

Discovery is the ultimate risk...

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SOJOURN

TIME ROVERS BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

Pompeii, August, 79 A.D.

The sky was falling.

Pumice stones rained in a dissonant curtain, shattering roof tiles and clattering in the courtyards. An amphora near Jacynda Lassiter's feet exploded. Crimson wine splashed her pure-white stola, cascading onto the ornate tiles. She braced herself in the doorway as an earth tremor rocked the walls of the villa, her eyes flooding from the scorching stench of sulfur.

She wiped away tears with the back of her hand. "Alfred Bartlesby?"

The academic didn't acknowledge her, his pale, bald head bent over a table illuminated by the anemic light of a half-dozen oil lamps. He huddled over a mound of papyrus scrolls, seemingly oblivious to Vesuvius' rage.

"Bartlesby?" she called again.

Cynda turned at the sound of a choked sob. A terrified girl, infant in arms, fled along the street. They were racing toward their graves. There was no sanctuary to be found here. The once-thriving metropolis of Pompeii, the jewel of Campania, was about to become an ashy footprint in history.

Her distraction had cost valuable time. "Bartlesby?" she called again, taking a few steps forward. The academic still ignored her, murmuring to himself as he furiously inscribed notes. One of the lamps guttered and died, but he didn't notice.

"Hey!" she shouted. "The bus is leaving!"

Bartlesby glanced up, surprised to see her. "Ah, well, actually, I would like to stay a while longer." He pointed at the papers in front of him. "I have a bit more work to do."

"Not an option," she called over the sound of the pounding stones on the roof. Ash filtered downward from the ceiling, from every crack and crevice, cloaking them in a fine layer.

"I paid extra to stay until the last moment," Bartlesby protested.

Cynda swore under her breath. This one was a linguist. He'd be hard to budge. She opened the case of the golden pocket watch nestled in her palm. The time interface's digital display hovered in the murky air above the watch.

"It is the last minute, Mr. Bartlesby. You are about to become a permanent fixture of the Pompeian landscape."

His eyes widened. "So soon?" Still he made no effort to rise.

Exasperated, she grabbed the academic's pudgy arm, hauling him off the low stool. He juggled his scrolls, grasping them to his chest while stammering protests. A parchment tumbled out of his fingers as they reached the door. He bent to collect it.

The digital display flashed bright red.

Time Incursion Warning!

Cynda leaned out into the street and stared up at the boiling mountain. An unearthly roar split the air, nearly deafening her. Death surged toward them—an impenetrable wall of superheated material, the pyroclastic flow that would entomb the city for sixteen hundred years.

"Oh, my God." Cynda's hand shook so violently, it took her two attempts to perform the required maneuver to initiate the transfer—wind the watch stem four times forward, two back, three forward, one back. A hum emanated from the device, barely audible over the cacophony of destruction.

The holographic clock wavered in the murky air, counting the seconds until the transfer.

3...2...1...

Cynda closed her eyes and prayed as the characteristic halo encompassed them. A moment before they shifted into the future, blistering heat shrouded them. In the distance, she heard the agonized screams of those who had no means of escape.

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2057 A.D.

Time Immersion Corporation

Cynda bit her lip in frustration, waiting in the penitent posture until the disorientation lessened. Apparently, Bartlesby forgot that part of his pre-transfer briefing as he struggled to his sandaled feet. He was back on his knees in an instant, retching.

When she finally stood, the ‘tourist’, as the customers were euphemistically called, was out of the time pod and teetering toward the Arrivals Lounge, flanked by two customer service reps. One toted his stack of papyrus, nodding her head in agreement while Bartlesby babbled incoherently, windmilling his arms to indicate explosions. A trail of ash cascaded from his stola. In his wake, one of the DomoBots tidied up the mess with electronic expertise.

Cynda was in no hurry to climb out of the time pod. Every Time Rover had a personal ritual to reorient to the Now. Some recited off-color nursery rhymes, others counted back from one hundred until they felt their brain cells stabilize. Cynda’s trick involved wedging herself in the door of the garlic-shaped time pod and inventorying the chronsole room: the ‘Reorientation to Place’ technique.

She began her mental checklist. *Corporate cobalt decor—check. High ceilings—check. Ergo chairs and desks—check. Bored employees—check. Low thrum of technology just one notch above my tolerance level—check.*

Concerned eyes peered over the top of the chronsole counter.

“Hey!” Ralph called in greeting. That’s why she’d gotten out of Pompeii alive—Ralph had been the chronsole operator. He was known for swift extractions.

“Hey,” she responded in a dry whisper. Clearing her throat made no difference—most of Vesuvius still seemed lodged there.

Her first few steps out of the pod would have made a drunk proud. Until she put chocolate into her system, her equilibrium would be on the fritz, along with her sense of humor. PTS—Post Transfer Syndrome. It beat PMS hands down.

Behind her, the pod door closed and went into what they jokingly called ‘Spin Dry’: a maintenance cycle that reminded her of one of those old front-loading washing machines.

She halted at the chronsole desk and leaned on the nano-laminate top.

It was currently a fetching shade of blue. At the beginning of each hour, it shifted color to add visual excitement to the work environment. In Cynda's opinion, it failed miserably.

"Hey," Ralph repeated, his glasses reflecting the overhead lights. Most folks had their eyesight corrected by an OpticBot, but not Ralph. He said the glasses made a statement.

Without prompting, he pushed a candy bar across the counter, one of the vintage kind with loads of sugar and preservatives. No high-protein, high-energy wallpaper bricks for her. Peeling off the wrapper with all the finesse of a gorilla, she demolished the first bar. Her hands continued to shake. He thoughtfully liberated the second candy bar, eyes blinking rapidly to overcome the stench of sulfur that seemed to envelope her. Wisely, he didn't comment.

Her mouth half-full of chocolate, she demanded, "Why in the hell are we cutting these so close? Why couldn't I have snagged him a couple days earlier? If the transfer hadn't worked..." She trailed off, attempting to short-circuit the profound tremor running the length of her body. The jump from Pompeii had been suicidal, even for a Senior Time Rover. Neither she nor Bartlesby were meant to be entombed with the city. The discovery of their bodies during the excavations in the eighteenth century would have required a lot of 'fixing'. Either way, she and the tourist would be dead.

Ralph looked genuinely chagrined. "I guess marketing is trying to make up last quarter's shortfall. The longer the tourist is on site, the more money. It's all a matter of economics—at least from TIC's point of view."

"Economics? Do they have any idea how those people died?" she demanded, the image of the young girl cradling the child replaying in her mind.

"No, they probably don't. Marketing's never been real strong on reality." Ralph lowered his voice. "I'm really sorry, Cyn. I wouldn't have made you go that close to the end. I'd have fudged the time."

Her anger melted. It wasn't right for her to chew on him. Ralph always looked out for her. They'd been buddies ever since he'd beaned her over the head with an alphabet block in pre-school and she'd promptly retali-

ated with a toy truck. They'd both been sent home with notes to their respective parents. From that moment on, they were joined at the hip. Lovers came and went, but Ralph was a constant.

"All we need is for one of these guys to croak and—"

He touched her arm, and she fell silent. A statuesque blonde customer rep was exiting the Departures Lounge, guiding a middle-aged couple toward one of the time pods.

"You'll see, Marjorie, it'll be fun," the man said, tucking a hip flask into the pocket of his voluminous raccoon coat. The woman shook her head in dismay, apparently not as keen about the upcoming adventure as her husband. The rep ushered them inside the pod and encouraged them to relax.

"You'll be at your destination shortly," the rep said with practiced ease.

"I have motion sickness," the woman warned.

"Not a problem. No motion involved."

Ralph and Cynda traded looks. This lady was in for a helluva surprise. "A forty-story plunge down a drainpipe" was how one Rover described it. Oddly enough, the length of the drop didn't seem to change no matter how much time you covered; just one long drop, followed by a very sudden stop.

The rep tapped her high heels over to deliver the Time Order and a warm smile to Ralph. She leaned against the chronsole, her well-rounded bottom jutting in the air. It was too perfect—no doubt the latest in posterior implants. Perky one day, sultry the next. You decided what you wanted your butt to look like, and the implant changed to match your expectations. From what Cynda heard, they cost a fortune. Apparently, customer reps made more than Rovers.

"Hi, Ralph," the blonde said, her voice low and full of promise.

His eyes twinkled. "Hi there. Are we still on for dinner?"

She beamed. "Sure are. And dessert, I hope."

"Always dessert," Ralph replied.

Cynda noshed her way through another candy bar, watching the pair with amusement. For some reason, Ralph's silver-streaked ponytail and oval, Teddy Roosevelt glasses simply mesmerized young women. It

never made sense, but the beneficiary accepted he was a skirt magnet. Last week, it had been a brunette in accounting. Today, it was Miss Well-Rounded Caboose in the nostalgia heels.

The blonde threw Cynda a sidelong glance. With a decided sniff, she returned to business. “The Hartmans are scheduled for 1925 Chicago. Mr. Hartman wants to get a glimpse of Al Capone.”

“Roaring Twenties Chicago,” Ralph said, inserting the nano-drive containing the Time Order into his terminal. His fingers flew over the touchscreen as the entries scrolled in the air. Studying the order, he observed, “A seven-dayer. Big bucks for that.”

“It’s their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary,” the rep replied. “Mr. Hartman wants to give his wife something special and then write a few ‘man on the scene’ articles for *Roaring ’20s Retro Magazine*.”

Ralph raised an eyebrow, double-checked his entries and announced, “Ready.”

The rep nodded her approval. “Go for it.” He hesitated, looking around. “Which Rover’s handling the Outbound?”

“No one.”

Ralph shot Cynda a quick look. “They’re flying solo?”

“New policy,” the rep replied. “Unless it’s a dangerous locale, no need for an Insertion Escort.”

“Chicago in the middle of a gang war? Nah, no danger there,” Ralph grumbled.

A noncommittal shrug from the rep. “You know Corporate.”

Ralph muttered under his breath as he keyed in the approval code. The pod door closed automatically. A few seconds later, the couple haloed their way into the past. The vid-monitor didn’t transmit Mrs. Hartman’s final words, but her wide eyes and quaking hand at her mouth delivered the message effectively enough.

“Incoming,” Ralph said, waggling an eyebrow. A moment later, a reassuring “Chron Transfer Complete” emanated from the computer speaker. The blonde tromped off, her heels making a racket. Her fanny wiggled unnaturally in time with her strides.

“No Outbound Rover?” Cynda muttered. “This isn’t a good sign,

Ralph.”

“Time to polish the old vid-résumé, I think.”

Cynda bent over the chronsole and smirked. “I see you’re working your way through the customer *rep-tile* pool,” she chided, indicating the retreating blonde.

“Be nice. She’s a blast.”

“Oh, I bet. You just like her designa-tush.”

“Hey, you’re not the only one to get time lag, you know,” Ralph protested. “Since I don’t like chocolate, sex is the best way to cure it.”

“Nonsense. All you chron-ops get are hangnails.”

Ralph frowned and promptly retaliated. “You have another assignment.”

“What? You’ve gotta to be kidding me!” Cynda’s eyes danced around the room, hunting for the boss. “Where is that moron?”

“Referring to our fearless leader as a moron, though technically correct, is probably not a good career move,” Ralph advised. He conscientiously opened another candy wrapper and handed over the contents.

She shook her head, waving the candy bar in her agitation. “I’m not going anywhere. TIC owes me eight days off. I’ve just set a new world’s record for time leaps.”

“Actually, not. I believe that Harter Defoe did that in--”

“I don’t need a walking encyclopedia. I’m going to get this settled and go home. I need some...down time.” She blinked, but it did no good. It looked as if someone had stuck a crimson filter in front of her eyes. The chocolate wasn’t having the desired effect against the time lag.

Ralph’s mouth twitched into a slow, libidinous grin. “Down time?”

She refused to be baited. “Where is our fearless leader?”

“Thad’s gone for the day. Meeting at Corporate.” Ralph pushed a pulsating hot pink nano-drive across the counter and pointed toward the Rover’s locker room. “Hie thee hence. I don’t want you busting my eardrums when you find out where you’re going.”

Hot pink? “An Overdue? Where?”

Instead of answering her, he logged himself out and rose from his chair. A young man stood nearby, digital clipboard in hand. The next

shift had arrived.

“Where?” Cynda demanded, reluctant to claim the nano-drive and obligate herself.

Ralph pointedly ignored her. Addressing his replacement, he said, “Five out today. One Overdue. Cynda’s handling that.” Before she could complain, he pushed the hot pink time bomb closer toward her and commanded, “Away, loud strumpet.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I could refuse this, you know. I have enough seniority.”

“You could,” Ralph said. They both knew she wouldn’t.

He donned a set of vintage headphones, adjusting them on his ears. Classic Led Zeppelin wafted around him. Waving, he hiked toward the double doors at the far end of the Chronsole Bay.

“Be sure to say hello to Oscar for me,” he called right before the doors thudded behind him.

“Oscar?” Cynda repeated. “Oscar who?”

The next shift’s chron-op plopped in the chair, executing a sunny smile in her direction. He looked all of twelve. Her mind rummaged for his name. *Irving? No, that’s not right.* She conjured up the mnemonic. *Ivan the Infant.* That was it. Ivan. *What had his parents been thinking?*

Bewildered, she scooped up the drive and headed for the closest empty desk. Jamming the drive into a port, she fidgeted as the information materialized at eye level.

Retrieval Order—Overdue Tourist

Location: London, East End

Date: August 25, 1888 A.D.

Time Grid: Late Victorian

Wardrobe Code: LVL1888F—Class 4

Due: August 21, 1888 A.D.

“1888? Oscar...Wilde.” *Oh, damn.*

“Thad, you son of a...” Cynda let the oath trail off, realizing it was wasted. He knew she loathed Victorian London, rated it right up there

with Europe in the throes of the Black Death. She scanned the rest of the order.

Tourist Name: Michael A. Turner

Profession: Professor of Sociology

Age: 57

Last Known Location: A. Phillip's Boarding House

Address: New Castle Street, Whitechapel

Special Instructions: Insert Rover on 8/24/88 for retrieval.

She checked the time date again. TIC was cutting it close--no one was allowed in London after August 26. Company policy.

"Just like having four days off between leaps," she muttered. She studied the digital image of the missing academic; he looked like someone's granddad. Maybe this trip wouldn't be that hard after all.

To escape the smiling child at the chronsole, Cynda carried the nano-drive to the locker room. Flipping the drive into her locker, she peeled off the stola. As she prepared to toss it in the recycling basket, she spied the scorch marks. A shudder coursed through her.

"Too damned close." To get her mind off the near-fatal encounter, she selected her favorite peach body wash. After a moment's thought, she slung it back in the locker. Given where she was headed, a shower was a complete waste of time. After a moment, she picked it up again. There was one more stop to make before she headed to London, and for that, she shouldn't smell like a lab experiment gone awry.

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The door chimed as Cynda entered the deli, a quaint holdover from when restaurant owners actually welcomed each customer in person. She loved Eli's Deli for many reasons, all of them having to do with lack of technology. At other delis, you placed your order using your Personal Security Interface (PSI) as the link. The order was ready when you walked inside the door, the cost auto-debited from your bank account, and the caloric intake added to your nutritional database. No need to talk a real

person.

Which is why she adored Eli's; they still relied on the personal touch. Cynda savored the ability to order her food from a human being, not the PSI on her wrist or a gleaming Server-Bot with a false smile and a paper hat.

"Hello, beautiful!" Eli called from behind the counter.

Another reason she loved this place. Eli was in his mid-sixties and learned the business from his father and grandfather, both named Eli Greenwald. She'd dubbed him E3, and he liked it.

"The usual?" he asked, eyeing her closely.

"No, I think I'll have the..." She stared up at the chalkboard listing the day's special. "I'll have the tuna salad on whole wheat, please. And a couple extra kosher pickle spears." She pushed her auto-cooled lunch tote across the counter and they traded looks.

"Fish on wheat, hold mayo, extra mustard and lettuce, two spears, coming up," he intoned, giving her a wink. Scooping up her lunch tote, he vanished into the kitchen to collect the pickles while his daughter made the sandwich at a nearby worktable. Every sandwich was made by hand. Eli swore he could tell if a Bot made his food, though she thought that might be a bit of an exaggeration.

Cynda waved her left hand near the register interface. The cost of the meal vanished from her bank account while the calories were added to her Daily Intake Record for insurance purposes. The register interface beeped.

"Recommend extra mayo and cheese to increase overall body mass," it said.

"Deny," she said.

"Recommend double chocolate milkshake to increase caloric—"

"Deny," she said, frowning.

"Recommend—"

"Override."

The thing beeped and stopped bugging her. Thin was her thing; it was just what the parental DNA had provided. Perfect for being a Rover. Less weight reduced the time lag and the cost of transfers. Unfortunately, the

insurance companies didn't see it that way.

Leaning against the counter, Cynda resisted the urge to drum her fingers. Other customers picked up their sandwiches and left. She made sure to look nonchalant, or at least as mellow as one could when committing a criminal act. Word was you got five years for the first conviction, and the numbers piled up with each subsequent brush with the law. She was courting a jail sentence because of the tomato seeds she'd hidden in the bottom of her lunch tote.

It was Blair's fault. Her wild-haired brother had somehow talked their parents into jumping ship—going Off-Grid, as it was called. Now they were stuck *out there*. Because of him they had no health insurance, no guarantee that next year's crop would thrive and they'd have enough to eat, no PSI units, none of the supposed perks of being part of society. They were now *persona non grata*. Because of Blair's boneheaded defiance, she risked everything to smuggle seeds to her parents.

Seeds were money to an Off-Gridder. The non-genetically modified varieties were rare, and easily a quarter of Cynda's paycheck went into each packet. Once her parents had their own supply, her father would be able to establish his medical practice, no matter how rudimentary it might be, and that would generate income. Until that day, she would break the law. If it all fell apart, she'd be the one doing the jail time while Blair played farmer and ranted against the evils of society.

"Creep," she muttered. "I should have drowned you when I had the chance."

Her eyes slipped over the few patrons dining in. Nobody seemed out of place, but then a Gov agent wouldn't. She had to figure her PSI interface would be mum about that, as well. The security geeks would know how to block that information. The PSI was great for scoping out your fellow citizens, but it seemed mute when it came to the Powers That Be.

She heard the double doors open behind her and Eli reappeared, lunch tote in hand. He placed the wrapped sandwich inside and handed over the tote with a smile.

"I picked the crispest pickles for you," Eli said.

"Thanks, E3. I appreciate it. Yours are always the best."

Turning, she caught sight of a man paying a bit too much attention. She knew it wasn't her figure. Ralph had once described her as a pipe cleaner with boobs.

Bluffing, Cynda took her sandwich to a nearby Designated Green Space. The ordinances allowed you to eat in a DGS, providing you weren't there longer than thirty minutes: a rule designed to prevent vagrancy. Stay over the half-an-hour limit, and one of the black and white CopBots would order you to move on.

Settling on one of the ergo benches, she unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite. A satisfied sigh came unbidden; Eli's creations were always heaven. A few benches away, the man who'd been watching her in the deli took a seat, licking a vanilla ice cream cone. A check of the PSI unit on her wrist told Cynda he was 37, single and worked for a mortgage company. On the Social Compatibility Scale, he rated 8.7 out of 10.

Not likely. The chickens were coming home to roost sooner than she'd hoped. The trip to Victorian London took on a new urgency. Maybe the heat would die down while she was gone. If not, she and Eli would be sharing the same cellblock at the Correction Facility. She wondered if E3's wife would be able to smuggle in some dill pickles every now and then.

Chapter 2

Monday, 24 September, 1888

London

Pressing the coins into the hansom driver's rough hand, Alastair shook his head at the question. "No, you do not need to wait."

"As you wish, sir," the jarvey replied, touching his battered cap in respect. He jiggled the reins, and the cab clattered down the street. Alastair watched it turn the corner as he dropped the remaining coins into his pocket. He regretted spending the money, but he'd run late at the hospital, forcing him to secure a ride to Marylebone. Flipping open his pocket watch revealed it was three minutes until five. He would be on time.

Alastair released a deep sigh as he mounted the stairs to the house. It was a three-story, white stone affair with a glowing gas lamp at the front door. It spoke of money, but then Lord Wescomb was a well-regarded barrister and came from landed gentry. He could easily have afforded a house in Knightsbridge or Mayfair, but preferred to be close to the law courts.

Alastair turned toward the clean and well-lit street. He'd once lived in a place like this, free of worry, free to spend a few coins on a cab journey. All that lay in the past now.

After another deep breath, he knocked on the carved oak door. The maid promptly answered.

"Doctor Alastair Montrose to see Lord and Lady Wescomb, at their request," he said politely. *Summoned to their presence was more like it.* The note he'd received, while cordial, did not allow him the option to decline.

"This way, Doctor," the maid replied.

Alastair stepped inside, glancing about as inconspicuously as possible. The carpets proved richly hued and the walls were of the finest hardwood. The delicate scent of flowers caught his nose. He found the source; an elegant lead crystal vase filled with an abundance of colorful blooms.

Chagrined, he realized the maid waited. He removed his coat and hat, passing them to her. She hung them on a hall tree, exhibiting a calm

demeanor he wished he could borrow.

Perhaps the Wescombs wish to donate to the clinic. His mind immediately discarded that fanciful notion. This summons was something else altogether.

Alastair took time to straighten his tie and jacket in the hall mirror, smoothing his hair and moustache. He looked as presentable as a young physician might, given his reduced circumstances. He'd made a point of wearing his best suit and polishing his shoes. A downward glance revealed they'd survived the journey in tolerable shape.

"They're in his lordship's study," the maid advised, gesturing down the long hall.

When they reached their destination, Alastair hesitated at the study door, as if retreat remained an option. Inside, he heard the reassuring sounds of a crackling fire and low voices. The maid gave him an inquisitive look. He nodded for her to proceed. She knocked and was readily granted entrance.

The room proved surprisingly intimate, with tall bookshelves on three walls and a massive hearth on the fourth. Lady Sephora Wescomb sat in a brocade chair near the stone fireplace, her intelligent eyes observing him with a hawk's intensity. Her silvered hair glinted in the gaslight in contrast to her deep-purple gown. It was cut in the latest fashion, with black lace at the bosom and at the cuffs. Her husband, Lord Wescomb, leaned back in a heavily padded chair with a faint look of amusement, adjusting his embroidered waistcoat over a slight paunch. Alastair delivered a nod in his lordship's direction and it was returned. He followed suit with the lady of the house.

"Come in, Doctor," Lady Sephora commanded, executing a graceful gesture toward a chair set equidistant between herself and her husband.

"Thank you, Lady Wescomb," Alastair replied as the maid closed the door behind him.

"You haven't changed a bit, young man," Lord Wescomb observed with a bemused chuckle.

"Thank you, my lord." Alastair settled into the chair, ill at ease. A glass of sherry rested on a walnut table near his elbow. He reached for the

liquor and sipped, waiting for his hosts to open the conversation.

Lady Sephora's form abruptly shifted, strawberry-blond tresses replacing the silver, her matronly figure exchanged for a girlish shape. Wescomb altered as well, his hair now dark and his face thin. Indeed, the pair now appeared as they might have two decades earlier.

"Are you not going *en mirage*?" Lady Sephora's voice matched her youthful appearance.

Alastair shook his head. "No, thank you. I have no need to do so." The moment after he spoke, he inwardly grimaced. He'd foolishly reminded his hosts of his aberrant behavior.

"Surely you go *en mirage* on occasion," she said.

"No, I don't."

The Wescombs traded looks. "Not at all?" Lady Sephora pressed, adopting a puzzled tone.

Alastair felt the trap closing. "No."

The low sigh from his hostess sounded like a reproof. In contrast, Lord Wescomb's face gained a slight smile.

"You always were a maverick," he said. From his lordship's mouth, it sounded like a blessing.

"I am not like the others, my lord."

"In that you are wrong," Wescomb retorted, his voice changing timbre in an instant. "You are more one of us than you wish to believe."

Alastair drained the liquor, set the delicate crystal glass on the table and rose, knowing he risked angering his hosts with such an abrupt departure.

"Thank you for the sherry. If that is all, I must--"

"Please, Doctor," Lady Sephora urged, gesturing toward the empty chair. "Don't make a scene. We are merely concerned for your health."

"I appreciate your concern; however, I cannot live as you prescribe. I do not wish to embrace this...*transitory* existence you so readily cultivate."

An awkward moment ensued; the urge to flee barely held in check by the social graces. Alastair stared into the fire, debating his next move. The gaslights on either side of the mantel hissed into the silence.

“I understand you no longer practice with Dr. Hanson in Mayfair,” Lord Wescomb said.

Sensing a merciful shift of topic, Alastair returned to his seat. He elected not to ask how his host knew about his change of venue. Apparently, the Transitive community paid more attention to him than he cared to admit.

“Yes, there have been changes in my professional life. I now practice at the London Hospital and a small clinic in Whitechapel.”

“I see. Do you enjoy your work at the clinic?” Wescomb asked, leaning forward in his chair.

Alastair gave a faint smile. “Infinitely so. The conditions are of the most primitive nature, and the people of the lowest sort, but they are grateful for any help they receive. They have so little.”

“Indeed.”

“When did you begin your work in Whitechapel?” Lady Sephora asked.

The relevance of the question puzzled Alastair. “In mid-July.”

“I understand that Dr. Hanson was quite displeased with you,” Wescomb said.

“We disagreed as to which patients I should treat.”

“What I heard about that young boy was true, then?” Wescomb asked.

Alastair shifted uncomfortably, adjusting his jacket. *What was the purpose of this close questioning?* “Dr. Hanson refused to allow me to treat the injured boy in the surgery. He didn’t want our patients to think we attended those of the *lesser classes*, as he put it.” Alastair’s jaw tightened at the memory of their argument.

“We have been to the East End, *en mirage*. It was most disheartening,” Lady Sephora observed with a distant expression on her face, as if she could still see the filthy streets and the ragged ghosts that inhabited them.

“They want for the most basic necessities,” Alastair said.

“What of Hanson’s daughter, Evelyn? Are you still engaged?” Wescomb asked out of the blue.

The query snapped Alastair back to the moment. He noted the pair switched back and forth, as if this had been rehearsed.

“We have broken our engagement. Evelyn has requested that I no longer see her. She cannot fathom why I wish to treat the poor. She deems it a waste of my talent.”

“Not surprising,” Wescomb huffed. “Evelyn always struck me as quite shallow. I said the same to Sephora after the first time I met her.”

Lady Sephora nodded. “Which I believe was the first time we met you, Doctor. At the Endicotts’ party. You and Evelyn never seemed to be a matched set, if you follow my meaning.”

Alastair opened his mouth to protest, then abandoned the effort. They were correct, though it stung to admit it. Evelyn heeded her father in all things, even the matter of a potential husband.

Alastair’s eyes drifted to his hostess. Sephora Wescomb was the converse of young Evelyn; she valued her independence and exercised her brilliant mind regularly, much to the annoyance of most males. Lord Wescomb seemed to comprehend that his wife was as rare as a clear day in London and should be cherished as such.

“Are you courting someone at present?” the lady asked after a diminutive sip of sherry.

That was over the mark. “Is there some reason I’m here?” Alastair asked, chafing to be away from the probing questions.

Wescomb replied, “We’ve been instructed to make these inquiries, Doctor.”

“By The Conclave?”

A brusque nod. “There are rare few of our kind that do not go *en mirage*, and The Conclave wishes to ascertain your mental health. It is not regarded as wholesome to avoid our true natures.”

“I am not unbalanced, if that is your concern.”

“Perhaps not yet. Still, you live outside the rules, and especially during this time it is dangerous to do so,” Wescomb advised.

“I remain circumspect. I don’t flaunt myself like Keats.”

Wescomb quickly nodded in agreement. “Keats does have his fun, but be assured that at present, all are under orders to appear as pedestrian as our fellow citizens. What with these unseemly murders in the East End, it is vital that we remain out of public scrutiny.”

“Then how does my behavior present a problem?”

“Our particular endowment must be exercised or it will run amok,” the lady cautioned.

Alastair shook his head. “It never has with me. I have control of it.”

Lady Sephora’s expression grew stern. “So you have said in the past, and I must admit you have mastered your need to go *en mirage* quite well. However, even the best of us will eventually succumb--”

Alastair rose abruptly. “I resent the implication that I cannot keep myself in check.”

Wescomb rose as well, and his voice took on a hard edge. “If my good lady and I are unable to overcome this...predilection, then why do you believe *you* are so invincible?”

“With all due respect, Lord Wescomb, I just am. May I now be excused?”

His hosts studied each other until Lady Sephora gave a resigned nod.

“Please be cautious, Doctor. Many eyes are upon you,” she said.

“As always, my lady,” he replied with open discontent.

Without further pleasantries, he departed the room at a brisk march. Brushing aside the maid’s assistance at the front door, Alastair collected his coat and hat and exited onto the street. Twilight hung in the air. The street’s deepening shadows matched his mood.

Inside the study, Wescomb sank into his chair with a long exhalation. “The boy is riding for a fall, I think. No one is capable of denying our legacy. He is a fool to think he can.”

His wife rose and closed the door in a rustle of silk. “He’ll learn it soon enough.”

“What will The Conclave do?” Wescomb asked.

“I am not sure,” she said. “They are so skittish at present. Knowing they have a rogue, even one as well mannered as Alastair, may cause them to react irrationally. They are most adamant that our young doctor be held accountable for his unhealthy behavior.”

“Let us hope this East End lunatic ceases his reign of terror and normalcy returns.”

The lady's face grew thoughtful as she returned to her chair. "And that the fiend is not one of ours."

Wescomb shook his head vigorously. "Good God, Sephora, I really can't believe--"

"It does not matter what either of us believes, John! It's what The Conclave presumes. If they are convinced that Alastair is behind this butchery..."

Silence descended as each mulled the implications. Wescomb poured himself another glass of sherry. His wife held out hers, and he performed the honors.

She studied the amber liquor. "We must pray for Alastair's future...and his sanity," she said softly.

Wescomb nodded solemnly. They drained their drinks. After only a moment's hesitation, both hurled the crystal into the blazing fireplace. The remnants of the alcohol flared brilliantly, and then vanished in the flames.



It took many blocks before Alastair's temper cooled, his anger replaced by gnawing unease. A sensible man wouldn't have lost his temper. The Wescombs had shrewdly attacked his weakest point: the urge to go *en mirage*. By resisting it, the urge only grew stronger. Though the Wescombs were circumspect in their practices, others of his kind regularly adopted bizarre forms and saw it as a grand charade.

"It's still a dangerous game," he muttered, "and I shall not play it."

When he became aware of his surroundings, he found himself on Threadneedle Street near the Bank of England. Pausing at an intersection, on a whim Alastair cut south toward the Thames, keen to judge how the new bridge was progressing. Something about the nascent structure always brightened his spirits, gave him hope.

As he stood along the riverside near the Tower of London, a slight breeze danced over the Thames. In the distance, he could see the massive concrete piers breaking the surface like two continents rising from the

depths. Fascinated at this marvel of engineering, he'd eagerly followed the news articles, relishing every minor detail. He could hardly wait until the first time the structure's twin spans rose heavenward to allow a ship to pass beneath.

"Amazing," he murmured.

Shifting his gaze toward the East End, he felt his melancholy return, descending on him like a thick London 'particular'.

"Such deprivation within sight of such a marvel. How can it be like that?" he mused.

The Tower of London's high gray walls loomed in the darkness as he hiked the Minories and then north toward St. Botolph's Church. As always, he was transfixed by the women trolling the exterior, circumnavigating the church like fallen angels in search of holy redemption. They'd learned that if they kept moving, they wouldn't be arrested for prostitution.

Various offers came his way, but he ignored them as he made his trek along Whitechapel High Street and then onto Commercial Street. The thoroughfare bustled with bodies; costermongers hawked their fruits and vegetables in strident voices. A newsboy chanted the latest scandal while a potman dished out pints of porter and stout to waiting customers. A lamplighter descended to the street, his task complete. Above him, the gas lamp spread its limited glow. "All-a-bloomin'," a flower merchant called as a young man chose a red rose for his sweetheart. The grating squeak of a wheelbarrow announced a scrap iron merchant wending his way through the teeming throng.

"Sir, spare tuppence? I can get a bed if you do that, sir," a tattered woman wearing a threadbare shawl called from her place on the street. Before her sat a battered wooden bowl inhabited by a solitary copper coin. Alastair knelt and placed two pence in the woman's hand, rolling her dirty fingers over the disks. She blinked in surprise at his touch.

"Bless you, sir," she said. "I'll not use it for drink. I swear it."

"I know." He could ill afford to give away even a few pence, but something about the woman struck his heart. "May God bless you," he said as he rose.

Partially obscured in the shadows of a doorway, a young woman asked in a husky voice, “Fancy some company, luv?”

Alastair ignored her. She persisted, catching up with him as he navigated his way through the dense crowd.

“Come now, luv, don’t be that way.”

He gave her a sharp look. Something felt odd, though her appearance gave no doubt as to her station in life: a plain, lower-class girl wearing a cheap straw hat, mismatched clothes and carrying a worn umbrella. Grabbing his arm, she forced him to match her pace. A strange tingle flooded through him, heralding the presence of one of his kind *en mirage*. Only one person would be so bold as to approach him in this manner.

Alastair glared and whispered, “By the devil, Keats, is that you?”

The young woman tittered. “Why do you think that?”

Indeed, it was Jonathon Keats, the rascal who claimed to be his friend. Alastair tried to shake himself free, but his companion clutched his arm like a beggar would a gold sovereign.

“Stop squirming,” the *girl* whispered, and then flashed a smile at a passing tradesman. “You’ll attract attention.”

That was rich. “What are you doing?”

“Hunting the killer, you see,” Keats replied in a conspiratorial whisper, revealing no hint of the man underneath.

“Do you not realize the danger your stunt poses?”

“I’m not the one who was summoned to our lordship’s house tonight.” Leaning in closer, pressing against his forearm, Keats asked, “Just how did that go? Did they give you twenty whacks on the bum and make you stand in the corner?”

This time, Alastair did manage to shake the nuisance free, and none too gently. In a swift gesture, he propelled them down an alley. Jamming *her* up against the sooty brickwork, he snarled, “How did you know I was with the Wescombs?” *Is Keats spying on me for The Conclave?*

“Oh, really, Alastair. Your name is on quite a few lips, old boy. Word is that you’ve gone *Opaque* on us.”

Alastair’s mouth twitched. “I prefer not to play around like you do,” he

retorted.

“I don’t play; I conduct experiments,” Keats announced in a grand tone. “Just like any great scientist.”

“Just like any proper madman, you mean.”

A couple entered the alley: a tradesman and a prostitute by the looks of them. After a quick glance in their direction, the woman hiked her skirts and leaned back against the brick wall as the man undid his pants, seemingly unconcerned that they were not alone.

“Oh, God,” Alastair said, averting his eyes. With a smirk, his companion did the same.

“Just a knee-trembler,” Keats said, employing the vernacular. “Nothing to be alarmed about. In fact, if you want to blend in,” *she* said, mischievously reaching for her skirts.

Alastair shoved the irritant further along the dark alley. “Why does The Conclave care what I’m doing?” he whispered, mindful of the couple behind them.

That earned him an amused look. “You confound them. You don’t play by the rules. They’re uneasy with anyone who doesn’t blindly follow their lead.”

“I am minding my own business. Can’t they see that?” Alastair insisted

“No, they can’t. Besides, this isn’t all fun and frolic,” Keats said, his voice less gleeful than before. “It’s what we need to do to survive. Fortunately, it harms no one...unlike some vices.”

Alastair glared. “I will debate that last statement until my dying day.”

“Which might not be too far away if you keep denying your heritage, my friend,” Keats remarked. “You know what that can cause.”

“I shall not become...unstable.”

Keats shrugged. “Old Roger Diamond said the same thing. I’ve heard he’s confined in a straitjacket now, thumping his brains against the walls of his family’s manor house in Dorset.”

“I am not so inclined,” Alastair persisted.

“Maybe not, but *they* prefer predictability.”

“I’m quite predictable,” Alastair protested, his voice rising higher than he intended.

“Nonsense. Predictable people don’t toss away their future over some street waif. Predictable people...” Keats paused and then continued in a lowered voice, “go about *en mirage* on occasion. You, however, are as opaque as...” *She* gestured toward the pair at the other end of the alley.

At that, the tradesman gave a short grunt and then stepped back, buttoning his trousers. The prostitute dropped her skirts.

“Bless ya, luv,” she said, humming to herself as they left the alley. They parted at the street, the act of dispassionate commerce complete.

Keats shook his head in dismay. “Despite the killer, they still go off with strangers. I just don’t understand.”

Alastair grasped the illusion’s arm and marched toward the street. “I’ve had quite enough of you for one evening.”

“Treat me nice,” Keats teased. “If I give a shout, the crowd will be on you like a pack of hounds. From what I hear, you’re about the killer’s height and your hair is nearly the same color. Might take a bit of time for the mob to realize they’ve got the wrong fellow.”

Alastair released *her*, unsure if the crank might pull such a stunt. He straightened his jacket, then strode toward the street, hoping Keats wouldn’t rejoin him.

The pest appeared at his side, eyeing passing gentlemen with stealthy glances.

“Mindless twit,” Alastair grumbled. “Don’t you have someone else to torment?”

His companion turned serious in a flash. He latched onto Alastair’s arm again, leaning close. “Be careful,” Keats whispered. “On all accounts. I would miss your gloomy person more than you might realize.”

After disengaging herself, Keats adopted a saucy walk, veering toward the mangle of bodies loitering outside the Princess Alice. The moment before crossing the threshold into the pub, *she* executed a short wave.

“Bloody lunatic,” Alastair muttered. “He’s the one they should be worrying about, not me.”

In time, the doctor reached the ramshackle building on Church Street that housed the clinic, a tailor’s shop, a saddle maker and ten families squashed into tiny, airless rooms. Situated on the ground floor in a space

no more than fifteen by fifteen in size, the clinic consisted of two wooden tables, a few benches and an endless supply of the sick and injured.

Tonight was no exception; all the benches were full. Some of the patients held their heads, while others had barking coughs. One man cradled his injured arm, a thick line of blood congealing on his shirt. Alastair's fellow physician, Daniel Cohen, was attempting to place a stethoscope on a sobbing toddler's chest. He glanced up, spied Alastair, and then shook his head in disapproval.

"I won't bother arguing with you," Daniel called over the noise. "You won't listen to me anyway."

"You need help tonight," Alastair replied, removing his hat, coat and jacket.

"You require a night at leisure," Daniel replied. The recalcitrant child grasped the stethoscope and tugged on it playfully. Daniel obliged by placing it on the youngster's chest.

"I'll take tomorrow night off," Alastair said, rolling up his sleeves.

"So you always say," was the curt reply.

Alastair crossed to a cabinet and tucked his garments inside to prevent them from being stolen and pawned for ready money. He gestured for the next patient to come forward: an older man spitting blood into a dingy grey handkerchief.

At least here no one questioned his sanity.

Chapter 3

No doubt they made a curious pair to any onlooker: the somber physician and the gregarious bootblack. Davy Butler had spied him the moment he left the clinic and now tagged along at his side, whistling a tune. As usual, the boy's face begged for soap and water.

"How's your leg this evening?" Alastair asked, noting Davy wasn't limping as much as usual.

"Right as rain," the lad chirped.

Alastair delivered a skeptical look. Davy would say anything to mollify him; it was the child's nature. His mind skipped back to their first meeting--the twist of fate that had cost Alastair his future in Mayfair--Davy lying in the rain-soaked street, his right leg bent at an impossible angle while a carriage driver bellowed a torrent of abuse. Fighting back tears, the boy had insisted he couldn't be hurt, that he had to work to feed his mum.

In the end, Alastair ensured Davy's widowed mother was fed and the rent paid. After a fortnight's convalescence, the boy was on the streets again, hawking papers while leaning against a crutch. Once his leg healed, he returned to sweeping the streets, polishing boots and scavenging along the Thames during low tide for discarded items he could sell. To his credit, and Alastair's supreme annoyance, he'd insisted on repaying every penny of the doctor's generosity.

"You sure your leg's not troubling you?" Alastair probed.

"It pains sometimes, but it's not bad. Not like some I've seen. You did right by me, doc."

"Well, that's good, then. How much did you make today?"

"Nuff for two days' food," Davy announced proudly.

"Good job." Alastair clapped the lad on the back. "How is your mother?"

"Her cough's worse," Davy admitted. "She works too hard."

"Yes, she does. Have her come to the clinic tomorrow night."

"I'll try, doc. You know how she is."

“Yes, I know.” *Stubborn, like you.*

A smile bloomed on the boy’s face. “I’d best be goin’.” He tapped his cap. “G’night!”

“See you tomorrow, Davy. My regards to your mother.”

“Right, doc.” The boy scampered across the street and into an alley like a gazelle.

The sight made Alastair smile. A success in a sea of failures.

He paused to purchase a paper and then immediately thought better of it. Every penny counted. The clinic accepted what a patient could afford to pay, which was typically nothing. The cost of medicines, bandages and other supplies came from the pockets of the physicians and what pitifully few charitable donations they could raise. That evening, one of the children offered her dolly in recompense. Alastair had declined, a thick lump forming in his throat. It was clear the doll was all the child had to her name, other than a case of consumption that would carry her to the grave within the month.

“Sir?” the newsboy asked. Alastair realized he’d been woolgathering.

“No, I’ve changed my mind. Thank you.” He continued toward home, recalling when the cost of a paper was a trivial expense.

Pausing outside the boarding house, he stared upward at the window of his room. A world away from his accommodations in Mayfair.

“At least I’ll go to my grave knowing I made a difference,” he murmured.

Knees and back complained as Alastair hiked the stairs to the second floor. The Wescombs’ interrogation still raged through his mind like a squall.

Maybe now they’ve issued their warning, they’ll leave me alone. He unlocked his door and pushed it open with a faint creak. The room looked untouched, with his medical books and diary on the rickety table and his spare suit hanging on a hook near the door, airing.

Delusions of persecution: one of the first indications that a Transitive was losing control.

“Nonsense,” He shut the door and stripped off his coat. “Utter nonsense.”

He was too weary. The words would not come tonight, no matter how long he stared at the blank page. Sighing, he leafed back in the diary, savoring earlier entries.

Friday, 31 August, 1888

Tonight, I tasted glory.

It happened with minimal commotion, as if she knew her fate and was willing to grant my quest without struggle. When it was done, so aflame was I that I rushed headlong into the streets to proclaim my triumph. None understood.

All things have a beginning. Tonight was mine.

Flipping forward in the diary with a gloved hand, he read further.

Thursday, 6 September, 1888

I detest funerals. They speak only to the living. Why would we, those who still draw breath, care of such things? I note the polished elm coffin was well regarded. Pity I could not claim credit for placing her within.

My search continues.

He closed the book and wrapped it in the fabric shroud, hiding it at the bottom of the wardrobe. Another time, the words would be there.

~••~••~••~

Cynda blinked her eyes, allowing them time to adjust. There was nothing quite like the darkness of a Victorian back alley. The pitch-blackness was augmented by the potent stench of far too many unwashed people and too few toilets, intermingled with the rank bouquet of rotting garbage.

She fidgeted under the weight of her clothes. Though she'd opted for fewer petticoats than the Victorian norm to keep the burden under an oppressive twenty pounds, it was still a far cry from the feather-light stola she'd worn a short time before. As Ralph had once astutely observed, "Clothes are the measure of the time." At the height of its glory, Pompeii was an exquisite city boasting ideal weather and three crops a year. At the

height of the British Empire, London, at least the East End, was a festering dump.

“Rule Britannia,” Cynda muttered, trudging down the alley. She carried a black Gladstone bag with a spare dress, toilet items and a substantial stock of chocolate packaged in appropriate Victorian-style wrappers. She didn’t plan on staying that long, but Overdues could be tricky. They tended to wander. Even though Whitechapel wasn’t that big—only about a square mile—there were a lot of holes to hide in if a tourist didn’t want to be found.

She squeamishly gave a dead rat a wide berth. Those were never mentioned in TIC’s sales literature. Neither was the stark poverty of the East End, or the lack of adequate sanitation. Instead, the vid-brochures waxed poetic about the virtues of time travel. *‘Imagine standing in the cheering crowds as Queen Victoria celebrates her Golden Jubilee (1887) or conducting research elbow-to-elbow with Lenin in the British Library (1902). Be there as history happens!’*

“What a crock.” Despite her misgivings, academic chrono-research was here to stay. One trip could deliver fodder for a decade’s worth of professional articles and Vid-Net interviews, exposure that led to tenure and fatter salaries. As the leader in time immersion technology, TIC was always eager to exploit history and make an unholy profit in the bargain.

Until the last buyout. TIC had yet to regain its footing. Wage cuts ensued, then layoffs. Even Victorian London looked rosier than her employer’s future.

Cynda paused at the entrance to the street to get her bearings. Despite all the chocolate she’d consumed before her departure, the mental fog remained. She blinked again, which only resulted in making the gas lamps appear multi-colored, like giant roman candles blazing into the grimy night. Every now and then, a bolt of lag-induced lightning would seem to strike the street in front of her, exploding in a burst of brilliant colors. The resulting thunderclap echoed like a thousand badly tuned cymbals. Her skin danced a two-step across her bones—all classic signs of advanced time lag. She was nearing the end of her reign as a Time Rover. Desk duty beckoned.

“Not a chance,” she said, shaking her head vigorously. She resisted the temptation to rummage in the Gladstone bag for more chocolate. If Ivan the Infant were on the ball, she’d be near the boarding house. Once she’d checked in, she’d track the missing academic and line him up to go home. Finding Professor Turner shouldn’t be difficult; Cynda was one of the best trackers in the business. She’d start with the closest pubs, and if that failed, then the brothels. Protected for a time from the local diseases and safely beyond the scrutiny of their spouses, the academics ran wild. If Turner wasn’t conducting research of a horizontal nature or drinking his weight in cheap booze, she’d head for the British Library. That was always her last resort.

A couple stumbled along, their off-key singing augmented by the level of cheap gin in their bellies. A bobby watched from the other side of the street with a benign expression. That puzzled her; she couldn’t remember a cop there in the past.

Navigating around piles of trampled horse manure, she hiked toward the boarding house. As men passed, a few politely tipped their hats in respect. She found that unnecessarily quaint. A carriage sailed by, the clip-clop of the horse’s hooves echoing in the narrow street. She passed a stable and then, a bit further on, a pub going full tilt. Frowsy, middle-aged women stood outside, gossiping. When an unaccompanied male wandered within range, their antennae went up like a praying mantis scouting its next meal.

“Hello, luv,” one of them called. The man sped up, his work boots slapping against the cobblestones as he hurried by. Apparently, he wasn’t interested in what she was offering.

Cynda trudged on until she reached her destination: a nondescript structure on New Castle Street.

A. Phillip’s Boarding House. A Warm Welcome and a Soft Bed, the sign read. The bed sounded good.

Maybe I’ll sleep for a week and then find Turner. She mulled the idea and then shook her head. *Not here. Anywhere but here.*

Sweating from the exertion and the weighty clothes, Cynda hauled herself up the stairs and gave a quick knock. A twinge of unease caused

her to glance over her shoulder. In the dim gaslight, she thought she saw a man watching her from the other side of the street.

When the door opened, Cynda swung around. Her balance faltered and she steadied herself on the door jam, the Gladstone banging into her knee.

“Yes, miss?” a woman asked in a less-than-friendly tone. She appeared to be about fifty years of age, with graying hair and a doughy complexion. Her breasts were a continent all their own. She wasn’t Annabelle, the boarding house’s owner.

Momentarily disconcerted, Cynda blurted, “I’m looking for a room.”

The woman gave her the once-over and then frowned, hands moving to her hips. “Mind you, we don’t rent to those who ply the trade...or those who drink too much.”

It took a moment for Cynda to understand what she meant. “Oh, no, I’m not...I’ve stayed here before. Miss Annabelle knows me. I’m Jacynda Lassiter.”

A look of chagrin. “Oh, I’m sorry, Miss. Annabelle’s spoken of you. Come in, come in. You walked here alone?” the woman asked, surveying the street. Before Cynda could reply, she added, “Not safe for a young lady anymore. Come on, I’ll take you to my sister.”

What’s up with Annabelle? Cynda took another look over her shoulder. The man was gone. Probably another lag-induced hallucination. She heaved a sigh of relief and hoisted herself over the threshold. The door closed behind her with a reassuring thud. The nearest wall provided needed support as she followed the heavysset woman toward the back of the building.

“I’m Mildred, by the way. Annabelle’s had a bit of an accident. Hurt her foot a few days back. I’m here to help her.”

“Good to hear it,” Cynda said, and then winced. That sounded less than sympathetic. Fortunately, Mildred didn’t appear to notice.

Annabelle Phillips sat close to the warm stove, one leg propped on the seat of a chair. She always had a reedy look to her, as if she were hollow and with a slight draft of wind might play a tune. Kneeling next to her, examining the swollen ankle, was a young man with rolled-up

shirtsleeves. He glanced upward at Cynda, his eyes an exhausted brown. A frown creased his face and she returned it. He wasn't Professor Turner, the wayward academic. *That would have been too easy.*

As Cynda opened her mouth to ask about accommodations, four scintillating lightning bolts set the kitchen in motion like a child's toy. Sparkly-blue dots morphed into steel-gray ones. Right before the gray faded into black oblivion, Cynda staggered into the young man, her knees giving way.

"Need chocolate..." she whispered, and then fainted at the startled man's feet.

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