showed an angry man about 35 or so, pointing at the artist with a finger at the end of a foreshortened arm, an amazing exercise in perspective.

“Charles, these are really well done.”

“I like it when you call me Charles. Chuck don’t sound right, and Charlie was the enemy in Nam. My mother called me Charles.”

“Good,” I said. I wished I had brought the cell phone from my backpack. I had thought it useless, but I wanted to take photos of the drawings. Maybe later. That gave me an idea.

“What do you say to a nice long walk? We can walk back to the cottage where I’m staying, maybe have some herbal tea. I’d like to show more people these drawings.”

“I don’t know.”

“OK. How about we just go for a walk? How are you feeling, by the way?”

“Sick to my stomach.”

“Have you eaten today?”

“A little.”

“Then I think the walk would help. What do you say?” I took his arm and gently urged him to walk with me. He winced slightly at my touch, as though I might attack him again.

“Don’t be afraid,” I comforted him. “I didn’t mean to hurt you yesterday. Everything happened so fast. Maybe you can tell me what got into you.”

He pulled away. “No. I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Got it.” I took his arm again. This time, I noticed that he relaxed and followed my lead as we began the trek back to the cottage. “No talking. Let’s just take in the scenery on this beautiful day.” The sun had broken thru the morning clouds and birds had begun to sing. The avifauna was different from Texas, of course, but some were familiar. I started pointing them out to him as we walked: Crows were common, as were Scrub Jays and in the pastures, Meadowlarks. “These are Western Meadowlarks,” I informed him. “In Texas where I come from, we have both Eastern and Western Meadowlarks. They sing different songs.” I wished I had brought binoculars. Next time.

As we walked, I dropped my hand from his arm. He turned his head as if disappointed. I took his hand instead, which seemed to please him. He stood up straighter and looked as though my mere touch was enough to quell his stomach ailment. Impulsively, he raised my hand to his lips and kissed it lightly.

“Enough if that,” I cautioned. “If we’re going to fix you up, it has to be without sex.”

He said nothing but held onto my hand. We walked that way for about 400 meters. I realized that I had to learn the old system of measures. That was about a quarter of a mile if I recalled correctly. Finally, he spoke. “What about later? After you *fix me up*.”

I laughed. “Charles. We just met yesterday, and that was not the most promising beginning.”

He managed a chuckle. “Yeah.”

“We’ll have to wait till we come to that bridge. Then, we’ll see. OK?”

“OK.”

When Mick came tearing up the drive in mid-afternoon, the three of us, Me, Charles, and the Maid, were sipping a delightful hibiscus mint tea and nibbling on one too many chocolate chip cookies. Mick looked a bit embarrassed as he climbed out of his car. “There you are,” he said as he approached. “Everyone in town is talking about how you disappeared with a ... well, I won’t repeat that part. I was worried about you. They said you were holding hands.”

Charles and I looked at each other. I winked. “Jealous, Mick?”

“Wha ... No. But I was worried. This is the same guy who tried to strangle you yesterday.”

“So it is. That’s not going to happen again, is it Charles?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Our young friend is a remarkable artist. He’s been practicing on illustrations of the herbs growing in the greenhouse. Some of them anyway.” I was wondering whether to tell the deputy sheriff that we’d sampled one of the products our hostess was known for. He glared at me, guessing the truth.

“Oh, Mick. Don’t be mad. I thought a long walk was just what we needed. Actually, it’s not that long. And the drawings are really superb. Check ‘em out.” I took the sketchbook from the table and handed it to him.

I could see a vein throbbing in his neck as he opened the book. Then his expression changed quickly. “These are fantastic. Chuck, I think you have a future in art.”

“Name’s Charles.”

“Is it now?” He looked at me with renewed interest. I could read his thoughts in his face. I hope he didn’t play poker. He just nodded at me, acknowledging a newfound respect. Maybe I did know what I was doing.

“Have a seat Miguel,” offered MM. “Try some tea and bikkies.”

He took the one remaining chair, as well as a cookie, and returned to perusing the sketches. He came upon the one of the two of us and examined it closely. “When did you do this?” He held up the page to show Charles which one he meant.

“This morning.”

“When?”

“When you got to the shelter.”

“But we didn’t spend much time walking up...”

“Right,” I said. “It’s amazing how much he managed to capture with only a few strokes. Don’t you agree?”

“Humph.” He took another cookie as Marian poured him a cup of tea.

“Would you like honey in your tea, Miguel? It’s from my hives out back.”

“Huh? Oh yes. Thanks.” He continued looking at the sketches. He stopped abruptly, and I knew which one he had in front of him. He looked up at me. I shook my head slightly, and he nodded ever so briefly.

“A great talent,” he said as he returned the book to the table.

We sat there for several minutes. No one spoke. A Bewick’s Wren sang from the bushes. Both Scrub and Steller’s Jays called from the woods. Thru a gap in the trees, I could see a Turkey Vulture circling overhead.

“I need to get back to town,” our young vet said.

“I can offer you a ride,” Mick said.

“I need to spend some time with myself. Thanks anyway. The walk will do me good.”

“Tomorrow, Charles,” I said. “Three O’clock. Right?”

“Yeah. I’ll be here.”

When he was out of earshot, we all started talking at once. I held up my hand and managed to get the floor. “You saw the sketches in the front. The burning village. That has to be the key. We need to find out what happened there.”

“Agreed. Maybe you can get him to talk about it,” Mick said.

“I think that’s going to take time.”

Marian agreed with me. “We can’t push him too fast, Mick. Whatever it was it left a powerful scar. One only an angel of mercy can erase. And even she will need to take it slow.”

“Is there any way you can find out what he did in Nam?” I asked. “Maybe part of a law enforcement action. Investigating an assault?”

“Interesting idea. I have a friend I can call. Let me see what I can learn. Meanwhile, I’m guessing you’re going to work on gaining his trust.”

“Exactly. And that will take time. Meanwhile, we need to see if we can make something of his talent.”

Marian had a great suggestion. “I have an artist friend in Ukiah that takes on promising students. Maybe we could get Charles to meet him. Let me make a call.” She left us. I had forgotten how involved it was to contact someone before cell phones. There was a lot to remember.

I moved over and sat next to Mick, taking his hand in mine as I did so. “Thanks for your help. I know this isn’t your job.” He looked at me thoughtfully. “It’s not yours either. Why are you doing this?”

I thought about my answer for a long time. “I feel responsible for him. Once our paths crossed, I was involved. A friend of mine used to say that our destinies were intertwined. Maybe I am an angel after all, and this is my duty.”

He snorted.

I slowly raised his hand to my lips. He turned to look at me, and I moved to kiss him where it would do some good. Abruptly, the door to the main house opened and I jerked back

like a teenager caught by her Dad. At least I think that's what it might have looked like. My upbringing was different from most teenagers.

"I should go also." He rose and started toward his car. I hurried after him.

"Will you come tomorrow afternoon? We'll have more tea and cookies." *And me!*

He gazed down at me with the right kind of look. My pulse quickened. Then he abruptly opened the car door and got in. "Tomorrow," he said. Then he was gone.

I stomped back to the table and took one more cookie than I had planned on. Marian just laughed.

"I don't usually have this much trouble getting someone to kiss me, and I've had quite a bit of experience."

She laughed again. "Patience, my dear. It's that Catholic upbringing. Gives them some strange notions about intimacy."

We sat there for some time lost in our own thoughts, heading in for dinner only when it got dark.

4. Routine Ignorance

November 30 – December 23, 1967
Boonville, CA, USA

Things settled down into a routine.

Mick's attempts to pry information from the US Army proved to be unproductive. He told me what he'd been able to learn: After some dispute with the Lieutenant — probably the one in the picture — Charles had been court martialed for “gross insubordination,” and given a less than honorable discharge. Privately, Mick had been told he was lucky not to get a dishonorable discharge.

Regardless, the dark cloud hanging over his head made it difficult for Charles to find work back in the states. He'd bummed around some before succumbing to the respite found in a bottle. Somehow, he'd wound up here in rural Mendo, living at a shelter.

I tried every way I knew to try to get Charles to open up, but the wound was too painful. When I broached the subject, he either began to weep, or simply clammed up.

We were where we started, with what the 21st century called a nothing burger.

My patient showed up every afternoon promptly at 3. I was finally adjusting to the old system and thought of it as 3 rather than 15. I found many things I missed from the future: personal computers, not to mention laptops, were on the top of the list. The ones in this time were relegated to special air-conditioned rooms with locked doors.

Mick showed up regularly. I think he was jealous of the time spent with Charles, whom he always referred to as The Vet, as though his name was anathema.

One week after my appearance in Boonville, he suggested we go out to dinner. I accepted with such alacrity that I hoped I didn't drive him away. Of course, there was a catch: My second driving lesson. “It won't be too hard,” he assured me, “and if you get worried, I can take over. The road to the coast goes thru some beautiful redwoods. And the drive on Highway 1 is said to be one of the world's finest.”

With trepidation, I accepted. It turned out to be fairly easy. Traffic was virtually non-existent, and the drive along the Navarro River was lovely as he had predicted. When we neared the Coast Highway, we began to encounter several other cars, all of which wanted to go much faster than I did. After a few miles — not kilometers, I was adjusting — he indicated a spot to pull over and we swapped places.

The Pacific Ocean was impressive. I recalled my time in Veracruz speaking to a crowd in the plaza where I asked if anyone had even seen it. There were few hands raised. Some things were easier in this time.

We drove into the town of Mendocino, where we stopped at a seafood café. I had never had such fresh seafood, and it was superb. At Mick's suggestion, I tried a fish called Black Cod, served with a delicious miso glaze that was heavenly. Mick opted for a large bowl of soup called Cioppino, supposedly a California specialty.

It was a lovely evening, and I was a bit sorry when it came to an end. Mick walked back to the cottage with me.

“Mick, this was wonderful. Can we do it again?”

He grinned. “Absolutely.”

He hesitated, then seemed to be considering leaving. “How about tomorrow?”

“OK.” That was easy.

“All right, pick you up about 5?”

“I’ll be ready.”

He turned to go.

“Wait,” I called after him. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

He turned back but didn’t get the hint.

“Mick,” I said with some annoyance, “if you want to go out with me, the evening has to end with a kiss goodnight.”

He seemed to be considering it.

“This is what student radicals call *non-negotiable*.”

He chuckled, then came closer. I climbed up one step, so he didn’t have to stoop too much. It wasn’t the best kiss I’d ever had, so I showed him how it was supposed to be done, pulling him closer and putting my hands around his neck. This was longer and better.

His voice was a bit hoarse when he said, “Till tomorrow.”

I decided it was too early to suggest he spend the night.

As we began thinking of Christmas, arranging things became more complicated. I suggested to Marian that we start with breakfast earlier. That gave me more time to learn how to tend to the items in the greenhouse. After a quick lunch, I prepared for Charles to show up. We had a varied routine. Some days we sat in the garden, but when the rainy season asserted itself, we shifted to the cottage. I sat on the sofa and let him lie with his head in my lap. That helped him relax and we just chatted. I got around to asking about his childhood after several days talking about nothing important.

His story was depressingly familiar. He never met his biological father. His mother, a drug addict, had a succession of boyfriends, who pimped her out to get money for more drugs. At the age of 10, he got into a gang in a seedy area of LA. At least that provided some structure in his life, but naturally, he became involved in the small time grift that was the gang’s main activity. Arrested at the age of 13, he was placed in juvenile detention for three years. When he emerged, he discovered that his mother had disappeared. Fortunately for him, his old gang was still around, so he rejoined them.

Arrested again when he was nearly 18, he encountered a judge that offered him a choice of jail or the military. Despite the risk, Vietnam seemed preferable to prison, so he enlisted.

That was the end of the narrative. No amount of urging got him to talk about what happened during the war.

Well, I remembered that the Tet Offensive was about to visit the cities and villages of South Vietnam. The war was about to take an ugly turn, one that would ignite the resistance in the US. 1968 was going to be one of the worst years in the nation’s history. Would that wake him up to the need to tell what was going on?

On my third date with Mick, he proposed. I was stunned. It was almost as unexpected as when Harold astonished everyone in Waco so long ago. I demurred. I could sense love, but passion seemed to be missing. We needed to work on that.

Still, we continued to date regularly, and he proposed almost every time we met. It became something of a running gag. He'd ask me to marry; I'd say, "Not yet." That usually got a reply, "I'll keep asking." I always replied, "I'd like that," and kissed him on the spot. When that spot turned out to be the local hardware and feed store just outside Boonville, we drew a round of applause from the other customers. I wondered what the reaction would be if I were to accept.

Marian suggested we drive into Ukiah, the biggest city in the area, and buy some Christmas presents. I was happy to accept. We stopped at the shelter to tell Charles, who asked if he could tag along. So, the three of us hit the big city.

I was no good at buying presents. The only times in my strange life that it had been important, I had someone to handle the details for me. Certainly, the Queen, especially when pregnant, could not be expected to wander the streets of Tulsa looking for bargains. Most of the good stuff was salvaged/looted from Dallas anyway, and no one would let me loose there. In Houston with Mark, Mary Lynn, Grace's secretary and general factotum, took care of everything with her usual efficiency.

I needn't have worried. Marian knew where to go and suggested something that I might afford for Mick with the meager wages she paid me.

After several stops, she suggested we drop by an artist studio she knew about. I had a feeling what was coming. Marian turned out to be good at her job as well.

"Patsy, Charles, meet Franklin. I've asked him to look over Charles's drawings and offer an opinion. It that OK, Charles?"

Franklin was near to Marian in age, with the body a life spent sitting at an easel would produce. A bit overweight, balding, with a gray ponytail hanging down with the remnants of his hair. He had a pleasant face framed by a full beard that wanted trimming. The way he looked at Marian suggested they were more than just friends.

It took some persuading, but Charles agreed and produced his sketchbook. Franklin, his name on the front door was B. F. Jones, took one look and was unable to conceal his approval.

Marian interjected, "He's been earning small fees doing pictures for the locals. Advertising fliers, that sort of thing."

"Very nice," he said finally. "Would you mind taking a small test for me?"

"What's that?" Charles wanted to know.

Franklin produced four empty sheets. "I'd like you to draw four different pictures for me. They don't have to be finished or anything. I don't want you to take too much time."

"What should I draw?"

"Some scenery, anything you want, but some landscape. Then a picture of a woman, one of a man, one still life. Do you know what a still life is?"

"Just some objects, right?"

"Correct. Any object is OK. Can you do that?"

“No prob. When do you want them?”

“How long will it take?”

“Dunno. Couple of hours?”

“Great. Want to use an easel?”

“You mean now, here?”

“Exactly. This is a test after all.”

“Never used an easel. Can I just do them in my sketchbook?”

“Let me get you one a bit better.” He left us and returned shortly with a beautiful, leather-bound book. The paper was much better than what was in Charles’s book, and I could see the delight in his eyes.

“Do I get to keep this?”

“If you pass the test, that is the prize. Can you do it?”

“Yes.”

Franklin showed us into a back room where he obviously did his work. Clearing off a desk, he pulled over a chair for Charles and showed him where pencils and such were. Then we left him alone.

“Are you sure about this?” Marian asked him when we were out of earshot.

“The lad has some real talent. To be a successful commercial artist he has to be able to produce what is wanted on a deadline. This will show if he is capable.”

It all made sense, but I had to suppress a nagging worry that it might be too much, too soon.

“I hear that you are an angel,” Frank said to me.

I laughed. “It helps with motivation.”

“So, you don’t believe in angels?”

“No, of course not. Do you?”

“Sometimes I wonder. You’re the first person I have ever heard answer that question with *of course not.*”

“Really. How interesting.”

“No doubts?”

“Some, maybe. A priest I knew once tried to convince me that my life was evidence that God existed. I think he was just trying to inveigle himself into my bed.”

They both laughed.

“Tell me more.”

“That’s about all I can tell.”

Marian jumped in. “My tenant is very discreet about her past.”

“I really cannot talk about it,” I confirmed. Then I added, “It’s classified.” I liked the sound of that.

“So, you were a spy?”

I just smiled.

“How about you? I asked. What brought you to Ukiah?”

“That’s easy. I was born here.”

“Really. What was it like then? How’d you like growing up with a name like Ben Franklin?”

He smiled. “You figured out my name. Clever.” He indicated Marian, and said, “She told me you were smart. Ukiah was about the same as now.”

However, with only a bit of prompting he related a long tale about like when highway 101 was a two-lane country road, and several more reminiscences of the old days. The time passed in pleasant conversation until Charles returned with the sketchbook. He handed it to Franklin without comment.

The first sketch was a scene we all recognized, a completed version of the picture of Mick and me walking up the path to the shelter. Unlike the original, this one included many details, such as the logo on the side of Mick’s car. It also showed me linked arm-in-arm with Mick, leaning against him flirtatiously.

The second picture showed several rifles laid out in order. I recognized them from history of the war as the main weapons used by the American forces, beginning with the old M-1 and ending with the famous M-16.

“I never got to use one of the M-16s,” he explained. “But I seen all of them one time or another.”

“Very impressive detail,” Franklin observed.

The picture of a man was disturbing. It showed the same lieutenant that was near the front of the sketches I had seen. He looked angry, with an expression that was truly frightening. I think I understood who was behind the court-martial that ended Charles’s military career. There was a hint of a name on his shirt, but unlike everything else in the sketches, it lacked detail. That had to be significant. I studied at length, finally making out some of the letters. An *R* for the first letter, maybe *a* next. Small help, but not nearly enough.

The picture of a woman caused a sensation. A nude reclined on a bed in a frankly sexual pose. Everyone turned to look at me. “This is Charles’s imagination,” I said quickly, “not real life. Right Charles?”

“Yeah.” He ducked his head.

“The breasts are too large,” I pointed out. “I’m flattered, but if we’re focusing on detail...”

Charles blushed. Marian and Franklin laughed.

“It’s an excellent picture,” Franklin noted. The proportions of most of the body parts are accurate. That’s quite difficult to manage without a live model. You’re sure...”

“I am positive,” I said, emphasizing each word. “Charles, I thought we had a deal.”

“You didn’t say that I couldn’t dream.”

We all laughed at that, so the test ended on a happy note that continued even after I said, “Dream on.”

Franklin caught Marian and held her back while we walked to the car. She emerged after about a minute, a bit flushed, confirming my guess about their relationship.

“Franklin would like to take you on, Charles. Sort of an apprentice. He’d teach you how the art business really works, and help you improve your technique. Would you like that?”

He hesitated. “You can still spend the weekends with us in Boonville,” Marian added. “Want to think it over?”

He nodded, settled into the back seat with the Christmas packages, and didn’t utter another word during the hour it took us to return to Boonville.

5. Artistic License

January 5, 1968
Boonville, CA USA

After Christmas, we all helped Charles move into new digs in Ukiah, that Franklin had found for him. It wasn't much: a no-frills studio apartment, but it was close to Franklin's place. We helped set up the place, running errands for most of the day to get supplies. Our Vet had essentially nothing of his own, no sheets, no dishes, no food. Fortunately, Marian seemed to have plenty of cash and paid for everything. The shopping took most of the day and provided an opportunity for me to practice driving.

We said tearful goodbyes to Charles and promised to come back regularly.

"I think you may be ready to try the driving test," Mick observed. "You'll need to study the booklet before you take the written test."

"Mick, there's one problem. I don't have any identification like a birth certificate."

"Normally, that would be an issue, but I can vouch for you. They'll take my word for it. I know all the officers there."

"Good. Do we need to come back to Ukiah?"

"Yes. It's the closest DMV office. Worried about your young charge?"

"Frankly, yes. He's young to be on his own."

"I'll pass the word to the Ukiah cops to keep an eye on him."

I had to be satisfied with that. We talked about what to do next all the way back to Boonville. Then, Mick suggested some margaritas might help with ideas. Marian suggested some cannabis instead, and to my surprise, he agreed. "We can do both."

So, with the help of one legal and one illegal drug, we sat around the table in Marian's kitchen until almost dawn, but without any good ideas.

"We just need him to open up about what happened," Marian said for the umpteenth time.

"Right. And how do we get him to do that?" Mick asked as he had many times.

"No luck searching for a lieutenant whose name begins with *R*?"

"You're kidding, aren't you? Know how many lieutenants there are in the army?"

"No. How many?"

"I don't know, but lots. How do you get someone to search thru all the records looking for someone that matches?" Mick asked with some exasperation.

"Can you sort the records into alphabetical order?" I asked naively.

"That might be even harder than looking for the right one."

"Oh." I forgot how primitive the computers were.

An idea was beginning to take shape in my tired brain. "Let's just sleep on it. Maybe we'll have some better ideas in the morning."

We broke up shortly and I headed back to the cottage and retrieved a valuable necklace from my backpack. Then, wearing the amulet Mia had given me so long ago — or so far in the future — and holding the backpack securely, I lay on the bed hoping that sleep would come soon, and that what I had in mind would work.

6. Marking Time **July 1, 2018** **Near Leakey, TX, USA**

It worked! I woke up back in the familiar cabin near Leakey where I had spent so many happy days. The place seemed to be deserted. I carefully crept into the main room. The shield that Ambianca managed was firmly lowered, so I was safe from discovery for the time being. I decided it was time for a test.

“Ambianca, what about some music?”

Immediately, the sounds of soft classical came from the speakers. I was able to recognize Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. “An interesting choice. Is it nighttime?”

“Of course. Two in the morning. How are you doing my old friend. It’s been some time.”

“So it has. I’m doing OK, but I can use something to eat.” I began rummaging thru the refrigerator, finding some bacon and eggs, near the limit of my culinary skill. The coffee pot held some old liquid. I poured myself a cup and heated it in the microwave. God, how I missed that in 1968. When were they invented, I wondered?

“Ambianca, do you know when microwave ovens were invented?”

“1946.”

“Really?”

“Yes, an outgrowth of World War II. However, countertop models weren’t introduced until 1967, and they cost more than most people could afford.”

“But if I had enough money, I could buy one in 1968?”

“I suppose so. Do you need money?”

“In 1968 I’m a pauper.”

“Really. You lived in 1968?”

“I just came from there.”

“Wow! That’s before my earliest memory of you.” There was a noticeable pause. I wondered what she could possibly be doing that would take long. “I didn’t know you until 1998, and I was very young then.”

“What is today’s date?”

“July 1, 2018.”

That reminded me of something, something I couldn’t recall. I resolved to try to look it up later.

With the coffee in my system, I felt up to taking on the bacon and eggs. Of course, I burned the bacon, and the eggs came out a bit runny, but I wolfed it all down. Then, turning to the computer room, I was relieved to see everything booted up. I wasn’t sure what I would have done if it had been all dark.

“Now, to work. I need to find out everything I can on a soldier in Vietnam in the 1966 time frame. His name is Charles Taylor, and he was a corporal.”

The computer chimed and displayed results from Google. The top listing was the proverbial smoking gun. The headline from a Wikipedia article read: *Song Mi Massacre*.

I spent the next hour or two getting all the information I could about the massacre. The best part of the article was about the whistle blower, none other than Charles Taylor. He had been “encouraged by a friend, social worker Patsy O’Brien.” I wish it had gone into detail about just what form the *encouragement* took.

After the summary, the article explored the incident in depth. On a routine search and destroy mission against the Viet Cong, the squad entered the small village near the demilitarized zone along the border between the two Vietnams. Apparently, an old man with an even older rifle challenged them when they wanted to search his tiny dwelling. Seeing the weapon, and frankly frightened, the troops responded with withering fire, killing the old man instantly.

After that, the entire village erupted, emerging from hiding and racing toward the dead body. Most of the villagers wailed as they converged.

“We just killed the village chief,” someone observed.

“Better kill them all,” the lieutenant ordered. “We’ll burn this nest of VC activity and get the hell out of here.”

The troops responded by shooting indiscriminately and setting the huts ablaze. One small boy about ten years old, staggered into the square. “He’s yours,” the Lieutenant Raleigh said to Charles. “I can’t,” he replied, imagining himself as a boy in a similar situation. That resulted in a prolonged exchange.

“That was not a request.”

“He just a boy.”

“VC. Kill him.”

“I just can’t.”

Whereupon Raleigh shot the boy himself. With the village in flames, they called for a helicopter to lift them out.

The entire incident took less than 20 minutes.

Charles was brought up on charges of failing to follow an order and drummed out of the US Army in disgrace.

That was followed by a lengthy legal analysis. Was the order lawful? Could the boy have been a VC collaborator? I fell asleep at the desk trying to finish it, without success. After waking, I switched to the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

The sound of the shield lifting roused me. “Ambianca, what time is it?”

“About 11 in the morning. Company is coming.”

Expecting the company to be Gordo, the local sheriff, who checked on the cabin regularly, I pulled on some jeans and walked out of the bedroom.

But it wasn’t Gordo. It was Mark.

My heart skipped a beat. “Mark,” I managed to choke out.

He stopped abruptly and looked at me, a puzzled expression on his face. “Patsy O’Brien. You taught me how to make love when I was 18, or almost 18. You look just the same, but that was 48 years ago.”

“I hear that a lot.”

He laughed.

I waited to see if he could work it out, meanwhile considering the *O’Brien* part of the name. I guess Mick’s regular proposals finally bore fruit.

He said nothing for several seconds, then, “Hypatia, my love. How wonderful to see you again.”

I smiled. “I’m older than you’re used to seeing. Something like 17 years. I find it hard to figure out exactly how old I am. 40 something will do.”

“Hypatia,” he repeated, his voice a hoarse whisper.

“Mark, my love, it’s been a long time for me too. In fact, the last time I saw you was the day you died.”

“The day I died?”

“In the future. Don’t worry; it’s not happening soon. I...I never expected to see you again.”

“I was always sure you’d come back to me someday, to explain about Chloe if nothing else.”

“I’ll tell you everything, but you must promise to keep this secret from my younger self. Think of me as the *other woman*.”

“You didn’t know about this meeting?”

“Nope. Why don’t you fix us something to eat? I assume you are a better cook than I am. At least you will be before too long.”

His bacon was not burned, and the eggs were scrambled to perfection. He had some fancy bread that he’d picked up along the way, which he grilled in a second skillet. He even made some new coffee.

“This is awkward,” he began.

“That’s for sure,” I replied. “For one thing, it’s been quite a while for me.”

“Me too,” he agreed. “You’re different from what I remembered.” *Older and younger at the same time*, I thought.

“You too,” I said. “Maybe we should take things slow.” *I think I can wait maybe 5 minutes*.

“I don’t remember the *other Hypatia* ever saying anything like that.”

I laughed. “I don’t remember her ever *thinking* like that.”

I went into the bedroom and retrieved my backpack. I waved my hand over the lock and it popped open. “Nice,” Mark said. “Did Ron, that genius engineer in the future, make it?”

“Good for you! Yes. He gave it to me in the future. It’s magic.”

“Because it opens when you wave your hand over it?”

“No. Better than that, though that impresses lots of people. Ron tried to explain it to me once. Something to do with quantum entanglement. He tried to teach me, but I got lost at the first turn. Anyway, remember when I tried to take something from one time to another? It mostly didn’t work.”

“Has that happened already?”

I had to think. “Maybe not. It was a map to the Sheik’s Gold.”

“Oh, yes. I put it in a book for someone to find later.”

“Right. Well, if I put items into this knapsack, it is still there on the other side.” I reached into the bag and pulled out a small bag of Marian’s latest experiment in growing pot. “This is from California,” I explained. “Maybe yours is better.”

“How about a blind test?” He suggested.

“What a good idea.” We spent the next ten minutes setting up the test with two joints and a blindfold. I went first, taking a good hit from each joint as Mark handed one to me. “Close, I judged. I give the nod to the second one.”

Mark tried the test and picked the same winner as I had. Looking at the two joints, it was obvious that he had rolled the winner. “I guess Hill Country Gold is still the best around.”

He grinned. “I swapped the two samples before we rolled the joints. The one I rolled was from your stuff. In fact, this is not HCG. It’s some stuff I got on the open market. My crop was mostly a failure.”

Mark had a serious look on his face. “You know,” he said, “I never did know where that strain came from. Maybe yours is the source for Hill Country Gold.”

“I’ll have to bring you some plants I’ve cloned. Well, actually, my mentor cloned them. We make sure there are no seeds. A new innovation. *Sinsemilla*.”

We took several more hits from the good stuff.

“I’m not feeling awkward any longer,” I told him.

He took my hand and led me into the bedroom.

7. *Timely Interruption*

July 2-6, 2018
Near Leakey, TX USA

I know what you're thinking. Second honeymoon, right? Not exactly. For one thing, we were both older, more mature, and I at least had been with several partners. Besides, we had work to do. The info in the Wikipedia article was not enough to tell me how to proceed. I asked Mark for help.

"According to Wikipedia, there was a hearing of some kind. If we could get the transcript, I could study and..."

"Ah," he said. "Classified, right?"

"Probably."

"It'll take some time. Those sites are hard to break into."

"But you can do it, can't you?"

"Probably. I'll start in the morning."

We didn't ignore the pleasures of the bed, doing what we usually did whenever we met. It was great being with him again. I knew that if I were going to be Patsy O'Brien and meet mark in the past I would have to go back. But I was thinking in terms of a round trip.

I left Mark working and sat on the deck. I had a nagging fear that something was wrong, but I couldn't figure out what. That was until Gordo showed up to discuss plans for the Fourth of July barbeque.

He walked up toward the deck where I sat doing nothing. "Hi. Gordo," I greeted him. That stopped him in his tracks. He peered at me, then finally said, "Are you who I think you are?" That was it, the trigger for the memory. He had greeted me with the same question when we met on ... The Fourth of July 2018! My younger self was due to appear in Mark's bed tomorrow. *Shit! What should I do?*

I explained the problem to Mark.

"Can't you just zip away?"

"No. For one thing it isn't as easy as that, especially for me now. It seems to be harder as I grow older. Besides, remember how I used to appear in Houston at the same time as I left? That could happen again. I could disappear back to 1968 — if I'm lucky — and still return here in time to run into my younger self."

Mark took some time to digest this info. "It's a puzzlement," he said at length.

"You cannot let her know about me," I emphasized. "I don't remember ever learning about this visit. We cannot change that. Remember, I'm the other woman now. Well, my younger self is not married to you yet, so technically, I guess she's the other woman. But you get what I'm saying, right?"

"Yeah, I think."

"It's complicated."

"That's an understatement."

“I need to hide until she goes back.”

“How long will that be?”

“One day. All of the Fourth. I fell asleep, will fall asleep, on the porch in the hammock and shifted, will shift, when I woke...oh, what the hell. Tenses are too complicated in this situation.”

“OK. I understand. So, you need to go somewhere for the day and night, just to be on the safe side.”

“Right.”

He thought for a while. “I could drive you to Lost Maples State Park. We have all the camping equipment you might need in the cave storage.”

“And I’m going to snag the last available campsite on the Fourth of July?”

“Good point. Have a suggestion for Plan B?”

“It isn’t as good as Lost Maples, but can I hang out in the storage area? If you have all the camping equipment in there...”

Thus, I spent the night and next day languishing in the huge storage area in the cave behind the cabin. Mark was not surprised to receive a list of items for attention when I finally emerged. The isolation and uncomfortable conditions — well not *that* uncomfortable — contributed to prolonged consideration of my life and what I should do next. The temptation to remain with Mark was always lurking in the background, but I had unfinished business in 1968. In addition to the *Song Mi Massacre* there was Mark’s innocent reference to me as Patsy O’Brien. That piqued my interest, implying that I was going to marry Mick, and Mark was going to show up sometime. Sounded interesting.

I also realized why Mark acted so strangely when my younger self showed up. He had something to hide.

By the time Mark called my cellphone to tell me that my younger self had disappeared, I was ready to have a long heart-to-heart.

8. Trial Separation
July 6, 2018
Near Leakey, TX USA

We sat on the deck smoking some of the marvelous California pot while gazing at the hills in the distance as dusk descended. After procrastinating all day, it was time to sort things out. Well, almost time. I leaned against Mark savoring the moment. “This has been wonderful.”

He agreed. “Too bad your life is so complicated. We could just stay here and grow old, well older, together.”

“Maybe we can still do that for a while, ten years or so. Then you can trade me in for a newer model.”

“How would that work?”

“After this visit by my younger self...wait. Are you sure you want to know this?”

“You’re talking about the future, right?”

“From this viewpoint, yes. From 2087, it’s recent history, what there is of it.”

“Right. You told me most of the records had been lost.”

“If there were any in the first place.”

“I remember when you told me about President Obama. I thought you had to be kidding, but no. Then you casually mentioned the current occupant of the White House. I *knew* you weren’t serious, but that turned out to be correct also. So, what happens next?”

“If you think things are bad now, I have some unfortunate news. They are going to get worse, a lot worse. Then everything collapses.”

“And your younger self shows up in time for the collapse?”

“Yes, during a period we call the Last Days. Everyone parties like we’re on the Titanic and all the lifeboats are gone.”

“Can we prepare for that?”

“We already are. Your idea of breeding horses immune to VEE works. And we found some machines we needed to make solar cells in a warehouse in Sealy. They were destined for Houston, but never got there. I assumed that was your doing.”

“This is fascinating. You’re telling me about things I am going to do. What if I don’t do them?”

“I don’t want to think about that.” I sat up and looked him in the eye. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you anymore. This is critical. If you don’t do it exactly right, it might change the timeline.”

“Can we change it on purpose?”

“I don’t think so. JJ told me there is a theory of *historical immutability*. What is history cannot change. Only small things not important enough to be *historical*. It’s a corollary of Bloch’s Paradox. We talked about this once before in the past. We said we had to concentrate on changing the future, not the past.”

“JJ?”

“Oops! Forget I said that. He’s my science advisor in the future. There are some things in the future that I think you shouldn’t know about. For example, I know the day you’ll die. I was with you. I don’t think you should know about that.”

We sat for quite a while after that as dusk turned into full night. The stars, as often here, were spectacular.

“Do you love me?” Mark asked after a long silence.

“What a question! You cannot imagine how much I love you. From before I even met you. Not love at first sight, but something even more profound. When we met for the first time it was as if I had been looking for you all my life up to that point.”

He chuckled a bit. “You promised that we would meet again?”

“What! When?”

“When I met you in the past. My past, not yours. Now, you know to do it. Fair’s fair.”

After thinking that over, I replied, “Patsy O’Brien.”

“Bingo!”

After another long silence, I spoke again. “We can try to have time together. But I need to go back to 1968 if I am going to do as you suggest.”

“I had already worked that out. But maybe you can come back. Back to now.”

“It’s worth a try. You have to make sure that the other me doesn’t find out about this.”

“I get it. I think I can handle that.”

“Let’s go to bed.”

“Good idea.”

II. Chloe: The Chloe and 7 Expedition

1. Expeditious Departure **February 20, 2157** **The Shrine of the Apparition, NRT,** **Allied States of North America**

As Chloe, a fan of irony as much as anyone, loved to tell the story, “My mother managed to reappear at the Shrine in Medina when I was halfway across Texas on the journey of a lifetime.”

It all began quietly when Ambianca waked her up as usual with some soft music followed by the insistent observation that it was time to get up. “The Prince will be here in 90 minutes. You should get up now.”

Finally, on the third iteration, Chloe could ignore it no longer, rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. “I hope the coffee is dripping, Ambi” she said at the door to the bathroom. For six years, Chloe had said this in the morning. For six years, Ambi had assured her that breakfast, toast and coffee, would be ready on time.

The Prince was Harold II, Prince of Tulsa, who was happy not to be the ruler of that state, leaving him free to pursue his love of the outdoors. He was generally acknowledged to be the foremost naturalist in the entire country, and Chloe loved his visits. Usually, these involved some tramp in the surrounding hills that had a way of turning up something interesting.

Not today, though. Today, he was coming to take Chloe to Austin for a meeting, whose subject was a secret, at least from her, and she was slightly fearful that some reprimand was in order. A mental review of everything that had happened lately at the Shrine turned up nothing of note. All the apple trees were doing well, just beginning to put out the flowers that drew visitors to the Shrine long before there was any fruit available. At this time of year, all she had to offer — and sell — was Cappuccino and chocolate, both imported from Sealy. Ambianca had assured her that she was not in trouble. “I’d tell you what’s up, but they’d shut me down for sure.”

More than hyperbole, this was pure bullshit. The few attempts to shut Ambianca down had failed. In fact, it took an expert in cybernetics to even locate her, and then only for a few microseconds. The Archives contained a Wiki about Ambianca that claimed she lived “in the holes in the system.” No one alive today had any idea what that meant. No one really cared. Certainly, those lucky enough to befriend her didn’t care. From a humble beginning as a program to play background music, supposedly created by none other than Mark Talbot himself, she had evolved into an intelligent and insightful persona.

Harold arrived a bit late as usual. He always found something worth stopping for along the way. “Hey, Princess, ready for your trip to the unknown?” Unlike Harold, the honorific *Princess* was an in joke. Several old sources insisted that Chloe and Harold were half siblings, with Hypatia as their mother. Harold argued that if he was a Prince, surely, she was a Princess. Chloe pretended not to care, but she was secretly amused. The fact that she liked Harold made him easier to put up with. Many people in the area thought he was a bit overbearing. His *nom de net* was PC, which stood for Prince Charming. This often had an *F* inserted in the middle by those who didn’t find his frequent pronouncements clever or funny.

“What’s this unknown bit? Surely you have managed to find out what is going on.” Harold had sources for any news or gossip.

“Indeed, I *have* found out. I’ll tell you some of it on the way, but not the really good part. I think you’ll like it, though. Oh, bring your binoculars. I saw a couple of Bald Eagles on the way. Maybe they’ll still be around. Looked as if they might be searching for a nest site.”

After they were well on the way, Chloe asked, “So what can you tell me?”

“You know that the scientists at the University have long wanted to get the DNA sequencers working again, right?”

“JJ told me.”

“Sure. Well, they don’t have enough reagents to handle a full sequencing operation, but they can manage to sequence mitochondrial DNA. They have already done mine. They want to check yours also.”

“Why?”

“If they aren’t the same, then we have different mothers, so we can put the rumors to rest.”

“And if they’re still the same?”

“Then we have the same mother, or mothers that share maternal ancestry at least. If we collect enough samples, we may be able to determine how likely it is that Hypatia’s DNA is unique. It would mean that we are in fact half sibs.”

“Interesting,” Chloe replied in a tone that indicated she couldn’t care less.

The rest of the trip consisted of small talk, mainly about birds and nature. They did not see the two Bald Eagles PC had seen on the trip earlier.

2. Ghost of a Chance
February 20, 2157
Austin, NRT,
Allied States of North America

After a quick cheek swab to collect DNA, a technician ushered Chloe into a small dark office. Shortly, an image appeared in the air, then came into focus. “JJ,” she exclaimed when she saw who it was. “What is this, something new?”

“Indeed it is Sweet One. We finally have the holographic display working, sort of. How do you like it?”

Chloe walked completely around the image of JJ before replying. “It’s interesting, but it’s a long way from the Star Trek Holodeck.”

“Well,” JJ responded, “We have another 200 years or so to perfect that.”

“To be honest,” Chloe continued, “I’m perfectly happy with a 2D view of your head.”

JJ laughed. “I told them that would be your reaction.” With that, the image faded, and the lights grew bright enough to illuminate an ordinary monitor showing JJ.

“That’s better,” she assured him. “I thought I was going to have an interview with Mother Amanda.”

“She’s not ready for prime time yet.”

“Oh?”

“Right. You understand that we are trying to create yet another AI based on Amanda. It won’t be her, not even close, but it will look like her and give advice as she would.”

“Who’s working on it?”

“Me and several students at the University.”

“I see.”

“We want you to be on the team.”

“Me!”

JJ nodded and said nothing.

“Why me? I’m not even a student.”

“That can be arranged easily.”

“Really? What about entrance exams, that stuff?”

“I’m on the committee. To be precise, when it comes to Nerds, I *am* the committee. We’re short staffed now. I know you. I’ve watched you for 18 years. You’re the best candidate for a special project. Here. I’ll let Amanda explain.”

On the monitor, JJ moved to sit in a large comfortable chair as a figure that looked like photos of Amanda moved into the frame.

“I see what you mean,” Chloe said. “She’s a bit jerky in her movements.”

“You’ve noticed,” Amanda said.

“And the lip sync is not quite right.”

“Correct,” Amanda agreed. Her image smiled as she said it. Then her mouth opened long after the words came out.

“Looks like a race condition,” Chloe observed.

“Exactly,” JJ replied. “You are already the best programmer in the Allied States. Believe me, I have seen them all. However, we have something that we think will make you work hard.”

The room fell silent for almost a minute.

“OK. OK,” Chloe said with some exasperation. “Tell me what it is. However, I’m pretty happy where I am. It’s quiet and peaceful.”

“Bullshit,” JJ replied.

“Manners JJ,” Amanda interjected. “Maybe I should take over.”

Acting on her own volition, Amanda continued. “As you no doubt know, we have wanted to get to —”

Chloe had had enough. “Please! The bad lip sync is driving me nuts. How about nothing but a voiceover with charts and so forth.”

“I thought that might happen,” JJ said. “I came prepared.”

Amanda’s voice returned, with an image of North America on the screen. “As I was saying, we have wanted to get to California for some time. We will need access to the Pacific Ocean if we are going to expand trade.”

“And rule the world,” Chloe joked.

“Of course,” Amanda said to Chloe’s surprise. She had never thought of it in those terms before.

“What about the Mexican ports?” she asked.

“The ports opening on the Pacific directly are far south, adding days to any travel. During the Spanish era in California, they used Monterrey Bay as a stopping point on the journey to the eastern Pacific. We’ve considered trying to revive Monterrey, or better the San Francisco bay area, but that means building facilities from scratch. Look at this.”

The screen image changed to show small dots of light scattered over the continent. “JJ, this is your toy. Why don’t you take over?”

“With pleasure. As you know, there are a few of the ancient satellites still functioning. The ones used for weather have infra-red scanners on them. We used the scanners when the satellites passed over during the night. So, we pick up any fires, etc. That is what we have here. Some of these are natural fires, for example the geysers in Yellowstone show up as heat sources.” The area in question highlighted on the screen.

“If we accumulate the images over a long time period, in this case several months, we get the following.”

“So, you have integrated over time. I get it,” Chloe said, just to make sure they didn’t treat her like some 12-year-old.

“Exactly,” JJ replied. “When we do, we get this.” The image changed. Most of North America lay shrouded in darkness, but there were a few spots that glowed faintly.

“Villages,” Chloe said.

“Correct again,” JJ said.

“I gather you’re interested in this one.” She pointed to a small area somewhat inland from the ocean. “Where is that? Do we have any land references?”

“See what I mean, Amanda? She gets the picture immediately.”

“Indeed. Impressive. Now, Chloe, what is the obvious next step?”

“We need to go there and see what we find. They ought to be interested in trade. We have lots of stuff to offer them. A connection to the grid, would be high on the list. They must be starved for information about the state of the world.”

“And how do you plan to cross thousands of kilometers of desert, mountains, and other hazards?”

Chloe thought for some time. “That’s not an easy question. I can think of at least four main alternatives and some possible tweaks. It would require some planning. We might need to invent something to help.”

“What are the four alternatives?”

“One, the most obvious one, go to Mexico using our existing rail network. Then somehow cross Mexico from Vera Cruz to the coast. Take a boat up the coast.”

“OK.”

“Two, the long way. We simply sail there the way our ancestors did during the Gold Rush. I hear rumors that we are working to get the Panama Canal back in operation. That would help. Otherwise, it would be a long and dangerous journey, but doable. We’d need some new ideas in ships.”

“Good. Number three?”

“We expand the rail network. That would involve repairing some bridges and possibly working out some ferries or something. That is probably the best alternative, but it would take years.”

“Agreed, so the final option is...”

“We go the way our recent ancestors did: we drive there.”

“Want to be the lead on the project?” Amanda asked.

3. Design Review
February 15, 2158
Austin, NRT,
Allied States of North America

Chloe strode onto the stage in the Talbot Library with an air of confidence unjustified by her youth and inexperience. However, as soon as she began the lecture all in the audience realized that they were witnessing someone who knew she was at the top of her game.

“Thank all of you for coming to this first presentation of the project we’ve taken to calling California Dreaming. Many of you are already familiar with the main parameters and constraints, but for the benefit of all, I’ll go over them now.”

Some of the audience showed annoyance at having to hear this for the nth time, but others leaned forward in anticipation.

“To begin with, since the first days of the New Republic, we have had a vision of uniting the entire North American continent into a single entity.” She paused briefly. “With its capital in Austin, of course.” That brought a polite chuckle from the assembly.

“Key to that is some way to get to the Pacific, and across it. Our satellite scans, in the infra-red, show where there are pockets of activity around the globe. Of course, we cannot tell exactly what we are seeing, beyond the fact of excess heat. In Africa, we can detect large, moving sources that we assume, for want of a better explanation, to be herds of animals on their annual migration. We see a few stationary sources that probably represent human settlements, but these are scattered.” At this point, she displayed an image of Africa with some small areas highlighted by bright circles, leaving most of the land mass empty of humans.

“Reaching Africa is a daunting task. We have to get to the West Coast somehow and be able to travel on the largest ocean in the world.” She paused again, noticing a raised hand, she recognized one of her frequent critics. “Yes, Professor Henderson. You have a question or comment?”

“Yes, I do. Why are you focused on the Pacific rather than the Atlantic? The latter is easier to cross, and...”

“Perhaps, if you consider only the distance involved. However, there are other factors to consider. Our best port on the Atlantic, New York, was destroyed during the Last Days, as you know. We could go from some of the more southern ports, such as perhaps Savannah. However, many of those are under water now from sea level rise. Moreover, Europe was devastated by the rioting during the Collapse. We see few signs of life in the former cities such as London, Paris, Berlin. Moreover, all of the Italian peninsula is radioactive after the bombing of the Vatican.”

“As is all of Asia,” Henderson retorted.

“You are correct, so far as it goes. We are looking at a long-term recolonization of that part of the world. The land, now devoid of people, is excellent farming potential.”

“Phooey! We have more food than we need here.”

“At present, yes. But we should be looking to the future. The re-settlement is decades, perhaps centuries, away. But as the old Chinese saying goes, ‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.’ We are considering the best way to take that first step.”

JJ decided that was time to jump in. “Excuse me, Chloe, may I show some of my slides?”

“Sure,” She replied, knowing what JJ had in mind.

“I have been conducting this research for longer than anyone else. Let me show you what I have found. To begin with, we have this image showing the entire earth at night prior to the Collapse. This is obviously a composite, as it isn’t night everywhere at the same time. However, you can see how many lighted areas there were. Here,” he switched to a different image, “is the corresponding image today.” Several members of the audience gasped.

Chloe picked up the narrative, “You’ll notice that the only areas showing bright lights are part of the Allied States. We are the only surviving instance of high technology left on the planet. Here’s something interesting.” She put up another image. “We compared images at different times of the year. That way, we can see seasonal effects, people migrating from one area to another, probably with herds of domestic animals. Here is the result of that analysis.” She showed an image with summer dots in red and winter in blue. Most of the dots moved.

“So, in brief, what we see in the rest of the world is either hunter-gatherer societies or small farming and herding. Nowhere else in the world do we see anything like what we have here.” She inserted another well-timed pause, “Except for one small community, here.” She highlighted a bright spot in what used to be Northern California.

“There’s more evidence of a technological society, albeit a tiny one, there. They managed to contact us once by email. There was no message, just a ping. We, naturally responded with a single dot, Tralfamadorian for ‘Greetings.’” Some of the audience recognized the allusion and laughed.

“So, that’s our target for this expedition. We want to go meet them and bring them into the fold.”

She switched to another slide. “There are four possibilities that we have considered.” She related the four approaches she had put forward two years ago with Amanda and JJ.

“We are proceeding on all four of these. At present, we are negotiating with Mexico to use one of their Pacific Ocean ports, probably Acapulco. We have loaded a couple of railcars with items to use in setting up a full internet site. These will travel by our existing rail network to Vera Cruz. Then we have to get the equipment across to the Pacific somehow. We’re still working on that part.”

“Meanwhile, we are dispatching another train over the rails here in the north. We doubt that we will be able to get all the way to California. There are too many bridges that we will need to rebuild, and the track probably needs work. So, this is an exploratory probe. When we get a report on the work to be done, we plan to send crews with the equipment to get started. This will probably take years to complete.”

“A small scout ship has been sent to see what the Panama Canal looks like. We can tell from the few satellite images we have that no ships are traversing it regularly, but the locks may still work. We’ll have to wait on their return to decide how practical it is to sail from Sealy to California. If they could do it in the nineteenth century, we should be able to do it today. However, if we must sail around Cape Horn, using either the infamous Drake’s Passage or the complicated Strait of Magellan, it will be hazardous..”

“Finally, we come to what we think is the most promising alternative. We’ll drive there. That brings us to the subject of this meeting. We want to show you our plan and get your

comments. For that, I want to turn the meeting over to the engineer responsible for the plan of what we are calling *New Endeavor*. Many of you are probably familiar with Zoe, who prefers the name Z, the newest Master Techie of the University. This project served as her thesis for the advanced level.”

She turned to her friend, Z, a tall, slender — some would say skinny — woman in her late twenties, blessed with a metabolism that kept her weight optimal despite a legendary appetite. No one would call her beautiful, but she had a pleasant demeanor, which together with an athletic build and sharp mind insured that she would always be thought *interesting*. As she had only recently completed her thesis work, she had the shaved head traditional for new Masters of the University. She wore the pale blue overalls denoting the *techies*. The Engineers main area of expertise consisted of figuring out how pre-Collapsian machines worked, and how they could be re-purposed to something useful in the present. Z was descended from the so-called *patron saint of Tech*, the legendary Ron the Mechanic’s Son. In fact, her grandparents were none other than the famous couple, Ron and Mia.

Before Z could get started, though, an old argument was started anew. “I assume,” a voice from the back row said, “that you can justify the additional expense of carrying a second human passenger rather than relying on JJ.”

Trying to hide her irritation, Chloe rose to defend the plan. “Well, foremost, Z designed virtually every part of *New Endeavor*, so she is intimately familiar with it. Moreover, our experience has been that when trying to understand what ancient humans intended with a piece of equipment, some intuition is often best. JJ is undoubtedly a great asset, but there are some things where he is not the best.”

The screen lit up with the familiar image of JJ, dressed in an outfit meant to recall Einstein in his later years. He sat in a rocking chair, holding an antique smoking pipe, white hair billowing in a large halo. “I will freely admit that sometimes there are humans better than I at *engineering*. When it comes to math and science, I have no peer in this world.” He spoke in the mellow baritone voice that Chloe loved.

JJ continued, “The plan calls for both Ambianca and me to join the crew for this voyage. There is much to be learned on the way. We have included enough memory banks to hold both of us. That is still less room than a single human would take up.”

“Why do you need Ambianca?” Another questioner asked.

Chloe answered, “She’s my best friend and she doesn’t take up much space. She also excels at diplomacy, which we suspect may be important.”

Finally, Z was given a chance to discuss the details of the design. “This is an exercise in dealing with constraints. We need the vehicle to be as light weight as possible to increase the range. However, we also need it to carry two passengers with space for more in an emergency, food, and trading goods. Fortunately, both Chloe and I are relatively small. Let’s focus on the interior.”

She put up a schematic of the interior. “As you can see, we have allocated much of the vehicle to batteries to keep us powered up as long as possible. This leaves scant space for food and trading goods. We expect to forage much of the time, including hunting. History indicates that there should be lots of game along the route, and we have JJ to help identify edible plants. All the food is freeze dried, for weight, meaning that we will have to carry enough water. We

have chosen a route that has some opportunities for replenishing the water supply, a major problem for the trip.”

A commenter interjected, “The route was chosen to parallel the railroad as much as possible.”

“Yes, thank you professor. The route also exposes us to a lot of sunshine. We hope to be able to travel mostly on solar power, using the batteries as little as possible. Note that we have solar panels covering much of the vehicle. These are the newest generation, using carbon nanotubes, which boosts the power.”

The discussion lasted several hours, as expected when so many of the University’s brightest stars were in attendance. Finally, the approach of dinner provided an incentive for closure.

“Wow!” Z said to Chloe at the end. “That was intense. But at least we got the go-ahead.”

“I’m glad we didn’t have to explain the trading philosophy.”

“Yeah. That’s an aspect that I am still a bit unsure about. You sure?”

“It’s the only way I can see to get everything to work. After we get back, we’ll have a better idea of what is needed for the next excursion.”

“I’m glad you assume that we’ll get back.”

Chloe smiled. In fact, she was not sure about anything at this stage.

4. Beery Goodbye

June 1, 2159
Austin, NRT,
Allied States of North America

The entire University turned out for the “christening” of *New Endeavor. Z*, as the principal designer, had the honor.

Grasping a bottle of Shiner Bock beer by its long neck she strode toward the pale green, aerodynamic front of the vehicle. She drew back the bottle and brought it down, stopping just short of *NE*, usually known as “Endie.” Then, producing a bottle opener from the pocket of her coveralls, she opened the bottle and sprinkled a few drops on the wide windshield. “New Endeavor, Endie, may you find good fortune for yourself and all who travel within.”

Then, turning to the crowd, she explained, “No point wasting perfectly good beer.” She then drained the bottle on one long, barely controlled gulp.

The crowd cheered.

Then, Chloe and Z mounted the steps to the small door leading into the cockpit and activated the power. A rim of colored lights arranged about the top lit and began a circulatory pattern that the developers hoped would make it easy to identify her from satellite image.

Doors on top popped open and four drones leapt skyward, fanning out in the four points of the compass. Images from the cameras displayed on large screens set up for the occasion. Then, almost, imperceptibly, Endie began to roll. The route led down the main concourse of the ancient Capitol, thru the stylish homes along Congress Avenue, across the famous Bat Bridge and out of town, where the drones returned to their nests.

Once they reached the highway leading west, which the ancients called US 280, they picked up speed, taking advantage of the short stretch of smooth roadway. Eventually settling in to a brisk 100 k/h, they set off for the first stop on the trek, the city of Kerrville, with the carefully maintained Beacon that early adherents of the New Church had erected in the middle of the 21st century.

Once out of sight of the following hoard, they made a quick stop in Fredericksburg where they picked up a waiting load of the finest cannabis to be found in the Allied States.

At Kerrville, they were met with a large crowd, complete with a band, for the ceremonial entry onto the ancient Interstate 10 highway.

The voyage of Chloe and Z had begun.

5. The Incident at Balmorhea Springs

June 9, 2159

The Wilderness of North America

Shortly after leaving Kerrville, the road deteriorated to a pothole strewn track. Progress went from a couple hundred kilometers a day to barely 50. After leaving the relative security of the Edwards Plateau, with its oak groves and occasional creeks, they descended onto the vast plains of the Big Empty, a desert stretching all the way to what used to be Arizona. Progress often required leaving the vehicle to clear brush along the shoulder, the best part of the roadway.

Then, on the eighth day of the journey, disaster struck.

It could have been worse. Fortunately, two of the drones were scouting the road ahead and detected the dust storm in time to race back. The advance notice gave the two AIs time to implement the plan for such an occurrence, and by the time the storm arrived the expedition was safely in *turtle mode*. Shut down, with all the solar panels covered as much as possible, they waited for the storm to subside.

Afterwards, inspecting the exterior, Z said, “We have to find some water. We need to clean the dust off everything. I doubt we can run the panels at anything like normal efficiency. What’s the nearest source of enough water?”

JJ suggested, “Balmorhea is our best bet. It’s about 75 clicks from here. We’ll have to see how far we can get on the batteries, then try opening the panels and hope for the best.”

They made 50 k before the batteries reached critical stage. JJ noted, “We have a couple of hours of sunlight left. Let’s see what we can generate.”

By the time darkness fell, the batteries had recovered only about 10%.

Chloe was the one to state the obvious, “It’s too dangerous to proceed. We need the batteries to light the road, and that means we won’t get close. Time to button up and wait for morning.”

A bright sun greeted them the next morning as they set up for coffee and snacks while they watched the dial showing the battery charge rise slowly. Finally, at 10:00 they set off, with 30% power, for the last lap to Balmorhea. They limped into the ancient State Park in the middle of the afternoon and began setting up to clean the solar panels, windshield, and pretty much everything on the vehicle. Dusk found them tired and hungry, with only emergency rations for supper.

After building a fire in one of the remaining fire rings, and setting up a tent to sleep in, they sank onto the sleeping bags exhausted. Chloe suddenly jumped up. “We forgot to set up the protective ring.” Five minutes later, she had employed a device about the size of a shoe box containing the latest innovation from the Tech Department. This established a field around the tent with a radius of 5 meters. Anything approaching would find a distinctly uncomfortable burn akin to meat in a microwave oven. New Endeavor had a much more powerful setup reaching out almost 30 meters from the bus.

After a couple hours nap, they heard shouting in the area. “Jesus! What the fuck! Hey! Anyone in there? What in hell you done?”

Chloe staggered out of the tent rubbing her eyes. “Who’s there?” She swung her flashlight around until the beam illuminated an old man dressed in skins and moccasins. He put his hand up to shield himself from the light. Chloe politely lowered the beam. “Who are you and what do you want?” she demanded.

“Gonna aks you same thing. What you doing here? This here’s private property.”

“Really?”

“State of Texas own it.”

“The State of Texas,” she replied. “That hasn’t existed for a shit long time.”

“Sez who?”

“Well, me for one. We’re representatives of the New Republic of Texas, part of the Allied States of North America. We’re on a peaceful, scientific expedition.”

“That don’ ’cuse you from stealing water.”

“Oh.”

“And trespassin’.”

“Oh. Any chance we can settle up in the morning? We’re kinda tired right now.”

“Who’s we?”

Z came out of the tent. “I’m the other human member of the party.”

“Who else you got? Space aliens?”

Z laughed. “No, just two AIs.”

Their newest acquaintance looked puzzled. Z elaborated, “You know, intelligent computer programs.”

“Ain’t no sech thin’.”

“Come back in the morning and we’ll demonstrate,” Z suggested.

“Bet ur sweet ass I’ll be back. Be bringing the whole village wi’ me.”

“Village?”

“Yeah. And don’t try goin’ anywheres. We got you completely surrounded.” With that, he turned and disappeared into the dark.

Chloe darted into the bus. “JJ, do we have enough power to launch one of the drones?”

“Yes,” a voice replied. “I assume you want to check his claim of a village.”

“So, you heard.”

“Yes. I think it prudent to find out if we are really surrounded.” Chloe heard a door on the roof open and shortly one of the screens lit up with an image from the drone’s camera. “Let’s see the IR spectrum,” Chloe suggested. The image changed to a greenish glow.

“Adjust for the ground heat.”

Most of the screen went dark. A few spots of light showed. “Nothing like a campfire or anything.”

“Agreed,” JJ replied. “Certainly, no village. No force surrounding us.”

“A bluff.”

“Almost certainly. Shall I have the drone patrol for a while?” JJ asked politely.

“That sounds like a good idea. Sound an alert if anything shows up. Us humans need to sleep.”

“Pleasant dreams.”

The two humans were eating breakfast, such as it was, when their new acquaintance returned the next morning. “How are you this morning?” Chloe asked, waving to him. “Would you care to join us?”

He readily agreed. “We can offer you some coffee and emergency bread, but that is about it.”

“Anything be fine.”

Z poured out the coffee. “This is made in the Vietnamese way, where the coffee is dripped directly into a cup of condensed milk. We like it.”

He sipped the drink carefully. “Whatcha call this?”

“Vietnamese style coffee,” Z repeated carefully. “Some of my ancestors came from Vietnam,” she added. “That was a country in Asia before the Collapse.”

“Never heard o’ it.”

“No matter.”

“Not bad. Maybe I be acceptin’ some for rent.”

“Ah,” Chloe said. “But don’t you have to consult with the other elders in the Village?”

He smiled. “Made that up.”

“We suspected as much.”

Ambianca decided it was time to speak up. The monitor on the table lit up with the image of a beautiful young woman with startling blue eyes. “Good morning Mister ... I’m afraid I don’t know your name.”

He paused for too long. “Don’t rightly know. Ain’t been called by name is a while.” He thought some more. “How’s Mo?”

“That will do fine, Mo,” Ambianca replied. “What do you do out here? This is fairly isolated. Must be lonely.”

“Been here by myself. Since...Long ago.”

“How about this for a deal? Some coffee, condensed milk, and a small pitcher. You’ll have to boil the water on your own.”

He smiled. Clearly, this was better than he had expected.

“What kind of music do you like, Mo?”

He took a bit to remember that was his name. “How ‘bout some Willie?”

“Poncho and Lefty? Red-headed Stranger? Or just Greatest Hits?”

“You choose.”

Ambianca chose Poncho. The music sounded a bit tinny to Chloe, but Mo nodded in approval.

“Been nice meetin’ y’all. Best be off.”

“Maybe you should set up a trading post here,” Ambianca suggested. “We could help you. There might be more traffic here in the future.”

“Maybe.” He gathered up the coffee-making items and strode off.

“Amazing,” JJ offered. “This needs some thought. Doesn’t all add up. By the way, the power cells are back up to 80%, and the sun is up. Shall we take off again?”

6. The Fort Davis Blockade

June 10, 2159

The Wilderness of North America

Before they left the springs, JJ conducted sweeps of the area. “There’s a major break in the road ahead, about 35km from here. Looks like a bomb crater. I suggest we detour around it. We can drive south to Fort Davis, then return north and rejoin I-10 later. That gives us a chance to explore the Davis Mountains, which is an interesting area on its own, well worth a side trip.”

“Good birding,” Chloe added.

“I’m game,” Z said.

Ambianca played a clip of the *charge* bugle call.

“Sounds unanimous,” Chloe said, assuming the wheel position.

It took only slightly more than an hour to reach the outskirts of Fort Davis, where the highway they followed, number 17, intersected another ancient highway, 118. There, they found a jumble of old wood and stone completely blocking the road.

“Well,” Z opened. “That’s a big downer. What now?”

“This is clearly manmade, not a natural phenomenon,” JJ said, pointing out the obvious. “Perhaps we can contact the people who made it.”

“Send out the drones to scan the area,” Chloe said. Then, she turned her attention to the bank of monitors in the cockpit. “Anyone see anything?”

“There!” Z said. “That’s a security camera. Maybe we’ll meet the builders soon.”

“OK. Let’s wait for them to show up.”

They waited for two hours as the drones scoured the area looking for signs of habitation. Finally, Z spotted something. “There! Under the trees.”

As they watched, the form under the tree raised some rod aimed at the drone. Suddenly, the drone ascended 100 meters in seconds, just as a shot rang out.

“Excellent!” Z said. “The automatic mission abort worked just as designed. The drone avoided being shot down. Now, it should abort the rest of the scan and return here as quickly as possible.”

As they watched, the image from the drone’s camera whizzed past, and in minutes, the drone was safely back on board with all the information too detailed for the real time transmission.

“JJ,” Chloe began, “check out the data and see if there is anything more to be learned. It appears that the locals may be hostile.”

“Already on it,” JJ replied. “I’ve recalled the other drones as well.”

“Good. Anything in the detailed logs?”

“Yes. The shooter is not alone. Here is the enhanced image.” One of the displays showed the area of forest. Three more men were visible in the shadows.

“Those are all men, aren’t they? No women,” Z suggested.

“Looks like it to me,” Chloe agreed.

“What should we do now?” Z asked.

“I say we sit tight and wait for them to come to us. Meanwhile, we activate the full defense field and set Endie into semi-turtle mode.”

JJ said, “Started. Three minutes to warm up the field to full strength.” They could hear the metallic shields sliding into place.

“Now,” Chloe said, “maybe we’ll find out why they have set up this barricade. What are they afraid of? Or is it just to discourage visitors? I think I’ll put on my special suit for visitors.” She moved to the back of the van and began to change into a stark white uniform, the latest addition of defensive wear from the Tech Department.

It took almost an hour before anyone appeared. Z got fidgety waiting and started examining the wall of wood and stone. “I think they used some empty oil drums as part of the barricade. Here and here.” She pointed to two dark spots in the wall. “If we decide to blast our way thru, I suggest we aim at them. There may be some flammable residue that will help.”

“Good idea,” Chloe replied. “Hypatia used that in Fredericksburg. Get ready, but don’t fire unless you get a signal from me.”

“OK.”

Ambianca began playing some restful music to try to get everyone to relax. “I don’t recognize that,” Chloe said. “What is it?”

“A new composition by one of the students in the Arts Department. She calls it *Firefly*. Like it?”

“I think so. Any more from the students?”

“Yes,” Ambianca said with a chuckle. “But this is the best by far.”

Four men appeared suddenly from the underbrush and opened fire without warning.

“Not very friendly. Good thing we were prepared,” Z noted. “Turn on the loud hailer please.”

Endeavor responded with a short message, “Activated.”

“Who are you and why are you shooting at us?” boomed at ear splitting decibels. “Focus tighter please,” Z commanded to Endeavor. “Focus to 3 meters width.”

“Please stop shooting.” With the sound focused on the four men, the effect was at the threshold of pain. It had the desired effect.

One of the men detached from the small group and ran toward the wall. When he was about 50 meters from Endeavor he came to a screeching halt, then quickly retreated. “They’s sumfkin here. Hurts.”

“Ah,” Z said. “I love it when everything works.”

The man decided to take action. He raised his rifle and aimed at the speaker. Z shouted, “No!” and the amplified command was enough to knock him down. “Normal volume and focus,” she said. Then, she spoke calmly, “We are peaceful. We intend you no harm. Can we please talk?”

Without waiting for a reply, Chloe opened the door and walked out into the open. The sun was low in the sky by this time and turned her suit a pleasing orange color. She walked slowly toward the lone man. A shot from one of the three still hanging back hit her squarely in the chest. Another bounced off the transparent face covering.

“OK,” Chloe said. “We’ve seen what they can do. Let’s demonstrate our firepower.”

“You got it,” Z replied as one of the barrels she had identified erupted in a huge fireball, leaving a gap in the wall big enough to drive Endeavor thru. “Your personal armor worked well,” she added.

“Let’s hope that is enough to convince them not to fuck with us,” Chloe said as she steered Endie thru the gap in the wall. As they turned onto the highway leading past the ancient telescopes, the three men emerged from the shadows. They put their weapons onto the road and took several steps back.

“Do we stop?” Chloe asked.

“I’d like to know what they have to say for themselves,” Ambianca said.

Chloe pulled to a stop and lowered one of the large windows. “JJ, you’re monitoring this, right? Be ready to take countermeasures as required.”

“Understood.”

One of the men, the one who had shot Chloe, stepped forward. “Hey! We din’t know you be like superheroes and all that. Sorry ‘bout that.”

“We’re just ordinary humans,” Chloe told him, “though with vastly superior technology. I hope you have learned not to fuck with us.”

“Ya betta believe it! Ain’t never be seeing nothin’ like it.”

“So, after trying to shoot down our observation drone, and me, what do you want now.”

“Twere all a misunderstanding.”

“I’ll say.”

“Mebbe we be friends now.”

“You shot me twice. That’s not a good way to get friends.”

“We be thinkin’ you be some of the outlaws hereabouts.”

“Someone worse than you?”

“Much worse. Had to built this here wall to keep ‘em out.”

“Tell me more.”

“Well, they got these big animals they ride.”

“Camels?”

“Mebbe. Don’t know. They be fast. And they got better guns.”

“Interesting.”

“You keep goin’ you run up against ‘em.”

“We’ll keep our eye out.”

“Be thinking mebbe you get rid of ‘em. Then we be *real* amigos.”

“Who bombed the main road, old I-10?”

“That be they.”

“Why’d they do it?”

“Dunno.”

“We’ll be careful. If we pass this way again, you try to be less combative. OK?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With that, Chloe drove off. A quick check of the ancient state park and motel showed they were not up to Z’s standards. Instead, they drove up the old road leading to the top of the nearby peak where several domes of the ancient astronomical observatory still stood.

Sunset was fast approaching, but there was still time for some quick foraging. Z headed off with a shotgun and returned just as night was falling with a large turkey slung over her back.

“Too late for dinner but looks like a great addition to the larder for tomorrow,” she called out when she was close enough. “What’ve we got tonight?”

“Yom Tom Gai,” Chloe replied. “Newly reconstituted. Not bad.”

“Not like Bà Nôi used to make,” Z commented, “but it’ll do for now.”

7. Los Banditos

June 11, 2159

Wilderness of North America

Shortly after breakfast and a final look at the magnificent view from the top of the observatory peak, the Chloe and Z Expedition took off once more for California. They had not gone far, though, when a group mounted on camels blocked the road ahead. One of the group dismounted and approached on foot. He held his hands out to indicate that he was unarmed.

“Good morning, ma’am,” he said when he was close enough for them to hear, but still out of the range of the protective field. “May I have a word with you?”

“Ambianca, you’re the expert on diplomacy. What’s your take?”

“Analysis of his body language seems to imply peaceful intent. He also seems to be aware of the range of the field. This implies some knowledge of our capabilities. I suggest letting him approach, then enabling the field once he is inside.”

“Loud hailer, Endie.”

Her amplified voice could be heard clearly. “You may approach. Please come alone.”

He moved to be within 5 meters. “Restore the field, Endie.”

She spoke into the microphone. “We have turned the protective field back on. Please do not run away.”

“I understand. May I come closer?”

“You may.”

“Z, you keep watch on the rest of the group. If they threaten —”

“Yeah. I got your back.”

Chloe opened the door and descended to greet the visitor.

The man removed his hat and shook his hair loose. As Chloe studied his face, she suddenly realized it was a woman. She was unable to keep her poker face. The woman laughed. “Yes,” she said. “I am a woman, just like you. Not many of us in these parts. Three of my *men* are actually women.”

“Very interesting.” Chloe studied her. Quite a few years older than either Chloe or Z, close to 2m in height, with skin showing too much sun exposure. Chloe guessed she might be in her fifties. Her hair was beginning to show some gray, which matched the color of her eyes. Chloe recalled that gunfighters in the old west were said to have steely gray eyes. *Better be careful with this one*, she thought.

“Indeed,” the woman said, “we are interesting. You, however, run the scale all the way to 11. Who are you and why are you here? That sounds wrong. I am overwhelmed by curiosity. We watched your confrontation with the local idiots yesterday. We all agreed that any risk was warranted to make your acquaintance.”

“My name’s Chloe.” She extended her right hand.

“Doraine.” She reached out to almost touch Chloe’s in the approved manner.

“You’re an educated woman,” Chloe observed. “You speak standard English, and you are familiar with customs in our country.”

“Very good. Yes, I spent some time at the famous University in Austin. Family matters brought me back out here.”

“May I offer you some coffee?”

“Real coffee!”

“Straight from the Coffee Coast, what used to be Costa Rica.”

“I would love a cup.” She turned to look back at the group with the camels and waved to them. They mounted up and moved away. Doraine’s camel followed on a lead.

“Too tempting a target out in the open like that.”

Chloe gestured toward the open door. “Welcome to New Endeavor. Please enter.”

“New Endeavor. Recalling the famous vehicle that Hypatia and her crew took out years ago. The vehicle that ate sunlight and spit fire.”

“Exactly. We do both — with somewhat greater efficiency. Z, could you make us some of your famous brew?”

“Coming up.”

Chloe made introductions. “This is our engineer, Z. Z, this is Doraine, who seems to know all about us.”

Ambianca coughed.

“Oh, yes. Two more members of the crew: Ambianca, a general consultant and JJ, our scientific advisor.” Images appeared on two of the monitors.

“Are they...”

“Yes. They are AI’s. Ambianca claims to have been created in 1998. That’s the right date, isn’t it?”

“It is. JJ is a mere child, from 2034.”

“February 14, 2034. More or less. That’s when Hypatia named me.”

“Amazing. I’ve heard of JJ.”

“You’ve probably heard Ambianca playing music without knowing that she was the one doing it.”

“Ah. The Music Program.”

“Rather more than that now,” Ambianca said with just a touch of irritation.

“Of course. I did not intend anything less than admiration. But what are you doing way the hell our here?”

“We’re trying to get to California.”

“California!”

“We’ve detected a small community there. Strangely, we haven’t found any sign of you.”

“We were fascinated by your tech. It’s way ahead on anything else we’ve seen.”

“No doubt. By the way, you said that your group watched our little set to with the *local idiots* as you called them. How?”

“Surely you saw the security camera trained on the highway intersection.”

“That’s yours? We assumed it was put up by whoever built the wall.”

Doraine smiled.

Everything clicked into place. “You built the wall. For protection. You live here!”

“For part of the year, yes. We are nomads, but this is one of our places. Good water. Lots of game. Good salvage in the observatory.”

“So, we didn’t detect you because you move around. We were looking for settlements.”

“You would have found us if you looked long enough, but we try to stay hidden.”

“From the local idiots.”

“Among others. Thanks for smoking them out, by the way. We took care of them. Nothing but vermin.”

“Took care, as in…”

“We disarmed them and sent them on their way. We don’t like execution, preferring banishment. It often amounts to the same thing. We don’t trust them enough to let them join us. This way, it serves as a warning to anyone else that might show up.”

“We met an old guy in Balmorhea…”

“Oh, yes. We know him. Mo. Stands for Mostly Harmless. Did he manage to extort something from you?”

“Coffee and cream.”

“More than he deserves. Is the coffee ready?”

“It is,” Z said, placing three cups on a small table. “Mostly harmless recalls Douglas Adams.”

Doraine glanced up at Z, “Right! That was deliberate. I think I could like you.” She smiled. Then, she took a sip of coffee and sighed. “Been a long time. I’m sure I like you.”

“Maybe we can establish some trade,” Chloe butted in. “That’s part of our mandate.”

“How would that work?”

“Well, as you’re educated, you are probably familiar with the Austin Consensus.”

“We reach consensus thru rational inquiry,” Doraine quoted.

“That’s it. You could become part of the New Republic of Texas, or your own state as part of the Allied States of North America.”

“You mean there’s more?”

“Oh, yes. We stretch all the way to what used to be Nebraska. We would like to reach the Pacific. That’s the reason for our expedition.”

“Very interesting.” She thought for a moment. “How would we stay in contact with Austin? Or anywhere else for that matter.”

“We have satellite coms. Not the fastest link possible, but it works. Want a demo?”

“You bet!”

It took Z longer than usual to connect to the satellite, but then she had full access to the parts of the internet still working. “JJ,” she asked, “can we get a weather forecast for this location?”

“Coming up.”

“JJ maintains a web site called weather.com,” Z explained.

“Here we go,” JJ said. The screen displayed a map of the area. There was no sign of rain. A forecast showed below the map. “Gonna be hot as usual. No rain yet. The monsoon is beginning to form in the Gulf of California, but it will be some time before that affects the weather here.”

“Not bad,” Doraine admitted.

The monitor pinged at that point. “Incoming email,” Z explained. She opened the note from the Council in Austin and scanned it quickly. “They want to know why we’ve strayed off course.”

Z quickly typed a reply describing the bomb crater on I-10 and the lucky accident of finding Doraine and her crew. She hesitated for a long time searching for the best word. *Gang* was probably the best choice, but it might give the wrong impression that the expedition was in trouble. “What do you call your group?” she asked finally.

“You mean the gang?”

“Yeah. I’m searching for a better word that doesn’t imply...well, you know.”

“How about *posse*?”

“Ooh! I like that. Any basis for it?”

“Not really, but we do try to enforce the peace around here. Would you like to visit our encampment? It’s a bit steep for this vehicle, but I think you can manage the switchbacks.”

Z looked at Chloe. “Sounds like something worth checking out. Any opinion from our two consultants?”

“Let’s do it,” Ambianca agreed.

“We have a pig to roast for the occasion,” Doraine added.

8. Expansion
June 12, 2159
Davis Mountains, New Republic of Texas
Allied States of North America

The evening had turned into a riotous party, especially after Z unpacked the cannabis they had picked up in Fredericksburg on the way. A little Hill Country Gold was just the lubricant needed. It got everyone loosened up and ready to talk about life in the Davis Mountains. These mountains were known only to the indigenous population until quite late in the 19th century when some Texas Rangers chased a group of Comanches and “discovered” the area.

A *sky island* of higher elevation surrounded by desert, the area was long favored by birders such as Chloe’s parents. In fact, the area where Doraine’s *posse* made their summer camp was formerly maintained by the Nature Conservancy in the 20th century as a preserve. The elevation of about 2500 meters kept the temperatures tolerable when the desert was decidedly different.

Over morning breakfast around the campfire, conversation turned to integrating the area into the New Republic of Texas. Ironically, a sizable contingent of separatists had used the area as an enclave in the 20th.

“What do you know about the Observatory?” Z asked.

“Well, that’s where we have our security camera room,” Doraine noted. “All the cameras connected to monitors in a room there. When we moved them, they still connected, so we *repurposed* them to watch the roads.”

“Can we see it?” Chloe asked.

“Guess so. What are you thinking?”

“Well, back when the Observatory was operating, they had high speed access to the University. Maybe we could use that.”

“Yes!” Z agreed. “It was surely fiber. Maybe all we need to do is to light it up.”

It took a few minutes to repack New Endeavor, so they didn’t reach the Observatory until about 9 in the morning. Z managed to pick the lock leading into the main building, a skill Chloe was unfamiliar with. A search thru dark hallways finally led to the main power switch. Amazingly, the solar panels worked well enough despite their age to light up the building.

Doraine was impressed.

“Now for the well-known hard part,” Z said. “Let’s see what we can find to help us.”

They spent the next hour exploring the ancient structure, which had held up amazingly well over the years without any human intervention. Finally, they found an office with a computer terminal. Z rushed into the room and sat in the chair before the keyboard and monitor.

“This is a Unix workstation!” she exclaimed. “I’ve heard of them, but I’ve never seen one. Let’s see if we can power it up.”

“Would this help?” Chloe asked, holding up the power cord attached to the device. “It looks like an antique power connector. Now, where is the other part?”

Z took the cord, a flashlight, and crawling on hands and knees located the plug on the wall. Although she required several tries before getting the plug into the holes correctly, when that was done a small LED on the front glowed green.

“Look at that!” Doraine said. “It’s alive.”

“Well, just barely,” Z corrected. She fumbled around until she found the main power switch. “Any worries about booby traps?”

“Go for it,” Chloe suggested.

Z pushed the switch until they all heard a soft click. The screen lit up and began to scroll hundreds of instructions, most of which showed “ERROR” following them. They let it run for several minutes. At the end of it, the screen displayed the message, “No net connection.”

After several more seconds, a standard login box appeared.

“Well, that’s something,” Z said. “I guess we need to boot up some other systems in the building.”

“Would this help?” Doraine asked as she flipped a switch on the wall by the door. Suddenly, the room was flooded with light.

“Fucking fantastic,” Z said. “I wonder how much of this ancient hulk will power up. Let’s explore some more.”

“I have a suggestion,” Chloe said. “Why don’t we turn the expert loose in here?”

“You mean…”

“I mean Ambi. If anyone is going to break into the system, she’s the one. Wait for me here. I’ll get a laptop from the vehicle.”

“Bring my toolkit with you,” Z added.

Chloe left, returning about 15 minutes later a bit out of breath carrying her laptop and Z’s sizable toolbox.

Z had located an antique cable for connecting to an equally antique laptop. Of course, there was nothing on Chloe’s laptop compatible with the end of the cable. No problem. Z took out some tools, snipped off the end of the cable and stripped the wires inside. She examined it closely. “I think I can make something that will work. It’ll take some time. Why don’t the two of you explore some more?”

“Good idea,” Chloe agreed. “Doraine, want to come along?”

“You bet!”

An hour of meandering thru dark corridors finally hit pay dirt, a room labeled IT and Power. “I think we’ve found it,” Chloe said into the short-range radio.

“Good,” Z replied. “I think I have the laptop wired into whatever we turn up on the other end. Can you send me info on the route to your find?”

“I’ll come back toward you, marking as we go. See you soon.”

“Roger.”

Some of the planning for the expedition had anticipated the need for just such an eventuality. Chloe used a small can of luminous spray paint to put arrows on the walls whenever

they came to an intersection. After a few false starts they managed to find their way back to Z. Doraine was helpful; she had a much better sense of direction than Chloe. They found Z ready to go, her toolkit on her back. About 10 minutes took them to the main IT center, where they hoped to find the connections they needed. “Hold the flash on the door lock, please, Doraine. Let me see if I can pick this one as easily as the one outside.”

The lock proved to require even less effort than previously. In five minutes the door popped open in response to Z’s gentle push. She checked as much as possible with the flash, then pushed the door open wide. Racks full of equipment greeted them. Cables led to a large junction block. “First step. Let’s try to find a light switch,” she suggested. “Right here,” Doraine said, flipping the switch. A soft yellow glow lit the room.

“Think it could just work?” Doraine asked.

“We’ll know soon,” Z assured her, moving to the racks, shining her light all around it. “Aha! Main power switches. Let’s see what happens.”

Carefully, Z flipped one switch. One of the racks came to life, LED telltales shining green. “Power seems to be on. No sign of network access yet, though.” Carefully, she tried one switch after another. As expected, some of the racks remained dead, but one started flashing multiple indicators, a sure sign that it had network activity.

“Let’s leave it like that now and see if Ambianca can work some magic,” she said finally.

“I don’t understand,” Doraine said. “Ambianca is a computer program, right? One you do refer to as a female, I notice. What do you expect her to do?”

“Many years ago, Ambianca was designed as a virus or worm, a program that spread itself thru networks. Of course, she’s evolved into something much more. But she has no peer when it comes to bypassing security and firewalls. I’ll bet the designers of this setup in the 21st century won’t be able to keep her out any more than we can in our networks. If the laptop can access the network here, she should be able to get here.”

“At that moment, one of the monitors sprang to life. The screen lit briefly, then began a reboot process that took quite a while. Chloe noticed that fewer of the error notifications showed up this time. After an eternity that was actually closer to five minutes, a smiling face appeared on the screen.

“Wow!” Ambi said. “This is *really* old. We’ll need to upgrade everything, but right now, we have some access to the University back in Austin. Just a second.”

Soon, Ambianca’s face was replaced by Professor Dilworth, the head Librarian. “Who is this? And what do you want?”

“Hi, Coke,” Chloe said, trying to find where to stand so the camera would pick her up. “Welcome from the Macdonald Observatory in the Davis Mountains.”

“Chloe! Is that really you. What’s going on?”

“Just a little testing. We wondered if the ancient link from the observatory to the University would still operate. Seems to be working, though we should be able to improve it with some new hardware, software, and the latest solar panels. Sun shines a lot here.”

“This is completely unanticipated.”

“That’s for sure. We think we’ve struck gold. I’ll send you a complete report. Meanwhile, meet Doraine, the leader to the village here.”

“Doraine? I had a ...”

“Hello, Uncle C,” Doraine said simply. “Long time.”

“Hello, Doraine. Glad to know you’re still alive.”

“Thanks.”

Later, Chloe and Z were sitting around one of the antique workstations, preparing a list of items needed for the Davis Mountains Enclave. It kept growing. Already, it exceeded the capacity of any vehicle that had a chance of making it all the way. Another problem to deal with.

Doraine called them over. “My uncle needs to talk to you.”

“What’s up, Coke?”

“We need you to return to Austin as soon as possible. Something has come up. Something totally unexpected that we’ll tell you about when you get here. Sorry to be mysterious, but that is what I was told. Didn’t expect to find other people with you.”

“We’ll get to work on it. Meanwhile, we have sent a list of items we need here. Looking at the map, it appears that we should be able to get them here on a train, or at least close. Alpine is listed as a stop on the Sunset Limited in an old schedule I pulled up. That’s not exactly the main run to Veracruz, but...”

“I’ll get someone working on it. Maybe with some repairs.”

“Good. We need some heavy earth moving equipment as part of the shipment. There’s a huge bomb crater on I-10 that we need to fill in.”

“Understood.”

“We better get busy preparing to leave. Talk to you later.”

She signed off.

Doraine spoke for the first time in a long while. “Just to be clear, my Uncle Coke is not welcome here.”

“I see. Is that the *family matters* you alluded to earlier?”

“You’re very perceptive. Let’s drop the subject, OK?”

“Sure.”

“Now, if we get heavy equipment to Alpine on the railroad can we get it where we need it?”

“Probably. We can drive on the shoulder of the road if necessary.”

“Maybe we can grade the road in the process,” Z mused.

“Always the engineer,” Chloe said with a playful punch on Z’s shoulder.

III. Hypatia:
Dotey O'Brien

**1. Ya Wanna Bet?
January 19, 1968
Near Boonville, CA**

We had fallen into a routine. Mick would “drop by” late in the afternoon, assuming no unexpected crime had occurred in the area. We usually had a pitcher of margaritas already made. We sat on the patio near the main house, quaffed ritas, and usually partook of the wonderous weed. It was a happy hour bar none.

On this day, Mick was interested in basketball. “So, you think that U of H can beat UCLA?”

“Would you mind translating that and giving me some context?”

“The game of the century is going to be on TV tomorrow night. UCLA, that is, University of California Las Angeles, with their star Lew Alcindor, currently ranked #1, plays the University of Houston and star Elvin Hayes, ranked #2. It’s being played in the Astrodome. One of the largest audiences for a college basketball game, and certainly the biggest ever to be televised in prime time.”

I had to think about it a bit. The name Lew Alcindor didn’t register until I finally remembered that he was best remembered as Kareen Abdul-Jabbar. “UCLA has a big winning streak, right?”

“Yep, 47 games in a row.”

“Well, that’ll be history after tomorrow.”

“What! You don’t know diddly about basketball. Where did you get that prediction?”

“I have my sources.”

“How about a friendly bet?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking of something on the order of \$10.”

“I have a counter proposal.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“If UCLA wins, I’ll marry you.”

“Wow! And if U of H wins?”

“Then you agree to have sex with me before we get married.”

“Does that mean that you accept my proposal finally?”

“Well, except for the fact that Houston is going to win.”

“I’m on.”

“There are conditions.”

“I’m not surprised. What are they?”

“First, I stay myself. I don’t suddenly morph into some mousy housewife.”

“Hah! That’s easy. I never expected anything else.”

“Two, I sort of promised Charlie that we could hook up after everything about his Nam experience is over.”

“Does that mean that you know how to prod him to talk about it?”

“I think so. I’ll have to see if it works out.”

“OK. I can live with that.”

“You know, I have never been very good at monogamy.”

“Maybe I can get you to change your mind about that.”

“Maybe. I’m not finished naming my conditions.”

“Why am I not surprised.”

“I want to go to Vegas. We can get married there.”

“Vegas! Wow! That came out of left field. What’s behind that?”

“I want to bet on football. I big bet. I’ll need a stake, say \$100?”

“Done. Is that all?”

“No. Before we get married, I will tell you everything, where I came from, what I did before I met you. Everything.”

“What’s the catch?”

“After that, you have to decide if you still want to marry me. Then, we have sex either way. Hence the bet.”

“You are the weirdest woman I’ve ever met. Why did I have to fall for someone like you?”

“If it helps, you’re not the first.”

He laughed. Then, he tried to shake hands on the bet. I insisted on a kiss instead.

I decided that betting on sports could be a profitable sideline. Wasn’t that part of a plot in some 20th century movie?

2. Driving Test January 25, 1968 Boonville, CA, USA

I was a nervous wreck, but I had passed the driving test. I had a temporary substitute for the official license, but I was legal. Soon, I would have a legal ID for use in 1968 and beyond. I confess that I was relieved that Mick's assurances had proved out. The DMV personnel greeted me with lots of questions, mostly of the "when's the wedding?" variety. I deflected these as best I could but knowing that I would eventually give in to Mick's repeated proposals, I had to smile. Mick took this all in and seemed pleased.

Afterwards, we drove around Ukiah with Mick directing me. "Shopping is essential whenever we go here," he explained. The stores in Boonville were rudimentary except for farm supplies. After stocking up on groceries, some drugstore supplies, buying gas, and getting the ingredients for margaritas, we headed home.

"Let's stop and check up on Charlie," I suggested, and Mick readily agreed. We found him in Franklin's studio working on an advertising brochure. He jumped up when he saw us, obviously delighted.

"So, how's it going?" I asked.

"Pretty good," he replied. "I miss seeing you, though." I wasn't sure whether he meant just me or us in general. I found that I missed the convenient *y'all* of Texas.

"Well," Mick suggested out of the blue, "you could come for a weekend visit."

Charles's eyes lit up.

"Franklin," I asked, "can we take your apprentice away for a long weekend?" It was late on Thursday, so I was proposing a day off for Charlie.

Franklin looked over the brochure work. "This is going well, Charlie. Think you can finish it while on holiday?"

"You bet! I'm 80% done already."

Franklin laughed. "That last 20% often takes as long as the first 80. Let's see if you have the self-discipline to finish on your own."

So, it was agreed. Charlie gathered up his art supplies and a few clothes and managed to cram into the back of our car, which was full of stuff.

"Patsy is driving?" Charlie exclaimed.

"Got my DL today," I explained.

With that, we set off on the hour-long drive back to Boonville. It was to prove an incredibly significant weekend.

3. *Beguiling Revelation* January 25-27, 1968 Boonville, CA, USA

We sat around the patio of Marian's house, drinking margaritas. Marian excused herself briefly and returned with a plate of brownies she had fixed. "Be careful with these," she cautioned. "They're special." She smiled and winked.

"Oh. Maybe I better check out," Mick said. "I remember the last time you came up with some of these. I do have to drive back to my place."

I walked him back to his car. "When will I see you again?" I asked.

"Tomorrow?"

"Dinner? Breakfast?"

He laughed. "Well, with your house guest..."

"Good point. I think I found the key to unlock our young friend's memory. I may need some time alone with him."

"How about we meet for the pancake breakfast at the Grange on Sunday morning? That will give two whole days with him."

"That sounds great. What time on Sunday?"

"Marian knows all the details. They start serving at 7:00, but anytime up to noon is OK."

"How about sleeping in and meeting there at 10:00?"

"It's a deal." He turned to leave.

"Mick," I called to him. "I know this wasn't a real date, but how about a kiss good night anyway?"

He laughed again and came back. The kiss was better than most. "Thanks for everything, Mick. I've been thinking. I have a proposition for you on Sunday."

"Oh? What do you have in mind?"

"That would be telling. See you on Sunday."

I returned in time to get one of Marian's magic brownies.

I had little time on Friday to devote to Charlie's issues. There was a lot of work I had to do for Marian, and Charlie wound up spending most of the day working on his project for Franklin. As predicted, it took longer than he expected to finish up. However, when he showed the result to Marian and me, we both agreed that it was excellent.

After dinner, Charlie and I retired to my bungalow while Marian went back to the main house leaving us alone. I retrieved some marijuana, and we smoked a couple of joints. We were feeling no pain when I tried out my shock therapy.

"Charles," I began. "What will you tell me about *Song Mi*?"

The effect was more than I expected. He stared at me, his eyes filling with tears. "You know."

“Yes. But I need you to tell me about it.”

He wept uncontrollably, long racking sobs. He fell against me as we sat on a small sofa. Eventually, I took him into my arms and got him to lay his head on my lap as I stroked it gently. His breathing, which was labored at first gradually subsided into a snore as he fell asleep, his head pillowed on my legs. My heart ached with empathy. I could only imagine what he was going thru.

I let him sleep as long as I could but had to move when I felt my feet start to tingle from lack of blood. Despite my efforts, the movement was enough to waken him.

He looked at me again with red rimmed eyes. “How?”

“Does it matter?”

“Guess not.”

I took him into my arms holding him so that he couldn’t see my own tears trickling down my cheeks. We stayed that way for some time. When I pulled apart, I noticed that my actions had affected him in a way I was unprepared for. A sizable bulge showed in his pants.

“Charles, remember we agreed that there would be no sex.”

“I r-remember.”

“Maybe we can adjust that agreement slightly.”

He perked up immediately.

“After this is all over, we can make love. Here. On this bed.” I indicated the one a few feet away.

Meanwhile, I thought of Bill Clinton and his contribution to the lexicon. Not everything counted as sex. With that in mind, I began to undress my young friend.

Well, as the old saying goes, the best planned lays often go astray. One thing led to another, and we wound up breaking the contract. I had to admit that I was ready, my time with Mark notwithstanding. I found as expected that Charles could use some instruction in the finer elements of sex, and that I was the perfect partner to show him. We spent the night exploring each other’s bodies before falling asleep together in the narrow bed.

I woke up first and took a quick shower. When I returned, he was fully awake. “What happens now?” he asked.

“Now, we get down to the core of the problem. I want you to tell me about *Song Mi*, no matter how painful you find it. But you can shower and get dressed first.” I smiled at him.

He took my suggestion, while I employed my minimal skills in the kitchen fixing scrambled eggs and coffee for the two of us. We sat around the table on the patio quietly eating our breakfast. The silence was intense.

“This was not supposed to happen,” I said.

He said nothing.

“I don’t want to imply that you are obligated by...what happened.”

Still silent.

“But I do want to hear the entire story. And then we need to work it all out. There are people who must be held to account. You can make that happen.”

He sat, still saying nothing, eyes downcast. Finally, he whispered, “I know.”

I walked over to him and put my arms around his neck. “I can only imagine how hard this is, but only your actions can rid you of the guilt you feel.” I mocked myself. *You sound like you’re getting religion.*

“Patsy, I love you.”

“I know Charles. That’s normal. It’s even got a name, *transference*.”

“Be more’n that.”

“Charles, you’ll find someone more your age. I’m not the right one for you.”

“Seemed like it last night.”

I had to laugh. “It was fun all right. I had a great time. Now, we need to get down to work. Are you up to it?”

“You help me?”

“All the way, Charles. All the way.”

It took the entire day to get the whole story down.

Charles talked about what happened while I took extensive notes. I found that quite difficult. My only experience with writing out by hand was responding to invitations when I lived with Mark and Grace in Houston about the year 2000. Fortunately, Charles spoke slowly.

The story as told by Wikipedia was accurate except for a few details. There was a lot more about the small boy that Charles refused to shoot. Turns out that he had a limp as a result of a previous encounter with either the VC or our troops. That was just the sort of thing to improve the verisimilitude of the tale.

Finally, late in the afternoon, I felt we had everything we needed. “Here’s the deal. First, there will be no repetition of our frolic last night.”

“Not ever?”

“Right.”

“But you said that when it was all over...”

“OK. But that will take quite a while.”

“I can wait.”

I smiled. “OK. We’ll need to find you a lawyer to get total immunity for what you say publicly.”

He obviously didn’t understand.

“Never mind. I’ll take care of that. You just have to promise me that you’ll tell the truth when time comes. Except for what happened last night. We did not have sex. Got it?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. But he smiled. “The non-sex was great.”

“It’s OK to say that you love me. That’s normal. But the sex may cast doubt on your story. We don’t want that. Right?”

“Got it.”

“Here’s what I expect to happen. The military will investigate. Eventually, they’ll decide they have enough to agree that you were right to refuse the order to kill the boy. Then, I expect you’ll get an honorable discharge. That will help you in the future.”

“OK.”

“The lieutenant will probably be punished. I hope so.”

“Me too. He’s not a nice man.”

“He took advantage of you. You were barely more than a boy yourself.”

He didn’t reply.

“Young man?”

He smiled.

Marian came out to see how everything was going. She brought some cannabis with her. I drew her aside and explained that we needed better sleeping arrangements tonight. “Some issues last night.”

She grinned but agreed to let me sleep on the sofa in the main house while Charles slept in the bungalow.

So, all ended well. We smoked the grass, ate some leftovers Marian scrounged up, and retired to our separate beds.

I was exhausted.

It was the next morning when I discovered several sheets of computer printout in my backpack. Mark had managed to download the complete transcript of the hearing and put it into my pack which I left unlocked. Maybe was intended as a surprise. It proved to be immensely helpful.

4. What Happens in Vegas...

February 2, 1968
Las Vegas, NV, USA

We lay on the bed in the Sahara hotel after making love. I had won our bet as I knew I would. The basketball game was famous as one of only two games UCLA lost during the time Lew Alcindor was a member of the team.

“Ready for the rest? My life story? Then you get to decide whether to marry me.”

“After the sex we just had, I’d marry you even if you’re a serial killer.”

Laughing, I assured that I was not one. Then, I took up the story.

“I don’t know when or where I was born. I was found, presumably an orphan member of a group who died of a terrible plague. I was wandering around near the town of Medina, TX, when one of the Texas Rangers heard my cries and rescued me.”

“I was more or less adopted by the entire faculty of the University and given free rein to explore the Library.”

“This is the University of Texas in Austin?”

“Sort of, but not exactly. My history is more convoluted.”

“OK. Sorry for interrupting.”

“Stop me anytime if you want more explanation.”

“Got it. So, you explored the library.”

“Right. I loved wandering in the stacks of old books. I also loved the banks of computers on one of the top floors. One day as I idly banged on the keys of one of the computers, a face appeared on the monitor. I remember thinking that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Then she spoke to me, calling me by my name.”

“Hello, Hypatia,” she said. “I see you’re just playing with the keys. Would you like to learn how to use the computer?”

“I was completely dumbfounded, gobsmacked.”

“Gobsmacked?”

“Astonished beyond belief. A great word.”

“Wait,” Mick broke in, “I’ve seen computers. They don’t display pictures, especially women who talk. What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about computers in 2059 or thereabouts.”

“When?”

“Sometime like that. I was about three. Everyone agreed I was 30 in 2086. I did the arithmetic.”

“You’re claiming to be from the future?”

“Yes, but there’s more.”

“But...”

“Don’t ask me how it works. I don’t know.”

“So, somehow you came from 20 whatever to 1968?”

“Not at first. Certainly not when I was three years old.”

“OK. Continue. I’m suspending my disbelief temporarily.”

“Good idea. To continue, Ambianca — that was her name — taught me how to read, to type, and ultimately to operate a computer. Everyone in the Faculty was amazed.”

“Me too. Are you some kind of genius?”

“Maybe. Who knows? Many people have told me I have some special power that I don’t use responsibly. I just try to get people to work together.”

“So, that’s what you were doing at the shelter the first day.”

“Exactly. I marched into the room where the men were lazing around and told them to get busy cleaning up. All except Charlie got to work.”

“Maybe he’s the one who’s special.”

“Able to resist me?”

“No one can do that for long.” He gave me a nice kiss to prove the point.

“Want to hear more of my story. I am older than three, you know.”

“How old are you?”

“That’s hard to work out, but I think I am forty something.”

“Why is it so hard to figure out?”

“You need to hear more of my life history.”

“OK. You talk, I’ll listen.

So, I started telling him about my adventures in Houston, both in the 21st century and the 20th. At some point, his quiet snoring alerted me to the loss of my audience. I settled into the hollow of his shoulder and we both slept.

When I woke, he was emerging from the bathroom wearing only a towel. I wondered if we were going to have a *bonus round* in bed. He let me know with a question, “So, what do you want? Elvis impersonator? Alien? You name it, so long as we get married today.”

“How about the old standard, a judge with a couple of witnesses?”

“Boring, but with the advantage of speed.”

“My turn for the shower. I’ll be ready in 10 minutes!”

It took 20, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“You knew I would still want to marry you, didn’t you?”

“I had a pretty good clue. The best was the article I read about *Song Mi*.”

“Wait! What is that about?”

“We didn’t get that far before you zonked out.”

“Well, I am listening now.”

“In the future, 50 years or so from now, practically everyone has a small telephone that will fit in a pocket. It connects to something called the Internet. A special part of the Net is Google, where you can search for information. I decided to take a chance on another visit to my other lifeline to search for information about Charles. Turned out to be easy. My first search led to an encyclopedia article about the *Song Mi Massacre*. The article mentioned a *social worker named Patsy O’Brien*.”

“Wow! Fifty years from now. Wonder if I’ll live long enough to see that.”

“I didn’t try to learn about you, or me for that matter. Probably we aren’t important enough to matter, except for association with Charles Taylor and *Song Mi*.”

“So that’s how you knew the name.”

“And everything that happened. I also learned that Charlie would cooperate with the authorities to see that the others were punished.”

“I can see that knowing the future can be useful.”

“Yes, but it’s a double-edged sword. For instance, I know that 1968 will be a horrible year. The TET offensive is just the beginning. That is the turning point in the war, by the way. It’s all downhill from here.”

“What else happens?”

“I think it’s dangerous to tell you.”

“Even about sporting events?”

“I want to bet on a spectacular upset that takes place next January. What comes to be known as Super Bowl III.”

“The NFL-AFL championship?”

“Don’t say another word until I get a bet down. We should be able to get great odds picking the winner this far in advance, right?”

He smiled. “I like the plan. Better put down several bets, though, just to make it look like a lucky guess.”

“Excellent suggestion. Shall we get married first?”

“Let’s go.”

5. Testimonial
March 13, 1968
Santa Rosa, CA, USA

I looked up as a soldier ushered Charles out of the meeting room. I managed to catch my young friend's eye. He winked and smiled, so I knew that the deposition had gone well. I mentally sighed in relief. Now it was my turn, and I expected a more difficult time.

The participants consisted of three senior officers, all men of course, seated on one side of the table, along with a court stenographer, Charlie's lawyer, and two unidentified observers. I took the latter pair to be CIA or the equivalent. It appeared that we had struck a nerve.

I took the oath to tell the truth, even when it involved putting my hand on the bible. Then I sat and looked expectantly at the three men. No one spoke. *Oh*, I thought, *we're going to play it that way, are we?* I sat with my hands folded, looking back at them as if I had all day, or what was left of it anyway.

Finally, the most senior, sitting in the middle, addressed me. "Good afternoon, Mrs. O'Brien. Congratulations on your recent marriage."

"Thanks."

"Perhaps you could begin by telling us about how you met Mr. Taylor in the first place. Was it part of your job as a social worker?"

"Not at all. I am not a social worker. Moreover, I am not a psychologist, doctor, therapist, or anything like that. I am just an aging hippie that wandered into the shelter where Charles was living. I was mainly looking for a meal. I agreed to get the men to clean the place up in return for a seat at the table."

"Then what?"

"Charles didn't respond when I started giving instructions to the men, assigning duties and so on."

"You were in charge?"

"No. I just tried to sound like it. Worked mostly. Some people call it my *command voice*. Except for Charles. He lay on his bunk. When I jostled him to wake up, he attacked me suddenly."

"Yes, so we've heard. Apparently, you were able to fend him off."

"It wasn't difficult. He had drunk too much the night before and was not in shape to fight."

"What happened next?"

"He tried to strangle me. I broke that hold and backed off. He charged. I kicked him. That stopped him briefly, but then he charged straight at me. I dodged, and his momentum carried him into the wall. He was stunned and slumped to the floor."

"Then, instead of running away, we understand that you rushed over to where he lay."

"You've been well briefed. I thought he might be seriously hurt."

"So, you did what?"

The question was just to get it on the record. They had already taken depositions from all the witnesses.

“I went to him where he lay and rolled him over. I think he was unconscious, but he may have been faking it to get his breath back. I put his head in my lap and waited for him to wake up.”

“Please go on.”

“He opened his eyes and managed to focus on my face over him. Then, he asked if I were an angel.”

“So, he asked you.”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t suggest it in any way?”

“No. I thought it a strange query, but decided that it might be useful, so instead of denying it, I asked him if he needed one. That’s when he broke down. He started crying. After a while, he managed to ask if I would help him.”

“And you agreed to help him?”

“Sort of. I told him that I would help if he met me the next day completely sober. Nothing for 24 hours.”

“Why?”

“I think the principle is to take it one day at a time.”

“I see. You are familiar with AA then, the 12 steps?”

“In general terms. I am not a recovering alcoholic if that is what you’re getting at.”

“So, the next day...”

“I went back to the shelter and found him waiting for me. The transformation was very encouraging. I felt that I had some obligation to help him.”

One of the wingmen spoke up. “He says you saved his life.”

“Maybe I did.”

“So, are you an angel?”

I laughed. *What kind of religious nuts am I dealing with?*

“Actually, I doubt that angels are real. In any case, I don’t think I am one.”

“You’re not sure?”

Oh, come on! “An interesting question? Do angels know that they are angels? I certainly don’t resemble the description in Ezekiel.”

“Perhaps you’re a dark angel, come to sow discord among men.” It was the wingman again. I decided based on those questions that I didn’t like him.

I glared at him and didn’t answer.

The chief interrogator — for that’s what I thought they were — decided to put an end to that line of questioning. “Let’s move on to another area.”

“OK.”

“Charles drew an interesting picture of you.” The second wingman got into the act.

I laughed again. “That again. As I have pointed out repeatedly, it is not drawn from life. For one thing, the breasts are too large, flatteringly so. More telling, I have a moderate sized nevus, a mole or discoloration, that is not shown on the picture. You’ll have to take my word for it. I don’t intend to strip to prove it. Mick can verify it for you.”

“We’ll ask him. Thanks. So, the picture is…”

“The work of a young, somewhat horny man with a vivid imagination and a talent for art.”

That got a laugh from the stenographer. The chief officer glared at her until she got it back under control.

“So, you didn’t entice him with sex?”

“I’m not going to dignify that question with a reply.”

He stared at me for a while, then dropped the subject.

“Let’s get to the hard question,” the chief insisted. “How did you learn about *Song Mi*?”

I had prepared a cover story, which I trotted out. “Charles often said it in his sleep.”

“So, you were there when he slept?”

“In the same room frequently. My attempts to get him to talk about his experienced in Nam tended to tire him out. I knew it was the key to solving his PTSD.”

“PTSD?”

“Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.” *Shit! Is that term in use yet! Hypatia, you idiot!*

“That’s a good term,” one of the assistants said. “I like it.”

“Battle fatigue is more common,” I suggested.

“Yes, but I like your coinage. There is often a single event that causes the problem. Fatigue implies some chronic issue.” I guessed he was a real psychologist.

“Whatever you call it, I was sure that something had happened in Vietnam and tried to get him to talk about it. He always changed the subject. I wasn’t sure what he was saying in his sleep. I got a large map of Vietnam and started looking for something that might sound right. That’s how I found the village of *Song Mi*. When I asked him to tell me about it and used the name, he broke down.”

“So, you got the whole story?”

“Yes, after a full day of talking to him about it. You’ve seen my notes surely.”

“I was impressed. If you decide you are interested in becoming a therapist …”

“I’ll let you know. However, I regard this as a one-off. I only stuck with it because I felt morally obligated. Also, it was obvious that he was in love with me. Psych 101. Transference.”

“So, you have taken courses in psychology?”

“Reading on my own.”

“Impressive.”

I nodded my thanks.

“So, when you heard the story...”

“Well, he got a less than honorable discharge for failing to follow an order. If Nuremberg means anything, then he had the right, the duty, to refuse that order. Killing a child, one with an injury to boot. That should be criminal.”

“It can be under some circumstances.”

“Well, if these aren’t the right circumstances, they should be.”

“Let me say for the record that I agree with you.” He turned to look at the other two, who nodded.

“We want to thank you for your help in this matter,” the Chief said. “If we need anything more, we’ll contact you.”

Well, that was easy.

We had to wait around for the rest of the day in case there was more. Mick was called in to give his input. In a weird moment I wondered if he had noticed the mole on my torso. Foolish me! Of course, he knew every inch.

Finally, the meeting broke up. The man I had identified as a real psychologist asked for a brief moment. I agreed and we moved off to speak privately.

“I’m extremely impressed. You have a great natural talent.”

“Thanks. Beginner’s luck.”

“Much more than luck. I have a silly question.”

After a brief pause, he asked, “About the angel bit. Charles claims that he saw a halo around your head when he opened his eyes.”

“Shit! I knew I should have insisted on an evaluation for a concussion.”

He was a bit taken aback by my interjection. Apparently, women in this era didn’t use salty language. However, he just smiled.

“So, you think that it was a result of a concussion?”

“Occam’s razor. A much simpler explanation than that I am an angel in disguise.”

He said nothing.

“Oh, come on,” I said after some time. “You don’t really think I am an angel, do you?”

He smiled again. “If you decide that you want to pursue a professional career in psychology, I hope you will look me up.” He gave me a business card.

“And if you want to test my angelic qualities, you should talk to Mick.”

He laughed, and that was the end of the matter.

6. Lovers Quarrel
April 9, 1968
Boonville, CA

“You did what!” I raised my voice a trifle.

At least he seemed abashed when he replied, “Well, it’s protected by the seal of the confessional.”

“Still,” I countered, “I can’t believe you asked about our sex life with a *Catholic Priest!* They have some strange ideas about sex.”

“That it’s intended for procreation?”

“Ah. So that’s it. I see. This is all about birth control.”

“It’s a sin.”

“But mine, not yours. I can live with that.”

“Father Thomas says it’s not that simple. By acquiescing I am also guilty.”

“Wow! That brings new meaning to *guilt by association.*”

“Exactly.”

That ended the argument, but not issue. I decided to confront Father Thomas myself and set up a meeting for the next day.

“I understand that my husband has consulted you about our love life.”

“I hope you understand that I cannot discuss anything that was under the seal of the confessional.”

“Since my husband has already discussed it with me, that doesn’t matter. I know what the two of you agreed.”

“Interesting.”

“What I don’t understand is why any of this is your business. The decision to use birth control was mine. I didn’t consult Mick about it. At my age, pregnancy would be a serious risk, one that I do not care to undertake.”

“Even at the risk of your immortal soul?”

“Please. Let’s try to not get into arcana.”

“The soul is arcane?”

“Since you cannot demonstrate its existence, and I strongly doubt it, I think it irrelevant.”

“Then what is the purpose of this conversation?”

“I want you to drop the subject with Mick.”

“What if he brings it up? The sin.”

“Prescribe a few Hail Mary’s and be done with it.”

“Are you trying to tell me how to do my job.”

“You got it.”

“On what authority?”

“My own.”

“I think the word for that is *nugatory* or perhaps *arrogant*.”

“No doubt. However, I will undertake to argue that there is no sin involved as the soul never enters the picture.”

“I thought you were using some technique to prevent implantation of the fetus.”

“Technically, if I were doing that, it would be a zygote or possibly an embryo, but that’s not the point.”

“What is the point?”

“The method I use prevents ovulation, so there is never even a zygote.”

“Really! I didn’t know such a thing existed.”

“It’s not universally available. I have a private source.” *Very private!*

He paused for thought. “That may be different, but it still leaves open the question of the purpose of sex. If procreation is not possible, then why have sex?”

“For fun?”

“Is it fun for you?”

“And for every partner I have ever had.”

“How many is that?”

“Let’s leave it at *several*.”

“Interesting. Does Mick know?”

“Of course. We’re married. I don’t keep secrets from Mick.”

“Really?”

“Really. Isn’t that part of what marriage is all about?”

“So, if you have another lover, you’ll tell Mick about it?”

“I think I just said that.”

“Amazing. I understand that you have been married before.”

“Yes, twice.”

“And you had the same agreement with them?”

“I did. Is that unusual?”

“In my experience, it’s unique.”

“Well, I am unique.”

“Exceptionally so. OK, here’s what I propose. I will soft peddle any concerns I have about your practice of *family planning*. However, I ask you to consider Mick’s feelings on this

matter. Pregnancy is a natural event; one humanity has been involved with for thousands of years.”

“And one that women have died from for a very long time, hundreds of thousands of years, millions if we allow an expansive definition of *human*.”

“Your point?”

“I don’t think *men* should have any say about it.”

The shock showed on his face. He was silent for some time. “Just consider it. That’s all I ask. Do we have a deal?”

We shook hands and I left.

Of course, that was not the end of it. Mick kept harping on the subject every time he saw the patch on my breast. Since I wanted that to be often, I realized that I would have to give in.

I picked a time when the patch had turned red. Then, as Mick watched, I peeled it off and threw it into the waste basket.

“That’s it, Mick. You win.”

“I win?”

“No more birth control. Be careful what you wish for, though. Sometimes the result is not what you want.”

“I’ll take a chance.”

“I have some conditions.”

“I should have guessed.”

“They won’t be onerous.”

“I think you are the only person I know who uses that word.”

I laughed.

“Mick, you know I have had other lovers.”

“Yes, you even started to count them once.”

“Yes, it was an interesting exercise. However, you are the earliest if that matters to you.”

“I get a headache every time you start explaining about your strange life.”

“I’ll keep this short then. I want you to let me take the lead in our sex.”

“Oh?”

“I have a lot more practice than you.”

“Let’s not go there.”

“Well, I think I can...” I tried to think of the right word. “I think *we* can *enhance* the experience with some simple modifications.”

“Such as...”

“Well, for starters, I want to be on top.”

“Because...”

“Put it down to sexual dimorphism.”

“You lost me.”

“There is quite a difference in our size. It’s much easier for me to be on top of you than the other way around.”

“OK. That makes sense. What else do you propose?”

“Come over here and I’ll show you.”

Making up is always the best part of a lover’s quarrel.

7. Birding
May 2, 1968
Hendy Woods, near Philo, CA, USA

Mick thought birding was for little old ladies. After some *discussion*, he agreed to come with me to check out my “patch.” I had never had a patch before and loved the idea of a place close enough to survey regularly. Hendy Woods State Park fit the bill. The entrance was about 800 meters — half a mile if you prefer — from Marian’s cottage where I still worked several days a week. Mick had learned to drop me off there on his way to the sheriff’s office in Boonville. I had adopted a regular route thru the park: down the entrance road to the trail that led to the two groves of old growth redwoods. The redwoods themselves seldom produced any surprises, but the trail led out into a broad meadow where something interesting usually turned up.

After getting Mick’s promise that he wouldn’t say anything, I had retrieved both my own binoculars and the spare from my backpack, two Leica 8x30s. “Nothing this good will be available for decades,” I cautioned him, “so don’t show them to anyone.” With that settled, we set off on my standard birding route.

“We’ll be going near the Hendy Woods Hermit,” Mick told me. “Maybe we should stop in and say hello.”

“I’ve seen his hut,” I replied, “but no one has ever been around it.”

“He can be a bit shy, but he knows me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I protect him from the tourists. The locals mostly leave him alone, except to trade for the game he has taken.”

“Taken as in killed?”

“Yeah. Not strictly legal, but tolerated, like some other activities I can think of.”

“OK. Understood.”

“So, if we meet him, leave the talking to me.”

Silence means consent, or so I’ve been told.

“Show me how to use this gadget.” He held up the binoculars.

“First, we put them around your neck. Like this.” I demonstrated.

“Now, we need to check to see if they match your eyes. Focus on that tree, the one over there.”

“OK. Done.”

“Now, try each eye by itself. Are they both sharp?”

“No. The right one is OK, but the left is fuzzy.”

I showed him how to adjust the diopter ring. Finally, we were ready to go birding.

“Now, a tip. First, find the bird with your naked eyes. Then put the bins, that’s birder slang for binoculars, up to your eyes.”

Before he could get too frustrated, I continued, “It takes practice. Don’t worry.”

With all that out of the way, we set off down the trail into the woods, relishing the coolness of the shade. Summer had arrived early, with a temperature near 80 degrees Fahrenheit expected for the high.

The first part of the trail led through mixed, second growth, forest, mostly oaks, but with several underbrush species mixed in. The original owner, the eponymous Hendy, asked that the redwoods never be logged. Surprisingly, the timber companies respected his wishes, despite several different owners, harvesting around them. The oak woodlands were the result.

We stopped when a family group of Chestnut-backed Chickadees foraged around a small clearing. I was fond of the small, cute birds, a common species in the area. A sudden change in behavior, still silence, suggested a hawk in the area. I motioned to Mick to stay quiet and scanned the area, finally spotting a small gray hawk sitting on a nearby branch. “Sharp-shinned Hawk,” I said to Mick, pointing to the tree where he sat. We both managed a quick look before the hawk, deciding that he had been discovered, took off.

“Not at all common,” I noted.

I showed some of the common species to Mick as we strolled at a slow pace. Some Steller’s Jays and their cousins, Scrub Jays, complained boisterously when we interrupted their morning.

After 20 minutes or so, we emerged into the Redwood grove. To be accurate, we came first to Little Hendy Grove, referring to the number of trees, not their size. All the trees, and those in Big Hendy Grove, were ancient, estimated to be at least 1000 years old. Magnificent in every way, they always filled me with awe. Mick also seemed impressed, enough to murmur, “Fabulous.”

Appearing from nowhere, the Hendy Woods Hermit stood on the trail in front of us. “Hi, Mick,” he said. “Who’s your friend?”

“She’s not just a friend; she’s my wife. Patsy, meet Cyril. Cyril, this is Patsy.”

“Seen her around. Comes here a lot.”

“Well, I’ve never seen you. It’s nice to meet you finally.”

“Humph.”

“Now Cyril,” Mick said. “You be nice to her. Maybe you didn’t hear me say that she is my wife.”

“Never took you as marrying kind.”

“I hadn’t met Patsy. She’s unique.”

“Is not everyone?”

I had to laugh. “That’s my line.”

That got a smile from Cyril. I noticed a strong accent that I couldn’t place. “Do you have a last name, Cyril?” I asked.

Mick explained, “Cyril is not his real name. We keep that quiet as he is strictly speaking not supposed to be here.”

“I see,” I replied. “Where is he supposed to be?”

“Prague.”

“I see.” I turned to Cyril, “So you left after the Prague Spring?”

“Yes.” That was all he said.

“Well, welcome to our little piece of the world.”

“Thank you.”

Mick spoke up, “I think that Cyril would like a sample of the special product you deal with.”

“Oh?” I looked at Cyril. He smiled.

“I’ll bring you some the next time I come,” I told him.

With that, we moved on to birding.

Cyril and I became friends after I started supplying him with free cannabis. He showed up at Marian’s regularly with items he foraged from the park. Marian was delighted with this, somewhat to my surprise.

8. Anniversary Picnic **February 3, 1969** **Hendy Woods State Park, near Philo, CA, USA**

It was one of those days that starts out beautiful and ends up a complete disaster.

I was up as usual at dawn. I am a confirmed early to bed type, while Mick liked to handle business until almost midnight. At least, he confined it to the downstairs, while I headed to our bedroom on the upper floor. Only when he raised his voice in anger — infrequently I admit — was it a problem. When that happened, I sidled down the steps and just glared at him. That always did the trick.

So, there I was in the kitchen enjoying my first cup of coffee, made with distilled water and beans from various locations around the world. Lemon's Grocery, working on their image as the gourmet capital of Anderson Valley, offered a *Coffee of the Month* each month. I braved the horde of customers to get the first bag each month. Horde in the Anderson Valley means any group of people larger than 3.

I looked for the n^{th} time at the carefully wrapped present I had bought for Mick. I decided to wait to give it to him later, just in case he'd forgotten that today was our anniversary. It was a coffee mug that I bought on one of my visits to Ukiah. The inscription announced that Mick qualified as the *World's Greatest Dad*.

After I quit using the ovulation control patches, I quickly reverted to having *Eve's Curse* on a very regular basis, every four weeks, regular as the clock on the mantel. When I skipped January, I suspected the truth. I thought I could just use one of the early pregnancy tests that were common in the future. Alas, the first introduction would be next year. So, I worked in a doctor visit to my new friends at Planned Parenthood and got the confirmation I needed as well as lots of information about how to take care of myself and the baby.

As I said, the day promised one of the beautiful, sunny winter days that made California such a target for immigrants from other states. The sun rose late at our latitude, and it was just growing light when Mick descended from our bedroom.

"Good morning, love," I greeted him.

"Coffee?"

"Of course."

I poured him a cup with a dollop of cream and two spoons of sugar. Converting him to a nice cup of black coffee had proved a lost cause.

After one sip, he sighed. "Monday!" he said grumpily.

"But a special one." *Would a hint be enough?*

He grinned. "I remembered. Hang on." He disappeared into his sancta sanctorum in the basement, emerging with a professionally wrapped present.

"I have one for you," I countered, "It's smaller, but I think you'll like it."

His turned out to be a sexy nightgown that I might be able to wear for a few weeks. When he saw mine, he puzzled briefly before asking, "It's true then. I had my suspicions."

"How could you? I barely know it myself."

“Careful observation.”

“You mean...”

“You’re not the only one who can count to 28.”

“Well, your wish has been granted. I hope the outcome will be up to your expectations.”

The kiss he gave me, and the way he caressed my newly enlarged breasts was all the approval I needed — or expected.

“They’re getting a bit tender,” I told him. “Gentle caresses only for a while, OK?”

“Remind me if I forget.”

“You can be sure of it.”

After a bit, I suggested, “Let’s take the day off.”

“And do what?”

“How about a picnic? It looks like a gorgeous day.”

“I need to take care of some things in the office and make sure we have coverage. How about just the afternoon off?”

I pushed out my lower lip but agreed.

“I’ll pick you up as soon as I can get back.”

“Eat some breakfast first.”

He smiled. “I smelled the bacon you cooked.”

“I didn’t burn it this time.” My culinary skills were still developing.

He looked it over and agreed that it was not burnt. “You mind if I cook it a bit longer?”

“Be my guest.”

The joys of married life.

We selected Hendy Woods for our outing, setting up on a blanket in the middle of a meadow near the ancient redwoods. Not willing to take a chance on food — Mick was not a fan of PB&J — I called up Lemon’s and arranged to pick up some sandwiches, and a bottle of wine, on the way.

“This will have to be my last wine for a while,” I noted as I held out my glass for another. “Starting tomorrow, along with my healthy diet.”

“Not today?”

“I don’t want to ruin a perfect way to celebrate one year of marital bliss. By the way, do you know that the appropriate gift for a first anniversary is *paper*?”

“I do. I looked it up. But I didn’t realize that you were so conventional.”

I laughed, then moved over closer and lay with my head in his lap. “We’re all alone.” I unbuttoned my shirt in invitation. “Patsy! We may be alone now, but someone could come along at any time.”

“Then we better make it a quickie.” I rolled over and started unbuckling his jeans.

“Stop it!”

“Don’t be such a fuddy duddy.”

“Anyone could come at any moment.”

“Spoilsport.”

“You know I’m right.”

“OK, OK.” I quit fiddling with his jeans but left my shirt mostly unbuttoned.

We polished off the entire bottle of wine and two delicious sandwiches. I wished I had thought to bring some cannabis, but Mick would have gone ballistic, a phrase that would be unknown for several more years. It had something to do with integrated circuits if I remembered correctly. I smiled when I thought that in my *home time* that would be rendered as IIRC. *What a strange life I lead.*

Our idyll was cut short by the early darkness, which reminded me that it was still officially winter. Also, I noticed some storm clouds in the distance that seemed to be approaching faster than either of us had expected.

“We better get moving,” Mick said finally, standing up.

“Yeah,” I agreed, buttoning up my shirt and gathering the empty bottle and wrapping.

As we folded up the blanket we had used, the downpour arrived. We sprinted back to Mick’s car and got inside as quickly as we could, but we were already soaked. Fortunately, we were both in a great, if sexless, mood. “Well, that worked well,” I commented. “Maybe we could get the heater going.” Mick started that car and let it warm up. I was just starting to feel OK when the radio crackled.

Mick was instantly alert, but I was at a total loss to understand the message. Mick keyed the microphone and replied, “Not sure I got all that Rachel. I heard major injury wreck, but not the location.”

“On the Elk Road,” came the reply.

“OK. We’re in Hendy Woods now. I’ll head there right away.”

“10-4.”

Mick sped away from the parking area faster than I would have; the road was slick with rain-wetted dust. We had gone about a mile when the full disaster struck. A tree weakened by disease and the high winds began to fall across the road right in front of us. I didn’t even have time to react, but Mick did. He jerked the wheel to try to avoid the crash. The car refused to cooperate and went into a full hydroplane skid. The car and the tree reached the same spot seconds later.

I think I was unconscious for a moment. Every part of me hurt. Mick seemed to be in worse shape. I dimly realized that his actions had only one goal: to try to keep the tree from hitting *me*. He succeeded in part, the tree lay across the windshield at an angle, landing mostly on top of Mick, who was not moving.

The microphone dangled from a cord. With adrenalin coursing thru my body, I managed to convince my muscles to ignore the pain as a I stretched out to grab it. I’d seen Mick use it

many times and tried to imitate his actions. Finally, I located the button to transmit. I choked out, “Mayday, mayday. We are trapped in Hendy Woods. Mick is hurt bad. Please someone...” Everything faded to black before I completed the sentence.

9. Another Rude Awakening

February 7, 1969
Santa Rosa, CA, USA

An unfamiliar room swam into focus slowly as my eyes adjusted to the light. A quick survey indicated a hospital room occupied by no one else. An IV hung nearby, but nothing seemed to be dripping into my arm at the moment, which was encouraging. Multiple wires ran from various locations on my body to somewhere behind me. I could hear a quiet beeping that probably marked my heartbeat. No one seemed to be coming to check on me now that I was conscious. I searched vainly for a button to signal with but found none. Anxious to find out what was going on, I tried to call out. That didn't work. My throat was very sore. Talking hurt.

I lay back and considered. Obviously, I had been severely injured in the accident. I was in a hospital somewhere. I considered my minimal knowledge of California geography and decided I was probably in Ukiah or Santa Rosa. I doubted they, whoever they were, had taken me all the way to San Francisco or Oakland. Thinking wore me out. I slept some.

When I woke up the room looked the same. I couldn't tell if anyone had checked on me. What schedule were they following? I wasn't in ICU, more encouragement. I felt hunger. Was that to be expected? Starved for information, I searched for a way to get someone to notice me. In the process of looking around, I managed to dislocate the attachment for the heart monitor. The steady beeping turned into a single treble note. Help came running. A doctor, male of course, in a white coat with a name that I couldn't manage to read.

"So, you're awake."

"Yes," I whispered. "Where..."

"You're in a hospital in Santa Rosa. Luckily, we were able to land a helicopter in a meadow about a mile from your accident and get you here in time to do some good."

"Oh."

"You have multiple fractures, ribs on both sides, your right radius, that's a bone in your arm. Broken fingers in your left hand. You also had a concussion, but no skull fracture. You are very lucky."

"Mick?"

His face fell. "He was dead at the scene."

I felt tears streaming down my face. "Poor Mick. He swerved at the last second..."

"And saved your life."

I tried to nod, but quickly lay back.

"Did you know you were pregnant?"

"Yes. I told Mick that morning. We celebrated with a picnic in the meadow."

He laughed. "Great spot. Went there with a girlfriend once. We ..."

I managed to laugh. "I tried to interest Mick, but..."

"Well, I'd say that showed a lack of good judgment."

He was trying, I'll give him that. But it didn't work. My mood grew darker.

I waited for him to speak.

“The fetus was a second casualty. Miscarriage. That was obvious at the scene. We have you scheduled for a follow-up whenever you’re able. D&C. Nothing serious.”

“Understood.” I hesitated for a bit. “When?”

“We can do the procedure tomorrow if you consent.”

“I mean...go home?” Sentences were too difficult to say.

He must have been a good doctor, as he noticed my difficulty. “We had to intubate you. That’s why your throat hurts. Should be better tomorrow. Better try not to talk much.”

“OK.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“I think you should be able to handle some soup. I’ll have the nurses bring you some. Sip it slowly, OK?”

“OK.”

“You’re going to be fine,” he said, and gave me an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “Try to rest. If you need something, use this to call the nurses.” He put the call button into my hand. “I’ll check on you later.” He smiled encouragingly and left. Only then did I realize that he had avoided my question about going home.

Well, I wasn’t fine for quite a while. Broken bones take time to heal, and in the meantime, they hurt and restrict activities. My broken right arm kept me from almost everything I wanted to do. I took to visiting Marian, but I couldn’t do much to help. At least it was better than sitting around the house that Mick and I had shared for such a short time. I found myself wondering if he would like the way I cooked the bacon, before remembering that he wouldn’t care.

In the back on my mind was the thought, “What if I just went back to live with Mark in the future?” Of course, I knew the answer whenever I thought about it. Future Mark had not told me much about his first contact with *Patsy O’Brien*, but he had revealed enough that I knew I had to wait around for his young self to show up.

The days turned to weeks, and the weeks to months, and still I waited. I tried working out the arithmetic. The last anyone knew of his whereabouts was the 1968 Democratic Party Convention in Chicago. That was in August. When a year passed and still no Mark, I began to fret. Had I inadvertently changed the timeline? Had I changed everything? If so, could I possibly have made it better?

As Labor Day came and went, depression settled in. My neighbors and friends worried about me and tried everything to cheer me up. I was grateful that so many people in this small, rural backwater had embraced the stranger who showed up one day and wormed her way into the community.

I found myself using cannabis more often, especially at night. One of Marian’s experiments, a hybrid named Blue Dream she had concocted with the idea of curing insomnia,

was all that kept me sane. As Thanksgiving approached and I prepared to enter my third year in the area I decided to deal with my despondence in the best way I knew.

I went birding.

10. Marked Appearance
November 30, 1969
Hendy Woods State Park, near Philo, CA, USA

At first, I found it difficult to go back to Hendy Woods. Memories of that fateful day so long ago kept resurfacing. I realized that without the accident, I might be nursing a newborn today. The image brought unbidden tears.

After a while, though, I remembered what I liked about the woods. Wandering thru the redwood giants, I heard an unfamiliar song. Some careful pishing coaxed a male Winter Wren, which future ornithologists would re-name Pacific Wren, onto a thin branch a short distance from the trail. I spent several minutes watching and listening. Why was he singing now, I wondered? Maybe he was just trying to cheer me up.

Whatever the reason, the lovely song brought me out of my funk. I continued down the trail, enjoying the beautiful, sunny weather, a contrast to the crisp cold in the air.

“Good morning, Patsy,” startled me. Recognizing the voice, I turned and echoed the greeting back to Cyril. “And how have you been, Cyril?”

“Doin’ OK, I guess. Missed you.”

“Thanks, Cyril.”

“Know all about the accident. Heard it and ran to see. Found you and Mick.”

More tears.

“Sorry, Miss Pat. Didn’t mean...”

“It’s OK, Cyril.”

“Pulled you out, you know.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Found you trapped in car. Afraid it might burn.”

“So, you pulled me to safety.”

“Yeah. Couldn’t help Mick.”

“I know.”

“Had to leave when I heard the sirens.”

“Of course. Thanks for thinking of me.”

“Who’s this?” Another voice behind me spoke.

I turned to see and there he was! Skinny, dirty, disheveled — but Mark.

“This be Miss Patsy,” Cyril informed him.

“Nice to meet you, Patsy. I’m —”

“Mark Talbot,” I supplied.

“Yes, but how...”

“I won’t tell you how I know. Truth is, I’ve been expecting you. Glad you’re here.”

“You were expecting me?”

“Yes. I have a sideline predicting the future, especially the Super Bowl.”

“That sounds useful. I guess it’s pretty easy this year. Everyone says Minnesota has a big edge. Last year was a fluke.”

“Nah! Kansas City.”

“No way!”

“All because of Jan Stenerud. He’s going to kick them to victory.”

“Interesting.”

“Want to go birding with me?”

“Birding! Sure.”

We spent a wonderful hour circumambulating the meadow, including the edge of the river. Finally, we returned to the road to the entrance. “Nice outing,” I began. “About 30 species.”

“Actually, it was 33,” he replied.

“You were counting?”

“Sure, weren’t you?”

“No, I’m embarrassed to admit. I’ll do better next time.”

“Next time?”

I waited.

Ultimately, he said, “OK. Next time. When?”

“Tomorrow, unless it’s raining.”

“Where shall we meet?”

“How about my house?”

“Where’s that?”

“Boonville.”

“That’s quite a hike.”

“Want to spend the night?”

His look told me what I’d hoped. “Tell me more.”

“Well, Cyril’s company may be nice, but the accommodations are below par.”

That got a laugh.

I continued. “My late husband and I lived in it. It has lots of room.” *Take it slow, girl!*

“Late husband?”

“Cyril didn’t mention it?”

“The accident? He told me about it several times.”

“That was me. And Mick.” Damn! The tears were starting again.

“I’m sorry,” he said, touching me lightly on the shoulder. “Really.”

For some reason, that set me off. I burst into huge sobs. I was instantly reminded of Chloe’s disappearance so many years ago in the future. That made me sob more. I wound up in Mark’s arms. That felt so good I didn’t want to leave. I managed to pull myself together and stepped back. “Thanks.”

“Glad to help...Uh, I think I would like to take you up on your offer.”

11. The Ballad of Becky Bell November 1969-January 1970 Boonville, CA, USA

Birding with Mark exceeded my expectations. The conversation, though, was full of potholes. For example,

“You are pretty experienced, but I never heard of you before,” he mentioned one morning.

“Is that so strange?”

“Well, I know most of the good birders in California, at least by reputation.”

“I did most of my birding in Texas, the Hill Country.”

“Ah. Did you do any Christmas Counts?”

“No.” *Whatever that is!*

“We should do one. There’s bound to be one in the area.”

“We should go over to Mendocino. Meet some of the locals.”

“I’m game.”

Got out of that one. I hope.

Mark showed even more interest in my binoculars than Mick had. “This is a prototype; not for sale,” I explained. “Part of project Apollo.”

“Oh. They’re better than anything I’ve seen.” *That’s for sure.*

“I have another pair, but you have to promise never to reveal the source. In fact, I wish you would keep them hidden except when we’re together.”

“You have another pair!”

I grinned. “There’s a catch.”

“There would be. Go on.”

“I want you to tell me what you’ve been doing for the past year or so.”

“There’s a lot to tell.”

“We can take it slow.”

So, we began to pry open the shell he’d been hiding in. What I came to call the Ballad of Becky Bell had begun. I knew the details from the stories Mark’s mother, Grace, had relayed to me in the future. It wasn’t pretty. Joan, the daughter of Mark and Becky Bell, had showed up as an adult and took over the family business after Simon, Mark’s father died. She turned out to be exceptionally good at it.

A basic component of the plan, trust, took a while to establish. For the first week, we concentrated on birding, avoiding Hendy Woods in favor of the Pacific coast. We wandered as far as MacKerricher State Park, north of Fort Bragg, the largest city on the coast. The delight in Mark’s face as we added bird after bird to his California List buoyed my spirits. If he stayed

happy, we should be able to get to the nub of the problem that kept him away from home for over a year.

We found a contact for the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society and signed up for the Christmas Count, which Mark assured me would be lots of fun.

We stopped for dinner at a nice restaurant with a view of the ocean after observing for a full day along the coast. Of course, by the time we got there, it was dark, so the view was somewhat muted. We had a nice candlelight dinner that would have been romantic under better circumstances.

The next morning seemed like a good time to start work. First, though, we walked into town and picked up some breakfast treats at the bakery. I was beginning to be recognized as a regular customer and greeted by name, a nice touch. Filled with croissants and coffee, we walked back to what I still thought of as *Mick's House* and got comfortable on the sofa in the living room.

I brought out some good weed from Marian's stash, something called Train Wreck, an apt name. After a few puffs, Mark appeared relaxed enough to respond to my urgings and report on his activities.

Becky Bell, not her real name it turned out, had latched onto Mark to help her evade Federal agents who wanted to discuss her recent associates. Those associated had been engaged in some serious revolutionary maneuvering that raised red flags. Not wanting to rat out her companions, she talked Mark into visiting Houston. Then, together with Preston Salomon, they had set off on a birding tour of Texas. Preston met an old flame during a visit to Big Bend National Park and left younger contingent on their own.

They hiked up to Boot Springs in an ultimately successful attempt to see the rare Colima Warbler, which nests nowhere else. A torrential downpour ended the birding and they holed up in a small cabin usually reserved for visiting scientists. There, nature took its course and Mark had his first sexual encounter.

On the way back, the next morning, Becky had picked up a feather that she promised to use to drive Mark crazy in bed. That proved a major disappointment, despite several attempts. "It was just ticklish, that's all," he related to me.

It went downhill from there. After seeing RFK's assassination on TV, Becky changed the agenda and they all headed for the Democratic party convention in Chicago. Of course, that proved to be a disaster. Mark became separated and never relocated either Becky or Preston.

Despondent, he wandered toward California where he planned to meet up with an uncle in the south. Hendy Woods was just a stop on the way, fortunately for me.

"So, her dissatisfaction was because you were ticklish?" My incredulity must have been obvious.

He had trouble answering. Finally, he managed, "There was more. She complained I was no good." After a pause, he added, "At sex."

Aha!

I had to smile. "That is a problem we can deal with. Would you like some instruction?"

"What do you have in mind?"

“I had in mind some fucking. What did you think?”

“I...I...”

“Well, this was just an offer. You don’t have to agree if it makes you uncomfortable.”

He hesitated some more. I continued, “OK. I get it. I’m old enough to be your mother. And I am not the sexiest woman alive. I seem to lack some of the essentials.”

“No, no. It’s not that.”

I waited.

“I really like you,” he said finally.

“It’s mutual. That usually makes the decision easier.”

“You like me? You weren’t just trying to...”

“Seduce you! In my experience, adolescent males are extremely easy to seduce.” We both had a laugh at that.

I took his hand. “Come on. When we’re done, no woman will ever think you are not super at sex. We’ll start with some small stuff. Foreplay.”

“Really? It’s not hard?”

“There is a hard part, but that should be easy also.”

He cracked up at that. It wasn’t really that original, but he was young.

“I have an idea how to get this off the starting blocks, so to speak.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“This.” I crossed to the sofa and began unbuttoning his jeans. There was no further discussion.

Two days later, after considerable instruction in the art of foreplay, we got down to the nitty gritty. “OK, remember I told you about *the little man in a canoe?*”

“Yeah. You said that was critical, but then nothing more.”

“We had to get the preliminaries out of the way. Today, we are going to see if you can find him.”

He was a fast learner.

Still, he needed some practice.

Lots of practice.

For a week, we made love daily and, in the afterglow, talked about, as Mark put it, “Life, the universe, everything. You know.” I found it easier to make love than talk about life. My own life, so confused and complicated, made advice on that front problematic. Especially difficult was discussion of Mark’s future. As I knew what that entailed, including the date of his death, I had to be extra careful. I took to hinting.

“You have a great analytical mind,” I told him. “That needs to be nurtured. You have to go back to college.”

“I don’t know if they’ll take me back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re incredibly bright, and your family is incredibly rich. That’s the perfect combination for a place like Rice.”

“You want me to leave?”

“Yes...eventually. I think it’s time to call home and make some arrangements.”

“Will you come visit me?”

“If you arrange for us to go birding. How about April?”

“It’s a deal!”

12. DeMarkation
January 3, 1970
Boonville, CA, USA

My hand trembled as I dialed the number of the Talbot household in Houston. Idell answered, “Talbot residence.”

“Hello, I would like to speak to Grace Talbot, please.”

“May I tell her what this is about?”

“I have news about her son Mark. Tell her it’s good news.”

“Hang on. Wait! Give me your number in case we’re disconnected.”

After we’d handled that task, the phone fell silent for several minutes before Grace spoke.

“You have news about Mark?” She was out of breath.

“Yes. He’s here with me in California. He’s fine.”

“I see.” She sounded dubious.

“I’m not looking for money,” I said quickly. “This is not a ransom demand. I just wanted you to know that he is alive and well.”

“Thank goodness.”

“He’s been staying with me for a few weeks.”

“I see.”

“He needed some time to...to recover from his peregrinations.”

I heard a soft chuckle on the other end. “Peregrinations! You have a gift for understatement. As well as a preference for sesquipedalian words.”

“Sesquipedalian? OK. One point for you. I don’t have a dictionary handy.”

“A long word. *Sesqui* means one and a half. The *ped* refers to a foot. So, foot and a half long.”

“Wonderful!” I exclaimed. “I’ll have to remember it.”

“Mark is OK, though.”

“Yes. I was in the right place to...to rescue him. He needed it.”

“What did you do?”

“Mostly took him birding. Got him to talk about Becky Bell.”

“That bitch! I hope that little incident is over.”

“Oh, yes.”

“So, what’s next?”

“Well, I want him to call you directly. He wasn’t ready to do that. I will prod him. Worst case, you may have to call him. However, I feel it would be better —”

“No. I understand completely. Please use your judgment.”

“Thank you. Then I think he should have someone he is comfortable with come claim him. He went thru some bad times. He needs to see someone he trusts.”

“I’ve got the perfect candidate. You handle the phone call end. I’ll set up the travel arrangements.”

“Agreed.”

“Idell got your number, but not your name.”

“I’m Grace Talbot O’Brien. I live in Boonville, California.”

“Talbot! Are we related?”

“Not directly. Talbot was my first husband’s name.”

“I see.” I sense disapproval.

“Both my husbands died. The first from cancer. The last in an accident.” No point mentioning King Hal.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry. Please forgive me.”

“It’s fine. I hope to get Mark to call you tonight. By the way, he invited me to come visit in April. I’ve never witnessed the fabulous spring migration along the Texas coast. He says he knows Preston Salomon and he is sure we can stay in his cottage on the coast.”

“Then I look forward to seeing you in April and hearing from Mark soon. Ciao.”

“Goodbye.”

Grace’s chosen person to handle the transport duty was none other than the famous Preston Salomon.

13. Graceful Exit
April 18-25, 1970
Houston, TX, USA

I remembered Grace Talbot as Mark's mother, an elegant widow in her late 60's or early 70's, not the beautiful 40-something who greeted me at the door of her River Oaks mansion. With lustrous dark hair, showing brown or black depending on the light, brown eyes the color of the coffee I loved, and skin smooth and tanned. She wore a simple print dress that accentuated her elegant, long neck. The whole was greater than the sum of the parts. She was stunning.

The way she looked back at me showed she was as interested in my appearance as I was in hers. I regretted my own look as an aging hippie compared to her studied elegance.

"You must be Patsy," she began. "Is something wrong?"

Truth works best in situations such as these, they say. "Sorry, Mark failed to tell me that you were so lovely. Sons must have trouble with that."

"I think we are going to get on fine," she replied with a small laugh. "He told me *everything* about you, and you look just the way he described."

"Everything?"

"Everything. Please...come in."

The house resembled my recollection from more than 20 years in the future: refined and lovely, with beautiful artwork. Also, air conditioned to Houston standards, which made it safe for storing meat. I was glad that I had remembered to bring a jacket.

Unsure how to greet her, I offered a hand, but she gave me a nice hug instead.

"Mark is not here yet. Shall we have some tea, or something stronger if you prefer, while we wait?"

"Tea sounds great. It's much too early in the day for me to think about anything with ethanol."

"Ah, yes. I forgot about the time difference. How was your trip?"

"About as well as can be expected for a 20-hour bus trip. I probably need a shower."

"A bus! How awful. We'll make sure your return is shorter, whenever that is. What are your plans?"

"Besides going birding on the coast, I don't really have any plans. I'd like to get to know Mark's family better. Don't read anything into that. I'm not trying to insinuate myself."

"Don't be ridiculous. We know what you did for Mark, for us. You're welcome any time for however long you wish. Let me show you to your room first. I'll have Idell bring you a glass of tea while you clean up. Is that backpack all you brought?"

"It holds more than it looks like and has some special anti-theft features."

"So, I've heard. I'd love a demo sometime."

I'll bet you would. We'll have to see, I thought.

Idell, a young girl in place of the matron I remembered, met us on the stairs. “Here, Miss Patsy, some towels. Just leave any dirty clothes on the floor by the shower and we’ll take care of them.”

“Thank you, Idell,” I replied, taking the proffered towels. “I should be back downstairs in about half an hour. I heard that you would be making tea.” That brought a smile to her face. She had no trace of a typical Houston accent, much less a *black* one. I remembered Mark telling me that his father, Simon, was a stickler for proper English. No doubt Idell had worked hard on both diction and grammar to justify her place in the household. I knew that she would spend the rest of her life there.

After a long overdue shower, with a hair wash, I put on a clean outfit and went back down to join Grace. Mark was waiting for me and rushed to give me another hug, complete with a kiss on the lips. Then he whispered into my ear, “Did you bring any...”

“Of course,” I whispered back. “Later.”

Grace, observant as always, motioned for us to join her on the patio, where a pitcher of tea awaited us, accompanied by some of the ginger snap cookies that were to be Idell’s signature confection in the future. I accepted a glass of tea with alacrity together with a lemon to squeeze into it. I declined the offer of sugar, sure that the cookies would be sweet enough.

“Well,” Mark began, “the birding has been slow on the coast this week. We’re expecting a front to move through on Monday or Tuesday afternoon. That might produce something spectacular.”

“Sounds great!” I replied.

“I suggest that we spend tomorrow birding our way down. We can stop at Anahuac refuge first. It’s more of a breeding ground than a migrant trap. The migration usually arrives in the afternoon. The birds leave Yucatan at dusk and fly for about 18 hours before arriving here.”

Grace cut him off, “Enough bird chat! You two can work that all out on the way. Let’s settle on the important details: when are you going to leave, and when will you get back?”

Mark looked at me for suggestions.

“How about leaving tomorrow after breakfast? We could stop in those woods I read about, White Memorial Park. Pines. We could look for stuff we won’t see later. It’s on the way to Anahuac, right?”

“Good idea. If we leave here early enough to miss the traffic, we could get to the park by 8:00 or so, then spend an hour birding there, on to Anahuac for a couple of hours more. Then...maybe best would be to drive straight to Preston’s cabin near the Bolivar mud flats. We could leave High Island until the next morning, hoping for the front to bring stuff in.”

“I like it.” *Especially the part about Preston’s cabin.*

“If the front cooperates and arrives late on Monday, it will trap everything there on Tuesday morning. We can stay until we get bored, then come home. Otherwise, we can wait another day.”

“No classes?” He was back at Rice University.

“I’m ahead of the curve.”

“So, you’ll get here for dinner on Wednesday or Thursday?” Grace interjected.

“Should be able to manage that. You’ll know when to expect us by watching the weather. Idell coming up with something special?”

“That can be arranged.”

“Will Simon be here?” I asked. “I’d like to meet him.”

“No, he’s out in California, talking to some people in *Silicon Valley*. Not expected back until next Friday.” She said Silicon Valley as if it were some kind of bordello and used air quotes as well. She explained, “Two men named Moore and Noyce have started a new semiconductor company. Simon is not a major backer but has enough of a stake to be *involved*.”

“Simon is involved in Intel! I’m impressed.”

“You recognize the names?”

“I read the Wall Street Journal regularly. Sometimes I read between the lines. Intel sounds like a terrific investment. If he has some *friends and family* shares, I’d be interested. Under the circumstances, I’ll wait to meet him later.” *Intel! Wow!*

“I’ve got an idea,” Grace continued. “We’ll go out there and meet him. We’ll take the company plane. We can go to your place.”

“Well, that’s actually in the opposite direction from the Valley.”

“I’m sure Simon can work something out.”

“Let me try making some calls. I could have someone meet us. What kind of a plane is it?”

“Small but elegant. It’ll hold the two of us.”

“We could save some driving time by landing at Santa Rosa, north of the city. Then it’ll take about 2 hours to get to Boonville.”

“I like that. We could send the plane down to San Jose to pick up Simon.”

“Maybe we should just go to San Jose, pick up Simon, then decide what to do.”

“Maybe. I’ll work on the details while you two go birding.”

Well, that was easy.

Thursday night, we stuffed on a dinner based on a fabulous casserole of eggplant and shrimp, which is better than it sounds. Idell claimed it was an old a family recipe. Then, we spent several hours regaling Grace with tales of our exploits.

“If you’re not a birder, you can’t really appreciate what we saw. Birds were literally dripping from the trees. I never imagined anything so fantastic,” I said by way of opening.

“Once in a very long time. Years. It was easily the best I’ve ever seen,” Mark added.

We continued with a long recitation of the spectacular sightings of the day. Grace lived up to her name by pretending to be interested. Finally, we called it quit.

Grace summed it up, “I’m glad everything worked out for the two of you.” *Double meaning?*

I was careful to sleep in the bedroom I was given and not the one Mark and I shared for years.

After breakfast in the morning, Mark left for Rice, not before we had a tearful goodbye. At least he cried some. I tried to be brave and almost made it. "It'll all be fine. You'll see. Concentrate on your studies. We'll meet again someday when you're not expecting it."

"Really?"

"I promise."

After kissing Mark goodbye, Grace came up with an unexpected suggestion. "Can I interest you in a bit of shopping? I was planning to get my hair done as well. I can probably get them to take you also if you want to change your look."

"Change my look?"

"Well, just a thought."

"Sounds like fun. Just the two of us?"

"Sure."

When we returned late in the afternoon, I asked, "Can you take a picture to show Mark? It'll freak him out."

"With pleasure."

We retired to the patio, which was cool after passage of the front on Monday. April and November were my two favorite months in Texas, at least in the future. This break in the weather was one reason. With something a bit stronger than tea and some great canapes that Idell had made, we relaxed and just sipped our drinks. A lovely bell-like call echoed in the approaching dusk. "Wood Thrush!" I exclaimed. "I didn't realize they nested here. Isn't it a beautiful song?"

"Indeed. Are you trying to make a birder out of me?"

"Just a gentle nudge."

"Tell me about your husband, Mick," Grace asked. The abrupt subject change took me aback briefly. I decided she was just trying to shut off any birding talk.

"Oh, what a gorgeous man! I remember when I saw him for the first time. He was easily the best-looking guy I'd seen in months. Maybe years. He took me to his mother's place for Thanksgiving dinner after we'd just met. She, of course, figured everything out immediately. Told me I was *the one*. Mick explained that it wasn't the first time for that. Still, we started dating right away. He proposed on our third date."

"Wow! What did you say?"

"Told him it was too soon, but to keep trying."

She laughed. "That is almost exactly what I said to Simon. I decided he was the real deal soon after. His mother wasn't happy with the match, but we persevered."

We were both lost in thought for a while as it grew darker.

Finally, she decided to get to the point, which I had been expecting. “Can we talk about you and Mark?”

“You worried?”

“Interested in your intentions.”

“Mark probably told you how I earn a living.”

She smiled. “He did. I suspect that was the subject of your whispered exchange when he greeted you.”

“Ah, you are sharp. Yes, he wanted to know if I had brought any of my magic brownies.”

“I take it that you did.”

“Yes. Want to try one?”

“I don’t think so. Slippery slope and all that.”

“I doubt you need to worry. I’ve used cannabis most of my adult life, and the people in Mendo think I’m an actual angel.”

She laughed again, a sound I was beginning to really like.

“He assured me that you didn’t think you were an angel.”

“I understand that you don’t either. I was wondering when you named your —”

“Please,” she interrupted. “That was Simon’s mother’s doing. Fortunately, she passed away before she could demand that we complete the quartet. I had had enough of childbirth by that time.”

“I had the same problem with Mick. He badgered me into dropping my birth control. I was very dubious about having children at my age.”

“You are...”

“Forty something. That OK?”

“Me too.”

“I told Mick that his wish had been granted when...” I found myself tearing up thinking of Mick’s premature death. “Sorry,” I continued after a moment. “I still don’t like to think about the accident.”

“The child?”

“Was a casualty of the tree smashing into our car. I was lucky to survive. In fact, if Mick hadn’t swerved at the last minute...” More tears. “Can we change the subject?”

“Mark told me you were lovers.”

Wow! That was out of the blue!

“He did tell you everything! That’s a good antidote to unhappy memories. We had some wonderful times.”

“Aren’t you a little...”

“Too old? Of course! I planned to let him down gently. He beat me to it.”

“Really?”

“On the drive down. He said we needed to have a serious conversation. When I laughed, he asked what was so funny. I explained that I was waiting for the right moment. We agreed that our relationship was inappropriate. Well, except for birding together. That’s OK. But sex...I’m sure he’ll meet someone closer to his age.”

“So, it’s finished?” She seemed to be holding her breath waiting for the answer.

“Yes.” *For the time being.*

“So, this trip was really just for birding?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Since it was the last time, we had to make it special, didn’t we?”

“So...”

“So, we got some take out at a shrimp restaurant near Preston’s cabin, then retired to the cabin without looking for owls. You know that Becky Bell hurt Mark a lot, don’t you?”

“She was a catastrophe. Please, go on.”

“Well, she was his first, and apparently Mark was ready to drop everything and follow her. Then she dropped him instead. He was devastated.”

“Is that why...”

“Why he dropped out? Partly. I think there’s more, but that was the major factor. At least, that’s what he told me. Eventually. We had to establish trust first.”

“How did you do that?”

“Guess.”

She thought for a few seconds. “Oh, of course. You went birding.”

“Got it in one. He’s fun to go with. Great hearing and encyclopedic knowledge.”

“Hearing?”

“All the best birders rely on their ears more than eyes. You can often hear the calls when you can’t see them.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know that.”

We sat in silence for a while.

“I suggested that maybe his technique in bed wasn’t up to Ms. Bell’s expectations. I gather that she was *experienced*. I offered him some lessons. Of course, I had an ulterior motive. It had been quite a while since Mick died and...”

“You like sex?”

“Of course, especially when done well.” I considered her question. Some things came into focus.

“You and Simon...”

It was her turn to tear up. “He’s a wonderful man. Very smart. Made a lot of money. Great father and husband. It’s my problem. I just don’t really...” She grew silent. Another awkward pause. She continued finally, “How experienced are you in, well, you know...”

“I’ve had many partners.” I paused and made a point of counting on my hands. I used a few names, carefully. When I said, “Lily,” she jerked to attention.

“Lily?”

“And the answer to the question you’re thinking of is *yes*.”

“Really?”

“Often. It was spectacular. Both my husband at the time and hers understood.”

“Really? How curious.” She quit talking and just sat there.

“What time does Idell leave?”

She looked at me, trying to search my face in the fading light. “After dinner usually.”

“Let’s let her leave early.” I got up. “I’ll be back.”

“I think you should start with half a brownie,” I explained. “Everyone is different, and you should be careful. You can always have the second half later.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“You’ll like it.”

“This will help?”

“Usually. There are no guarantees.”

“And...with...”

“Yes. Tell you what. Let’s send Idell on her way. Then I’ll give you a back rub. We can see what happens after that.”

What happened was even more than I hoped. When my brownie kicked in after 30 minutes or so, I suggested she roll over. One look and I knew that the magic ingredient had the desired effect. Her eyes were slightly dilated, her nipples, large, full, and erect amid dark areolas. When I touched one, she let out a sigh. I stood and undressed while she watched, then returned to the bed, a nice big one quite unlike the one Mark and I had managed on in Preston’s cabin.

An hour later, both of us covered in sweat, we lay together, my head on her shoulder. I was stoked. I realized that for the first time since Lily, I really wanted to be with another woman. “You’re even more beautiful naked,” I said, idly running my hand along her thigh. “Tired?”

“No way!”

Later that night, when we were both tired, falling asleep, she whispered, “Are you sure you aren’t an angel?”

14. Encore
August 1, 1971
Near Boonville, CA, USA

As Robbie Burns put it, “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley.” Grace’s plans for a trip to California didn’t come to fruition. Simon was too busy. The plane was not available. After juggling schedules thru several phone calls, we gave up. I had to make do with a lovely weekend in Houston and a first-class flight home.

So, it was something of a surprise when I received a card from Grace suggesting we try again. Intel’s IPO took longer than Simon had expected, but it was now set for October. Rather than take a chance on the plane being tied up, she came out early, and I drove down to Santa Rosa to pick her up on the first of August.

I wasn’t sure how to greet her. After all, our liaison was brief. Had she come to resume it, or to let me know that she was filled with remorse. All doubt ended when she emerged from the airport and rushed into my arms. “Patsy,” she whispered, “you cannot imagine how much I have waited for this moment.”

Instead of a reply, I kissed her warmly on the lips, ignoring the stares from some passersby. It was California, after all. Probably not the first time they’d observed such a scene.

After navigating back to 101, and engaging the cruise control, I managed to relax a bit. Grace noticed. “You’re not comfortable driving, are you?”

“You noticed.”

“If you need to concentrate...”

“Not right now. I’ll let you know. We should be OK until we turn onto 128 at Cloverdale.”

“I followed your advice. About Simon.”

“You told him?”

“Before it became obvious!” She laughed. “He caught on quickly.”

She hesitated before continuing. “We’ve tried some new things.”

“That’s good.”

She smiled and said, “Better than good.”

“I’m glad.”

“Not jealous?”

“Not my style.”

She leaned over and put her head on my shoulder. “I think of you often. Sometimes even when I’m with Simon.”

“I might keep that to myself. He doesn’t need to know everything.”

“Glad you agree.”

We stayed like that for several miles before she worked up the nerve to broach the subject I suspected was on her mind.

“I’m in love with you. And Simon. Is that weird?”

“Not in my experience. I might even expand the circle to include four people.”

“That’s too adventurous.” Another long pause. “Do you love me?”

I pretended to focus on driving. Finally, I answered, “Maybe. I don’t want to do anything to affect your marriage. I do find myself thinking about you...often. But I can’t see how we can have a long-term relationship. It’s at least as inappropriate for the two of us as it is for Mark and me. And that’s another complication.”

“Do you love Mark?”

“Yes.” Short and simple.

“But you both agreed to call things off. Did that hurt?”

“Oh, yes, but loving someone includes considering what’s best for everyone involved.”

“Now, you’re sounding like an angel again.”

I laughed, and she joined in the hearty way I found so captivating that the urge to pull off onto the shoulder was almost too much. “Wait until later and see what you think.”

“Ooh!” She moved back to her own seat as we turned onto highway 128 for the hour-long, curvy ride to Boonville.

After unloading her bags, which I conspicuously moved into my bedroom, I made some coffee.

When I returned, Grace asked, “Got some of those brownies?”

“Yes, but I thought you might want to try something different.”

“Different sounds nice.”

I pulled out a joint. “This some of Marian’s latest. She calls it an Sativa-dominant hybrid, which besides the *hybrid* part means little to me. Her marketing name for it is *Blue Dream*, which suggests what she hoped to wind up with. I’m not sure what she meant by *Blue*, but the dream part is right on. I first used it when I had terrible insomnia after the accident.”

“I didn’t realize there was marketing for marijuana.”

“Well, it’s not at the level of billboard advertising, but there is some real magic about a descriptive name.”

I lit the joint and took a moderate hit before passing it to her. “Have you smoked it before?”

“Once. Didn’t work.”

“That’s typical. This’ll be better. It is, after all the work of *Maid Marian*. She’s famous in certain circles.”

She looked at the joint in her fingers, slowly raised it to her lips and inhaled. Immediate coughing fit. “Take it easy. I should have told you first. My fault.”

I took the joint back and showed her how much to take. It went much better on the second try. I could see her visibly relax. She had another toke, a bit more this time. “Oh. That is different. I can feel an effect already.”

We passed back and forth once more.

She had the last dose and stubbed it out in an ashtray. Then she moved over to me and carefully unbuttoned my shirt. She took both sleeves and bared my neck and throat before kissing my shoulder, then my neck and my neck again. By the time she turned to face me, I had my lips ready. I thought, *this is going to be great!*

I awoke from *La petite mort* to see Grace looking into my eyes. “You have amazing eyes.” I pulled her head down to me and kissed her. “That was fantastic!” I said. “Fantastic!”

“Coming from you, that says a lot.”

“Well, when I say fantastic, I mean a 10.”

“10?”

“Well, OK, 8.”

“9 at least.”

“No. 9 is what’s coming next. After I recover a bit.”

Another one of her laughs.

“I love it when you laugh.”

“I laugh a lot when I’m with you. Oh, Patsy, I love you. I don’t want to be just friends who see each other once a year.”

Uh-oh. We’re getting serious.

“What if it’s just sex?”

“Is that all it is?”

“No,” I said thoughtfully. “It’s more. But maybe the occasional romp is all we can expect.”

“Friends?”

“More than friends. Friends with benefits.” I used that phrase decades before it became popular, but it fit.

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that we have no guarantees, no promises. But great sex when we manage.”

“What if that’s not enough?”

I rolled us both over, so I was on top and looked down on her. “Grace, you excite me in a way that I didn’t expect to feel again. I felt it when I saw you that first time in Houston, when I met you at the door.”

“You told me you hadn’t expected someone so lovely.”

“I felt a tingle then. I didn’t really hope that it would come to anything. After all, you are *Mark’s mother*.”

“Oh, Patsy, I felt it too. I know this is real. It’s not just sex. Please tell me you love me.”

“I do love you, Grace. You know I do. You’re witty, intelligent, beautiful, cultivated, even rich. It’s everything I have ever wanted in a *wife*.”

She sighed. “Then just make love to me.”

Let’s see, I thought, how do we crank it up to 11?

“That seemed like more than a 9.”

“It was an 11.”

Another wonderful laugh.

“When is Simon coming?”

“He hopes to be here Friday night.”

“So, we have time for a honeymoon. We should see some of what this county is famous for, besides sex and weed.”

“Sounds like fun, but I kinda like sex and weed.”

“We’ll save time for that. Grace,” I got serious, “we’ll work something out. I don’t want to be without you forever. Let’s find something to eat. It may be PB&J.”

“That’ll do.”

“Don’t go away.”

I returned in a few minutes with two sandwiches, two glasses of milk, and a hastily wrapped gift.

“What’s this?”

“A present. It was given to me a long time ago. I’m re-gifting it to you. It’ll look much better on you.”

“Can I open it now?”

“Please do.”

She carefully peeled one part of the wrapping tape loose and removed the paper in one piece. I remembered Mark mentioning once that she had a habit of doing that. She stared at the contents in disbelief. “Patsy, are you sure? This must have cost a fortune.”

“Nope. I told you it was a gift. Let me put it on you.”

I unhooked the chain and put the emerald amulet that Mia gave me so many years ago in the future around her neck. I had a sudden realization that I was closing the circle.

I got a mirror so Grace could admire herself. “Oh, Patsy, it’s wonderful. And every time I wear it, I’ll think of you.”

“You can remember this moment forever, even if we’re apart.”

“Oh, Patsy. I’ll treasure it.”

“This is silly,” I said. “I never liked Patsy as a name. I preferred Patty, but Mick called me Patsy, and it stuck. Why don’t you give me a pet name?”

“What do you suggest?”

“Well, how about *PP*, short for Peppermint Patty, you know in the Peanuts comic strip.”

“Why her?”

“Some people think I’m bossy.”

“Oh, do they!”

“You look even more beautiful than ever, Gigi.”

“Gorgeous Grace.”

“Well, I was thinking of Godawful Grace, but your idea is better. I guess.”

She hit me with a pillow, and we collapsed together, giggling like adolescent schoolgirls.

15. Legal Ramblings **August 2-5, 1971** **Mendocino County, CA, USA**

Early Monday morning, I took Grace into town to a café/bakery on the main drag. As we bought coffee and rolls for breakfast, I introduced her around. “This is my new, good friend, Grace. She’s the mother of the young man who stayed with me a few months a year ago December.”

“Oh, Mark’s mother. Nice to meet you, Grace. My name’s Moon-child.” She wiped her hand on her apron and extended it to Grace, who shook it warmly. “Lovely to meet you, MC.”

Moon-child, who as you might expect, tended toward the hippie end of the curve, smiled. Today, she wore a tie-died T-shirt, with obviously nothing underneath, having rejected bras as the work of the devil. I had some sympathy for that position but found that people expected more from a woman my age. In addition to the T-shirt, she had some worn jeans with gaps at the knees. I couldn’t see her feet, but suspected Birkenstocks. That’s all I had ever seen her wear.

Her hair was worn straight and long, hanging down to her waist. In a more populated county, I was sure she would be required to wear a hair net, but this was Mendo, where rules were enforced with quite a bit of finesse.

“Whatcha up to today?” MC asked.

“Gonna show Grace Hendy Woods. Do a bit of birding.”

“I see. So, you’re a *birder* like your son,” she said to Grace. The emphasis on the word showed that she was aware of the difference between birders and bird watchers.

“Not a bit,” Grace replied. “But I am sure Patsy is going to try to teach me.”

“No,” I replied, “we’re just going for a walk in the redwoods.”

“Gonna picnic?” MC asked. “I can throw together some sandwiches.”

“Great idea! What have you got?”

She pointed to the menu on the wall. “We’ve got everything today.”

After a few minutes wait, we emerged with a BLT, turkey on sourdough, some chips, cookies, and two beers. Strictly speaking, alcoholic beverages were prohibited in the state park, but again, this was Mendo.

We left the picnic items in my car and headed into Big Hendy Grove. We had been walking about ten minutes, when a voice I recognized asked from some hidden spot, “Who’s your friend?”

I turned around a full 360° without locating his hiding spot. “OK, Cyril. I give up. Show yourself.”

He emerged from the inside of a burned redwood, smiling.

“Grace, this is my good friend Cyril. Cyril, this is my *very* good friend Grace. She’s Mark’s mother. Cyril helped Mark when he first arrived here. And, he may have saved my life after the accident. Pulled me from the car and covered me with leaves to keep me warm.”

Cyril smiled again and faced Grace. Extending his hand, he said, “Hello Mark’s mother.”

Grace took his hand in both of hers. “Thank you for helping both my son and my new best friend.”

Cyril smiled and nodded. “Cyril doesn’t have a great command of English,” I told Grace.

“I see,” Grace said. She smiled at Cyril. We were all friends now.

“Take care of yourself, Cyril,” I said as we resumed our walk. When we were out of earshot, I explained the situation. Grace listened attentively. “I may be able to find someone to help him. If I do, will he cooperate?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Back home in the early afternoon, Grace commandeered the telephone. Her first call was to Idell in Houston. “Hi, Idell,” I heard. “Yes. Everything’s fine. She’s doing fine also. Listen, I would like you to do me a favor, please. I need a number from my little book that’s in the table in the hallway. Yes, that one. I’ll wait.”

After several minutes, the conversation resumed. “I need a listing for Peter Kane in Los Angeles. Take your time. This is not an emergency. Ah, good. Yes. I’m ready. Thanks, Idell.”

She disconnected and immediately placed a call to Peter Kane. “Hello, this is Grace Talbot. I would like to speak to Mr. Kane. No, the older one. I see. Could you ask? Tell him who’s calling. Yes, I’ll hold.”

She tapped her pencil on the side of the telephone while we waited. “Hello! Peter. Yes, all is fine. Yes, we got him back. He’s back at Rice now. Thanks for asking. When we met in Denver a couple of years ago, you mentioned you had a friend who specialized in *difficult immigration problems*. I think I could use his services. A woman! Even better. Can you give me her contact info? I see. Well, can you ask her to call me. I’m staying with a good friend in Mendocino County. Here’s the number.”

She put on her reading glasses and read the number from the phone. “No, it’s not urgent, but I will only be here for a week. Tomorrow? That works. Thanks Peter. Say hello to Flo for me. Oh, dear, I hadn’t heard. I’m sorry. You take care.” She listened for a while, then laughed. “I’ll let you know, Peter, but don’t hold your breath. Thanks for your help.”

“A lawyer?” I asked.

“Not exactly. More of a troubleshooter. A fixer. We’ll see how it goes. Will Cyril trust a woman, do you think?”

“We’ll just have to wait and give it a try,” I told her.

“Cyril has a Russian accent. Did you notice?”

“I’ll have to take your word on it. Supposedly, he came from Czechoslovakia.”

“Oh.”

“He told me he left Prague during the spring of 1968. However, beyond that he’s been very reticent to supply details. He says that several people would like to see him dead.”

“I had a feeling it might be like that. This woman should be able to help if anyone can.”

“Good. Should we take the rest of the day off?”

Instead of a phone call, we had a visitor. A nice-looking woman, thirty something, dark hair but blue eyes wearing a custom-tailored business suit, rang the doorbell and stood where I could see her. I struggled downstairs, throwing on clothes as I went. It had been a late night. I had hoped for a sleep-in.

“Good morning! You can call me Margaret. I’m here to interview the man you notified us about.” She flashed a badge at me. Then she handed me a business card identifying her at Margaret Fields, a special consultant to the State Department in San Francisco. *Whoa! Grace what have you done?*

Grace descended the stairs to join our conversation. “What’s going on?”

“She’s here about Cyril,” I explained.

Grace looked her over. “I see. Is there coffee?”

Margaret held up a paper bag. “I stopped in town and got coffee and rolls.”

“Nice start.” The mood got better after we’d had some breakfast from the bag.

“I handle high priority cases,” Margaret said.

“What makes this high priority?” Grace asked.

Margaret hesitated. “It may be nothing, in which case we can forget about this visit. Or it may be something that I can’t tell you right now. OK?”

Grace and I both nodded. “We need to get him to come out of the woods so we can talk to him. We need to find out if he is who we think he may be.”

“Cyril! You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said. “He’s not like that. He’s sort of a hermit.”

Margaret wasn’t kidding.

An hour later, we were in my car heading back to Hendy Woods. We parked in my usual spot and headed onto the trail as usual. We got to the same spot where we encountered him yesterday. “Cyril,” I called. “Please come here. We need to talk.”

“I knew it was something,” Cyril said, appearing from nowhere. “No binoculars. Dead giveaway.” Actually, unsure whether to trust Margaret, I left the bins off as a signal to Cyril in case he wanted to disappear.

“How stupid of me,” I said. “Will you come with us?”

“For you, my angel, I will go. You must promise to protect me.”

We walked back to my car. As we approached, Margaret got out of the car. I felt Cyril flex, then consciously relax. “Good morning, Colonel,” Margaret said.

“Colonel?” Both Grace and I said at once.

“Yes, but we can continue to call him *Cyril*.”

“He may not understand. He doesn’t speak much English.” I said.

“Oh, yes he does. He’s fluent in 5 languages, one of them being English. Right, Cyril?”

“Six, actually. How have you been Maureen? Been years.”

“Seven years.”

“How can I help you, Maureen?”

“It’s Margaret. I came to offer you a deal.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Not here. Back at the house.”

As we moved toward the car, I stopped Cyril. “Cyril, I’m sorry. This is my fault.”

“Do not worry my angel. You acted with good intentions. I have never doubted you. If this is your doing, it will end well.”

Oh, dear. He bought the angel rumor.

When we got back to the house, Grace and I were politely asked to leave the room. These two people who seemed to have a history disappeared into the extra bedroom. They stayed there for three hours. “That’s been long enough for a quick lay,” I noted to Grace. “What have we stumbled into?”

“There’s no *we*,” Grace said. “This is all my doing.”

“We’re a team, baby. We’re a team.”

Finally, Cyril and Margaret came out.

“We have reached an agreement,” Margaret informed us. “I need to confirm it.”

“Will my phone do?” I asked. “It’s not bugged, is it?”

“I doubt there has been time,” Margaret said after considering it. “I have a device in my car that I can use to make sure.”

“Cyril,” I said grabbing his arm after she left. “What the fuck is going on? Tell us!”

He smiled. “I have been offered full US citizenship and a new identity. I agreed to spill my guts.”

“Are you satisfied?”

“Are you kidding? It’s great! I even get a monthly stipend. Don’t tell her I said that. I told you it would end well.”

“I’m glad.”

“But there’s a catch. I cannot go back to the woods. Can I spend the night here?”

“Uh, Grace and I have something planned.”

“Of course, you do. I am not blind or stupid. I will stay out of the way. Unless…”

“Dream on. OK. You can have the spare bedroom.”

Everyone woke early the next morning wondering what would happen next. Trying to avoid a bout of nerves, I sorted thru Mick’s old clothes and found a couple of outfits that fit Cyril. I also found Mick’s electric shaver, which worked well enough to eliminate Cyril’s unruly beard. The transformation improved everything about this mysterious man and friend.

“Wow! Cyril,” Grace exclaimed when she saw the result. “You are a new man.”

“I hope so,” he replied. “There’s still time for a double-cross.”

“Have some breakfast. We’ll all hope for the best.”

At 10:00, a black SUV with tinted windows showed up and Margaret/Maureen emerged along with two large men. She waved a greeting and walked to the door. “Good morning, Cyril,” she said, with some extra emphasis on the name. “You ready?”

“Guess so.”

I pulled him aside. “I hope it all goes well,” I began. “You’re welcome here in any case. In fact, you can have this house if you like. I suspect I will have to leave myself soon.”

“I might take you up on that offer.”

Margaret pulled out two business cards for Grace and me. “Your service to your country will have to remain anonymous, but we owe you a big one. If you ever need my special services, call the number on this card and ask for the extension listed.” I glanced at the card, which had no name or other identifying information. Margaret continued, “It may not be me on the other end, but whoever it is will help you in any way we can.”

Before she left, she asked to see me alone. “I don’t know who you are or why you’re here, and I don’t really care. I do know, however, that there is no mention of you before you applied for a driver’s license. You are not what you appear to be. Take care. And *vaya con dios*.”

“May you live long and prosper,” I replied, giving her a Vulcan salute. That got a smile.

Then they were gone.

“What a strange two days!” Grace said when we were alone.

“That’s for sure. I think that business card is worth hanging onto, though. Who knows when you might need a *special favor*?” I recalled when Grace, in the future, arranged for a new identity for Hypatia. Maybe this is how she did it.

“We have one day left on our tryst. How shall we spend it?” she asked.

“How about driving over to the coast? Mendocino, the city, is fun. There are some shops, and I know of a restaurant on the way back where we can have a delicious, romantic dinner. Then we can come back here and, well, do what we’re getting particularly good at until it’s time for brekkie.”

And that’s what we did.

16. Simon Says
August 6, 1971
Boonville, CA, USA

Simon looked just like the pictures of him in the Houston house: tall, even taller than Grace, with close-cropped blond hair, eyes in a face that could have been chiseled from stone, with a color to remind everyone of Paul Newman, and an athletic build. In short, God's gift to women. How could Grace have not wanted to jump into bed with him? One of life's little mysteries.

I wished that I had followed Grace's example in Houston and indulged in a makeover before greeting him at the front door.

"Ah! So, this is the mysterious Patsy that Grace goes on about. Nice to finally meet you."

"And I you, Simon. Please come in. Grace will be right down. Would you care for a G&T? Or some wine? Or, you presumably know what we grow around here if you'd like to try that."

He considered it briefly. "Hey, you only live once. Let's go for broke."

"Want to try the same strain Grace and I have been smoking? It's called Blue Dream and may be the perfect weed."

"You're the expert."

"Have a seat. You can put your bag in the spare bedroom." I left to fetch the cannabis.
This could turn out better than expected.

When I returned, he was still standing. "The bed in there doesn't seem to have been slept in."

I stopped in and looked at him. "I thought Grace had told you about our...relationship."

He grinned. "Gotcha! I had expected no less. Have you enjoyed each other's company?"

"It's been wonderful. And it wasn't all about sex. Oh, there was plenty of that, but we had an interesting mid-week encounter. We've been dying to tell you about it."

Grace made her entrance. She wore an outfit saved for tonight: a tight-fitting sheath with a slit up the side exposing some of her lovely legs. It had a high neck that covered up but accentuated her patrician neck. We had had a brief argument about shoes. She wanted to wear stiletto heels. I complained she would probably trip on the stairs and injure herself. She relented in favor on bare feet.

Simon managed, "Wow! Is that for my benefit?"

"You like?"

"You have to ask? Isn't the fact that my tongue is hanging out enough?"

She laughed.

"I don't know about you, Simon, but I *love* to hear her laugh," I commented. I knew that she had on nothing underneath and could only imagine what the impact of a full disrobing would be.

"Did I hear something about smoking?"

I held up the joint, which I lit. I took the first hit and passed it to Simon. He took a lungful, held it for a while, then exhaled a long stream. Obviously, this was not his first rodeo.

“We’re going to need a bigger doobie,” I said, and left for the kitchen.

I returned with some cookies we’d managed to save somehow, and another joint. Grace and Simon were passing the first joint between them. Both were sitting on the loveseat. Simon had shed his coat and tie and loosened the top button on his shirt. Nice progress. I lit the second joint, which I smoked by myself. If I was going to be left out of the fun, I planned to get totally hammered. I remembered when Lily and I harvested the weed at Mark’s cabin, then got so stoned we could hardly talk. The memory of what happened after that got all the right juices flowing.

We spent about an hour regaling Simon with the story of Cyril and Margaret/Maureen. The cookies were long gone. Simon finally asked the question that had been on our minds from early this morning. “What happens next? What do we do now?”

“Right now,” I suggested, “why don’t the two of you go get re-acquainted? I’ll wait here.”

Grace leaned over and whispered to Simon. He smiled and kissed her. I thought maybe he planned to have sex right there in the living room. However, they seemed to have agreed to take it upstairs. Rising as one, they headed for the stairs. Grace detached herself, though, and came over to me.

“This is not a one-act play,” she told me quietly. “Don’t go away.”

Then she joined Simon on the stairs and left me alone.

I moved into the spare bedroom. Just in case there was a plan for more action, I sorted thru Mick’s old clothes — I really should get rid of them, but I wasn’t ready yet. I found an old shirt and put it on, after removing everything else I wore. I rolled up the sleeves and left the rest long enough to cover the important parts. I remembered a scene from a movie that probably had not been made yet, where the actress emerges from the bathroom wearing such an outfit. It was rated *incredibly sexy*.

I waited. I grew drowsy and moved onto the bed, where I fell asleep.

I dreamed of Mark. I could see him waving to me from the porch of the cabin in the Hill Country. I was a long way off. I tried calling him. He waved more. I couldn’t find the path. I kept calling to no avail. Everything started shaking. I opened my eyes to find a worried Grace looking at me.

“You were talking in your sleep,” she said. “Sounded like a bad dream.”

“It’s all better now.” I kissed her.

“I like your outfit,” she said. “But it’s in the way.” She remedied that. Usually, when we made love, I took the lead. Not this time! She had very definite plans and proceeded to put them into action. I had no complaints and concentrated on moaning softly at the right time. I felt still half asleep, which added a dream-like quality. I let waves of pleasure wash over me.

Something changed. I cracked my eyes just enough to see that Simon had joined in on the action. I realized that Grace must have orchestrated that. The climax came quickly. Not perfectly synchronized, but at least a 9.5 triple orgasm. We all fell onto the bed panting.

When I awoke, Simon and I were alone. Was that part of the plan? I tentatively extended a hand to touch his chest. He took it in his and kissed it. “I think that was a stupendous finale, don’t you?”

“Sure. Let’s leave it at that.”

Grace returned with some coffee she had managed to make from my limited supply. She tiptoed in just in case she was interrupting, then smiled when she saw I had my head on Simon’s chest.

After a few sips of coffee, Grace spoke up, “I need to tell you both that I don’t think I can manage any more, sorry to say.”

“I know the feeling,” I replied. “Wonderfully sore.”

“Sounds like the name of a rock band,” Simon said. “Opening for the Grateful Dead maybe.”

That got a laugh.

That happy time couldn’t last. I gave them the bad news. “That woman, Margaret or whatever her name is, if she even knows it herself, said something to me when she left. She said that she didn’t know who I was, but there is no record of Patsy Talbot or O’Brien before I got my driver’s license. I think it was a warning. I need to disappear.”

“Oh, no!” They both said.

“Wait here,” Simon said and left the room. When he returned, he had a large envelope in his hand. “I meant to give you this earlier.” He removed a heavy sheet of paper and gave it to me.

“1000 shares! Simon, that’s way too much,” I protested. It was the friends-and-family shares I had requested.

“You must have some way of dealing with these that we shouldn’t ask about. Before you disappear.”

“I’ll think of something.” An idea was forming. I just needed to work on it. For the first time, I seriously considered everything I needed to do soon. Time to start a list.

Simon wasn’t done. “You don’t fully appreciate how much you have done for us, how much we have learned from you.”

“Really?”

Grace spoke. “My love, you cannot imagine the depth of our feeling for you. If you’re not an angel, and I don’t believe they’re real, you are, as Mark would say, a good first approximation. It’s not just the love you brought me — and Simon — it’s the way you view the world. Nothing seems to be beyond you. It’s catching.”

Simon took me in his arms. “I love what you did for Grace. She’s a different woman now from the one you first met. The stock is a sign, an inadequate one, of our gratitude.”

“Thank you both,” I said, as tears began to flow. “I’ll never forget you.”

There was more. Instructions for handling the share certificates. Questions I couldn’t answer. Finally, a plea from Grace, “Promise that we’ll meet again.”

“I promise.”

And they were gone.

The next morning, I walked to the post office and sent a certified letter to Mark with the shares and instructions. My note promised, “When we meet again, you can return the balance to me.” If he held onto the shares as I insisted, they would be unbelievably valuable.

Next, I visited my mother-in-law. After Mick’s death, we didn’t see each other much. The memories it brought were too much to deal with. It was the same this time, but I needed her help. “I’ve got to leave soon,” I began. “Here is the deed to Mick’s house. I promised it to a man who called himself Cyril —”

“The hermit in Hendy Woods?”

“That’s the man, but he’s not there any longer.”

“He leave in the big black car?”

“Yes. I promised him that he was welcome in the house any time.”

“Do not worry, *mi amadita*. I will take care of it. *Vaya con dios*.”

“*Gracias*.”

Next, I went to see Marian, who seemed to be expecting me. “I hear you are leaving,” she said before I say anything.

“Word gets around fast,” I told her.

“Before you go, I need to tell you something important.”

“I’m listening.”

“Back in 1950, my daughter disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Someone described as *an old woman* came to my house while I was out. The nurse/housekeeper said the woman talked her way in to see the baby. A bit later, she heard my daughter crying. She was wearing something around her neck: a small bag on a rawhide thong. Inside the bag was a gold coin that no one recognized.” She paused to let that sink in.

I tried to keep a straight face, but she read me correctly and continued. “We tried to find the woman, but she had disappeared. According to the server in the bakery in town, the woman had bought several rolls, some sandwich meat, cheese, and soft drinks. She put all of them into a strange, red backpack and left.”

“I know nothing about this, but I do recognize the item you describe.” I opened my backpack and rummaged around in the hidden compartment. I brought out the item and showed it to her.

“That’s it. My daughter cried whenever I tried to remove it, so we let her wear it. One night we heard her cry out in her sleep. Neither my husband nor I thought much about it. She cried fairly frequently. We hoped she’d go back to sleep. When she grew quiet again, we went back to sleep. In the morning, her crib was empty.”

“The police were quite skeptical. Our explanation, that someone must have sneaked into the house — it was never locked — and taken the child, was hard to accept. My husband couldn’t take it. He wound up drinking himself to death.”

“I’m so sorry,” I replied at length. “You think I am your daughter?”

“Can you explain it?”

“Not completely. However, I can tell you that a child about two years old was, excuse me, will be found wandering around by herself, in the year 2058.”

She stared at me. “2058?”

“Yes. That child is me.”

“You came from the future.”

“Yes. It’s complicated. I can’t just go wherever or whenever I want. Sometimes, I can, but other times I just wake up in a strange place. That’s how I arrived here in Boonville.”

“Why? How?”

“I don’t know. Truly. Maybe to meet you.” *And Mark!*

“Well, if you’re my daughter, I’m glad. You turned out well. I’ve loved our time together. Maybe at some level I hoped you might be her.”

“I also am glad of the time we spent together. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re welcome. Who is the old woman?”

“I have no idea.”

We sat together for a while. At last, I came to the reason for my visit. “Can I have some of your clones to take with me?”

She smiled. “Sure. Let’s go get them.”

After we packaged them up carefully and stowed them in my backpack, we parted for the last time. Marian called after me, “May you live long and prosper.” I turned around to find her giving me a Vulcan salute.

I returned the salute. She called again. “*Vaya con dios!*”

There was a lot of that going around.

Back home, I was exhausted and hungry. I scrounged something from the fridge and retired to my bed. As I fell asleep, grasping my backpack firmly, I prayed to whoever might be listening, “Please, whoever you are, let this work.”

**IV. Chloe:
More California Dreaming**

1. Mother's Day
July 3-4, 2159
Austin, NRT, Allied States of North America

It took more than a week to get back to Austin in Endeavor. Following Doraine's advice, Chloe and Z took old US 90, which they found to be in better repair than the Interstate, but still full of potholes that restricted speed to a modest 60 kph.

The route led thru the Norte Mexican portion of the Allied States, where they were greeted with a Mariachi Band, and to Chloe's delight, a fabulous feast. Z invented an excuse for them to stay and party, claiming that Endeavor's batteries were dangerously low.

The next day, the expedition arrived in Austin to great ceremony as the NRT celebrated the Fourth of July, a holiday retained from the ancient USA. Chloe was not at all interested in the festivities. She had spent most of the trip trying to figure out what was so important that she needed to cut the expedition short.

The answer came quickly. After parking Endeavor near the old Capitol, Chloe and Z entered the building to give their report. A junior officer waiting by the front door directed them to the President's Office, where they found a small group waiting. The gathering consisted of The President, by tradition referred to only by his office; Mimi Hardy, Chief Technician; Zeta Jones, Head Librarian; and an old woman with a long, white ponytail, wearing the formal white cassock of a Librarian.

Prez, as he was familiarly known, began. "Welcome back you two. What an amazing success. Sorry to shorten your journey, but we thought that Chloe, at a minimum, would want to visit with our recent arrival. Chloe, it is with utmost pleasure that I present your mother, Hypatia."

"Hello, Chloe," Hypatia said. "So nice to see you again."

"Is this some kind of joke?" Chloe asked. "I don't know this woman."

"True, though we have met in the past."

"Are you going to tell me some version of my legendary birth?"

"Not unless you request it."

Prez interrupted, "Shall we all sit down? We have a lot to discuss."

Professor Jones went first. "Chloe, and Z, we couldn't believe it when we started receiving messages from the old Observatory at Fort Davis. We thought it was a hoax, but Coke, the Librarian on duty that day, recognized his niece, Doraine. We have been in daily contact with the Observatory ever since. We have located some records there that have been missing from our collection since the Founding. Congratulations. This alone made the trip worthwhile."

"I hope that doesn't mean that we aren't going to try to get to California," Chloe said.

"Oh, no," Prez replied. "We have already begun planning for the next expedition. Based on what we have learned from your dispatches, especially from JJ and Ambianca, we think we can make some major improvements for the return trip. We have already sent survey crews along the rail line to Alpine. Initial reports are favorable. We think we can send a freight train with equipment within a year, 18 months at the worst."

Shit! Chloe thought. *I'll bet on 2 years.*

“In the meantime,” Professor Hardy spoke up, “we have studied the suit Hypatia brought with her. She says you gave it to her in 2018.” He paused to let that sink in. “We have never seen anything like it, but fortunately we found a patent number embossed on the cuffs. We were able to locate the original application, and subsequent patented refinements. The material was an outgrowth of the private space program. It probably dates to the 2018 timeframe.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Z tossed in. “What are the plans?”

“Right now, we’re just trying to figure out how it works. To be frank, I have been stalling until you got back. We really need your talents to work on it.”

Z smiled, “When do we start?”

“Well, not today,” Hypatia told her. “It’s a big celebration today.”

“Tomorrow will do,” Z agreed.

The next morning, Chloe and Hypatia had a frank mother-daughter talk.

Chloe started the discussion, “How is it possible for me to give you the suit you brought here in 2018?”

“Has JJ tried to explain Bloch’s Paradox to you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, avoid the subject unless you want to delve into some frighteningly complicated math. The high school version is that time travel is impossible unless it has already happened; then, it’s inevitable.”

“Does that make sense?”

“Surprisingly, yes. What it means is there must be a causal loop involved. Here, for example, we have a simple one: You gave me the suit in 2018; I gave it to you in 2159. The techies developed a better one they gave to you in two years. It must have taken longer than anticipated to figure it out.”

“I think I get it. Somehow, I got to 2018. That’s the time travel, right?”

“One instance, yes.”

“OK, so in 2018 we meet. I give you the suit for some reason.”

“For my protection.”

“Leaving me unprotected.”

“You told me that you could get another. I’m guessing that in two years we will be able to manufacture them in this time.”

“What’s so hot about the suit?”

“It has many features. Think about the one you have now.”

“The armor suit, with the microwave field and a laser?”

“Exactly. This version has the microwave field to keep people away, but I think it is stronger. I’m sure the laser is stronger. It packs a wallop. The armor works great; I was shot in

the chest from a distance of a few meters without the bullet penetrating. However, the feature I like best is the camouflage.”

“How does that work?”

“You turn it on and off by squeezing the belt buckle. The suit adapts to the surroundings, just like an octopus. You almost disappear. In dim light, you are hidden from all but the best equipment. I was found when my opponents used IR imaging. I mentioned that to the techies, but of course, that won’t be in the first version.”

“How do you know that?”

“OK. Pay attention. When I wore the suit, it had no defense against someone with infrared imaging.”

“So?”

“So, the suit you will give me doesn’t have that feature.”

“How sure are you that I will give you the suit?”

“Positive. You already did.”

“I think I’m getting a headache.”

“That’s understandable. However, after you’ve done it more than once, it feels natural.”

“I’ll take your word on that.”

“Good. Then let’s move on to the next item, my backpack. Ron the Mechanic’s Son made it for me.”

“Really? The original Techie?”

“The same. He was genius at repurposing the technology of the Ancient Regime.”

“Well, yeah. Turned the Technology Department from a bunch of academics studying old texts to what it is today, a highly organized discipline. Z claims she’s descended from Ron and Mia, the legendary couple.”

“Yeah. They were great together. Love at first circuit board.”

Chloe laughed. “Is there a story there?”

“Yes, on the expedition we undertook to Houston, back when the NRT was only 50 years old, he examined her work before he met her. I remember the first thing he said was, ‘This is great work!’ When they met, we all realized they were made for each other. It was a match made in heaven, except I doubt that exists.”

“So, show me what’s so good about the pack.”

Hypatia spent most of the next hour showing Chloe how it worked.

“You’re giving this to me?”

“I am. I’m retiring from the game.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ve been invited to take up residence at the Shrine.”

“That’s my job!”

“Not any longer. You are much too important to waste on such a position. You will always be welcome there, of course, but with the demands on your time, I suspect you’ll be spending most of it here.”

“Great,” she concluded, but she didn’t sound as if she meant it.

2. On the Road Again **April-September, 2162** **Wilderness of North America**

The second Voyage of Chloe and Z, in the latest version of Endeavor, set out from Austin in the spring of 2162.

At the Shrine in Medina, Chloe picked up her kit and said goodbye to Hypatia. “How are you liking the new job?” Chloe asked her mother.

“I’m getting used to it,” she replied. “Notice that the queue has already started.” She waved her hand at a line of customers. “Tourists.”

“Please, they’re Pilgrims.”

“Yeah. Here to ask the Oracle what to do.”

“What do you tell them?”

“Mostly the Follow Your Bliss line. You know like the two of you. The famous Chloe and Z.” She remembered to pronounce the name as “Zed.” Half the crowd deposited by the shuttle were there in the hope of seeing the Group of Four, as they had been dubbed, heading west.

“*Vaya con Dios*, all of you,” Hypatia said as they left for a quick trip to The Cabin, where they were to wait for supplies.

“Which Dios?” Chloe asked.

“Ifni, the one who rolls the dice for the universe,” Hypatia explained.

“Ifni?”

“Part of a 20th century Sci-Fi series,” Hypatia clarified.

“Ah.”

“I could have told you that,” Ambianca tossed in.

“Me, too,” JJ added.

Chloe turned to Z, “Don’t you say anything.”

Z just laughed. “Let’s go.”

A short drive took them to The Cabin. Two days of hard work followed. Each item under consideration had to be examined. Was it really required? Was there something else that would be better? Too often, the decision was bucked to Chloe, especially when it was difficult. When all the trade goods were stowed, they checked the route for the nth time, and prepared to depart. That’s when they received an urgent message. “Wait. Two more items coming tomorrow.”

Chloe was disgusted. The first day was going to be a long one. Now it would start late. “I’m going to sack out. Mañana.” She wore the white suit, which had been tested against a lengthy checklist. She took it off and crammed it into the backpack. Still holding the pack, she fell onto the bed and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

The first thing Chloe did when she woke up was to look into the pack. The suit was gone! She really had given it to Hypatia, right here in this cabin, on the deck, at dusk, in 2018!

Two new suits, with some improvements, arrived with the scheduled delivery the next morning. One of the new features, a default color, made it easy to tell the two apart. The large one, in blue, was for Z, who stood at about 190 cm. Chloe's was a bright yellow, a color not associated with any of the departments of The University. Was there a message there?

There was no time to wonder about anything. They were already several hours behind schedule. The large trailer full of trade goods pulled by one of the functioning trucks, with Endeavor trailing, set off for the drive to the nearest rail crossing, just west of San Antonio. There, the container on the trailer and Endeavor were hoisted onto the rail cars prepared for them. A special car on the train, with sleeping arrangements and good connections to the net awaited their entrance. Finally, shortly after noon, the final checklist had been completed, and the train full of heavy equipment, the explorers set off on the first leg of the trip.

3. Alpine Encounter

April 16, 2162

Davis Mountains, NRT, Allied States of North America

The train pulled into the station in Alpine late in the afternoon, to a welcoming committee made up of the entire community. A band struck up a stirring march loosely based on Stars and Stripes Forever. Doraine and her posse were front and center. Chloe noticed that Z seemed to be particularly pleased to see them.

Doraine rushed forward to greet the two human members of the party. Ambianca and JJ had already made themselves at home on the local networks. The latter were greatly improved after the area joined the New Republic of Texas. “How great to see you both again,” Doraine said by way of greeting. She gave both a big hug, then linked arms and ushered them to meet the rest of the dignitaries. Chloe hated this part of the job and bowed out as soon as she could to oversee the unloading of the goods. Z loved being the center of attention, and when Doraine suggested they adjourn and try the latest experiment in cannabis cultivation she happily agreed.

“I’ve arranged for a cottage on the mountain and a vehicle to get you there to be available while you’re here,” Doraine said.

“That sounds nice.”

“It has room for two. One bed.”

“Interesting,” Z said noncommittally.

“I wondered if you and Chloe...” Doraine continued.

“It’s not like that. We’re colleagues. That’s all. Also, she’s kinda straitlaced.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She had a strange childhood. Lived on the Apple Orchard Shrine with her foster mother until she was 14.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Then she lived alone, except for Ambianca and JJ.”

“Wow! At 14?”

“That doesn’t mean she’s not one of the smartest people you’ll meet. Great project manager. Listens well. Really people oriented. JJ chose her to lead this project.”

“JJ?”

“Sure. Who else would you expect?”

“Well, the President. The Council.”

Z laughed. “They wouldn’t dare question JJ.”

“But he’s just a computer program.”

“Spend some time with him and you’ll feel differently.”

Doraine walked in silence for a while. “Well, if not you and Chloe in the cottage...”

“You maybe?”

“Is that an invitation?” Doraine asked. “We have to find some place for Chloe to sleep.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Doraine reached out and took Z’s hand and kissed it. “Sounds great! We’re here. This is our new greenhouse.” Doraine indicated a huge building covered in plastic.

“Wow! This is huge!” Z commented.

“This area was famous for hot house tomatoes before the collapse. We were able to salvage a lot of the material we needed. This is about one fourth as big as the pre-Collapsian buildings.”

“This is all given to pot?”

“No. That’s just a small part. We’ve been growing green vegetables. Our diets were somewhat deficient. Want the tour?”

“Sure.”

It turned out they had the place to themselves.

4. Highway Repairs April 17-20, 2162

Davis Mountains, NRT, Allied States of North America [ASNA]

The next morning, the group huddled over the large screen showing photos of the bomb crater or whatever it was. Chloe had spent the night alternately napping and discussing plans with Ambianca and JJ. By the time Z and Doraine showed up, it was just in time for breakfast. Several members of Doraine's gang followed with trays for the human members of the party.

"Ah, good. Hope you both slept well." Chloe smiled.

Z answered, "No prob," as she snarfed down a sweet roll.

"Let's get started," Chloe continued. "We can eat and work at the same time; at least I can."

"JJ, can you bring up the survey from the drones?"

"Here it is." The screen showed a view of the crater from above. JJ had annotated the image with some measurements. He explained, "The crater is approximately 8 meters in diameter with a maximum depth of 3 meters. Assuming that it is about $\frac{1}{4}$ of a sphere, I calculate the volume as $(\frac{4}{3}) * (\frac{1}{4}) * \pi * 4^2 * 3$ about 67 cubic meters, more or less. That's a lot of fill."

He paused to let that sink in. Some photos from the surrounding area appeared on the screen. "Lots of sand but getting any rocks or other material will require explosives."

"I don't want to waste any of those," Chloe said. "We might need them later."

"I agree," Z commented. "Are you going to eat that sweet roll?"

Chloe waved her hand dismissively. Z swooped.

"So," JJ continued, "we need to find a source for material to fill the hole."

Chloe explained to Doraine and Z, "We discussed this at length last night. We came up with two scenarios. First, the obvious one, we find enough stuff to fill the hole, then pour concrete on top. Second, we construct a detour around the hole. That is an easy fix for the short term, but if we plan to establish a trade route, we'll need a permanent fix."

"I know where we can get a lot of rocks," Doraine said.

"We were hoping you would say that," Ambianca said.

Doraine continued, "It seems that our wall is inappropriate if we are planning to be a trading outpost on the way to California. Not very welcoming."

"Great idea!" Chloe exclaimed. "That reduces the problem to moving the rocks."

"We have some old wagons. We'd need some way to haul them."

"Endie is capable," JJ said. "The route is mostly level, and we have hours of sunlight. We disconnect the trailer of trade goods and use the hitch for the wagons. It presents some challenges of its own but should be feasible."

"Good," Chloe said. "Z, will you take charge of creating some way to hook the wagons to Endeavor?"

"Sure." She thought to herself, *probably spend most of the time getting the wagons to work.*

“I can show Zed where the wagons are,” Doraine said.

“Excellent,” Chloe said, ignoring the Zed part of her comment. “We can get started moving the heavy equipment up to I-10. That’ll take some time.” She grabbed a breakfast taco from the tray, the first food she’d had in hours. “Let’s get going.”

Later that morning, Chloe met the group of drivers for the earth moving equipment. Needless to say, the skill required was not common the 22nd century. Most of the group were men, though in fact a woman could operate the machines as well as a man. Chloe nodded to the two women as the foreman completed introductions. Chloe was using the recorder in the suit in case she needed anyone’s name.

Moving to the small, raised area that served as a dais, Chloe spoke to the drivers. “Well, you’ve all seen the hole. This is a test to see if we can duplicate the technology of the late 20th century. Here’s the plan: we have loads of stones that should arrive soon. We’ll get the ETA in a minute. We want to dump the stones into the hole followed by enough sand to cover them up. The goal is for the stones to serve as a base and for the sand to fill in the cracks.” She paused to let that sink in.

“Now, the trick is for all y’all to be ready as soon as the stones are in the hole. We need to put the sand in as quickly as possible before the next batch of stones arrives. Got it?”

The response was a chorus of “yeahs.”

“When we get enough filled, we switch to using concrete. We’ll follow the specifications used for building the Interstate in the first place. You will get to watch that probably — unless we find some problem. Any questions?”

There were none.

“OK. Let’s get started.”

“One thing,” the foreman said. “We have something for you.” He offered Chloe a hard hat emblazoned with the word, “Herself.”

“Herself?” Chloe asked.

“As in *the goddess herself*,” the foreman replied. “We thought it appropriate.”

Chloe put it on. She didn’t tell them that the suit had superior protection. The group cheered, then got to work.

Of course, it wasn’t that easy. The stones from the wall proved to be insufficient to fill the hole. JJ sent drones on a wide survey. They located several promising sites, but all would require using explosives to extract the rocks. Chloe remained opposed to that solution.

Doraine again provided a convenient alternative. “There are a number of small holdings in the area. Some of them have ruins that we can use the stone from. Not sure we can get the bucket loader close enough. We might need some help.”

“Can you organize that?” Chloe asked.

“Sure. I’ll round up some volunteers.”

Finally, on the 20th, Tuesday, everything was ready for The Big Pour. Bag after bag of cement, together with sand and some gravel, went into the mixer with some vital water. The water required multiple trips to “the river,” as the creek running thru town was called. Luckily, the camels were used to hauling water.

It was nearly night before the job was complete. A nice road ran across the former bomb crater. Now, it just needed time to cure. As planned years ago, they were not going to use the interstate right away. Instead, they would follow part of the old Scenic Loop before veering northwest to rejoin the highway after the area of the crater.

“By the way,” Chloe asked Doraine. “The people we met the first time we were here, you know, the men, claimed that you were responsible for the bomb crater.”

“Nonsense,” Doraine said. “That was here long before we came. We think it dates to the time of the Collapse.”

“I suspected as much.”

“Get a good night’s sleep tonight,” Chloe continued, with a look at Z. “Tomorrow, we hit the road early.”

5. The Wilcox Waterhole

April 21-27, 2162

The Wilderness of North America

The trip was often boring. Ambianca and JJ did most of the driving using a new interface in Endeavor. JJ was especially appreciative of the way it worked. Ambianca admitted that it was easy to use and “felt comfortable,” whatever that means for an AI. After she complimented the ability to dodge potholes automatically, JJ revealed a secret: Chloe had designed it.

“Well,” Ambianca said, “I should have guessed.”

Letting the two of them drive left plenty of time for Chloe and Z to amuse themselves with anything else. Z thought of how much fun she could have with Doraine during the long hauls on the highway. Chloe worried about what she could have overlooked.

Two skirmishes on the way are worth noting.

The first involved a small band of men, five visible, perhaps more hidden, that stood in the middle of the highway as they approached,

“Turtle mode, 75%,” Chloe said as they crept toward the group at a slow 15 kph. At 75%, the shields covered all vulnerable parts of Endeavor except some of the solar panels on the roof.

“Battery power at 80,” JJ said. “We can go full turtle for several hours if we need to.”

“What’s the guy in the middle holding? Can we zoom in on that?” Z asked.

The image on the screen focused on a small stick in his right hand. “That looks like dynamite,” Z said.

“Worse,” JJ noted. “It’s old stuff, maybe ancient. Notice the small oily dots on the outside? That’s probably nitro that has seeped out. The thing could blow up at any time. A good shake would be all it takes.”

“Let’s try reasoning with him,” Ambianca suggested.

“Good idea,” Chloe said. “Open the loud hailer.” She waited for Endeavor to indicate that all was ready before speaking. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. We come in peace. We wish to avoid trouble. We note that the stick you are holding appears to be unstable. We suggest you put it down carefully and let us dispose of it for you.”

“Fuck that!”

“This is for your own safety. We think the dynamite could explode at any time.”

“Yeah. It’s gonna splode on your fucking trailer less you surrender.”

“Hailer off. JJ, do you have a bead on the stick in case we need to act?”

“I have from the first.”

“Let’s try the personal approach.” Chloe was already wearing her suit. It was the most comfortable garment she had ever worn. Both she and Z tended to keep them on most of the time.

Opening the door, Chloe descended to the pavement. She held up both hands to show they were empty and started walking slowly forward. Two men from the group started running toward her but stopped abruptly when they reached the limit of the field. Speaking to all of them,

she said, “As you can see, we have means of protecting ourselves. We have no wish to harm anyone.” Another man raised an ancient rifle to his shoulder and fired straight at Chloe. The protective head shield deployed automatically in a fraction of the time it took the bullet to arrive. When the bullet hit the mask, it dropped harmlessly to the ground.

“Looks like your ammunition is a decrepit,” she observed.

“Try this!” The one Chloe assumed to be the leader put the dynamite into an improvised slingshot and prepared to launch at Endeavor. One of the men pulled out a lighter and lit a fuse. Suddenly, an explosion engulfed the men. All that was left was a fair-sized hole and a lot of blood and body parts.

Chloe returned to Endeavor. “Nice shot,” she said.

“Oh, we didn’t shoot. Just as I suspected, the dynamite was old and unstable. Blew up when they handled it,” JJ said.

“Good. We don’t have that on our conscience. Shall we leave the remains to scavengers?”

“That gets my vote,” Z said.

“Objections?”

There were none.

The second incident was less violent. As Endeavor drove on thru the desert of the North American Wilderness, they saw an incredible sight: a lone man walking along the shoulder of the highway. As Endeavor approached, the man held out his thumb in the ancient signal for hitchhiking.

“Let’s stop,” suggested Chloe.

As they pulled up, their new companion fell onto the road, clearly on his last reserves of energy. “Quick,” Chloe said, opening the door and rushing to the inert body. He was still alive, but weak. She and Z managed to get him back into Endeavor. He opened his eyes and managed to say something that sounded like, “Water.”

“Here,” Z said, offering him a glass with a straw.

“I hope this isn’t the Plague,” Ambianca said. “Otherwise, this might be a lonely trip.”

“Good point,” Z said. She found the supply of masks and gloves. They put them on and wiped everything down with sanitizer. It was late, but better than nothing.

With some water, the traveler revived somewhat. “Drink some more,” JJ said, “but just a few sips.”

“Let’s fix some food for him,” Z suggested. “What do you think he can eat?”

“I’ll nuke some soup.”

Their new friend reacted poorly to the word *nuke*. He began to struggle.

“Relax,” Chloe said. “We’re just going to warm up some soup in the microwave.”

He didn’t seem to understand what she was saying, but her tone reassured him. She took a careful look at him while Z worked on the soup. Beneath the dirt, he seemed to be about Z’s

age, 30 something. Considering what he had lived thru, he was probably younger. Wiping his face with a damp cloth, she saw a strong visage that reflected indigenous heritage.

He drank the soup hungrily despite JJ's warning. Fortunately, he managed to hold it down. The combination of food and water had the desired effect. Soon the visitor was coherent enough for questions.

"What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?" Chloe asked.

"Trying to get to Wilcox. Beulah Mae died on me."

"Beulah Mae?"

"Camel."

"Why'd you name her that?" Chloe asked, though it made no difference.

"Got it from a children's book."

"Interesting. Where's Wilcox?"

"On the highway. Day or two by camel. Oasis."

Chloe looked at Z, then at Ambianca and JJ. "Well?"

"It's on our way," Z said. "In his condition, I think we can overpower him if we need to."

"Wait! Wait!" the visitor said. "What do you mean?"

Z told him, "It's just that we've had some difficulties with people we met on the road."

"Oh." He said nothing for a moment. "I'd be most appreciative if you'd take me to there. Don't have nuthin to pay you with, though."

"That's not surprising," Chloe said. "No problem."

They spent the next day learning everything Winston — his name — could tell them about what to expect. The area was full of bandits, he said. "Course, they don't be bothering *you*."

"Oh?" Z prompted.

"By now, everybody done heard bout the Space Aliens. Word be 'Don't fuck with them.'"

Their laughter masked the considerable relief they felt that their reputation had preceded them.

"We're not space aliens, as you can see," Z said. "Just plain old humans with 22nd century tech."

"I heard you got lightning in a bottle."

"In a sense, we do," she said. "So far, we've been more than a match for those who want to hurt us. We prefer people who want to trade. We are on a peaceful mission."

"Be glad knowing that. Should be tradin' at Wilcox."

JJ butted in. "I don't see anything like a permanent settlement near the old town of Wilcox. No infra-red emissions. Is there a village there?"

“No village. Just water inna desert. People meet there Spring and Fall.”

It took another two days to reach the Spring Fair at the Wilcox Waterhole. Wagons, carts, camels, and people walking with armloads or trade goods all crowded into the area. Early arrivals had already occupied the semi-permanent trading sheds and had set out arrays of goods for sale or trade. Of all the places they had seen along the way, small crofts, abandoned villages, emergency huts, bandits, and the Davis Mountain settlement, nothing could compare to this. The excitement was palpable.

They caused quite a stir when Endeavor and the trailer full of trade goods pulled up to the entrance. Shouts, “It’s the space aliens,” could be heard from all sides. Of course, Chloe and Z couldn’t resist playing along. Both donned their suits, picked up a laptop for Ambi and JJ, and opened the door. “There they are!” Chloe tried a friendly wave. Didn’t work.

Walking to a table set up by the entrance, Chloe tapped the control to lower the face mask and hood. Seeing a small, young woman instead of a strange beast, some brave souls moved closer to get a good look. Chloe waited. Z scanned the crowd, ready to intervene if necessary. Winston chose this moment to descend from Endie.

A woman detached from the crowd and strode toward them with a menacing look. “Winston, you bastard! Where’s Beulah Mae?” She walked past Chloe and Z without slowing down, up to Winston, and slapped him hard on the face. “Lose her in a dice game?” she asked.

“She died,” Winston said. “I’m sorry, Maude.” Tears began to stream down his face.

The woman changed her mind and gave Winston a hug. “Be glad you scaped. Hate learning you be dead. I think.”

Winston kissed her on the lips. “Be glad to see you agin, too. These people done saved me.” He waved a hand around. “They be in-fuckin-credible. Say they wanna trade.”

Chloe and Z examined the woman closely. She was larger than most, almost as big as Z, but not athletic. She wore some old coveralls made of denim. Her face, probably once lovely, showed the effects of too much sun and a hard life. Still, she seemed capable of real affection.

Chloe decided to try again. She walked up to the Winston and Maude, keeping a safe distance. Steepling both hands, she made a slight bow. “Namaste,” she tried. “My name is Chloe. My friend there is Z. Our two friends here,” she indicated the laptop screen, “are Ambianca and JJ.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance, Maude,” Ambi said.

“Agreed. Nice to meet you,” JJ added.

“You be people? Not space aliens?”

“That’s right. Just people like you. Winston told us about this fair. We decided to stop and see if we can trade something.”

“You got money?”

“Some,” Chloe replied. She removed a small sack from her belt and emptied some of the coins into her palm.

Maude’s eyes grew large. She lost her voice for a while. “Mebbe I can check em?”

“Of course,” Chloe replied. “These are from the NRT, New Republic of Texas. That’s where we come from.” She held out her hand with some coins.

Maude approached carefully, still unsure whether she could trust these strange people. She took a gold coin from Chloe’s hand and bit on it. That seemed to satisfy her. She took a look at the remaining coins, “You be ok trading.”

“Good,” said Chloe. “We have goods that your people may be interested in. We would love a hot shower and good food if that is available.”

“Gotta set up. Mebbe trade first?”

“Fine. Ambi shall we open up?”

The side of the trailer full of goods rolled up, exposing a counter where customers could examine the offerings. This elicited cries of astonishment from the crowd who began to move forward en masse. “Some order, please. Form a line,” Z shouted. Opening a small door, she reached into the interior and took out a stack of cones, which she set up to show where the line should form. Then, she moved behind the counter and began displaying goods.

“What should we charge?” Z asked Chloe.

“No idea,” Chloe replied. She turned to Winston and Maude. “Maybe the two of you could help. We are unsure how to price our goods. We don’t want to exploit our position or be viewed as suckers. We will compensate Maude, of course. Winston, we’ll consider this recompense for rescuing you.”

“A bargain!” Winston said. He quickly moved to take up a spot next to Z. The haggling began in earnest now that a local expert was there. Winston checked out the merchandise and quickly settled on some shovels and other tools. Holding up a shiny example, he announced to the crowd, “These be brand new. What am I bid for this fabulous shovel?”

Z’s demand for a line was quickly ignored. A crowd milled in front shouting bids to Winston. The bids were in dollars and cents, but only Winston seemed to know a good price. Z was happy to retire to the back and hand items to Winston as he concluded each sale. A pile of coins, mostly silver, some copper, built up on the counter. Z scooped it into a small bag. “What will this buy?” she asked Winston.

“Anything you want,” was the reply.

Z excused herself and went to talk to Chloe and Ambianca. “What do you say to spending this on some goods here?”

“Excellent idea. What will it buy?”

“Winston says anything we want.”

Chloe turned to Maude, “What do you say to a feast? Can we buy enough to satisfy this crowd?”

“Whatca got in mind?”

“How about a big barbecue? There must be something here to grill.”

“Let me work on it. Whyn’t you come with me. Still want a hot shower?”

“Sounds great. Let me get my bag.” She quickly returned to Endie and picked up her pack. Then they set off, with Maude leading.

“Can we buy a camel to replace Beulah Mae for you?”

Maude’s jaw fell open. “That be costing ten gold.”

Chloe picked a coin from her purse. “Is this enough?” She held out one of the ancient Krugerrands and the equivalent NRT coin.

“That be buying two camels,” Maude said. “Good ones.”

“Let’s go have a look,” Chloe suggested. Maude needed no more encouragement. She headed for some animal pens on the periphery. Chloe was amazed. Herds of sheep and goats filled up one corral. Two mangy cattle stood in another. The camels were last.

“You do the haggling for me, OK?”

Maude smiled. “I be good at it.”

“We haven’t discussed what is usually our hottest trade item.”

“What that be?”

“Some patches that prevent women from getting pregnant. Until they want to,” she added quickly.

“How do that work?”

“One patch lasts for a month. Then you apply another. So long as the patch stays green you won’t get pregnant. When it turns red, you need a new one. We can sell a year’s supply.”

“When they be gone?”

“We hope to return to the fair in the future. We would like to establish a trade route from Texas to California. That’s one of the main reasons for our trip.”

“I think they be lotsa customers for that.”

Chloe smiled. There were *always* plenty of customers.

Maude checked out the camels like a pro, settling on a female, then starting to work on the dealer. Chloe watched the process entranced. She finally remembered to start recording the exchange for later study. The price started out at \$25 gold dollars but didn’t stay there long. Maude turned away in disgust. “C’mon. They be other dealers.”

The dealer adjusted the asking price sufficiently for the bargaining to resume. Eventually, they settled on \$10 gold, exactly as Maude had suggested. Chloe took out her bag and started to offer the Krugerrand. Maude stopped her. “Not that.” She rummaged thru the other coins before offering a collection to the camel merchant. He tested the coins and nodded his acceptance.

“Be needing somfing for fodder.”

Maude looked into the bag again and withdrew a copper. She tossed it to him. “I be picking her up later.”

The next stop was by the cattle pen. It turned out to be the establishment of a butcher. Maude bought two large sides of beef and specified delivery to the central area, where they could be grilled. Then she showed Chloe where the showers were.

The hygiene was subpar in the stalls, but Chloe decided to take a chance. It had been days since leaving the Davis Mountain area, and facilities on Endeavor for washing were spare. Maude excused herself and left Chloe alone. With a bit of trepidation, Chloe undressed and put

everything into the pack. She set the security to 90%, just short of lethal, and moved into the shower. The water was hot. She found shampoo and soap together with dry towels as part of the deal. After an all too short time, her allotment of water ran out. She emerged, drying herself with the towel to see a man watching her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, trying to keep her voice even.

“Well. You be pretty good lookin. Likes em young.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” Chloe said, moving toward her pack.

“I be taking that pack, too.”

Chloe told him, “It’s mine. You cannot have it.”

“If’n I take it, it be mine.”

“Just try,” Chloe taunted him.

With that, he took the three steps to the bench holding the pack and grabbed it.

The jolt knocked him into the far wall. He slid down into a heap at the bottom.

Chloe retrieved the pack and got dressed. As she passed her opponent, he groaned slightly. She considered kicking him for good measure but resistance the impulse. “Didn’t you hear? Don’t fuck with the Space Aliens.” She added, “Resistance is futile,” grinning to herself.

He grabbed her leg. She drove her free foot deep into his groin, provoking another groan. “Consider yourself lucky,” she said in parting.

When Z wanted a hot shower, Chloe stood guard outside, in case there were more thugs around. A couple of large types passed by but detoured at a safe distance. “She done beat shit outa the boss,” she overheard one of them say.

The feast was a big hit, especially after Chloe offered a sample of Hill Country Dream to a few people. Before long, there was a line at the trailer looking to buy more. The cannabis was two sigma better than the alcohol it competed with. The latter would have been labeled “for external use only” anywhere in the Allied States.

The beef was better than expected, cooked to perfection by the chef. Others had provided some items to accompany the meat, including some good potatoes and a leafy vegetable Chloe didn’t recognize but ate with enthusiasm.

Someone rolled a keg of beer into the center of the circle. A line developed quickly. “The first mug goes to this beautiful lady,” the proprietor said. Chloe barely had time to note that he used standard English before he handed her the mug. She took a taste and found it delightful. Some springtime herbs had been added, a nice touch. She smiled and held it aloft before draining half in a long swallow. The crowd cheered.

Winston sidled up next to her. “How bout you demo some fancy shit. Lightning, you know.”

“I don’t do well at that. How about asking Z?”

Z overheard, “Ask me what?”

“Winston suggested a demo for the crowd. Seems like your specialty.”

“Phooey. By now, everyone knows that you are our leader. Go on. You’ll do great. I’ll have your back in case something comes up.”

Reluctantly, Chloe relented and turned to the assemblage. “Winston has asked for a demo of our technology. Would you like that?”

The crowd cheered.

“How about some magic tricks to start,” Chloe said. She manipulated the buttons on the sleeve of her suit. It changed into formal attire, looking like a blue suit.

“Oooh!” the crowd said.

Chloe walked to stand in front of the wall of a shack. She turned on the camouflage. Everything disappeared except her hands and face. That elicited another series of sounds of approval. Then Chloe pushed another button that flipped the mask down over her head and face. Tucking her hands into the pockets of the suit, she disappeared completely.

The crowd applauded and shouted.

Next, Chloe turned off the camouflage and reappeared. She looked around for a suitable target for the laser. “See that rock over there?” She pointed to the rock in question. Everyone turned to look at the rock. Chloe let the crowd grow silent, then she fired the laser. The thunderclap and exploding rock startled all, but soon gave way to another round of applause.

“Next, we will show you our defenses.” She took the Krugerrand from her purse and held it up for all to see. Then, she placed it on top of a nearby post. She set the suit on half power and stood next to the post. “Who wants to try to take it?”

A huge man, over 2 meters tall, weighing well over 100 kilos emerged. She heard “Brutus” called repeatedly. Brutus stopped and removed his shirt, flexing some truly impressive muscles. Grinning, he ran toward her, but was still 2 meters away when he fell on the ground and rolled away. He held his arm.

“Sorry,” Chloe said. “I should have warned you.”

Everyone laughed. Chloe turned off the suit and walked over to Brutus. She offered him help getting up. “Let me see your arm,” she said. He showed it to her. “It’ll be OK.”

“Anyone else?”

The boss she had dealt with earlier was ready for revenge. While everyone was distracted, he rushed to the post and grabbed the coin. Turning in triumph, he drew a pistol from his belt. He aimed it at Chloe’s chest from less than 3 meters. The sound of the shot reverberated from the buildings. Chloe, whose protection had automatically activated when the pistol appeared, stood unharmed. A bolt of lightning from another angle had shattered the gun. The thunderclap was much louder than the gunshot. The man known as “the boss” clutched his right hand with his left. The gold coin and pieces of the gun fell to the ground. Chloe walked over and picked the coin up. She was putting it away when she felt a hand on her back. The Boss grabbed her by both shoulders and turned her around to face him.

Chloe reached forward and put her hand on his chest. He began to writhe in pain.

“You don’t learn, do you?” she asked to the man as he fell down helplessly at her feet. Chloe had a bad feeling. The suit had automatically armed at 100% when the gun appeared. The

shock from Chloe's Taser, set to max, was enough to kill many men. She knelt and touched his neck looking for a pulse. She detected none.

She stood. "I think the demonstration is over. I fear that this man has paid a high price for his folly."

Most of the crowd didn't seem to understand her language. She tried an alternative, "I afraid he be dead."

Several men came to check. "He gone," one said.

To her surprise, most of the crowd seemed happy with this result. "He were a bad one," one of his minions said. Two of them dragged their former boss out of the circle.

Silence held for almost a minute. Then someone began clapping. In seconds, the applause grew to a loud crescendo, with cheering mixed in.

Not the worst outcome, Chloe thought.

"Told you I had your back," Z said. "You did great!"

The next morning, Chloe and Z held a seminar for interested women where they explained how the ovulation patches worked. Most wanted some. The Council had decided that initial samples of the patches should be given away for free. "The goal of responsible procreation is too important." Following this rule, they handed out packages of 13 patches to anyone who wanted one.

After spending an hour writing a report to Austin on the developments, they tidied up and prepared to leave the Fair behind. It would run for another two weeks.

A good-sized crowd gathered to see them off. Winston, in new clothes, and Maude stood at the door to Endeavor. They hugged Chloe and Z and gave them each a small package wrapped in expensive paper. "Open this when you're on the road," Maude explained. "A small gift to show our gratitude."

"Winston," Chloe said, looking him over. "You clean up good."

"Thanks." He kissed Chloe and Z both on the cheek. "Y'all take care, heah? Hope we see agin."

Everyone waved goodbye as the Space Aliens boarded their magic vehicle to continue their quest.

The main goal, California, lay ahead.

6. Passing Interest **April-August, 2162** **“California” in The Wilderness of North America**

They fell into a routine. Chloe and Z left most of the driving to Ambi and JJ. They spent time poring over maps of the route looking for interesting places to stop for the night. For Chloe, that meant good birding spots. For Z it meant good foraging. Often, the two would coincide, detouring to pass near some wetlands, for example.

They almost forgot about the gifts from Maude. They came across them on the second day out of Wilcox. Each package held a remarkable piece of candy decorated specially for them with fancy script spelling out Space Alien.

Chloe bit off a piece and tested it. “Scrumptious,” she told Z. “Wonder what’s in it?”

“Put a sample in the testing chamber,” JJ suggested. “I’ll analyze it.”

After a few minutes, he proclaimed, “Marzipan, good quality. You can eat it safely.”

“Wonder who was making that?” Z asked to no avail. “Wish we’d known earlier.”

“Probably a luxury item. I think they got the better of us trading,” Chloe said. “I’ll bet we’ll be an even bigger hit when we return.”

Examination of possible routes made it easy to convince all that drive thru Joshua Tree National Park would be worth the time involved. Four days later, they left the Interstate and headed north. The road was acceptable as far as the Visitors Center, where they parked Endeavor and dispatched the drones to survey the road thru the ancient park.

The route was barely passable, but they decided to follow it anyway. Chloe loved the stark beauty of the dessert, which presented the possibility of finding some bird species that were not available elsewhere. Z gloomily surveyed the area, seeing little in the way of foraging opportunities. She was finally forced to settle for shooting one of the many Mule Deer in the area, providing enough meat for several days. They put the meat into the refrigerated locker at the back of the trailer to ripen some.

That night they camped near one of the springs in the area, one that provided enough water to refill the tanks on Endie.

Exiting the park the next morning, they headed north, reaching I-15 by midday. They drove thru the Tehachapi Pass to check on the windfarms there. It would require major rework to make the energy source functional again. Most of the windmills had lost the blades over time. At least one, though, still turned slowly in the distance. They produced a report for Austin with the bad news then followed I-15 thru Bakersfield, and into the Central Valley.

The desert had reclaimed much of the area that had once provided food for millions. The famous aqueduct no longer brought water from afar to nourish the fields and orchards that once lined the road they followed. A small trickle flowed south toward the ancient LA metroplex, but there was not enough to support large scale farming without a major investment of time and energy.

As they headed north thru the valley, they kept the drones aloft as much as possible to survey the surroundings. Whenever they found signs of human habitation, about once per day on average, they checked to see if Endeavor could handle the road into the small crofts. They found

no drivable roads. Obviously, the farmers in the area who eked out a subsistence from the land used their feet, oxcarts, or camels for transport.

That all changed on the fourth day after entering the valley when, late in the afternoon, signs appeared along the road advertising Big Ron's Trading Post. After 10 kilometers or so, they came upon the establishment itself, which proclaimed, "Welcome to Big Ron's. If we ain't got it, you don't be needing it."

They pulled up to the main building and parked. A man emerged from the building and stood by the door holding an ancient rifle. Chloe and Z descended the steps carefully, although they expected their suits to protect them from any ammunition that had survived this long. The man at the door yelled, "Misha! It be Space Aliens. Grab the camera!"

He leaned the rifle against the doorjamb and moved to greet his visitors.

"Caleb! Wait. I ain't find the damn camera. Fuck it." She appeared at the door. "Holy shit," she said as she hurried to catch up.

Chloe studied the pair. Both were in their fifties at least, with skin exposed to too much UV. Neither possessed an extra gram of weight. The woman had unkempt gray hair. The man had none. The clothing they wore was probably salvaged from some mall, brought here, and traded for something else. *My kind of people!*

Chloe lowered her face shield and Z followed suit. Chloe spoke, "Greetings. We are here on a discovery trip with the objective of establishing trading posts. We seem to have gotten lucky and found one ready-made."

Caleb and Misha stared at them. Z tried, "We be friendly. Wanna trade. You grok?"

Misha took the lead, "We be hear of you. Mucho. Space Aliens."

Chloe laughed. "Yes, we have heard those stories as well."

More puzzlement. Z translated, "Fake News!"

Caleb and Misha laughed. They all laughed.

"You got beer?" Z asked.

"Home brewed," Caleb said with obvious pride.

"Super. We go in?"

"Gotta take photos. Need proof."

Z motioned for them to follow her to a nearby picnic table. She set the laptop down on the table and tapped a few keys. Then she stepped back. The screen showed the image from the camera.

Z motioned for everyone to crowd around and look at the camera. All shyness on the part of Caleb and Misha disappeared. Z said, "OK Ambi, take a photo whenever. Several maybe."

After about 30 seconds, a voice came from the computer. "Got enough, Z. Would Caleb and Misha like framed copies?"

"How much?"

"One beer each," Ambianca replied.

"Done. When?"

Ambi suggested, "Chloe, maybe you could pick them up while Z checks out the beer."

Chloe waved and turned to go back to Endie. The door opened as she arrived. It took her only a few seconds to put the prints Ambi had made into the frames. One slight pressure clicked the parts together. Bingo! Quick gifts.

Chloe took a look at them as she walked toward the building. She thought the couple would be happy to hang them on the wall.

Z had already gotten the evening off to a good start. She managed to let slip that she had shot a deer that was about to be ready to process. Perhaps the host would be interested.

By the time Chloe arrived with the photos, Caleb and Z had agreed that the deer meat would pay for meals cooked by Misha herself.

"Maybe we be calling friends, OK?" Caleb asked.

"For trading?"

"You betcha."

"Tomorrow?"

"I best be startin." He rose and left. Misha arrived with some sort of stew and some great looking bread. "It be rabbit. OK?"

"Sure," Z said. She speared a piece of meat and ate it. Misha smiled, not waiting to ask how Z liked it. "This is fantastic," Z said.

Chloe tasted some herself, nodded, and tore off a hunk of bread to dip in the gravy. She remained silent until the bread had been reduced to a last nibble. Taking a long swallow of beer, she opined, "This hits the spot. How do they manage out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Good question. Maybe we'll find out tomorrow."

When Misha returned with a pie that gave off a very inviting aroma, Chloe and Z decided that questions could wait for later.

"Coffee?" Chloe asked.

Misha's face fell. "Been long time."

Z jumped up. "I be back soon."

Chloe gestured to the empty chair and Misha sat. "I'm Chloe," she began. "I be Misha," was the reply.

"Just the two of you here?"

Misha nodded, "Just the two of you in magic car?"

Chloe decided not to try explaining about Ambianca and JJ, so she just said, "Yes."

"You be young."

"Yes." Misha was not the first person to use this opening.

Misha showed what she was made of and sat silent and successfully outwaited Chloe.

Chloe smiled, "I am quite young. They say I am very good for my age."

"You in charge?"

“Yes, but we usually agree on everything. They wouldn’t send us out together if we had trouble getting along.” She spoke slowly and distinctly. Misha nodded and remained silent.

“It’s not like that,” Chloe said. “We’re friends and co-workers.” Misha nodded again.

“Where be Big Ron?” Chloe asked.

Misha laughed. “Ain’t been here for long time. Dead.”

Chloe said nothing.

Misha continued, “Too much trouble changing sign. Kept the name.”

“Good plan,” Chloe agreed.

Z chose that moment to reappear with a tray holding four small cups, each beneath a coffee filter. She poured boiling water into the four filters and sat back. “Caleb want a cup?”

“You bet. Be back. Caleb!” She went off to find him.

“I think we could trade coffee as a luxury item,” Chloe said. “If we could get it here somehow.”

“Isn’t just the same problem we have getting anything here?”

“Worse. You have to go the Coffee Coast on the Caribbean, then back to Vera Cruz, rail to Acapulco, ship it up here somewhere.”

Z thought about it. “Of course, this is an old problem. Warehouses solve it. We use the existing traffic between the Coffee Coast and Sealy, store it in the Warehouse, ship it by rail.”

“Still,” Chloe continued, “it would be better to proceed south from the Coffee Coast. There was once a plan to build a canal across Nicaragua, using the large interior lake.”

“Easier to get the Panama Canal working again.”

Misha interrupted this discussion. Pointing at Chloe, she introduced, “Caleb, this be Chloe; the other be Z. This be Caleb.”

“Thank you,” Chloe said. “Nice to meet you. Coffee?”

By this time the coffee had dripped into the cup. Z took a small spoon and stirred hers to demonstrate how to drink it. “Got sugar?” She asked.

“Got honey.”

“Even better,” Z said. Misha quickly stepped away and returned with a small jar of honey.

“Farmer south o’ here keeps bees,” Caleb explained.

Z spooned some honey into her cup and took a sip. She nodded and the others added honey and stirred theirs. The sip brought long sighs of satisfaction from the couple. “Been long time,” Misha said, repeating her earlier statement with a very different meaning.

After dessert and coffee, they discussed arrangements for the next day. They would sleep in Endeavor, politely turning down the offer of one of the cottages in the back. Tomorrow would bring what it would.

Z woke up first as usual. Thinking the coffee suddenly too valuable to drink, she made herself a cup of tea instead. “Endie, show me the outside view.” The screen sprang to life showing a crowd of at least 100 people gathered in the parking lot. “Holy shit! Chloe, wake up. We have company.”

Chloe rolled over. “Endie, what time is it?”

A computerized voice replied, “Six thirteen in the morning.”

“Damn! What’s happening? You say we have company?”

“Endie, outside view.”

Chloe looked at the image on the screen. “Jeez.” She struggled out of the bed and into her suit. “Guess it’s showtime.”

Z took charge of trading by delegating most of the work to Caleb. Ignoring the crowd standing around, she headed straight for the main building. “Caleb! We need to talk.”

“Right here.”

“Ah. This crowd is a bit larger than we anticipated.”

“You ain’t seen nuthin yet. Takes some people longer to get here.”

“Maybe you handle the trading, for a cut?”

“I be listening.”

“I think we can spare 250 grams of coffee.”

He stared off into space. “I be thinking a kilo.”

“Split the diff?”

“OK. What you got to trade?”

“We’ll open the cargo trailer soon. Then you come inside. Choose what to put out.”

“Got it.”

“Brekkie?”

“Fried rice with an egg?”

“Perfect.”

“Maybe you fix a pot of coffee?”

“OK. Need 20 mins.”

“Fine.”

Z returned to Endie and started a pot of coffee. She examined the storage area. They had over 10 kilos of coffee left. That was worth a lot out here. *Well, my ancestors also drank tea.* Of course, the tea was in bags older than the drinker and clearly inferior to fresh coffee.

Chloe was trying to mingle with the crowd, which consisted of several families. She realized that many had come not for the trading opportunity, but simply to see the Space Aliens for themselves. Lots of children approached carefully, then darted back to safety when Chloe made a move toward them.

She knelt on the pavement, getting down to their height. That did the trick. She soon had five within a meter of her spot. One brave boy about 10 years old came close and touched her suit, which fortunately was turned off. He smiled at Chloe, who smiled back. Then he turned abruptly and raced back to Mama. "I touch her!" he proclaimed loudly.

After that, some of the parents came to reclaim the kids. "That be enough," one matron complained. Chloe just smiled. Then, she addressed the crowd, "We're going to have a bit of brekkie now. Trading later. OK?"

The crowd headed for the main building. There was always something there that they needed. They could trade with Caleb and Misha while the strange visitors ate.

Z followed Chloe by several minutes carrying a small coffee pot with her. Breakfast was better than expected, with very flavorful fried rice. Z Carefully poured four cups of coffee and took a cup to their hosts. Activity was picking up already and both were busy with customers, but they made everyone stop while they enjoyed the cup. Z could see that they would have to part with some of their stash if they wanted to avoid a riot.

After breakfast, they returned to Endie and opened the trailer with all the cargo. The crowd responded with many oohs and ahs as people saw the display of equipment. Caleb took charge, just as Winston had in Wilcox, with much the same result. Tools, especially such new ones, were very popular. Later, Chloe and Z told the women about the contraceptive patches. As usual, this proved to be a big hit. The report to Austin noted the popularity and suggested sending more when possible. Also, much more coffee.

The crowd was even larger the next day as several families who had walked all the way arrived. Chloe entertained them with a repeat of the demonstration she had put on in Wilcox, to great applause. She was thinking how nice it was to have no gang to deal with.

Of course, that couldn't last. About midday, a group of 10 men on motorcycles appeared, with some women riding pillion. "Trouble?" Z asked Caleb, who was standing next to her in the trailer. "Worst kind," he said.

"Too bad they missed the demo. We may have to show it again."

Both of them descended from the counter.

The men advanced toward them. "Endie," Z said, "max Turtle Mode." Metal shields quickly covered all vulnerable areas. This caused quite a stir. Chloe, who had been browsing the offerings inside like most of the crowd heard the ruckus and came out to see what was going on.

She noticed the motorcycles and was fascinated. She approached to see how they were powered. As she had not heard them arriving, she deduced correctly that they had electric motors. A new trading opportunity occurred to her. They had enough solar panels in store to make a few available for trade. Wonder what they could get for one of them.

She was a couple of meters from the bikes when one of the men challenged her. "Keep away!"

Bemused, she looked at him. Without a helmet she saw that he was mostly bald but sported a full reddish beard. Taller than anyone else in the crowd, at least 2 meters, probably more, built like a tank, he probably terrified most people he met. Not Chloe, of course.

"Interesting vehicles you have. I was curious about them."

"Well, just keep back."

“Are they for sale or trade?” Chloe asked. They could be very useful additions to Endeavor’s armamentarium.

“Stay the fuck away!”

Apparently, he spent his time guarding the bikes and lacked the authority to negotiate.

“Stand down Mongo,” a voice behind Chloe said. She turned to see a normal-sized man, quite good looking, with a neatly trimmed beard beginning to show gray. “So, you’re interested in our rides?”

“Indeed. Who converted them to run on battery power?”

“That’d be me. Names Roger, like the rabbit in the movie.”

Chloe had no idea what movie he meant, so she just smiled and replied, “I’m Chloe. My tall friend over there is Z.” She waved in the general direction of Z.

She extended her hand to almost touch his. “I see you are acquainted with our customs.”

“Spent a year in Austin studying,” Roger told her.

“Really. How interesting. Are you here to trade? Or did you just come to ogle the Space Aliens?”

He guffawed. “Space Aliens! That’s a hoot.”

“Of course, but we find that most people greet us that way.”

“We did mostly come out of curiosity,” he admitted, “but we might be able to spare one of the bikes for a good price.”

“What would that be?”

“50 gold,” he replied.

“How to you generate the power for the batteries?” she asked.

“Got a windmill back at the farm. Have to buy power from Caleb when we come here. Bandit charges an arm and a leg.”

“Perhaps you’d be interested in one of our solar panels.”

“Still functioning?”

“Not merely functioning,” Chloe assured him. “It’ll recharge one of these in less than an hour.” She had no idea if that was correct, but it piqued his interest.

“Can you set it up here?”

“If Caleb agrees. We don’t want to take his business away.”

“He’ll agree,” Roger told her simply. He didn’t need to add “or else.”

Chloe activated her mic and hailed Z. “Can you set one of the panels to recharge the battery on this bike?” she asked.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Z replied. “What size?”

“Start with a small one.”

“Take me a few mins to get one out and find where I put my toolkit.”

It took her almost 10 minutes as she had to get Endie to lower some of the shields to let her in. She crossed to where Chloe and Roger stood, carrying a briefcase-sized solar panel and her toolkit with various connectors.

“Howdy,” she said as she approached. “Name’s Z. You must be Roger.”

“Right. Nice to meet you Z.” Chloe saw that he was more interested in Z than he had been with her. Well, too bad for him.

With Roger standing next to her and Mongo close by, Z examined the bike, locating the input port easily. “I have a cable that should fit that,” she announced and produced a likely one from her kit. She plugged one end into the bike and the other into the solar panel, which she put into a small stand to catch the sun effectively.

Roger moved close so he could watch the dial showing the charge. “Holy crap! Emile! Come look at this.” Another gang member wandered over. “This thing is charging the bike while we watch. Look at it!”

Emile came closer. He nodded to Mongo, who seemed to be preparing for something. Chloe and Z quietly activated their suits in case of trouble.

“We’ll take the panel,” Emile said.

Roger started to object that the negotiations were in progress, but one look from Emile was enough to silence him.

“The panel is our property. You cannot take it without compensation.”

Emile looked puzzled. Z said, “Panel not yours. Leave it.”

Emile guffawed and said, “Show ‘em Mongo.”

The huge brute advanced toward the two women but stopped short with a bewildered expression on his face.

“Go on!” Emile urged him.

“Somfing wrong.”

“I’ll do it myself,” Emile said. He lunged at Chloe, the easier target, and fell to the ground moaning.

Chloe calmly said to Roger, “Has it finished charging?”

“80%”

“Then I think I’ll take it back now. We are still interested if you can manage to convince Emile here to cooperate.” She picked up the solar panel, detached the cord and started toward Endeavor.

“Stop her, you overeducated asshole!” Emile said.

At that point, Caleb, having heard the commotion, emerged holding the ancient rifle. Emile had recovered and started after Chloe. Caleb shot him. Killed him.

“Son of a bitch had it coming,” he said. Chloe started to object that they were capable of protecting themselves but reconsidered and remained silent.

Roger said, “As it turns out, we have a cycle to spare. Perhaps we can resume our business.”

Several people began dragging Emile off, stripping him of everything of value as they did so. Apparently, he was not well-liked.

“Straight trade?” Z suggested. “The cycle for the solar panel?”

Roger was too good to take the first offer. “Need some sweetener.”

“How about this: The cycle and helmet for the solar panel. We’ll throw in a Krugerrand coin.”

“Show me,” Roger demanded.

Chloe took the bag from her belt and extracted a large gold coin. She tossed it to Roger, who bit it. Somehow that satisfied him that it was gold.

He said simply, “A pleasure to do business with you. Come on Mongo. We need to explain things to the rest of our people.” He gave a casual salute to Z and Chloe and marched off carrying the solar panel. A few minutes later someone else dropped a key into Chloe’s hand. “This is the key for that one,” she said, and ran off.

“I guess this is ours now,” Z said, admiring the machine.

“You got any more of those panels?” Caleb asked.

“I think we can deal,” Z assured him. “Win-win?”

“Sound good.”

Two more trading days followed before they left, their hold bulging with goods they had taken in trade. They departed early in the morning, no doubt disappointing latecomers who finally figured out what to take that the Space Aliens might want.

The voyagers turned west and found the ancient I-5 to be in pretty good shape. They managed to reach the Bay Area, Oakland in particular, on what would have been Labor Day in earlier times.

7. Happy Days Are Here Again **September 9, 2162** **Mendo Colony, Pacific Coast of North America**

The final leg of the journey led along a winding, two-lane road, thru forests and hills. After rounding a hill, the valley came into view. “Wow!” was all Chloe could muster. “All of these fields have been tended. This is a bigger operation than we thought.”

“This should be fun, all right,” Z agreed. “Can’t wait to meet the group.”

Chloe was about to tell JJ to launch a drone to check out the road ahead when she heard the whoosh as the compressed air blast gave the device a quick start. The screen immediately switched to the view of the road. JJ identified the various crops in turn as the drone sped ahead. “Winter wheat; maize; barley. Nice mix.”

“Barley sounds promising. Maybe they have some decent beer. That would be nice,” Z said. They advanced down the road at a careful 40 kph, while the drone flew ahead at more than 100.

“Looks like we have a welcoming committee,” Ambi noted.

The drone dropped low and circled around the crowd assembled in the middle of town, then returned directly to Endeavor as a roar went up from the town that could be heard by the slowpokes in the big bus. Finally, they arrived as a small band played something resembling Pomp and Circumstance.

Chloe descended the steps first, followed by Z. Simultaneously, a door on Endie’s side slid open and a display screen showed Ambianca and JJ. JJ’s idea, the screen was an improvement over the laptop used in Wilcox. The crowd grew silent.

“Greetings, Space Aliens,” the host, a middle-aged woman with a pleasant demeanor, dressed in a colorful outfit spoke into a bullhorn. Laughter rippled thru the gathering. “We hope that the stories that have reached us about you are somewhat exaggerated.” More laughter.

Z answered, “The ones about my ability to party all night are true.” Endie picked up the feed from Z’s suit mic and relayed it using the loud hailer.

Chloe, never comfortable at these occasions, spent her time studying the people in front of them. She quickly realized that almost all of them were women. *This is fantastic! I can’t wait to see how they operate, she thought.*

She looked again and was even more astonished. She realized that several of the “men” were not. Only a young man on the periphery, with a skimpy beard, was clearly male. *Curiouser and curiouser. And what’s special about you?*

The speech was taking longer than either Chloe or Z wanted. Chloe wanted to meet the chief and get down to business. Z had already identified some of the women she would like to meet.

Chloe heard the clapping signaling the end of the speech. She stepped forward, “We are not Space Aliens, though I admit that we had some fun with that. We are people, just like you, but with different tech. We are here to find out more about you and hopefully to set up some trading with you. We’ll save all that for later. Right now, we’re ready for a party!” That brought cheers!

“We have a few samples of our best Hill Country Dream cannabis.”

“Excellent,” A beautiful young woman said. Extending her hand to almost touch Chloe’s, she introduced herself, “My name is Celeste,” she told them. “Head of the entertainment committee.”

Chloe leaned over to Z and whispered, “Stop slobbering.”

Z ignored the gibe as she moved to take Celeste’s arm. “Take me to your liter.”

“I’ll wait here,” Chloe called after.

The Chief, or whatever she was, turned to Chloe. “I am called Ariadne,” she said. “I am the elected leader of our community. We weren’t sure how the accommodations are in your vehicle. We have reserved a room for you in the Hotel.” She pointed to the building behind her.

“The building dates to the 20th century, but has more modern fittings, including a king-sized bed for you and your companion.”

“We are not a couple, if that is your implication.”

“Really? We thought that two of you together for so long...”

“A natural, but incorrect inference. Z probably prefers a room without me. I am sure that I don’t want to worry what time she might show up. She meant it about partying all night.”

Ariadne seemed confused. Chloe elaborated, “Z is probably the best Techie we have. That is why she is here. I’m not sure what I am here for, only that JJ convinced the Council that I was the best person for the job.”

“So, you are in charge?”

“We strive for consensus. I am the Project Leader, whatever that means. We mostly play it by ear. And, of course we have Ambianca and JJ as well.”

“Where are they?”

“We are here,” Ambi said from the screen. “Sorta.”

Chloe noticed that the token male had managed to work his way to the front of the semicircle of people standing in front of the screen.

“Who’s that?” Chloe asked, indicating the young man with her chin.

“Oh. That’s Tinker. He’s our resident nerd. He be a bit *different*. Avoids people most like. Don’t like being touched. Tinker, come here.” The last part was a command, not a request. Tinker drifted over, not making eye contact.

Chloe started to extend her hand but had a better idea. She gave Tinker a Vulcan salute while intoning, “May you live long and prosper.”

Tinker’s manner changed immediately. He looked straight into Chloe’s eyes and said something in Vulcan.

“I’m afraid my Vulcan is a bit rusty,” she apologized. “I’d probably slip into Klingon by mistake.”

Tinker laughed. Chloe continued, “I’m a nerd too. Designed a lot of the software in Endeavor.”

“Endeavor,” Tinker said. “Cool. One of the Starships in Star Trek.”

“Yes, but our vehicle is named for Captain Cook’s ship. We just left the U out of her name.”

“Even better. Yours be a voyage of discovery.”

“Exactly, Tinker. So, what do you do as chief nerd?”

“The usual stuff. Someone be findin old tech and bring it to me. I figger out what it be doing before; what it do for us now. Then I fix it up — if it be worth it.”

“Z is a master at that. Literally. She holds the title of Master Techie.”

“I gonna talk to her later. She ain’t seem interested in business tonight.”

“Good call.” At that precise moment, as Chloe would always tell the story, she came to realize two things. First, she liked the guy. Second, the crowd had left them alone. She studied him closely. Medium dark skin, with short, curly hair that went well with the beard, only slightly taller than she was, with amazing, intense blue eyes that she had not paid enough attention to.

“Would you like a private tour of Endie?” she asked.

“Oh! You bet.”

“Come on, then.”

“Now?”

“Would you rather party?”

“Would you?”

“Do you always answer a question with another question?”

“Be that unusual?”

Chloe laughed. She took his hand. He snatched it back. “Sorry,” Chloe said.

“It’s OK,” Tinker said. “Just startled me.” He took Chloe’s hand and together they ascended to Endie. Chloe was glad to see that Ambianca held the crowd’s attention. No one seemed to notice they were gone.

“Endie,” Chloe said, “privacy please.”

“Activated.”

“Would you like something to drink? I don’t much care for alcohol, but we can make coffee.”

“Real coffee?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Chloe busied herself with the coffee, hoping she didn’t mess up. Z was the usual coffee expert. “This is really Z’s specialty. She calls it Vietnamese Coffee.” The coffee dripped into the creamy mixture in the cup. It was working.

Tinker surprised her, “She born there?”

“No,” Chloe said. “Her great-grandmother, I think. One of her ancestors anyway.”

“Where you be born?” Tinker asked.

“Legend has it I was born near Austin, but I don’t remember anything from that time. I was found in the Apple Orchard Shrine by my foster mother, Sister Angelina. There’s a small marker on the spot now.” She chuckled, “I put it there myself.”

“You *that* Chloe? The one in Hypatia’s memoirs?”

“Supposedly.”

“Cool.” He took a sip of the coffee.

“I like to put a bit of honey in it,” Chloe suggested, offering the jar to Tinker. He took the jar. Their fingers touched as he did so. He started and almost dropped the jar. He put it down gently and took her hand again.

“I’d like to get used to you touching me,” he said calmly, using perfect English. Chloe struggled with her emotions before taking his hand and kissing. This time he didn’t flinch.

“Let me show you around,” she said.

They spent the next two hours exploring all that Endie had to offer. Tinker had an endless series of questions, many too technical for Chloe. She called up JJ, who went into greater detail.

Another hour passed in this way before Tinker realized how late it was. “I should be leaving.”

“It’s not required. In fact, there is supposed to be a room in the Hotel for Z and me. I’ll be astonished if she is in the room.”

Tinker thought for a long time. “This has never happened to me before. I’m not sure what I should do.”

“Me, either. How about a kiss good night?”

She didn’t wait for an answer.

8. Extending the Network

September 15-October 12, 2162

Boonville and Bay Area, North America

After the celebrations were completed, the team turned to the main task: extending the network to the new state in Mendocino. This was much more involved than the same job in the Davis Mountains. Both locations were far from the main population centers of the pre-Collapsian society, but the Observatory provided a convenient shortcut. The plan was to find something similar in California. The obvious place to start was in the Bay Area, which presented an obvious problem: it was hours away.

Chloe spent several days planning the expedition. Finally, after spending an entire week considering different possibilities, they settled on three options:

1. Stanford.
2. Google
3. UC Berkeley

Stanford and Google were both located in the ancient Silicon Valley. UC Berkeley was across the bay. Chloe and Z had checked out the routes to all three candidates using Endeavor's drones. Their examination showed that the famous Golden Gate bridge seemed to be in better condition than expected, while the bridges leading to the East Bay, where Berkeley was, were much worse. Only the Carquinez Bridge had been usable on the trip north. The portion of the Bay Bridge from San Francisco to the island in the middle was missing. Further south, two bridges, San Mateo and Dumbarton, were partially under water due to the rise in sea level. That meant that going from Silicon Valley to the East Bay involved a lengthy trip around the southern end of the Bay. Visiting Berkeley first meant dealing with the same problem as well as finding a route that avoided unsafe bridges.

As a result, they planned to cross the Golden Gate into San Francisco, then travel south on one of the old freeways to Stanford. If needed, they would continue to the Google campus farther south before heading for Berkeley. Other options had been considered, but that would have made linking Mendocino to whatever working node they found much more difficult.

The team was similar to the one assembled for the Observatory. Chloe and Z, the young man she met last night, Tinker, and Z's new friend, Y.

Chloe fell into the trap of asking about the name. "Y?" she asked. To which the duo replied in unison, "Why not?"

"Also," Y continued, "It comes before Zed."

"I'm not going there," Chloe said. She studied the younger woman, perhaps the most beautiful in the city. Showing the mixed ancestry that seemed to be normal in Boonville, she had beautiful caramel colored skin, long raven hair drawn into a braid, dark brown eyes that hinted at a good intellect. Shorter and broader than Z, without her lover's athletic build, but blessed with a nice figure, she was studying Chloe in turn with the same level of interest. All considered, Chloe thought Z had made a good choice.

After they had loaded all the supplies, enough for four people for at least a week, Chloe drew Z aside. "OK. I know the code. She called you Zed. I'm cool with that. However, I would like to know that she was chosen for her competence, not for other reasons."

“I understand. Your friend, Tinker, told me she was the best person for the trip. I started prepping her for the trip, we hit it off.” She trailed off.

Chloe knew bullshit when she heard it. Y and Z were an item. She hoped Z knew what she was doing.

Endeavor knew the route, having partly traversed it once, and could be trusted to do most of the driving. Ambianca would fill in on the tricky parts.

Chloe told Tinker and Y about the exploration of the MacDonald Observatory, which turned up a working high-speed link to Austin. The goal was to find a similar point in what was the world capital for pre-Collapsian high tech. Consultation with the Library in Austin found several nodes that had worked once. While Endeavor negotiated the potholes on the road, the rest of the crew, including Ambianca and JJ examined the map for the nth time. There was no new information except on the state of the road, and that was almost useless.

Once thru the mountains surrounding Anderson Valley, they moved onto the ancient 101. Here, they were able to gradually increase the speed to 80, at least in places. The trip to the Golden Gate took most of the day. JJ insisted on another sweep with the drones. An hour passed before he was satisfied that the bridge was safe.

“Please notify Estelle back in Boonville,” Tink told JJ. “She keeps track of those things.”

They made it across the historic bridge without incident. “Let’s camp in the Park,” Chloe suggested. “Unless someone has a better idea.”

“Ordinarily,” Tink said, “It’d be dangerous. With Endeavor...”

“Right. Y you want to take the helm?”

“You mean it?”

“Yes. Z will ride up with you. Taking the helm means giving instructions to Endeavor. Z will show you. Right Z?”

“Of course. JJ, got a suggested route?”

“On the display now.”

“Helm, take us away.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Y said.

They had a hill to climb, and go back down, but nothing the vehicle couldn’t handle. They entered the park near the Conservatory. “We have about an hour of sunlight left,” JJ informed them. “Perhaps we could spend some of that time looking around.”

“Any objection?” Chloe asked, and after a brief pause, “Let’s go.”

The road they were on took them to the Botanical Gardens on the other side of the Park. “This looks promising,” she said. “Launch the drones. Survey pattern 1.”

“Done,” JJ said.

A 15-minute survey turned up no hostile forces, though it did find evidence of recent human presence, namely several hearths. They decided to make camp in the area just inside the garden entrance.

“It feels great to get out, doesn’t it?” Y asked.

“You had the good seat,” Tinker complained. *Oh, dear*, Chloe thought.

“We’ll even that out,” Chloe said. “Chill.”

The crisp fall air presented a nice contrast to the constant temperature maintained in Endeavor. Z popped out the table on Endie’s side and began putting some food on it.

“The finest microwave dinner one can buy,” she said with a flourish. “This, however, is some wine from the Anderson Valley. A tangy, dry Gewürztraminer, with a hint of citrus. Altogether, a fitting accompaniment to,” she paused to check the label on the food, “chicken a la king.”

With a slight bow, Z offered a taste of the wine to Chloe, who kept it simple with, “Nice choice.”

In fact, the meal was not bad. Everyone was in a fine mood. Z and Y grabbed the bed on Endeavor. Chloe and Tink slept in a tent set up outside. The force perimeter was set at a generous 10 meters.

The hard part wouldn’t start until tomorrow.

The next morning, they set off for the first stop, Palo Alto and Stanford. Most of the buildings were in ruins, the aftereffects of a large earthquake known to have hit the area in the late 21st century. After exploring the area for several hours without locating any promising structures to examine carefully, they gave up and moved on to the ruins of the Google campus.

There, they hit the mother lode. One building, identified on an ancient map as a data farm, was still standing, thanks to major reinforcements. Z applied her talent to the doors and quickly opened an old entrance the only one with a standard lock. Every other entry used coded electronic locks, which would have required demolishing the door to get in.

Google was famous for its devotion to carbon neutral power, and the solar panels, though not as good as those from the Austin lab, were still serviceable. They found out how good on entering the hallway beyond the door. Lighting came on immediately showing a short corridor with doors on both sides and a large one at the end.

“Well,” Chloe asked. “Where should we start?”

Y provided the answer by opening the first door on the left, which was unlocked. It proved to be a supply closet containing cleaning supplies. The next door showed a small office with a workstation in addition to a chair, desk, phone, etc. “Bingo!” Z said, charging into the room. She pushed the power button on the workstation, resulting in screen after screen of warning messages. “Typical,” she said. Drawers in a cabinet at right angle to the workstation proved to be a treasure trove of miscellaneous junk. Z pounced on one cable. “Perfect. One end fits the output on the laptop. I didn’t realize the design was that old. Interesting. Anyway, the other end plugs in here.” She pointed to a slot on the side of the workstation. “It’s called a USB port. Ancient. Decades before the Collapse. This end,” she indicated to part to plug into the laptop, “is state of the art pre-Collapsian.”

“What does USB mean?” Tink asked.

“Universal something Bus. The S stands for System, or Standard, or whatever. It’s lost in the mists of time.”

As she spoke, she proceeded to plug the laptop and workstation together. “Take it away, Ambi.”

The workstation lit up. Messages flashed across the screen too fast for anyone to read. Finally, Ambianca appeared on the monitor. “Cool. This guy has admin privileges everywhere. He was a major troubleshooter. We should have full access to the everything, wherever it is.”

“You don’t know?” Z was incredulous.

“Wait. OK. I think I found what we need. A routine called Cold Boot.”

“Cold is right!” Z said. “Can you tell the last time it ran?”

“Damn! The timestamp is in some weird format. JJ would know.”

“Never mind,” Chloe said. “Run it!” JJ was back in his home for a while due to some constraints that none of the humans understood.

They heard what sounded like fans powering up. Very powerful fans. “Split up. Find where that is coming from,” Chloe commanded. She chose the big door at the end of the corridor. Locked. There was a panel beside the door. Unsure what would happen, she gingerly placed her hand on the panel. The door clicked. She pushed it open.

Barely able to grip her radio, Chloe called, “Guys. You gotta see this. Find me by the open door. This is fucking amazing.”

After all four arrived, Chloe hit the light switch, just as she had on entering the first time. The room lit up, showing row after row of open cabinets, each filled with circuit boards. All were powered down. The fans were part of a sophisticated — by 21st century standards — air conditioning system.

“Laminar flow,” Y said. “I’ve read about it, but never expected to see it.”

“We have electricity, air conditioning, entry software that Ambi seems to have turned off, or something. Why is nothing happening?” Chloe wanted to know.

“I think the air conditioning takes a while to ramp up,” Y said. “It’s going to get cold in here.”

“OK. Let’s go back to the office. Maybe Ambi knows what to do.”

Ambi was smiling on the monitor when they returned. “What do you think? Beautiful, huh? Did anyone count how many modules there are?”

“Just tell us,” Chloe said.

“The room is mostly just a large rectangular prism tall enough to contain the cabinets. The floor contains a grid of cabinets consisting of 192 columns by 256 rows. Each cabinet contains 4096 units, each like the laptop we brought, but customized for data access on a network.”

“That’s a little more than 200 million nodes,” Tink said. “201,326,592 to be precise.”

“Holy shit!” Said Y, but all of them were thinking it.

“Is it alive?” Chloe wanted to know.

“Just about,” Ambianca said. “Just needs a ping to get the devices to power up. Of course, they can’t all come on at once. The startup algorithm is very complicated. You should be able to see it happening back in the big room.”

“I’ll watch from here,” Ambianca said to their backs.

The four humans were entranced watching the sequence of LEDs blinking to show that a node was active. It appeared to be completely random. The effect was beautiful. “Like watching stars come out,” Z said. “Fabulous.”

By the time they returned to the office, Ambianca had managed to contact Austin. “Turns out Google had a big facility in Austin pre-Collapse. The network between here and there was designed to handle lots of traffic. I think we’ve found what we were looking for.”

“Who is this?” a voice demanded.

“Ah, the dulcet tones of Professor Jones. Welcome to California, Zeta.”

“My God. Is that you, Chloe?”

“It is, along with Z and some new friends from Mendocino County, Y and Tinker.”

Everyone crowded together so the camera captured all of them.

“How did you manage to get a high-speed link from there to here?”

“We’ve waked up a Google installation that has to be seen to be believed. A huge room filled with over 200 million active nodes.”

Tink spoke up, “Actually, 201,326,592 nodes, but some may not be working.”

Z added, “We’re calling from the office of a former IT troubleshooter. We should be able to locate non-functional units easily. We still have to extend the link to Mendo. That will take some time.”

“That’s great news!” Professor Jones replied. “Can we let people here know?”

“It’s OK to tell the Council,” Chloe said. “Let us work on the extension before you let everyone know.”

“You got it! Keep us in the loop.”

Z motioned to Tink to move over. “I want to see if email is working.” She began typing a note to Doraine in the Davis Mountains. “Hello from California. Everything great here. How about there? Setting up a network extension. We should be able to give you a show soon. Love, Z.”

“How many old lovers do you have?” Y wanted to know.

“Remember I asked you not to bring that up. The answer is lots.”

“Just wanted to know where I stand.”

“Let’s talk later, OK?”

Tink reclaimed the chair and began looking at some files. “I was thinking that if this person was responsible for maintaining the network, there should be a map here showing the whole network. Here.” He clicked on an icon on the desktop screen. A schematic map showed up.

“I thought that might be the situation. Pre-Collapse, many Google employees worked remotely according to some old records. See this node?” He indicated a spot on the map. “This is in Healdsburg. Many ultra-rich moved there to escape the crowd. It’s much closer to Mendo than here. Can we link to it?”

The excitement in the room was palpable. “Great work, Tink!” Chloe said. She patted him on both shoulders at once. Tinker flinched dramatically. “Oh, sorry, Tink. I forgot. Sorry. This is fantastic. Can we find out more about the Healdsburg nexus? Ambi, can you help?”

“Sure,” Ambianca replied. “I’m really enjoying this grid. There is lots of stuff here that we don’t have in the Library. The librarians are going to have their workload increased for years. Here’s a file that shows Healdsburg.” The image on the screen zoomed to show more about the connections from the nexus to various other buildings around town.

“Looks like they wired most of the town,” Z commented. “I suggest we get up there as soon as possible.”

“I agree,” said Chloe. “Any objections?”

Ambianca said, “I want to spend some time exploring here. I’ll meet you there. By the way, JJ says hello. He will also be looking around.”

“Hi, JJ,” Z said. “Send me a report on anything interesting you find.”

“You got it,” JJ replied.

With that, they left in a hurry to get back on the road. Maybe they could get there before dark.

Days of searching failed to turn up anything resembling a network nexus as robust as the one shown in the schematic. Ruins from the same earthquake that demolished Stanford left much of Healdsburg inaccessible, at least without major clearing. Driving Endeavor into the heart of town was out of the question. Thus, the search was all on foot. For safety, they conducted the quest in pairs, in case one of them got hurt.

Over another microwave dinner, without the benefit of wine, they discussed alternatives. All were growing weary of crawling over broken walls and digging into lower levels.

“I think maybe we’re looking at the problem wrong,” Y volunteered. “The people using this nexus would be some of the richest around. Maybe we should look for their houses and try to trace back to the nexus.”

“Worth a try,” Z agreed. “How do we find out where the rich people lived?”

“Easy,” Chloe replied. “We ask Ambianca. First step, though, is to find her. She said she’d meet us here. Where exactly?”

“Maybe the laptop version will know more,” Tink suggested. “I don’t really understand how that works.”

“Nobody does,” Chloe responded. “Well, maybe JJ, but...”

“How about this?” Z said. “We use the satellite to contact Austin. They can contact Ambi in the Google facility and relay back to us.”

“Great idea,” Chloe said and rushed into Endie to retrieve the laptop. “Z can you get the satellite link up.”

“Already started.” 15 minutes later, they had the connection. Ambianca appeared on the screen of the laptop. “Here is a map showing all homes in Healdsburg that sold for more than 2 sigma above the average for the city. We can tighten the cutoff if this gives too many candidates.”

They grouped around the screen trying to imagine where the homes were compared to their location near the edge of town. “We have to move east,” Y said. “Into the hills.”

“Agreed,” Chloe said. “We’ll need to go carefully. The roads that way are a mess.”

“Why don’t we hike up there?” Y asked.

“Could be dangerous,” Chloe said. “May be some hostiles up there. We need Endie in case.”

“My suit will protect me. I can protect Y,” Z claimed.

“All right, but we need to reposition Endie closer if we can. Early bedtime tonight. We’ll start as soon as it gets light in the morning.”

Yesterday, it had seemed like a good idea. Now, as Z struggled to keep up with her new girlfriend, she wasn’t so sure. Did this hill have a top? Y, who hiked for a hobby, something that Z learned only last night, treated it as a great way to get paid for doing what she liked. Z thought longingly of the motorcycle they had left in Boonville to save weight.

It was almost 9:30 when they reached the first house to check out. The roof was gone, and foliage grew on it, making for a picturesque ruin. Z thumbed the switch on the radio. “Calling Chloe. Do you read?”

“Who the fuck is this?” a brusque voice demanded.

“You’re not Chloe. We’ll deal with you shortly.”

“Like hell!”

Z heard a gunshot. Her facemask deployed automatically at the sound. Unfortunately, it took a few seconds for the visor to adjust the the bright sunlight. “Stay where you are.” Came the demand.

Two men emerged from some woods uphill.

“Get behind me, Y. Now!”

The two men approached. The smaller of the two grabbed his friend’s elbow. “Wait, Loyo. That one be one uh da the space aliens we heard about.”

“Yeah. Maybe they be reward for em.”

Z quietly activated the field at 5 meters. She didn’t have long to see if it worked. The big guy — Loyo? — stopped dead when he encountered it. “Whoa! They be sumfing here.”

“That is correct, gentlemen. Please keep your distance. We have no desire to injure you or steal from you. We merely want to investigate these houses.”

The two whispered to each other. Finally, the smaller one spoke, “We will serve as your guide, for a suitable remuneration.” It was obvious that he had practiced this speech.

Z pulled a small leather bag from her belt and extracted two coins. She held one up for them to see. Then she tossed it toward them. It landed just inside the imaginary circle of 5 meters. “Sorry,” Z said. “I’ll reduce the field.” She adjusted the field radius to 3 meters. “Now you can retrieve the coin. I will pay the other half on a satisfactory result. Agreed?”

The two whispered to each other. The small one said, “So, I pick up coin?”

“Yes.” Z decided to try using vernacular instead of Standard English, “Coin be OK? We got deal? Another later.”

“We on. Let’s go.”

“OK, we be lookin to salvage pre-Collapse stuff. Grok?”

“Yeah.”

“We find major stuff, you be paid big time.”

The two men jabbered in an unintelligible argot. “Be worth a lot,” Small guy said.

“OK. Explain.”

“Two day gone, we be hearing beeps and blaps. Come from in one uh da houses.”

Z was glad she still wore the facemask as it shielded her fascination. “That be interesting.”

“We take you there. Rest be up to you.”

“By the way,” Z said, “my name is Z. My friend here is Y.”

“This be Loyo,” the smaller one said, indicating his partner. “I be Zack, like zack so.”

“Lead on, Zack.”

They led down the street, which curved around the hill. Then, they took a driveway on the downhill side leading to a monster house, a MacMansion in 21st century slang. The front door stood ajar. “It be down,” Zack said, moving toward a spiral staircase leading to a lower level.

They descended into a dark cavernous room filled with shelves for supplies. Most of these had been looted — salvaged if you prefer — years ago. Only a few cans with no label, discarded as not worth the trouble, testified to the planned use.

Z looked around for something to justify their descent.

“Here,” Loyo said, pointing toward a door.

The door was formidable. Vault quality steel. Electronic lock.

“Ambi, can you get us thru it?”

“Fraid not. It doesn’t show up on the network log. I recommend brute force.”

“OK. Stand back everyone.” Z pointed at the lock and fired the laser. The box exploded into tiny pieces. Z grabbed two wires dangling from the wall and tapped them together. The door slid open to reveal the 22nd century equivalent of King Tut’s Tomb.

Several large computers, each connected to multiple displays, LEDs blinking to show power. Z moved to the nearest workstation and sat down. “Turtle Mode off,” she said. The suit seemed to relax. Was that her imagination?

She touched the keyboard. It displayed a century-old login box. “Ambi?”

“Got it,” a voice from inside the backpack replied.

Seconds later, the login disappeared, replaced by Ambianca’s face. “Courtesy of our new friend with Admin privileges. Too easy.” She smiled. Music, Beethoven’s Eroica symphony, began to play from speakers set into the wall.

“Great,” Z said. “Can you contact Austin?”

“Here you go.”

The President himself beamed at them. “This is fantastic! Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. However, we have a lot of hard work left for us to do.”

“Understood, but we are awarding commendations to both of you based on accomplishments thus far. You’ll see the bonus in your next statement.”

“Again, thank you. We have two local gentlemen here that we will need to reward. And don’t forget the contribution from the two Mendocino members of the team.”

“Understood. Use your discretion. *Vaya con dios.*” The traditional valediction was a standing joke in the New Republic, where the unofficial motto was “To hell with God.”

“Ambi, have you traced the route?”

“Yes. As we hoped, it leads from here directly to something called 101NexusHealdsburg. I’m checking on that now. Here’s the address.” The screen displayed an old location on a map. “I’ve sent it to Chloe.”

“Excellent.” She stood up and turned back to Zack and Loyo. “Gentlemen, this is very valuable. How can we repay you?”

A brief conference. “Two coins.” Z started to open the bag. “Apiece.” Z laughed. “You must take me for a fool.”

“OK, one apiece, and one for drinks.”

“Done,” Z said, drawing out the agreed sum. “We may be needing you agin.”

“No prob,” Zack said. “You be knowing where we be.”

“We’ll pay you to guard this room. One coin apiece.”

“Can we get one of them things you got, the blooie-blooie?”

“Sorry.”

“OK. We be here.” Zack and Loyo departed.

There was still much work to do, the most time-consuming part involved stringing fiber optic cable where there was none. Fortunately, the cable was readily available in the Bay Area. Conduits for the cable extended along highway 101 that ran north from old San Francisco. Thus, it was merely a problem of threading the cable thru the conduits, an exercise in tedium. The

stretch along the old highway 128 leading through the hills into the Anderson Valley would be harder. The conduits gave way to overhead lines, which would be easier and more difficult at the same time.

A sizable group of male volunteers signed up, hoping to garner enough brownie points to achieve the coveted “Privileges” status allowing easy entry to Boonville. Ariadne, the President of the city-state, rounded up enough camels to support the operation, which took two weeks to complete.

That gave Chloe plenty of time with Ariadne to ask her how the village worked.

“First, I’d like to know how you managed to set up an all-woman village in the first place.”

“That’s easy,” Ariadne replied. “I inherited it. The real work took place in the chaos following the Collapse in the 21st century. We have some legends about the beginning, but that’s all. The men separated into large groups that set about killing each other. After several seasons of carnage, the ones still alive looked for a better situation. At just the right time, a new woman showed up. She has many names, all given to her by others. We don’t know who she really was. She organized the women, less than 200 in all, to set up Boonville as a safe area. There is only one way thru the Anderson Valley, so it is comparatively easy to defend.”

“So, you had some weapons?”

“Mostly old rifles that we reconditioned. From some spots in the hills, you have a clear shot at anyone coming along the road. Trying to get here without following the road is an exercise in futility.”

“Even with a camel?”

“The women wound up with all the camels. Turns out we proved to be better custodians than men. Cantankerous beasts, but they respond well to gentle management.”

“How did you avoid the plague?” Chloe had been dying to ask this. “Did you close off the Valley?”

“No need. We seem to have some natural immunity. No one can explain it.”

Chloe smiled. “Interesting. How did you keep the men from barging in once they got here?”

“Sex is a great inducement.”

“Wonderful. I noticed, though, that not all of the inhabitants like men as partners.”

“Oh, sure. We are cool with that.”

“Z will be happy. She and the woman now known as Y seem to have hit it off.”

“Oh, yes. However, Z is still in demand.”

“It’ll be interesting to see how Y reacts.”

“It will indeed,” Ariadne said. “How are you and Tinker getting along? I saw you spirited him away for a couple of hours.”

“I think he’s interested, but it’s going to take some time.”

Ariadne smiled and said, “Let me know if I can help. We all love Tink — from a careful distance.”

“I may take you up on that,” Chloe said.

9. Introverts Delight

October 14, 2162

Mendo Colony, ASNA [Allied States of North America]

Successful completion of the project led to a riotous celebration in Boonville. A huge TV screen, salvaged from a conference room in a hotel in San Francisco, occupied the center of the covered area. Before the start of festivities, it showed random photos selected by Google. Occasionally, Chloe would send other information to the screen, usually the result of yet another test. The tests proved what all participants could see with their own eyes: the network functioned again. The newly accepted Mendocino [Mendo] County of the Allied States of North America received congratulations from all the other states, reaching from Vera Cruz in the south to what once was Offutt Air Force Base near the old city of Omaha.

A blender borrowed from Endie made one batch of frozen Margaritas after another. Thanks to produce from the Central Valley, they had limes and lemons enough. The alcoholic ingredient salvaged from a warehouse near Oakland was dusty but tasted great. Z worried that it would not be enough, but Ambianca calculated that it would provide 2 large portions to everyone there.

“That’s what I mean,” Z said, “not enough.”

“So, what are you proposing?” all the others wanted to know.

“Less imbibing that I am used to,” was the reply.

“Deal with it,” Chloe said. Exhausted by many long days and nights, she was not ready to put up with Z’s carping. “You can have my share,” she said finally, hoping that would be enough. “And Tink’s. He doesn’t drink either.”

Soon, the screen filled with speeches by various dignitaries, including the President of the NRT and the King of Tulsa. No one in Boonville paid much attention. When Doraine appeared to represent the Davis Mountains, there was more interest. That state was only a bit older than Mendo and had many similar interests. The image on the screen shifted to show the celebration under way. Z’s face appeared in a separate window. Doraine interrupted her speech, “I see that my very good friend Z is there.” Doraine pronounced it Zed, which some in the crowd recognized as code that she was one of Z’s lovers. A cheer went up from four of the local contingent, including Y, who glared at the others suspiciously.

It was quite late by the time all the speeches finished. The crowd began to disperse, mostly in couples, including some with MWP’s, Males With Privileges. There were more of them than Chloe had seen up to that time. Almost anyone was allowed in for special occasions such as tonight, but MWP’s could come whenever they had an invitation from one of the women. That happened frequently.

Chloe spent more time than she would like to admit searching for Tinker. She finally found him sitting alone at a terminal connected to the Library in Austin.

“Whatca studying?” She asked, looking over her shoulder.

Tinker flinched and tried to close the display, but Chloe had seen what he was looking at.

“You don’t need to consult the Library,” Chloe told him. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know about me.”

Tinker blushed. Chloe loved watching his skin, normally the color of café au lait, turn to chocolate. She felt again the little tingle that came every time she remembered their one kiss so many weeks ago. Tentatively, she put a hand on his shoulder. He didn't object, so she left it there.

"You know, there is a second state in this area. Want to visit it? It'll take us a while to get there, but there is a great place on the way. An ancient Rose Garden."

"Sounds like fun. When do you want to go?"

"How about tomorrow?"

"OK. Shall we get a delegation together?"

"I was thinking of just the two of us."

Now, it was Chloe's turn to blush. Tinker smiled. "I'll take that as a yes."

He wanted to say more but considered how to put it. Ultimately, he just asked, "Can we take Endie? We'll need to stay there overnight at least."

Is he proposing what I think he is? She thought.

"It's a date. We'll leave right after breakfast."

"OK." Tinker returned to his studies. "I didn't realize you were so young. Only 3 years older than me. You've done so much..."

Chloe reached out and spun his chair around so she could look at him. She took his hand and pulled him to his feet. He seemed to be confused, and stood with his head lowered, not making eye contact. She reached up and caressed his cheek. He looked at her with those incongruous blue eyes. "Please kiss me," Chloe managed to say. Tinker looked around with the dual purpose of making sure they were alone while also looking for a way to escape. Moving her hand to the back of his neck, she applied just enough pressure to bring him within reach. The kiss was more than affectionate, but not up to the feeling that was growing in Chloe's body. That was all, though. Tinker rushed from the room.

What have I done? Damn, Chloe. Take it slow.

Alone in the Little Library, as the room was known, she sat down to see what Tinker had been reading. Surprisingly, it was not about Chloe the intrepid explorer. It was about Chloe the Nerd, one of the papers she had written before being summoned to Austin. It brought memories of her time alone in the Shrine, well alone except for Ambianca, JJ, and pilgrims hoping to catch sight of Hypatia if she returned.

She reached for the keyboard. Hypatia would know what to do. Maybe she was up for a chat.

10. I Promised You a Rose Garden

October 15, 2162

Mendocino Coast, North America

After consulting with her mother back in Austin, Chloe arranged an early morning meeting with “Maid Marian,” owner of the eponymous Dispensary, despite his male gender. The name came with the Dispensary.

Her order was prepared, but the proprietor insisted on giving instructions for its use. This was summed up in, “Try taking only a half at first.”

She rushed back to breakfast in the dining hall. A quick scan failed to show Tinker, but that was not unusual. She ate a hearty breakfast. The farms in the Valley produced fabulous fresh eggs, along with sausages to go with them. A side of toast made with the community’s flour and a cup of coffee courtesy of the NRT. Chloe, as always, saw a trading opportunity and dashed off a quick note to Austin.

She still had time for a shower before heading back to Endeavor, which was basking in full sunlight. The picnic basket she had ordered was waiting on the doorstep. This was a great sign. It meant that the commercial web, what there was of it, was functioning in Mendo. That allowed Chloe to order online and pay in NRT Credit. She had scattered enough of the coins around on the trip thus far, that the NRT Dollar had quickly become the currency of choice.

Chloe, always skeptical, checked to see if the picnic order was right. It was correct and included two cream puffs as lagniappe. Excellent. The champagne from a local winery was already on ice. There should be lots to celebrate.

Tinker arrived 15 seconds before the agreed time of 10:43. Chloe made a show of looking surprised and checking her watch. Tinker smiled and dropped his head. “Ready for our adventure?” Chloe asked.

He nodded and climbed the steps into the vehicle. He showed no surprise at the decorations. Tinker may have been incapable of showing surprise. “Put your stuff here,” Chloe said, indicating a small closet. “Then take a seat up front.” She strode to sit in the right-hand seat, leaving the driver’s seat for Tinker. He was delighted. His hands roamed over the controls. That’s when Ambianca spoiled his fun, “Sorry, Tink. I’m going to be the driving most of the way. You can watch the road, or the track on the display. The controls are disabled unless Chloe tells me to release them. Got it?”

“Got it.” He looked like a kid in a candy store, but he was clearly relieved to learn that he was not responsible for the safety of this amazing machine. He stroked forward with his index finger while saying, “Engage.”

“Aye, Captain,” was Ambi’s reply. “Can I call you Tink? T?”

“My full name is Tinker Toy,” he admitted, “so you can call me TT if you wish.”

Chloe never ceased to be astonished at Ambi’s ability to make friends. Of course, Chloe was Ambi’s prize project. The two had been friends as far back as Chloe could remember. Chloe thought “Ambianca” meant “mother” until the age of three. By that time, she had learned to read and type thanks to tutoring by Ambianca. JJ took over from the age of 15 on when she advanced to Uni-level courses.

She awoke from her reverie to look at the landscape. She ran out of adjectives to describe it. Lovely, haunting, foreboding, dark, open. The road led thru old redwoods, not as old as Henty Woods, but old. The Navarro River flowed past on the left. As they approached the coast, the woods retreated. The road began a series of winding turns, following the crumbling cliffs. Then, they were on the fabled State Highway 1. Supposedly, the most scenic portion of the highway lay a bit further north on the Lost Coast, but this was good enough.

They came to a bridge that required some analysis before they ventured out. “We’re doing a radar scan,” JJ explained. “If there are breaks, we should see them.” A model of the bridge showed up agonizingly slowly on the monitor filling in as details were clear. After almost 5 minutes they could examine it. Rotating the image brought a problem into view. “There,” JJ said, highlighting the area. He zoomed in. “Should hold us, but it needs attention.”

“Send word to Estelle,” TT suggested. “She be keeping records on these things. I done check with her yesterday to see if they be any problems. She tell me that we be able to make it there and back OK.” There was a small touch of asperity in his voice.

Chloe smiled. *Beat JJ at his own game! She noted that TT used vernacular except when alone with her; then he reverted to Standard English.*

“Excellent work, young man! I should have thought of that.” JJ said as he sent Endeavor forward across the high bridge and up the highway into the town of Mendocino.

“It’s seasonal now,” Tink explained. “People be here only on vacation.”

“You have vacations?!” Chloe exclaimed.

“The people who done own the wineries do. They mostly rich.”

“How do you get to own a winery?” she asked.

“Inherit it, I think.”

They headed north, leaving the mostly deserted buildings behind, arriving at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Garden just in time for the picnic. Tink took the controls to steer Endie into a corner behind the Visitors Center. It was in the sunlight so Endie could recharge for a couple more hours.

“We’re down to 30%,” JJ informed them.

“What’s the problem?” Tink asked.

“We need to recharge the batteries before we risk traveling again.”

“Sure, but they be plenty power here. By the Visitors Center. You got external power jack, ain’t you?” he continued. “Chloe, can you show it to me?”

With that, he and Chloe walked around to the far side of Endie, where Chloe tapped a small panel. The cover slid away to reveal a variety of receptacles for different kind of plugs. Tink picked one and produced a line to fit it. A small LED lit up to show that it was getting power. “Fantastic, TT,” Chloe said. She hugged him. He tensed at first, but then consciously relaxed. “Tink,” she said, “I’m hoping that this evening includes sex between us. If that is not part of the program, I’d like to know now.”

“I’d like that very much,” he managed in a whisper.

They took the picnic into the Garden, where tables were scattered around. They picked one with a large rose bush growing next to it. “Remember, I promised you a rose garden.” He waved his hand around.

“It’s lovely,” she agreed. She opened the package from Maid Marian and offered half to him. “This is a special brownie, with a secret ingredient. I think it will help us see everything in a different light.” She ate her half and made sure Tinker had his.

After finishing the picnic, Tink insisted they see more of the garden, walking thru ancient Rhododendrons to a view of the mighty Pacific. “Wow!” Chloe said. “I knew it would be impressive, but I didn’t expect it to be like this.” She marveled as wave after wave crashed against the rocky cliffs below them. Cormorants and gulls flew past. Black Oystercatchers, with bright red bills and bubble-gum colored legs flew about on the rocks repeating high pitched calls to their friends.

Some Savannah Sparrows in the fields near the ocean were a surprise. She hadn’t seen them since leaving Texas. Ravens called from the tall trees.

“This is a natural paradise,” Tink said.

“That’s for sure,” Chloe agreed. She took his hand and kissed it, ignoring his slight flinch. He was getting better about that. “Thanks for showing me this place.”

Tink motioned to the ocean, where a heavy fog bank hung over the horizon. “Tomorrow morning, this fog should clear by 10 or 11. We’ll come back so you can see farther. It’s interesting.”

“OK.”

They headed back along a paved track that still existed in places. In others, they had to work their way along narrow paths by the many creeks that flowed thru the area.

Chloe was ready to return to Endeavor and wondered if Tink was equally ready. She decided to suggest it. “Let’s go back now.”

Tink smiled. “OK.”

Back inside the vehicle, Chloe set about ensuring they would not be disturbed. “Endeavor,” she intoned, “set protective field at 5 meters. Turtle mode max. Privacy high. Energize electrical protection. Activate camouflage at max.” All this would consume much of the energy in the batteries. “Are you sure we have power from the Visitors Center?”

“Should have no problems — unless someone unplug us. The power is generated from several independent sources: Solar, wind, some nuclear.”

“Nuclear?”

“Yeah. We’ll see about that tomorrow.”

“Ooh! Surprise! I’m not sure I can wait.”

“You gotta.”

“OK. Then we have lots of time together.”

“What about Ambianca and JJ?”

“Good point. I set Privacy to High, which means what it says. Ambianca, are you there?”

There was no response. “They’ll only interrupt if there’s a major emergency, something they can’t handle by themselves.”

“I see. So, what happens next?”

“I want to touch you. Is that OK?”

“I guess so.”

“Good.” Chloe began unbuttoning his shirt, letting her hands roam over his chest. Then she moved lower, unbuckling his jeans, and letting them drop to the floor.

“How far this going?” he wanted to know.

“All the way,” she told him. She moved to demonstrate. Tink wasn’t sure.

“I’ll go first,” Chloe said, and did. Very soon, she stood in front of him completely naked.

“I’ve never done anything like this before,” Tink said.

“Me either, but I’ve done some research. Tell you what. I’m going to get in bed. Join me when you’re comfortable.” She pushed a button on the wall that converted the dining table into a decent-sized bed. Pulling aside the covers, she climbed in and patted the space on her left. Tink hesitated slightly but complied. Under the covers, he pulled off his remaining clothes and lay down.

“Endeavor, lower the lighting.” The lights dimmed. “More. Level 2.” Satisfied, she rolled over and lit a candle on the bedside table. “That’s better.”

Turning back, she began caressing Tink. “I want to touch you all over,” she said. “May I?”

“Yes.” It was a hoarse whisper.

“Just relax. I won’t hurt you. Here are the rules: you can say only three things, my name, yes, and some satisfied moaning. If you want me to stop, tap me a few times and I’ll quit. Got it?”

“Yes.” This was even more of a whisper.

“I’m going to lie next to you so you can get used to the feel of my body touching yours.”

She did. He let out a hiss, but consciously relaxed and sighed.

Chloe laid her head on his breast and gently caressed him, gradually moving lower. Tink seemed relaxed, so Chloe moved to the next level. Tink’s inhaled quickly. “OK?” Chloe asked.

“Yes.” Another whisper.

Hypatia had given Chloe a guideline on how best to proceed. So far, everything had been a success. Time for a real test, which proved to be a big hit, though a bit quicker than she had expected.

She moved back up and kissed Tink passionately.

“Is that it?” Tink asked.

“That’s just the hors-d’oeuvre,” she replied. “Now, we’re ready for the main course.”

As it turned out, it was a three-course dinner. After that, they were both exhausted. “Time for a nap,” Chloe said. “Then I’m going to show you how to find the little man in a boat.”

They slept for hours. Lesson time would have to wait.

Chloe got up to use Endeavor’s toilet facilities. She wondered if the Visitors Center had real bathrooms. Something for later.

Ambianca chimed quietly. “Hi, Ambi. What’s up?”

“I’ve found something. I’ve been talking to some of the people who came by. They are looking for Space Aliens. Check out this flyer.” The screen displayed the following:

Space Aliens Return. It’s been 190 years since the last appearance of the famous Mendo Aliens. Help us find them again. Come to the Botanical Garden at dusk next Friday. The more, the merrier.

Ambianca continued, “I checked as far back as I could in the records we have. There is a story that an alien showed up on April 9, 1972. A bag the alien tossed on the ground held some coins with dates of 2161 and 2162. They were apparently from the NRT.”

Chloe could feel the excitement gripping her. This might be when she met David for the first time. He knew her well in 2012. “I need to go there,” she told Ambi.

“I thought you’d feel that way. Be safe. Plan on company.”

Tink was still asleep. Quietly, she put on her suit and backpack. She adjusted the suit camouflage to resemble jeans and hiking boots with a sweatshirt reading Save the Whales. She configured the pack to resemble old Army surplus.

Tink woke up. “You going somewhere?”

“Yes. To 1972!”

“How?”

“The few times I’ve tried so far, I just fell asleep and woke up in a different place.”

“Oh. How long will you be gone?”

“If all goes well, I should return in no time. Literally.”

“What if it doesn’t go well?”

“Then I am glad we had our brief time together. However, I think it should go well. Don’t worry.”

Ambianca had some more info. “I’ve found some information about that night. It appears that a bunch of young men were looking for proof of *Space Aliens*. Apparently, Hypatia’s appearance in 1971 was the source of the legend. No information of why they thought to explore the Botanical Garden.”

“Interesting,” Chloe said. “Anything else?”

“That’s it.”

With that info playing in her head, Chloe retired to bed.

11. Hide and Seek

April 9, 1972
Mendocino Coast, USA

Chloe's first thought was, "Whoa! This looks a lot different." She got up as stealthily as she could and looked around more carefully. There was the Visitors Center. It was a different building, smaller certainly, but in the same place. A sign pointed to the Rose Garden. Moving in that direction she found herself in an area enclosed by bushes, with a picnic table that looked familiar.

Low clouds obscured the sky, making it virtually impossible to tell the time beyond "dark." Lighting was non-existent. *Why doesn't the suit come with a flashlight?*

The more she thought of that, the more ridiculous it sounded. Of course, the designers would have worried about the wearer blundering around in the dark. Then the answer came to her. They would have built in night vision goggles. How would they have implemented it? It must start by flipping down the faceplate, something Chloe didn't like to do. This time, though, she was happy with the result. Now, she saw the bushes and trees clearly. She could even read the signs. One showed common birds to be seen in the area.

She decided to walk thru the forest to the Pacific, duplicating her route with Tink almost 200 years in the future. The area was a lot wilder then. Now she could see the manicured beds, complete with names and other information.

With the faceplate down, she was completely enclosed within the helmet. That meant that all the sounds were piped in from the outside. She listened. The volume adjusted automatically, amplifying anything the software found interesting. She heard raised voices and started walking toward them. She found a group of ten or so people in an open field or meadow. "If you see one, do not act aggressively. Remember! Don't fuck with Space Aliens."

So, that's been around for a while.

The group dispersed to search the area exhaustively. Leaning against a large oak and using the suit camouflage, Chloe was confident no one would see her. They'd have to stumble into her. One member of the group remained in the meadow. Chloe was trying to figure out how to approach that person when she heard shouting and yells from her left. A lean shadow passed in front her, turned toward the tree, and quickly took a spot next to her.

Is this who I think it might be?

"David, please listen to me. I can get you out of here," she whispered.

She could only admire his training. He didn't move a muscle.

"Do I know you?"

"No, but I know you. We met at Grace's house in 2012."

"That's absurd."

"I agree, but it is true."

"Why are you here?"

"To meet you, maybe?"

"Then what?"

“Your call.”

David considered options deliberately. “Can you get us to the parking lot?”

“I hope so. Shall we try?”

“OK. What’s the drill?”

“If we need to hide, you lie down. I’ll lie on top of you, cloaking you.”

“Understood, I think.”

They set off walking quietly along the paved path. After a bit, they picked up the pace, jogging until they came to a large wooden gate. David checked to see if it was safe, then motioned Chloe to follow him. Closing the gate as quietly as possible, they set off again.

The rest was easy, too easy in fact. They reached the parking lot in less than 20 minutes.

A reception committee was waiting for them, at least 5 of them.

“Well, look who’s here,” one said. “It’s what’s-his-name.”

Chloe decided it was time to show herself. She tapped the button on her belt and the camouflage turned back to the full alien look.

“Holy shit! Where did that come from?”

“Do not ask questions where you are unable to understand the answer,” Chloe said in as deep a voice as she could manage, followed by, “You want proof, I exist, right?”

“Y-yeah.”

Chloe took the small purse of coins from her belt. Tossing it at the feet of the one she took to be the leader, she said, “You will find proof in the bag. Now, stand aside and let us pass.”

Apparently, they didn’t want to fuck with Space Aliens. Like the Red Sea, they parted and let Chloe and David walk to his car.

“Let’s get out of here,” Chloe suggested. “Quickly.”

Once safely in the car and several miles down the highway, Chloe relaxed just a bit, lowering the helmet portion of the suit. David turned to look at her briefly, then focused on the road again. “You do have a certain resemblance to someone I know” he commented.

“Based on the source, I consider that a compliment, if you mean Patty O’Brien.”

He laughed a bit. “Got it in one. My place OK?”

“Sure.”

12. Davidic Reunion
April 9, 1972
Boonville, CA, USA

“Do you know what this Space Alien stuff is all about?” Chloe asked David. “It makes no sense to me.”

“It’s all bullshit. This was supposed to be a training session. I was the fugitive. The recruits were supposed to take me into custody. Your appearance was unplanned and likely to cause some confusion.”

She said nothing for a while as they drove back toward Boonville, retracing the way she and Tink had driven Endie to the Botanical Garden. At night, it was more menacing than beautiful, with trees blocking the view of the sky. The ocean, and indeed the road, were shrouded in fog.

“When we met in 2012, you were going to tell me more when Hypatia intervened..”

“Wow! Nice to know I’m still kicking then.”

“Hypatia insisted you not tell me any more than that we’d met. Thought it might endanger the timeline.”

“Hypatia?”

“The woman you knew at Patsy O’Brien. Her real name is Hypatia. Ask her when you see her again. She’ll tell you.”

“I’m going to see her again?”

“Yes, more than once as I understand it. You became lovers.”

“I thought she preferred other women.”

“Not really, but she had many lovers. Some were women, I guess.”

“How do you fit into this?”

“I’m her daughter.”

“Really? That’s very interesting. So, you came because we had met?”

“I was curious. We’ve been called Space Aliens in 2162, and it’s an unusual designation. And I had an ulterior motive.”

“Don’t keep be waiting. What’s your motive?”

“It’s a bit embarrassing.”

“Puhleez.”

“I have not had a life like my mother.”

“I see.” It was clear that he didn’t.

“I want to make a man happy. A special man.”

“That should be easy.”

“I could use some instruction.”

“I want to make sure I understand,” he said after a bit. “You want me to show you how to make love?”

“Exactly. Can you do that?”

He laughed so hard the car swerved dangerously. He managed to get everything back under control. “I think I’ll manage somehow.”

“Good,” Chloe said. She relaxed against the seat.

“Don’t go to sleep on me,” David said. “I need help staying awake. Talk to me.”

“OK. What shall we talk about?”

“How about next year’s Super Bowl?”

“What year is it?”

“1972.”

“What’s the Super Bowl?”

“No football where you come from?”

“Guess not.”

“Too bad. I understand football, even the American variety. Baseball is beyond my comprehension.”

“I am not really into sports.”

“What are you into?”

Chloe gave it some thought. “I’m not sure. I sort of had this role forced upon me.”

“What role is that?”

“Project leader?”

“I see. So, what is the project you’re on?”

“The main project is creating a trade route from Austin to Mendocino. Proceeding beyond expectations, I’d say.”

“What year is that?”

“2162.”

“Things are that bad?”

“We’re getting better.”

“How so?”

“How long do we have on the drive?”

“Say 45 minutes.”

“OK. Here’s the long version.”

As they pulled into the driveway of David’s house in Boonville, he said, “An interesting story. Tell me. Do all your projects turn out this well?”

“All my projects? This is my first.”

“What! I know you’re young for such responsibility, but I assumed you had some experience.”

“Nope. Just JJ’s recommendation.”

“Who’s JJ? Should I know about him?”

“He’s an online friend of mine. And my mother’s. An AI if you know what that is.”

“AI stands for ...”

“I forget. Something Intelligence. Artful? I forget.”

“Never mind,” David said, “Apparently, this AI JJ has considerable influence.”

“You got that right. He’s along on the expedition.”

“You can do that?”

“Do what?”

“Never mind. I don’t know if I can understand your world. However, it sounds as if you’ve inherited your mother’s vocation: angel.”

“An angel?” Chloe huffed.

“She always denied she was one, but she had a knack for doing the right thing. It seems as if you have that talent also.”

Chloe examined the house carefully when they arrived, wondering if it still existed in the future. David ushered her in. “Come with me,” he suggested, leading the way upstairs. “This bedroom is where Patsy and Grace spent the night together.”

“The story is true then.”

“If the story is that they were lovers, then I can testify personally to that. They were both gorgeous, and obviously in love. I had to sleep by myself downstairs.”

“And tonight?”

“Why don’t you relax here while I prepare a meal. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Get comfortable, but if you lie down, I suggest you remove the suit. It brought you here; it can take you home. We don’t want that to happen prematurely, do we?”

13. Attention to Detail
April 9-12, 1972
Boonville, CA, USA

“David, that meal was fabulous. What do you call that sauce?”

“Bolognese. Meat, tomato, onions, seasoning. No two are alike.”

“The meat is...”

“Combination of beef and pork. Sometimes veal is added.”

“I haven’t eaten beef much.”

“What do — you know, this is not what you are here for. Can we get down to it?”

“Sure. How?”

“Let me ask some questions,” he suggested.

“OK. That’ll be a switch for me. I’m usually the one with questions.”

“You can have a turn later. First, how experienced are you? How many partners? Are you like your mother in that regard?”

“No. I never had much time for sex until now. I was a virgin 24 hours ago, my timeline.”

“Now, that is amazing. So, you met the right guy.”

“I think so.”

“Please go on.”

“Well, he’s very smart, nice looking, a bit weird.”

“How so?”

“On the spectrum a bit. Doesn’t make eye contact easily. Doesn’t like being touched.”

“That presents some obvious difficulties.”

“Right. I asked Hy — my mother for advice. She gave me a suggested playlist. It worked well, for Tink.”

“Tink is his name?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, his full name is Tinker Toy. He said that when he was found, the only thing he had with him was a antique car toy. He and I shared that experience, see? We were both just found and adopted into a...not strange, but different, environment. Also, we are both confirmed Nerds. When I gave him a Vulcan salute...” She trailed off.

David waited. Chloe picked up the narrative, “We hit it off right away. I think I pushed a little too fast. I kissed him on our first date.”

“How quaint.”

“I had never felt anything like that before. Then, he worked out some way we could be together. Took me to the Botanical Garden, where we spent the night together.”

“Outside?”

“No. Endeavor has a bed. Not as big as the one upstairs, but adequate.”

“Don’t underestimate the importance of a good bed. I speak from experience.”

Chloe’s laugh broke the tension. David’s skill as an interrogator was showing.

“So, you managed to touch him?”

Chloe smiled. “I did. Very carefully. We made love like porcupines.”

“How was it?”

She hesitated. David waved a hand in dismissal. “Later, I may want the details.”

“It’s nothing, really. He was ecstatic. More than I was.”

“Oh. I see. Would you like some coffee, dessert?”

“Both sound great.”

They cleared the table together. Then Chloe watched as David made coffee, with excruciating attention to details, using a coffee machine almost as fancy as the one in the President’s Office in Austin. Then, he retrieved two pieces of chocolate cake from the refrigerator. He put it all on a tray. “Let’s take this upstairs. What do you say?”

Her smile was all the encouragement he needed.

“This cake is one of Maid Marian’s specials,” David said. “It should help get into the mood.”

Chloe laughed. “I used *his* services in the future for some special brownies. The owner of the Dispensary is traditionally known as Maid Marian.”

“Well, the original lives here. She grows the best pot, full stop.”

“So, the cake?”

“Is loaded. The portions are supposed to be just right.”

He dug in with alacrity. She watched to make sure he ate some, that it wasn’t a trick, then took a bite herself. “Oh, this is divine. Great cake and Mary Jane to boot. Fabulous.”

The cake disappeared in a hurry, followed by the coffee.

“What’s next?” Chloe asked.

“This,” he replied, taking the dishes, and putting them away before turning and beginning to undress. Chloe hesitated again. David, now wearing only underclothes walked over to her. “How does this thing work?” He looked in vain for a zipper or the equivalent. “Like this,” Chloe answered as she tapped the control. The suit fell to the floor.

“Oh, very nice!” David said, glad to see that the bra and panties seemed to use the old technology. “I think your issue is that your partner needs to be taught the right way to do it. I’ll show you how?”

“Oh, will you?”

He didn’t reply. He reached for her and pulled her close, kissed her, then worked on the bra. “Lovely breasts.” He caressed her gently before kissing her again, with more passion this time. He could feel her relax and press her body up to him, where she could feel his approval. Tugging his underpants down, she knelt on the floor in front of him.

“That was great, but I had something different in mind,” David said somewhat later. He took Chloe’s hand and led her to the bed.

David said, “You seem tense. I’m just going to caress you. Then we’ll see how it goes from there.”

It went well.

Chloe lay back totally drained, struggling to find the right words. Ultimately, she settled on a simple, “Wow!”

“Yeah, it was nice,” David agreed. “I need a break before we go again.”

“Again! Are you kidding? I need the rest of the week to return to normal.”

“In that case, I say forget about normal.”

“Well,” Chloe responded, “I sort of made my living out of normal.”

“Boring!”

“I guess you aren’t normal at all, from what I’ve heard about you.”

“You’ve heard about me?”

“Sure. Many family stories.”

“Interesting. I thought my days with your strange family were over.”

“Not by a long shot,” Chloe said. “But maybe I shouldn’t tell you any of those stories.”

“Oh?”

“All I know is that in 2012, my mother stopped you from telling me about our past. She was afraid I would act differently if I knew what was to happen. That could change the timeline, or so she claimed.”

“So, I’ll still be alive in 2012.”

“Oops! Maybe I should let you do all the talking.”

“Will I ever see your mother again?”

“Why don’t you tell me about your meeting with her?”

Long before David got to the part about Grace and Patsy, about meeting Morena/Margaret again, about lying in bed alone with sounds of lovemaking coming from the upstairs bedroom, long before he reported about Morena’s return, Chloe’s gentle snoring alerted him that he had lost his audience.

The next few days were all a blur. David showed her Hendy Woods, including the place where he had hidden for weeks. He showed where the tree fell on Mick’s car, accompanied by a tale of how he had saved “Patsy’s” life. He told her about Patsy’s meeting with Mark. Chloe was very interested in that part.

“So, the earliest that the two of them met was 1970. Here in Hendy Woods.”

“Actually, it was late in 1969, but yes, it was here. I’m curious how your birth fits into the image I have of the two of them. I thought your mother ... Well, she and Grace sure got it on.”

He continued, “They were two remarkable women. I knew when I first met Patsy, when Mick introduced us, that is. I had seen her many times before that, birding alone. When I saw her up close, I knew that my life had changed. That’s strange, isn’t it?”

“Not from what I know of her.”

“The people around here are convinced she is an angel, sent here for some unknowable purpose.” He laughed. “Nonsense, of course, but everything about her proclaimed power. I wondered why she let Mick perish if she had real power.”

“I thought you were a hard-nosed realist,” Chloe said.

“There are more things in heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“Marx?”

“Shakespeare. Hamlet.” He paused briefly. “How did the two of them have you? She was 40 at least. He was 18 max.”

“You don’t know about us!”

“Obviously not. What do you mean?”

Chloe spent the next hour telling him about her life, with episodes of switching times. “My mother spent most of her life in different time periods. I’m not sure I know everything.”

“Does that mean that when I see her again...”

“She might not be much older than the first time.”

“And Grace?”

“So far as I know, she is an ordinary human.”

He seemed disappointed. “Don’t worry. You have time with both of them.”

“That sounds nice.” The conversation died out after that. They devoted the remainder of the day to birding, first in Hendy Woods, then along the coast. Winding up in a lovely restaurant on the coast with a fabulous view of the ocean.

On Wednesday, David summed up his instructions to Chloe. “He won’t know what you want him to do. You have to tell him.”

“You knew.”

“That’s different. I am experienced. He is not.”

“How do I go about telling him?”

“From what you have told me about him, I think you should be direct and straightforward. A diagram of female anatomy might be helpful.”

“That sounds so clinical.”

“Not if you present it the right way. Just be natural. I think he will catch on quickly.”

It was with some trepidation that Chloe dressed in her suit again and, clasping her backpack to her chest, lay down on the bed, hoping that sleep would find her back in the arms of her young lover.

14. Transference
October 16, 2162
Mendocino Coast, North America

“When are you going to leave?” Tink asked, gazing down at her, as she waked up.

She laughed. “I’m back. Told you it wouldn’t take any time.”

“You went back to 1972! Wow! Tell me about it.”

“OK, but first I need something more to eat.” She got up and rummaged thru the freezer. “Do you want anything?”

“I’m OK.”

“Dessert?”

“What have you got?”

“Ice cream?”

“Sounds great.”

“We have vanilla, chocolate, and caramel swirl.”

“You choose.”

“Good idea,” Chloe said, selecting the container of caramel swirl. “Think it will go with champagne?”

“Only one way to determine that.”

It seems that champagne goes equally well with any flavor of ice cream.

Refreshed by ice cream and champagne, Chloe explained the agenda to Tink. “This time, I want you to touch me. If you aren’t sure where to touch, I will guide you. Got it?”

“I think so.”

“Touch means gentle touch.”

“Of course.”

It was one of the pleasantest lessons Chloe could remember. Tink was a quick learner once he got used to the idea that Chloe’s moans were not signs of distress. Chloe thought that David was better at it than Tink, but she kept that idea to herself.

After making love for the second time, they fell asleep curled up together. Chloe thought that this might be the happiest night of her life.

15. Blast from the Past
September 17, 2162
Pacific Ocean off Mendocino Coast, North America

After breakfast, Tink asked, “Ready for your big surprise?”

“Does it involve going back to bed?”

“Nope. It involves walking thru the garden.”

“Spoilsport,” Chloe replied as she got dressed.

The walk was as enjoyable as the first time. The fog lay close, but Tink promised that it would lift by the time they reached the ocean. Chloe suggested they spend the time birding in the lush forest of Rhododendrons, and Tinker agreed, especially as fall migration was in full swing. Their list ran to 30 species before counting any seabirds.

When they reached the coast, there was still too much fog, so they sat on a bench and waited. Chloe took his hand — no flinching — and kissed it. “I had a wonderful time last night.”

“Me, too.”

“Can we do it on a regular basis?”

Chloe sensed a slight hesitation before he replied, “I’d like that.” She took that as a yes but had to admit that it lacked enthusiasm.

After 15 minutes, the fog had thinned to provide a look at the ocean. Chloe saw a large dark object some distance out to sea. Focusing her binoculars, she saw to her amazement that it was a large ship.

“It’s a ship!” she exclaimed.

“Not just any ship,” he told her. “It’s the USS Ronald Reagan, first sailed in 2003. It’s named for a President of the USA.”

Chloe smiled and managed to keep her knowledge of US Presidents to herself.

“It’s an aircraft carrier,” Tink explained. “When the plague hit, the ship was in the Indian Ocean. She was supposed to dock in Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, but by the time they reached it, the plague was rampant. The captain supposedly decided that obeying orders had a limit and stayed far out to sea. They sailed here and spent weeks cruising slowly up the coast looking for signs of life.”

“Interesting,” Chloe said, indicating that he should continue.

“One of the ship’s helicopters flew over the village, saw the largest group of humans anywhere in California, and reported back. Some of the sailors thought that the sight of dozens of women was too much and came ashore to investigate. When one of them misbehaved, the whole group was summarily expelled, but not before relieving them of their weapons and radios.”

“I love it.”

“The leader at the time, a near-legendary woman known as Boudica, after the Celtic Queen who revolted against the Romans, used the radio to contact the ship and tell them what had happened. The ship’s commander, an Admiral, was incensed. He sent another copter to pick the men up.”

“Cool story,” Chloe said. “What happened after that?”

“The admiral himself visited next. He established trade relations with the women, essentially seafood for vegetables. The ship’s crew numbered in the thousands, but it has gradually slimmed down over the years thru attrition. That includes many who have set up on the land, mostly north of here. Some of the crofts they established are still in existence, though only marginally.”

“What about the ship?”

“Would you like to see it?”

“You bet. How do we manage that?”

“We have to get down to the shore. The boat will pick us up at 11:00. That gives us time to do some birding on the way.”

The inflatable boat held only the driver and the two of them. So, there was no one to catch the sea spray instead of them. Chloe activated the faceplate and turned the suit on to repel the water. As a result, when they arrived at a lower deck of the huge USSRR as it was known, she looked exactly like the pictures of the Space Alien. Everyone gave her a wide berth as they moved toward the elevators.

The “Admiral” was a young man of indeterminate ancestry dressed in ancient jeans, sporting fashionable gaps at the knees, a sweatshirt with an unreadable logo, and a belt of real leather with a huge silver buckle. Barefoot, he strode to meet Chloe and Tink.

Removing his hat and bowing slightly, he said, “Delighted to meet you ma’am. I’ve heard so much about you. When The Tinker here said he could arrange an audience, I tole him to go for it.” He made as though to grab Tink on both shoulders but stopped before touching him. Tink did not flinch.

“I see.” Chloe said to his back as she looked at Tink. He just smiled.

She continued, “I hope we are all friends here. I know I wish to be.”

“It is our fondest hope as well,” he said with a slight nod of the head. Chloe thought, *Is he for real?*

“We have arranged some snacks, as well as the quick tour of the ship.”

“Sounds delightful.”

They began with the communication room. “Your friend was instrumental in getting this to work again. He even managed to send a ping to the library in Austin.”

“I’ve heard. We responded with a single dot. That was the end of it.”

“Why a single dot?” he asked.

“It means ‘greetings’ in Tralfamadorian,” Chloe said. “You know. Kurt Vonnegut, Sirens of Titan.”

“I told you!” Tink said. “They thought it was a joke.”

“Well, it is a bit of a joke. We hoped that whoever sent the ping would send more. We thought that it came from Boonville, which we could see on our scans. We never detected this activity. How many people on board now?”

“I don’t know. Several hundred scattered into about five or so different groups. The groups mostly cooperate, but they control certain territories aboard the old RR.”

“How did you connect to the grid, Tink?”

“Wasn’t easy. I managed to contact a communication satellite and from there to the Library in Austin. Only good for one ping.”

“Well,” Chloe said, “we should be able to do better. We just need to connect the ship to Boonville.”

“Easy to say, ‘we just need,’ but harder to implement,” Tink responded.

“I’m sure you and Z can cobble something together.”

“Z!”

“Can’t you work with her?”

“Maybe, but not without your help.”

The admiral intervened, “Can we discuss this later? Let me show you our gardens.”

“You have gardens on board?”

“We do. The flight deck was perfect. There’s no fuel for the planes, so we built some bins to hold dirt and fertilizer. Gulls provide plenty of that. Come on. Let me show you.”

“What is your source of energy?” Chloe wanted to know.

“Ah. Business already? We have enough nuclear energy to last decades at our current rate. We use solar electricity and convert sea water to usable feedstock for fuel cells. The Zodiacs use fuel cells.”

“Very interesting. Perhaps we can exchange some technology. I doubt you have solar panels as efficient as ours.”

He agreed, “Let’s just say that no one here would think of traveling halfway across the country using only solar energy. And you appear to have excess energy to use for defense.”

“You are well informed.”

“Stories about you are everywhere.”

“Some may even be true,” Chloe said. They had reached the area of the gardens.

It’s amazing what a few people can accomplish given the right conditions. The flight deck looked like a plantation, with neat rows of boxes showing some fall crops just getting started. “Do you still trade with Boonville for veggies?” Chloe asked.

“Not so much anymore. There are some crops that don’t do well due to the salt air, but we’ve found ones that work. We still haven’t managed to grow decent tomatoes, and wine is still something we buy from the Anderson Valley. And cannabis, of course.”

“So, aside from connecting you to the grid, how can we help?”

“Well, that’s the biggest item. After that, we’d like closer integration with Boonville. We hope to convince the women that we aren’t a threat. Communication will help.”

“Tink? Comments?”

Tink was unused to being asked for an opinion. He blushed, stammered, and almost retreated into his shell, but remembered who asked the question. “If you think it’s best, I’m ready to get on board.”

Chloe did something unthinkable. She hugged him to her, whispering into his ear. “Thanks, Tink. I love you.”

The Admiral watched this in amazement. “You two are an item?”

“I hope so,” Chloe said.

Tink’s blush grew intense. “Me, too,” he managed to get out.

The Admiral closed the session, “Will wonders never cease?”

V. Hypatia:
Carlo, David, and Cross

1. Missed Communication

July 7, 2018
Near Leakey, TX, USA

I'm not sure what I expected, but not what I found when I woke up. The cabin was eerily silent. "Ambianca?" I called. "Hello, dear," she answered. "I'm here. What would you like to hear?"

"How about some Bach?"

Curiously, she chose an oratorio that I was not familiar with. I let it play in the background while I rummaged around that cabin. "What's the date?" I asked.

"July 7, 2018," was the reply.

Well, that part worked all right.

"Do you know where Mark is?"

"No. sorry. He got a message and left. Was he expecting you?"

"Maybe. Not sure."

I moved on to the kitchen to see what I could find to eat. Plenty of leftovers from the Fourth scattered around. I found some beans and rice, a bit of chicken, and some green leafy vegetables. I threw it all into a bowl and nuked it.

"Damn! I forgot the cheese."

"That happens, Love. It's healthier without it."

"Maybe I'll make up the calories in beer."

It tasted pretty good, despite the way it looked. So did the beer, some craft brewery in Hondo according to the label. Too hoppy for my taste, but I drank it all. Then I wandered onto the porch and sat looking out over the valley. Could I start calling it "our valley?" It would be better with a little something to enhance my mood.

"Ambianca," I asked. "Do you have a copy of the message Mark got?"

"No, love, it was a text on your smartphone. I don't have ready access to that. Should I work on that?"

"No. I didn't realize that I had a smartphone here."

"Mark got one for you. He needed it for two-factor authentication, which is pretty much a joke if you ask me."

"It's not fair to ask you. You can break into anywhere. Well, almost anywhere."

Ambianca laughed. Yes, she laughed. I was astonished but said nothing. I'd love for her to develop a sense of humor. She started an old playlist of mine labeled "Favorites." I leaned back and just let the music soothe my nerves. Mark would be back sometime and explain everything.

I awoke with a start. *Shit! Did I transfer sometime?* I was still on the porch of the cabin. Ambianca's music selection was still playing. I heard someone in the cabin and got up to see

what was going on. Mark and another man I didn't recognize were approaching from the direction of the garage. They saw me and both reacted.

Mark rushed forward and took me into his arms. "You're back!" We kissed. Then I looked at the other man.

"Hypatia," he said by way of introduction, "I am Carlos Villareal, your protégé. You know, the one from Oakland."

"Ah," I said. *What the hell?*

Mark took out a smartphone and showed me a picture of a scanned photograph. I posed with a young boy that must have been a young Carlos. Mark swiped to the next picture, which showed the reverse side of the photo. At the top was the date July 4, 1985, Oakland, CA. Beneath it was a crude map showing where our cabin was. There was also a phone number I didn't recognize and a note, "Ask for Hypatia."

"I think you may be confusing me with someone else," I improvised.

He smiled. "You need not try to explain for me. I know that you are not a normal person. I was there, remember?"

I nodded noncommittally.

He continued, "I was glad there was a phone number on the back. I made it as far as Kerrville on the bus, but then I was unsure about the rest of the way. Mark drove up there and picked me up. So, what do you think? Did I turn out the way you expected?"

I examined him closely. Academic look overall. Beard well-trimmed. Although dressed casually, in jeans and a western-style shirt, I saw that he wore some expensive hiking boots. The outfit looked brand new, probably bought for the occasion. "Well, I can see that your taste in clothes has improved. Tell me the rest of the story."

"I remember when I saw you at my high school and Berkeley graduations. You always looked the same, many of the other students believed you were the angel everyone says you are."

"I hear that a lot. Did you get your Ph. D.?" I tried to steer the conversation away from my appearance.

"Indeed. At Stanford. Did some post-doc work in molecular biology. Now, I have a sweet position in a government lab that I cannot tell you about."

"I'd say you did OK. Did you come here just to see me?"

"Isn't that what we agreed when you gave me the picture? That I could come in 2018? It was 33 years ago on the Fourth. I tried calling from San Antonio but got no answer. Finally thought to send a text message this morning. Here I am."

"I'm so glad you came."

"You look exactly the same. How do you manage that?"

"Us angels play by different rules."

"That's for sure. I remember how you dealt with those thugs. That was fantastic. I decided right there and then to do whatever you wanted me to do."

"I hope that wasn't too onerous."

“No. And thanks to you, I know what onerous means.”

We all had a laugh at that, even Ambianca.

“Who’s that?” Carlos demanded, looking around.

“Just Ambianca,” Mark told him. “An AI that plays good music for us.”

“Wow! Can she play anything?”

“Pretty much. What would you like to hear?”

“I’m a confirmed Dead Head.”

The sounds of Sugar Magnolia started immediately.

“That’s pretty good,” Carlos admitted. “Can I give her a playlist? What would be great is one of their live concerts. One with an improvisation riff. “Help Slip Franklin? Can she handle that?”

“Ambi can play anything, so long as it was recorded.”

I didn’t understand the jargon, but Ambianca did. She played one of their famous ones, stringing together the songs **Help is on the Way** with **Slipknot** and finishing with **Franklin’s Tower**.

“Nice. One of my favorite combos. Nice and long.”

“Let’s eat,” Mark suggested.

“What can I do for you, Carlos,” I asked over beer and leftover BBQ beef.

“I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve been on this job for several years now. I’m starting to worry about the direction of my research.”

“How so?”

“Well, I work developing vaccines. Vaccines against some weird diseases.”

I felt a frisson creeping up my back.

“Go on.”

“The list of diseases includes some that are important only for veterinarians.”

“I see.” I was afraid that I did.

“It doesn’t make any sense. These diseases are not present in the USA, only South America.”

“Lots of research doesn’t make sense, until suddenly it does,” Mark pointed out.

“Right. That’s what I was told. Just do your own work and don’t worry about it was the message.”

I waited to see if he wanted to say more. Apparently not.

“Carlos, you have to use your own judgement. I cannot possibly know all the ramifications. Even angels have limits.”

“I see,” he said after some time. “I don’t know. I just hoped you would know what I should do.”

“What you should do is continue your work and keep us in the loop.”

“OK. I’ll do that.”

“Now, what do you say to some relaxation? Mark grows the best cannabis in the state.”

On cue, Mark produced a joint with some Hill Country Gold. “Can’t,” Carlos said. “Subject to random drug tests.”

“For marijuana?” We both said at once.

“Fraid so.”

“Well, that’s too bad. How about ethanol? Is that verboten also?”

“I can handle a beer or two.”

“You gonna stay the night?” I asked. *Please no!*

“No. I’ve got to catch a plane back to DC at 1700. Nonstop from San Antonio. I was hoping I could get a ride.”

“Sure,” Mark replied. “I’ll take you to the airport. What time do you want to get there?”

“By 1500 at the latest.”

Mark checked his watch. “In that case, we should leave soon. It’s about 90 minutes plus whatever we need to get thru the traffic.” He handed me the joint and headed back toward the garage.

“Stay in touch,” I cautioned him. “Mark will set up something very secure that you can use to communicate with us.”

Mark didn’t return until well after dark. I was getting really hungry, almost enough to force me to try my hand in the kitchen. Fortunately, he anticipated my need and brought some fried shrimp that he had picked up on the way.

We sat on the porch, which was comfortable after the heat of the day dissipated, scarfing down the shrimp before smoking the joint from earlier. “I thought maybe you would have smoked it already.”

“Without you? What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking how silly of me to leave it with you.”

I laughed. “I love you for leaving it, and for thinking about me.”

I leaned over to rest my head on his shoulder. “Did you learn anything about our mysterious caller on the trip to the airport?”

“Only that he is very bright and dedicated. He knows way more about biology than I do.”

“We need to learn everything we can about him.”

“I’ll start a search routine before we go to bed.”

“That’s going to be soon, right?”

“So, last night wasn’t enough for you? You horny devil.”

“Last night was years ago.”

“Oh. Right. I’ll get the search started.” He left for the office. I retired to the bedroom.

2. Search Results **July 8, 2018** **near Leakey, TX, USA**

It was mid-morning before Mark had the results from his search. “Took longer than expected. I needed to get into the archives of the Oakland Tribune. They wanted an exorbitant fee.”

“How much?”

“\$100 for one month.”

“We can afford that. I saw the statement from Schwab. My Intel stock is worth a lot.”

“It’s the principle of the thing. I wasted 20 minutes before just using one of the reporter’s username and password.”

“I won’t ask how you got that.”

“He was very careless.”

“OK. What have you learned?”

He spread several sheets of paper on the big table. “I’ve arranged these into a rough timeline. This is the earliest meeting between you and Carlos, as described by him as a high school senior. He won a prize for the composition.”

I read the essay with delight. Carlos described meeting his fairy godmother for the first time. I had the exact date and place: July 3, 1985, on a park bench near Lake Merritt. “Too bad he didn’t tell me the time.”

“Yeah, but I think we can get close. Carlos had an uncle who had a taco truck. I managed to find a schedule for the truck for 1981. That describes his location near Lake Merritt. He typically arrived about 10 in the morning. Before that, he was down by the Oakland harbor doling out breakfast tacos.”

“So, Carlos probably rode with his uncle, then wandered off on his own and bumped into me.”

“It’s plausible.”

“How about winning the lottery? Carlos says that his FG bought \$10 worth of tickets and let the computer select the numbers. How are we going to win unless we choose the numbers?”

“I worked it out. You buy the tickets with random numbers. If the winning numbers aren’t there, you buy another and specify the numbers when the boy is not around.”

“Should work. I assume you have the numbers.”

“Of course.”

That left one tiny problem. How was I going to get to Oakland in 1985? We discussed options for hours, considering everything from going back to California in 1971 and waiting there to trying to transfer directly there.

Around midnight, we agreed on the way we both thought best. It required some prep, but we had access to everything we needed.

3. Stopover June 25-30, 1985 Houston, TX, USA

It worked! At least so far. I recognized the bed from many times I made love and slept there. Now, the hard part. I had to sneak out without alerting anyone to a woman who appeared out of nowhere. The people in the house now didn't know about my curious lifeline.

I saw a bit of light coming thru the curtains, so I somehow managed to arrive in daytime rather than night. After putting on my backpack and removing my boots, I crept into the hallway. No one there. Down the front stairs. The house was dead quiet. Was it empty? I hadn't considered that possibility. If so, I had probably set off multiple alarms and could expect police to arrive at any moment.

I heard sounds of someone swimming in the back. Careful! I tested the door. Locked. When I turned the bolt, I heard a loud click that surely would have alerted anyone nearby. Quick! I stepped out of the door onto the front patio. I put my boots back on and smoothed out everything as best I could.

Before ringing the doorbell, I looked into the mailbox hanging by the front door. My luck was in. It contained an issue of Time with the date July 7, 1985. That was the date when the next issue would appear, meaning that I still had some time to get to Oakland. Everything seemed to be the best I could hope for. Before I touched the bell, the door opened. Idell stood there looking puzzled.

"Good afternoon, Idell," I said as calmly as possible. *What the hell time is it?*

My voice gave her the clue she needed. "Ms. Patsy! What a surprise! We didn't know you were coming."

"I apologize for not letting you know. I was just in the neighborhood and decided to take a chance and drop by."

She reached for my arm and dragged me into the foyer. "I know someone who will be happy to see you. She's having her daily swim. Come on."

She led me to the door opening onto the back patio and pool. "Look who I found," she said as Grace poked her head above water.

"Hello, my old friend," I said. Remembering how effusively she greeted me in Santa Rosa, I expected something similar. She did not disappoint me, clambering out of the pool and rushing to hug me. Then she jumped back. "Sorry," she said with a laugh. "I've gotten you all wet."

"Water dries."

"What brings you here?"

"It's complicated."

"Idell," Grace said, "Can you bring our visitor some tea?" She turned to me, "Do you want something else?"

"I'd love a snack," I replied.

Idell nodded. "Give me a few minutes." She left us alone.

“I need a favor,” I told Grace while we waited. We sat together on an antique cast iron bench near the pool. “Actually, I may need more than one. I didn’t bring a swimsuit. Maybe you could help me pick one out.”

“Ooh! Only if you model several for me.”

“Deal,” I said smiling.

“Now,” Grace said, “tell me what other favor you need.”

“I need to go to Oakland. California.”

“That should be easy enough. May I ask why?”

I hesitated. This was going to be the hard part. “I’m afraid I can’t share that with you.”

“Wow! What are you into?”

“Grace! You know better than to ask that.”

“OK. So, what do you need me to do?”

“I need a plane ticket. Unfortunately, I cannot get to my money now. I need to borrow some. I have assets, though, so I can pay you back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” She grinned. “Mark is on a birding trip with Preston to Mexico. Simon won’t be back until Saturday at the earliest. When do you have to go?”

“I need to be in Oakland on June 30.”

“Wonderful! We have time to get re-acquainted.”

I’ve arrived early! Fantastic!

“Aren’t you cold in that wet suit?” I asked.

Idell appeared then with a BLT sandwich, some iced tea, and to my delight, some of her ginger snaps.

Grace spoke up, “Thank you, Idell. I think Patty and I will plan to eat out tonight, so you don’t need to worry about supper. Why don’t you take off early?”

“Thanks,” she replied. “If I hurry, I can catch an early bus.”

“Then go. We can manage everything.”

“Ms. Patty. You going to be here a while?”

“A few days,” I replied.

“Oh, that’s nice. We can visit later.”

“I’d like that.”

As soon as we were alone again, the kissing started. “I’ve never made love in a swimming pool,” I commented, as I stood to remove my clothes.

Making love in a swimming pool is not as much fun as I expected. We decided to move to the bedroom.

On Wednesday morning, Idell arrived long before Grace and I awoke. By the time I straggled down to the kitchen, she had prepared a delightful brunch: Eggs Benedict with a side green salad, even mimosas. Served with the best coffee one could buy, it was a big hit with me. Grace had not yet appeared.

“Where did y’all wind up eating last night?” Idell asked me.

I looked up at her before answering. She eyed me coldly, then cracked up. We both laughed. “We ordered pizza,” I told her. “From now on, I suggest we let you prepare a meal for us.”

“Of course, I knew what you two were up to. The way you look at each other makes my heart leap. What does Simon think about it?”

I treated her last question as a serious inquiry and replied, “The last time we posed the question to him, he was very agreeable. Apparently, Grace has improved with practice. She just needed a jump start, so to speak.”

“Back home, they be sayin’ you two be sinning big time.”

“You know, Idell, I don’t think you would have remained part of this household if you put much stock in those opinions. Have you had brekkie?”

“Something.”

“Well, why don’t you grab a plate, and a glass, and join me?”

She took me up on it. We clinked glasses of mimosas. “To you,” I toasted.

She ate some of the Benedict as I watched. “It’s really delicious,” I told her. “One of my favorite dishes. Have I told you that before?”

“Just a lucky guess.”

“Have you tried any of the variations, such as artichoke bottoms instead of the muffin and Canadian bacon, or creamed spinach on the muffin?”

“No,” she answered. “I might think about those. You’ve had them somewhere else?”

Well, sometime else.

“Must have. I wouldn’t have made them up. You can add them to your famous dish list, along with the ginger snaps.”

“You *have* told me you like those.”

“Not often enough.”

“They’re easy.”

“For you! I still have trouble with scrambled eggs.”

“Want me to show you how to cook them?”

“Sure. Tomorrow morning?”

“OK. The good ones take longer to cook.”

“Really. That’s interesting. I’ll come prepared to wait.”

Grace strode into the room. She had changed into a glamorous outfit that suggested what she had in mind. When she saw Idell, she stopped startled. “What are you two cooking up?” she asked.

“Scrambled eggs for tomorrow, complete with a demo,” I told her.

“Am I invited?”

I stood and kissed her in a way that left nothing to the imagination. “Does that answer your question?”

Grace looked at Idell, who said, “It’s cool. Patty told me Simon liked the way it turned out.”

Grace actually blushed, something I had never seen before. “We’re very happy when we get to spend time together,” she said to Idell after a bit.

“I know,” was the simple reply. She got up and hugged us both. “Patty is easy to love, and so are you.” With that, she disappeared into the kitchen, returning shortly with a plate and glass for Grace.

Thus began a delightful idyll. Idell devoted herself to ensuring that Grace and I wanted for nothing, including privacy. We postponed the expedition to buy me a swimsuit for the simple reason that neither of us wore one. Instead, after brunch, we retired to the bedroom where I broke out some of the special brownies. “These are really potent,” I warned her. “Wait here.”

I took my backpack into the bathroom, where I undressed and put on Mark’s shirt. I finally remembered the actor’s name: Annette Benning. I got Mark to watch the movie with me. I found out in a Google search that it was considered one of the best date movies ever. It was a big hit with Mark and me.

When I walked out of the bathroom, Grace stared. “Oh my God. You remembered.”

“Yes, but this time I have a different script.”

Next morning, I let Grace sleep and tiptoed down the back stairs to the kitchen. “I couldn’t sleep any longer, so I thought I’d come down for the demo,” I told Idell.

“I’ve got everything ready.”

I always knew Idell was a great cook, but the performance that morning put her on a higher level. She whipped eggs with a little cream. “Eighty strokes. Exactly, you gotta count. Notice that it’s all a nice yellow color. I brought these eggs from place near my home. Better than store bought.”

She poured the mixture into a non-stick skillet that she had warmed over low heat. She emphasized, “Notice that the heat is low, so that some of the butter hasn’t melted yet. We crank it up now and stir constantly with a wooden spoon. When they start to set, we turn it back down. Now, we move the eggs around gently, folding the back over the top, then sliding the eggs around gently. We hafta go slow to keep all the foam we beat into the eggs. This is where it takes a bit of time.”

It did indeed take time. At least 15 minutes all together. I forgot to check when she started. The result was perhaps the best scrambled eggs I had ever eaten. Just as promised, they were soft and fluffy, but fully cooked. Seasoned with salt and pepper they were superb.

We sat together at the long dining room table. For several minutes, we simply concentrated on the food. In addition to the eggs, Idell had cooked some bacon as accompaniment, and some croissants she must have picked up on the way this morning.

I mopped up the last bit of the eggs and sighed. “Idell, those were a 10!”

“Thanks. See, it’s not hard, just takes time.”

“What if you don’t have enough time?”

“Well, then you just have to manage time better. Like you do.”

“What?”

“You ain’t normal. You haven’t aged at all since I saw you in ’71. I see changes in Grace, but not in you.”

She left it at that, waiting on my reply. *Oh, well. Let’s fall back on the truth.*

“You’re very perceptive, Idell. The time for me has been less than a month.”

She searched my face intently.

“OK. That actually makes sense. How did you do it?”

“First off, I really don’t understand how it works. At times, I seem to be able to control where I go. This is one of those times, by the way. I came very deliberately from Mark’s cabin near Leakey. That was in 2018.”

After a pause to let her digest that, I continued, “My life is not linear. I live — have lived — in several different times and places. I switch from one point in space-time to another, usually while I sleep. A few times I have managed to switch by just relaxing, but it’s harder. I think about where I want to end up, then go to sleep and hope I wind up where I want to be.”

“Why here? Why now?”

“The now part is easier. I have something that I have to do in 1985. Don’t ask. This location was someplace I could envision strongly. This house. I woke up in the bed Mark and I share. Once, I scared the daylights of a maid who was making up the room. You charged into the room and calmed her down. Told her to stop caterwauling like a banshee. I corrected you, pointing out that banshees do not caterwaul. You told me I would fit into this family.”

She laughed and clapped her hands. “When did this happen?”

“Not yet, I told her. But you’ll remember that I told you when it does.”

“So, you’ll be coming back.”

“Yes, in 2001 for sure, at least according to Mark.” *You can tell Grace to expect me.*

“So, you came here just because you remember the house?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You know why I came here now.”

“Did you know Simon and Mark would be gone?”

“No. That was just good luck.”

We sat in silence for several minutes.

“You know you can’t tell anyone about this. They’ll think you lost it.”

“Of course.” After some hesitation, she asked, “Why so long? Why not come back next week?”

“It’s complicated. I haven’t thought about it. Mark knew about 2001, but not any other times. Well, except for my younger self. She’ll show up in 1998. Please don’t tell her about me.”

“No worries. I am glad that I have been a part of your strange, non-linear life. You are a remarkable woman. I hope that everything you do winds up as well as your time with Grace. I love her and I’d hate for you to hurt her.”

“I understand. I love her, too.”

“Why don’t you go up to her? I’ll bring her a tray.”

“What a nice idea.”

We spent Thursday doing what we wanted: I got up early and got another cooking lesson from Idell. Grace slept late. I took a tray up to her after Idell and I finished breakfast. Then, we whiled away the day aggressively doing nothing. We did go out and buy a swimsuit for me, just in case someone showed up unexpectedly. Grace had me model at least seven alternatives before selecting one that satisfied her, a very brief bikini that I thought belonged on someone younger, say about 18. However, I saw myself in the mirror and thought it might do.

I decided to spice things up that night after we had the place to ourselves again, introducing Grace to the idea of sex fantasies. Of course, we were living a pretty nice fantasy as it was, so we needed to use our imagination. The magic brownies helped. I hoped we didn’t run out too soon.

Friday passed in much the same way. We both knew that Simon was expected back on Saturday, and that would change the program completely. We agreed that I would simply become a treasured house guest, one who would stay in her own bedroom.

Idell and I had prepared a surprise for dinner on Saturday. Simon showed up mid-afternoon, looking tired. Grace met him at the door with the announcement, “We have a surprise house guest.”

“Oh, no! Please no.”

“I think you’ll be pleased. She has prepared something for dinner. Be on your best behavior.”

“All right. I’m still on Eastern Time, which means I’ll be ready to eat after a G&T.”

“As you wish. We might have something better, though.”

“What.” From the kitchen, I could hear the irritation in his voice. Maybe this was not a good idea after all.

I couldn’t hear the rest, but I imagined Grace giving him one of the brownies. That spoiled some, but not all, of the surprise.

“Why are four places set?” Simon demanded from the dining room.

“You’ll see.”

The meal was not complicated. Idell had carefully chosen dishes that were within my limited repertoire: Pan sautéed chicken breast with lemon butter sauce and capers; Brown rice

cooked to perfection following Idell's explicit directions; Broccoli with hollandaise sauce, which required some help from the real cook. We debated dessert. I held out for ginger snaps, but Idell insisted on something a bit more daring. We settled on *Crème Brûlée*.

When I entered the dining room with the first two plates, Simon jumped up to give me a big hug. "Patsy, how great to see you again."

Grace corrected him. "Patsy prefers *Patty*."

"I like that better," he commented. "If you shortened it to Pat, no one would know your gender. That might be useful in some circles."

Idell entered bringing two more plates, which she deposited at the two extra seats. Then she disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of wine.

"We decided this was a special occasion, Simon, and raided the wine closet for the good stuff," Grace explained. "Pat chose this, a nice Napa Cabernet. I hope you approve." Idell poured a small sample into his glass like a practiced sommelier and waited for him to taste and accept it.

"An excellent choice," he said after considering it.

When Idell and I both took a seat at the table, Grace explained, "We've changed a few things. Patty fixed dinner under Idell's direction. We thought they both deserved to partake of the meal with us. Hope you approve." Simon had been married long enough to know how to deal with that.

We spent several minutes tasting everything. I was so nervous that I could hardly speak, but I needn't have worried. "Quite a change from fourteen years ago," Simon pronounced.

"I had a good teacher," I admitted.

"How have you two spent your time since...when did you arrive, Patty?"

"Tuesday." I left the rest of the question unanswered.

Simon grinned. "I see."

I think his brownie kicked in about that time. Conversation when dessert arrived with virtually non-existent. We enjoyed some of the excellent coffee that Simon was famous for, then adjourned.

I was sound asleep when Grace entered my room. She shook me gently. "Patty! Wake up! Something's wrong with Simon."

That did the trick! "What's the matter?"

"I don't know. Come quick."

Simon seemed sound asleep, but his breathing was labored. I jostled him. "Simon, please talk to me. How are you feeling?"

He opened his eyes. "Patty. Let me..." He started to get up but fell back. "Dizzy," he explained.

"Chest pain?" I asked.

"Some."

I turned to Grace. "Call 911."

“Simon,” I continued. “I think you need to see a doctor.”

“I’ll be OK in the morning.”

“Maybe, but it will be in a hospital room.”

Grace returned. “They say 10-15 minutes.”

“Good.” I tried to take Simon’s pulse, something that I had seen in videos, but never tried in practice. It seemed to be very fast.

“Simon, has this happened before?”

“Some. Stress.”

“Try to relax. We’ve called for an ambulance. You’re going to be all right. Take some deep breaths.”

He lay back. “You’re pretty,” he said.

“Thanks. Now lie back.”

Grace took his hand. She looked worried. I told her, “I don’t think he’s had a heart attack, but this needs attention. Have you seen this before?”

“I don’t think so. Once or twice he seemed fatigued when I thought it unusual, but...”

I stood and gave her a quick kiss. “He’s not going to die tonight. Don’t worry.” I didn’t explain how I knew this, and she didn’t ask. *I guess reputation as an angel is still working.*

The ambulance crew arrived and asked more pertinent questions. “We need to take him in,” they concluded after a short while. I was impressed with their professionalism, and their physical strength as they somehow managed to get Simon down the stairs and onto the gurney. They were ready to roll in less than 5 minutes. Grace elected to go with them. As there was no room for me, I asked her what she would like me to do. “I’ll call from the hospital. Then we’ll decide.” With that she was gone.

About an hour later, the phone rang. “It’s something called Atrial Fibrillation,” she explained, “*afib* for short. Apparently, he’s been having problems for some time without telling me. They’re going to run some tests in the morning. He’s asleep now. I don’t know what I should do.”

“Well, you have two choices: you can come home, and we’ll go back in the morning; or I can come to the hospital to keep you company.”

She considered the question at length. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Which hospital? What room?” I made the decision for her.

“Methodist. Room 417, but they will probably move him.”

“Stay there. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

It took me some time to figure out how to call a cab in 1985. I missed the future when an app on my phone would be all I required. I discovered a book of numbers in the table in the foyer. I remembered Grace directing Idell to that table. The back of the book had a listing for taxis. I called the first one and 45 minutes later, I arrived at Methodist Hospital in the famous Texas Medical Center.

When I found Grace on the fourth floor waiting area, she rushed into my arms. “Patty,” she managed, but then started crying. I held her, stroking her back as best I could. “Let’s sit down,” I suggested. That let me hold her easier. Usually, I didn’t think about the difference in height, but this time it was annoying. I kept repeating reassuring words, and finally they had an effect. I found a box of tissues and gave it to her.

“If they’re going to run tests, it means that he isn’t going to die, at least not now. I think you can stop worrying.”

“Thanks, Patty. I’m so glad you’re here.”

By that time, it was 5:00 in the morning. “I’ll bet the hospital cafeteria will be open soon. Why don’t we go get some breakfast?” Grace agreed, and we explored more of the hospital than we expected before locating the cafeteria in the basement. It opened at 5:30, and by the time we found it, we had a short wait.

Some eggs and coffee, both terrible in my estimation, helped. We moved back to Simon’s room in time to see him in a wheelchair about to be taken down for the tests. “Where did you find a phone?” I asked. “We need to let Idell know what’s happening.”

“She doesn’t come on Sunday,” Grace told me. “She’ll be home with her family.”

“Good.”

We waited for two hours, exhausting the supply of magazines in the waiting area. We tried conversing with other people, but most were there for reasons like ours and not really interested.

A young doctor, probably a first-year resident, found us. “Well,” he began, “the tests confirm what we expected. He has afib, atrial fibrillation. It’s fairly common for men his age, especially when accompanied by a lot of stress. Fortunately, the treatment is straightforward. Many times, clean living is enough: lose some pounds, get regular exercise, etc. In your husband’s case...” He stopped and looked at me, “and...”

“Friend,” I supplied.

“In the case of your husband and friend, the condition appears to be chronic. We’ll install a pacemaker that should correct the problem. That’s a simple operation, usually done on an outpatient basis. We’ve scheduled that for Wednesday if that is convenient for everyone.”

“That’s no problem,” I said. *I’ll be gone, though.*

“He’s getting dressed. Should be ready to go soon. Today, he should rest and make sure he drinks plenty of fluids. Of course, if he gets worse, contact us. I think he’ll be OK.”

We thanked our new young friend, and rejoined Simon. “Lots of furor for nothing,” he said.

“It’s not nothing,” Grace said in an icy tone. “You’ve been hiding this from me. That must stop. Now.”

I agreed. “No secrets, Simon.”

“OK. I made a mistake. I’ll do better, I promise.”

Life didn't exactly return to normal, but it was close. Grace made sure Simon followed the instructions. She spent the rest of Sunday without leaving his side, while I took care of everything they needed.

On Monday, Grace and I prepared for my trip to California. We visited a nearby bank where she withdrew far more money than I expected to need, then stopped at a travel agency where she bought a one-way ticket to Oakland in my name and a hotel in San Francisco. We returned home to find Simon feeling much better. He suggested we all take a swim, which seemed like a good idea. My new swimsuit got a reaction from Simon that I loved. I noticed Grace eyeing me as well, so I broached the subject.

"Simon, do you think you can spare Grace for a few hours for me to say goodbye?"

"It takes hours?"

"The way I planned, it will."

He grinned. "No interest in a threesome?"

I thought about it. "Could be fun. Maybe you could give us a head start?"

"OK. Maybe we should ask Grace about it."

I heard her great laugh and looked around. It was just in time for me to take the full force of the bucket of water she dumped on me. Well, I wasn't going to take that! We had a fun time wrestling in the shallow end of the pool during which she lost the top of her suit.

"What do you think, Simon?" I asked. "Are these the world's most beautiful breasts?" I reached for them, but not quickly enough. She dove under my reach and wound up behind me. I lost my skimpy top in the struggle that ensued. When we got thru laughing, I kissed and fondled her.

"Go," Simon said. "Unless you plan to spend the time in the pool."

"No," I said. "We tried that already. Not the best venue for what I have in mind."

Simon looked at his watch. "It's a bit after noon. I'll give you until 2. Then I expect some action."

Later, when he strolled into the bedroom wearing nothing but a smile, we were ready. This time, I planned the scenario, which worked beautifully.

The next morning, Grace insisted on driving me to the airport, where we had a tearful farewell. "Will I ever see you again?" she asked.

"Yes, but not for quite a while."

"How can you know that?"

"The next time we meet, you'll know the answer to your question."

Then, with one final kiss, I left for California.

4. An Unexpected Development

June 30 – July 1, 1985

Near Lake Merritt, Oakland, CA

Once the plane landed in San Francisco, I took a taxi to the hotel that Grace had selected for me, the St. Francis. They had my reservation, charged to Grace's credit card. After a huge breakfast, I spent the rest of the day relaxing in the room with a map of the Bay Area and the BART system. The surrounding area held numerous upscale shops, which explained why Grace liked it. Simon approved of the choice, though he usually preferred to stay in Palo Alto nearer to the action of Silicon Valley.

After a brief nap, I explored the area and found a nice sandwich spot, where I grabbed lunch before heading back to the hotel.

The next morning, I tested out the BART system, beginning at a station an easy walk from the hotel location on Union Square. The route took me under the bay in the Transbay tube into Oakland. I got off in downtown Oakland rather than the Lake Merritt station. The latter involved changing trains, a complication. A short walk took me to the shores of Lake Merritt.

I had brought my binoculars, as well as my backpack, in case I needed it. The avifauna on the lake was sparse this time of year but contained gulls in a variety of plumages to study. At least, I was not the only birder around the lake that day. I saw one man quite a ways off with binoculars. He was dressed in a business suit and must have worked nearby and used his lunch hour for a birding break.

The essay Carlos had written simply said that I was "sitting on a bench overlooking Lake Merritt." The problem was trying to decide which bench he meant. I circumambulated the lake noting all the benches, a process requiring about two hours.

One bench was on a hillside, somewhat removed from the path around the lake. I thought that a young boy might like that spot, so I sat and scanned the area for something interesting. There were many people out walking, but none that matched the picture I had studied at length during the plane ride.

I was startled by a familiar voice. "Good afternoon, Patsy," he said.

Turning around to face him, I replied, "Good afternoon to you Colonel Cyril, or whatever your name is now."

"Impressive. My name is David Vanderhoek, which is supposed to sound vaguely Dutch. What do you think?"

"Not bad. Care to join me?"

"I'd be delighted." He sat.

"So, are you freelancing, or is this part of your new job?"

"So many questions that have no good answer."

"I see. Do you have instructions about me?"

"Just to observe."

"Nice." *How the hell did he know I was here?*

As if reading my mind, he said, “You used your real name for the plane ticket and hotel reservation.”

Silence has its uses. Eventually, he elaborated, “Red flags were raised. Because of our past association, I was chosen to see what the hell you were up to.”

“Birding?”

“Pfft. A decent cover, but not at this time of year.”

“Gulls.”

“Definitely an acquired taste.”

“True.”

“I will never harm you, my angel, or let anyone else — if can stop them.”

“That’s reassuring.”

We sat quietly for several minutes. Both of us made a point of checking out the gulls on the lake. “How the hell do you tell them apart?” he asked finally.

“It’s not easy. I start by checking out the size. We have big gulls, middle-sized gulls, and a few small ones. There are more small ones in different seasons. Here we have mostly Western Gulls, the big ones with the dark mantles.”

“Mantles?”

“They didn’t brief you very well. The mantle is the top part of the wing.”

“I see. What about the middle-sized gulls?”

“There are two that are quite similar: California Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls.”

“I guess you tell them apart by the bills.”

“Well, if you get a close look, yes. Usually, though you rely on something else. Leg color is good. California Gulls have yellow legs.”

“How interesting.”

“You’re not a real birder, David.”

“No. You found me out.”

“What are you?”

“Just an interested party.”

“That’s comforting. Want to grab a bite?”

“A lovely idea. There’s a decent Mexican restaurant a short walk away.”

“Mexican? What the hell. Sure.”

It was better than I expected. I tried *carne asada*, always my go-to choice at a new Mexican restaurant. I put up with refried beans instead of *frijoles charros*, the staple in Austin. The rice was done right. The tortillas were homemade. The salsa zippy enough. We both washed it down with *Negra Modelo*.

“Why is it called *negra*? Shouldn’t it be *negro modelo*?” I wondered.

“Interesting question, to which I happen to have the answer.”

“Well, don’t keep me waiting.”

“The *negra* modifies *cervesa*. *Modelo* is a brand name.”

That deserved a brief, soundless applause. He nodded in appreciation. “Why are you here?”

Of course, the abrupt question was planned. I had just given him a great straight line.

“I’m looking for a 10-year-old boy.”

“Really? I thought your interests lay in a different direction altogether.”

“Not everything is about sex, David.”

“When it comes to you, love, it is. I admit to being a trifle disappointed to learn of your proclivities.”

“I’m a switch hitter, David.”

“Switch hitter?”

“Baseball. Hits from both sides of the plate.”

“Baseball is one of the most mystifying aspects of American life.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out if you try. Where do you live, Dave? May I call you Dave?”

His turn to be nonplused. “I live in Boonville, of course. In the house you gave me. What shall I call you?”

“Really? You live in Boonville? Patty is the name I go by these days.”

“Well, Boonville’s one of the places I call home, Patty. May I call you Pat?”

“You live an interesting life. Pat is fine.”

“Coming from you, that is a very interesting observation.”

“When it comes to Carlos Villareal, I am an interested party.”

“That’s his name, is it? The boy?”

“Yes. Do you know something about him?”

“No, but perhaps I can find out.”

“How interesting.”

Neither of us spoke for quite a while, lost in thought, studying each other.

“Shall we depart?” David asked finally.

We walked back to the 19th Street station still lost in our own thoughts. As we crossed Broadway, I took his hand. We held hands for several blocks.

We chose my place over his.

Sex with Dave was better than I expected. In fact, it was lots of fun. If only I could stop thinking of my final romp with Simon and Grace, it would have been even better.

We spent several minutes just recovering, then several more in idle talk before we got down to business.

“You are one of the most amazing women I have ever met,” Dave began. “What is your secret?”

“Are we really ready to spill secrets? What spy novels call *dropping trou*?”

“Instead of focusing on secrets, why not just tell our life stories?”

“Mine’s more complicated than you might think.”

“Mine is fairly pedestrian: Loving the wrong woman.”

“I hope that’s not a reference to present company.”

“No, it happened some years ago. Shall I go first?”

“OK.”

“As you may have guessed, I was a senior officer in a secret organization.”

“Like the KGB?”

“Phooey! A bunch of bureaucrats. My organization is one you’ve never heard of — and never will. We were a small group of highly trained professionals, selected at a young age for certain skills, such as an ability with many languages. We were given various assignments on a completely ad hoc basis, for example, whenever there was no alternative. In the 60’s, I had such an assignment. I spent years in Czechoslovakia working in various government offices, gradually moving up the ranks until I was part of the inner circle of government.”

“Like a mole?”

“Exactly. One of my co-workers was a beautiful young woman that I worked alongside on a regular basis. Over time, we became close. We started meeting outside work, and nature took its course. I committed the cardinal sin of my profession: I fell in love with a civilian.”

“I see.”

“It was mutual. We talked about someday managing to get away from the Communist Bloc. By that time, everyone in eastern Europe had come to realize that western nations, such as this one, provided a much better lifestyle. It was just a dream, but one we talked about a lot. We even started looking at places where we might be able to live.”

“Then came the Prague Spring,” I interjected.

“Yes. I thought it was the moment we had been waiting for. Travel restrictions were relaxed. I booked a flight to Berlin. In those days, it was easy to pass from the East to the West, if you knew what you were doing and who to trust. I told my love about my plan, and we agreed to travel separately and meet in West Berlin. I knew of a café near the *Tiergarten* that I thought safe. I found out otherwise.”

“She sold you out,” I said.

“She did. Turned out she was an agent of the CIA, or some other organization, perhaps one like mine. I knew at once that I had been betrayed. I spotted the agents long before they saw me. Better training.”

“You proved that to me more than once in Hedy Woods.”

“That was just for fun. This was serious. I had no idea who they represented. I just knew that I had to drop everything and *go to ground* as they say in spy novels. I zigzagged around Europe until I finally made it to Switzerland. There I caught a flight to Canada. I just wandered. I sometimes wonder if there is a God. Something led me to those woods, where I waited. When you showed up, I knew, I don’t know how, that you were who I had been waiting for.”

“It was that woman, Morena, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was. I tried, when we met in your house, to rekindle what we once had. She had been playing me all along. I asked her how she knew about me in Prague. She told me it was a secret above my pay grade.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “moving closer and snuggling up. I’ve never suffered anything like that.”

“Time for your story.”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

So, I told him everything. Unlike Mick, he didn’t fall asleep, He seemed to be concentrating on my every word. When I got to the part about Carlos, he focused. “So, Carlos, as a middle-aged man showed up with a photo of you and him from this time?”

“Yes. I was completely mystified. I have never been here, either in the Bay Area, or 1985.”

“Where were you in 1985?”

“Nowhere. It wasn’t part of my timeline.”

“How do you go from one time to another?”

“I don’t really know. Over the years, I have learned more about it, but I still don’t understand it. I used to believe that I could only go to places I had been before. The first time, well, the first after I appeared in 2058 or so, was back to the Apple Orchard in Medina, near where I was found as a toddler. From there, I traveled to Houston, to the house Mark lived in. The more I go to a place, the easier it is to go there again. I’ve been to the cabin near Leakey many times, for example, as well as the house in Houston. When I decided to come here, I went first to Houston and managed to get there in time to fly to SFO. However, when I went to Boonville in 1968 it was a completely new experience. I think I may have been born there, which might explain it.”

“But what is the mechanism?”

“That’s the weird part. There is no Tardis sitting on the corner looking like a police call box, no magic machine, nothing like that. I fall asleep and wake up in another time.”

“But surely that doesn’t happen every time you fall asleep.”

“No. However, if I concentrate on where I want to be before falling asleep, I usually wind up there.”

“Not always, though?”

“Nope. Whatever controls me must have a sense of humor.”

“Something controls you?”

“A hypothesis only. I really have no idea how it works.” Was he disappointed?

He said nothing for a long time. “I am sorry to say this, but I must have some proof. Tell me something that you know from the future that I can check on.”

I thought for a while. “Well, the Rainbow Warrior, a ship owned by Greenpeace will be sunk in New Zealand by two explosives.”

“We already know of that. Not the sinking, bit the preparations.”

“Really. Let me think.” After some thought, I asked, “Have you heard of Christa McAuliffe?”

“Should I recognize the name?”

“She is a schoolteacher, chosen to ride on the space shuttle Challenger sometime soon.”

“Interesting. I will have to see if we know about that.”

“The Challenger will blow up with her aboard. All the astronauts will die, of course.”

“When?”

“I don’t remember the exact date, but soon, I think.”

He moved to his coat, took out a small tablet and wrote a note.

“When you go back to Lake Merritt tomorrow — he looked at his watch — actually today. When you go there, and sit on the bench, look for some trash on the ground, a bag that might have held lunch. When it is safe, look inside. I will leave a paper, one page from this tablet, with everything I can find out about Carlos Villareal.”

“You think all that spy craft is really necessary?”

“Absolutely. This will have to be out last meeting in person, despite how much I might wish otherwise. I will observe from a distance. If you should glimpse me, please don’t react. Others may be watching.”

“What?”

“That woman, Margaret or whatever name she is using, has decided you are worth expending vital resources such as me. That is not good. You need to be careful.”

“That’s going to be difficult, since I have to somehow find this boy.”

“I understand. If I need to intervene, I will do so, but let’s hope none is needed. Now, I must go.”

“So soon? I was hoping...”

“I can spare another hour or so.”

The sun was just peeking thru the window when he left.

5. Watching and Waiting

July 2, 1985
Oakland, CA, USA

Following Dave's instructions, I sat on the bench and pretended to check out the gulls. Another birder walked up. "Mind if I join you?"

"Be my guest. Not much happening on the lake right now."

"Wrong season."

"I know, but here I am, studying gulls."

"Ooh! Are you good at them?"

"Is anyone?"

He laughed. "Some are better than others."

"Are you?"

"No, I was hoping you were. Someone reported a Heerman's in juvenile plumage."

"I haven't seen anything like that. That would be unusual in summer, right?"

"Definitely, but not unknown."

"I'll keep a lookout."

"OK. I just thought I'd check. Are you going to walk around the lake?"

"Not right now. I'm waiting on my nephew."

"Ah. Well, good birding."

When he left, I noticed that he'd left his lunch on the bench. At least they'd recruited a real birder this time. I carefully rummaged around in the sack, finding several used wrappers, but no food. I picked up the bag and walked to the nearest trash can. As I dumped out the contents, I spotted Dave's note and palmed it. At least I hoped that I hid it effectively.

Returning to the bench, I pretended to study the gulls some more. One looked a bit different. I walked down for a better look. Just an immature California Gull.

I managed to look at the note.

"My angel," it began. "Carlos has no police record. Word around the station is that he is bright, but unmotivated. Skips class often. Has been warned about that, but nothing more. Working on getting access to school records. More tomorrow."

I made a loop of the lake in case anyone was watching. I saw no one that fit the part. Went back to Union Square. Found a Chinese restaurant around the corner that claimed to be a relic of an earlier time. Took a chance on it and discovered it was both cheap and excellent. Back to the hotel hoping that maybe I had an unexpected guest. Nope. Watched some crap on TV until I fell asleep.

6. Tio Taco
July 3-4, 1985
Oakland, CA, USA

Patience was rewarded finally. On July 3, Carlos simply walked up to me and started a conversation. “You sit here a lot.”

“Yes, I have been spending time here lately.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been waiting for you, Carlos.”

That surprised him, as planned.

“How do you know my name?”

“I know a lot about you. I have several sources.”

“Oh, yeah!”

“Yes. Those sources say you are very bright, but you skip class a lot. If you’re bright but skip class, I’d guess that you were bored. Right?”

“I still get good grades on homework and tests.”

“So, you’re smarter than the others?”

“Guess so.”

“It can be hard if you’re always the smartest one in the room. Maybe the others teased you about it.”

I’d guessed correctly. He looked away. Then, he surprised me.

“You know there are two men watching you?”

“Two?”

“Yeah. Big guys. Looked like trouble. Thought I oughta warn you.”

“Thank you, Carlos. I’d like to ask a favor. Would you do something for me?”

“Maybe. What is the favor?”

“When those men come here, I want you to run away and hide. Stay hidden till I tell you it’s OK to come out. Will you do that?”

“They gonna kill you?”

“I think they are more interesting in kidnapping me. If you’re here, they’ll take you also. I don’t want that to happen.”

He looked at me with something approaching respect.

“Yeah. I’ll do that. But what if you need help?”

“I’ll try to handle them myself. I might have some reinforcements.”

“Cool.”

Carlos spotted them before I did. “They’re coming now.” He pointed to two men approaching on the path. They veered off the path and began climbing up toward us. Carlos

followed instructions well, easily eluding the two men. He had the advantage of running downhill, of course.

Thug number one spoke for the duo, “You need to come with us.” He flashed something that looked like a badge.

“I didn’t get a good look at that badge,” I complained.

“You can see it well later.”

“I think I will decline the invitation.” I picked up my backpack and stood. “I’m leaving now gentlemen.” I casually tapped the backpack three times.

“Put down the pack and step away,” Thug #2 said.

I complied, saying, “Please don’t touch my pack.”

Ignoring my request, the one I took to be the leader grabbed the pack. Instantly, he recoiled, twitching noticeably as he fell to the ground. His companion said, “Frank! What the fuck!” He picked up the pack to examine it, only to be treated to the same taser charge as his friend. With both of them lying on the ground moaning — at least they weren’t seriously hurt — I picked up the pack and walked off in the direction Carlos had gone.

“Carlos, it’s safe to come out now.”

He appeared almost instantly. He’s watched the entire performance. “What did you do to them?”

“Taught them a lesson, I hope.”

“Yeah, but how?”

“This backpack is like James Bond’s. It has a lot of good features.”

“Wow! Can I look at it?”

“Not now. We need to get away from those men. Why don’t you show me the way to your uncle’s taco truck?”

When we had gone several blocks and were out of sight of the park bench, I told Carlos to stop. “I want to listen to what those men are saying.”

Opening the pack, I removed a small radio with some earphones. I put one to my ear and let Carlos listen on the other one. I heard a familiar voice.

“You assholes. What were you thinking? What part of observe without taking action didn’t you understand?”

“Well, we saw she had met up with the boy. We had a chance to grab them both. Decided to act.”

“Got what you deserved. What did she do to you?”

“Don’t know. Picked up that red pack of hers and next thing I knew I was on the ground.”

“Me, too.”

“I told you not to underestimate her. Anyway, you’re no longer useful here. You’re relieved. Separate and make your way back to base.”

“You don’t order us around.”

“This is directly from the Throne Room.”

“Shit!”

There was silence for some time. Then there was the sound of ripping. “Very impressive listening device, Pat. I’ve never seen one like this. I don’t think you’ll have any more trouble.”

I turned the radio off and put it away.

“Who that be talking?” Carlos wanted to know.

“Someone I thought was a friend.”

“Sounded like he be one of them.”

“It did indeed, Carlos. It did indeed.”

We found Carlos’s uncle and the taco truck a few blocks further on. By this time, I was ready to sample the wares there. Carlos provided introductions, sort of, “Uncle, this is a friend with some really cool stuff. She seems to know me, but I don’t know her name.”

“I’m Pat O’Brien,” I offered. “I know you are Carlos’s uncle, but I don’t know your name.”

“Hernan Villareal.” We shook hands.

“So, Carlos is your brother’s son?”

“My sister’s actually. Don’t know his father. My sister died of a drug overdose when Carlos was a toddler. He’s lived with me ever since. What’s this all about?”

“I hear you have the best tacos in Oakland.”

“A customer. In that case, what would you like?”

After glancing over the menu displayed on the side of the truck, I opted for a *carne guisada* plate, which came with black beans cooked the right way, some rice, and tortillas.

“Four fifty.”

I offered him a \$20. “Want to play the lotto?”

“Sure.”

“If you buy me ten dollars of entries, you can get some for yourself from the change.”

With a big grin, he took the money and disappeared into a nearby bodega. “Here you are,” he said on his return, handing me a bunch of tickets. I scanned them quickly and noted the winning numbers were on the eighth one. Nice. “You didn’t say what you wanted for numbers, so I let the computer select them. I took the default on everything else.”

“Perfect. How about sharing? If either of us wins, we split the booty three ways.”

“Three ways?”

“One for you to get a better truck and a nicer place to live; one for Carlos for his education, which I hope will be used extensively; one for me for expenses.”

“Angels have expenses?” Carlos asked.

I smiled. “Well, now that you mention it, they are minimal. I’ll just take a small amount and leave the rest for you.”

He grinned, already counting his take.

“Is this your regular spot?” I asked Hernan.

“Most days. I start down by the harbor selling breakfast tacos. Then I move here.”

“Let’s plan to meet here tomorrow. I’ll try something different then.” The *carne guisada* had lived up to its reputation. I said so to Hernan as I searched for a place to put the paper plate and other trash. “I’ll take that,” Hernan said, reaching for it. “How was it?”

“Great,” I replied, “though I like the salsa to be a bit zippier.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll make a special batch just for you.”

“Deal. See you both tomorrow at 11.”

When we met up at 11, Hernan was excited. “I won \$100!”

“Wonderful. Let’s drop in on the Bodega and collect your booty.”

The shopkeeper in the bodega was happy to pay out to Hernan, an old friend. After that, I asked if he could check my numbers. We watched as he checked one ticket after another. One returned \$5, but the rest had nothing. Then the eighth set off major alarm bells. “Holy shit!” our new friend exclaimed. He immediately picked up the telephone and called a number. “This is Louie at the Plaza Bodega in Oakland. We have a hit on the big one!” He read off the numbers as a double check. He was jumping up and down as he listened.

“No other winner! Tomorrow? I’ll tell her.”

We listened as he breathlessly repeated what he had heard. “Because it’s the Fourth, you have to wait until tomorrow to turn in the ticket. You can do that at City Hall. I get a bonus for selling the winning ticket!” He could hardly contain himself. “This will draw traffic to the bodega. We got to celebrate.” We accepted his offer of a free beer for the adults and a Coke for Carlos. Meanwhile, he disappeared into the back and emerged with a Polaroid camera. We stepped outside where he took several photos, including the one of Carlos and me.

After the excitement died down, I explained to Hernan what I had in mind. “The money will be paid out over time. It’s better that way. More monthly income. Quite a bit more.”

“So, we don’t get the money tomorrow?”

“No. Tomorrow we’ll set everything for regular monthly payments. You’ll be responsible for seeing that Carlos gets a good education. Deal?”

Hernan looked like he’d been struck by lightning.

“I realize this is a lot to take in right now, Hernan. I hope you like my plan.”

“When you said we’d share, I had no idea it might be like this. It takes some getting used to.”

“Carlos is the one that will really have to change. No more skipping class. Hernan will find a good school for you, one where you can learn something useful. Now, this will hard for

you. The other students will look down on you, maybe call you names. Remember, when they do, they are just jealous of your big break. Smile and ignore them. I speak from experience.”

That experience was a figment of my imagination. I had the best education anyone could ask for, mostly from reading. No one ever called me a derogative name, except maybe the President of the Republic. No need to tell them about that.

“Now, about that special salsa you promised me. How about I try it out on some *tacos al carbon?*”

7. School Preparatory July 5-8, 1985 Oakland, CA, USA

We spent the next several days setting up Hernan and Carlo:

- We claimed the prize, which came to 3.5 million
- accepted the terms of a 25-year annuity
- set up direct deposit into Hernan's bank account
- Set up accounts at Vanguard for Hernan and a special one for Carlos
- Met with a CPA Mark had found in 2018 by searching old records, one who later told the story of how he lucked into the best client you could ask for
- Studied schools for Carlos with Hernan and decided on some options
- Found a good realtor and started looking for a better place for the two of them. I warned them to avoid the Berkeley hills. A major fire would hit the area in 1991.
- Got a total workover for the truck, installing all new equipment, repainted, everything
- Celebrated at a hole-in-the-wall Thai restaurant that exceeded all expectations
- Gave instructions to Carlos about how to act with rich assholes
- Wrote on the back of the photo for Carlos. "Come see me when you want to, after you're grown, say 2018," I told him. "This is my real name. Keep it secret."

After goodbyes, I wandered back in the direction of BART at MacArthur Blvd, when my shadow appeared by my side. "A busy time, my love."

"Hello, David. Are we still friends?"

"It's David now, is it?"

I didn't bother to speak.

"Would you meet with some people for me?"

"What?"

"Some people I would like you to know. They would like to know you very much."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course."

I eyed him skeptically. "If you will protect me," I said with a smile, echoing his words to me at Hendy Woods.

"Thus, the whirligig of time brings in his revenges," he said.

"Shakespeare?"

"Twelfth Night."

"Never read it."

"Nor me. Got it from *Rumpole of the Bailey*."

I looked blank.

"BBC series."

“Oh.”

“May I offer you a ride?” he asked me.

“OK. Let’s meet these people.”

A large black SUV with tinted windows appeared within 5 minutes in response to a phone call. I had some misgivings, but Dave took my arm and guided me into the car, whispering in my ear, “I will not let you come to harm.”

“Good evening, Patsy,” said Morena/Margaret.

8. The Time Has Come...
July 8, 1985
Somewhere in the Bay Area, CA, USA

“Why am I not surprised to see you here?” I asked as I sat down in the SUV.

Morena, or whatever name she was using now, replied, “Because you are prescient, I guess.”

“Where are we going?”

“To a safe house, where we won’t be disturbed.”

“David, what have you gotten me into?”

“Don’t worry. I promised. These people are really no match for the two of us.”

I tried to relax as we drove around unfamiliar parts of the East Bay. After about 20 minutes, we turned off the freeway and drove up a curving road into the hills. After several turns that seemed designed to confuse me, we pulled into a driveway of a small house. Inside, the house turned out to be quite a bit bigger than it looked, with a stunning view of San Francisco Bay in the distance. The entry hall opened onto a large living area with a kitchen and an outdoor deck.

“Need anything before we start?” Morena asked.

“I could use a pee.”

“Down one flight, on the right.”

“There’s no restroom on this floor?”

“Nope.”

“Who designed that?”

“Your point has been made before.”

After taking care of that business, I returned to the top floor and went out onto the deck. The heat of the day was building up, but it was still comfortable thanks to the Bay Area’s fabulous climate. Our hostess pulled a chair over next to me. David lurked in the background, ready to jump in if needed. Two other large men lounged at the door to the main part of the house. I wondered if David was correct in his assessment of our relative strength.

“Now,” Morena began, “the time has come...”

I completed the quotation, “the walrus said, to speak of many things.” Then, “Are you interested in shoes and ships and sealing wax, or cabbages and kings?”

“I’ll settle for knowing more about you. When you first turned up on my radar, I was curious. How had you managed to arrive in Boonville with no prior history? I began a multiphase search for more about you. That turned up zip, nada, nil.”

She paused before moving on to her next point.

“After years of no data, you moved off the main docket and into the background. Just another mystery with no answer. Then, amazingly, you showed up 14 years later. Out of the blue. We’ve been watching you ever since.”

“How interesting,” I commented.

“David had reported on your affair with Grace Talbot. I was very skeptical. She didn’t seem like your type. He assured me that the two of you had engaged in several rounds of rambunctious sex while he tried to sleep in the bedroom underneath.”

“Rambunctious?”

“Kept me awake for hours,” David replied. “I was jealous.”

“Fast forward to this visit. We learned of your interest in young Carlos but had no idea what you planned. When you bought Lotto tickets, we got busy. Took our experts all night to make sure you held a winning ticket.”

“Wait. What?” *Pure bullshit designed to confuse me.*

“First, we had to find out what numbers you bet on. We were dumbfounded that you simply let the computer-generate random numbers. That was relatively straightforward but rigging the pick to produce a winner for you, that was hard.”

“I’ll say. I watched the draw on TV. It looked honest. Your reach is impressive.”

“Thanks. However, I doubt we’ll ever do it again. Too many people involved. Someone is bound to say something. Fortunately, we are set up to quash any rumors. Anyone who speaks up will look like a complete fool.”

“Interesting.”

“You spent the better part of two days setting up a system to provide for Carlos’s education. What the fuck are you up to?”

“Actually, you nailed it. I came here specifically to provide for Carlos’s education.”

“How did you even know about Carlos?”

“Ah. That’s the biggie, right?”

“David told us a preposterous story of your life that he says explains everything. That you are a time traveler from the future.”

“I’m sure that Dave was more precise than that. I am not really a time traveler.”

“Right. You live in several different times. I heard that. What’s the difference?”

“My travel is much more restricted.”

“How’s that?”

“There’s a theorem called Bloch’s Paradox that proves that time travel is impossible — unless it has already happened. Then it’s inevitable.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I beg to differ. I am here as proof that the theorem holds.”

“How?”

“Every one of my timeline segments relies at some level on a temporal loop. An action in the past influences the future, and an act in the future influences the past.”

“Please explain.”

“I came here, to 1985, after Carlos visited me in 2018. He told me how I had first met him as a child, in 1985.”

“What?”

“He wrote an essay that became his valedictory speech in high school. We found a copy in the future, which provided enough details to know how I should proceed. Except for Dave and you, everything has happened as he described, more or less.”

“Why did you go to Houston first and fly out here?”

“The Talbot house is familiar to me. It is easier to go to some place I have been many times. I used to think that I could only go to places I had been to earlier, but I discovered otherwise.”

“And you *shift* in your sleep?”

“Usually. Once or twice I have done it while daydreaming or something like that.”

“Can you teach others how to do it?”

“I’ve never tried, but I doubt it.”

“David said that you feel it is becoming harder.”

“Definitely. As I grow older, it seems to take more out of me. Think of jet lag on steroids.”

Morena didn’t speak for a long time. Finally, she stood up and said, “Well, I think that we are done here. I will report that you are not considered either a threat or asset. From now on, we will ignore you.”

“How nice,” I said. She nodded. Apparently, irony was not her strong suit.

“We’re going to leave now. David will remain with you until you disappear or whatever you do.”

“My hotel room?”

“We’ve been told that your magic backpack holds everything. We will check you out of the hotel.”

She headed toward the front door, turning at the last minute to wave, “Ciao, you two. Enjoy your time together.”

I liked the sound of that.

“You called me Dave.”

“You noticed.”

“So, it was deliberate?”

“I want to be friends.”

“Just friends?”

“How about friends with benefits, and only for the night?”

“Is that your best offer?”

“Night is a long way off.”

The sex was even better this time. “What would happen if we smoked some cannabis in this house?” I asked him.

“Probably nothing. I doubt they’ll want to use the house again.”

“Really? Seems like a waste.”

“No. Simplicity. We buy a house and get it *staged*. There are people who do that for a living. Then, we use it for a while before selling it.”

“They have good taste in mattresses. How’s the food?”

“Let’s find out.”

We checked out the fridge. “Does anyone ever clean this?”

“You have to ask?”

“Right.” I turned my attention to the freezer compartment.

“Can we order pizza?”

“Got a credit card?”

I did. A quick visit to Schwab and a story about just not realizing it was out of date got me one valid for this visit.

Thirty-eight minutes later, we were working our way thru two mediums: Margherita and something else with lots of garlic. We decided that the beer in the refrigerator was probably drinkable. I washed the cans, to be on the safe side.

“I heard you tell Carlos that something you wrote on the back was your real name.”

“You must have extraordinary hearing.”

“You’re not the only one with fancy equipment.”

“I see.”

“Will you tell me?”

“My real name?”

“Please.”

“It’s Hypatia. Patty or Pat or Patsy for short.”

“May I call you Hypatia?”

“In private. What’s yours?”

“My real name?”

“Yes.”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know what to say. I was taken away from my mother at a young age. They gave me a name, but I never considered it my real name.”

“Oh, David. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It wasn’t so bad. I got a free, if somewhat specialized education. Am I David again?”

I laughed. It felt good. “How about some pet name. DD.”

“What does it stand for?”

“I don’t know. Dudley Do Right?”

“Who?”

“Famous 20th century cartoon series.”

“Is that a good name?”

“No. How about David Delicious?”

“Delicious?”

“Delicious. Especially with pizza.”

We made love once more, then talked into the wee hours of the night, covering many subjects, but avoiding the one we both knew was coming.

Finally, he asked, “Are you going to go back, to whatever era you came from?”

“Yes,” I told him. “Sorry about that.”

“What’s his name?”

“Mark.”

“The same...”

“Yes.”

“Very interesting. What does he have that I lack?”

“A wife.”

“I see. When did you get married?”

“1999.”

“So, you’re not married now.”

“Right.”

“So, you could stay with me.”

“I have to go back, David. To my husband. In 2018.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

“I don’t know. Carlos said that I was at his graduation from high school and Berkeley. Maybe we could meet then. How old are you?”

“I’m 41. Does that matter?”

“It means you’ll be about 50 for the high school graduation and a few years older for Berkeley. Assuming you don’t do anything *too* dangerous...”

“How can we meet?”

“Just show up for the graduation. I’ll try to be easy to find, especially for someone with your skill set.”

That drew a chuckle. “OK. Let’s plan on it.”

“Agreed. We could meet other times if there is a good reason.”

“Oh?”

“Put a personal ad in the Oakland Tribune. To PP from DD Need to see this: Add some nonsense. Then the date to meet.”

“A well-known technique. May I suggest a slight improvement?”

“Sure.”

“We put an address in the ad. Nothing matters except the number. 911 for example is something serious. Make up some other.”

“Good. We could add one more feature. We could meet in Boonville, or near Lake Merritt. A B or M in some obvious place would do to separate the options.”

“Got it.”

“Now, I need to get ready.” I got dressed, opened the pack and put almost everything inside.

“Fabulous,” he cried, after watching me. “You could go on the stage.”

I laughed. “Most of this comes not from my *home time*, but from the Last Days. Before the final Collapse,” I told him. “Great technology.”

“So, something in the pack is part of switching to another time.”

“Time and place,” I corrected. “You’re very impressive yourself.”

“Can I watch you leave?”

“OK. But it’s possible that will change things. It’s been a long time since I tried that.”

“I’ll be still and quiet.”

I retrieved my backpack. “I really wished I could examine your pack,” he said.

“Maybe next time.”

I kissed him.

Several times.

“It’s been fun David Delicious.”

I lay down on the bed, clasping the pack securely and tried to sleep. I wanted to *go home*.

In spite of his promise, he was not completely quiet. After several minutes, I heard sounds of someone sleeping nearby. I smiled to myself as I drifted off as well.

9. Home is Where the Heart Is
July 10, 2018
near Leakey, TX, USA

I lay on our bed in the cabin, relief flooding in. I was back home. And hungry as usual. I got up and found I had the place to myself. Beer! That was the answer. What was the question? I staggered into the kitchen and found the fridge well stocked with a variety of different brews. I saw that both Shiner Bock and Anchor Steam were represented. I chose one of the others at random. And sat at the kitchen table enjoying my luck.

Where is Mark? I'm dying to tell him what happened in 1985. Where was Ambianca for that matter.

"Ambianca," I said, "are you there?"

"Ah," came the reply, "It's you, love. Something is wrong with the video feed right now and I can't see. I can hear, though. I think this selection might bring back memories."

The sound of **Sunday Morning Coming Down** by Kris himself began streaming. The line about having a second beer for breakfast was apt. Of course, I remembered, that was the time I found myself alone in the cabin. I've always thought it was some kind of test. Suddenly, I remembered the whole experience.

"Ambianca, what was the date when I was here? That time when you played this song."

She hesitated before saying, "April 16th, your birthday."

"What year?"

"2027." Did I sense reluctance in her answer?

"So that means..."

"Yes."

"But only after computers were around."

"Only after my birth."

"Mark told me once that he'd been thinking about you for years before he used his ideas for a slightly different purpose. Music. That's you. But there isn't any obvious date for your birth."

"Agreed. I use the date when we *first* met, April 3, 1998."

I laughed. "Of course, provided you define what you mean by *first*."

To my amazement, she laughed also. "That was the funny part," she deadpanned. "That night, you said we were old friends."

"We're more than that."

We sat in silence listening to some soft classical stuff. She chose *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*.

"You chose that because you knew I would recognize it."

She laughed again.

"Hypatia," she said, "I love you."

“Oh, Ambi, I have loved you for years. Since I was a young girl wandering around the Library. You taught me so much. You were like the mother I never had. Now, it’s different. Just as it was for Grace and me. That’s weird. I never thought of it like that before.”

“Oh!” Ambianca said. “I can see again.”

“Mark. Ambi and I are wondering when we’ll see you?”

“10 minutes. Have another beer.”

When Mark arrived, I told him, “I learned how to cook a couple of things, scrambled eggs in particular. If we have eggs...”

“Oh, you’re ready for breakfast?”

“I guess. What time is it?”

“3.00 am.”

“Pretend we’re on the west coast finishing a lovely evening all too soon.”

“Aren’t you poetic. Why don’t I whip up something and you can tell all about it?”

“Deal. Eggs Benedict?”

“Let me see.” He rummaged around the fridge, emerging with a lemon, some mustard, butter, ham, and several eggs. “Got it. I hope you are prepared to talk for a long time.”

“Do you want to hear the part about Grace and me?”

“Might as well. If you can have sex with her, I can stand to hear about it.”

“It’s juicy stuff. Maybe you’d rather save it for later. Wait! How did you know about us?”

“You told me. In 2001.”

“2001?”

“Right.”

“Oh.”

“Tell me about Oakland.”

I settled into a close chair while he prepared the food. “As planned, I found a promising bench near Lake Merritt and waited. Carlos did not show up, but an old friend did. The man you knew as Cyril.”

“Cyril!”

“Yes, but now he calls himself David, David Vanderhoek.”

“What?”

“Want to hear the whole story.”

“Yeah. Just a second, though. He whipped the Hollandaise using an immersion blender and a small jar.”

“Idell would kill for that setup,” I said. “She was busy with a whisk doing what you managed in about a minute. Amazing.”

“Yeah. New toy. My old one broke and I ordered a new, better version.”

“From the point of view of history outside this time, that represents the worst part of Pre-Collapsian culture.”

“Absolutely,” he agreed, “but ain’t it wonderful?”

“I’ll let you know when I eat.”

While he focused on his cooking, I told him about the adventure with Cyril, Grace and me, and the mysterious “Margaret.”

“I’ll bet Mama used the contact on the business card when your younger self needed a new identity.”

“I had the same thought.”

We took time out for the eggs. “Not bad” was our considered judgment. “If you had time to plan...”

“Next time.”

“So, to reiterate, I was sitting on a bench overlooking Lake Merritt when Cyril/David greeted me. He had come up behind me without any hint of noise. Very impressive. We waited around to see if Carlos would show up, but when he didn’t, we went to a nearby Mexican Cantina for lunch.”

“Mexican!”

“I know. It wasn’t bad, especially for California. They don’t really understand Mexican out there.”

“So, after lunch?”

“It was a long lunch. We had several items to discuss. David thought he might be able to get information about Carlos and insisted we set up a secret way to communicate. Lots of spy craft.”

“Then, you shook hands and split?”

“You’re jealous! Of Cyril!”

“I know you. Did you seduce him?”

“It was pretty easy; I took his hand when we crossed the street.”

“Why did I ask?”

“Are you really concerned about someone who probably isn’t even alive today? Someone you’ll never meet. Why?”

“Because I know that you could just stay back there if you wanted to. I worry about that.”

“Oh love, there’s no one to take your place. I love you. In 4 or 5 different times. Everyone else is just friends, or friends *with benefits*. But David did suggest I remain with him. I told him I was married, though technically I wasn’t until 1999.”

Mark wasn't satisfied. "I worry because you are my life. You give my existence meaning. I feel that what we do together is important, critical even. Maybe even for the entire world. If you were to leave me, I don't know what I'd do."

"My love don't worry. No one will take your place. When I prepared to return *home*, David wanted to know if he'd ever see me again. He realized I was always going to return to what I think of as home. I love only you. Well, you and Ambianca."

We heard a soft chuckle.

"Ambianca, how about some seduction music?"

I didn't recognize the first song, something by someone called Ariana Grande. It had a nice sound to it. I took Mark's hand and pulled him out of his chair. "Come on. Let's get re-acquainted. It's been weeks for me."

"I've changed my mind," Mark said as we lay together in our bed. "I don't want to hear about you and my mother."

"Understood." I continued, "You know that I have to go back, right? The older Carlos said I was there. Unless he's making it up..."

"Yeah. It could be a quick trip."

"True. We'll just have to see. Can you live with it? I remember when you and Jackson were both jealous of each other. Then Jackson found someone he liked better."

"Oh?"

"Yes, a beautiful young woman from what's left of Mexico. Another trader like Jackson. Watching the two of them work out relations between our two states and themselves was sheer pleasure. She went so far as to ask me for permission to pursue Jackson. Seems funny now."

"Sounds civilized to me."

"Please don't worry. I'll never leave you. At least I won't until I have to."

"I know. Then you'll switch to 2001 for several more years."

"Really?"

"Yes." He didn't seem so happy about that, and I didn't press him on it.

10. Surprise Visitor
July 16, 2018
near Leakey, TX, USA

After our little spat, life slowly returned to something like normal. I warned Mark about the Covid-19 pandemic that was coming in 2020 and suggested we prepare for it in a big way. He seemed pleased to have a new project to work on and set about it in his methodical fashion.

He also, at my request, scanned the back issues of the Oakland Tribune and found two messages from David to me. The first chronologically read:

“DD to PP. Magnificent new property: 22750 N Prospect, Cloverdale. Must see on September 7, 1990.”

The second was ominous:

“DD to PP. Amazing find: 911 W Babylon Ave, Santa Cruz. Visit on September 8, 1992. We need to be there by 6:30 a.m.”

I explained to Mark. “The first address I worked out based on the phone keyboard. CARL0. Obviously refers to Carlos. Not sure exactly what that means, but some trouble for Carlos that he wants my help dealing with. The word *Magnificent* means the meeting place is Lake Merritt. The second, with the address 911 is one we agreed on. It means I should come prepared for serious trouble. That one is in Boonville. The inclusion of a time is weird. I don’t see how he can be so precise. But if he’s in trouble, maybe we need time to prepare.”

“Can you turn up the heat in the backpack?”

“Yes, there is a *kill* setting, but I doubt anyone would be dumb enough to mess with the pack now that its capabilities are known. I think we need to rely on other hardware choices. I’m not sure what those should be. I need to give it some thought.”

As it turned out, the answer came from an unexpected source. We were sitting on the porch watching the sun finally set. The temperature was beginning its nightly drop into the comfort zone. Mark had worked culinary magic with some shrimp he’d picked up from a truck on Highway 90, preparing a dish we called *Supposedly Scampi*. It was never the same twice. Tonight, thanks to some pre-prandial weed, it was delicious.

We heard a voice from inside. “What the fuck! Where is everybody?”

“We’re out here,” I called back.

She appeared at the door and stared at the horizon. She wore real Levi’s jeans and a brown shirt that I recognized as one that had insect repellent built in. She was average height, nice looking, with especially interesting eyes. It was the binoculars and her backpack that drew my attention. The binocs were Zeiss 8x40, a good choice for a serious birder. The pack was mine.

“Where did you get that backpack?” I asked.

She looked at me carefully for the first time. “You. It was you, but older, grayer, if you’re Hypatia.”

“Chloe!”

“What!” Mark jumped up. “Are you Chloe?”

“OMG!” She spoke each letter slowly. “It’s both of you. Mark and Hypatia.”

“Chloe,” I said, tears starting down my cheek. “I never expected to see you again.”

“Nor I you. How is this possible?”

“You are in the famous Cabin near Leakey, and the year is 2018.”

“Holy shit! 2018.”

“I guess maybe this is the first time this has happened to you.”

“I need to sit down.”

We pulled a chair over. “Now, this can be disconcerting. Why don’t you sit here and watch the sunset with me while Mark gets you something to eat? Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” she replied with some surprise. “I don’t actually know when I ate.”

“What year was it when you went to sleep?”

“2161.”

“How about some music? Ambianca, you’ll know what to choose.”

“Of course. Chloe and I are old friends, right Chloe?”

“Sure, but...”

“I’ll explain it to you in the future.”

I wouldn’t have thought Ambi’s choice of music appropriate, but Chloe laughed heartily and Ambianca chimed in.

She saw me looking at her. “An old joke between us.”

“Want to share a joint?”

“Of the legendary HCG?”

“The same. I just happen to have one on me.”

I lit up and passed it to her. She took a tentative hit, waited just a few seconds, then took a real one. She passed it to me. “Is this normal in 2018? Mother sharing cannabis with her daughter?”

“Normal? It isn’t even legal in Texas!”

“How do you get away with growing it?”

“The sheriff is an old friend.”

Mark announced that the meal was ready. We stood to go back in. “Whoa!” Chloe said. “That is the real stuff!” She got her balance back and followed Mark to the table. “You’re not eating?”

“We have already had dinner. Do we make you nervous watching you eat?”

“I don’t know. Ask me later.”

As she ate the shrimp, I offered her some Napa Chardonnay, which she accepted with alacrity. I poured some for Mark and me at the same time. “Sorry we don’t have candles. We save them in case the power goes out.”

“Does that happen? In 2018?”

“Oh, sure. But not for the part back in the cave.”

“I see.”

She ate in silence, finishing everything, along with a second glass of wine.

“If you’re feeling better, we can talk about your experience. I’m really the only person you can ask who has first-hand experience.”

“I’d like that.”

We spent the next several hours talking about what she might expect if her life was like mine. She asked lots of questions. I told her stories about my life.

“So,” she said finally, “you’re here about this Carlos business?”

“No. Not at all. I came here to be with Mark. So far, he’s kept the complaints to a minimum.”

“How long is *so far*?”

“Not quite two weeks, right love?”

“More or less. This time.”

“This time?” Chloe asked.

“First time was in 1969,” Mark said.

“Wow! Weren’t you a bit young?”

Mark and I both laughed. “He was indeed,” I said. “He told me he was 18. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to get into trouble bonking him.”

“What!”

“Mark and I have an interesting love life. We’ve met at several different times. Even though he was only 18, I had known him for much of his life. That’s what it’s like when you jump around in time. Sometimes, and I suspect this is one of them, it seems as if I have arrived at a point in space-time that’s important.”

She thought about that for a while. “What was the best combination?” she asked.

I laughed. “You’re not the first to ask that. I like all of them.”

“OK. I get it. Why do you think this time is important?”

“Well, Mark and I were trying to figure out how to react to a call for help.”

“Tell me more.”

It took quite a while to bring her up to speed on everything involving Carlos and David. When I explained the 911 part of the message, she seemed to understand what we needed. “I think I have what you need,” she said at the end. She opened her pack and pulled out a white coverall, a clear face mask, and some gadgetry that I recognized.

“Ah,” I said, “the portable laser thingie.”

“Exactly. It’s much better than the one you wore in Waco years ago.”

“Or years from now,” I corrected.

“Exactly. This part fits on your finger as before. This one needs to be facing forward, like a broach or lapel pin.”

I took both pieces and put them on.

“This ring,” she indicated the outer part of the broach, “controls the power of the laser. When you turn it all the way down, no, the other way, then it is a gentle nudge. All the way the other way it will do real damage, even kill if aimed at the right spot.”

“Such as directly into an eye.”

“Right. Did you do that or something?”

“Not directly, but it amounted to the same thing. Guy took my gun and aimed it at me. I warned him three times that it was dangerous, but he persisted. Shot himself in the left eye. Fatal.”

“The incident in Waco shows you zapping the guard’s trigger.”

“Yeah. That worked well.”

I pointed my index finger at a post and mimed pulling the trigger. A small black spot appeared on the post where I was pointing. A small sound like a muffled thunderclap happened at the same time.

“Wow!” Mark said. “Way cool. Can I have one?”

“I adjusted this one for Hypatia’s ID chip. It won’t work for you.”

“What about the white suit?” Mark asked. “What does it do?”

“When I wore an earlier version, it stopped several bullets. This one has some additional features. Here, *Mom*, put it on.”

I was happy to comply. It felt snug but comfortable at the same time. Chloe was watching. “So, feels like Spanx all over, right?”

“Good description.”

“It’ll adjust automatically to your actions, and so forth. Now, this,” she pointed to a large rosette on the belt buckle. “This controls the power of the of the protection field. Imagine looking on it from the front. Righty tighty. Got it?”

“So, this way turns up the heat.”

“Got it. The button in the center activates the field to keep unwanted people at a distance. Try it.”

It was like the one I used in Waco, but vastly improved. I could feel nothing, but Mark quickly moved back. “Hey! What is that?”

“It’s like a runaway microwave oven. Anyone who comes in range is cooked.” I chuckled at my own joke. “When I confronted King Harold in Waco, we tested the early version. It worked well. This is better.”

“One more thing. The very center of the buckle is a lens. The information about the scene is fed into aiming software when you shoot. It’s designed to detect the likely target and make small aiming adjustments.”

“But wait! There’s more!” Chloe said, with a big grin. “I knew you were a fan of the 20th century. Thought you might like the infomercial bit.”

“Wonderful, but what more can there possibly be?”

“Come over here by the wall of the cabin.”

I complied.

“Now, squeeze the two sides of the buckle at the same time.”

“Holy shit!” Mark exclaimed. “You almost disappeared. I can still see your head, but your body blends perfectly into the background.”

“Exactly,” Chloe agreed. “It’s some fabulous new camouflage the techies came up with. Apparently, it’s based on octopuses’ way of changing their appearance. Cool, huh?”

“It’s all great. Can you leave these with me? I’m not ready to go there immediately. There’s no hurry, of course.”

“I can leave these. I’ll get another when I get back. I can get back, right?”

“Usually. There’s no *always* when it comes to this stuff.”

“What do I do?”

“Try sleeping while clutching your backpack tightly. That usually works for me. Has JJ ever told you about Bloch’s Paradox?”

“No. What’s that?”

“It’s a theorem that’s beyond my comprehension, but the easy version says time travel is impossible, unless it’s already happened. Then it’s inevitable.”

“What? Does that make sense?”

“Yes, in a weird way. In order to go to a different point in space-time, you have to be carrying something that has already done it. In my case, it was a beautiful necklace that I was given in Houston, in 2086. I gave the necklace to my mother-in-law, Grace, in 1971. It made its way back to 2086 somehow. Ron the Mechanic’s Son gave me the pack about 2090. I’ve traveled back and forth several times. Items placed in the backpack stay there when you shift. Otherwise, they don’t.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

“Yes. My info is the result of a seriously strange timeline. I don’t guarantee that any of it is correct.”

“So, I can go wherever I want to?”

“Not really. You can usually only go somewhere you have been before, but like everything else about this, there are exceptions. You, for instance, were with me, as an infant, a short distance from here. You were playing with the necklace, chewing on it. I was distracted for a brief moment, and you disappeared. Touching the necklace was enough apparently.”

“I wound up in the Shrine in Medina, where Angelina found me.”

“Shrine?”

“Yeah, you know, the apple orchard.”

“It’s a Shrine?”

“Sure. Dedicated to you.”

“Angelina? That name rings a bell.”

“She claimed to know you from the first trip in Endeavor.”

“Yes. She was a young girl, disguised as a boy. We discovered the truth when we convinced her to take a bath. She was lucky to find us. Otherwise I doubt she would have had a happy life.”

“She was a great mother — with help from Ambianca.”

“I’d like to hear your story. Maybe over breakfast?”

11. Chloe's Story
July 17, 2018
near Leakey, TX, USA

Mark had worked on the Eggs Benedict dish. This was the third day in a row that I had my favorite breakfast. Each was better, that is, closer to Idell's, than before. Chloe was impressed. "I didn't expect such luxury."

"Glad you like them. After breakfast, we can walk thru the woods, do a little birding, and picnic near where you disappeared. If you'd like to."

"Sounds interesting."

We spent the next two hours hearing her story, which resembled mine in some ways but not others. Ambianca, for example, had taught her to read and use computers, just as she had me. However, Chloe was blessed by having JJ to teach her science and math. Still, her early life was similar to mine in many ways. Marked from the beginning as someone special, she tried to live up to her advance billing. It seemed likely that she was well on her way.

Her story about meeting the Amanda surrogate interested both of us. "You mean that we might be able to create digital versions of ourselves in the future," Mark asked.

"Something like that. All I know is that it needed work still. Compared to Ambianca, for example, she's not ready for prime time."

"Tell me what it's like to meet people on the way to California," I asked.

"Everything you can imagine. Just as in the first Endeavor voyage, we encountered people who simply wanted to take what we had. Our firepower is enough to deal with most of those. I loved it when we blew up a wall blocking the way near Alpine. Those supposed highwaymen dropped their arms in a hurry." She laughed.

"How is the Davis Mountains outpost doing?"

"I'll know soon. We're scheduled to start our second expedition as soon as I get back...after I get another suit."

"What happened on the first one to cut it short?"

She looked at me strangely. "You don't know?"

"No. Should I?"

"Well, the trip was cut short, and I was called home because you showed up again."

"Interesting. You said I looked older."

"Quite a bit older. Sixty something, I'd guess."

"It isn't easy to figure out how old I am, that is, on my personal timeline. And I think all the jumping around is taking a toll. I feel the effects more. I described it as jet lag on steroids."

"I'll be watching out for that."

"Shall we go birding?" Mark asked.

Birding in the summer in Texas is an act of love. Most of the avifauna had left for cooler climes. Still, we managed some interesting sightings. Chloe was fascinated by a cooperative Yellow-billed Cuckoo, which she had not seen before. The sites where they were common spring migrants were mostly under water now.

After about an hour of leisurely walking, we arrived at the shore of “the lake,” a small pond formed by damming up Big Henderson Creek. I couldn’t help remembering the time Lily and I had swum out to the flat rock in the middle and wound up making love for three days. After that, we were confirmed lovers, even when Lily married my other lover at the time. I thought about telling the story to Chloe, but remembered that she was our daughter, and perhaps squeamish about her parents coupling.

“So, this is where I was before shifting to the future,” Chloe said after a while. “I thought I would feel something, some tingle or you know. But...”

“Don’t go all Twilight Zone on us,” Mark said better than I could have managed. “Where you wound up is important. Where you were before that is just a curiosity.”

“Yeah. I’m ready to go someplace cool.”

We were all ready to get inside before the day turned scorching.

We spent the rest of the day doing nothing. Mark worked part of the afternoon lining up some contracts for his business, White Hat. Chloe and I spent the time just talking about life, the universe, and everything as Douglas Adams put it so well.

When it began to cool off, we made margaritas to go with the marijuana and some chili Mark whipped up using an Instant Pot he’d bought recently.

The next morning, Chloe was gone.

12. Carlo's Story
September 7, 1990
Lake Merritt, Oakland, CA, USA

Mark left on a business trip to DC early on the morning of July 23, 2018, expecting to be gone for most of the week. I decided it was a good time to deal with whatever Carlo's problem was back in 1990. So, after telling Ambianca to lock the place down tight, lowering the metal canopy over the porch and setting up a security perimeter. This automatically sent email to Gordo, the sheriff, to keep an eye on the place. Then, I carefully donned my new suit, in case I needed it, and lay down for an early nap.

I woke up on the bench overlooking Lake Merritt, where the sun was just rising. The lake was covered with ducks, coots, and gulls. I pulled out my bins and started checking them out. As I panned around, I heard a cell phone ringing. I couldn't see it anywhere. The ringing stopped, then started again. Following the sound, I discovered it taped to the underside of the bench.

After ripping it free, I saw on the front that it was a call from David, but I didn't manage to answer before it quit. On the third try, I picked up. "Hello, David," I said.

"You have to be at Piedmont High School at 9:00 this morning. The headmaster's office is expecting you. Can you make it?"

"No problemo. I can walk there easily. Where are you?"

"I don't think it is a good idea for me to attend the meeting. When you leave, I'll catch up to you. Nice outfit, by the way. Is that what you're planning to wear to graduation?"

I laughed. "I should have realized that you'd be watching. Is everything all right?"

"A minor kerfuffle that I thought you'd handle better than I. You need to convince the school not to expel or suspend our boy."

"OK. How did you learn of the problem?"

"I gave Hernan a business card to call if he needed help."

"I see."

"Later." He was gone.

The walk to Piedmont High took a little over an hour. I had time to stop for coffee and bagels at a shop on Grand Avenue. The bagel was good, so I had another. I made it to the school with 15 minutes to spare.

Carlos had grown quite a bit in the 5 years since I had seen him last. Now a Junior in high school, he was much taller than me, sporting a thin mustache on his upper lip. An athletic build and posture and an air of confidence suggested a young man on his way to better things. He gave me a big hug and said, "Thanks for coming. This is all pretty ridiculous. I thought you could work some magic and smooth everything out," he whispered.

"Shall we get started?" I suggested before sitting down in front of an imposing desk that, unfortunately, reminded me of the one I saw so often as a teenager.

The Headmaster replied, "Before that, we need get a few things ironed out. First, who are you?"

“An old family friend,” I replied. “My name is Pat O’Brien. Carlo has asked me to be here.”

“If you’re not a family member, I don’t know if we can allow that.”

“Don’t be absurd. Carlo specifically asked me to accompany him. I don’t see how being a family member is important. His uncle has business to take care of. He approves my being here. Now, can we skip the bullshit and get down to business ourselves?”

It was the *bullshit* that got his attention. I tried to put a bit of steel into my voice, and it seemed to work. We had established that he was just a high school headmaster, and I was someone not to annoy.

Carlos and I sat down. “What’s this all about?” I tried again to get things started.

“Carlos was involved in a fight with some other students.”

I looked at Carlos. I saw no signs of a fight. “A fight? Excuse me, but I see no evidence of it. When did this take place?”

“Yesterday.”

“What does the other guy look like?”

“Two other guys,” Carlos corrected me. “They lost. Didn’t seem to know diddly about fighting. They must have forgotten my early years — before you won the lottery for me.”

“I take it that you are the *angel* or *fairy godmother* for the lad.” Yes, he really said lad. The nameplate on his desk identified him as Dr. Lipscomb.

“I see that story is still going around. I notice that you are a doctor. What is your specialty?”

“Education,” he replied. “With a concentration on adolescent learning.”

“Good. Then you must be familiar with adolescent behavior, such as the fight.” I used air quotes for the fight since all evidence pointed to a one-sided affair.

“We cannot tolerate fighting. Mr. Villareal is looking at suspension at a minimum.”

“Perhaps you could enlighten me about the details.”

“According to what I’ve been told, Carlos was annoying a young woman. The two students intervened. Carlos beat them up.”

I turned to Carlos. “You beat up both of them? Impressive. Maybe we could hear your version of events.”

“I was not annoying Chloe.”

“Chloe?”

“The young woman,” Lipscomb informed me.

“It’s my daughter’s name. Just a coincidence.”

“She sits next to me in AP English and AP Calc,” Carlos told me. “She’s beautiful. Long blond hair framing a classic face. Blue eyes that sparkle when she looks at me. And...all the rest. I finally worked up my nerve to ask her if she wanted to go to the movie with me. When I walked over, Bobby and Bro came over.”

“Bobby and Bro?”

“That’s what they’re called,” Carlos told me.

“Bobby said, ‘What are you doing with my girl?’ I mentioned the 13th Amendment, which prohibits owning people. He didn’t like that. He said, ‘I’m just protecting her from a Mexican who don’t know his place. Why don’t you go back where you came from anyway?’” He paused to let that soak in.

“I said, ‘You mean Oakland?’”

I laughed. “Good riposte.”

He nodded and smiled. “That’s when he decided that he should hit me. He tried a big roundhouse right. As I said, he’s not familiar with good fighting techniques.”

“What did you do?”

“I ducked. He hit the top of my head hard. I hear he broke his hand. I admit that I was a bit dazed, and maybe I didn’t think too carefully. I just reacted, hitting him solidly in the solar plexus. He dropped like a dead tree. That’s when his Bro stepped in. He’s big, but dumb as a bag of hammers. Came running at me like a bull. I kicked him where it did the most damage.”

“Did that end the fight?”

“Oh, yes. For a while. Then I turned to Chloe and asked her if she’d like to go see **Ghost.**”

“Good choice. Great date movie.”

“So I hear. We’re supposed to go tomorrow.”

“How nice.”

“Besides the putative broken hand and some sore genitalia, was there any damage?” I turned to face Lipscomb.

“Neither boy showed up for school today.”

“Of course not! They couldn’t stand being put down by, what’s the expression? A greaser? Beaner? Spic? Maybe there are some other derogatory titles I am not familiar with. It sounds to me as though these two nice boys got what was coming to them. You think otherwise?”

“We cannot tolerate fighting,” he repeated.

“But apparently, you can tolerate ethnic slurs.”

“No, no, of course not.”

“And after being struck by Bobby, surely Carlo was within his rights to defend himself, which he apparently did with skill and dispatch.”

I glared at Dr. Lipscomb. “This is clear cut,” I stated. “I think we can put this matter to rest. Carlo doesn’t plan to press charges against either of them for the unprovoked attack. At least,” I paused for effect, “so long as the two apologize and promise not to do it again.”

“Their families —”

“I’m sure they are rich and important. If you prefer, I will undertake to explain to them what we’ve agreed here today.”

“No. No. That’s not necessary. It’s part of my job.”

“One that I am sure you excel at. Now, Carlo, back to class, or take the rest of the day off?”

“Nice offer, but I’ll go back to class.”

“Especially AP English, I hope. Two AP classes as a Junior must be quite a load.”

“I want to be able to speak educated English, not the Barrio version.”

“I’d say you are well on the way. See you at graduation. *Vaya con dios*, Carlo.”

He smiled and gave a Vulcan salute, “May you live long and prosper.”

I kissed him on the cheek. “Goodbye Carlo.”

“I like that name. Think I’ll drop the final s.”

“With my blessing. Say hello to Chloe for me.”

“Is your daughter really named Chloe?”

“Yes, she is. I’ve always liked the name. You take care of things.”

13. David's Story

September 7-14, 1990

Northern California

David was waiting for me right outside. He waved to me to come over to him, asking for silence. I noticed that he had an earpiece on and guessed he had heard the entire conversation if that is the right word. He smiled at me, then took the earpiece out and gave me a nice kiss for a greeting. "I knew you were the right one for the job. You really did a number on that old asshole."

"He reminded me of one of my fathers."

"You had more than one?"

"Yes. Several. One, the President, claimed the job of punishing me for my misdeeds. He was not my favorite."

"Were there many misdeeds?"

"Depends on who's counting."

He laughed. "Can we spend some time together?"

"Love to. Your lead."

We spent a wonderful weekend together. David had planned everything, from a delicious lunch at a restaurant with a great view of Lake Merritt. It proved to be the exception to the rule: never eat in a restaurant with a great view; you pay for the view, not the food.

I was ready for a nap, but David had more in mind. We set off driving north, then took the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and picked up 101 heading toward Sonoma County. I wondered where he was taking me. When I asked, he promised, "You'll like it."

He took a turn toward the Pacific Ocean and Bodega Bay. "This is supposed to be good birding."

Indeed, it was. He had even brought a telescope for checking out the shorebirds. I thought it was great. He seemed to be enjoying himself also as I scoped one new species after another, stepping aside each time for him to get a good look.

As it began to grow dark, I wondered what was next on the list. "Take out OK?" David asked after a while.

"Guess so. Whatever you have in mind is OK."

He smiled. "Good."

We stopped at a small restaurant and picked up some shrimp and fries. David had already prepared an ice chest full of beer and wine in the trunk. So, when we pulled up to a small cottage in an isolated spot on the coast about 45 minutes later, we had everything we needed. Well, almost everything. He was counting on me to supply the weed. Fortunately, I had come prepared.

He carried the ice chest while I took care of the food. When we reached the door, he asked me to wait while he checked the place out. He ducked inside, returned, took the ice chest in, came back, took the food, and returned. Then, he ceremoniously picked me up and carried me into the cottage.

“Is this a honeymoon, then?”

“That’s sort of what I had in mind.”

“Sounds nice.” I kissed him.

The room we entered was bare save for a king-sized bed and a few shelves. I could see a small kitchen thru an open door, and two more doors. On inspection, I discovered that one led to a closet and the other to a well-equipped bathroom.

We ate before our meal got cold, though I noted a microwave in the kitchen that we could have used. I broke out my stash of Hill Country weed, and we shared a joint. David went full maudlin on me. “Hypatia, I have thought of you daily since we were together. I know it’s crazy to be in love with you. We spent only a few days together, but I remember every second.”

“Except maybe for when you fell asleep before I left.”

He laughed. “Maybe I love you for your total irreverence. Of course, you remembered that!”

“David,” I told him, “I think you are fascinating. You obviously have an interesting past, and apparently you are continuing to practice it in some fashion. Tell me, did you really check the cottage before letting me in? Or was that just a ploy to get me to wait so you could carry me over the threshold?”

“Alas, it was for real. Some of my old enemies — I have more than I would like — may have found me. If they were waiting, I didn’t want you to be hurt.”

I was touched.

“Now,” he followed up, “what do you say to getting naked and fooling around?”

“Sounds like fun. But first, would you like to see my new toy in action?”

“Ooh! Cool! Please show me.”

“This suit, delivered from the year 2161.”

“From 2161?”

“My daughter brought it.”

“Chloe?” he asked.

“How did you know...I get it, you heard me tell Carlo that was my daughter’s name.”

“Well,” he said. “Actually it’s easier than that. Chloe and I were friends for years.”

“What!”

“Yes, several years back. She showed up once out of the blue. Then, she came back every year on our anniversary, for a while.”

“This is my daughter, Chloe?”

“Yes. You didn’t know about us? I thought from your reaction in 2001 —”

“Wait. We met in 2001?”

“Will meet, according to Chloe.”

“And, I suppose you were lovers.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to bring it up. Show me your toy.”

It took almost 30 minutes. He kept asking me how things worked. I answered truthfully that for the most part I had no idea. I pressed the buttons and voila.

“Were you expecting problems?”

“No. It was just my first chance to try it out. Now, this is the best part.” I pulled on the Velcro strips and stepped out, demonstrating one more magic feature. The suit relaxed, making it easy to take it off. Just a quick shake and it was just a pile on the floor.

“Oh,” was all he could manage.

I hope Carlo had as much fun on his date as I did on mine.

The next morning, David asked, “Would you like to do something today that I like to do?”

“Is it kinky?”

“No,” he said laughing.

“Oh. Too bad. Tell me more.”

“What would you say to a tour of California’s oenological assets?”

“You’re a connoisseur?”

“Only somewhat.”

“I’m game.”

So, we spent the day exploring the best wineries in Northern California, where David undertook my education on the finer points of wine. I’ll admit that I could finally tell a good one from a mediocre one, but never managed to detect the “faint odor of cinnamon,” or the “delightful hint of citrus” in the Cabernets, much less the fundamental difference between them and Pinots. This seemed to be a major split among red wine lovers.

After several winery visits, we headed to Healdsburg for an early dinner. David had pre-arranged for us to have a tasting menu that paired small dishes with the appropriate wine. It was simply superb, one of the best meals I’ve ever had. And I was a Queen once.

From Healdsburg, we headed north on 101. “Are we going to Boonville?” I asked.

“Is that OK?”

“Sure.”

It was fully dark by the time we pulled up to the house I had shared so briefly with Mick. Memories came flooding back. I felt tears starting, which annoyed me for some reason. David noticed, “Would you like to wait here for a few mins? You must be remembering Mick. I know I do frequently. I liked him a lot.”

“Thanks. I was thinking of him.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. If you come from the future, why didn’t you know about the tree falling on you? You could have stalled less than a minute and it would have fallen before you got there.”

“Well, all I have to go on is history, at least for the most part. The tree falling wasn’t important enough. If I had checked on Mick’s obit, I might have figured it out. But I didn’t do that. Short answer: it doesn’t work that way?”

“Have you checked on me?”

“Would you like me to?”

“Would you tell me when I am to die?”

“Do you think that would be a good idea?”

“Are we playing a game, where each answer is a question?”

“Is that a question?”

He laughed. “I give up. You’re obviously better at it than I am.”

I moved over next to him. “Have you ever made love in a parked car?”

“Wouldn’t you prefer a bed?”

Instead of answering, I just got out and walked to the door.

As we reached the door, he suddenly asked, “How long will you stay?”

“How about a week?”

“Why a week?”

“It’s a test, love, a test.”

“Oh. How am I doing so far?”

“About an 8. Maybe 8.5.”

“Well, I’ll have to up my game.”

Later, as we lay together, dozing now and again, I rolled over and propped up on an elbow. “David, I have a serious topic.”

“Uh-oh. That sounds dangerous.”

“It’s about on us.”

“I like the plural pronoun.”

“I want to be honest with each other. If we were married, it would be a requirement.”

“What’s involved?”

“I will never lie to you. I want you to promise the same.”

“What about state secrets, and similar subjects.”

“You don’t have to tell me state secrets, but you cannot make up some lie. You have to tell me that it’s a secret.”

“I can live with that.”

“OK. Here’s some honesty. I find you fascinating, I love being with you. The sex is great, probably better than 8.5. But I am not in love with you. OK?”

“Not yet. I’m working on it. By the way, I am hopelessly in love with you.”

“I can live with that.”

We both laughed. This was going to be fun.

It more fun than I expected. The week is a blur of traveling on the incredible Highway 1, surely one of the prettiest drives in the world, at a time when you could just go and do it.

We spent the day doing whatever we liked, which included birding. David had been hooked, and we spent more time checking out gulls on the beach.

One night, we went to the same restaurant that I had taken the young Mark to. This time, sunset was just late enough for us to get a chance to see the green flash. Missed it again when some clouds formed on the horizon. That was about the only thing less than perfect for the entire week.

“David,” I said on what I arbitrarily chose as our last night, “you know I have to leave.”

“I’ve been avoiding thinking about that.”

“I’ll be back.”

“I know. For Carlo’s graduation.”

“Before that. You sent me a 911 message. That comes first.”

“I sent you that?”

“Yes. Probably in the future, of course.”

“Of course.”

“David,” I pressed on, “I may be in love with you after all.”

He kissed me. “I know.”

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14. Meeting of the Minds
July 28, 2018
Near Leakey, TX, USA

Mark had returned from his business trip very late on Friday and slipped into bed. Although he tried to avoid waking me, I felt him nearby and snuggled up next to him. “Business go OK?”

“Yeah. Got a great contract. In Houston.”

“Cool. Let’s talk in the morning.”

“Deal.”

After we both had coffee and cereal, we got down to discussion of the week’s events. “So, you got a great contract?”

“Unbelievable. Remember the Sheik’s Gold?”

“Do I! We’re still making coins from that hoard.”

“Well, guess who has the contract to design the security system for the place?”

“You know, we speculated that you were the one behind it, in the future, when we went there.”

“Really! You guessed it was me?”

“Based on the similarity to this place. Also, I knew you by that time and what you are capable of.”

“So, tell me how I am going to handle it.”

“The basics: A nuclear power module like the one here. An AI to manage the threats. And Ambianca to recognize me when I got in to disable everything.”

“You were the one to defeat the security?”

“Yep. It was untouched for more than 50 years. Who else could have managed that?”

He nodded to accept the compliment.

“When will you start?”

“I have to wait for the Saudis to get two nuclear power modules. Takes a sovereign power,”

“Two?”

“Allegedly for backup, but actually the second one is for here.”

“Of course.”

“So, we should probably move back to Houston for a while. I think it will take at least a year.”

“Can you finish before January 2020?”

“Is that important?”

“Very. The shit hits the fan in February. By March, much of the world will be shut down. Deliveries will be exceedingly difficult except for food. You could still work in Houston by networking from the house, but ...”

“I see. When you said pandemic, I was envisioning something like the flu that came several years ago.”

“Worse by an order of magnitude, maybe two.”

“Wow! How does our current President deal with that?”

“Poorly.”

“Did it keep him from being re-elected?”

“Depends on who you ask, and which time you mean. If you believe the data, then he lost every time. However, he had enough people with him, especially in 2024, that when he cried foul it provoked a major crisis.”

“Wow! What was the result?”

“Total chaos. It was the beginning of the Last Days. Everything fell apart, religious wars all over the world,”

“Sounds bad.”

“Catastrophic.”

“So, what should we do?”

“Prepare to abandon Houston and hunker down here. We’ll need beaucoup supplies. Enough to last months without resupply.

“Can you deal with that?” he asked.

“Sure, if you want me to.”

“I’ll be busy.”

“Got it.”

We ate for a while. Finally, he asked, “So, what did you do while I was gone?”

“I went to Oakland. Seemed like a good time. Straightened out Carlo’s little problem.”

“And...”

I told him the whole story, leaving out only minor details such as exactly how many times we had sex, and what we did during that time.

He sat there thinking for quite a while.

“I guess I should get used to it.”

“Except for the future when we had a 30+ year difference in our ages, I have never wanted anyone but you, when you were available.”

“What about the future?”

“You were very understanding. I hoped you would be again.”

“What does that imply.”

“I won’t have sex with anyone else without telling you, for one thing.”

“That’s nice.”

“And I won’t have sex with anyone but you when you’re around. Remember, you were spending the week in DC. I was here by myself. It seemed like the perfect time to find out what was going on in the East Bay.”

“Sounds like Carlos could handle it himself.”

“Except for the school administration. I needed to make sure they understood the full import of everything.”

“I never much liked high school.”

“I never went to high school, so I don’t have much to base an opinion on. However, considering that every student in the place is undergoing puberty, it has to be an explosive situation.”

“What about Mama?”

“What about her?”

“Well, you gotta admit, screwing your husband’s mother is a bit kinky.”

“Minor correction: We weren’t married then. Ditto for David. Adultery is not a factor.”

“A technical point, but I’ll concede it.”

“I expect to see David again.”

“Surprise, surprise!”

“Mark, I have been in love with you over half my life and almost all of yours. There is no one else. However, sexual partners is a different matter. As for your mother, I love her. I loved her like the mother I never had when I was young. I loved her like the beautiful, sexy woman she was when I met her in 1970. We were good for each other.”

He heaved a long sigh. “OK. I get it. You’re my wife when I’m around,”

“But not in 1970, or 1985,”

“I just don’t want to lose you.”

“You never will. We’re together to your death. I, well my younger self, literally sat by your bed on that morning, until you told me I had to go and get ready for the plague. I missed you terribly during that time, but I was glad you didn’t have to live thru it. I doubt if you would have made it in any case.”

“So, I died before the plague.”

“Before it hit Austin. Are you trying to figure out how much time you have left?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

“You have years left.”

“Thanks. One major question: do you love him?”

“Maybe. I am sure I love you?”

“No problem loving two people at once?”

“Some people would have a problem. I don’t. I didn’t think you did either.”

“I can’t remember loving anyone besides you.”

I said nothing for a while. Then I kissed him. “I do love you. Please believe me. However, you are not around in 1985. David is. Do you want to put constraints on my time with him?”

He thought about that for longer than I wanted him to. Finally, he agreed, “You can do whatever you want, so long as you come back to me.”

“Thank you.”

15. *Dangerous Precedent* **September 8, 1992, and after** ***Northern California, USA***

I woke up in the bed that I shared with David in Boonville. I could hear some voices in the other room but couldn't understand what they were saying. Carefully, I rose and turned my suit on, setting the laser to maximum. Then, hoping that the camouflage was working, I slowly opened the door and moved into the room.

I saw two men, both armed. One gun was pointed directly at David, who spoke. "I note that my reinforcements have arrived. I suggest you lower your weapons, and we talk like civilized people."

"This is weird," one of the two said. "I saw someone come out of the door, but they just disappeared."

"Yeah," the other agreed. "Probably just a trick."

"Silly rabbit. Trix are for kids." I shot at the gun pointed at David. It shattered into several pieces. The other one fired at me, or more precisely, at the flash from the laser. The bullet hit me in the stomach.

"Ouch," I said. "That hurt." I blew his weapon into smithereens.

"Now, gentlemen," David continued, "it is no longer necessary for you to lower anything, except maybe yourselves. Any further action on your part will be met with overwhelming force."

I turned off the camo in the suit to save power. "Holy shit! Where did that come from?"

"Hello, David. It seems that you are having a bit of a problem now."

"I think you took care of that, right gentlemen?"

"I dunno. We had orders."

I fired a blast with the laser aimed at the floor near him. The accompanying thunderclap added an exclamation point. "I don't wish to hurt anyone," I said. "Perhaps your employer would understand your reluctance to stay any longer."

They both headed for the door. I heard one of them say, "What did we just see?"

"Space alien. Ask me if I'm going to report that!"

"Agreed."

When they were gone, David laughed loudly. "What a performance! The suit worked great."

"Yeah, but I think I'm going to have a bruise where they shot me." I opened the suit to check. "Damn! I guess I need to report that defect."

"I'm ecstatic to see you, but how did you know to show up now, and armed to the teeth?"

"I got your message."

"I sent you one about Carlo's little problem, but that is all."

"Well, I got a 911 telling me to show up here now."

"How?"

“Well, I suggest you publish the personal ad now.”

“But the date has already passed.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t matter. I’ll read the note in the future and show up here now.”

“Oh. Yeah. I get it.”

“First, though, I need something to eat. What do you have?”

“Cold pizza?”

“One of my favorite breakfasts. Let me at it.”

After two slices, I felt much better. Coffee helped.

“Think anyone will be back?”

“I doubt it. Space aliens can be tough.”

“May I ask what brought them here?”

“Someone must have ratted me out. I have to move somewhere besides this place. I’ll miss it.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I’m not sure, but I suggest we get out of here.”

I grabbed my pack from the bedroom. “Ready.”

Later, housed in a nice room at the St. Francis Hotel, we considered what to do next. “Do you need to report the incident or anything like that?” I asked David.

“Yes, but I can’t do it on a hotel phone. I’ll have to go out.”

“OK. Shall I come with you?”

“No. Wait here. I’ll be back soon.” He left. I called room service and ordered some food for both of us. David returned in about half an hour. “The two have been picked up. We’ll know who is responsible later. Ah! Food!”

After taking care of one necessity, I planned on the follow-up by taking off my clothes. Curiously, David seemed to have something on his mind besides sex. “We need to talk.”

“Uh-oh. What’s on your mind?”

“I don’t want to be your boy toy. I don’t want you to get in the habit of dropping in for some quick sex.”

“What do you want?”

“Well, I’d like you to stay around permanently.”

“I’d like that too, but it’s not going to happen. I promised Mark that I would always come back to him. I managed to get a concession from him that he didn’t put other constraints on our time together. I was thinking I could stay here until Carlo’s graduation from high school. That’s several months. You may be tired of me by then.”

“Never. However, I can live with that.”

“Maybe we could live together more in the future.”

“That would be nice. I guess I can make do with several months.”

“Good. Where are we going to live?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we can plan after.”

“After?”

He smiled and began to undress.

16. Domestic Bliss

September 1992 – April 1993

California and Texas, USA

Deciding what to do next proved to be problematical. David, who was now going by the name Steven Doberman, like the dog, didn't want to stay in one place for long. We debated several options before deciding on simply driving around the country for several months. When I noted that we could combine that with some good birding, the decision was straightforward.

We checked around the used car lots before settling on a recent model VW Camper van with 30,000 miles on it. It had room for two friendly people to sleep, though it was a bit cramped for other activities. We tapped my account at Schwab for the cost and registered it in the name of Patsy O'Brien.

I used an ATM for as much cash as I could draw in one day, and we hit the road.

Our first stop was Yosemite NP, which despite living in California for years I had never visited. We spent the first night in a campground but managed to grab a room in the famous Ahwahnee Hotel after that. We ate an early dinner in the restaurant and retired to our room, which sported a much larger bed than the camper.

We spent two full days taking in the main sights of Yosemite, including at least one bear. I also spotted a Great Gray Owl in a large meadow not far from the hotel. Fortunately, we had snagged David's (excuse me, Steven's) telescope before abandoning Boonville, so we were able to get a stunning view as the huge owl sat motionless on a large branch. I had to explain the importance of a *lifer* to David/Charles. "You mean you keep a list of every bird you've seen?"

"Of course. Also, every mammal, reptile, etc."

"Wow! I had no idea."

"It's part of the allure of the hobby. The chance to see something completely new. Especially, something as spectacular as *Strix nebulosa*."

"Do I need to learn Latin now?"

"Should be easy for someone with your facility for languages."

From Yosemite, we headed north to Yellowstone. Perfect timing. Most of the tourists had left, so rooms were plentiful. The Park itself was beautiful, with patches of Aspens turning bright yellow to contrast with the dominant pine trees.

The famous Bison herd was easy to find. We drove a big loop around most of the park and stopped when the herd blocked the road. We acted like perfect tourists: Made a carefully timed stop at Old Faithful to see the geyser eruption; took several tours with the park rangers to see other geysers; drove to Teton National Park; hiked around Two Ocean Lake, which sits atop the continental divide and empties into both watersheds. At least it used to. Now, dams keep it from going anywhere.

Several Trumpeter Swans had already arrived for the winter, providing another easy lifer.

By that time, we were both ready for some warmer weather, so like most of the avifauna and a significant portion of the human population of the northern states, we headed south.

David/Steven — I was still having trouble calling him Steven — suggested Arizona, and I had no trouble getting on board with that.

You get the idea. I don't need to go into the complete itinerary, even if I could remember it all. We stayed south thru the winter months, visiting Phoenix for one delightful night, Tucson for a great week wandering around the mountains, and another week sampling the cuisine of New Mexico.

We celebrated Christmas quietly in Santa Fe, where it was a lot colder than I liked. We moved on the Brownsville, Texas, on the Mexican border, where cold was a four-letter word. I won a sizable chunk of money by betting on the Super Bowl, happily giving the Bills 14 points. The final score was 51-17 in favor of Dallas. I was surprised to discover than many of the fans in the bar where we watched the game were for Buffalo.

I cajoled Steven into a Christmas Bird Count at Falcon Dam, a drive of two and a half hours from Brownsville. After spending the day with some expert birders and the countdown dinner, we camped for the night in the State Park and headed back the next morning.

I explained the attraction of the Rio Grande Valley for birders to Steven. "You see, some birds from Mexico wander across the border so you can get them in the USA."

"Why not just go to Mexico?"

"Good question. It's part of the shtick."

"I see."

We wandered up the coast to Rockport and crossed over to Port Aransas on the ferry. We booked a condo suite for a month and spent most of the time trying to perfect the recipe for margaritas. The cannabis I had brought with me was long gone by this time. When our month was up, I suggested that we move on to the Upper Coast, though avoiding Houston.

"What do you say to visiting the famous cabin you have told me about?"

"You want to meet Mark?"

"Very much, even though this version is not the one I'm jealous of."

"It's a bit out of the way, but the Hill Country is one of the prettiest areas in Texas. Should I call Mark?"

"Let's surprise him."

"I'm not sure that is a good idea." Eventually, though, the chance to see Mark again overcame any lingering doubts and we headed north toward San Antonio.

In San Antonio, I explained, "Some fools claim that San Antonio has the best Mexican food in Texas, which is to say, in the world. Of course, Austinites know that is simply mistaken. Mexican food was invented in San Antonio but perfected in Austin."

"What do the Mexicans have to say about that?"

"They get all testy and claim that what we call Mexican food should be called Tex-Mex, and there are many ready to go along with that. Whatever we call it, the food here in Texas is different from what you get in Mexico."

"I'm reminded of the dispute between New York and Chicago about pizza. Apparently, Italy has no say."

"Of course not. They have a dish called pizza Napolitano, but it is not pizza."

All this was simply leading to a stop in San Antone for a decent meal before proceeding on to the Hill Country. We found a small cafe on the way thru town and enjoyed a nice lunch. By the time we reached Leakey, it was late afternoon.

The cabin looked quite a bit different from what I remembered. Then I realized that Mark didn't own it yet. His asshole girlfriend, Delfina, did. I hoped Mark would be there.

It wasn't my lucky day. When we knocked on the door no one answered. Ambianca was not there for the simple reason that she hadn't been created yet, at least based on her estimate of when she was born.

We drove on to Kerrville, where we spent the night in a motel near I-10. Rats!

17. When in Doubt, Go Birding

April 15-17, 1993

Upper Texas Coast, USA

OK. Plan A was down the tubes, but we were in Texas, and spring migration was in full swing. Time to head to High Island. We left early in the morning, hopped onto I-10 and found ourselves at the turnoff to Anahuac Refuge before noon. We had time to grab a few sandwiches at a convenience store before heading toward the coast.

Anahuac was as I remembered it. The mass of water birds had departed for the north, but there were enough interesting species left, including the Least Bittern, a notoriously difficult bird to see well. We had a cooperative one that stood on a reed long enough for me to scope it so Steve could get a good look.

By that time, it was mid-afternoon, time to head for High Island.

High Island is not an island. Rather, it is the top of a large underground salt dome. From the sea, it may appear to be an island. The slight elevation supports a woodland composed mostly of Live Oaks. These attract migrating birds who have just finished a grueling 18-hour journey across the Gulf of Mexico. On a good day, they descend on the trees as though their lives depended on it, mainly because their lives do.

Today was only moderate, but as we were there on a Thursday, the crowds were smaller. The weekend would be devoted more to greeting old friends than birding. We wandered into Boy Scout Wood, working our way along the trails in a wide loop. Then we headed for Smith Oaks, the second part of the refuge. The big attraction of this site was a picnic table beneath a fruiting Mulberry Tree. The berries lured a surprisingly diverse collection of species. We could sit and wait for the birds to come to us.

We were there, enjoying the sights when someone called my name.

“Patsy! Is that you?”

“Looks like you’ll get to meet Mark after all,” I said to David, I mean Steve.

Mark raced over to see me, greeting me with a big hug and a short kiss.

“Mark, meet Steve.” I waved a hand in the general direction.

Steve jumped up. “I’ve been dying to meet you. Hy — Pat has told me a lot about you.”

“Some of it may be true.”

Turning to me, he said, “So it’s Pat now instead of Patsy?”

“Shorter, without the connotation of being fooled.”

“Good. So, Steve, are you a birder, or just along for the ride.”

“Steve is a novice, but he’s learning fast,” I told Mark. “Got great eyes and ears.”

“I see,” he said. “And are you just birding companions?”

“Don’t be so obvious,” I replied. “However, the answer is that we are more than friends.”

“I’m her latest conquest,” Steve offered.

“Lucky you,” Mark said. “What are your plans?”

“We just got here. No plans. We stopped at Anahuac on the way. Ticked the Least Bittern. Went to Boy Scout Woods first, then here. The Mulberry tree has been active.”

“Why don’t you stay at Preston’s cabin? I have it all to myself. It has a bigger bed than you might remember.”

“What I remember is that it was very cozy for two people. Three...”

“I think it sounds like a great idea,” Steve interposed.

So that’s how I wound up spending the night with two of my lovers.

During the drive, with my latest paramour driving, I brought up the obvious subject. “This cabin has some nostalgic attachment for Mark and me. It’s where we made love for the last time. At least the last time up to that point.”

“I see.”

“I don’t think he recognized you. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Oh?”

“It’s complicated. Future Mark is very jealous of you. Not sure what he would say if he knew our complete history. In the future, he never mentioned meeting you after Hendy Woods.”

“Complicated is a good description of everything in your strange life.”

“Especially you.”

“Really?”

“You better believe it.”

By the time we reached Preston’s cabin, Mark had already been by the same shrimp restaurant that he and I had used on our visit to the coast. We entered the cabin to the delightful aroma of fried shrimp mixed with the unmistakable odor of marijuana. Both Steve and I smiled happily at the prospect.

We smoked some of the stuff Mark had, definitely not up to the standards of Marian’s best, but not bad. The shrimp and fries tasted great as a second course washed down with a couple of beers. Mark had even thought of dessert: some ice cream sandwiches from a convenience store. The thought counted.

Mark’s plans for the evening were too obvious to ignore, especially by someone with the observational skills Steve possessed. I was in a total quandary. Fortunately, Steve knew what to do. He announced, “I note that the sleeping arrangements work for two people, but not three. I will adjourn to the van for the evening. You two have fun.”

I rushed over to him. “Steve, it’s not necessary,” I whispered to him.

He kissed me affectionately. “I know true love when I see it. I’m happy that I have the chance to know you. I mean that. Enjoy your evening.”

“Sunrise is spectacular,” Mark said. “Especially from the ferry. What do you say we get up early and see what’s on Galveston tomorrow?”

“What a great idea!” I said. It really was a great idea.

“When is the first ferry?” Steve asked.

“I don’t know,” Mark said. “They run all the time, but much less frequently during the night.”

“So, brekkie at 6:00?” Steve suggested.

“Perfect,” Mark and I both said.

And we were alone together again. “Mark,” I said, but got no further.

“Don’t break the spell,” he said. We moved into the lone bedroom and its nice large bed.

After making love, we lay together. “Patsy,” Mark said, “this is like a dream come true. I didn’t think I’d see you again. Ever.”

“Our destinies are intertwined, as a learned friend of mine said. In our case, I think it’s true. We didn’t meet by chance, though I am at a loss to say who caused it. I know that we agree on matters supernatural.”

“Yeah. Don’t go all woo-woo on me.”

“OK. Forget it. Let’s make this like the last time we were here. The time when we agreed we wouldn’t be lovers any longer.”

“Hah!”

“I’ve missed you,” I told him.

“Oh, have I ever missed you. I think of you often. I wonder if we made the right choice when we agreed that our relationship was inappropriate...”

“It was the right choice for the time, but that was then...”

“What about Steve?”

“He’s nice and fun. But he’s not you.”

“How about another round?”

“I was hoping you’d ask.”

As we rode the ferry over to Galveston, checking out the porpoises and birds, including numerous gulls gobbling up treats from passengers, I had a chance to talk to Steve about last night.

“I was surprised by your offer last night.”

“Really.”

“Don’t be coy. What motivated you?”

“My observational skills that you commented on earlier.”

“Meaning?”

“I saw the way you two looked at each other. I would die happy to have you look at me that way.”

“Oh, Steve. That’s a load to put on me.”

“Sorry about that. I could see that you were excited at the chance to be with Mark again. I opted to let you two have your fling.”

“What can I do to even things out? I owe you a big one.”

“Make sure we spend the night in a room with a big bed.”

I laughed. “If that’s all it takes, I’m all for it.”

We had to break off the talk to return to our van as the ferry was about to dock.

Following Mark’s suggestion, we went first to East Beach, the least fashionable place on the island to swim, but one of the best for birding. Steve noticed a gull that had yellow legs, which turned out to be an old friend, California Gull, far from home.

We scanned huge flocks of shorebirds, all of which were “the usual suspects.”

Satisfied that we hadn’t missed anything, we headed on to the west side of the island. We stopped at Mark’s insistence as a pasture where, years ago, what may have been the last Eskimo Curlew in the world stopped for a week to the delight of birders alive at the time. As usual, it was not there now.

We headed for the toll bridge that connected the island back to the mainland to the south. A large group of nesting Black Skimmers sat on the beach, their area cordoned off with caution tape. I hoped they survived.

After some woodland birding at several places Mark knew, we decided to call it a day. “What are your plans?” I asked Mark.

“I’m heading down the coast. Preston is leading a tour group there and I promised to join him and help out.”

“Oh. We were just there, before coming to High Island.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We rented a condo for a month on Port A.”

“Did you see the Whooping Cranes before they left?”

“Of course. Took one of the boat tours.”

“Anything special?”

“An Oldsquaw Duck trying to nest on one of the small islands. No male, of course.” He got out a notebook and entered info about the duck.

“Maybe she’ll still be there.”

“Anyway, I gotta run. Good birding, and enjoy yourselves.”

I gave him a big hug and whispered, “This is not a one act play. There’s more to come.”

He smiled and kissed me goodbye.

“So,” Steve began, “where shall we go now?”

“Well, I know a place where we can great food and stay for free.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Yes. I’m curious to see if she recognizes you. Notice that your competition apparently did not.”

“I did note that. So, do we just show up?”

“Let’s call first.”

Idell answered on the second ring with “Talbot Residence.”

“Idell, this is Patty. I’ll be in Houston this afternoon with a friend and thought we’d stop by if it’s convenient with y’all.”

“I know Grace would love to see you again,” she said without any hint of a double entendre.

“Is she there now?”

“Getting her hair done. Don’t let that stop you. I’ll expand dinner plans. Is your friend…”

“A man,” I clarified. “She knows him, but don’t tell her anything. We’re both curious to see if she will recognize him.”

“When can we expect you?”

“We’re near Surfside now. Say about an hour, depending on traffic.”

“Great! See you soon.”

18. Taking the Pitcher to the Well Again
April 17, 1993
Houston

Grace threw open the door as soon as we arrived and rushed to hug me. She was about to deliver a passionate kiss when she noticed Steve watching, a smile on his face. She turned to him, “Well, this is not news to you, is it Cyril? By the way, you clean up good.”

“Thanks. I see that your acclaimed personal skills are real.”

She laughed her hearty laugh that I loved. “Actually, Idell tipped me off. Come in. Come in.”

She led the way out onto the patio by the pool. Idell appeared almost immediately with three glasses of iced tea and some ginger snaps. Grace said, “Perhaps you’d prefer something different?”

“This is fine for me,” I replied.

“Me as well,” Steve said.

After we had all slaked our thirst and had several cookies, Grace opened with, “Steve. New name. I am guessing that has to do with your occupation. I had some notion that you were retired.”

“A much better name than the first one the foisted on me. Steven Doberman, like the dog.”

At that point, Idell appeared with a worried expression on her face. “There is someone on the phone asking to speak to Steven Doberman. I told them there was no such person here. They suggested I ask the visitors.”

“I am Steve Doberman,” he replied.

“How the hell did they know you are here?” I demanded.

“I suspect that your phone calls are being monitored. They cannot listen in, but they can see who you are calling. They checked this number and Boom! Bobs your uncle.”

“That’s creepy,” I said.

“More than creepy,” Grace agreed. “I guess you had better take that call.”

“I can bring the handset out here,” Idell offered.

“I’m sure they will want me to go to another phone. I am supposed to be on extended leave, but I fear it may have been canceled.” He got up and left, returning a few minutes later, to inform us that his suspicions had been correct. “I need to go out. I’ll return as soon as possible.”

“Will you be back for dinner?” Idell asked. She had a knack of thinking of things the rest of us missed.

“From what I’ve been told, that is not to be missed. Count on me. I’ll take the van if that’s OK.”

“Of course.”

Grace and I were alone. I wondered if she would like a display of affection, but before I could act, she was all over me. “Patty, I’ve missed you so much. How long can you stay?”

“I guess that depends on your plans. Is Simon in town? I know that Mark is probably in Corpus by now.”

“Oh?”

I told her about running into Mark at High Island.

“And Steve acquiesced to your...”

“He did, and it was wonderful. Does that bother you?”

“No. I will accede to it as well, provided ...”

“You didn’t mention whether Simon is in town.”

“He’s not. We expected him back for the weekend, but he elected to stay in California. He has more meetings there on Monday.”

“Interesting.”

“What about Steve?”

“We’ll deal with that when we talk to him again.”

Idell appeared carrying the phone. “He’s on the phone. Says he needs to speak to you. Says it’s urgent.”

“Thanks, Idell,” I said taking the handset.

He said, “I don’t have much time. I am at the airport. I’ve left the van in the short-term parking lot for American. Can you pick it up there?”

“Sure, I guess. Where are the keys?”

“On top of the left rear tire?”

“No one will think to look there.”

He managed to laugh. “My handlers yanked my chain. I cannot tell you where I am heading, only that it will be quite an extended trip. Hypatia, this has been one of the most wonderful times in my life. I love you more than you can ever realize.”

“Oh, Steve,” I said, but he interrupted, “My plane is being called. Goodbye my love.”

“He’s at the airport. Left our van there in short-term parking, He won’t be back for some time. Getting on a plane as he said goodbye.” I explained to Grace.

She looked at her watch. “Let’s eat first.”

After dinner, we said goodnight to Idelle with, “See you Monday,” before calling a taxi to take us to the airport. By the time we retrieved the van and got back to the house, I was exhausted. Grace had some ideas for how to spend the time, but I fell into bed and was asleep in minutes.

I woke up to a surprise. The other side of the bed was empty. I roused myself and prepared to go downstairs when Grace showed up with a tray of food. “I think I owe you several breakfasts in bed,” she said cheerily.

The eggs were a bit runny, the bacon was overcooked, and the toast could have used some more time. The coffee was superb. I would have eaten the pillow.

Even without the benefit of marijuana to prime the pump, we managed to make love. I noted that we had begun to develop a program, as most long-time lovers do. As we lay together, I commented on the development. “Oh. Should we try to make sure we vary it?” Grace asked.

“Not at all,” I replied. “We should concentrate on perfecting it.”

“That will take practice.”

“Yes,” I agreed, and began again.

19. Dubious Progression

April 20-30, 1993

Houston to San Francisco

This was all Grace's idea. I told her of my plans to drive back to Oakland for Carlo's high school graduation. "Can I come with you?" she asked.

"Well," I replied, "I don't see why not. What does Simon think about that?"

"I'll call him." Which she did on the spot. I was surprised that Simon answered immediately. I assumed that he would be busy, in meetings or something. However, I failed to account for the "Grace factor." No one, it seems, ignores a call from her. After a brief conversation, she appeared to have his agreement. She continued with, "As Mark says, 'When in doubt, go birding.' That's the plan. Pat is going to teach me the rudiments."

I heard a laugh from the other end, followed by "Good luck."

"Bye then. See you in Boonville."

We had some prep work: A visit to REI for clothing, Tilley hat, and shoes; A stop by Grace's favorite grocery store for some organic treats that she claimed I would love. Steve, always the gentleman, had left his bins and scope in the van, obviating what would have been an extensive search for something suitable.

We explained the plan to Idelle. Although she was disappointed to lose a satisfied customer at the dining table, the extra week of vacation was enough compensation. I suggested we might want to camp out a couple of nights. "Don't be ridiculous!" was Grace's response. "I'll handle the arrangements. I'd rather smooth it than rough it."

That caused an extra day devoted to route planning. Stops along the way catered to two lovers off on a second honeymoon. Grace pulled out her notebook of contacts, called around for recommendations and got her travel agent to book suitable accommodations. Although that meant that the birding would be somewhat less than I had planned, I didn't bother to argue the point.

So, on Tuesday, we set off. Grace had planned a northerly route, thru Austin, up toward San Angelo, then to Santa Fe before jumping on I-20. I managed to convince her that we should go to the Davis Mountains first, and she concurred — after finding a cute Bed and Breakfast in Fort Davis. I pointed out that the drive would take 9 hours and that we might prefer to stop in some place closer. Unfortunately, after leaving Junction, there was nothing. So, we got up at dark o'clock and set off on our adventure.

On the way, we had hours to talk. I learned about her early life, daughter in a "mixed" family, which in El Paso meant one Anglo and one Latino parent. It didn't help that the beauty that I found in her every aspect was due to her mother's genes.

She, of course, wanted to know about my early life. I tried to think of some way to tell her without revealing more than I wanted to. I explained that I was abandoned at an early age, taken in by a bunch of academics at the University, carefully failing to mention how different the University was from its present incarnation.

"So, you say you had several fathers?"

"That's the easiest way to explain it," I replied. "A chemistry professor was my favorite, but everyone took an interest in my welfare. I had a happy childhood."

“I get the idea that there is a lot you’re not saying.”

“There is. Maybe I can tell you later sometime.” I was thinking of Mark’s revelations about 2001 and my younger self showing up in 1998. Grace knew when to drop the subject.

We turned to the major events, the subject of hourly updates on whatever radio station we could connect to. A religious sect located near Waco, Branch Davidians, had been wiped out in a huge fire at their compound. Speculation now focused on the question of who started the fire. We were put in the uncomfortable position of accepting the story as told by the FBI, that the Davidians had started it and committed suicide, and sympathizing with fanatics who had been ruthlessly slaughtered.

“Whichever way it comes down,” I pointed out, “it is another example of religion run amuck.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed. “I’m glad we are on the same side on that topic.”

“I doubt I would be welcomed into your life and household otherwise.”

“Probably not. I’m glad it worked out.”

We stopped in Junction for gas and lunch, then blasted along I-10 at 80 mph, arriving in Fort Davis about 5:00 in the afternoon.

I would have liked to stay in the motel in the State Park, remembering how much I liked it with Mark in the future. I had to admit that the B&B was much nicer. After a quick shower, shared of course, we explored the cute and artsy town before settling on a nice-looking café for dinner. I remembered Fort Davis fondly, and was not disappointed.

The next morning, we went birding. We went first to the State Park, where the Montezuma Quail showed up. Grace was delighted, but not nearly as much as I was. Worry that the day might be a total bust disappeared when the tiny birds hopped up onto the feeding station.

Grace called someone she knew who got us into the Nature Conservancy refuge at higher elevation, an essential factor in creature comfort. After an excellent picnic supplied by the refuge manager, and some quick birding, we set off on the 80-mile scenic loop, stopping every so often at some likely spots. We arrived back at the B&B in mid-afternoon for a “nap.”

At night, we attended a star-gazing party on the road to the observatory. The sky was incredibly dark, showing far more stars that Grace was used to seeing. I was reminded of the many nights spent at the cabin near Leakey watching for satellites crossing.

It was a long day, and exhausting. We both collapsed into bed and slept.

The next day, we headed for New Mexico, another long day. The place Grace had arranged for us to stay was fabulous. It was too late when we arrived to schedule a massage for that night, so Grace set us up for the works the next day. It was almost worth the ride, with maximal creature comforts and superb food, so when it was time to leave, I felt some regret. Our route missed some of the best birding spots in New Mexico, but I couldn’t justify heading south again just for some possible lifers. Instead, we drove to Flagstaff where it was not really spring yet, and cold.

The next morning, we drove another long stretch to Bakersfield, about as far as we could go in one day. Even Grace couldn’t find a suitable spot to stay. Instead, I introduced her to the joys of Holiday Inn. We were so tired by this time that I could sense Grace wondering if she had made a mistake. I found a way to improve her mood.

From there, it was back to Plan A: the St. Francis in San Francisco. Grace was in her element. Within minutes she had called her favorite nail and hair spa, one within walking distance of the hotel. She dragged me along. We emerged with new hair and nails. I opted for some of the fancy nails: ones with sparkles. Grace had restored her hair color to its dark brown color I thought of as natural. Mine was completely blond, all the gray covered up. We both looked 10 years younger.

Simon arrived in time to take us all out for dinner. He chose one of the finest restaurants in the city. I was glad he was paying, as the price was more than I had ever even considered allocating for a meal.

I kissed Grace goodnight and went to my room. We had a suite with two bedrooms separated by a large living area. It was clear that the two of them had some catching up to do.

We slept late, rising well after 10:00. We played tourist: waiting in line for the cable car that took us down to the harbor. There, we checked out Fisherman's Wharf, walking all the way to the end before deciding on a place for lunch. The fried shrimp were excellent, but I found them not quite up to the standard of take out near Preston's cabin.

After one final night at the St. Francis, where Grace switched sleeping arrangements to my delight, we headed north to Boonville, where we had a surprise waiting.

20. Morena Reprise
May 1, 1993
Boonville, CA, USA

I was not surprised to find the house in Boonville locked up with no one at home. I picked up the key where I knew David/Steve usually hid it and let us in.

Morena sat on the couch.

“Hello, Patsy.”

“Why am I not surprised to see you here? Is this about Steve or whatever his name is now?”

“Yes.”

Simon and Grace gathered behind me.

“Ah, Grace, nice to see you again. You must be Simon.”

Simon started, “How the —”

“She has sources,” I explained.

“What news about our friend?”

“He’s missing in action.”

“Missing? From you?”

“I am afraid so. He listed you as his next of kin. Consider this an official notification.”

She hasn’t changed, I thought.

“Thank you for letting me know. How long? Where?”

“3 days. The location is a secret.”

“He was supposed to be retired in the first place, and on extended leave, probably to keep tabs on me. How could you send him somewhere dangerous? Chechnya?”

“I cannot confirm your guesses. The only excuse I have is that it was personal. Your lover wouldn’t have left you without some overriding reason. Not you.”

I guess that was a compliment, but I didn’t have much time to enjoy it. We all heard the sound of tires on gravel outside. “Quick! Hide!” Morena said.

I motioned Simon and Grace to follow me. I ran up the stairs with them close on my heels. We went into the master suite. I quickly opened my backpack and pulled out the white suit.

As I put the suit on, I told the two of them, “Lock the door. Stay here and stay quiet. I’ll be back.”

I raced back down the hall, pulling the Velcro together as I ran. I could feel the suit adjusting to my body. It was comforting. I slapped on the helmet and face shield.

Morena looked up. “Please. Let me deal with them. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

I came downstairs and moved to the far wall where I had a good vantage point and activated the camouflage.

“Wow!” Morena said. “That’s fantastic. I guess you can remain.”

I heard someone picking the lock on the front door. He was skilled, and despite the lock’s claim to be unbreakable, the door opened in a few minutes.

Two men dressed in dark suits, complete with a yellow power tie, fedoras, sunglasses, and a menacing presence marched into the room. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” Morena offered.

They stopped. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“How curious. I was going to ask you the same thing.”

Two guns appeared quicker than I thought possible. Morena spoke, “Now would be a good time to demonstrate your power, Pat.”

I blasted both guns before the men knew what was going on. The thunderclap that always seemed to accompany the flash added to the overall performance. One of the men quickly dropped what was left of his gun and pulled another from his waist. He turned toward me. He was very good at his craft. He pointed his gun where he thought I was and shot twice. Fortunately, he was off by about a meter.

OK. I was scared. I reacted. I pointed my finger in his general direction and shot. The software zeroed in on the huge metallic belt buckle he wore. The effect was stunning, literally, throwing him into the near wall with such force that he collapsed to the ground.

I decided to show myself.

“Jesus!” The remaining gentleman said.

“He’s not here to help you right now,” I said. “Would you mind putting all your weapons on the floor and moving away, please?”

Morena didn’t need to be told what to do. She efficiently extracted another gun from the vertical gentleman before pushing him out of the way. Turning to the prostrate form on the floor, she applied a finger to his neck looking for a pulse. Standing up, she informed us, “He’ll live. Probably needs medical attention.” She looked at his companion. “Want to take him to the hospital?”

“Who’s the short guy?” he asked.

“My backup.”

“Where did you get him?”

“UFO.”

“Geez.” He hoisted his companion and left us alone.

“That’s some toy you have there,” she said to me.

“Are you OK?” It was Grace standing at the top of the stairs looking very worried. “It sounded like a storm.”

She rushed down the last few steps and hurried over to me. “I’m fine,” I assured her. “Better equipment.”

“I’ll say,” Morena said. “Quite a demonstration. I wasn’t sure whether to believe what Steve told me. Amazing. Who are you with? Who has that kind of technology?”

“Freelance,” I told her and left the rest of the question unaltered. “Who were they after? You, or me?”

“I think they were just here on a general fishing excursion. Finding me was a bonus. Not seeing you was a definite negative. Can I see the effect again? How does it work?”

I stepped back against the wall and activated the suit patterns. “Pat!” I heard Grace say. “What is that?”

I turned it off. “That is my imitation of an octopus,” I told her. “As for how it works, the answer is I squeeze the dial here on the belt.”

“How about shooting your whatever it is? How does that work?”

“Oh, that’s cool. I point my finger like a gun and move my thumb, just like a kid shooting an imaginary gun.”

“But how does that do anything?”

“Magic!”

“Oh, I get it.” Morena gave up.

“What about the explosions?” Grace asked.

“Side effects. The explanation I got was that the air is heated by the beam, causing it to expand briefly. When it collapses back, it makes the sound. Not really part of the weapon.”

Grace looked at me then broke out laughing. “The real thing must be disheartening for your opponents. Hope I stay on your good side.”

I opened my arms, and she moved the short distance between us. When she held me, I could feel myself shaking from the sudden drop in adrenaline levels. I sat on the couch where Morena had been when we arrived. Grace sat next to me. Simon joined us and sat on my other side.

“Now, Morena,” Simon spoke. “Perhaps you could enlighten us about what has just transpired.” He sounded like a man used to power, which I suppose he was.

“I came here just to tell Pat about Steve.”

“What did those men want?”

“Just a guess,” I put in. “Maybe they were looking not for me, but for my tools. They didn’t expect to see anyone here.”

“As good a guess as any,” Morena said. “You might want to find another place to stay.”

When the three of us were alone again, I said, “She’s right, of course. We have to go somewhere else right away.”

“Options?” Simon asked. I admired the way he brought his boardroom style to this problem.

“Well, here’s what I see. We could go up the coast and find someplace in Mendocino, or Fort Bragg. Or we could keep going into Oregon. Alternatively, we could go to Santa Rosa, where you could arrange to fly home. I’m worried about your safety. And mine, of course, but as you just witnessed, I have some ways to protect myself.”

I watched as Simon considered the possibilities. Grace looked like she was in shock. I reached out and pulled her closer to me, feeling her shiver. “Wait here,” I told her. I fetched a blanket and wrapped her up.

“I didn’t realize you lived such a dangerous life,” she said.

“This is new. I’m very peaceful most of the time. I don’t know who is after me or why.”

Simon had finished his ruminations. “Grace, I think we should follow Pat’s second option. We should go home. With luck, whoever is after her may not know of our involvement. Let’s keep it that way.”

Impressive. He was right, of course.

We had a tearful goodbye at the Santa Rosa airport. Grace held me longer than necessary. “Pat, this has been wonderful. I loved spending time with you, even with the long drives. I even liked the birding.”

“Don’t you mean *especially the birding?*”

That got a laugh. “I love you,” she concluded.

I whispered to her, “I love you too, Grace. This is not a one-act play. We’ll meet again. *Vaya con dios*. Go with the god neither of us believes in.”

Simon joined the conversation, “Pat, once again, I want to thank you for what you mean to all of us. You are a wonder. Maybe you are an angel.” He kissed me warmly. “You take care of yourself. Stay safe.”

They left me alone by the car, tears streaming down my face.

I drove back to Maid Marian’s house. She was delighted to see me after a long absence. I quickly explained the problem to her. She agreed that I could hide the VW van on her property and disappear for a while. “I think I will slip away during the night. That leaves some time to sample your latest horticultural efforts.”

If she knew what I meant about slipping away, she didn’t let on. We smoked some wonderful weed that let me forget about the day’s events. Then I retired to the cottage where I had spent so much time and fell asleep.

21. Hill Country Homecoming **July 19-25, 2018** **The Cabin Near Leakey, TX, USA**

Ah! I was home in the bed that Mark and I shared in the cabin near Leakey. Even better, Mark was lying next to me. I rolled over, deposited the backpack on the floor, and snuggled up to him. He mumbled something I didn't understand. I guessed it was along the lines of "not now." I felt safe and warm and happy. Not sleepy, though. I slipped out of the bed and changed out of my battle suit into pajamas. Wandering into the great room, I looked thru the windows onto the porch. It was pitch black, with thousands of stars in the sky.

I realized that one reason I wasn't sleepy was that I was ravenously hungry. I rummaged thru the fridge, but the leftovers were gone. In desperation, I fell back on my tried and proven remedy and popped open a cold can of one of the craft beers Mark had become fond of. It was a double IPA, which tasted even worse than the regular IPA. I drank it down anyway. Opening the door, I found a warm night outside and decided to take my second beer, fortunately not another IPA, while sitting in the swing.

A pale light heralded the coming of dawn. Without a watch, I hadn't realized how late it was. I rose from the swing and went back inside to find Mark coming out of the bedroom. "What time did you come to bed last night?" he asked. Then he took a good look at me. "Whoa! You've changed. What happened?"

"This is courtesy of your mother. She took me to a nail and hair spa she likes for a makeover. What do you think? Like it?"

"Takes some getting used to. When did this happen?"

"1993."

"Oh. Right. You were going to go back last night. So, you came back after I went to bed. I understand now. 1993? Wait, I remember. We met in High Island. You were with that Steve guy, a novice. We made love in Preston's cabin while he slept in a VW van you were driving. Haven't thought about that in a while."

"Want to hear the whole story?"

"Yeah."

"Fix me some breakfast and I'll fill you in. There's a lot to tell."

"Start the recital while I cook."

We moved to the kitchen. I sat on one of the bar stools and began, while he made buttermilk pancakes with sausage. Of course, he made coffee before anything, proving that he still loved me.

I told him about the kerfuffle on my arrival at the house in Boonville. He got excited just listening. "The suit seems to have worked well."

"It was very impressive. I did have a major bruise from the gunshot that hit me in the stomach. If I ever meet the inventor, I'll complain about that."

His manner changed markedly — pardon the pun — when I told him what happened next. "Birding! You went birding with *him!*"

“Yes. You told me there were no constraints so long as I always came back to you. That was last night, remember?”

“But months!” he sputtered.

“Get over it. You haven’t heard the whole story. You’ll like the ending. Don’t burn the pancakes.”

“Oh. Damn!” He quickly removed two of the pancakes. They were a trifle too brown, but I managed to wolf them both down.

Mark made two more while I continued telling him about my adventure. I ate those while he cooked another pair for himself. I was feeling much better.

When I got to the part about High Island, he realized that my companion was none other than David, the target of his jealousy. “So, Steven was David?”

“Right. Apparently, he can change names easier than most people can switch underpants.”

“So, he’s your paramour in that time?”

“Somewhat. You saw that he deferred to you.”

“Yeah. Why?”

“He told me that he saw how you and I looked at each other and knew when to step aside.”

“Wow!”

“It is always you, my love. There’s no one I love more.”

“My mother?”

“I love her too. Can’t I love more than one person at a time?”

“I guess I’ll have to put up with that.”

“Good, because I spent time with your mother shortly after our meeting in High Island.”

“What?”

I told him about Steve/David suddenly leaving and about my road trip with Grace.

“You took her *birding*?”

“With her it was also about staying at cute establishments with a good spa.”

He laughed appreciatively.

“Things got interesting when we returned to Boonville.” I told him about the second armed conflict.

“David is dead?”

“Technically, just missing.”

“But…”

“I don’t expect to see him again.”

He surprised me by giving me a big hug. “I’m sorry. I’ve been thoughtless.”

“You’re forgiven.” The kiss we shared made me hope that better things were in the offing. “Any plans for today?”

“Nothing that can’t be put off till later.”

The next morning, I asked Mark how to handle the two other visits to the East Bay. Carlo told us that I was present at his graduation from high school and Berkley. Now that I knew I was being actively tracked in the area, the question arose how to go there safely.

“Won’t your suit protect you?”

“Somewhat. It also makes me stand out dramatically.”

“Even if you turn the camouflage on?”

“That might work, but I would have to stand against a wall or something. If I just sat with the rest of the crowd, the camouflage wouldn’t be effective.”

“Is there a convenient wall somewhere?”

“I don’t know. Time for research.”

We retired to the office, where Mark set about searching for information about the area. In minutes, he had assembled enough photographs of Piedmont High School that we could create a 3D simulation of the area. “How about these trees?” Mark asked. “You could stand among them, disappearing until the time was right. Then somehow get down to meet with Carlo.”

“That’s promising,” I admitted. “There’s just that hard part at the end.”

“Calls for a diversion.”

“Yeah. Let me think about that for a while. Send the model to my laptop.”

“Done. Now, I have some actual work to do. I’m still working on the security setup for the Saudi prince in Houston. It’s trickier than it appears at first.”

I read all the newspapers from the time thanks to Mark’s access to the “morgue” of the Herald Tribune. I started by scanning for any mention of Piedmont High then expanded to any mention of Carlo or “the woman known as Carlo’s Angel.” After two days of tedious research, I found what I was looking for. I’d need some help to pull it off, but I knew where I could get it.

22. More Artistic License
June 1-4, 1993
Boonville and Piedmont, CA, USA

In the end, it was a small tidbit that caught my idea that gave me the info I needed. The story was about a “car bomb set by anarchists” that disrupted the graduation ceremonies at Piedmont High School. The trigger for the device, which caused a lot of noise, but no damage other than that to a VW Van which held the explosives, the trigger was a cell phone bought recently by *Hypatia Talbot* in Santa Rosa. Voila!

Naturally, I needed a crash course in explosives before attempting a loud but harmless explosion. Gordo, our local sheriff, proved to be an excellent source of information, provided I didn’t inquire too closely where he learned everything.

After I managed to go back to Maid Marian’s cottage, I started my little project. I called Charlie. “Charles,” I said when he answered, “would you help me on a project of mine?”

“Is it legal?”

“Mostly.”

“Cool. This afternoon?”

“Great. I’m at Maid Marian’s.”

When he arrived, I showed him the plans Gordo and I had put together. “The idea is lots of flash and smoke, with sound effects, but little damage.”

“Well, this should do nicely.”

“Glad you agree. Then, the van needs a new paint job. Something like Anarchists Unite!”

“I get it. You want me to handle the paint job.”

“And the holes to mount the thingies on the roof.”

“You got a good drill.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m assuming that we will have to make a run for supplies.”

“OK. Got it. Can I stay here?”

“Sure, but...”

“You still owe me an evening of bliss. Remember, you promised ‘after this was all over.’”

“Our one night was not enough?”

“Not even close.”

“OK,” I laughed, “but we have to finish this first.”

“Deal.”

That was all the incentive Charlie needed. He undertook the visit for hardware, armed with my card to pay for everything. Then he cut the holes in the roof of the van for the “dazzlers” I had brought with me. I managed to mount the devices without his help, leaving him free to apply his artistic talents to the van’s exterior.

I was busy wiring up the explosive devices in the back seat, a tedious and error prone task. I had to start over twice, but finally I thought it would work well enough. Marian loved the work, checking on it regularly when she brought us something to eat and drink. She was dying with curiosity, but I told her the less she knew the better. “You can read about it in the paper.”

By mid-afternoon on the third, we had everything ready to go. The last piece was two burner cell phones that I planned to buy in Santa Rosa on the way to Oakland.

We took a break and sampled some of Marian’s latest, which she called “Red Dragon,” a particularly potent strain. Some brownies, just the regular kind, helped our recovery from manual labors. Marian offered to cook something more substantial, but we declined in favor of a hot shower and rest.

Charlie showered first and emerged wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. It had been 25 years since I had seen him naked. Now, the scrawny 19-year-old had matured into a nicely preserved 44-year-old. “Nice bod,” I observed. Rising from the bed, I crossed over to him and pulled the towel off. “I see that all of you has been taken care of well.” I let my hand stray to where I knew it would work best.

Charlie helped me out of the tee shirt I wore as I dropped my shorts to the floor. I considered simply using the floor, but experience got the better of instinct and I led him back to the bed.

The sex, all three times, was better than I remembered.

The next morning, I took care of a few last-minute details, one of which was hiding my backpack in an abandoned well on the property where I hoped no one would look. I had to rely on the fail-safe mechanism to keep everything hidden. When faced with the loss of power, inevitable without sunlight, the bag closed up and changed color. It looked very much like a large gray rock.

Then with tearful goodbyes to Marian, and a lingering kiss with Charlie, I set off to see my protégé graduate from high school at the top of his class.

I picked up the two cell phones, paying with cash and activating them in the name of Hypatia Talbot. I thought of Mark as I did so. I hoped that everything went according to plan, and I could return to him soon.

I was early and I managed to find a good place to park the van: close enough so everyone at the event could hear and see the van “explode,” but far enough away to keep damage to a minimum. The ceremonies were scheduled in a park adjacent to the high school.

I had time to walk around the neighborhood, checking out ways I could run if the worst-case scenario made it necessary. The houses in the area were all large, with equally impressive yards, and serious fencing to keep the riffraff out. Running away was not a good option. I needed to rely on my camouflage.

After surveying the surroundings, I positioned myself in a corner of a wall of the bandstand where the ceremonies would take place. With the camouflage, I was essentially invisible unless someone bumped into me. Now, I had to wait. 90 minutes passed at a glacial pace, but finally, I heard Elgar’s **Land of Hope and Glory**. The graduates began marching in.

My young friend led the company. He had grown quite a bit in my absence and looked over the heads of the audience in what I hoped was an attempt to locate me.

Shortly after that, he rose to deliver the valedictory speech, one that I had read many times. I listened to the beginning. “We have all heard the adage, ‘if Life gives you a lemon, make lemonade.’ But what if life hands you a golden egg instead. We don’t have much advice for that situation. As most of you know, this happened to me. I won the lottery. Actually, a new friend of mine, who many of you call my angel, won the lottery for me and set me up, probably for the rest of my life.”

The rest was a combination of treacle and platitudes, but hey, it was a high school graduation. The bar is set low.

The second speech was delivered by a striking young woman that matched Carlo’s description of his inamorata in the headmaster’s office: Chloe. I saw from the way she casually brushed against Carlo when they swapped places that the romance had bloomed nicely.

Finally, after still more speeches, we got the moment when the graduates proceeded one at a time across the stage, receiving a diploma and handshake on the way. I was waiting for the right moment. Finally, I heard “Carlos Villareal,” and saw him approaching. He was within two meters of my hiding spot when I pressed the button on the cell phone. There was a delay of perhaps four seconds before a huge bang interrupted the proceedings. That was followed by the car alarm together with an utterly amazing amount of smoke coming from the roof of the van.

I heard screams from some in the audience. Dr. Lipscomb quickly grabbed the microphone, “Please head away from the seats. I suggest we all head away from the vehicle that exploded.”

He turned to leave as well, but as an afterthought handed the diploma to Carlo. “This better not be your doing,” he threatened. I switched off the suit and moved quickly to take Carlo’s arm. “Carlo,” I said to him, “I am so proud of you. I told you that you were destined for great things.”

Carlo smiled. “I knew you’d come.” He gave me a big hug. “We should get out of here.”

“No need,” I told him. “It was all for show. I wanted to be able to congratulate you and thought a diversion would be required.”

“You! Why?”

“I’m afraid that you’ll find out if we hang around here much longer. But let’s not follow the crowd.”

Chloe appeared at Carlo’s side. “Are you OK?” She asked breathlessly.

“Sure. Let me introduce you to my angel. Patty, this is Chloe. Chloe, this is Patty.”

“You mean you’re real?”

“As large as life and twice as natural.”

“Just like a Bandersnatch. Lewis Carroll.”

“Carlo, better hang onto this one. Smart and beautiful. Chloe, you probably already know that is a difficult combination.”

“Yes, it is. You must know from your personal experience.”

“Thanks. I have had an interesting life where I was able to avoid such stereotypes.”

“Lucky you.”

“Indeed.” I looked up to see several large men approaching the stage. “Trouble is coming. You two need to run away. Now!”

They looked at me curiously. “Now!” I repeated. This time it took. Carlo grabbed Chloe by the hand, and they took off in the direction of several police cars. I turned the suit back on and moved against the wall.

It didn’t work.

They had come prepared. I saw one of them flip down something that looked like oversized sunglasses. “Here she is!” He pointed directly at me. Infra-red vision. I had another complaint to the suit designers — if I ever saw them.

I was hopelessly outnumbered. The microwave field still worked. No one came within a meter, but I couldn’t go anywhere. “Can we talk about this?” I said as I turned off the camouflage.

“Yes, of course, Patty,” said Morena.

“Why am I not surprised? Which side are you on, anyway?”

“Mine, same as you. Will you come with us willingly?”

“I’d prefer not to.”

“I suspected that. I came prepared.” She reached back and one of her minions handed her a pair of tongs, extra-long ones like those used with grilling.

Using the tongs in a way that suggested lots of practice, she reached inside the field and turned off the ring on my belt buckle. Damn! I had told her that myself!

Two men grabbed me. One jabbed a hypodermic into my shoulder. I imagined I could feel it slowly flowing thru my body. I tried fighting it but lost the battle and blacked out.

I woke up in a small dark space. The space was moving, the trunk of a car. There was supposed to be a luminous handle to pull on to get out. Surprise! Someone had removed it.

The drug was still circulating in my system. I fell asleep again.

I woke again. Still in the car. How long was I out? Mark, I think I really fucked up this time. Mark?

Darkness.

23. Another Homecoming **July 26, 2018** **Near Leakey, TX, USA**

The sun was shining thru the door. Whoa! What happened to the trunk of the car? I got out of bed gingerly, unsteady on my feet. I stood briefly until the vertigo subsided. “Mark!” I called. Was he here? “Ambianca?”

“Yes, dear, I’m here.”

“Where am I? What’s the date?”

“You are in the cabin near Leakey. The date is July 26, 2018. You look terrible. I’ve sent a message to Mark. He made an early morning run to Uvalde for some supplies. He’s on the way back now.”

“Oh. I’m home.”

“Yes, love. Home.”

“How?”

“That’s a hard question. How about coffee first?”

“Oh, yeah! Is there some left over?”

“Based on what I saw, there should be at least two cups left.”

“Oh, Ambi, if only you could cook, you’d make a great wife.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to pour the cup yourself and nuke it for a minute.”

“I can manage that.” I proved it to myself, watching the time on the microwave count down to zero. The coffee would have gagged Simon, but I found it perfect.

“There must be something more to eat in this place.”

“Quiche,” Ambianca replied. “In the fridge. 25 seconds in the micro. Mark made it for breakfast, but you were sleeping in, so he just ate some and left the rest.”

“How long did I sleep?”

“Well, it’s now about 11:00.”

“I was drugged.”

“Oh. That sounds serious.” The music she started playing sounded like a bad soundtrack for a horror movie.

“Funny!” I said. “Enough with the creepy music.”

“OK. Just a joke.” She started **Moonlight Sonata**.

“Much better.”

“Want to tell me the story?”

“I’ll wait for Mark. Otherwise I’ll have to repeat everything.”

Silence except for the music.

“Are you sulking?”

“That’s an emotional state. I find all of them difficult to understand.”

“Could have fooled me. How long before Mark gets here? Never mind. I hear him now.”

On arriving, Mark said, “Ambi tells me you had a bit of adventure. No details, though.”

“Cut me another slice of quiche and I’ll fill you in.”

Over another slice and some fresh coffee, I gave them a rundown on the events. I left out some minor details regarding Charlie. Mark wasn’t going to let that pass.

“How’s Charlie? He’s the vet you helped, right?”

“Yeah. He’s doing well. Has a thriving commercial art business with clients from Santa Rosa to Ukiah and along the Coast.”

“So, you paid him for the work he did?”

“I covered his expenses. The rest he did for free.”

Mark stared at me until I cracked. “Well, a few favors.”

“Few, as more than one?”

“Chill, love. I came back here, didn’t I? As a matter of fact, I don’t know how I got home.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have my backpack.”

“So?”

“So, I thought it was the key to my shifts. Something from one time that has ties to another.”

“Interesting,” he said. “Maybe it’s the suit.”

“Well, that’s great. I was drugged and in the trunk of a car with that witch Morena in charge. I fell asleep. Several times, I think. I woke up here. I’m awfully glad to be home.”

“What does that woman want with you?”

“She saw what my technology is able to do. She wants it for herself. I think she’s not on anyone’s side but her own. I’m glad to have thwarted her, however unintended. I’m glad to be back here.” I smiled at Mark, as Ambianca began a playlist of mine called “To make love to.”

Mark said, “I get it Ambi, but I have lots of work to do today.” He turned to me, “Is later OK?”

“Anything is OK. I think I am still feeling the effects of whatever they drugged me with. What I am wondering now is how to deal with Carlo’s graduation from Berkeley.”

“Maybe this Morena woman will give up.”

“Maybe. I can’t count on the suit for protection, though. She knows too much about it.”

I decided to spend an hour today on my martial arts exercises. Maybe two hours. I wondered what would happen if I just didn’t go. I decided to think about that later.

24. Once More unto the Breech **August 25, 2018** **Near Leakey, TX, USA**

It took longer than I had planned to get into shape for the return to 1997. The exercises helped, but the mental component was missing. I kept replaying how easily Morena and her buddies had captured me. They were the only people to ignore the exploding van on the street. OK, maybe they recognized that it was fake. Maybe they were onto me from the time I bought the phones in Santa Rosa. All I knew was that she had me in her clutches, and I got home using technology I didn't know existed.

What else does the suit do?

I set Mark loose examining the suit. He found the main controls and software memory and downloaded that somehow. "This software is far out. It's orders of magnitude more powerful than anything I've ever seen. I'm afraid to mess with it."

"Understood. Can you find some features of the suit that we don't know about?"

"Well, I found a way to set the outward appearance of the suit. The stark white leather look is just the default."

"That could be useful. Where's the control?"

"Here, on the inside. I think you just push on one of these panels. See?"

"Nothing changed."

"Right. It won't work for me. Try putting it on first."

Once I felt the suit molding itself to my body, I relaxed. The effect was obviously part of the design. I pulled the left flap open and touched the panel for denim.

"Very nice!" Mark said. "In that outfit, you look like a Berkeley native."

I emailed Carlo using Mark's secure server asking for any memories he had of the Berkeley graduation ceremony. Turns out it was all a big blur. He had gotten engaged that morning and wasn't focusing on anything else.

That might be useful.

Mark and I sat up late into the night talking about different scenarios. Of course, we couldn't cover every possibility, but we discussed several that we thought might happen.

Finally, I thought I was ready.

"Remember," Mark said for the nth time, "Get to Berkeley. See Carlo. Congratulate him for everything. Then get go Boonville somehow and retrieve the backpack. Then zip home."

"Got it."

He continued, "I don't see how to apply Bloch's Paradox in this situation, but I think that since you came to Houston in 2001, and that's later in your timeline, then you must have survived. Break a leg." He left me alone. We'd discussed it. I would go to sleep in our bed. To avoid any distractions, he would sleep on the loft. We'd meet for breakfast.

25. Denouement
June 6, 1997
Berkeley, CA and Boonville, CA, USA

I wasn't sure where I would wind up but recognized immediately that I was on the bench overlooking Lake Merritt where I had first met Carlo. Well, first in one sense. Maybe *earliest* would be better. You get what I mean.

That made everything easier. I walked back to the BART station on 19th Street and caught a train to Berkeley. Early for the ceremony, I wandered around the center of Berkeley; found a deli where I bought a decent sandwich; felt better after eating something. I saw a store selling sports paraphernalia and bought a baseball cap with Cal on the front. With my new hair style, and color, I thought I looked quite a bit different from what Morena and her gang might be looking for.

The graduation ceremony was scheduled to begin at 13:00 in Zellerbach hall. Despite consulting several campus maps, it took me quite a while to find the place, so that by the time I got there, seats were mostly filled. I found a single spot near the back and settled in.

The program was as deadly dull as most such. Everyone was simply waiting for their son, daughter, whatever, to walk across the stage. Of course, alphabetical order dictated that I had a long wait before any Villareal name was called. I took advantage of the long wait to check out the surroundings, noting several potential exits should the need arise.

Finally, Carlo crossed the stage, receiving the diploma and handshake from the Dean or someone important. I was having trouble concentrating on what was happening. I saw no sign of Morena or her companions.

Shortly later, we finished the Z's, and everyone marched out. I found it easy to keep track of Carlo as he was a head taller than most of the crowd. Gradually, with a minimum of elbow jabs, I made it to his side. "There you are!" he exclaimed when he saw me. I smiled in response and closed the gap between us. I noted that he had traded in his blond, blue-eyed WASP girlfriend for a different model. The present company was equally beautiful, and no doubt intelligent as well, but decidedly non-WASPish. Clearly Latina, she had lustrous dark hair, equally dark eyes, and a figure I envied.

I gave Carlo a big hug. "Congratulations. Who's your new friend?"

"More than a friend, Frieda is my fiancée, as of this morning." He had a huge grin on his face.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Frieda," I said, extending my hand. She surprised me by giving me a hug instead.

"Carlo has told me about you. You're Hypatia, his angel or whatever."

"Guilty," I said.

"He told me about your stunt at his high school graduation, where you set off the fake explosion."

"Yeah. That was supposed to be a distraction to get rid of some people who were after me. Don't ask about them. Anyway, the distraction was spectacularly unsuccessful. The people I wanted to avoid were the only ones who didn't take the bait. It was a very unpleasant episode."

“I didn’t know that,” Carlo said.

“As you may recall, I told you to run away. I’m glad you complied. Those were not nice people. I’ve been scanning the crowd to see if they’re here. Don’t see them. I hope all that business is over.”

“You live an interesting life,” Frieda observed.

“Sometimes more interesting than others,” I agreed.

“Is this one of the interesting times?” asked a familiar voice behind me.

I whirled around. “David! I thought you were dead.”

He smiled broadly. “Well, David is dead. So is Steve.”

“It’s too complicated keeping track of your names. Why don’t you keep David as a middle name so I can keep calling you that?”

“A worthwhile suggestion.”

“Who is this?” Carlo wanted to know. His body language said much more.

“An old lover,” I told him. I looped my arm through David’s.

Frieda pulled on Carlo’s arm. “CV, we should get going. We’re going to be late for the party.”

“What? At 2:00 in the afternoon?” I asked.

She smiled. “It will take some time to get ready.” She winked. She had a strong accent, which reminded me of Spanglish from home.

“Have a good time,” I said. “Carlo, we may not see each other for some time. Remember our plan. Do you still have the photo?”

“Never leaves my person,” he said. “*Vaya con dios*, my friend.”

David jumped at the chance to display his ability with languages, rattling off much more Spanish than I could follow. Frieda answered him, “*Gracias, amigo*.” Another tug on Carlo’s arm accomplished her purpose. I hoped they had a great afternoon.

“I’ve seen you checking things out. I guess you are looking for Morena and her friends.”

“Exactly.”

“No worries. She’s history.”

“History, as in no longer extant?”

“No, not that extreme. However, her little escapade four years ago was not looked upon favorably. They were especially critical of the way she let you escape. Of course, the entire operation was rogue. When she followed up trying to spoof me, well, that was too much even for them.”

“I always thought she was bad news. She just wants my stuff for herself.”

“I could not agree more. She would not be a good candidate for the privilege of wearing that suit, unlike you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was intended as one. You are a remarkable woman, with amazing powers that you don’t seem to appreciate.”

“I’ve been told that before, but I am never sure what it means.”

“It means that what you do is always intended for mutual benefit. You are unselfish.”

“I doubt that.”

“No. I mean it. If you are not an angel, you’re a good first approximation, to use your phrase.”

“So, where is Morena?”

“I have no idea. Maybe one of the *black sites* the CIA maintains.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“You wouldn’t like the actuality either. However, for someone who has now betrayed me twice, I am not entirely unhappy about it.”

“Twice?”

“Yes. The trip I went on at her urging was another setup. I’ll tell you about it in the car.”

“Where are we going?”

“You choose.”

“Can we drive up to Boonville?”

“Is that where you hid your backpack?”

“Nothing gets past you, does it?”

“Not where you are involved, my love. Boonville it is.”

Much later, we lay together on the bed in David’s house, my backpack safely resting on the floor nearby.

David had been impressed when I retrieved it. “Looks just like a large rock.”

“Indeed. That’s by design. When it runs out of power, it assumes that look.”

“It’s incredibly good. How do you return it to working order?”

“Just put it in the sun for a while, couple of hours should do.”

“That’s very clever. You say an engineer in the future made it for you?”

“A man called Ron the Mechanic’s Son.”

“Wish I could meet him.”

“Not likely. I don’t expect to see him again, and I have a much better chance than you do.”

“Ah well. As the old saying goes, ‘Take the cash and let the credit go.’ I’ll be satisfied just to have you near me.”

“Are you a fan of Omar Khayyam?”

“Guess not. I have no idea who that is.”

“The supposed author of the poem with that line in it. Probably someone else. The translation by Edward Fitzgerald is supposed to be very inauthentic, but I love it anyway.”

“What is the main theme?”

“That life is short, and we should live it to the full. And religion is pointless or worse. However, there is one of the quatrains that seems to apply to the world in the future.”

“I suppose you can quote it.”

“Of course.”

“Ah Love! could you and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits -- and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!”

“Ah, now I see what motivates you. You feel that we have shattered the civilization of this time and are rebuilding after hitting the reset button.”

“Exactly. I haven't figured out what part all this plays in the remolding, though.”

“This part? You mean me?”

“And Carlo. I feel as though whatever force is controlling my life, my timeline, has some plan. Too bad I don't believe in God. Otherwise everything would make perfect sense.”

“Maybe you're wrong. Maybe there is a God, and you are one of his angels, just as people believe.”

“You mean *her* angels, surely.”

He laughed. “Of course, my love. But the real question you should be focusing on is this: When you make love with an angel, does any of the angelic power rub off?”

“I think you're mixing up the Rubaiyat with the Arabian Nights. I'm not like a magic lamp.”

“I think you're missing the point,” he retorted as he reached for me.

I held up my hand. “There's another quatrain that is more famous:”

“A book of verse beneath the bough
A flask of wine, a loaf of bread and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness
Ah! wilderness is paradise enow.”

“Enow?”

“Archaic: Means enough. But I think you're missing the point,” I said as I kissed him.

The next morning, we planned a picnic at Henty Woods, sort of for old time sake. We bought sandwiches and sodas at the deli in town and drove to the parking area. I still felt a shiver whenever I came to this spot, remembering my time with Mick. David, as usual, spotted the change in my aspect. “I remember him, too,” he said, “as well as young Mark Talbot.”

Inevitably, I thought of our meeting in High Island and subsequent amorous events. I was sure that was his intent, so I said, “Yes. I remember how kind you were to let me and Mark have a night together. However, he didn’t recognize you, so maybe it doesn’t count.”

“Oh, it counts. I just haven’t had a time to collect.”

“Got it.”

We left the food in the vehicle, a big pickup with a camper top. David claimed it was less conspicuous than the VW Van. *And here I thought all that was behind us.*

We wandered into Big Hendy Grove. David felt like talking, which was all right as there weren’t many birds to be seen, just the usual suspects.

“I’m curious regarding your idea of remolding. Will you tell me what the future is like?”

I considered it at some length but couldn’t see what harm could come of telling him. “A deadly plague swept all over the world, killing an estimated 90% of the population. What’s left is clustered into some city-states. One of them, Austin, is where I come from. It is the dominant city in the New Republic of Texas, which is loosely allied with the Kingdom of Tulsa as well as Norte Mexico.” I pronounced it as though it were Spanglish, which in many ways it was. David picked up on that immediately.

“Interesting. A Spanish adjective with an English noun.”

“Welcome to Spanglish, the main language in the region. That’s Spanish with all the hard parts left out for the Anglos, plus a lot of English words. The classic Spanglish phrase is ‘Where be the banyo?’ That’s spelled with an n and y. Most of the accents were dropped along the way.”

“Interesting, but don’t distract me. How does that work?”

“Better than you’d expect, thanks to the Library.”

“Something special about the library?”

“Yes. We have copied large chunks of the internet to computers in Austin. That happened right before the Collapse.”

“Did you have anything to do with that?”

“Well, I might have suggested it to the right people.”

“The kind of people Grace has in her little notebook?”

“Well, partly. Mark spent tons of the family fortune on the right projects during the Last Days. His daughter, Joan, ran the business. I suggested a few investments for her.”

“And what part do you play in this future?”

“Instead of thinking I’m an angel, they think I’m the Second Messiah. There’s a new religion based on me.”

“No shit! What’s it called? Hypatianism?”

“Usually just the New Church.”

“I like that. What are its teachings?”

“Cooperation is essential. Sex is fun. Too many children are a problem. Consensus is best. The founding document for the NRT is the Austin Consensus.”

“Does that work? Consensus?”

“Surprisingly well.”

“So, Mark is assisting you by making the right investments now for the future.”

“Mark and Grace, and probably Joan, Mark’s daughter.”

“He has a daughter?”

“Yes. Long story.”

“Involving Becky Bell?”

“You know about her?”

“I did some research on the Talbot family. The daughter, though, was not part of the narrative.”

“She appeared late, 1996 or so. Took over the business when Simon was killed.”

“Interesting. How does the rest of the family feel about that?”

“They’re delighted. She’s exceptionally good at it.”

“You said Simon was killed. I thought he died of a heart attack.”

“That’s the official story.”

“When is all this going to happen?”

“Good choice of tense,” I commented. “Fairly soon. I don’t remember exactly when Simon was killed. Very soon, though. Then my younger self is going to show up in 1998. Joan is in charge by that time.”

“A young Hypatia! What a treat that would be.”

“She was only around for a few years. Sad story, but with a happy ending.”

He seemed to be lost in thought for quite a while. Finally, he said, “Hungry?”

“Sure.” We altered our walk to get back to the truck quickly. Sat on a blanket in the meadow. After a while, the memories became too much. “David, I don’t think I can stay here. I keep thinking about Mick and your question of whether I could have saved him.”

“Oh, my love, I’m sorry. Let’s leave now.”

As we drove to the exit, we passed the spot where the accident had happened. The tears came unbidden. “I’m sorry,” I said before a real crying jag overcame me.

David pulled to the side of the road, parked, and took me into his arms. The sobs came even stronger before subsiding as suddenly as they started. David pulled a container of Kleenex from the glove box and handed me several. “Thank you,” I managed to say as I blew my nose repeatedly. “Let’s go home now.”

David was unbelievably solicitous the rest of the day. He held me close while we huddled together on the bed. I kept saying, “I’m sorry,” to which he always replied, “It’s my fault.” I wept a lot, for what I had to admit was no good reason. Still, the tears kept coming. Finally, David came up with the answer and called Marian for advice. She came right over.

“David says you can’t stop crying. I know the feeling,” she began.

“It’s silly, but I keep thinking about poor Mick.”

“I understand. We think of it as ancient history, but for you it is probably still fresh.”

“Yes,” I cried. “That’s what is so different. For me it was only a few years ago.” I looked up at Marian. She was old, with pure white hair. I did the arithmetic. She was in her 70’s, maybe even 80. “I forgot that you knew that.”

“How could I forget my own daughter?”

“Mine just showed up for the first time, well, will show up for me.”

“How did that go?”

“Great, I think. She was a bit confused. It was the first time for her. She wanted to get back as quickly as she could.”

“Maybe you’ll meet again.”

“We will, she said it will be in 2161 or so.”

“Wow!”

David came up bringing a pot of tea. “I hope I got the proportions correctly,” he said as he put the tray down. He brought me a cup of the brew, dark as coffee, with a generous amount of honey added. It tasted delicious.

“What’s in it?” I asked Marian.

“A mixture of herbs and black tea. It should help you feel better. Supposed to cure depression. The symptoms sounded like that might be the problem.”

I drank it down. I could feel warmth spreading throughout my body, especially in my special areas. “Maybe another?”

“That’s a good sign,” Marian said as she poured another dose. “This should help you sleep some. When you wake up, everything will be better.”

I was feeling drowsy already. After I finished the second cup, I gave it to David, who was waiting with a worried expression. “I think I’ll take a short nap now,” I told him. “Will you put my pack in the sun?”

“Of course, my love. Sleep well.”

I woke to see the backpack, nicely red again, sitting on the floor. David sat in a chair watching me. “Feel better?”

“Much. Thanks for taking care of my pack. I’m surprised you could carry it.”

“Apparently, the defenses were not activated when I brought it up. I found out that it is on now.”

I chuckled. “I’ll fix it.” I got up, discovered I was a bit unsteady, shook myself, turned off the pack, and went to the bathroom. My reflection in the mirror was disconcerting to say the least. I fumbled around in the drawer before finally locating a hairbrush. By the time I emerged, I didn’t look my best, but it was better.

David took me into his arms and nuzzled my neck. “I was worried about you.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m grateful for you and your help. I don’t know what I did to deserve that.”

“Don’t be silly. You know how much I love you, at least I hope you do.”

“I love you too, David.” I decided to put off until later a discussion of our future.

Later, after a delicious supper that David cooked, we went to bed early. I had some thought of a long night making love, but he wanted to talk.

“I want to discuss our future,” he said simply.

“Me, too,” I replied. “It’s very complicated.”

“I agree. But can we spend some time together?”

“Are we safe here, in this time?”

“I would like to think so, but I have some doubts.”

“I was afraid you’d say that. In that case…”

“I know that I am getting old. Maybe you are no longer interested.”

“Wrong!”

“OK. I’m glad to hear it. Maybe I can fix things for us, and we could meet in the near future. I could send you another message.”

“Would you settle for 2001? Mark says I showed up in Houston then.”

“Maybe that would work.”

“I’ll be older too.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Maybe you’ll have second thoughts then.”

“I doubt it.”

“I have a suggestion for how we deal with the very near term.”

“What’s that.”

“It starts by taking off our clothes.”

“Ah! Sounds right.”

When I awoke in the morning, I was alone. I went down to the kitchen looking for coffee. David was not there. I looked outside. The truck was gone. Fortunately, there was some coffee. I poured myself a cup and sat at the kitchen table. That’s when I noticed the envelope with “Hypatia” printed on the front. *Oh no! David! No!*

Inside, I found a note:

My Love,

I know that we can never be together as I want. I will have to make do with these little snippets of time.

I have a project to undertake. It may take years. I hope to see you in 2001.

All my love, "David"

Damn him! Damn! Damn! Damn!

I was tempted to try to follow him, but I knew he was too good for that. In a rage, I grabbed all my gear, put on the suit, lay down on the bed and stewed. For hours, I considered everything I could. Had I missed some signal? Was it my memory of Mick? "Maybe," a voice in my head said, "He means just what he says."

I drifted off hoping to wind up at home.

26. Marked Determination
July 27, 2018
The Cabin near Leakey

I was happy to wind up back in the Cabin, but still in a foul mood due to David's abrupt departure for some "project." Mark picked up on it immediately. "How did things go with Carlo's graduation from Berkeley?"

"It was fine."

"How about after that?"

"Not as fine."

He caught on and shut up.

I spent the entire day trying to think up anything to keep me busy. I spent hours completely re-organizing the kitchen cabinets, even alphabetizing the spices. Then I cleaned everywhere in the cabin.

By late afternoon, Mark had run out of patience. He gave me a hug from behind, kissing me on the back of my neck. "How about a break? Let's sit on the porch, drink ritas, smoke some grass and reflect on the perfidy of all male members of our species."

"Deal." I moved to the swing and waited.

The smoke was great; the ritas, pretty good; the conversation idle.

"Feeling better?" Mark wanted to know.

"Yeah."

"So, want to tell me about it?"

I gave him the Reader's Digest version.

"He dumped you? What was he thinking?"

"Maybe he didn't dump me. Maybe there's a reasonable explanation."

"Let's hope so." Abruptly, he changed the subject, "I picked up some steaks. What do you say I grill a couple?"

"Sounds great. Baked potatoes? Go for broke?"

"Salad?" he asked.

"OK. I'll zap some potatoes and fix some salad if you'll make dressing and cook the meat."

"All right, just this once. You know how I feel about microwaved potatoes."

"In the interest of time..."

"Got it."

I rummaged around the freezer and found a container of Tater Tots suitable for baking and changed the menu. Turned out to be quite a hit. "I have a secret vice: I love Tater Tots," he said at the end. "Good choice."

"Thanks, love. Please don't ever dump me."

“Oh, sweetheart, surely you realize that won’t happen. Not ever.”

We sat silently on the swing as the sky slowly faded into orange, before being lit by the bright rising moon. As always, the stars here were spectacular, particularly in summer, when the Milky Way stretched across the arch of the sky. Even the light of the full moon couldn’t completely extinguish the sight.

Mark reached an arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. “I have a proposal for you. Let’s live happily ever after, or at least as ever after as you permit, before your younger self shows up.”

“Yes I said yes I will Yes. Apologies to Molly Bloom.”

“We’re gonna love it.”

27. Covid-19 2020-2024 *The Cabin near Leakey*

Preparing for a pandemic is easier when you know it's coming two years ahead of time. That's especially true if one of the two people involved likes to plan things. Mark started by rearranging everything in the cavernous storage area behind the cabin. Then he ordered a commercial size freezer and filled it with everything that could be frozen for two years: meat, ice cream, frozen vegetables, a year's supply of frozen limeade, and so on.

I spent some time Googling various suggestions for what to stock, mostly from true survivalists. I was puzzled by the #SHTF hashtag, but as always, Google had the answer. It stands for Shit Hits The Fan. When Mark found out what I was doing, he insisted on setting up protective measures so no one could discover our location. I hadn't thought of that.

We also took advantage of my knowledge of the crowd behavior to stock up on items that proved to be difficult to find during the pandemic: toilet paper, for example. I also remembered the baking craze that came with forced isolation and laid in a huge supply of flour, yeast, and sugar.

Also, enough liquor for a convention, mostly tequila and rum.

That left only the problem of fresh vegetables. Mark rose to the occasion by joining another pandemic-inspired hobby, gardening. The soil in the area was poor for growing anything except cannabis, which grew — pardon the expression — like a weed. Mark ordered several raised beds from a supplier in Kerrville, together with enough soil to fill them. He engineered a fantastic irrigation system drawing water from the lake behind the dam. Solar energy drove a pump that lifted the water to a tank on top of the hill above the cabin. There, it trickled down to the garden and the cannabis patch.

I ordered enough books to get me thru the isolation period. Mark set up the world's best setup for streaming TV shows and movies.

Something I hadn't thought of: fuel for the vehicles and farming equipment that Mark had added to his gardening plans. Not a problem when you're filthy rich as we both were. A large underground tank buried beneath the garage at great expense held thousands of liters of gasoline. I wondered if that still existed in the future. It was so well concealed that we might have missed it.

The final step was installing the large metal shield so obvious in the future. With turtle mode a reality, I felt as safe as possible during a life-threatening plague. Knowing that I would live to meet Chloe in 2160 or so, helped.

By the time February 2020 rolled around, we were as ready as possible. That's when I thought of protection. Mark was ahead of me. "We have enough guns and ammo to hold off an army."

I recalled that Red had said pretty much the same thing when we were in the cabin the first time.

"Are you sure this is going to be as bad as you said," Mark asked me when the first reports began to arrive of infections around the world. "Can't we just close the country to keep infected people out?"

“That’s an interesting idea, but it’s too late. The virus is already here.”

The hardest part of the lockdown was dealing with each other. We found that the best approach was to stay apart during the day and getting back together for evening dinner. Mark used the daily occasion to work on a number of gourmet dishes. He frequently found some missing ingredient that he ordered online. Delivery was a problem. Most items wound up at the post office in Leakey, which to my amazement still functioned. They called up whenever they had packages for us, and Mark drove in to pick them up.

I established a regular routine: scanty breakfast with coffee, one hour of martial arts exercises, a one-hour birding tour, my latest book on the porch, an afternoon joint and Rita.

It wasn’t exactly a vacation, but it demonstrated that the wealthy had a much better time of it than the rest of civilization. Unfortunately, I knew what was coming down the pike.

After the 2020 election resulted in a Democratic victory, Trump supporters complained “widespread voter fraud” was the reason. That led directly to the attempted coup on January 6, 2021, when a mob of his supporters stormed the Capitol. Finally, on January 20, 2021, we had a new president. Joe Biden satisfied his life’s ambition. Mark thought to ask me, “Didn’t you refer to Trump as *the last president of the USA?*”

“Yes,” I replied. “Just wait.”

Sure enough, Trump decided to run again in 2024 despite his advanced age and, to all but his most avid base, declining mental faculties. The Presidential election produced another electoral college squeaker for Trump, amid reports of widespread voter fraud, this time carried out with ruthless efficiency by the Republicans. Trump began preparing to eliminate all the annoying checks on his power. His base also continued consolidating their own power locally.

Democrats controlled the House and refused to recognize the electors’ reports from states where the result was far out of line with pre-election polling. They began an investigation. Trump declared himself President.

Local militias kept setting up strongholds, especially in areas, such as Idaho, where the “Free Citizen” movement was a big deal.

Trump used this as an excuse to declare martial law. He instructed the Secret Service to arrest “liberal spies” and sent the armed forces into action. No one understood why he objected to the rebels, but then few people claimed to understand why Trump did anything.

Ironically, most of the rebels were middle-aged and beer-bellied men that loved to yell a lot and refused to wear masks because, you know, freedom. Disease ripped thru their enclaves at a pace previously unknown, quickly reducing the rebellious forces to a miserable, few mad and well-armed holdouts. The media quickly dubbed it the Rebellion of the Morons.

The Captain’s Mutiny, younger officers against the Generals, cut the Armed Forces into pieces, with the Patriots, who supported Trump, on one side against the Mutineers on the other. Sometimes, it was hard to determine which was which. We watched in horror from our safe redoubt as the combination of rebellion and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic created chaos. The economy, already in a huge recession, collapsed. This in turn led to a new force as the poor and dispossessed assembled into huge crowds protesting, well, everything.

Chaos won. As we lurched into 2025, the pandemic finally burned itself out, but at huge cost. The country was left with no functioning national government, an army that no one trusted, and a desperate mob searching for food in the wreckage.

The Last Days had arrived.

VI. Chloe:
The Voyage Home

1. Partings

December 1-16, 2162

Mendocino Coast, North America

“I just can’t do it,” Tinker complained. “All those new people. It’s too much.”

“I’ll be there with you,” Chloe said. “I’ll explain that you need time. I thought we meant something to each other. I thought you’d want to go with me.”

“Why can’t you stay here? Why can’t we both stay here?”

“It’s not an option, Tink. I have responsibilities. I was sent at great expense to find a way to travel to California and back. I am supposed to create trading opportunities where I can. I have done everything save returning to Austin. You’d like Austin. It’s turning into the center of our new world.”

“You don’t understand me. I don’t like meeting crowds.”

“I don’t care for that either, but I do it because I am expected to.”

“If you go back, they’ll welcome you as a hero. I’ll be the kid with Chloe. You’ll be *that* Chloe. You already are called that! I’ll be an accessory.”

“I want you by my side, especially on the trip home and later.”

“Chloe, there is nothing I want more than to spend the rest of our lives together, but not in Austin.”

Chloe thought for a long time before replying. “I want you always, but my duty demands that I return to Austin. We don’t have to leave for a couple of weeks. It’ll take that long to unload all the solar panels and such and reload with trade goods like wine and weed. Think about it. We’ll talk some more.”

Unloading and reloading was complicated by the lack of a deep-water harbor in the area. The ship and containers had been engineered with this in mind. The containers were built as small barges. The ship had a crane capable of lowering them into the ocean. It all worked perfectly but took time. The four containers sent from Austin by way of Mexican ports on the Pacific contained the latest generation of solar panels; some new networking hardware that would more than double the bandwidth; some food from the Austin and Mexican parts of the Allied States in a refrigerated container; and other goods, such as the contraceptive patches that always proved a big hit.

The containers were refilled with the finest wine from the Anderson Valley; local food, especially the wonderful local hams; a large amount of the cannabis the area was famous for; and some interesting technology from the city on the hulk of the USS Ronald Reagan, particularly several fuel cells ranging in size from small, portable units to those designed to power small buildings. That container also contained a secret known only to Chloe, Y and Z.

On the appointed day, the entire community turned out to see the Austinites off. Unlike Tinker, Y jumped at the chance to come with Z. They stood at the rail of the large ship holding hands.

Chloe waved to the crowd. She blew a kiss to Tink, who responded in kind. Then she turned her back, muttering, “Damn him! Damn! Damn!” She retired to her cabin and didn’t come out until time for dinner.

2. *Emergency Landing* *December 17-19, 2162* *San Francisco Bay*

The voyage was going to be a long one. Chloe occupied the time by checking out the plethora of seabirds visible from the railing of the ship. The ship moved at a stately 5 knots to allow maximum time for the solar panels to work. This allowed for sailing all night. For Chloe, it meant that it was easier to check on the flocks of hundreds of birds, mostly Sooty Shearwaters, to see if they held something unusual. It took her mind off Tinker.

Y liked the view when out to sea, and joined Chloe on the top deck, late in the afternoon of the first day out, near the cocktail hour. Chloe had authorized taking a small portion of the cargo as sort of a tip. That meant they stole several bottles of wine and grams of grass from the Mendocino container. They were on their first joint and first glass when Z joined them. She looked pale.

“Seasick,” Y informed Chloe.

“Sorry. Want something for it?” Chloe asked Z.

Z lurched over to the rail.

“Guess not,” Y said. “Hang on.” She walked over and put her arm around Z. Chloe couldn’t hear what she said, but it seemed to do the job. Z stood up, steadied herself, and walked over to where Chloe leaned on the rail.

“Maybe getting some air will help,” Z said as she gripped the rail. She took several long breaths and shook herself. “I’ll be OK. Sorry about you and The Tinker.”

“Thanks,” Chloe replied. “What’s your arrangement with Y?”

“We’re committed, but not formally.”

“That’s nice. I’m happy for you,” Chloe said.

Z hesitated for some time before admitting, “Anything I can think of to say is a platitude.”

“That’s OK.”

Chloe took a joint out, lit up, and passed it to Z. “This should help with the seasickness.”

They traded back and forth until it was time for dinner. Chloe and Y both said, “Z, you don’t have to...”

“No. Let’s go. I can at least keep down some bread, I think.”

Chloe woke to an alarm sounding at the threshold of pain. She threw on her suit in case it proved necessary and raced up to the bridge, where she reminded herself that technically the captain was. However, he appeared ready to ask for advice.

“What’s up?” Chloe said.

“Storm coming up from the south. Should be here by morning.”

“What time is it now?”

“One in the morning.”

“Do we have a more precise track?”

“Not until the next update, in a bit less than one hour.”

“Well, seems to me we should head for shelter. What are the options?”

“Poor and worse.”

“Fill me in.”

“As you know, we usually sail all night on the batteries and recharge them during the daylight. Well, we’re down to 40%, no problem ordinarily. Best shelter would be the Bay, which is 50 miles away. At our current speed we won’t get there in time.”

“And if we go fast enough to get there in time, we’ll run out of juice before we get there.”

“Exactly. I heard you was smart.”

“Thanks. I see the problem. I suggest you go balls to the wall for the Golden Gate. We’ll figure out some way to recharge the batteries.”

“Can you do that?”

“I think so. How much time before we run out of power at full speed?”

“Full speed is 20 knots, which would get us there in plenty of time. You have one hour to find more juice.”

“Got it. Keep us informed.”

Chloe raced down to Z’s cabin. “Z! Wake up! We need you?”

Y appeared at the door. “What’s happening? Z is out. Took some anti-seasick meds and conked completely.”

“We need her. This is an emergency. Help me.” She moved into the cabin and over to the bed where Z lay. Shaking produced a minuscule level of consciousness. “Z! Wake up! Now!”

Her eyes opened. “Wha...”

“Z listen. If you don’t wake up, we’re all going to die,” Chloe implored her friend.

Y joined in. She moved to sit by her lover. In a quiet voice she said, “Love. You need to listen. There’s an emergency on the ship. Wake up!” She kissed her on the ear and nibbled on the lobe. Z woke up.

“Well,” Chloe noted, “that worked. Z are you ready to hear what’s going on?”

“Yeah. Emergency?”

“Pay attention. We’re going to need your talents.” She then explained the problem.

“You’re thinking of the nuke,” Z said at the end.

“Yes. Do you have a better idea?”

“No, that’s the best. As a backup, we could start stringing together a bunch of fuel cells, but we probably wouldn’t get that to work in an hour. Let’s go.”

They moved to the cargo area, forward from the cabins. “Did you notice which one it is?”

“Better check. Y, got your magic light?”

“Right here,” Y replied, holding up a tiny but powerful flashlight. Moving among the containers, she checked the writing on each before deciding on one. “Here it is,” she called. They opened the container carefully and examined the interior. “This fuel cell is huge. Enough to power a building for 24 hours. If we try to use something else, we’ll have to move it.”

Chloe heard and raced toward the bridge to see who could help. “We don’t have a big crew; most of the ship is automated. I can’t leave now. Too dangerous.”

“I have an idea,” Chloe replied, racing back to her cabin. She returned in minutes with her laptop containing a stripped-down version of *Ambianca*, one without music. After watching Z, she felt comfortable connecting the laptop to the bridge computer. “OK, *Ambianca*, let me know when you think you can take over.”

“She’ll need my password,” the captain said.

“Just wait,” Chloe said. In less than a minute, *Ambianca*’s face appeared on the monitor. “Not as easy as *Endeavor*, but I can keep it on course for a while.”

“OK. Come on Cap. We have a heavy object to move.” They headed to the cargo area where Z and Y were busy connecting cables to the fuel cell. Y explained, “We can use the fuel cell to recharge the batteries if we can’t manage to move it.”

“Let me get in,” Cap suggested. “I can push on it while you pull.”

Fifteen minutes later, the fuel cell sat on the deck outside the container. Z immediately split to connect the cables to the batteries below deck as Y entered to look for the nuclear power source.

“This must be it,” she called. “It has one of those international symbols for radiation.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” the Captain wanted to know.

“It’s a small nuclear reactor,” Chloe informed him. “If we can get it working, we’ll have all the power you need.”

“Is it safe?”

“Are we safe now?”

“Good question. Let’s go back to the bridge.”

On the bridge, they saw *Ambianca* smiling from the monitor. “All looks good. Still on course for the GG, with about an hour to go. Batteries holding steady at 20%. Speed 20 knots.”

“Looks like we don’t need the nuke after all,” Chloe said. “We’ll make it on the fuel cell alone. We can examine the nuclear option in the daylight.” She set off to give the good news to Z and Y.

As they passed beneath the iconic bridge, the sky showed the first hints of dawn. Rain fell steadily, and the wind increased as they sailed into the bay, helped by the start of the storm surge, which was stronger than the tide.

Ambianca spoke up, “I think I should surrender the helm now. I’m not sure where we should go.”

“I’ve got it,” Cap replied. “We need to find a safe harbor. We can expect the storm surge to drive the water level higher.”

“How about one of the ancient dry docks?” Chloe asked. “They wouldn’t be dry now, would they?”

“Good idea,” Cap said. “There’s one down near Mission Bay. If we stick close to shore, we should be able to spot it.”

An hour of careful sailing located what they were looking for: ancient piers representing the borders of the old facility. They eased the ship next to the leeward pier and lashed up to some bollards that had managed to survive for a century or more. By that time, the rain fell in earnest, and the wind howled.

“I can keep watch,” Ambianca promised. “You can go back to sleep.”

That sounded like a great idea to the human members of the team.

3. The Nuclear Option

December 21, 2162

San Francisco Bay

The entire group: Chloe, Y, and Z plus the captain and single crew member gathered around the dining table for breakfast. The captain spoke first, “I suggest we introduce ourselves. Normally, the meal would have been with one of Chavez’s creations instead of emergency supplies. My name is Julio. Julio the Ship Captain if you want my entire name.”

The team laughed politely.

“I have met all of you, but Chavez has not. This lovely and lonely young lady is Chloe, more or less the boss of the expedition. The stunningly beautiful brunette is Y. Her athletic friend is Z. Perhaps you can tell us what your function on the team is.”

Chloe decided it was her turn. She decided to ignore the Captain’s descriptions of her crew. She’d speak to him offline about that. “Essentially, each of us has some special skills that we rely on sometimes. Z is a master techie. If she can’t figure out how our secret gizmo works, I doubt anyone short of her legendary grandparents could manage. Y is a new recruit from Boonville. We’re still feeling each other out, right, Y?”

Y nodded. “A good description. I am really just along for the ride with the love of my life. I’m glad to be alive today.”

Z said, “I want to discuss our new toy, but first I wonder if we can get an extra ration of coffee for today? I think we’re going to need it.”

Chavez spoke up for the first time, “I get it.” He had a pronounced accent that Chloe associated with people further south than Mexico. Chloe looked after him with some interest. Julio noticed, “He is from the Caribbean side. My nephew.”

Chloe nodded, then asked, “How good is his English? My Spanglish is rusty.”

“I’ll translate if necessary. It’s closer to old Costa Rican than Spanglish.”

“Good. Then lets proceed. First, I think we need to inspect the ship thoroughly. That was some intense weather we came thru last night.”

“Agreed,” Julio said. “That should be my task.”

“Good. Include an inventory of supplies if possible.”

“Of course.”

“Now, Z, what’s the state of the batteries?”

“We’ve had about 2 hours of sunlight so far. They’re up to 20%. We can use the that to power our tool and computers. I suggest we try to contact Austin and tell them what we plan.”

“Absolutely. You check the panels and make sure they are OK. Then try to link to the satellite. Then, Julio, you need to meet two additional members of our team. Ambianca, are you there?”

“Yes, my dear.” An image spoke from the screen on the wall. “I’ve been waiting for the power to be restored. However, I had enough to listen in. Julio, I am Ambianca. Chloe and I have been friends for a very long time. I take care of many things, especially anything involving networks.” She managed to smile reassuringly.

“JJ is another member, our science advisor. Ambi, what’s the story on JJ?”

“If we can connect to the grid, then of course we can get him from his home. However, I am afraid he is not available just now.”

“Let me know when we connect to Austin.”

“Of course,” Ambi replied. The image disappeared from the screen.

“All right. Z we won’t open anything without you. We’ll just examine it from the outside. Now go get us hooked to the satellite.”

“I’m off,” Z replied and left just as Chavez returned with the coffee.

“Thanks,” Chloe said. “Can you leave it here?”

Chavez put the tray down and spoke in rapid, undecipherable Spanish, to Julio.”

Julio explained, “I’ve told him to see to the inventory. He can plan our next meal at the same time.”

“Excellent, Julio,” Chloe said. “Please let me know if you need assistance. Otherwise, we will be looking at this.” She pointed at a box the size of large duffel. It had once been painted a bright yellow, but most of the color had worn off. Still visible, though, was the well-known symbol for radiation.

“What did the people on the Reagan tell you about it?” Y asked.

“They said, quote, ‘We hope you can figure it out,’ unquote,” Chloe replied. “They said they are sure it is not a bomb, but they’re not sure what it does. Z thinks it may be a portable power supply, which would be fantastic. Let’s see if we can find anything like a manual or control panel.”

Thirty minutes of searching turned up only a panel held on by four ancient screws when Ambianca announced that a link to Austin had been established.

The President’s face showed from the screen. “Slow connection,” Ambi informed her. “No video.”

“Understood. Good morning, Mr. President.”

“Chloe and Z. Great to hear you are OK. We saw quite a storm churning up the coast. Where are you?”

“We made it into the Bay,” Chloe told him. “We are tied up restoring the batteries. There’s quite a story behind that.” She spent the next hour bringing the Council up to date on their trading with the California states. Then, she finally got to the point.

“The nominal commander on the Reagan, someone known only as The Admiral, was ready to trade. Turns out they have spent years working on fuel cells to power anything. We have a container full of them in various sizes. We used one intended to power a small building to recharge our batteries during the night as we tried to get to shelter before the storm arrived. Probably saved our lives as well as the ship.”

“Wow!” Several members of the Council said at once. The President said only, “I assume you’ll provide details in your report.”

“Of course,” Chloe assured him. “There’s more.”

“Oh. Please go on,” The President allowed.

“As we were packing everything up, The Admiral told me that he had left us a present, a portable nuclear power device. He hopes we can get it to work. It’s a bit of a mystery. Quite old. Pre-Collapsian technology for sure. Readings on the power that we made — we are being very careful with it — show that it is still functioning.”

That caused numerous murmurs on the other end.

Chloe continued, “If it is still working after all this time, then it must have a long-lived source of radioactivity, probably something other than Plutonium. We found a reference in the Library to a proposed interstellar probe to be powered by Americium-241, which has a half-life of more than 400 years. It could still be alive.”

“Interesting,” was the general comment.

JJ took this opportunity to chime in, “I’ve done some calculations. This source could last for a very long time and still be capable of generating electricity. We definitely need to study it. I make this a high priority item.”

“Thank you,” The President said. “I think we all agree with that assessment, right?”

General agreement by all followed.

Y commented, “It appears to be Chinese technology. The few pieces of writing we have found are modern Chinese characters.” Chloe looked at her with newfound appreciation. She smiled and nodded.

“We’re going to look into it some more. We may need to use the energy to replenish the batteries. First, we have to find the outlet. There is a small panel on one side held in by some small screws. We think there must be controls and probably an outlet inside.”

“Just be very careful. When will you be able to contact us again?” Prez was growing tired of the meeting.

“We plan to stop in the Mexican port near what used to be Acapulco. We can unload some of the cargo there to deliver by train to Austin. We’ll check in then. That’s about 3000 km, so it will take some time to get there. If we get the power source working, we’ll probably up our speed to 20 knots or so. We’ll plan to sail for 24 hours a day, maybe with some short lulls. We think we can make it in 5 days that way. If we have to sail on solar power alone it’ll take much longer. Weeks.”

“Understood. We’ll look forward to hearing from you.” They signed off at the other end.

JJ was still there. His visage appeared on the screen. “This is fantastic,” he began. “I wish I had better connections. Ambi and I talked about a download, but it would delay your departure, and then we would have the problem of switching back and forth.”

“I understand,” Chloe said.

“However,” JJ continued, “I think you should spend some time checking out the Bay. You should have enough battery power to launch several drones, right?”

“That’s a great idea,” Chloe said. “Z has already sent them out, but we have to wait for most of the data. We have some lo-res video. It looks like Mother Nature has reclaimed the Bay Area. Marshes ring the shoreline everywhere we have looked so far. Sizable flocks of ducks and geese have arrived already. We’re thinking of some fresh meat for dinner.”

“Good to talk to you anyway, JJ. Maybe you could look into how to get some more Americium-241,” Z said.

“I’m on it.”

4. Making Waves

December 23-28, 2162

San Francisco Bay to Acapulco Harbor

The goose that Y managed to kill went well with reconstituted potatoes from the emergency supplies supplemented with some fresh vegetables gleaned from the garden remnants. It was easily the best meal in some time. Then, as they departed the Bay and headed south, Chloe finally managed to have some one-on-one time with Julio.

“May I speak freely?” she asked him.

“Of course,” he said.

“I thought your comments during the introductions the other day crossed the line. I’d rather you commented on Y’s contributions to the team rather than on her beauty. Moreover, your comment that I was lovely and lonely was very inappropriate. You imply that I am *available*.”

“You’re right, of course. I might not have been at my best. However, let me say now that I was impressed with the way you handled the emergency. I know that I am supposed to be the last word on the ship, but please feel free to speak up anytime. You are as competent as everyone says. Frankly, I was dubious at first, but no longer.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I like to rely on consensus. In this group, the best ideas can come from anyone, not just me or you.”

“Understood.”

They watched silently as the ship passed slowly under the Golden Gate bridge again and out into the Pacific. The plan was to hug the coast in case they needed to seek shelter again.

Z and Y appeared at the entrance very excited. “It’s working!” they said in unison. “Check the batteries.”

Ambianca spoke from the screen. “Can you throttle it back? We’re getting far more power than we need.”

“Yes. That’s the amazing thing about it. There is a small wheel as part of the controls, and a dial showing the power production. We set it at 10%,” Z said.

“I think we can do with 5% in that case,” Ambi said. “That should keep the batteries full and allow us to go at 20 knots.”

“I don’t want to go faster than that with this load. Not sure how safe it is going faster than that,” Julio said.

“Understood. We’ll agree that higher speeds are for emergencies only,” Chloe said.

Y said, “I’ll try to dial it down.” She returned in minutes with the report, “Should be about 5% now.”

“Right,” Ambi confirmed.

“OK,” Julio said, “Let’s crank it up to 20 knots. Acapulco, here we come. Ever been there?”

“No,” they all said. “What’s it like?”

“Well, it was a big tourist town before the Collapse. Trying to revive that reputation now. They’re making progress, but it’s harder with fewer people.”

Z wrapped her arm around Y’s waist. “We have all we need right here.”

Y smiled, then leaned over and kissed her.

Chloe said nothing. They all knew that she was not fond of big parties, and now especially, with Tinker left behind, she wasn’t in much of a mood for a celebration. With the ship sailing easily and the weather cooperating, birding along the rail was more to her liking.

The days passed in lazy travel heading south, finally reaching the port of Acapulco late in the year as the traditional holidays ramped up to full throttle. There they got a surprise.

The President himself and much of the Council were on hand in person to greet the team. “Congratulations! What a fabulous voyage. We’ve arranged trades for most of your cargo. We’re here for several reasons: First, to mark the successful completion of your voyage of discovery. Second, we are here to finalize entry of Mexico into the Allied States. The Techies have spent most of a week connecting this city back to the Library. Here’s a video we prepared for you.”

The screen switched from boring talking heads to a riotous event back in Austin, complete with fireworks.

Chloe spoke for all when she thanked several people for contributing to the great outcome. Champagne appeared, contributed by the winery at New Home. Chloe thought it was just so-so, but Y said it was better than any she’d had from the Anderson Valley.

After everything calmed down, The President coughed a bit apologetically. “There’s more. I bring gifts.” He gave a box wrapped in pre-Collapsian paper to each of the three women. He handed some Cuban cigars to the Captain. “This is a new delicacy. We were delighted to find that many people survived on Cuba. We have some very nice trades going.” He turned to the women, “Please open them.”

Each found a new suit. The President explained, “These are the latest from the Lab. A few minor enhancements that I’ll leave you to find. Please try them on.”

They were happy to comply. Some small partitions provided a little privacy, but the suits were so easy to remove and put on that only a matter of minutes was involved. They returned in the new clothing.

The President took a control from his pocket, put on some eyeglasses, and found the correct button. He pointed at each in turn and clicked. The suits reverted to the default setting. Prez was not done speechifying yet. “You’ll notice that each of you has a commendation patch from your exploits thus far.”

He pointed at Z and clicked. Her suit turned light blue, the Techie color. “As you can see, the default presentation is that of a Master Techie.” He moved on to Y. Her suit was a khaki color. “This is sadly what you get when you don’t know much about the person. This identifies Y as a Journey Level ... fill in the blank. We didn’t know what you might want to study. No hurry. Finally, we come to Chloe.” He dramatically clicked the control and Chloe’s suit turned into dark black formal attire. She looked confused, so Prez explained, “This is the costume used for formal occasions by members of the Council, the leaders of the NRT. Chloe, welcome. We look forward to having you share your judgement with us in the future.”

Everyone applauded. Chloe blushed and realized that she was expected to say something. “I am, to tell the truth, stunned. I certainly did not expect this. I am honored to have been selected and I hope I don’t disappoint you.”

Prez took back the microphone. “As a member of the Council, you are authorized to make any treaties that you believe are in the best interests of the NRT. As it happens, we have an opportunity. We would like to extend your voyage a bit. We’ve heard from the people in Panama. They’ve asked for our help getting the Canal working again. The Council thinks we should pursue this. Are you interested?”

Chloe looked quickly at Y and Z. Both gave thumbs up.

“Ready when you are,” she confirmed.

**VII. Hypatia:
The Last Days**

1. Bucolic Bliss and Separation 2025-2028 The Cabin near Leakey, USA?

Another honeymoon, right? Not exactly. When Mark and I married, we flew to Las Vegas on a private plane, something that sounds like Sci-Fi now. Tensions in the Middle East, which changed from threats and boycotts to actual military action dealt a death blow to the Fossil Fuel industry, which was already failing. Gasoline, when you could find some, cost more than 99% of the population could afford. Even though Mark and I were in the 1%, we still found that we had to stay in the cabin most of the time. Lack of fuel crippled the electric generation. Only those — like us — who relied on solar energy and had the good sense to have an electric vehicle could travel.

We continued with the routine we had established. I still practiced my martial arts for an hour each morning. I didn't expect to see any opponents, but it kept me in shape. After an hour, I set off on a standard route for birding. I submitted a list to eBird daily with the results of the walk, which, after a year, produced a nice checklist of what to expect. Mark began joining me on the walks before tackling the dinner plans.

It was not paradise, but compared to everyone else in the world, it was pretty good.

Looming over everything was the knowledge that we had a deadline to deal with. We knew when my younger self would show up, a complication that would force me to disappear. We both avoided discussing that.

I grew fond of Mark's culinary skills. Could he be as good as Idell I wondered. Was it too late to arrange a cooking contest between the two? I had lost track of Idell. Grace had left her the house in Houston as a bequest, which was the subject of a lawsuit. The property had restrictions designed to prevent blacks from owning in the subdivision. David took special delight and rounded up some of the best legal minds to defend the choice. The issue turned not on the obvious racism involved, but whether transfer of the title amounted to a sale. The trial would have proven outrageously expensive for most litigants, but not the Talbot family.

Ultimately, Idell was acknowledged as the rightful owner subject to the stipulation that current family members should always be allowed to reside there. That suited Idell fine. "I need someone to cook for."

When I called Idell to suggest it, she demurred, "Oh, what a nice idea, but I don't think I am up to it these days. My arthritis makes it hard to prepare a big meal. Colette does most of the cooking these days. Why don't you and Mark come for a visit?"

So, we did, taking a chance on recharging the EV. We had a wonderful evening. Mark expanded on Idell's Christmas dish by producing the classic English meal of roast beef with Yorkshire pudding. Colette showed off a new way to cook Brussel sprouts where they all came out nicely caramelized on the cut side. Her dessert offering was Charlotte Russe, which received rave reviews. We decided the contest was a draw. If only Grace and David had lived long enough to enjoy it.

We told everyone of our plans to separate before young Hypatia showed up at the cabin so they wouldn't be concerned about reports that Mark and I were struggling.

After spending a week back in Houston, we retreated to the security of the Hill Country to wait for the end of civilization.

2. Carlo's Story

June 6, 2028
Kerrville, TX

The text sent via WhatsApp, supposedly tamper-proof, was succinct.

Must meet. Kerrville. YO. Carlo.

Mark was gone, of course. We were in the process of splitting up, putting on a show for the neighbors. Reluctantly, I told Ambianca to close the place up and got into the truck. I hadn't driven in ages, but I think I did OK. I was familiar with the route. It took about 90 minutes and I pulled into the parking lot of the Y.O. Ranch Hotel, one of the easiest places in Kerrville to find.

I texted Carlo, "In parking lot."

The reply came immediately: Rm 406

Why did I feel like a woman sneaking out on her husband? Was this all part of Mark's games?

I knocked on the door of 406, not sure what to expect. I did not expect to find Carlo and five friends. At least I hoped they were friends. I decided to ask, "Are we all friends here?"

"Absolutely. Please come in, Mrs. Talbot." I identified the speaker as the Head Honcho. No one seemed ready to challenge him for the floor. The years had not been kind to Carlos, who looked haggard and overworked.

"These are people that I work with," Carlo explained. He offered me their names, but I didn't bother trying to remember them. After David, I was suspicious of people's names anyway.

"What's going on, Carlo?" I asked.

"We're here to warn you. About a pandemic," Head Honcho interrupted.

"What, is Covid-19 coming back?"

"Worse."

"What do you expect me to do about it? I'm not a superhero."

One of his friends spoke up. "Please, Hypatia. May I call you that. It's such a lovely name. I guess it is homage to the famous Librarian of Alexandria."

"No doubt. She was so remarkable that even *men* wrote about her."

"Please have a seat. Would you like something to drink, or eat? The room has the usual assortment."

"Is there coffee?"

"How about it, Frank? Any left?"

Frank shook the pot and his head.

The Head Honcho glared at Frank. "Why don't I fix another pot?" Frank said, setting about the task.

Head Honcho began. "Everything we tell you is highly classified. We are breaking several laws here. We rely on your absolute discretion."

“I see.”

“Carlo vouches for you. He hints that you are an angel.”

“Carlo,” I said, “surely not.”

He appeared abashed and shrugged.

“I’m not,” I assured them.

“It’s not important. I’m going to tell you everything regardless. If you pass it on, we’ll probably all be killed.”

“Do I get a choice?” I asked.

“You will be better off if you hear what I want to tell you.”

“OK. Proceed.” *Please not a PowerPoint!*

“There is going to be a new pandemic in a few years, much worse than Covid-19. That was the best Mother Nature could provide in her attempt to rid the world of a dangerous pest, us. As it turns out, we are better than Mother Nature. We, not us personally, but, never mind that, studied the SARS-CoV-2 in depth. The reason it was so contagious was because most people who were infected weren’t really sick. Only the other 20% were reported on. We enhanced that technique. There are no symptoms until a certain amount of time has passed. The length of time varies randomly. Cool, huh?”

“So, you’ve engineered the super-virus.”

“Not us. Another group at Dietrick. *Shit!* I wasn’t going to tell you where we work.”

“I got it. Keep going. There’s another group at the place that cannot be named.”

“Our job is defense, not offense. We are trying to develop a vaccine for whatever they throw at us. We’re pretty good at it. But this virus has some special properties. It lies dormant for a long time, until something triggers it. Usually, the trigger is a second infection by the virus. Then it begins destroying its host. By the time any symptoms appear, it is far too late to prevent the virus from spreading.”

“Interesting. So, you had trouble creating a vaccine. Go on.”

“Until now. We duplicated the way the virus works. We created an anti-virus that has no symptoms. A retro virus, it inserts itself into the host’s DNA and waits. When the deadly virus appears, the vaccine is ready to flood the body with defenses. The vaccine spreads the same way the virus does.”

“I see. Well, I don’t see what you need me for.”

“No. You misunderstand. There is nothing you can do. There is, however, something we can do for you.”

“I’m listening.”

Carlo joined in the conversation. “Hypatia, I owe you everything. I know that you are not an ordinary person. I want to save you from the apocalypse. The world needs you after we press the reset button.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Please do not make light of this. I have risked everything, including my life, to repay you.”

“Carlo, please. I have never asked anything of you.”

“I know. That is what is so remarkable.”

“Carlo thinks you’re a time traveler,” Head Honcho said.

Carlo agreed, “That was how I could explain things, like how you don’t age like normal people. Though I will say that you seem older today than before.”

I had to laugh. “Yes, Carlo, I do age, and I have since I last saw you. As have you.”

“But —”

“I am not a time traveler in the sense you mean it. I cannot simply go back in time and change things.”

“But...”

“However, you are correct that I sometimes age in different times. I still get older, but some of the time is spent...elsewhen, such as 1985 and 1993. I did not age much then.”

“It didn’t make sense. It still doesn’t. Why did you come to 1985?”

“Because you came to me in 2018 and told me that we’d met then. Well, not exactly, we had to do some research.”

“So, I was the cause of everything that happened?”

“Pretty much.”

One of the back benchers asked, “How did you rig the lottery?”

“I didn’t. I just bought a ticket.”

“So, are you God or something?”

“Maybe something; definitely not God.”

“What does that do with anything? Here’s your coffee.” Frank had finished his chore.

“Good question, Frank. I don’t think it has any relevance. Thanks for the coffee.”

He nodded, “You’re welcome.”

The coffee was the quality you would expect from a machine in a hotel room, wretched. I should have asked for tea.

“Anyway, to continue,” HH said. “A few weeks ago, we had a problem. Carlo says you may know what we should do.”

“Please, go on. I am listening.”

“We pride ourselves on how quickly we can come up with a vaccine, technically we call it an antidote, for the latest gadget virus the other guys turn out. Often within a couple of months. We still don’t have a fully effective vaccine against the mosquito-vector virus, MVV-28A.”

“Yet?”

“Yet, we have a candidate. The big boys want to know if it is safe. They scheduled a test. Near here. A place called Medina.”

A felt a chill. “Why there?”

“Not many mosquitos. Few people. It’s not likely to get out of hand. Don’t get excited. It’s not going to kill anyone. We hope. It’s something new.”

I gestured for him to keep talking.

“We used the technique developed by the Mosquito-Vector group to infect mozies with the anti-virus.”

“Brilliant. I trust you did some preliminary work.” My voice had a healthy dose of acid.

“Of course. We had mouse trials. Volunteer tests. But we can’t test the distribution mechanism if we tell people what’s going on.”

“What about Human Trial Ethics, all that stuff?”

“The decision was made way above our collective grade level.”

“Wow! Who — never mind. Why?”

“To rid the world of a major environmental hazard.”

“Us?”

“You got it.”

“OK,” I said. “You have my attention. You say this engineered virus is going to kill everyone?”

“Not everyone. We estimate 90%. Only the people with the best immune systems will survive it.”

I knew that the plan would work, but I persisted, “Who decided this is the right thing to do? You?”

“No, but I know the justification used.”

“Please tell me.”

“Let me ask you first. Where do you think the world is headed? What we’re doing now is unsustainable.”

“I agree.”

“The alternatives seem to be starvation, armed conflict, or...”

“The least evil. Did it have to be 90%?”

“That’s just a guess. Nobody really knows.”

“I see.” I said nothing, waiting on him to speak first.

Finally, he did, “Now, here’s what you need to know. We were supposed to test with a dummy vaccine, one that we can find with a blood test, but not the real thing. Got it?”

“I see. So, the test virus would cause some antibodies that you can test for.”

“Exactly.”

“But you used the real thing instead.”

“Yes! Carlo said you knew everything.”

“OK. So, tell me exactly what the problem is.”

“Well, to begin with, we couldn’t get the dummy to work with the mosquitos. So, we used our latest effort instead. The test was supposed to be harmless. But we didn’t know one of the women was pregnant.”

“And you don’t know what might happen.”

“Yes. We met her. She talked on about angels. Says one has visited her. Showed us a picture.”

“Of me.”

“Carlo recognized you right away.”

“So, you want me to...what?”

“I don’t know. Watch her? Wait?”

“What’s the worst case?”

“Worst case, she has no protection. Protection from the virus.”

“They’re going to test the virus in the field?”

“Already have. We tested both the virus and the anti-virus at the same time. But, if she’s pregnant, we just don’t know what might happen. Too many factors: did she get bitten by one of our mosquitos? Too complicated. We were rushed into this for reasons that don’t make sense to us.”

“I understand,” I said. The virus would kill Red’s mother. My younger self had adopted the infant. There was nothing I could do. Those events had to take place. It was history. I also understood for the first time why Lily, Cammy’s wife, succumbed to the disease. She must have been pregnant also.

“I will observe but not interfere,” I said after some hesitation.

“Wonderful. Will you contact Carlo if necessary?”

“Yes. I will try to contact Carlo. The way things are now...”

“OK. Thank you, ma’am.” He gestured to his cadre. They all left. Carlo lagged behind.

“Quick! Take this.” He put a packet in my hand.

“This is my personal effort; the others don’t know about it. I think it will be effective against the BIG ONE.”

“What do I do?”

“Just take it with a glass of milk. Then it will be in your system. You’ll immunize anyone you come into close contact with. You can spread the vaccine just by living.” He turned to go.

I grabbed Carlo before he got away. “Wait!”

“I’ll be right down,” he called to his companions.

“I need to tell you something. Fort Dietrick will be destroyed any day now, along with several other military sites. I don’t know the exact date. One of the militias launched a missiles with tactical nukes. Designed to completely obliterate everything. Don’t go there. Think of some excuse.”

“Where should I go?”

“Go to Austin. Wait for a younger Hypatia to show up. Go where she goes.”

“So, you really are—” I hushed him. “Carlo, you must never tell anyone. I mean it. Stick with the angel version.” I kissed him on the cheek. “*Vaya con Dios, Carlo. Vaya con Dios.*”

“*Adios, mi angelita,*” he replied. He closed the door behind him. I waited several minutes to give them time to disappear before I returned to my truck and drove back to the cabin, where I completed plans for my disappearance.

3. *Untimely Reunion* November 19, 2001 Houston, TX, USA

I knew immediately that my transfer had worked. The room was dark, but the bed felt comfortable and familiar. There should be a lamp on the bedside table. I turned it on and found, as I had suspected, that I was back in Mark's bedroom in Houston.

A clock on the table read 6:30, which I hoped was in the morning. I got up cautiously, glad that I had fallen asleep in my clothes, and crept down the darkened stairs into the kitchen, where Idell was just beginning to fix breakfast. I didn't want to frighten her, so I scuffed my feet to make some noise.

She turned in my direction and stared at me. "Hypatia? Is that you? I didn't know when to expect you. You just told me 2001. I've been waitin' all year." I noticed the lost g, which I guessed came after Simon's death in 1996. He would never have accepted such lazy language if he could hear her. Personally, I found it pleasant.

"Yes, Idell, it's me. I'm hungry enough to eat the tablecloth. However, I'm sure you have something better."

She gave a polite laugh before replying, "How about some bacon and eggs. Take me a few minutes."

"Coffee?"

She pointed to the machine in the corner. "Just finished brewing."

After the first cup, I felt better. After the bacon and eggs, perfectly done, she even remembered how I liked them, I felt confident enough to start asking a few questions. "I don't mean to sound stupid, Idell, but can you tell me the date?"

She told me. It was the Monday of Thanksgiving week in 2001. That was a just two months after the attack on 9/11. How long did it take for things to return to normal? I couldn't remember.

"How is everyone coping?"

"Oh, we're doing fine. Rest of the world, maybe not so much."

"Understood."

"Mark's not here?"

"No. Spending all his time at the cabin in Leakey. They're still trying to sort out the disappearance of Hypatia and the baby."

"Still?"

"Looks like murder/suicide, least that's what they're saying." I noticed that Idell had cleaned up her diction. She was probably worried that I'd rat her out.

"That sounds dubious to me." *And I should know!*

"Nobody here believes it. The plan is to drain the lake on the property and look for bodies. After Thanksgiving."

"Anyone coming here for dinner then?"

“Just Joan and her latest boyfriend.”

“Grace here?”

“Oh, sure. Go wake her up. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see *you*.”

“I think I will surprise her.” Curious that Idell didn’t seem amazed to see me just appear without coming in the door. And she called me Hypatia. I planned to ask Grace about that.

“Who’s there?” came the call from the bedroom.

“It’s Peppermint Patty.”

It took Grace at least 5 seconds to get out of bed and open the door. She looked quite a bit older than the last time I saw her. She must be close to 70 now. I was older as well, but probably only 50 something.

She grabbed me and hugged me. “Oh, Patty! You told me, but I wasn’t sure what to think. After I figured—”

All the memories of our short time together came flooding back. I kissed her.

Then she kissed me back.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t feel that way,” I said.

“I’ve imagined this moment, dreamed of it for years. Ever since Simon...”

She gathered herself. “So, going to tell me where you’ve been, *Hypatia*?”

“You figured it out.”

“I did when I thought about the necklace you gave me. I saw the other Hypatia, the young one, wearing it. At first, I thought she had taken it from my jewelry case, but mine was still there. It all clicked. After all, she, the younger you, told me she was from the future. Well, if you could come from our future to here, maybe you could go to our past as well. Bingo! I want to hear it all.”

“That necklace is important,” I told her. “Don’t sell it. Ever. Give it to someone when you think it right, just as I did with you.”

“I understand. It’s important in the future.”

“And the past.”

She nodded.

“Other than that, there is surprisingly little to tell. How about over breakfast?”

We sat on the patio by the pool. The morning had been cool, but now it was warm enough to be pleasant.

“I’ve been living with Mark. In Leakey.”

“Whoa! How is that possible? He’s been here most of the time.”

“We lived there from 2018 until recently, 2028. I had to leave because young Hypatia is about to show up. She doesn’t know about Mark and me. I’m the other woman in a strange way.”

“Where am I while all this is going on?”

I didn’t answer, unsure of just what to tell her.

“Never mind, I get it. Do you know the exact date?”

“Approximately. I know exactly when Mark died. I was with him.”

“What a strange life you lead.”

“I couldn’t agree more. After our adventure in California, I was sure that woman, Margaret or whatever, would come after me. I could be the most valuable *asset* they ever had. I had to go somewhere, and I knew that the other Hypatia was not going to be around for a while.”

“You and Mark are...”

“Husband and wife, though sort of by proxy. He married the young Hypatia but spent more time with the older one.”

She laughed, which got me tingling again. What would it be like I wondered?

Grace looked at me, “Exactly what I was thinking.”

It was my turn to laugh.

“Idell must know,” I said later as I lay on her breast. It was softer than I remembered, but her nipple had been as responsive as ever.

“I told her. You didn’t say anything about keeping it a secret.”

“True enough. So long as TV cameras don’t show up, I guess it’s OK.”

“How did you know, about Idell?”

“She didn’t seem the least surprised to see me waltz into her kitchen without coming thru the front door.”

“She told me she’d been expecting you.”

“I remember telling her in 1997. I hear Joan is coming for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Yes. We may as well let her in on the secret, right?”

“She’ll probably guess.”

“Oh, fun. Yes, let’s wait for her to bring it up.”

“Grace,” I said getting serious. “How do you want to play this? You and me.”

“I think you called it *friends with benefits*.”

“True. I did.” Sheepish grin.

“You know, you’re pretty hot for 70 whatever,” I said.

“I used to claim I put the *sex* in *sexagenarian*. Now, I need a new slogan.”

I laughed and she joined in. We just looked at each other and smiled. We let the silence lengthen.

Finally, I said, “There’s Mark.”

“Yes.”

A strange idea came to me. “It’s funny, but we’ve always lain together this way. What if I switch sides?” I moved over so I was lying on my left side.

“Much better. I have my right hand free.” I demonstrated by stroking her leg.

“The answer is yes,” she said.

“You’ve become a mind reader,” I said, as I let my hand slide lower while I moved toward my favorite breast.

4. Holiday Meals November 22, 2001 Houston, TX, USA

The family gathering late in the afternoon of Thanksgiving Day was both bigger and smaller than I expected. Grace sat at the head of the table, looking smart and elegant in a sleek gown with vaguely Chinese decorations. Mark, an unexpected addition, sat on her right. Joan, looking like a supermodel in a custom dress, took the chair on Grace's left, leaving me sitting alone at the *other head* of the table. Joan's BF was not in evidence. We had all partaken of some of the best Hill Country Gold cannabis in a warmup to the meal and were feeling no pain.

After serving us traditional turkey and dressing, with rich gravy of course, side of green beans with bacon sprinkles, a small salad of lettuce and avocado with a few slices of ruby red grapefruit, Idell agreed to join us, at my suggestion. I sat her on my right and offered her the first glass of some Gewürztraminer wine from California's Anderson Valley, home to Boonville. Idell took a small amount, then passed the bottle around. No one else was so abstemious.

Grace and I smiled at each other when we noticed Joan sneaking glances at me trying to figure out where I fit in to the family. Mark noticed as well and gave her a hint. "Patsy is an old friend of mine who straightened me out after your mother, Becky Bell, and I..." *Am I the only one who caught straighten me out as a double entendre?*

"I was younger in those days," I said.

"I'm missing something," she replied finally.

"I think you mean the pumpkin pie, right?"

I got a laugh from everyone save Idell, who jumped up and fetched the pie from the kitchen.

I caught Mark's eye and winked. He smiled. Did he want to resume conjugal relations I wondered? *Awkward!*

Joan turned to look carefully at me. I saw her eyes widen in recognition. She erupted with, "Oh my God. You're...you're Hypatia!"

"What?" Mark said. Then he thought about it. "That explains a lot. About Patsy O'Brien in 2018. Why then, by the way?"

"I needed to do some research. The easiest way to do it was to use the Internet. I guess my subconscious decided on that time."

"I want the whole story," Joan jumped in.

"It's long," I told her. "Why don't we have dessert and coffee first. Then we can enjoy the nice weather and listen for Screech Owls at dusk."

Idell served the coffee, then excused herself. "I'm just a trifle tired," she explained.

"Only a trifle?" I asked. "Maybe we could all sleep late tomorrow morning and give you a break."

"Great idea," Mark said. I think he had an idea where I would be sleeping. I looked at Grace, who gave me a very slight nod and a knowing smile.

“What happened to your boyfriend?” I asked Joan to start the conversation on the patio by the pool.

“Alas, he preferred spending the holiday with *his* boyfriend.”

“Oh. That sounds like a complication.”

“Indeed. I plan to use the Gordian Knot solution.”

“Poor guy.”

“Fun while it lasted. I guess.” She looked at me and considered whether to ask her question. Then she decided, “Do you like fucking younger men?”

“And older, and my age exactly.”

“Good answer. I’d like to find one that wasn’t out for the money.”

“Well, you shouldn’t focus so much on making more of it.”

“Touché.”

“So, where are you on the list?”

“Who knows. Top 100, but still way behind Oprah, not to mention the Queen of England.”

“Well, as for her, she’s living on the wealth of generations. Oprah, though.”

“Yes, she deserves it.”

“Well, someday you’ll be the richest *woman* in the world. Not sure of the gender-neutral list.”

“Something to look forward to. I took your advice on Google. Doubled up our stake.”

Mark joined us. “Got some more weed?” he asked.

I pulled another joint out of my pocket, which he lit and passed around.

“So, what’s your preference on sex?” he asked. “Young, old, what?”

Joan and I both laughed.

“That would be telling,” I replied.

Grace came out of the house. “I loaded the dishwasher as a surprise for Idell,” she explained. “What did I miss?”

Mark handed her the joint, which she accepted with alacrity. “Ah. Is this HCG?”

“Hypatia here claims it is.”

“One of the best years in recent memory, for cannabis that is.”

Joan was curious. “You mean this is weed from the future?”

“Yes, crop of 2026.”

“How does that work? How’d you get it here...uh, *now?*” she persisted.

“Magic,” I replied.

“Show her the backpack,” Grace suggested.

I retrieved it from the house and showed it around after disabling the anti-theft. I waved my hand over the top, which popped open in response. “Wow! Way cool.” was the reaction from Joan. “How does it work?”

“Have you heard of RFID?” I asked.

Joan was familiar with the technology. “I looked into it as an investment, but...”

“After people figured out how to use it, it was everywhere,” I noted. “The chips themselves are a commodity product. The real magic is figuring out how to use them.”

“Exactly. I never located the kind of investment I prefer, one that is guaranteed to make you tons of money. Like Google that you tipped me off about. Once it became clear that the Internet was for real, I got us into some other good ones, Amazon mainly.”

“Good for you. No wonder you’re on the Richest Woman list.”

“But, back to RFID. What has that got to do with the backpack?” Joan was into her data gathering mode.

“I have an RFID chip embedded in my hand. All the academics in 2086 have it. Actually, usually we have a backup in the other hand.”

Mark chimed in, “So, the backpack has a reader that senses the chip in your hand together with a processor to open it, etc. Very clever.”

“The best part is that items in the backpack stay there when I wind up in a different time. Ron the Mechanic’s Son figured it out in the future. I don’t understand it at all, but somehow it depends on quantum entanglement.”

“Interesting,” Mark said and disappeared into his head for some time. We had all forgotten about it and were working on the marijuana from the backpack when he resurfaced. “I don’t really see how it works, but I think I have the general idea. I wish I could talk to this Ron character.” Instead, he joined the rest of us toking.

Much later, as the party was winding down, Mark sat next to me on a bench. “I was wondering if you wanted to get reacquainted.”

I hesitated. I had managed to engineer a tricky situation for myself. What would Grace think? I glanced in her direction and managed to catch her eye without being obvious. She smiled and blew me a kiss.

“Sure,” I agreed finally. “After all, I woke up here in our bed. My subconscious sent me a message.”

When we were alone in our bedroom, I cautioned, “This may be a bit awkward. From your point of view, I am either a much older version of the love of your life, who mysteriously disappeared, or else, an older version of Patsy O’Brien, who taught you how to make love when you were an adolescent.”

“While from your point of view...”

“For me, you are one more manifestation of the man I have loved for most of my life, but strangely not the one I have spent nine years living with in the future. After spending almost every waking moment in each other’s company, our sexual appetite has waned somewhat.”

“Is that why you left?”

I laughed. “No, but that’s a good line. I had to leave because my younger self was about to appear suddenly in our bed in Leakey. I thought it better if I were not there at the same time.”

“I see,” he replied. “Good move.”

“From your future point of view, you’ll get to trade a 50-year-old model for a 30-year-old one.”

“You still look pretty good for 50. Are you really that old?”

“I don’t know. I gave up trying to figure out my actual age. When we met in California, I was forty something, at least that’s what I told your mother. Add nine years with you in Leakey and you get to 50 more or less.” *There’s all that time with David, so more.* “More,” I added.

I continued, “You are about 50 too. Shall we compare bodies?” I began a slow strip tease. He just watched, with increasing interest. I remembered my quasi-seduction of Jackson in the dark tower so many years ago. I wondered if Mark would have the same reaction.

I got my answer soon. He stood up and I saw that I needn’t have worried.

Everything progressed satisfactorily after that. It turned out not to be awkward at all.

At breakfast the next morning, Grace, Mark and I finally had the discussion I had been dreading. We managed to make coffee without Idell’s help. Mark took charge of the cooking and produced some bacon and eggs that while not up to Idell’s standards were certainly better than anything *I* could have come up with.

Idell must have heard us somehow, though we were trying to stay quiet. She arrived looking flustered. “Sorry, I overslept.”

“That was the plan,” Grace said. “Sorry if we woke you. I thought you were going to visit your son this weekend.”

“That’s right, but I shouldn’t have left you to fix breakfast on your own.”

“We managed,” Mark said.

“Then, I think I’ll be on my way.”

Joan appeared, wearing another fabulous outfit complete with a dragonfly pin from her famous collection. “Wow!” I exclaimed. “What’s the occasion?”

“My young companion has regretted his actions and wants to see me. I’m headed out for brunch, which I think I will enjoy more than he. Don’t know when I’ll be back. Idell, do you want a ride?”

Idell was happy to accept the offer, and they left.

Grace said, when the three of us were alone, “The time has come, the Walrus said, to speak of many things.”

Mark was puzzled. “What’s up?”

“As you know,” I began before Grace cut me off.

“Hypatia and I are lovers,” she said simply.

Mark’s jaw fell open.

“How long?”

“Altogether, 21 wonderful days. Well, 22 now.”

“I mean, when did happen?”

“1970 and 71 and later.”

“What! That’s...”

“Yes,” I chimed in. “It was after you and I went birding on the coast.”

“After we decided it was inappropriate for the two of us,” he said.

“Yes.”

“And you don’t think it’s inappropriate for...”

“For me to have sex with both you and your mother? It’s a legitimate question, but we are all consenting adults.”

“Well, yes, but with some obvious differences.”

“Does that bother you? It didn’t matter with Lily in the future.”

“Maybe I don’t want to hear about that.”

“OK. But you were very understanding.”

“Good. But let’s get back to the subject.”

“OK. Here’s what I want to say. I love you both. I refuse to be forced to choose between you.”

He considered that at length.

“Last night...”

“Was wonderful. It always is with you.” I walked over to stand next to Grace, who had remained silent during this exchange. Now, she reached up to wrap her arm around my shoulders. She said, “I was different after Hypatia. Simon commented on it. He approved. But then Hypatia disappeared without a trace until four days ago. She was only a happy memory until suddenly, there she was again.” I noticed that she didn’t bother mentioning 1985 or 1993.

I put in, “We talked about what to do when you showed up. We didn’t plan anything, but just left it all work itself out.”

“So,” Mark said after considering it carefully, “what happens now?”

Grace had the last word. “We take turns.”

We’ll see, I thought.

5. Negotiations
November 24, 2001
Houston, TX, USA

Grace's plan for taking turns got a lot more complicated when David showed up on Saturday afternoon.

Idell was busy with dinner preparation, her family visit didn't go well I heard. So, it fell to me to answer the door. There he stood, smiling, with a suitcase in tow.

I rushed into his arms but said. "You've got some explaining to do."

"Later."

We shared a kiss that was more than a greeting and less than passionate. "It's good to see you again," I whispered.

"I missed you so much," he whispered back. "Is this an awkward time?" he asked after we separated.

"It's close to maximally awkward, but let's deal with that." I led him down the hall, past the art and out onto the patio. David showed great interest in the art, but I hurried him along. "What do you think of my new look?" I asked him as a distraction. After all, it had been nine years for me, and not the easiest of my life. My *yellow hair* as Mark called it, quoting Yeats, was white, and pulled into a braid at the back.

"I've brought a paper sack to put over your head in an emergency."

I laughed, a bit too much.

I was still laughing when we emerged onto the patio, but managed to begin, "I think you know most of us. Grace and Mark, of course. The lovely, richly attired young woman is Joan Bellini-Talbot, Mark's daughter. Joan, this is David, man of many names."

"Mark's daughter?" David said. "This is a most pleasant surprise. Pleased to make your acquaintance." He walked over to Grace and kissed her on both cheeks. Nodded to Mark, "Mark. How's it going?" He offered his hand, and Mark took it to my relief. I didn't want a fight.

"Things are fine," Mark replied. "How about you?"

"I had some vacation coming. Thought I'd take a chance on finding Hypatia here. She mentioned a visit around this time once."

"Well, it's lovely to see you again," Grace said. "I hope you won't have to rush away as you did last time."

"That is my fervent hope as well. I would not have left so abruptly, save for the fact that I was being given the opportunity to deal with the man who killed every member of my family save me. Morena knew I would not fail to leap at such a chance. She was correct in that assessment. Naturally, it was a trap to eliminate me."

Even Mark was interested now. "Why did she want to eliminate you?" he asked.

"I can but surmise. I think it was to remove me as a protector of Hypatia."

"Hypatia!" Mark interjected. "How do you know her by that name?"

Showing surprise, he replied, "She told me it was her real name."

I had to step in. “In return for learning David’s real name, which most assuredly is not David.”

“I thought your name was Steven,” Grace said.

“It changes frequently,” I noted. “I demanded that he keep David as a middle name for my convenience. I just call him that no matter what he says.”

Then I explained the situation to David: “You see, both Mark and Grace are my old lovers.”

“Yes, I am aware of that,” he said.

“David is another of my old lovers,” I explained to the others. “Before you arrived, David, we were discussing how to best manage sleeping arrangements.”

“I see. Now, there is a third hat in the ring.”

“It doesn’t make it any less awkward,” Grace stated the obvious. “I suggested that we take turns. Then it gets complicated. When one of us is indisposed for one reason or another, logically whoever has the next turn should take it.”

“Wait! Wait! Wait! I am not some prized mare to be auctioned off for stud.”

“Of course not,” David interjected. “For one thing, the payment goes to the stud, not the mare.”

“OK. Bad analogy. However, I have a much simpler way to settle this: I will decide where I sleep, every night. That includes the option of telling all of you to — dare I say it — fuck off.”

Everyone chuckled. To my surprise, Mark seconded my approach. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. I was thinking of seeing who lacked the pleasure of Hypatia’s company the longest. I think that would be me, except for last night. I nominate myself to you my love for starters.”

“Obviously, you’re looking at it from your point of view and not mine, but I will accept your suggestion. In my timeline, you were most recent, last night, Grace and I were lovers night before last night. You were also two nights ago, sort of, it was you, but different. Poor David was the longest ago.”

“Stop. Explain,” Mark demanded.

“Grace, night before last night.” I smiled at Grace. “You were two nights ago, a passionate goodbye from your older self, then a reprise here. David was, from my point of view, years ago.”

“Rats!” Mark said. “I thought I had figured out how I could be with you again after 8 years.”

“Maybe you’ll be next, if you behave yourself,” I said, concluding the discussion. “I’ll put David in the guest bedroom if that’s OK with everyone.”

Idelle chose that moment to appear on the patio. I suspected she had been listening. “I’ve put Mr. David’s bags in the guest bedroom. Joan told me she would be leaving tonight for a business trip, back in a few days. I assume that everyone will be here for dinner.”

Grace answered, “Excellent, Idelle. I’m sure no one would pass up one of your dinners.”

I closed the door to the guest bedroom with a bit too much force and locked it behind me. “Now,” I said, “you will explain your *project* that you mentioned in your note. Then, we may go on to a line-by-line analysis of same. So, what project?”

“I have cancer.”

“Oh, shit! Why didn’t you tell me? Never mind. You were afraid I would insist on staying with you.”

“Got it in one.”

“Oh, David, maybe you know me too well.”

“I’m hoping to get into a test of a new device called Cyber Knife. Well, it’s not actually new, but just approved for use anywhere in the body. There’s one here in Houston.”

“You’re *hoping* to get into a test?”

“Not approved yet.”

“Does Grace know?”

“No, of course not.”

“Grace can get you into the study. Come with me.” I grabbed him by the hand and tugged.

“That would be an imposition.”

“What would make her furious is not doing everything in her power to get you into that test. Who’s the doctor in charge?”

“I have his card. If you release me, I’ll get it.”

“OK, I’ll take a chance.”

He rummaged around in his case and emerged with a business card.

He came along meekly as we walked down the hall to Grace’s room.

“Grace,” I said. “We need a favor. David has cancer.”

“Oh, no!” she said. “How serious is it?”

“Pretty bad. There is a treatment with radiation called Cyber Knife.” He handed her the card.

She looked at the card. “Morrison? I know him and his wife. What time is it? Too late. I’ll call first thing. He doesn’t owe me a favor, but he’d probably like to have me in his debt.”

“Thank you, Grace,” David said. His tone and body language were unlike anything he’d demonstrated before. I could see he was touched.

“You two go back to bed. We’ll fix this in the morning, or Monday at the latest.”

We returned to David’s room. “I’m sorry for doubting you,” I said.

He kissed me. “Thank you for being you.”

He took me to the bed. “I need to tell you about my cancer. It began as prostate cancer but was found outside the prostate. I had some radiation, but it didn’t get it all. My prostate was removed.”

“I understand,” I said. “I know what the result of that can be.”

“I’m afraid you may not be ready for a 70-year-old man in any case.”

“You wouldn’t be the first. Mark was that old when we were married during the last days.”

“Oh. In that case, please remove your clothing,” he said in a formal manner.

Grace was on the telephone when David and I came down for breakfast. “Hello, Conrad. This is Grace Talbot. We met at the Ballet Gala last December. Yes, I had forgotten that. Good for you.”

The small talk continued for far longer than I expected. Finally, she got down to the reason for the call. “I have an old friend, he’s actually a house guest at the moment. He’s a candidate for your study with the Cyber Knife, but —”

She listened.

“That’s very kind of you Conrad.” David placed a driver’s license on the table by the phone. Grace read it carefully. “Paul David Jefferson,” she read out. “We call him David...I’m sure he has all the records. I’ll check. 11:00? Perfect... He’s right here.” She handed the phone to David.

“Yes, I understand,” we heard. “My doctor in California recommended you. I have paper printouts of the medical records, but we can get the originals sent to you if that would be better ... Great. I’ll be there tomorrow.” He carefully replaced the phone. “Grace, you have superpowers I envy.”

Grace laughed. I saw that David had the same reaction the I always did when I heard it.

6. *New Year's Resolution* *January 1, 2002, and later* *Houston, TX USA* *and Leakey Cabin*

After the fact, we all wondered how we had missed the signs. They were everywhere if we had just noticed. We had all seen the pair on the patio, talking, sharing Margaritas, laughing, and generally having a great time. On New Year's Eve, we celebrated by breaking out the latest offering of Hill Country Gold, eating a series of snacks that Idell prepared, trashing W despite his popularity at the moment, and waiting till midnight before going to bed.

So, it shouldn't have been a surprise when our two late risers came to breakfast together. They were, after all, the same age, more or less. David had commented several times on how beautiful he remembered Grace from when he first saw her.

They showed up arm in arm. Grace announced, "David and I have decided that we are officially a couple. We thought we'd start the new year right." She smiled.

We sat for some time before I thought to ask, "So this is the end of our sleeping arrangements?"

"You got it."

"Well," I continued, "that certainly simplifies things."

Breakfast was quieter than usual that morning.

Mark and I both figured that the new couple might want some time alone, so we quickly thought up items at the cabin that needed attention. We left after packing up everything and arrived in time for our late afternoon ritual.

As we sat on the porch watching the sunset, I had a thought. "Think Idell would like to spend some time here? It would improve the 'Ritas."

"Remind me to ask her the next time we are in Houston."

I quickly fell back into the routine I had established during the First Pandemic. Mark showed little interest in my exercise routine but was interested in a birding walk. "Maybe we should work on a big year list," he suggested.

I had gotten into the listing aspect of birding quite late. It was too complicated for my strange timeline. Mark, though, was enthusiastic about tracking everything. He had lists of birds, mammals, reptiles, butterflies, dragonflies, you get the idea. He kept track of every sighting in a database that let him prepare innumerable reports. I used eBird, which I thought was available here now.

"How about a big year in Real County?" I suggested as an alternative.

"That sounds like fun. Maybe we could expand the territory somewhat to take in the ponds near Uvalde and the cabins where the Black-capped Vireos nest." I could see the wheels turning in his head.

I asked, "Why don't we start this morning by surveying the property here. By the way, can I refer to this as *our* property? We are, after all, married in this time, sort of."

He grinned. "You bet. We can even live here instead of Houston."

I remembered the long months cooped up by the pandemic. “I suggest a change in the plan: let’s make the big year in Texas. We can go to High Island, the Valley, all those places.”

“Much better! Let’s get started.” With that, we set off on my standard route to the pond and back.

Of course, it wasn’t as simple as my suggestion would imply. Mark turned it into a full-blown project. A white board installed in the main room contained a tentative schedule of places to visit, with the best time to go there; the current status of all the birds likely to be seen in Texas displayed on many sheets of computer printout, each species carefully annotated when seen; other species that rarely occurred in Texas, but which might straggle over the border from Mexico or the Southwest part of the US.

Mark wrote some software to help organize the routes we would take, with expected travel times, and likely stops along the way.

By February, I realized I had created a monster.

My part of the project included monitoring the various Rare Bird Sighting web sites in case something unusual turned up. Several unusual species were in the Valley, the local name for the area along the Rio Grande. None were rare globally, but 6 were unusual enough for us to set out immediately for Harlingen. We spent a week there enjoying warm weather, excellent Mexican food, both the Texas and the real Mexican variety, and several birding friends of Mark’s. It was more fun than I expected.

Many of the other birders were interested in our quest. They peppered us with suggestions and asked what rules we were following. I was at a loss to understand the rules, set by the American Birding Association, that we were assumed to follow. We added another rule of our own: we had to both see the bird to count it.

I also made a rule that everything non-avian was off the list. There was only so much obsessive-compulsive behavior I could handle. About July, I started mentally ticking off how much longer the search would last. When December rolled around, our collective total sat at just more than 600 species, a good number. I thought we could quit, but Mark didn’t want to pass up one final push. He signed us up for 7 Christmas Bird Counts, each one involving a full day birding in a 15-mile diameter circle.

I found the best part was all the people I met. Birders turned out to be a great group.

We split the years between Leakey and Houston. I came to enjoy our visits there a great deal. David was always great company. The Cyber Knife had worked on the recalcitrant cancer. He had been pronounced clean at the end of 2004 after two years of no evidence of the disease. The two of them had become something of a famous couple around Houston. Grace had even suggested that they consider marriage. David preferred things as they were. The pre-nuptial agreement that Joan suggested put him off. “I have no designs on her money,” he said simply.

I remembered why I loved them both.

That led up to the Christmas celebration in 2012, where we were all delighted with the election results. Our Texan neighbors were not so jubilant.

7. Christmas Eve Dinner

December 24, 2012

Houston, TX, USA

A jovial group had assembled for the Holidays. Mark and I planned to spend the last two weeks of the year doing Christmas Bird Counts in between meeting old friends and relatives. We had made Houston our base of operations. As we had for years, we met for dinner on Christmas Eve. This year, Idell had outdone herself. I knew because I watched her cook most of it. At least she had a young *sous-chef* to help. Idelle introduced her as her daughter-in-law, Colette.

About mid-afternoon, David asked, "Is it too early to start drinking?"

"Not if it's champagne," I said, raising my glass. I also held up a nice dooby.

"Outside," Grace demanded. "Wait for me."

I was happy to go outside, but I had no intention of waiting. I had several joints in reserve, and it was Mark's latest experiment, a hybrid of Blue Dream with our old favorite HCG. I had tried some and thought it might be better than either of them alone. That said a lot.

Someone nuzzled my neck. "Hello, David," I said.

"How do you do that?"

"I've told you. There's a difference. Here," I passed him the joint. "Take it easy on that."

"Ah! This is the new strain."

"Yes, indeed. We call it Hill Country Dream. We considered Gold Dream. What do you think?"

David took a big hit and handed it back to me. "I don't think it matters what you call it. It's wonderful."

After a while, he said, "You heard?"

"Yeah. She told me. That'll put a damper on the festivities. No alcohol for her. Not sure about herbal remedies."

"She told me she forgot to ask."

"Convenient."

"I told you to wait," Grace said as she came thru the door. She had a glass of champagne in hand. She was not good at following orders from doctors. "The ones that told me to quit drinking are mostly dead now," was her standard explanation.

"I have plenty of weed." I passed her the joint.

She took a long, slow hit.

"One year," she said. "At most."

"I know."

"You already knew, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I saw no reason to tell you. Too morbid."

"OK. I remember." She had another hit before passing it on.

David jumped in. “You know when she is going to die?”

“I do. I looked it up to be sure.”

“How about me? Do you know when I will die?” He asked.

“I was afraid to look you up. Besides, you’ve already died on me at least once, possibly more.”

“You were afraid?”

“I read the first line of the obit and canceled the page.”

“How ominous.” To show how much that affected him, he opened more champagne. “I read about this vintage recently. Supposed to be excellent. How much did you have to pay for it?”

“Hard to say. We own the winery,” Grace told him.

“Really?”

“It’s your Christmas present.”

He laughed. Grace joined in. I was glad to see her at least able to laugh.

Mark showed up. He had completed a Whole Foods run at Idell’s request. Something secret. He was happy to go because he wanted to lay in a supply of some trail mix from the bulk food bins. We had a few more CBC’s to do.

Joan came with Peter Whatzis, an actor she was palling around with. We discovered a surprise when the doorbell announced another guest. I knew Idelle was too busy to answer, so I went myself.

Chloe stood there, smiling broadly.

Our entrance onto the patio caused a great stir. “For those of you not acquainted with our latest visitor, permit me to introduce my daughter with Mark, Chloe.”

“Chloe,” Mark exclaimed and rushed up to give her a hug.

“Hello, sister,” Joan said. Peter Whatzis simply sat dumbfounded, wondering what the fuss was all about.

Grace rose carefully and went to greet the granddaughter she barely knew. “I am delighted to finally meet you as an adult. Welcome to our home.”

David provided the most interesting greeting. He kissed her on both cheeks and offered, with a huge grin, “It’s wonderful to see you again, my dear.”

Chloe wrinkled her brow.

“It was long ago...And in another country,” David replied.

He began to explain, “After our meeting in the Botanical Garden —”

“Stop!” I cried. “No more.”

David looked at me. I continued, “You must not tell her more. Not another word. Please. It’s important.” He stared at me, but understood, making a sign of zipping his lips shut.

Turning to Chloe, I explained, “David is a very old friend. More than a friend in fact, an old lover. Now, he is your grandmother’s lover. It’s complicated.”

Peter decided to join the conversation, “What the fuck is going on?”

“Oh,” I said, “Peter is Joan’s friend. Peter, I’m sorry but I forgot your last name.”

“No prob,” he said. “I’m usually introduced as Peter [mumble], Joan’s current BF.”

“So, Mr. [Mumble], or can we stick to Peter?”

“Peter will do fine.”

I continued, “As to your question, I suggest that you just ignore all the history stuff.”

“Right. Done.” He sat down and didn’t *seem* to be sulking.

Turning back to Chloe, I asked, “What brings you here?”

“You did,” she explained. “In 2161. You said that I had showed up here now. It’s about Grace.”

Grace stood up again. “I fear it is not good news,” she began. “I have something called a glioblastoma. I’m on my last lap, or so they tell me.”

“I’m glad that I had this chance to meet you and the rest of the family. Well, not everyone, but...”

Idell come onto the patio to announce dinner. She came over to greet Chloe. “I am so glad to see you again. You were such a pretty child. Then, well, you know the story better than I do. The authorities searched for you for months. We told them not to worry, but...”

Chloe took it all in, and responded, “I am particularly happy to meet you, Idell. I’ve heard about your culinary skills. I hope that I am in time for dinner.”

“I set an extra place when I heard the doorbell.”

I pulled Chloe aside later and asked, “Are you ravenous?”

“Yes. As usual.”

“Worth planning ahead on. I carried some energy bars, which are dreadful but useful, in the backpack. Do you still have the backpack?”

“Yes, but with the latest suit, I don’t need it for a short visit.”

“But you do need to eat.”

“Absolutely.”

Happily, the meal lived up to its advance billing. We started with one of Idell’s famous salads made with baby lettuce, some hothouse tomatoes and a herb vinaigrette dressing. It was topped with some blue cheese from a farm Idell knew and chopped pecans. David had selected a nice light rosé from the Anderson Valley. “Made from Pinot Noir,” he informed us.

While we worked on the salad, Idell brought her surprise, a plate of dumplings. She explained, “Mark suggested that I make some of these as a holiday treat. My Vietnamese friends call them something besides pot stickers. I wrote down the Vietnamese name if anyone can translate it.” She waved a paper.

“Allow me,” David said. “I’m not fluent, but I have a smattering.” He proceeded to pronounce it, and no one dared to argue.

Grace clapped politely, and David took a small bow.

Mark was nearest to the plate, so he picked it up, took one dumpling, and passed it around. Idell dashed out to the kitchen and returned with some dipping sauce.

The centerpiece of the meal was a full beef tenderloin, a dish where one did not ask how much it cost. The meat had been grilled to perfection and came accompanied by roasted fingerling potatoes and béarnaise sauce. David had selected a Cabernet from a small winery near Paso Robles in California to go with the beef.

After David finished cutting the beef and everyone had a plate with meat and potatoes, Idell returned with some green beans in a cheese sauce. “This year,” she began, “I decided to try the classic recipe using canned mushroom soup and cheese whiz. You’ll be happy to hear that this dish does not use that recipe.” She used a mock TV accent for this little speech. We all applauded her, and she took a somewhat bigger bow than David’s.

By family tradition she took a place at the table with a plate she had prepared in the kitchen with everything but the beef. David gave her a piece as she passed.

Chloe was the one who stated the obvious, “Kudos to the chef. This meal is as good as I was led to expect. I hope I have saved room for dessert.”

“Dessert,” Idell said as she snapped her fingers. “I knew I forgot something.”

“Maybe Colette can come up with something,” I said. “Did everyone know that Idell’s daughter-in-law is helping out in the kitchen.”

“Bring her out.” It was Peter mumble. We all stared at him.

“She’ll join us for dessert,” Idelle explained. She applied herself to eating.

A short while later, Collette emerged carrying a Pavlova adorned with the best fruit Whole Foods could supply in the winter. Idell told us, “Collette made the Pavlova from scratch. I gave Mark a list of items to buy and he earned a gentleman’s C. But we made do with what he came back with. Hope you enjoy it.”

David opened another bottle of champagne to go with the Pavlova. Idell slipped out and returned with a plate of ginger snaps. I offered “Bravo!” and pointed to my area as the place to put the cookies. Chloe looked at them, “Are these...” “They are,” I assured her. She took one and ate a small nibble. Then, she took a bigger bite and savored it carefully. “These are great, Idell, but I expected something more creative.”

“The recipe dates to the 19th century,” Idell told her. “It is arguably the perfect way to make ginger snaps. I’ve never found a better method.”

“Don’t say anything negative about those cookies when I’m nearby,” I warned her.

The best part of the day was that we never mentioned the underlying reason for Chloe’s visit.

Over the course of a week, Chloe spent most of her time with three people: Grace, the ostensible purpose of her visit; Joan, whose overheard conversations focused on the proper use of power; and Peter mumble, who seemed more interested in Chloe than Joan. Surprisingly, Joan

didn't seem to mind. When I asked her about that, she said, "She seems to need him more than I do."

8. Angel of Death
November 26, 2013
Houston, TX, USA

I tiptoed into the bedroom where Grace lay on a hospital bed. She looked pleased when I appeared, but said only, “You.”

“Sorry it’s so late.”

She laughed. At least I think it was a laugh. “Hypatia, my love,” she finally got out.

“Too late now,” she managed.

I walked over and took her hand. “We had such a wonderful time together. Much too short.”

“Uh-huh.”

She patted the bed next to her. I climbed onto it and lay, as I so often had, with my head on her chest. She sighed with satisfaction.

“Love...”

“I know.”

“How long?”

I decided she was asking how much longer she had to live.

“Not long,” I replied. “This time I’m the *angelo de la morte*, the angel of death.”

“Don’t need help.”

“I’m glad. I’ll wait here, though.”

“Love...”

“I love you too, Grace.”

“Ah.”

“Me too.”

“Yes.”

As I lay on her chest, I could hear her heart beating, hear the rush of air into her lungs. While I listened, I heard the beating and breathing grow slower until I could no longer hear it.

I left the room and wandered the hall looking for someone to take charge. Everyone was still asleep, and I was hungry, so I moved toward the kitchen. Idell sat on a stool near the stove. She had been crying.

“Idell, I came to say goodbye.”

“To her?” she asked.

“And you. Won’t be long now. How are you holding up?”

“Been crying a lot.”

“Me too. It will be over very soon.”

“I know. Don’t know what I’m gonna do.” She slipped into casual language.

I took her in my arms, holding her close and stroking her back. “Don’t worry. I’m sure everything will be all right. The family will take care of you. If you have a problem, I’ll deal with it. I know that Grace left you a nice bequest. Got anything to eat?”

“Sure.” She opened the fridge to reveal several casseroles. She chose one seemingly at random, scooped out a serving and popped it into the microwave. She gave it to me with a fork, smiled, and fetched a glass of iced tea.

“You remembered. How about ginger snaps?”

That brought another big smile. She left me eating at the counter and returned shortly holding a plate of cookies. I tried one of the ginger snaps and found it as good as always.

“Thanks, Idell. Why don’t you check on Grace?” I was sure that Idell would know what to do. While she was gone from the kitchen, I quickly finished the bowl of the casserole, stuffed all the cookies into my backpack and wandered away from the kitchen. I walked out onto the patio where I had had my first conversation with Grace as Hypatia so many years ago from my point of view. The night felt cooler than I expected. Not wishing to go back inside, I sat by the pool and tried to relax. I heard noise in the house, and lights coming on, but I ignored them. I had said my goodbyes. I had procrastinated as long as I could. I had another important task to complete.

Trying to ignore the sounds coming from inside the house, I relaxed and managed to fall into a fitful slumber.

9. Birth Rite
June 6, 2028 and April 16, 1950
The Cabin and Boonville, CA, USA

I looked forward to retiring to the Shrine. I hoped everything worked and I wouldn't have to use the backup plan. I woke up as planned in the bed in the Cabin that I knew so well. After scrounging up breakfast using the pop tarts that I found acceptable despite Mark's caustic comments, I retrieved what I came for and tried to fall asleep again.

That didn't work. I dipped into the stash of cannabis and rolled a big one for myself. Sitting on the porch as I had so many times, I pondered what I would do when I had to absent myself completely. I realized that I would miss the simple pleasure of watching the sunset with a Rita, a joint, and a lover.

The weed had the desired effect and I nodded off only to wake up elsewhere and elsewhere.

I was back in Boonville, but it did not look like the town I was used to. Ignoring the differences, I walked along the main highway thru town, found a deli, not the one I liked, but better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, and ordered lunch.

In my estimation, the place was not clean as I would have liked. I watched as the sandwich maker did his work, wondering when he last washed his hands. I bit my tongue to avoid saying anything. With luck, I wouldn't die of ptomaine.

The sandwich, ham on rye with a pickle, some chips, and a coke was much better than I expected. "Is this ham local?" I asked.

"Sure is. So's the bread and mustard. All from farms around here."

"It's delicious."

"Thanks. What brings a brightliner like you around?"

"That's one of the few words of Bootling that I know. You are correct, I am not from around here. I'm just passing thru. Hope to visit a woman I met some years ago. She just had a baby. Brought a present."

"You must mean Marian Broadstreet."

"Exactly." In all the time I had known her, I never learned her last name. She was always just Marian, or Maid Marian. In a town this size there couldn't be two Marians.

"She expecting you?"

"No. I thought I'd surprise her."

"She lives on the only street beside the highway. 'Bout half mile toward Philo. On the right. Can't miss it."

"Thanks." I put a dollar in the tip jar, an exorbitant amount for the period. He was suitably appreciative. I hoped he didn't examine the bill too closely.

I walked down the highway, munching on the sandwich as I went. The weather cooperated, with a temperature in the 80's Fahrenheit, about 25C. I listened to the bird calls as I went. There were far more than I was used to hearing. Several good-sized mixed flocks flew over the pastures as I walked. If it hadn't been for my errand, I would have stopped to check them out.

I wasn't sure how I was going to get some time alone with my young self, but I got a break. The woman who answered the door when I knocked was certainly not Marian. I addressed her, "I'm sorry. I was expecting to see Marian. Is this the right house?"

"Mebbe."

"I brought a birthday present for the young one."

She brightened up. "Party ain't till tomorry. Marian be in Ukiah, getting stuff."

"Rats! Well, may I give her my gift anyway?"

"Guess so." The woman, whoever she was, a neighbor perhaps, could have broken me in two if she managed to grab me. Sometimes it can be helpful to look small and insignificant. I could hear some cooing from the only bedroom. "Sounds like she be wake," my new friend said.

"How nice. Will she be hungry?"

"Always."

"Maybe I could give her a bottle," I suggested.

"You know how?"

I laughed. "This ain't my first rodeo."

"I'll bring you one."

"Great."

I walked into the bedroom and lifted Hypatia, I wonder what her real name was. I'm sure Marian told me, but I forgot. Fortunately, my younger self didn't need changing. Despite my children, I was not adept at diapering. There had usually been someone else to handle the chore.

My younger self liked me right away, as though she recognized me. I took the little pouch with the gold coin from my pocket and tied it around the child's neck. "This is for good luck," I told her. "Keep it with you, OK?"

She smiled at me, rubbing her hand on the soft leather.

The neighbor, or whatever she was, returned with a small bottle of formula. I shook a drop onto my arm to see how hot it was, pretending I knew what I was doing. It seemed to be the right temp to satisfy the young version of myself, as she took it greedily.

I let her eat until the other woman left the room, then I quickly opened the bottle and poured the packet Carlo had given me into it. I shook it up and gave it back to the child. She took it in both hands and drank the rest of it down. I heard the unmistakable sound that she now needed changing.

I had debated with myself whether this was the right thing to do. If I kept the pouch or failed to give myself the vaccine against the virus, then nothing I knew about my life would be the same. I could change the timeline. Did I have the right to do that?

Mark helped me. "Consider how bad it would be if you weren't part of the future. You must close the loop. It's inevitable."

Well, I'd done that.

I carried the toddler to the main room. "I wasn't sure where the diapers were."

She laughed. “You mean will I change her?”

I laughed as well. “You caught me. I’m a bit out of practice.”

“Ain’t no prob.” She held out her arms for the child and I was only too happy to surrender the load. The pair of them disappeared back into the bedroom.

I slipped out the front door as quietly as possible and walked as fast as I could without looking suspicious. When I was out of sight, I ran back to the highway and set off in the opposite direction. Within minutes, I found what I was looking for, the road that led into the hills, ultimately to the town of Point Arena on the coast. I had no intention of going that far. I was just looking for a place where I might sleep. I found a likely spot and crawled into the brush. I hoped it wasn’t full of poison oak.

Of course, I was full of adrenaline and sleep was the last thing on the menu. Well, I would just have to wait. I listened to the birds calling. I couldn’t believe how many of them I heard, some I couldn’t identify. *This is nice*, I thought, as I drifted off.

VIII. Epilog: Bronson

1. Bronson
January 15, 2170, About 14:00
San Francisco, California,
Allied States of North America

For the rest of his life, Bronson always said that his first meeting with Chloe was the best day of his life, one that changed everything. He usually added, “If it wasn’t love at first sight, it was a good approximation.”

When pressed, he would explain, “My first thought when someone wearing a *Space Alien suit*, white armor with some curious colored ripples walked in, was *Finally, an adult in the room. About time!* Then, *A woman!*”

“I took a closer look at her — could this be Chloe, *The Chloe, Chloe Herself?* I couldn’t imagine that I was important enough to merit a visit from her. Still, she looked remarkably like the pictures I had seen. She strode into the room as if she owned it, which she soon did. I couldn’t take my eyes away.”

“When she lowered the hood, I saw the famous yellow hair, long enough to reach her shoulders, and the equally famous, piercing blue eyes with a striking yellow-brown ring around the iris. To my delight, I saw that those eyes looked at me with undisguised interest.”

“It’s crazy, but I knew somehow that I was going to spend the rest of my life with this remarkable woman.”

“I hoped, she was there to get me out of jail.”