



Somewhere Between Longview and Miami

by

Jennifer L. Armstrong

SOMEWHERE
BETWEEN
LONGVIEW
&
MIAMI

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CHAPTER ONE

I get a letter from him about every six months.

My subconscious prepares me for the event by causing me to have major urges to check the mailbox twice a day, sometimes even three times. I also think a lot about him for the month leading up to the letter. Just the usual stuff -- fantasies about chance encounters with him even though he's about 1500 miles away.

The letter, when it arrives, is savored. I don't tell Wilson about it although he always comments that I seem distant.

I usually smile and say, "It's moon orbs. Right now the moon is aligned with Jupiter and it creates an aura of peace in my life." I have no idea whether it is even possible for the moon to align with Jupiter, but, of course, neither does Wilson. He just looks at me like I'm crazy and asks me if I want to go to the Beer Canteen before or after the movie.

"After," I say. I feel drunk already and a beer would send me into another solar system.

But Wilson has to have his beer so we pull into the parking lot of the Beer Canteen which means we'll miss the seven o'clock show, so we'll have to hang out here till the nine o'clock one, and by that time Wilson will have put away three beers, I will linger over one, and the whole experience will have cost us four dollars. The movie will then set Wilson back another two dollars. Welcome to East Texas. The land of dollar beer and dollar theatres.

Did I mention that I think Wilson and I are going to get married? Everyone else thinks so, so I guess you might as well too.

The Beer Canteen is always crowded on a Saturday night. It's one of those places that can't decide whether it wants to be a country-and-western bar or a top-40 hangout so it combines dark, wooden booths with chrome-trimmed chairs and tables; posters of Dwight Yoakam with posters of U2. The music is also a mix -- love ballads, dance hits, a bit of funk, lots of heart and soul. But all the men wear cowboy boots and all the women have hair and a face that have taken at least an hour and a half to achieve.

"Hold the table, Jessie," says Wilson. "And order us some beers. I gotta go." He heads in the direction of the men's room.

We both just turned twenty-one. Before that all beer was consumed in the back of Wilson's pick-up, parked on some side road. It was a pain, though, because we always had to bring a twenty-one year old along to buy the beer so I never had Wilson to myself. Since it was usually Wilson's older brother, Johnny Ray, they just talked about sports and the truck and why their father couldn't get off their case. But now Johnny Ray's moved to

Dallas or else I think he would still come out with us even though we can get our own beer.

Before Wilson returns, I pull the letter out of my purse just to look at it -- just to see that scrawled return address, that address that always seems to be changing, although one thing remains constant. The city is always Miami.

Wilson is swaggering down the aisle between the tables to return to our booth. I always insist we sit in a booth because I feel safer -- less exposed in case a fight breaks out. Of course I can't tell Wilson this because then he would think that if I could think of this, then other people could and now they're looking at him and thinking, what a chicken for sitting in a booth. That's my Wilson.

"Hey y'all!" Wilson grins a greeting to a group of people that we used to go to high school with.

Wilson slides into the booth and faces me.

"Did'ja order the beer?"

"She didn't come yet," I say glancing across the room at the over-worked waitress.

"Oh for crying out loud," says Wilson as if it's my fault.

I look at my watch. "We have two whole hours before the movie. It's not like we're on a schedule."

"I just want a drink, that's all," says Wilson trying to make eye contact with the waitress.

As guys go, Wilson isn't bad. He's good-looking -- dark brown hair that falls sensuously in his face, a face that's nice-looking because it has no flaws, and a well-proportioned body from working out. As far as I know, Wilson has never cheated on me, he drives his own pick-up, and he plans to take over his dad's contracting company some day.

Brennus was good-looking because his features were so defined and his grin was irresistible. His hair was light brown, blond in the summer. He was shorter than Wilson who's about a head taller than me. Brennus had no clear career ambitions but he had an energy that made you feel that if you were the woman who stood behind him, someday you'd end up shaking hands with the President. The only thing is, Brennus isn't here anymore and Wilson is.

"So I've been thinking," Wilson is saying. "It wouldn't cost much and I want to do something *now*. I don't know if I could stand working with my daddy until I can take over."

I resist the urge to say "What?" because I know I'll pick up on the thread of this conversation if I just hang in there.

"How 'bout school?" I say. At our age, it's a standard question.

Wilson snorts as the waitress arrives at the edge of our table.

"Two Coors," says Wilson barely looking at her. "School, Jessie! I'm so sick of

school! Besides, it's not gonna do me any good. My dad's taught me all I need to know about the business."

"So you're thinking of doing some jobs yourself?"

"Exactly. Haven't you been listening to me? Smaller jobs so I'd need less equipment. I've already got the truck. At the most I'd need a couple of thousand to get started."

"Maybe you can go to a bank," I say. "The truck could be your collateral."

"I've thought about that. I've also thought it might just be easier to get my daddy to lend me the money except I dunno if he'd go for the idea of me starting up my own contracting business..."

"Why don't you just ask him if you can take over some of the smaller jobs...?"

"I dunno." Wilson thinks about this. "I guess I could. That's not a bad idea. I mean, eventually I gotta take over the whole company so he should let me have a bit of it now."

"He's gotta give you chance..."

The Coors arrive and Wilson takes a gulp. So many of the guys around here have names like Billy Ray and Bobby Lee. Wilson was Wilson's mother's maiden name -- a liberated woman of her time who didn't want her name to die out since she was an only child. Probably one of the biggest reasons Brennus never fit in at Longview High was his name. Brennus was some ancient Celtic warrior who won some battle, I dunno the details. Brennus did, of course.

"I'm gonna talk to him," Wilson has decided. "He *can't* say no. I'm his son, for crying out loud."

"How's Johnny Ray?" I ask.

"I dunno," says Wilson. His mind is on his future business proposal as he swigs his beer. "We gotta a phone call last week."

"Is he seein' anyone?"

"Why do you care?"

"Just making conversation." One of the problems with Wilson is he just says what he thinks. I believe it is customary in some parts of this country to think one thing and say another, or at least to translate your thoughts into more tactful words. A couple of thousand dollars is all it would take to tempt me to go and find one of those places, but I'm a coward.

Wilson waves for another beer.

"I really think this is gonna work," says Wilson. "It would cost me nothing and it would get me away from my daddy. I like him at home, but he's a bastard to work for. If I take a piss for more than two minutes he's screaming at me to stop slacking off."

How ironic, I think. I go to the bathroom for more than two minutes and when I get back Wilson asks me if I fell in.

I straighten my denim shirt and examine the thin chain of gold on my right wrist.

"Whaccha lookin' at?" asks Wilson.

"The bracelet you gave me." I glance up at him and grin.

"That's nothing, baby." Wilson laughs. "When I get my business going, you're gonna get tons of nice things. Wear that necklace I bought you to church tomorrow. I like the way it looks on you."

CHAPTER TWO

One of Brennus's regrets is that he can't find a woman to play Bonny to his Clyde. A partner in crime. The thought of a life of robbery culminating in a final fatal shoot-out is wildly romantic to him.

Jessie Banks -- a girl he had met the year he had stayed with his aunt in Longview, Texas -- had had a lot of the qualifications. She had an edge to her, a potential edge anyhow. But if she had robbed any banks, it would have been for the love of him, not for the love of the danger, so he had never proposed the idea to her.

Brennus doesn't know why he keeps writing to her. There's a sense of unresolve when he thinks about his year in Longview -- something that still needs to be settled, but he has no idea what it was. He continues to write her with the sense that maybe he's saving her from some great danger. Hell, anything could happen to someone in that part of the country where practically every guy has a gun rack in the back of his truck and there are more shady forests and empty fields than he had cared to explore in his brief sojourn in east Texas. But that isn't it really. Jessie can take care of herself. Maybe it's guilt that he could have saved her from a life of mediocrity but had chosen instead to leave her behind.

Brennus looks around his small one-room bachelor apartment -- one wall covered entirely with books, many on Celtic history. Apart from his books, his furnishings consist of a simple Bauhaus chair, a television on a square white table, a small white refrigerator, a coffee-maker on the fridge, and a futon mattress with a white comforter. Most of his money goes towards rent for the apartment that he had chosen for its Art Deco exterior.

Not wanting to spend another Sunday afternoon inside, Brennus decides to go out and splurge on a Miami weekend paper and a coffee.

CHAPTER THREE

The letters I get from Brennus are erratic -- scrawled thoughts, frantic ideas -- never one of those letters where the person tells you what he did since he last wrote. But Brennus was never one for talking about what he did. He liked to talk about what he'd thought -- the solution to the Mid-East crisis that had struck him during Calculus, the feasibility of Elvis still being alive that had come to him in American Lit, the necessity of not engaging in nuclear disarmament that had occurred to him while running laps in P.E.

After Brennus left, it took me awhile to get back into the everyday talk of most people -- what movies you'd seen, how the day's going, who's seeing so-and-so and who's broken up with whoever. Even with alcohol, most people don't seem to have any *ideas*. Oh everybody has opinions, but even if they have substantial facts to back them up, their opinions are prosaic. Brennus was the type of guy to tell a Christian that he believed Muhammad was the true prophet and a Muslim that he believed Christ was the true prophet, just to get things going. He was at his best when people were on the defensive.

That's how we met. Brennus was in the cafeteria giving my friend, Jeannie, a hard time because she had said in an English Lit class discussion about Shakespeare that Shakespeare must have consciously been trying to record the human condition.

"You don't really believe that, do you?" he asked just as I came to join her for lunch. He had taken a seat across from her with no thought that someone else might be meeting her.

"Well, yeah," she said.

"You make him sound like some great artist," said Brennus.

As I sat down beside Brennus, who I'd never talked to before, Jeannie gave me a pained look. It wasn't common in our school to challenge people on their comments in class and literary discussions were unheard of.

"Shakespeare was an artist," said Jeannie, sounding as if she were quoting a teacher.

"Shakespeare was an entertainer," said Brennus. "There's a difference."

Jeannie just stared at him. I wondered if I should pull out my tuna fish sandwich and start eating it or wait until the conclusion of this dialogue.

Brennus glanced at me and continued talking.

"Shakespeare didn't write to record the human condition, he wrote to entertain. He wrote about love and hate and war because that's what people want to see. Sometimes he hadn't even finished writing his last act when his first act was actually being performed so it wasn't as if he was laboring over every word."

"I didn't know that," I said since Jeannie didn't seem to be responding. I decided it

wouldn't be inappropriate to start my lunch so I took a bite of my sandwich.

Brennus focused on me.

"Yeah," he said. "Don't get me wrong. The guy was a genius. But I just don't think we should go around thinking that geniuses sit all day in a tiny dark room pondering about what words to use to describe the human condition. They go out. They live. They write about it."

I smiled and nodded. I'd seen this guy around and always thought he was cute but I'd never made any plans to actually meet him.

"My name's Jessie," I said.

"Brennus," he said holding out his hand. I had to put down my sandwich to shake it. I think that moment constituted the first official handshake inside the walls of Longview High.

"Brennus," I repeated.

"He was a Celtic warrior," said Brennus standing up and grinning down at me. "I'll tell you about him sometime."

"OK," I said as I looked up at him. That was the moment I fell in love with him. I was captured in that grin. That was the moment I realized there was a huge world outside of Longview, Texas and that Brennus would be the one to give me my first taste of it.

Wilson was always around. We'd started out in kindergarten together and then for the next eleven years I think there were only three years where we didn't have the same homeroom. Since Wilson was one of the first guys to get a pick-up truck, he was usually carting around a truckload of us to all the football games. Brennus never went to a single football game his entire year in Longview, so even when I was in love with Brennus, I was getting picked up by Wilson in the truck for the pre-game pep rallies.

"So who's that guy you and Jeannie were talking to?" he asked me that night when we were heading out to the game. Since he had picked me up first I had the privileged seat up in the cab.

"What guy?" I asked even though Jeannie and I had only talked to one guy that day.

"The one at lunch," said Wilson.

"Oh, him," I said. "His name's Brennus."

"*Brennus?*"

"Yeah, it's a Celtic warrior name."

"What the hell is a Celtic warrior?"

I sighed.

"It's in the history books," I said. "They were warriors."

Wilson turned to stare at me, ignoring the road for a solid five seconds, which is something you can do in the East Texas back roads since you can drive for miles and never see another vehicle.

"Yeah..." he said. "Go on."

"They were nomadic," I said. "I think they ended up in England. No, Ireland." I bit my lip as I thought about this. "England is the Anglo-Saxons."

"Whatever," said Wilson, now tired of this topic. "You wanna pick up Stewie first, or Bobby Joe?" He asked me since I'm the one who's going to have my thigh squished up against whoever it is once he gets into the cab.

"Stewie," I said. Stewie's thinner.

Wilson takes a left at the fork in the road.

"*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by,*" I said. We had discussed the poem in English.

"This one isn't the one less traveled by," said Wilson. "They're about the same."

"That's it exactly," I said excitedly. "That's what the poem's about! *Though as for that the passing there had worn them really about the same...*"

"You get excited over the weirdest things," said Wilson as we turned off the dirt road onto Stewie's gravel driveway.

CHAPTER FOUR

I guess there are worse places to grow up than East Texas. Bangladesh comes to mind. I mean, at least we have paved highways and lots of forests and big grocery stores, but as far as comparing Longview 70210 to Beverly Hills 90210, well, you get the idea. It's too rural to feel like anything significant is happening. The gap between the life of the average Longview citizen and life on television is like comparing water buffalos to Siamese kittens.

The most popular teenage activity is getting drunk, usually somewhere in the woods or in the middle of somebody's field.

When Brennus got drunk his eyes would glitter like a crazed poet. He and I would go out with a six-pack stolen from his aunt's basement and take it to a field where we'd drink till we were buzzed and then look up at the stars and he would point out all the constellations. He could have been making them up. Knowing Brennus, he probably was. Brennus had more fun making up a story and seeing if he could get away with it than dazzling people with his vast knowledge of literature and history. It forced me to spend a lot of time in the Longview High library checking up on the constellations and the history of the Celts and the life of Shakespeare so that if I ever wanted to repeat anything, I wouldn't look like an idiot if it turned out to be another one of his inventions.

For Wilson, Longview contains everything he needs to make a happy life and if things ever get boring, he makes a weekend trip to Dallas to visit Johnny Ray. Before Brennus, I thought I was happy in East Texas.

* * *

"Hey Jessie." Brennus took the seat beside me in the caf.

He remembered my name! was my first thought.

"So..." he said conversationally.

Jeannie was late and I was hoping she'd stay late.

"So..." I said.

"So, how come we don't have any classes together?" he asked as he pulled a kaiser roll sandwich wrapped in plastic wrap out of his knapsack and started to open it.

My mind went blank. How was I to know? We all took, more or less, the same classes since no one really specializes in anything in high school.

"Bad luck, I guess," I said.

"It's those damn computers," said Brennus taking a huge bite out of his sandwich and still managing to talk with his mouth full. "Have you noticed that there's some people

you never see and others you're in the same classes with for years in a row?"

"Yeah," I said, thinking of Wilson.

"They don't give a flip about whether or not we meet new people and have a wide-base of friends. Instead we meet the same people over and over again, end up with only a few friends, and never know all that we missed out on."

"Isn't better to have one or two close friends than to have a whole group of acquaintances?" I asked. I could see Jeannie getting into line to buy a hamburger. The line was long.

"Shelley said that he was never part of that great sect that believed you should have just one friend or mistress and commend the rest of the people in the world, though they be wise and fair, into cold oblivion."

It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the poet.

"Why not?" I asked to stall for time in order to pull my thoughts on the subject together, if I had any.

"Because the world is a broad highway and the person with only one friend has the dreariest and the longest journey."

Brennus didn't look at me as he spoke. He was scanning the room like a general surveying the mess hall.

"E.M. Forster wrote his novel, *The Longest Journey*, based on that poem," Brennus continued. "His character, Rickie, believed in Shelley's philosophy until he fell in love and thought that his mistress was sufficient for happiness. He turned out to be wrong."

"That's too bad," I said. My head was spinning. I wasn't up to this. If he had come over, sat down, and asked me if I'd seen any good movies lately, I would have been able to handle it.

Brennus was looking at me. I quickly glanced at Jeannie who was still waiting for her hamburger. I think he wanted me to say something.

"I think it's hard to meet people," I said.

Brennus laughed and turned back to the wide room, bustling with people.

"It might not be as hard as you think. And I don't think Shelley wants us to go out and meet *everyone*. He just doesn't want us to limit ourselves to a few people. Look at them." He pointed to the crowds that filled the cafeteria. First period lunch was always the most crowded with every table filled, chairs scrapping, guys yelling, girls laughing. "Most people sit at the same table with the same people every lunch period. One thousand people go to this school and over their high school career they will hang-out with two close friends and maybe meet, about seven more people."

They'd be doing well, I thought. I had Jeannie and apart from that, Wilson was my only access to a social life.

"And then what's even more amazing is if they go onto university, there'll be twenty thousand people there and they'll probably maintain the same numbers. Two friends.

Seven acquaintances. Then they'll graduate into a world of three billion people and despite the fact that there are more people than they could ever meet in a lifetime, they'll stick with their wife, their drinking buddy, and the seven or so guys they know at work."

"Do you think people should meet more people?" I asked. Jeannie was at the cash paying for her burger.

Brennus sighed.

"I'm not saying anything. I'm just talking."

Then it hit me. It wasn't so much that he wanted to run on about how stupid everybody was for not meeting people, he wanted to have a discussion. A discussion about whether it's better to have one close friend or whether you should know a lot of people. Maybe it could have led to a discussion about love, whether it's better to love and trust just one person and put all your hope on him or her... Jeannie was coming and Brennus was three-quarters of the way through his sandwich and looked like he didn't intend to linger once he finished.

"But love changes you, doesn't it?" I said suddenly.

"What?" said Brennus. He hadn't been expecting a follow-up.

I took a deep breath.

"Love makes you want to believe that one person is enough. That one person contains the universe inside of them."

"That's *it*," said Brennus, looking at me. "That's it exactly."

Jeannie sat down across from me and gave me a grin -- one of those knowing grins that if Brennus had been watching her, he would have immediately understood. For a moment I resented Jeannie. I wished I didn't have any friends, or that I was like Brennus, where I didn't have a set routine of meeting someone for lunch everyday.

Brennus nodded at Jeannie but by not changing his position or the expression on his face, made it clear we were having a discussion and it would not change because of her arrival. I've never been more impressed with someone in my life.

"So love is an illusion?" I said.

"You mean a trap?" he asked. "Love is what lures you onto the broad highway believing that one person is sufficient?"

He didn't have all the answers! He really wanted to discuss this!

"Then what is it?" I asked. "Love, I mean. I mean, I want to believe in love. That it's a guide of some sort. That it *means* something."

"But what are the end results?" asked Brennus. He was still occasionally glancing around the room, but he had put down his sandwich and was staring down at my tray as if he were thinking more seriously about the topic. "You fall in love, you live in a trailer, the guy gets drunk and beats up his wife. The wife only has one or two friends and a small life so she doesn't want to leave him..."

"Yeah, that happens." I sighed. "The sick part is everybody gets into a relationship

with high hopes."

"Yeah, it's like you said, they think the whole universe is inside that one person."

Brennus looked up from the table and grinned at me.

"But there really isn't a universe inside of anybody," I said. "The world is outside of every single one of us."

"But we still keep on believing that we're going to find someone with everything we've ever wanted, don't we?"

I sighed again.

"Yeah." And I was looking at him. I was looking at everything I've ever wanted as he picked up what was left of his sandwich and stood up.

"Nice talking to you," he said before turning and joining the crowds pushing through the aisles towards the exits.

"He's too deep," said Jeannie. "I mean, that guy is on another planet."

"I think everything he said made sense." I pushed my sandwich away. I couldn't eat anymore.

I had English Lit that afternoon.

We discussed, or really, the teacher discussed, the concept of justice in *The Merchant of Venice*. I listened. For the first time I listened with a desire to actually understand. If the topic of justice ever came up with Brennus, I wanted to be able to contribute something. *The pound of flesh which I demand of him is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it.* I could hear myself dramatically quoting that though I wasn't exactly sure what point I'd be making. I guess I'd argue in favor of mercy. *The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.*

Maybe we'd get into a discussion about the world in general and how awful it is and then I could say *How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.*

Of course, everything would be out of context because I had pretty much fallen asleep when we had read the play out loud during class so I only had a vague idea what the plot was all about.

E. M. Forster, Brennus had said. I'd have to look him up.

"No one cares about ideas anymore," said Brennus to his aunt that night. They were in a small kitchen finishing up a dinner of veal parmigiana and pasta. "Instead everybody's got a story to tell."

"You're not kidding," said his aunt sipping her after dinner coffee. Brennus's aunt was the most interesting woman he had met. "If you ask people why they think racism still exists in the south, they don't give you an analysis of the situation, they tell you a story of

how their cousin Billy Bob was beaten up by a black guy."

"The minute you get abstract, people get nervous. It's like the law of gravity has suddenly halted and they're rapidly rising, in danger of hurtling towards the unknown of outer space, so they tell a little down-to-earth story to get back to familiar ground."

"It's fear," agreed his aunt. "Fear of being wrong. Of being caught not knowing something."

For Brennus, knowledge was power. Ideas were real. Ideas controlled the world. Not trade embargoes, not guns, not nuclear weapons. Ideas. Because behind every man that held a gun, there was an idea that had brought him to the point where he would be willing to shoot another man.

Brennus was also seventeen years old with no liquid assets and so ideas were all he had. His parents, who lived in Michigan, had just filed for bankruptcy and sent their only son down to the mother's older sister who had an extra bedroom in her small bungalow.

"I met a girl today who actually might have potential," said Brennus getting up to pour himself another mug of coffee. "I started talking and she didn't freak out. She actually made a good point about how we expect the person we love to contain the entire universe."

"You talked about love, eh?" said his aunt. His aunt and his mother had been born in Regina, Saskatchewan. Brennus's mother had married an American. Brennus's aunt had never married and had been lured to Texas a few years earlier by the hope of a rugged life among the cowboys and ranchers. Unfortunately no one had told her that all the ranges were in west Texas, not east Texas. She was considering a move to Alaska where the men apparently outnumbered the woman ten to one. "That's a hard one because someone always wants to tell the story of their relationship."

"She kept it strictly to theory," said Brennus sitting down again. "Which is the only way to discuss love. Love is the ultimate concept because it's so elusive."

"Love, as we know it, is either closely linked with lust or hate. We want someone really badly and when we can't have them, we hate them."

"I think real love actually does happen, but it usually only lasts for a couple of minutes and then it just becomes a glorified memory," said Brennus taking a sip of coffee. He had loved in his short lifetime and he had felt its joys and agonies. His few experiences had convinced him that it was far more satisfying to be in control of his emotions.

Brennus's aunt watched him. He was obviously still thinking and she didn't interrupt his thought process with any comment. She and her precocious nephew never talked just for the sake of making sure their jaws still worked. They exchanged ideas. It was the type of relationship she had dreamed about in her university days when she had wanted to discuss the weightier matters of life. Instead, despite the social upheavals of the sixties, her fellow Saskatchewanites had been content to discuss their career plans,

mortgage rates, and future number of children. Their plans had paid off. Most of her fellow university-graduates had steady jobs, homes that were paid for, and the obligatory 2.4 children. And she still had her ideas. And a job as a hostess at the *Hot Biscuit* to pay the rent.

"People act like feelings matter," said Brennus suddenly. "People act like if they feel something for another human being it must be real. What they don't realize is the most important thing is to *know* someone. If you really know the person, then your feelings for him or her matter. Positive or negative, they matter."

Brennus's aunt stood up and poured herself another cup of coffee.

"And to think that people have actually gone into marriages, pledging to spend the rest of their lives together, based on just their feelings," she said. Unlike many of her fellow university graduates, she had never gone through a messy divorce.

"That is not going to happen to me," said Brennus.

They didn't have *The Longest Journey* in our library so I picked out one of the other books by E. M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. I liked the sound of that.

I was standing there in one of the aisles perusing the F section and thinking how it's a different world in the library. So many books! I'd never thought about coming to get one for fun, I mean, not for a class. The people who spent a lot of time in our library were the types who ended up becoming doctors and lawyers in Dallas but were complete nerds for their four years in high school.

That's when I saw Brennus come in through the glass doors.

It was just like the movies. I could see him clearly through the books on the shelf and my first impulse was to run. Run where, I did not know. To him? Away from him? As it was, I just stood there and watched as he dumped his knapsack down on a table and started walking towards the magazines, in the opposite direction of the bookshelves.

I had no idea what I should do. He had grabbed some magazines and was returning to his table, already flipping through them. Thankfully he hadn't even glanced at the bookshelves since if I could see him, he could probably see me.

I looked down at the book in my hand and knew I couldn't let him see me checking it out. The connection between the book and our lunchtime conversation would just be too obvious. I stuck it in my purse, thankful that our library has never gotten around to installing a security system. I figure our principle felt a few missing books wasn't worth the price of a security system. Besides, the thrill of stealing a book might encourage people to read.

Before I let myself think about it, I walked quickly down the aisle and towards Brennus's table.

"Hey!" I said.

He looked up.

"Oh hi, Jessie." He smiled.

I just stood there like an idiot.

"Sit down," he said, waving to the chair across from him.

I sat.

"Whaccha readin'?" I asked.

He held up the magazine. *Time*.

"I like to keep abreast," he said grinning.

"Well, it's always nice to be abreast," I said, smiling back.

"Soooo," he said. "You here to check out a book?"

"Uh, yeah," I said. "You know, just lookin' around."

Brennus nodded.

"It's an OK library," he said. "Of course, the Celtic section is somewhat inadequate..."

"Oh yeah," I said, remembering something. "So tell me about this Celtic warrior Brennus..."

"Oh right." Brennus put down his *Time*. He only slightly shifted his position in his seat but it was if he had settled back and was going to spin me a yarn.

"Well, he was the leader back when Rome lived in terror of the Celts. The story of Brennus goes back to a time when the Celts decided to move from the Adriatic Sea down towards Italy since the weather was getting too hot. Unfortunately, the land they wanted was inhabited by the Clusians who weren't willing to give it up. Instead of just battling it out, the Clusians called on Rome for help who then sent a delegation of ambassadors, one of whom killed a Celtic leader. The Celts were furious since according to the international law of the time, that type of interference wasn't permitted. When Rome refused to take the Celt's complaint seriously, it was decided that they would march on Rome and take the city."

Brennus paused dramatically.

"The Romans came up with a battle plan. They would leave a reserve of troops near a hill to attack them from behind during the height of the battle. But Brennus, the Celtic leader, guessing this might happen, just went straight for the hill, ignoring the rest of the troops who were so taken by surprise that chaos broke out and they fled back to Rome, so scared that they forgot to close the city gates."

I smiled at the visual picture. Brennus grinned back.

"The Celts thought it was a trap at first and approached the city cautiously, expecting some sort of counter-attack. But the streets were deserted. Everyone had fled to the Capitol and were hiding, everyone except the senior patricians, the old men of the city who were out sitting in their togas, waiting for death. At first the Celts thought they were gods. One of the warriors reached out and pulled at one of the old men's beards, just to see if they were human. The old man responded by whacking the warrior on the head.

The Celtic awe of the men was destroyed and the warriors went crazy, killing the men and sacking the city of Rome."

"Really?" I said. This was amazing. We'd never learned *this* in our Western Civilization class.

Brennus nodded.

"The Capitol, where everyone was hiding, wasn't as easy to take since it was on a steep hill. Many Celts were killed trying to storm it but the Romans couldn't wait in there forever. They agreed to pay the Celts a thousand pounds of gold to make them go away. Cattle and gold were the two things the Celts valued since they were easy to transport. Anyhow, when it came time to weigh the gold, the Romans actually accused the Celts of balancing the scales in their favor. Brennus then casually threw his sword down on the scale that was determining how much gold the Romans would pay and declared *Vae victis*, Woe to the defeated!"

Brennus smiled to conclude his story.

"Wow. I wonder how much his sword weighed?" I said. It was the only semi-intelligent thing I could think to say.

"Probably quite a bit." Brennus shifted in his seat. "There was a second Brennus later on but unfortunately he lost a battle with the Romans in a snowstorm and killed himself."

I was late for class, but I didn't care. I had just had the most interesting history lesson of my life.

CHAPTER FIVE

I was tempted to tell Jeannie how I felt about Brennus -- about how each encounter so far had made me feel so alive. I could have talked about him every moment of the day from the minute I fell in love with him. But I knew the only reason girls do that is to convince themselves that they have something solid. It's, like, if they don't talk about the relationship, it may not exist -- it may turn out to be a dream made of whip-cream. I knew Brennus wasn't the type of guy who'd want to be talked about -- *Did you see the way he looked at me?* So instead I talked about *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

"It's amazing, Jeannie," I said. "It's about this English widow who goes to Italy and marries an Italian guy named Gino who's ten years younger than her."

"So, like, does she speak Italian?" asked Jeannie biting into her hamburger.

"No," I said, glancing around the crowded lunchroom. I couldn't see Brennus.

"So how do they talk?"

"Well he speaks a bit of English and she speaks a bit of Italian, but mostly I think she's just in it for his looks and he's in it for the money. So anyway, her in-laws get all mad."

"Do they speak English?" asked Jeannie dipping a french fry in ketchup.

"I mean, her in-laws back in England. The family of her husband who's dead."

"So whadda they care?"

"Well this is Edwardian England. You know, these things were important then. You couldn't just be an English woman and then go marry some Italian who was just the son of a dentist."

"*Edwardian* England? You mean this is one of those old-fashioned novels?"

"Yeah, but it's really interesting. The characters seem really real."

Jeannie looked bored.

"That guy is so cute over there."

Since Jeannie never points, I turned to face a crowd of about five hundred potentially cute guys.

"Which one?"

"Boots, tight jeans, plaid shirt."

She had just narrowed it down to four hundred and fifty.

"Red and blue plaid?"

"Oh c'mon Jessie. You know the one I mean. The Louisiana guy."

"Oh! The *Louisiana* guy." I settled back in my hard plastic chair. Jeannie and I had had this discussion before. It kills me how Jeannie and I can have the same discussions

over and over again -- word for word. I wonder if she notices. I wish she'd at least preface the whole thing with *I know we've had this conversation about fifty times before, but...*

"I met him," she said.

Well this was a new element to the conversation.

"No way," I said. "How?"

"Drinking fountain. He was behind me and I didn't know it. I turned around, bumped into him, and said sorry. His name is Billy."

"He told you his name is Billy?"

"No, Linda told me his name was Billy. He said, *that's OK*, in his really deep voice. He's got that sexy drawl. I nearly died."

I didn't point out that bumping into a guy, apologizing, and having the apology accepted didn't really constitute meeting someone.

"How many people do you think like him?" asked Jeannie who hadn't taken her eyes off him. "He always sits with guys so I don't think he's seein' anyone. I know Linda thinks he's cute, but she's got a boyfriend."

"It's always the ones who you think no one likes that turn out to have about fifty women who all think they're the only ones who like him."

"Thanks Jessie. Oh, there's your man."

"Who?" I said twisting around.

"That Brennus guy. He's weird."

"Where?" My voice had suddenly become frantic.

"Calm down! Over there by the Coke machine."

There he was. Dropping his quarters into the machine and pressing down on the Coke logo.

"You like him, or somethin'?"

"Oh no," I said quickly. "I was just startled..." I let my voice drift off and picked up my water bottle.

"He's coming over here!" said Jeannie.

"He is!" I almost choked on my water.

Jeannie looked like she was about to pass out as her face dropped onto the table.

"He's walking right behind you," she whispered across the table. "He's gone right by!"

Very carefully I twisted my head just in time to see Billy, the Louisiana guy, passing our table.

I sighed and tried not to feel sick.

"Good afternoon, ladies." Brennus's voice came from the seat beside me.

I jumped. He grinned.

"Can I join you?" he asked, carefully placing his Coke in front of him and pulling

out a sandwich from his knapsack.

"I think you already have," I said as he sat down beside me, knowing that my pleasure was probably radiating from my face like a laser beam.

"So, you guys have lived here all your life?"

"Uh, yeah," I said. Now that her dream man had passed right by her, Jeannie's whole aura was one of futility and hopelessness. She stared at her hamburger as if it was the most disgusting thing she'd ever seen.

"Are you OK?" asked Brennus. I was jealous that he'd noticed her.

"No," she said. "Life sucks." He was a stranger to her. She wasn't going to confide in him her reasons for hating life, but she wasn't going to pretend everything was OK.

"Life does suck," agreed Brennus. "We'd be idiots not to see that we live in an absurd world. Camus said that the most fundamental question a man can ask himself is should I kill myself?"

"Yeah," said Jeannie, showing as much interest in the philosophy of Camus as she had in Edwardian England.

"Despite the fact that happiness is elusive and the world is full of misery and despair, Camus felt that the answer was no, we should not kill ourselves. The only way we can fight against the absurdity and tragedy of life is to face it. That's what can give life meaning and value."

"Really?" I said, putting down my sandwich.

Brennus nodded and began to unwrap his sandwich.

"According to Camus, we have two basic needs. Understanding and social contact. However, the world we live in doesn't always provide these needs. A lot of people use hope as a buffer zone to prevent themselves from actually seeing this though."

"That is absolutely terrifying," I said. I had stopped eating altogether.

"Yeah, well, it's one way of looking at the world," said Brennus taking a bite out of his sandwich. "So you *have* lived here all your life?"

"Uh, yeah."

"So what do you know about the Observatory?" he asked.

"The *Observatory*?" I said. He hadn't shaved this morning. There was a slight growth on his chin and upper lip.

"Yeah, you know, Kyman, Texas..."

"Yeah, I know the Observatory. I mean, everyone knows about the Observatory." *How often did he shave?* I wondered.

"OK, so what do you know about it?"

"Well, I've only seen it once." I paused in my examination of his face to give this matter some thought. "It's right on the edge of Kyman. It's massive. White. It peaks in the centre."

I gestured with my hands to indicate the general shape of the building under

discussion.

"A cathedral to science?" asked Brennus.

"Yeah," I said. "That kind of describes it."

"Excuse me," said Jeannie picking up her tray.

"Sure," I said trying to smile at her. After all, I don't want to lose her. Who would I hang out with?

Jeannie headed for one of the many plastic garbage containers to dump the remains of her tray and I knew that she would then proceed to the bathroom to spend the remainder of lunch applying more make-up in an effort to be beautiful for her next encounter with Billy.

"Umm, I think there's supposed to be a lot more behind it," I continued talking because I wanted to make the most of this time alone. "But you can't see anything."

"It's underground," interrupted Brennus. "An 87 kilometer long tunnel. It's one kilometer longer than the Superconducting Super Collider was going to be."

"Oh," I said, kind of disappointed. "You know all about it."

"No," he said putting down his sandwich. "I don't. I don't know how to get inside."

"Well, I don't think anyone can get inside," I laughed. "It's just for scientists. It's not like a museum, or something."

"Do you know what they're doing in there?" said Brennus turning towards me as if he was about to impart great wisdom. "They are working on a grand unified theory. A *GUT*. They are trying to discover the theory of *everything*."

"No way," I said just staring at him.

"They're looking for an underlying principle of physics," he continued. "You know how electricity and magnetism used to be separate fields of study?"

I nodded. I had no clue.

"Well, then Michael Faraday came along and proved that the underlying force for both fields is the same. Hence, now you have electromagnetism. So some physicists feel that all the separate fields can be linked together if you just find that one underlying principle. Not that the Superconducting Super Collider or this project have the ability to prove such a theory since you would need an accelerator with the energy to trace a circle one trillion kilometers..." His voice drifted. "But anyhow, the greatest advances that we will make in this lifetime will be done at the Observatory." He spoke as if he was part of the team of scientists assigned to this project. "Some of the greatest minds of science are working in that building. So you can see why we have to get in there."

I didn't see, but I was too thrilled with the use of the word *we* to care whether or not the idea made any sense.

"Well," I said. "I do know that the Observatory is not its official name. It's really the *Lancet Center of Studies in Physics*, or something like that."

"The Observatory makes it sound like Kafka's castle," said Brennus picking up his

sandwich again and turning back to survey the cafeteria. "That's exactly what it is. An inaccessible place that gives most people the creeps."

"How did you know?" I asked. I didn't know about Kafka's castle, but I knew that most people in Kyman treated the people who worked at the Observatory as if they manufactured toxic nuclear waste and sold it to small neurotic countries who wanted to destroy the United States with germ warfare.

"My aunt. So tell me more. Who's Lancet?"

"Umm. I think he's the guy who funded it."

"About \$12 billion, I heard."

"Yeah, something in the billions."

"The SSC would have cost \$11 billion," said Brennus. "So who is this guy, Lancet?"

I smiled.

"I've heard he looks like Jack Nicholson. My mother wants to meet him. She *loves* Jack Nicholson."

"I'd like to meet him too," said Brennus. He was staring intently at me. "Listen, Jessie. We're going to meet him, OK?"

"OK," I said agreeably.

"And most importantly, we're going to get inside that Observatory," he said. He turned back to absent-mindedly stare at the crowds. He was deep in thought.

"Sure," I said.

"It goes without saying that this is just between the two of us," he said taking the last bite of his sandwich and final gulp of his Coke.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Definitely."

CHAPTER SIX

Brennus didn't tell his aunt about his plans to check out the Observatory. She would have felt a moral obligation as his entrusted guardian to object even though she would have secretly wanted to know what it was like inside. So instead, he would tell her about it afterwards.

The day was silent in that way that makes you feel as if you're living in a science fiction movie. The air was still, the sun was suffocating.

My mother was saturating her face with Oil of Olay in an attempt to use it up. My mother doesn't like half-empty containers sitting around for years on the bathroom counter. I had bought my mother the Oil of Olay for her birthday in the hope that it might aid her in finding a husband under the age of fifty.

My father was Italian. *Roman*, my mother liked to say, as if I was the bastard child in some noble lineage. She was a high school senior, he was a construction worker. And it wasn't like he was actually in Longview to do any construction. He just happened to be passing through on his way to California. My mother was not even sure exactly where he was from, though she knew his parents were originally from Milan. His name was Giuseppe, which is the Italian equivalent of Joe. Anyhow, that's why my mother named me Jessie. Because it kind of sounded like Giuseppe. Good old Giuseppe never even knew he had a kid since he only stayed in Longview for three days. A weekend to be exact. But I have this theory that if I ever got into a car and started driving west towards California, I'd meet a lot of people my age with dark eyes and single mothers.

"Mascara," I said.

"Mascara?" said my mother incredulously. "No one notices mascara! It's a tiny black line on a part of your face no one looks at!"

"That's eye-liner," I said. "Mascara makes your eye-lashes look fuller."

"Who needs fuller eye-lashes? I mean, for crying out loud. Jessie! *Fuller eye-lashes?*"

You'd have to know my mother to realize why this concept is so ludicrous to her. My mother reminds me of Caroline Abbott in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the very proper English girl who went to Italy, fell in love with the earthy Italian, Gino Carella, came back home when he married another woman, and said "All the wonderful things are over." My mother never loved again after my father left.

"Well at least put some lipstick on," I said handing her my tube of ruby red lipstick.

"Only because my lips are dry," said my mother grabbing the tube.

"This stuff costs eighteen dollars a tube, ma," I said. "It's Lancôme."

My mother looks shocked.

"Then why don't you just give me some Chapstick?"

She glances at her watch.

"I'm going to be late," she said throwing some files into her *I Support My Local Library* book bag. My mother was an accountant who worked with a small firm in Tyler, about an hour's drive from here. She used the time in the car to learn foreign languages. She'd mastered Italian and Spanish. Now she was onto French. The ironic thing was my mother had no plans to travel outside of the U.S.A. All of our vacations had involved driving somewhere to look at something -- the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, Mount Rushmore, the geysers in Yellowstone Park, the Alamo. Strangely, we had avoided California.

"How many more Sunday afternoons are you going to have to work?" I asked.

"Probably four," she said as she headed down the small hallway of our trailer. Another month of tax season. The last week would be the worst. She'd be in the office eighteen hours a day.

Wilson always took me to church Sunday mornings. When he was ten he gave his heart to Jesus and he and I got baptized when we were thirteen. There's an active youth group at the church we go to but Wilson says they're a bunch of wimps who just call themselves Christians because they think they're better than everyone else.

I was tempted to ask my mother if she could drop me off at the mall, except that I didn't want to spend eight hours in a mall that took forty-five minutes to do up completely. Normally I'd be at Wilson's house for Sunday dinner but today he had to finish up an English Lit paper due on Monday.

"Be good," she said kissing me on the cheek before disappearing out the door.

I walked slowly back to our modest living room which was in the very center of the trailer. The door of a trailer is usually in the living room, but for some reason, ours was on the end in the kitchen. I had finished *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and I didn't have any homework. Walking to the video store didn't appeal to me. I lay down on the couch as the phone rang. Stretching out my arm, I could just barely reach it.

"Hello?"

"Hi." It was a one-syllable word, but it was spoken with the assurance of a man who is well received in all circles. Immediately I felt the need to clear my throat.

"Oh, hello," I said trying to sound casual, as if it were no big deal that Brennus should be calling me on a Sunday afternoon.

"I hope I didn't wake you."

"Oh no, my mom just left to go to work," I said.

"No way," said Brennus sounding mildly surprised. "So did my aunt. How many people do you know who have parents or guardians who have to work on Sunday?"

"Ummmm," I thought about this. "No one I guess. My mom's just working because it's tax season. She's an accountant."

"Really?" Brennus sounded vaguely impressed. "So what does your dad do?"

There was a pause.

"I don't know," I said.

"What, he left you guys?" Brennus's casual tone made it so easy to talk. If we'd been talking about movies we'd have been more intense.

"No, I never knew him. He was an Italian construction worker."

"Those Italians," said Brennus, sounding as if he were already full informed on the habits of transient construction workers.

"Yeah, really," I said.

"Goes back to the Roman Empire," said Brennus. "Virile soldiers conquering the world."

"That's funny," I said. "My mother always refers to him as Roman."

"We're all affected by our roots," he said. "Your father was probably the spiritual, if not, literal, ancestor of one of those Roman soldiers that was sent out to subdue the Celts of Londinium. Hey!" Brennus had just thought of something. "I wonder if our ancestors knew each other? Maybe one of the Celtic warriors in my tribe battled it out with one of your Roman soldiers."

"Or," I suggested, "maybe one of the Celtic maidens caught the eye of the Roman soldier and he vowed to never fight her people."

"That would be like *Norma*, the opera. By Bellini. It's the story of a Druid's daughter who falls in love with a Roman soldier."

"No way," I said.

"We've got to get together and talk about getting into the Observatory," said Brennus, sounding as if he were getting down to business. "I'm going to go to the library today and do some research on it. Do you want to get together tonight?"

"Sure," I said.

"OK, I'll pick you up around seven. Does your mother care if you stay out late?"

"Oh no," I said. Actually, my mother freaked out if I stayed out after ten on a "school night," like we were in some sort of 50's movie where all the kids had curfews. But my mom would be working.

Brennus got the directions for my house and then hung up. I glanced at my watch. Five hours to wait. I almost indulged in speculating that he must really like me if he wanted to be sure I could go out with him that evening before he got on with his day. But it's been my experience that speculation may be entertaining but it's usually useless. Jeannie had liked a guy named Kevin our sophomore year and had spent the year making up theories as to why he couldn't commit to being her boyfriend. She would explain them over lunch.

"He's worried about his algebra class. He's always doing homework for it. He knows he doesn't have the time to see anyone."

"He has a hard time admitting his feelings. He can't express himself. He feels it, but sometimes he doesn't even know it."

"Kelly thinks he's afraid of commitment, you know, he takes relationships seriously so he has to give it a lot of thought before committing."

I found out halfway through the year it was because he liked a girl named Marie. I never told her and to this day Jeannie referred to our sophomore year as "the year Kevin liked me." It terrified me how fragile the human psyche is that it needs to be constantly reassured, even at the expense of truth. Our history teacher had talked about revisionist history, where people rewrite history to suit the present. People who had been defeated in war rewrote it to seem like they had planned it all along.

It also terrified me that our memories weren't sacred. We couldn't even trust our own brain. I had mentioned this to my mother who had replied, "You can have magic or you can have honesty. If there's magic and mystery, he's probably seeing someone else."

"I don't understand relationships," I had said abruptly.

"You have to get outside the rules of relationships to understand love," she had said. "If there's love, there's no need to define it."

"So just being able to call a guy your boyfriend isn't enough?" I had asked. This was destroying all of my previously-held beliefs about love.

"There are no rules," my mother had said. "When it comes to love, there's no court of appeal that you can go to and say *that's not fair* and expect anything to be done about it. You'll get sympathy from your friends, but that's about it."

That's when I knew she had no disillusionments about her relationship with my father.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The afternoon passed slowly but eventually I was with Brennus.

"It's because we have these unfulfilled longings that we know there's more to life than this," said Brennus. "C.S. Lewis. You know, we're hungry and there's food. We're tired and there's sleep. But then there's this other indefinable feeling that there's no fulfillment for. You know that feeling you get when you find a new book or you meet a new person and you think *this is IT*, this is what I've been looking for.

I nodded emphatically.

"But then it never is," Brennus went on. "That initial excitement fades and you realize that those feelings are just glimpses into the desires of your soul."

Brennus leaned back, slowly at first, then lost his balance and fell right back onto the unmowed grass. We were in a field. Brennus had borrowed his aunt's car and a six-pack from her basement and we had driven down one of the back roads until we came to a field that seemed suitably distant from any house, and hence, any owner.

"You know, I've always wanted to go to Turkey," Brennus said. I didn't care that Brennus hadn't mentioned the Observatory. He just seemed to want to talk.

"...I just feel like if I could walk around all of those ruins I'd connect with something. Some part of my past." He thought about this. "Actually, I don't know if the Celts did much settling in Turkey. Probably not." He turned to me. "They started around the Black Sea and moved east and didn't settle much. But anyhow, I've seen pictures of Ephesus and it looks so cool. To actually walk among the ruins of an ancient city." He sat up straight.

His ideas weren't coming out smoothly, partly because he was on his way to being drunk. But I was learning more from him than any teacher I'd ever had. All my life I'd been in a playpen, taking the tidbits people had fed me. Now, here was someone who had lifted me out of my playpen and was showing me how to walk. I could feel myself mentally falling, but I also knew the only thing to do was get back up and try again.

"I had a point though," said Brennus. "What was my point? Oh yeah. But I know that's not the answer. Going to Turkey isn't going to fill the void or anything. It'd be nice if there was a Promised Land for each one of us. A personal Mecca that if we could just make it to, everything would feel right..."

He fell back onto the grass and stared up at the stars.

"I feel like Arthur Dent guarding his home from the bulldozers," said Brennus.

"Who?"

"Arthur Dent. You know *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*."

"I don't know that one," I said rolling over onto my stomach to look at him. There was no point in acting like I'd always been a devoted fan of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Brennus would have lost all respect for me if he ever caught me faking it.

"It's about this English guy, Arthur Dent, whose house is going to be bulldozed to make way for a bypass so he lies in front of the bulldozer. Then his friend, Ford Prefect, comes along and tells him that he's not really from Islington but from a planet called Betelgeuse and that the world is about to be demolished in twelve minutes to make way for an intergalactic freeway."

"So then what happens?"

"Oh, they hitch a ride with the Volgon destruction fleet and Arthur Dent ends up traveling around the galaxy in his bathrobe. It's hilarious."

"Why do you read so much?"

It would have been a dumb question except that I sincerely wanted to know. Brennus didn't hesitate.

"Because I've found the Spirit of Life in books. Like Ansell in *The Longest Journey*. Some people find it in people or their job, or whatever. Did you ever see *Shadowlands*?"

"No."

"My aunt owns it. Anyhow, there's this line. *We read to know we're not alone*. Man." He stood up. "I gotta take a whiz."

I watched him disappear into the shadows, heading into the total darkness of the nearby trees.

He returned a minute later. In the murky shadows I think I actually saw him doing up his fly. Most guys in Texas take a piss in the woods and come back doing up their fly and it doesn't mean a thing. But with Brennus it seemed intimate and blunt at the same time.

"I just had a thought," he said while he was still a few feet away. "*The Longest Journey*. Rickie had life figured out in theory but couldn't connect with the common man. The problem wasn't with Rickie's theory of life, the problem was most people don't have life figured out and so they live it the way they want it to be. Not the way it is. The way they want it to be."

Brennus had collapsed onto the ground and was lying on his back.

I internally vowed to somehow read *The Longest Journey* if I had to drive to Dallas to get a hold of it. I'd have to check out one of those online bookstores.

Brennus was lost in thought for a few seconds. I wondered if he ever wrote his ideas down.

"But we've got to talk about the Observatory." It was his business voice. "I've been reading about it all day." He rolled over onto his side to face me. "High security. All employees are carefully screened. Very few visitors. Lancet has never actually been seen,

his name just appeared on the initial check to build the thing and it's operated by one Charles D. Naylor, who by the way, *has* been seen. Charles D. Naylor is a prominent scientist who's taught at several universities and is well known in the field of physics. He published a book about GUT..."

"Gut?" I asked.

"The grand unified theory," replied Brennus. "You know, a simple underlying principle of physics..."

"Right, right." It was coming back to me.

"Dr. Naylor is not the type of man to believe in dramatic breakthroughs and says so in his lectures. He does public lectures, by the way. He believes that compiling data is a slow process and that the GUT theory will only be proven by steady, consistent work. I think he's hiding something."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because, scientists usually talk big." Brennus spoke as if he frequently hung out with scientists. "When they understate what they're doing, you know they've found something and don't want anyone else moving in on their territory."

"What specifically are they doing?" I asked slowly.

"Various experiments are going on," said Brennus. "One thing they're working on is linking electro-weak forces with strong nuclear forces. Actually, that's all I really know. I was in the science section and ended up spending most of the afternoon reading a book called *Basic Scientific Facts Every Citizen of Planet Earth Should Know*. Did you know that the earth is 8,000 miles in diameter?"

"No," I said.

"What does atmosphere contain?" asked Brennus, as if quizzing me for a test. In the shadowy field, with only a half moon to illuminate us, Brennus was gorgeous. His features were defined, his eyes intense as he stared up at the stars, his hair falling slightly forward in his face.

"I don't know," I said gulping.

"Oxygen, carbon dioxide, and water."

Now it was my turn to fall onto my back and stare at the stars. Stars -- glittering diamonds, twinkling lights, bright rays of hope to wish your dreams on.

"What are stars?" I asked.

Brennus glanced up.

"Self-luminous objects that radiate due to an internal energy source."

"Do you think they're worth wishing on?"

"Well, the one you're wishing on might have been dead for a thousand years and it's just taken this long for the light to get to earth."

"Not much to hang a dream on. How about diamonds? What are they made of?"

"Carbon."

"The black, sooty, stuff?"

"Charcoal? Yeah, that's one form of carbon."

"If the world were going to be analyzed and explained to you, would you rather have it done by poets or physicists?" I asked suddenly.

"That's a good one," said Brennus. "I don't know. Facts. Or...theories, or ideas, or dreams, or hopes... I dunno." Still lying on his back he crossed one leg over onto the knee of his other leg. "I read a speech by Dr. Naylor today where he says, nothing is more important in the search for truth than facts. I mean, I just let life happen, analyzing it after events have passed and coming to the conclusion that when everything's over, all you can really say is, this is what happened. But Dr. Naylor, on the other hand, dreams of a theory of *everything*. I think maybe he's more of a Romantic than any of us."

"Michigan. Is that a state or a city?" asked Jeannie at lunch the next day. I had to tell her I went out with him, but to cover up our conversation, I just gave her a few facts about him that he had revealed on the drive home.

"Oh for crying out loud. Michigan *State*," I said. "Think about the university."

Jeannie shrugged.

"I don't plan to go there. Where in Michigan then?"

"I dunno. I didn't ask."

"Mr. Hunt made him read his critical essay in front of the class today."

"No way!"

"Yeah."

"What was it about?"

"Social commentary in *Batman*."

"*What?*"

"You know, *Batman*, the movie. The first two movies. He talked about the Joker being repressed and something about Catwoman and power feminism. I didn't catch it all."

"I've gotta ask him about that."

"He talked about the dark side of Batman too. You know, the guy dresses in black and practically lives in a cave. Oh, I remember something else. What happened to Vicki Vale?"

"I dunno? What?"

"That's what he asked."

"I'll definitely ask him about it."

Then I thought, if I ask about his essay, he'd know I was talking to Jeannie and that we talked about him. I decided not to ask. I'd just work *Batman* into the conversation. Then I decided I was being stupid.

"He's so cute."

"I know," I said, thinking about the way he smiled. My mother would say Brennus had a Jack Nicholson smile -- the kind that makes you fall in love with a guy even if you have nothing in common. I figured I was probably conceived because of a smile.

But Jeannie was staring at Billy so I knew we were off the topic of Brennus.

CHAPTER EIGHT

You look fine.

I didn't ask.

The words are running through his head. He and Carrie had seen *Batman* about six times back in Michigan and after that their favorite routine was she'd say, "You look fine," to which he'd reply, "I didn't ask."

In the movie Jack Nicholson had used the line to put Jerry Hall in her place, but the way Brennus and Carrie did it, it brought out the moxie in both of them. Brennus would have liked to have seen the Joker up against Carrie. She had a way of making a guy feel like crap, but happy crap, happy just to be with her.

A day doesn't go by when he doesn't think about her. He wonders if this is going to continue all his life.

Growing old doesn't seem real to Brennus anymore.

Carrie had made him feel like growing old together would be the most fun thing in the world -- they'd buy a house on some derelict beach, fill it with books by Kant and Hegel, become geniuses together, maybe have a baby by accident, take up card-playing, have people over for dinner, grow old and ugly, retire and get government pensions and then take packaged tours all over the U.S.

Now Brennus just wants to pull a James Dean and blow up in a car at twenty-four.

If she had died he could have claimed her as his own. He could have lived his life in her memory, never loved again, and been fine.

But to find a soul-mate and then lose her just because she doesn't think the connection is important... Like soul-mates are expendable or something.

"Only connect," he had said to her. "E.M. Forster. That's what it's all about."

He should have known better than to quote her favorite author to her.

"Exactly," she had said. "But to just connect with one person is to take the longest journey."

And in that moment he had realized his mistake and knew he had been spared the disillusionment that follows love. Never again. That was the last time he'd make that mistake. He only wished that he'd been the one to tell her he didn't want to take the longest journey.

So he thanked her and left. But he'd left when he still loved her and so there had been no chance for closure.

He continues to stare out of the bedroom window at the Miami street.

Just when you thought your body has become impervious to emotions your nerves explode into a tingling terror worse than a day of guzzling espressos, worse than just

about being hit by a car. A huge mess of emotions is impossible to resolve. Brennus can't decide which is worse -- to be out of touch with your feelings or to be consumed by them.

You look fine.

I didn't ask.

CHAPTER NINE

Jeannie's family had at least 20 cereal boxes in their cupboard. It's not that they were all different, it's just that they would eat about seven eighths of the box then leave the crumbly remains of the last eighth for posterity.

My mother and I had one box of Corn Flakes and a nearly full box of Mueslix that my mother had bought on a whim about a year ago.

Jeannie slid open the cupboard door and surveyed the piles of cereal boxes. She closed the cupboard.

"You wanna have some toast?" she asked. "I don't think anyone's gone grocery shopping."

"Sure," I said.

"I've got an idea," said Jeannie picking up the loaf of Wonderbread on the counter. "A double-date." She stuck two pieces of white bread into the toaster and opened the fridge door to try to find some jam.

"With who?" I asked. My mind was fuzzy. I hadn't seen Brennus all day and I was wondering if maybe I should be at home waiting for his call. I couldn't even phone him since he hadn't given me his aunt's number and I don't know her last name to look it up. I just realized, I didn't even know his last name.

"With *who*? Billy, that's who."

"You and Billy and who else?" I asked. How would I ask him what his last name was? Did he know mine? He must since he'd phoned me.

"That guy Brennus," said Jeannie. The toast popped up and she stuck two more slices in.

I just stared at her.

"C'mon. You could ask him out." Jeannie spread some butter on the toast followed by a layer of bumbleberry jam. Jeannie's mother liked to experiment with jam flavours. They're the only family I knew who didn't have strawberry jam in their fridge.

"But why? Why are we going on a double-date?"

"So I can casually ask Billy out," Jeannie patiently explained as she brought the plate of toast over so we could get started on the first batch. "I can't just ask him out, him and me. I've gotta be able to go, Hey Billy! Me and my friends are going to see a movie Saturday night. You wanna come?"

"So we'd go see a movie." I thought about this. I was starting to feel tingly and terrified.

"Whatever," said Jeannie. "We could go dancing. You know, whatever."

"When?"

"This Saturday night."

It was Thursday. Would I even see Brennus tomorrow at school?

"Do you know Brennus's last name?" I asked abruptly.

"Yeah. I think it's O'Leery, or something like that."

"Can I see your phone book? No, forget it." I was staring at the wall with a piece of toast in my hand. I had just remembered that Brennus had said that his aunt was his *mother's* sister, so there's no way they'd have the same last name.

"Well, do you wanna do it?" asked Jeannie as the toast popped up. She stood and went over to the toaster to make the second batch.

"Yeah, if I see Brennus tomorrow I'll ask him," I said. "But I've got to ask him before you ask Billy because I can't phone him since I don't have his number."

"OK." Jeannie seemed happy with this.

I, however, was too nervous to eat much of my toast.

"It's not enough to just talk, you have to take action," Brennus was saying to his aunt.

"*Gentleman's Agreement*," said his aunt.

"What?"

"A 1947 movie that won several Oscar's. Gregory Peck pretends to be a Jew in order to experience anti-Semitism first-hand and discovers how it's the nice people who say they're not anti-Semitic but who never take action who actually allow it to continue."

"But Schindler never said he was not anti-Semitic," said Brennus. "And his action was self-serving. But he was a hero nonetheless. There's a tree planted in Israel for him."

They were discussing *Schindler's List*.

"So ideology doesn't matter?" asked Brennus's aunt. "It wasn't what motivated him that mattered?" Her voice was challenging.

"He manifested an ideology," said Brennus. "He *lived* an ideology."

"But he stood for business and his philosophy was war is good for business. It had nothing to do with being against the concentration camps or the treatment of Jews. It was convenient to employ Jews since their wages were lower."

"He lived his ideology first and then absorbed it," insisted Brennus. "By the end of the movie he was against anti-Semitism because of his experiences. His feelings and thoughts followed his actions instead of the other way around. If he had been pro-Jewish and had started up a business as a safe haven for Jews he wouldn't have been as successful as he was. He was a businessman who became pro-Jewish, instead of a pro-Jew who became a businessman."

When they had first rented the movie they had had a similar discussion and Brennus had taken the opposite side. He had argued that Schindler's motivations were wrong and

so the result was inconsequential. Brennus's aunt had taken the Machiavellian approach that the end justifies the means and that the only significant fact was that Schindler had saved over 1100 Jews.

Normally she took pleasure in indoctrinating people with her own opinions and then a few weeks later when they brought them into the conversation as their own, arguing them to the ground. But Brennus had a tendency to switch his own argument half-way through the discussion, thus rendering her strategy impotent. She had read somewhere that Napoleon also liked switching his plans in the middle of battle.

"So which is better," she asked, "an ideology without action or action without an ideology?"

"Let's look at this holistically," said Brennus. His tone of voice lightened. "Schindler saved nearly 1200 Jews. Schindler was a businessman who knew he could profit by the war. The two must be linked together somehow. The Jews would have said that God used Schindler for their benefit. In that case, Schindler's ideology is inconsequential, but his actions aren't. *Capisce?*"

"*Capisce.*" said his aunt standing up. "I like the holistic approach to things."

Regardless of my advice, Jeannie had gone ahead and asked Billy out for Saturday night. It was lunchtime and Brennus wasn't in the room. I took pleasure in that now Jeannie was looking nervous.

"Well you could always ask Wilson," she said.

That's probably what would happen, I thought as I looked around the crowded cafeteria for a glimpse of Brennus's tousled dusty brown hair. It was too bad because I was psyched up to ask him.

"There's Wilson," said Jeannie jumping up. "I'll ask him for you."

She hurried towards the group of guys, all wearing plaid shirts, tight-cut jeans, and cowboy boots, that had just entered the doors. As she was taking Wilson aside, Brennus appeared right behind them. Jeannie concluded her exchange with Wilson and grinning at me, began to make her way back to me with Brennus in her wake. She had no idea he was right behind her. I sighed and tried not to cry.

"He can come!" she announced loudly as she sat back down.

"Good afternoon, ladies," said Brennus, pretending to doff a hat. He kept on going. Jeannie's eyes widened.

"Where did he come from?" she asked.

"He was right behind you," I said quietly.

"Oh," she said. There was a pause. "Well Wilson will be a lot of fun. I think he'll get along better with Billy. You know..."

"Yep," I said and that was that.

Billy and Wilson were talking engines. I don't even want to try to reproduce their conversation except to say that Billy's side of it took an extra charm with his extremely sexy Louisiana accent. Texans drawl too, but Billy's drawl was smooth and deep. In addition to the seductive voice, he was cute. Wilson was good-looking in a sharp way, but Billy was just plain nice-looking. Brown hair, brown eyes, broad-shoulders. I could tell Jeannie was about ready to build an altar and start making sacrifices to her new god. Even the fact that they had excluded us from their conversation for the past 45 minutes didn't bother her.

I sipped my beer and thought about Brennus. Jeannie was right. He and Billy would have mixed like... I tried to think of a good simile. Oil and water was too common. Like Yankies and Southerners? Well they were a Yankee and a Southerner so that wouldn't be a simile. Grits and mustard? That would be a disgusting combination, but it *would* mix.

If Brennus were here, however, he would have talked to me and Jeannie would have talked to Billy. Wouldn't Jeannie have preferred that? I glanced across at Jeannie who seemed thrilled just to be able to listen to her man speak.

After 45 minutes I was dying to make a contribution even if I had no idea what they were talking about.

I glanced at my watch.

"We're gonna be late for the movie," I said.

Brennus called me the next day. Wilson and I had already got back from church but this week he and his Dad had a job to finish up in the afternoon. But he was going to pick me up later for his Mom's Sunday dinner.

"Jessie? I just heard on the radio there's a lecture by Dr. Naylor, open to the public, in Tyler tomorrow," he said without bothering with the preliminary, *Hi, this is..... How are you doing?*

"Oh, good," I said, running my fingers through my hair. "Uh..."

"We'll have to go," continued Brennus. "He'll be discussing some of the latest scientific breakthroughs. He didn't say specifically whether or not they're the latest scientific breakthroughs at the Observatory and I wouldn't expect him to give away all of their secrets in a public lecture, but I still think we should go. I figure the best thing to do is try to meet him afterwards and then just take it from there."

"OK," I said.

"Tickets are ten bucks. I'll get them. We'll take my aunt's car. We can meet at school and just take the afternoon off."

"OK," I said.

"I'm going to call about the tickets now," said Brennus. "If you don't hear from me, assume I got them and we'll meet at lunch tomorrow."

"OK," I said.

"Great," said Brennus and hung up.

Still holding onto the phone, I sat and stared at the wall a few minutes after hanging up.

CHAPTER TEN

My head was swiveling around the cafeteria. Somehow I had managed to not tell Jeannie about my plans. Part of the difficulty was that she couldn't stop talking about Billy. When he had dropped her off Saturday night he had asked her out. I missed most of the juicy details due to my frantic scanning.

"Are you lookin' for something?" asked Jeannie.

"Yeah," I said casually. "Brennus is supposed to meet me here."

"Why didn't you *tell* me!" she practically shrieked. Instantly I felt guilty. She didn't even know why he was supposed to meet me and she immediately comprehended the possible significance.

I was saved from trying to explain by Brennus's appearance at the doorway. He obviously knew that Jeannie and I chose the same table everyday because he simply made eye contact with me and gestured with his head for me to join him.

"Well, I gotta go," I said.

"Good luck," she said grinning.

I felt bad leaving her alone until I turned around to see her getting up and making her way to join Billy's table.

"Hey," said Brennus briefly. We were clearly on a mission as we marched down the hallway toward an exit. No time for idle chit-chat.

We exited into the parking lot. Brennus's aunt's car was a burgundy Oldsmobile, circa the 1980's, large and plush on the inside, though slightly rusting on the outside. Brennus got in first, hit a button and the doors unlocked. I got into the front seat.

"Have you read *A Brief History of Time*?" asked Brennus as we pulled out of the parking lot.

"No," I said.

"I think we should use it as a starting point," said Brennus glancing at his rearview mirror. We had picked up speed and were gliding along the highway.

"To sum up, the laws of physics should be able to produce a single mathematical model to explain the universe. It's the GUT theory again. Anyhow, you might want to read it sometime if for no other reason than it's a classic."

He sounded pompous. That hit me hard. Brennus was a pompous, patronizing egotist.

Every once in awhile God gives you an epiphany, a moment of insight when you see life the way it really is, not the way you want it to be. At that moment I realized I was just Brennus's protégé, not his girlfriend, nor would I ever be. He liked me because he

could show off his intellect and I was an appreciative audience. I didn't contradict and I didn't walk away. He didn't care whether I understood or not, and he certainly didn't care to understand me.

But here I was driving in a car to Tyler with a guy who was exciting and good-looking and everything that I thought I wanted. I thought I was in love with him, but if I had just gone to the lecture and come home and not let myself think about him anymore, I would have soon forgotten him and he wouldn't have become a part of my soul.

The moment passed.

"Our primary agenda is to meet Dr. Naylor." Brennus accelerated and passed the car in front of us. "I've read enough to be able to pass for a Physics major. I'll just say I go to U. of T. You'll be my girlfriend."

I looked down at my lap.

"What do you want to major in?" He glanced at me.

"Uh, journalism." It was the first thing that came into my head.

"Good idea. Maybe we can even say you're doing a story about him or the Observatory or whatever." He took a deep breath. "I think that about covers it." He reached forward and switched on the radio. After doing some station surfing, he concluded with trying to bring in some hard rock from Dallas.

"There's nothing more irritating than a radio station that doesn't come in clear." Brennus sighed and switched off the radio. "One thing I really miss are the radio stations in Michigan. I don't think we have a country station in the whole state. There might be some CDs in the glove department."

I opened the glove department, selected a battered *Pet Shop Boys* CD, and stuck it in the player.

"...What is especially dramatic about supersymmetry is that if it is advanced into further dimensions its power can be increased..."

We were at the Tyler Women's Building and Dr. Naylor was discussing the ramifications of supersymmetry. I hadn't even picked up what supersymmetry was. Maybe this was something everybody was supposed to know.

I looked around the room. Most of the people were older men and woman in suits and expensive dresses, both sexes displaying some seriously expensive jewelry on their personages. Dr. Naylor's theme seemed to be that a lot of exciting things were happening at the Observatory (although he didn't specifically say what) and that in order for exciting things to continue to happen, they needed support. Financial support, I assumed (though he didn't specifically say what kind). He was obviously talking to the right people. Furthermore, they actually seemed to be following what he was saying. Clearly they were as well read as Brennus.

I consulted the piece of vanilla white paper I had been handed when we came in. After the lecture by Dr. Naylor there would be a break and refreshments would be served. Then we would return for a question-and-answer session.

I wondered what the refreshments would be. Coffee and tea, for sure. Cookies, maybe. Or maybe cheese and crackers. No, probably not. Cheese and crackers went with wine. Maybe cake. Cheesecake. A slice of cheesecake each. That'd be nice. Hopefully not fruit. Fruit was OK but I wanted something more...I couldn't think of a word. *Civilized?* Afternoon tea. I wanted afternoon tea. This roomful of well-dressed older people made me want to have an afternoon tea of sandwiches and cakes and biscuits...

"Try to think of some good questions," Brennus whispered to me.

"What?" I was startled out of my fantasy of silver serving platters and delicate china cups.

"For this." Brennus stabbed at his paper.

He wanted me to think of a question for the question-and-answer session?! I didn't even know what the lecture was about!

"We have to make an impression on him," whispered Brennus before returning his attention to the speaker.

Yeah, I'd make an impression on him, all right. *Dr. Naylor, what exactly is supersymmetry?* It would probably be like asking a geography teacher where China was.

I tried to think of a question. *Dr. Naylor, what are your hopes for the Observatory...?* Ummm. *Dr. Naylor, you said in your lecture that supersymmetry could be extended into other dimensions. What dimensions exactly would those be?* I sighed. *What's it like inside the Observatory, Dr. Naylor? Does Mr. Lancet really look like Jack Nicholson?* Well, if worse came to worse, it would make an impression. But the question is, what would Brennus think?

This was overwhelming. No matter how good the tea and cookies and cake were going to be, they'd be ruined by the stress of trying to think of a good question. I tried to think back to my freshman year science class. All I could remember was cutting open a frog. I squirmed in my chair at the memory.

"Thank you for your attention," said Dr. Naylor. "I hope to meet as many of you as I can during the break and look forward to your questions."

As the room applauded, he was led out of the room by a well-dressed, well made-up matron who had clearly organized the afternoon.

We followed the crowd down some stairs to where the tea and coffee was set up in the lower room. There were also two big plates of chocolate chip cookies.

"All we need is some juice and we're back in kindergarten," said Brennus taking three cookies and a paper cup of coffee.

"You had cookies in kindergarten?" I said, stepping forward to let a large lady in tent-like silk dress pass behind me. "You're lucky. We always had fruit. We used to fight

over the grapes." I took a sip of tea and a careful bite of my cookie.

"I don't think now's a good time to meet him," said Brennus looking over at Dr. Naylor who was surrounded by Tyler socialites. "We'll make an impression on him with our questions and then we'll try to meet him afterwards. What's your question?"

"Umm, I was thinking about asking him about the Observatory, I mean, the Lancet..." My mind went blank and I couldn't remember the Observatory's real name.

"Forget about the Observatory," said Brennus. "We don't want him to think we're interested in the Observatory. We want him to think we're interested in physics." He had lowered his voice so as not to be heard by the crowd surrounding us.

"OK," I said agreeably. "Then maybe I'll ask something about supersymmetry."

"OK," said Brennus. "I'm going to ask him about the current paradigm in particle physics. I read an article about how it's shifting."

"Sounds good," I said.

Brennus glanced at his watch.

"I'm missing Geography," he said. "I love the feeling of missing something."

"I'm missing Spanish," I said, looking down at my own watch. I *didn't* like the feeling of missing something, especially Spanish. I'd been taking it for three years and I could barely ask my way to the bathroom in Spanish. For me, every class was crucial if I were going to pass all of the vocabulary quizzes.

Brennus was staring at Dr. Naylor who was talking to a tall, older gentleman in a gray suit. From the smile on Dr. Naylor's face, I presumed the man was pledging a donation to the Observatory. It seemed strange that Dr. Naylor would need to travel around promoting the Observatory and soliciting money. Had Lancet spent all of his money in the initial construction of the building and the Super Collider? When a man had billions, you'd think he'd also have investments where he could just run the Observatory off of the interest, or something. Of course, if all the money had been used to build the Observatory there'd be no capital, and hence, no interest. I wondered how much it cost to run the Observatory each day.

"Let's go back inside," said Brennus. "I want to get better seats."

"But the seats are all taken," I said as we started moving through the crowd towards the exit.

"Yeah, but they're not reserved," said Brennus. "If no one's left anything on the seat, it's ours."

Reluctantly, I followed him. There was no doubt in my mind that by moving forward we were going to end up offending two very rich Texans.

Brennus found us two seats in the second row. Most people had left their program on their chairs so we were lucky to find two empty seats. I decided I would just sit and stare straight ahead and if there was any confrontation, Brennus could handle it.

As it turned out, there was no confrontation. Maybe the people went home. Or

maybe they just didn't care where they sat. Despite my staring straight ahead, I could see that the older lady beside me gave us a strange look, but then decided to ignore us. Once again, Dr. Naylor appeared at the front of the room.

"OK," he said conversationally. "I've enjoyed meeting many of you during the break and you've asked me some very interesting questions, so I'm going to start with those."

Beside me, I could feel Brennus's irritation.

For the next half an hour Dr. Naylor discussed some current theories of physics, what other countries had been doing with regards to GUT, and further thoughts on supersymmetry. I was relieved. I could always tell Brennus that my question had been answered.

Brennus's hand was one of the first ones up when Dr. Naylor asked, "Any more questions?" Dr. Naylor, however, chose a grey-haired gentleman in the back row. The man asked a question about black holes. Dr. Naylor gave a fifteen minute answer. When he concluded, several hands went up. Dr. Naylor called on a woman with a string of pearls down to her navel. She asked whether time travel would fit into the Grand Unified Theory.

I could have asked that question I thought. But it was obvious by now that Dr. Naylor was only taking questions from the rich people. Brennus didn't have a chance, even if he asked the most intelligent question of the day.

Dr. Naylor explained that despite the philosophical implications of time travel, the causality factor of, for example, meeting your grandfather, getting into a duel with him, killing him and of course, then obliterating your own birth, that yes, time travel was possible. One possibility was traveling through wormholes, a tear in space-time which would create a bridge that would connect different points in time.

"Of course that's strictly hypothetical," he concluded.

Brennus's hand went up. Dr. Naylor glanced at him then surveyed the room. No other hands were up. Then an older lady in the middle wearing what looked like a Chanel suit, put up her hand.

"Yes ma'am?"

Brennus made a noise of irritation which Dr. Naylor ignored.

The woman asked what the Grand Unified Theory would look like. Would it be a single line statement explaining everything?

"It would be rules and equations, ma'am," said Dr. Naylor. "Rules and equations to explain *everything*."

Dr. Naylor decided that that would be a good note to end on.

"I want to thank you folks for coming out. I've appreciated having the chance to talk to you and to answer your fine questions. If you want anymore information about what we're doing at the *Lancet Centre of Studies in Physics*, I'll be right up here at the

front."

I assumed Brennus would be one of the first up there since we were only in the second row. When we reached the aisle, however, he made a sharp left turn and headed for the door.

He didn't speak until we were in the car, backing out of our parking space.

"What an idiot!" he said. "What a freaking idiot! *Did you see* the way he sucked up to those rich..." Brennus had to suddenly slam hard on the brakes not to rear end a Mercedes that had just rounded the corner heading towards the exit of the parking lot. He gave it the finger as it continued on its way, but thankfully the couple in it didn't look back.

"And *those* questions! They were so lame! They were about as stimulating as some conscience-raising lecture on some long-discussed, worn-out topic like sexism or racism... Time travel! There are hundreds of books on time travel!"

It was mildly interesting to me that Brennus considered sexism and racism to be outdated topics. That was a Yankee for you.

I thought it'd be cool if we hung out in Tyler for awhile. The mall was pretty decent and there was a little deli across from it that you could almost pretend you were in New York. But Brennus had already hit the loop and was on the straight road that would take us home. The only thing we'd pass would be a couple of antique stores and a Dairy Queen.

I kept quiet, waiting for Brennus's anger to drain out a bit. Soon the air started to seem more breathable.

"Wanna stop off somewhere?" I asked.

"Where?" he asked after a pause, as if he had had to translate my question into his own native language.

"I dunno. Dairy Queen?"

Another small pause.

"OK."

"I mean, if you're in a hurry, or something, we don't have to..."

"It's just I have some homework, but we can stop off for a drink."

He'd skip an afternoon of school, but hurry home to do some homework.

The way I remember it, that stop at Dairy Queen was nothing to rush home and write about in my diary. I don't think we were completely silent. I mean, we must have talked about *something*. Probably the uniforms of the DQ employees, the cars in the parking lot, the group of people sitting in the corner, I dunno. Anyhow, it was at that point that I resolved that I'd read more, think more, talk more, and do anything to make sure that Brennus would always like being with me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Two jobs for now," Wilson is saying. "Three, if I do good with these two accounts. They're regular customers, not just a one-time job so I'll be making regular money."

Wilson's father, as it turned out, didn't mind turning over some of his customers to Wilson. At fifty-five, he likes the thought of easing into semi-retirement and I think that by the time he's sixty, Wilson'll be running the entire company.

We're at the Daiquiri Drive-Thru, a drive-in bar where you sit in your car and the waitresses bring you your drinks. That this system so blatantly encourages drinking and driving hasn't seemed to occur to anyone, although the police love cruising by the Daiquiri Drive-Thru, following and stopping cars that are obviously being driven by cars that didn't have a designated driver.

"Do you know what that means?" says Wilson. His arm goes around my shoulder. "It means we can get together officially. I mean, you know..."

I sit and think about this. He means engaged. I have to say something.

"Yeah," I say.

Wilson seems content with this response and leans back in the driver's seat. Just then our drinks come. Removing his arm from my shoulder, Wilson reaches into his tight back pocket for his wallet and pays the waitress.

I don't know how to tell him that I might want to go to school, that maybe I could study Science, and History, and Literature... I want to know *everything*. I want to understand the laws of physics. I want to be able to quote Dante. I want to learn about the Egyptians and their pyramids. One year with Brennus wasn't enough. I need a lifetime like that.

* * *

"But it doesn't make sense," I said over a milkshake. It was our second trip to Dairy Queen and much more successful than our first. "If a person travels back in time, they could meet their mother or father. And what if they, say, prevent their father from meeting their mother by, oh, I don't know, tying him up and putting him in a closet the day he's supposed to meet her. So then you'd never be born, except there you are..."

"But that's a philosophical argument," said Brennus taking a spoonful of his hot fudge sundae and inserting it into his open mouth. He stopped speaking for a moment. "But the laws of physics say time travel is possible."

"But we could go back and change history," I protested.

"But that's assuming we're autonomous individuals and that history is changeable," said Brennus waving his spoon at me. "A classical physicist would say that no matter how hard you try, you wouldn't be able to change history, you'd just be absorbed into it. Like, if you locked your father in the closet, he'd escape, meet your mother, tell her this story about being tied up and she'd think he was a hero for escaping. So you'd just become part of their story of the day they met."

"But that's just one theory, right?"

"Oh yeah." Brennus took another huge spoonful of ice-cream. "And we'd probably never know till someone actually did go that far back in time. I think so far they've only gone back by a couple of seconds."

We were supposed to be together to talk about getting into the Observatory, but as usual, it was taking us awhile to get around to it.

"I watched *Howards End* last night," I said after a pause. In lieu of reading the books, I had decided to watch all the movies that were based on E.M. Forster's novels. It was quicker, for one thing.

"Really?" said Brennus looking interested. "I think that's the greatest book of all times."

"I think what was really interesting..." I was venturing forth with a literary opinion. "...was the study between the two sisters. Helen was passionate and dedicated, but it was Margaret who was the bridge between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes."

"You're so right!" Brennus actually looked impressed, though it was more like a teacher being excited by an astute student than a man being charmed by a woman. "Margaret knew that England had been built by men like Mr. Wilcox and that her artistic circle owed them respect for that."

"And Helen couldn't see it that way and could only fight against it..."

"I think it's because she was a spinster," interrupted Brennus. "E. M. Forster's novels always have these spinsters. Like, *A Passage to India*..."

I nodded. That had been the night before last.

"Adela Quested is reserved on the surface, but underneath she's passionate and erotic..."

"Just like Helen...!" It was my turn to interrupt. "Helen's the one with the lover!"

"And Helen's child is the one to inherit Howards End..."

"Spinsters," I said thinking out loud. "How 'bout *Where Angels Fear to Tread*?"

"Oh yeah," said Brennus. He had stopped eating his sundae. "Harriet and her inlaid box. They were in Italy, for crying out loud, and all she was concerned about was getting her inlaid box back, the one she had *lent*, not *borrowed*, *lent*."

"But Caroline Abbot was a spinster too," I said, happy to be discussing the one book I *had* read. "And she was another one of the passionate ones. You know, she would have given herself body and soul, as she said, to Gino..."

"It was something about the culture," said Brennus leaning forward. "With Adela Quested they were in an erotic culture. India. Then with Caroline Abbott they were in Italy. The culture brought out that erotic side of them that they had suppressed in England. That was also brought out in *A Room With A View*, the eroticness of Italy, I mean."

"Yeah," I said, thinking of how the story had ended with a honeymoon scene in Italy.

Brennus shook his head.

"The guy was amazing." Now he was talking about E.M. Forster. "He totally understood people and relationships. And *life*. He *understood* life, for all of its trivial moments and all of its sublime moments."

Brennus the English teacher.

Another pause. I figured once I got the hang of this intellectual discussion thing I'd be able to help us with our transitions from one topic to the next. But for now I just said, "So, breaking into the Observatory is still on?"

Brennus's head jerked around to see if anyone had heard. Like I'd be that stupid. We were sitting in a corner and the booth behind us was empty."

"Shhh," he said. "Yeah. I've got a plan."

I was hoping for some bank robbery-type strategy where we'd pull up in the middle of the night in an unmarked van dressed head-to-toe in black and use a rope to climb onto the roof.

But Brennus's idea was to make friends with the guy who worked for the vending machine company that supplied the Observatory and then convince him to let us join him on a delivery.

"I spent yesterday parked outside of the Observatory," said Brennus. "The guy came at about four and took three trips into the place. They must go through a lot of food in there. Anyhow, after that I followed him. The name of the company is Billy Dee's Snacks. Of course, that was written on the van. I didn't need to follow him to find that out. Anyhow, when he went back to Tyler to the headquarters, or whatever you want to call it, I followed him inside and asked him if he had dropped a pair of sunglasses in the parking lot and held out my pair. He had said no, but thanks for asking. I introduced myself."

This is something only Brennus could get away with, I thought. Introducing himself as if that were normal procedure when a guy may have dropped a pair of sunglasses.

"How old is he?" I asked.

"About twenty-five. He's got that hick look about him. No offense to your people."

"None taken," I said.

"Anyhow, I said it was nice meeting him, see ya around. So now it's your turn. You've got to make contact with him."

"Me?" I said. "Why me? Why can't you just go back?"

"I don't see that working," said Brennus. "I think you should meet him, and then somehow I'll bump into you guys and it'll all seem like a massive coincidence that we all know each other. It'll *bond* us and he'll be our friend for life."

I sighed.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Can't tell you," said Brennus grinning. "You've got to find out for yourself otherwise you might slip and give it away that you already know him."

"Then how am I going to meet him?" I asked.

"We'll follow him on his route sometime," said Brennus. "I figure he starts at about nine. He couldn't be any earlier since a lot of those offices that have vending machines don't really get going until nine. Hopefully he'll make some stop where it'll be convenient for you to casually meet him."

It was a weird plan, but presented by Brennus there were no other alternatives.

"Oh, by the way," I said casually. "A couple of my friends are going to Dallas this weekend. You wanna come along?"

This had been Jeannie's idea. Another great way for getting herself together with Billy, though of course she had suggested it as if it were for the sole purpose of bettering my relationship with Brennus. The idea was we'd go dancing Saturday night and tell our parent's we were staying at someone's place so we didn't have to be home until Sunday. The only question was whose place. So far Jeannie's best idea had been our grade eight Family Studies teacher since we knew she'd moved to Dallas. Of course, we had no intention of actually staying there. We could sleep in a field, if we slept, for all Jeannie cared.

I explained all this to Brennus, except for the part of Jeannie wanting to be with Billy and me wanting to be with him.

"Sure," said Brennus. "I'd like to see Dallas."

"You haven't seen it?" I asked, surprised.

"Only the airport," said Brennus.

"You'll love it," I said. "It's ten times better than Tyler."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wilson, Jeannie, and Billy were waiting for us in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen.

I just stared at Jeannie as she got out of the truck and I got out of Brennus's car.

"We had to bring him," she hissed to me. "Billy couldn't get his dad's car."

I sighed and just hoped it would all work. Wilson wasn't the type of guy who liked to be the odd one out.

Hopping out of his truck, Wilson started heading for Brennus's side of the car. This would be their first encounter. I climbed back into the passenger's seat while Brennus rolled down his window.

"Hi," said Brennus.

"Hi," drawled Wilson. "You must be Brennus."

"That's right," said Brennus. I detected a slight drawl. Either he was making fun of Wilson or he had just picked it up.

"Uh, this is Wilson," I said. I had, of course, never mentioned Wilson to Brennus.

"Hi Wilson." Brennus grinned.

Wilson looked mildly annoyed that he needed an introduction.

"So we're going to Dallas," said Brennus conversationally.

"Yeah," said Wilson. "Y'all follow me." He turned and walked back towards his truck where Jeannie and Billy were waiting.

"Whew," said Brennus, starting up his engine. "*That's* a relief. I was afraid *he* was gonna wanna follow *me*." This time the accent was obvious.

"I just loved them because they symbolized chaos," Brennus was saying. It was a two hour drive, at least at the speed Wilson was going. I'm sure he was consciously or subconsciously proving his manhood by his speed. But Brennus seemed to be having no problem keeping up and discussing his theories of life at the same time.

"The Romans tried to maintain order and the Celts proved to them that the world is essentially disorderly. I mean, they were literally the barbarians at the door, proving how shaky a civilization really is. And in many ways the Celts were more conscious of justice than the Romans. They would go to war over a broken treaty. The Celts believed that all things belonged to the brave and that philosophy still gets you by today. All those self-help books..." Brennus shook his head. "You can bet the Celts would have laughed their heads off. They had life figured out all right."

I smiled. Inside I was petrified. My mind had gone blank. It was like, this was my

big opportunity, me and Brennus alone in a car for a couple of hours and my mind was *empty*. I was frantically trying to remember some of the rules about making conversation that I had read in an article in *Glamour*, but nothing was coming back to me except, ask him about himself. And somehow Brennus's intoxicating presence made that rule seem kind of stupid.

"So," said Brennus. "What are we actually doing tonight?"

"Well," I said. "We'll probably get some dinner and then go dancing. Jeannie probably has a restaurant and a club picked out and Wilson will probably say he knows a better place, so we'll end up going to the place that Wilson wants..." I was examining my hands on my lap as I spoke.

"So, what's the deal with him?" asked Brennus. "Is he, like, one of the Big Guys, or something?"

"Not really," I said. I felt uncomfortable discussing Wilson, like maybe I was accidentally leaking out some emotion. It was hard just trying to sound natural. "I mean, he's not on the football team, or anything. He's just one of those guys everybody likes. He's got a truck."

"He's cool," said Brennus. "That's what you mean, right? He's cool."

"Well, yeah, I guess so." I'd never thought about this before. "Well, in a way."

"By East Texas standards, he's cool," said Brennus. I knew he wasn't saying that he thought Wilson was cool, he was just discussing someone who really meant nothing to him.

"Yeah," I said. "He's pretty easy-going."

"But you said we'll end up going to the place he wants to go to."

"Well, he's a *guy*," I said trying to explain a concept that had previously never been analyzed in my life. "Like..." I paused to think. "Jeannie planned this thing so she'll have an idea of what she wants to do. But Wilson is opinionated and always thinks he has a better idea, especially better than Jeannie. And Billy won't say anything 'cos he was invited along by Jeannie, so he won't want to go against her, but at the same time he might be agreeing with Wilson..."

"What about us?" asked Brennus. "What will we do?"

"Well..." I said. "I don't really care where we go."

Brennus nodded.

"Me too," he said.

I smiled out the window.

I didn't mind when he switched on the radio. My brain was feeling strained and I figured if I came up with any brilliant conversational items, I could save them for the ride home.

"It's a great Italian place," Jeannie was saying. We had parked our cars on one of

the streets in Deep Ellum and as we got out of our vehicles Jeannie was telling us about the restaurant she had in mind.

"*Italian?*" said Wilson. "I don't wanna just eat pasta!"

"Well it's not just pasta," said Jeannie. "It's chicken and beef and salad..."

"I don't want to go to no Italian restaurant when there are so many great places around here," said Wilson.

Billy was examining the boutique windows that we were passing by as Brennus and I followed behind them.

"What do you wanna go to?" asked Jeannie, irritated. "Some stupid steak place?"

"Yeah!" said Wilson as if she had just suggested a steak place as an option. "There's a great one just around the corner here."

We were heading for the heart of Deep Ellum where most of the restaurants, nightclubs and galleries are located.

"Hey Billy," said Wilson. "You want steak, huh?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," said Billy. "Whatever." He continued to establish his neutrality by swiveling his head around to examine all the trendy shops even though he'd probably been here a hundred times.

"We can get steak anywhere," said Jeannie. Irritation had turned to anger. "We've come all the way to Dallas..."

"Well I ain't comin' all the way to Dallas for pasta," said Wilson and that was final.

Wilson had established his position as leader of our little group and it was up to Jeannie to withdraw. As she was trying to impress Billy she transformed instantaneously, as if a steak restaurant had been her choice and she was pleased that everyone liked it.

We were led down a quiet side street away from the center of Deep Ellum to a large restaurant on a corner that seemed to be the only legitimate business on the block. All the other buildings looked dirty and abandoned. Most of Deep Ellum used to be like this, industrial and scary, but the city cleaned it up and now it's one of the best places to go at night.

"Where did you hear about this place?" I asked. The neon sign above the door identified this establishment as *Raymond's*.

"Johnny Ray," said Wilson enthusiastically. "He likes to come here after a game."

"Basketball," I explained to Brennus who nodded.

We entered a dark, smoky, and very noisy room. Most of the tables were full and the ratio of men to women was about three to one. There was a bar in one corner with the television turned onto a sports channel. I had a feeling the menu would probably just have three items, well done, medium, and rare.

A hostess with wilting blonde hair and indifferent eyes seated us at a round table in the middle of the restaurant.

Jeannie tried to smile pleasantly. Wilson looked pleased with himself. Billy,

Brennus, and I all continued to look nonchalant.

"Beer all around," said Wilson to the waitress who had appeared when we had taken our seats.

"Can I see some I.D.?"

"Make that a Coke," said Wilson with an attitude of *Hey! I tried.*

"Same," I said. I was seated between Wilson and Brennus and Jeannie was seated between Brennus and Billy.

"Ginger ale," said Brennus. Wilson gave him a look.

"Diet Coke," said Jeannie.

"Coke," said Billy.

We opened our menus and sure enough, the main fare was steak and the specialty was the Twelve Incher which if you finished, you got a t-shirt with *I'm a Raymond's Twelve Incher* on it. I was relieved that they also had a hamburger on the menu.

When the waitress returned, Wilson and Billy ordered the Twelve Inchers, Jeannie and I ordered hamburgers, and Brennus ordered Steak Teriyaki.

"So," said Brennus conversationally. "It would be twelve inches across, I presume?"

Wilson just looked at him.

"The steak," explained Brennus.

"Yeah," said Wilson.

"How thick would it be?" asked Brennus.

"I dunno, couple inches."

Brennus nodded as if he had suspected this.

"You ever eaten it before?" asked Brennus.

"Johnny Ray does it all the time," said Wilson. His tone signified, *end-of-discussion.*

"I hear Sandy and Bobby are together," said Jeannie. "They make a cute couple."

I knew this topic was more than just a silence-filler. She wanted the topic of relationships to come up since in some way this was supposed to bring her closer to Billy.

"Yeah," I said helpfully. "They're together all the time."

"Are they in love?" asked Brennus.

"Of course they are," said Jeannie as if she'd never heard a more stupid question in her life.

"A lot of guys just get into a relationship because it's convenient," said Brennus. "You know, someone to do things with and you don't have to go to the effort of finding a date."

Jeannie glared at him as if he had just announced he enjoyed picking his nose in public.

I felt it was my duty to speak seeing as Wilson looked amused and Billy looked

uncomfortable.

"Really?" I said. "So you figure everybody in a relationship may not be in love?"

"That's right," drawled Brennus. "Relationships are about convenience and love isn't always convenient. It can happen at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and maybe even with the wrong person."

"Is it still love then?" I asked. Now, more than Jeannie, I had a vested interest in this conversation.

"I'll tell you what love is," said Brennus, taking a sip of his ginger ale. "Love is when the chance of spending the rest of your life in a rat-infested prison cell with that person would make you feel like the luckiest person alive."

"So what is a relationship then?" asked Jeannie sounding incredibly irritated.

"A relationship," explained Brennus patiently, "is about having someone to do things with."

"Then love doesn't happen as often," I mused.

"Hell," said Brennus. "Maybe it only happens once in a lifetime and that's your taste of eternity. So when it does happen, bow down and worship because that may be your one glimpse of God."

I was tremendously relieved that the food arrived then since I can't imagine how Wilson might have responded to Brennus's theory.

Jeannie decided that the topic of love and relationships was unsafe and drew our attention to the basketball game playing on the television screen. The men broke out into discussion. Most surprising to me, Brennus also participated in the basketball discussion with Wilson and Billy, seeming to know all of the teams and all of the important players. Jeannie was visibly relieved.

"Let's not go dancing," Brennus whispered to me. "I want to go see where Kennedy was shot."

We were walking back to the car, following Wilson and Billy who were proudly holding out their *I'm a Raymond's Twelve Incher* t-shirts and Jeannie who was proudly admiring them.

"I think they all want to go dancing..." I protested.

"Not them!" hissed Brennus. "Us! We'll meet them later."

"OK," I said. I was quite pleased that he wanted to break away from the group.

"Uh, guys!" I called out. They turned around.

"Brennus and I are going to, uh, go see where Kennedy was shot and we'll meet you later."

"*What?!'*" said Wilson. "But it's dark! You're not going to see anything!"

"That's OK," I said.

We had arrived at the car and Brennus was unlocking my side.

"You just tell us where we can meet you," said Brennus. "Either that or we can make our way back to Longview ourselves."

"You can't go home til morning," Jeannie suddenly burst out. "We're supposed to be staying over at our Family Studies teacher's place and if Jessie goes back early..."

"We won't go back tonight," Brennus assured her.

"We're going to Disco Bob's," said Wilson resuming his role as commander.

"But I thought we'd go to San Domingo," protested Jeannie.

"It's on Claremount Avenue," said Wilson ignoring her. "Jessie knows the way because I took her there once."

I knew that last comment was a dig at Brennus.

"Meet us at about one," called out Wilson as he resumed walking towards his truck.

"Now how do we get to Elm Street?" asked Brennus when we were both inside the car.

"Uh, I'm not really sure..."

I also wasn't one hundred percent sure that I could get us to Claremount Avenue but I knew Brennus wouldn't care if we couldn't meet up with the rest of them.

"I'll ask at a gas station," decided Brennus, as he started the engine.

We pulled into the first open gas station. While Brennus went in to ask, I tried to figure out where we were. But Wilson was right. It was dark and I didn't recognize anything. From the buildings we might have been heading into the business district so that at least meant we were probably close to the book depository, or whatever it was. The truth was, all the times I had come to Dallas I had never seen where Kennedy was shot even though I'd seen all the movies about it.

"We're really close." Brennus returned and slid back into his seat. He handed me a bottle of lemon-flavored Perrier. "In case we get thirsty."

"That steak teriyaki must have been spicy," I said.

"It was," agreed Brennus. He had pulled out of the gas station and turned right. "Let's see, I think we turn right at these lights and then follow the road... We're looking for Main. Yeah, this is it. Now we go left and go..." He glanced down at his hand where he had apparently written down some brief directions. "Nine stoplights." He looked back up at the road. "That guy in there must get a lot of people asking how to get to where Kennedy was shot because he knew exactly how to get there."

The roads were quiet. All the action was on the perimeters of the city or down the side streets in the little out-of-the-way restaurants and nightclubs. But the heart of the city was still.

We came to a red light. Brennus stopped long enough to make sure no one was coming before going through it. I think I gasped. When I say the roads were quiet, I didn't mean *deserted*. Brennus grinned at me.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's OK," I said. And that was that.

"OK, this is Market," said Brennus looking down at his hand. "Should be coming up." Brennus made a quick lane change. "Should be just up here."

"Houston! Here it is!" Without bothering to put on his flicker, Brennus made a quick right turn.

He was scanning the scene.

"Hey, I think this is the part of the road Kennedy was coming along...!" His head was twisting as he looked around. "What's that street coming up called?"

"Um, I don't know," I said, looking around myself. I had no idea. Why hadn't I paid more attention when I watched *JFK*?

"Why don't they have any street signs?" demanded Brennus, leaning forward in an attempt to see better.

I had a feeling this whole excursion was going to make me feel like a complete moron.

"It's Elm!" said Brennus catching a glimpse of a sign as we shot through a green light. "Of course! Elm was the one he was shot on," he explained to me.

I nodded. This was news to me.

We made an illegal U-turn and Brennus put his flicker on to turn right.

I looked around. It did look vaguely familiar. We had turned onto Elm.

"There it is!" Brennus practically screamed as he pointed and accelerated at the same time. "There it is! *The grassy knoll!*"

We had come to a fork in the road with a triangular plot of grass in the middle. Brennus continued to the right of the tract since, as I realized later, the left was for the oncoming traffic.

"This is the spot!" Now Brennus was yelling. "*THIS* is the spot where he was killed!"

We couldn't stop because there were cars behind us. Brennus's head was swiveling. "Where's the Book Depository?" But we had shot through the underpass and Brennus was forced to make an illegal U-turn at the first stop light we came to.

"We'll park the car and look around," he said as we returned to the scene of the assassination, this time approaching it from the other side of the grassy knoll.

We found a parking meter about a block away and walked back to the grassy knoll.

"Let's see now," said Brennus, scanning. "That's the only building it could be." He pointed.

Sure enough, when we had crossed the road over to the brown brick building there was a little plaque informing us that the Book Depository where Lee Harvey Oswald had allegedly shot President Kennedy was on the sixth floor of this building. There was a museum there now.

"Too bad it's not open," said Brennus. "But let's go look at the grass. No. Wait.

Let's check out the monument first."

We wandered back across the road to Main and Market and, along with some Japanese tourists, examined the monument erected in honour of John F. Kennedy. Despite it being so late, the monument was well-lit and there were enough people around it to make me feel like we weren't too weird for coming so late.

Brennus started heading back for the grass with me trying to keep up.

"Now how did that go?" Brennus had arrived back at the assassination sight before me and was surveying everything as if he were the F.B.I. agent responsible for the case. "The other gunman was supposed to be somewhere around here..."

"Um, I think that was the theory," I said, biting my lip. Blast! Why hadn't I paid more attention to that movie?!

"Probably over there," announced Brennus pointing across the road. "It was supposed to be above the grassy knoll. People were standing all around here." He looked around. "It's quite shaded on this side though. A man could stand right here without anyone paying attention to him." Brennus looked like he was planning another assassination. "But then I'm sure there've been some changes here since 1963," he decided.

Brennus surveyed everything one more time.

"OK." Brennus was satisfied. He collapsed down onto the grass. He had been holding the Perrier the whole time. "Let's drink."

We passed the Perrier back and forth like two bums with a whiskey bottle.

"Poor Jackie," I said. It was the only thing I could think of.

"Yeah really, eh? I guess the hard part would be the funeral." Brennus fell back onto the grass.

"Not breaking down and stuff," I agreed.

"But then, he *was* sleeping with Marilyn."

"But Jackie really loved him, I heard somewhere."

"Hell, the whole country loved him." He handed me the Perrier to finish off.

"Let's leave a message in it," I said when I had taken the last gulp.

"What, in the bottle you mean?"

"Yeah," I said. "You know, we were here, or something like that."

"You got some paper?"

"Yeah," I said opening up my purse. "Pen too. Hey! I've even got a Ziploc bag with an old cookie in it." I opened the bag and tossed the cookie out onto the grass. "We could put it in here to keep it from getting wet."

"OK," said Brennus. He seemed to like the idea because he sat up. "What'll we say?"

"I dunno. Anything."

"Something about JFK?"

"Sure," I said. "Just a message. Anything. I know, just write what you're thinking."

"OK," said Brennus taking the pen and paper from me. He thought for a minute then scribbled some words. Before handing it to me he folded it. I took it from him and hesitated for a moment. I wanted to know what he'd written but there was no way I could unfold it with him sitting right beside me. Had he honestly written what he was thinking and that's why he didn't want me to see it?

I quickly scrawled a few words before hurriedly rolling up the piece of paper, putting it in the Ziploc bag and stuffing it into the Perrier bottle.

"We've got to bury it somehow so it doesn't just get thrown out," said Brennus. "This is city property and they probably send someone around to clean up after the tourists."

With my house keys I began to dig a hole in the firm ground. Finally the hole looked big enough for the bottle. When I tried it, however, the neck was still pointing out.

"Oh, just leave it there," said Brennus standing up. "Someone will find it eventually."

Reluctantly I stood up. It was crazy, but I'd wanted somehow to stick it in my purse just to see what Brennus had written.

"C'mon," said Brennus. "We still have time to go dancing."

I stood up and glanced at my watch. It was only ten o'clock.

"I don't know how to get to Claremount," I said.

"You can ask at a gas station," said Brennus grinning. "It's the best way to get information."

"Hey!" screeched Jeannie.

Wilson, Billy and Jeannie had managed to seize a table in a room crowded with bodies constantly moving to acquire beer, food, and fun. The dance floor was as crowded as a refugee train out of a war-torn country. The table was only for two and Wilson had pulled up an extra chair for himself.

"Listen," yelled Jeannie, to be heard. "You guys hold the table! Billy and I want to dance."

It was clear Jeannie was dying to get Billy onto that dance floor. Brennus and I took over the chairs.

"I'm getting a beer," said Wilson getting up and pushing through the crowd. There were no waitresses at Disco Bob's so you had to order your food at a counter and get your beer at the bar. Wilson must have been counting on the dim lights to get away with ordering a beer.

A conversation was out of the question with the noise level so Brennus and I just sat there, listened to the music, and waited for Wilson to get back so we could go and order some food. Except that Wilson didn't come back and I finally saw him on the dance floor

with some girl with short curly brown hair who looked about twenty-five, which would explain how he got the beer bottle he was holding in his hand.

I sighed and pointed him out to Brennus.

"I'll just go get some food," Brennus shouted, standing up. "What do you want?"

"Whatever," I yelled. It was funny how the night air had made us hungry.

Brennus merged with the crowd and I waited.

From the dance floor I could see Wilson watching Brennus's course through the crowd. That he might be jealous never occurred to me at the time. All I could see was that his face held contempt.

Brennus returned with two hamburgers, fries, and Coke. Apart from chicken wings, I think that's all you could get at Disco Bob's. The burgers were those huge kinds that after you finish them, you feel so sick of meat you just want to eat fruit for the next week.

We didn't try to converse as we ate -- it's hard to scream and swallow at the same time.

Wiping his face with a napkin and leaning back in his chair, Brennus surveyed the crowd.

"This your type of place?" he yelled.

I laughed as I pushed away my plastic basket of food.

"NO!" I yelled back.

He grinned.

"They seem to like it," he said directing his thumb at the dance floor though I think he was specifically thinking about Jeannie, Billy, and Wilson.

I leaned forward so I wouldn't have to yell so loud.

"Wilson likes it," I said. "But Jeannie just likes being with Billy."

Brennus nodded as if he'd figured *that* out a long time ago.

"Let's dance," he said abruptly.

"But what about the table...?"

"Screw the table," he said standing up. "There will be other tables." This last comment was delivered as if it were an ancient Chinese proverb.

We danced the night away. It's amazing how time can disappear when you're on a dance floor and the music is pulsating through your body. Disco Bob's closed at two and our gang was among the last to leave.

Brennus had been right about the table. I don't think any of us had returned to it. Wilson must have been moving around the place a lot that evening since I saw him with quite a few different girls throughout the evening.

"I ain't sleepin' in no field," Wilson announced as we walked through the emptying parking lot.

"What about Johnny Ray's?" I asked.

"Forget it," said Wilson. He sounded ticked-off. It honestly never occurred to me

at the time that he was irritated by the presence of Brennus. Or more specifically, by the fact that I was with Brennus that night. "He's visiting Dad and Mom this weekend."

"That's ironic," I said.

"Well what are we gonna do?" demanded Jeannie. "We can't go home."

"An all-night diner," suggested Brennus. He sounded as if he had been waiting all his life to have the opportunity to make that suggestion.

"I don't think so," muttered Wilson.

"No, that's a good idea!" said Jeannie. "I don't know if we can find a diner, but there's probably a donut shop or something. You know, the 24-hour kind."

I was dead tired, but a cup of coffee would wake me up, I knew.

"OK," sighed Wilson. "Y'all follow me."

We got into our respective vehicles and took to the quiet streets of Dallas. Eventually we came across a Denny's that advertised in neon lights that it never closed.

We parked and went inside. There were a couple of broken-down old men sitting at the counter, but apart from them, we were the only patrons. A tired-looking hostess seated us and gave us our menus after taking our order of coffee all around.

"Hell," said Wilson looking at the menu. I don't think he said it for any particular reason. We were all pretty bushed and I myself was finding it difficult just thinking about formulating a coherent sentence.

But the coffee came and we all revived a bit. Despite the filling hamburger, by now I was starving. I had burned a lot of calories on the dance floor. Except for Jeannie, who just ordered fries, we all ordered full dinners. Wilson went for chili and fries, Billy for roast turkey, Brennus and I for veal parmigiana. It made me think of *Howards End* and how Leonard Bast had gone walking all night only to realize that he still wanted his three meals as if it were daytime.

Wilson, Billy and Jeannie gossiped about people at school while Brennus and I listened. From the attention Brennus was paying them, I think he was enjoying hearing all this dirt on people that he normally wouldn't be able to find out.

The food came quickly.

Wilson and Billy were enjoying their meals, but Brennus and I exchanged looks after our first bite. The veal was tough, the tomato sauce too tangy and the cheese too rubbery.

"Oh well," said Brennus almost to himself. "What did I expect? There are just some places you don't go to find certain foods. You don't go to England for a good cup of coffee. You don't go to Kansas for fresh salmon. And you certainly don't go to East Texas for anything that might be considered *gourmet*."

I thought this comment would irritate Wilson but instead he looked up from his chili and laughed.

"You gotta order the right things," he said pointing at his bowl.

"Become a connoisseur of the not-so-fine-things, you mean?" asked Brennus.

"Whatever," Wilson shrugged, sticking a couple of fries in his mouth.

"Since I've come here I've been experimenting with the boxed macaroni and cheeses," said Brennus putting down his fork. "I've tried all the brands ranging from Kraft to generic."

"I like Kraft myself," said Jeannie. "Though it's more expensive."

"It is," agreed Brennus. "The generic brands, of which there are several kinds depending on the store, isn't actually all that bad, but Kraft Dinner is definitely cheesier."

"Costs about 79¢ though," said Jeannie. "And my mom always gets the 3 for 99¢ kind."

"I'm still looking for the best instant coffee," I said. "We don't have a coffee-maker, can you believe it?"

Wilson shrugged like this didn't shock him.

"Neither do we," he said. "Only Johnny Ray drinks it at home. He gets that Maxwell House stuff and seems to like it."

"We get Taster's Choice," I said. "But that's 'cos my mom likes those ads."

Brennus was prodding his veal with a fork.

"I should have got a salad," he said.

"I don't like the salads here," said Jeannie.

"Really?" Wilson looked at her like he was shocked which puzzled her for a moment until she realized he was just being silly. She hit him in the arm.

"Everythin' OK?" The waitress made her obligatory appearance then disappeared.

"Why do they always ask you if everythin's OK when you got food in your mouth?" asked Billy with food in his mouth.

"They time it," said Jeannie. "So you can't complain about anything."

The table fell quiet which was not surprising considering it was past three in the morning and we were all beat. Brennus managed to get the waitress's attention for another round of coffee. By four o'clock Wilson was getting restless. We had long finished our food and were on our third round of coffee.

"I ain't gonna sit in a Denny's all night," said Wilson shifting around in his chair.

Jeannie looked at her watch.

"We'd get home at six, six-thirty, if we left now," she said. "It's gotta be later than that."

"OK," sighed Wilson. "We'll go sit in a dumb field." He stood up and we all followed him to the cash register.

Out in the parking lot we were once again following Wilson who claimed he had a natural ability to discover empty fields. He warned us that we'd have to be at least an hour outside Dallas, though, before we stopped since we had to be well established in the country to find a quiet place.

Sure enough, the first dirt road he turned off onto led to a field that had no signs of life -- no adjoining lit house, no parked cars, no barking dog in the distance.

Leaving our vehicles on the dirt road, we got out, hopped the fence, and headed more for the middle so that just in case anyone happened to pass by, they wouldn't hear our voices. When Wilson was satisfied that we had walked far enough we all sat down in a circle, Indian style.

"Let's have a nose-picking contest," said Wilson. "Person who's gets the most on their finger wins."

"OK!" said Billy.

"That's *disgusting*!" said Jeannie. "You guys are so disgusting!"

"Are you in?" Wilson asked her.

"No!" Jeannie looked like she was about to stand up and walk home. "Why are you guys so disgusting?!"

"It's the dichotomy between perfection and imperfection," explained Brennus. "We struggle for perfection while enjoying the imperfections." He turned to Jeannie. "Like tell me you don't get a kick out of sticking that Q-tip in your ear and seeing what comes out. The more the better."

"You're sick," said Jeannie.

I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"It's like squeezing a zit," I suggested. "You know, seeing the white stuff pop out."

"Greatest thing in the world," agreed Wilson.

"You guys are so disgusting," said Jeannie.

"What's that?" said Wilson suddenly.

"What?" said Jeannie jerking her head around.

"I heard a noise." Wilson sounded so dead serious that I knew he was trying to get us going. Had he really been concerned he would have been more casual.

"Where?" demanded Jeannie trying to look into the darkness.

"Over there," said Wilson waving his hand in a general direction.

"Well whaddya think it was?" Jeannie was actually concerned. She should know better. My eyes were getting used to the dark and I could see that even Billy was trying not to let a smile leak out.

"I dunno," said Wilson. "But I was readin' in the paper the other day that there's a mad dog on the loose. Bites ya in the leg and pretty soon you go crazy, foamin' at the mouth and stuff..."

"Oh for crying out loud..." Jeannie realized Wilson was being a bit too melodramatic.

"What do you do when you're really afraid," asked Brennus abruptly. He had stretched out on the ground so that only his head was still part of the circle.

"I whistle a happy tune," said Wilson sarcastically.

"No, really," said Brennus.

"I ignore it until it goes away," said Wilson.

"What about you?" Brennus twisted his head to look up at Jeannie.

"I dunno," she said. "Whatever. Run, I guess."

"What about you, Billy?" It was the first time Brennus directed a question at Billy.

"I get out my gun," drawled Billy, smiling in the darkness.

"Jessie?"

I sighed. I hoped he wouldn't ask me because I didn't know.

"I just wish I weren't afraid," I said. "I hate being afraid. I think I'd just try not to be afraid."

No one asked Brennus what he did, but at that point I was so tired I could barely stay awake. So I stretched out on the grass beside Brennus. I was drifting in and out of consciousness. From what I could gather, Jeannie, Wilson and Billy kept talking.

The next thing I knew Jeannie was shaking me awake. The field was now as bright as day and my whole body was damp with dew. It was nine o'clock and time to go home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Miami is a great city, thinks Brennus. It has its quota of cool cafés, wild nightclubs, weird people -- everything you'd want in a city. Even a beach. Not that he was a beach person exactly, but then, if you were a beach person you usually ended up in California.

Why he had chosen to go southeast after graduation, he still wasn't sure. It was more a matter of ruling out all the other possibilities. He had no desire to go north because he'd already been there. Going west would have been an obvious choice if only for the reason that Go West sounded so appealing. So he had gone east. And he had decided to put off applying to University in the hope that something better would come along. As to what, he had no idea. He just knew that going to university was the obvious thing to do after high school, therefore he would not go to university.

His parent's had taken this well. They didn't want the additional financial burden of his tuition.

Today as he is strolling to work -- a high school diploma had definitely narrowed his job opportunities and the result is that he is dishwashing at one of the many trendy restaurants by the beach -- he glances down and sees a Perrier bottle lying by a garbage container. Why would someone be standing by a garbage container but opt to put their bottle on the ground? People are stupid.

In any case, the bottle reminds him of one of his few nights in Dallas. The message in the bottle. He'd always wondered what she'd written.

Man it's hot! With the back of his hand Brennus wipes the sweat that's running down his forehead. He can hardly wait to stick his arms into a sinkful of hot bubbly water for the next eight hours. His aunt has moved to Alaska. He's seriously thinking about joining her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Oh hey!" Brennus looked up from his *Newsweek*.

"Hi," I said. I sat down across from him. We smiled at each other.

I had been passing by the library and seen him and decided to go in even though I was supposed to be on my way to Spanish.

"So," I said.

"So," he grinned.

"I hope you had an OK time..."

"I had a great time." His grin broadened.

"Wilson isn't the easiest person... and I mean, Jeannie and Billy are kind of..."

"I had fun." He leaned forward and his hand touched mine for a moment.

"Good," I said. I know I blushed.

"Whaccha readin'?" I asked, nodding towards his magazine.

He glanced down at the page he was reading as if to confirm what he was about to say.

"An article about astronomers looking for other planetary systems."

"That can't be easy," I said. "I mean, there're billions of stars in our galaxy, how do they tell what's one of our stars and what's another galaxy?"

"They have their ways, I guess," Brennus shrugged.

He was acting strange, more subdued, laid-back. He was just leaning back, looking at me and smiling. I can't describe it. Kind of a Sunday morning feeling -- like we were having a long and lazy brunch together.

"Hey, did ya know a molecule of DNA has about as many atoms as there are stars in our galaxy?"

"No way," said Brennus grinning. I couldn't tell whether he was impressed or just being flirtatious. That's what it was, I realized. Brennus was *flirting*. He wasn't lecturing or philosophizing or speculating, he was flirting.

"Sooooo," I said, leaning forward, biting my lip, and smiling. My mind had gone completely blank.

"Sooooo," he said, still grinning.

"So here we are," I said.

"So here we are," he agreed. "In Longview, Texas."

"Did you ever think you'd end up in Longview, Texas?" I asked.

"Never. Hey!" A thought had hit Brennus. "Remind me to tell you about this new

theory I have. I thought of it when we were talking in Dallas, you know where Kennedy was shot."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, just a theory about who was behind it. It's so obvious I don't know why anyone hasn't come up with it before."

"Who?" I asked.

"I can't tell you until I read up on it a bit more."

"OK," I said agreeably.

There was a lengthy pause.

"Soooo, when do break into the Observatory?" I asked.

"We'll go tomorrow," said Brennus.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brennus would have picked me up at my place but I didn't want my mother asking me why I wasn't going to school at the regular time so we agreed to meet in the school parking lot at nine.

"OK," I said when we were driving on the two-lane highway to Tyler. I'd been thinking a lot lately and I felt I needed some clarification. "Let me get this straight. I don't really get this theory of everything thing. I mean, where does it come from? I mean, why don't we know it already? Isn't it something really simple..."

"The reason you don't get it," interrupted Brennus, "is because we are only in the fourth dimension. Gravity, nuclear forces, electromagnetism, they would all be unified in hyperspace which is a ten dimensional universe. There's also talk of a twenty-six dimensional universe."

"Oh," I said.

"It's called the superstring theory," said Brennus.

I decided that was enough about what I didn't know.

"Well, I've been busy reading Walt Whitman," I said nonchalantly.

"I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," replied Brennus passing an elderly lady in an oversized navy blue El Dorado.

Thankfully I'd read *Song of Myself*.

"For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," I answered. For some reason that line had stuck with me.

"In theory anyhow," said Brennus passing another car, this time a middle-aged businessman. "Hey, could you check the glove department? I think I've got a *Byrds* CD in there."

I hadn't even heard of the *Byrds*. I pulled out the CD, stuck it in the player, and then examined the cover. One of those 60's groups. Unless it was a 90's group trying to look 60's. That was possible. I put the cover back in the glove department.

"Why are glove departments called glove departments?" I asked.

"Because people put their gloves in there," said Brennus. He was concentrating on accelerating and passing yet another car. This time it was a man in his twenties in a black Corvette who glanced at us as we were passing and looked ticked. He was going well over the speed limit and Brennus had the peddle almost down to the floor just to keep even with him. The man stepped on the gas. About a mile down the road, another car was coming towards us.

"There's another car coming," I said lightly.

Brennus's reply was to step all the way down on the gas. We were running parallel with the Corvette. The Corvette was not going to give.

"There's another car coming," I said again, this time more determined.

"I can see it," said Brennus sounding irritated.

The Corvette stepped on the gas and surged ahead giving Brennus the chance to pull in behind him.

Brennus cursed as he made the lane change.

The oncoming car whizzed by us, its two female occupants giving us a horrified look.

"Well," I said after a pause.

"I hate this state," said Brennus.

"I've also been reading Sylvia Path," I decided to say and paused, giving Brennus a chance to quote her. He didn't.

"Mushrooms," I recited. "Bland-mannered, asking little or nothing. So many of us! So many of us!"

"She killed herself, you know," said Brennus. He was staring straight ahead at the Corvette that was rapidly leaving us in the dust of an East Texan highway.

"Really," I said and decided not to talk until we got to Tyler.

We parked in a small plaza across the road from Billy Dee's Snacks. There were a couple of the Snack vans beside the building but without any sign of drivers.

"So, what are you going to do after high school?" I asked.

"I have no idea. I hate all the choices we have," replied Brennus. "We have way too many choices. Doug Coupland, you know, *Generation X*, and option paralysis when we're faced with so many choices that we just freeze and end up choosing nothing. I like the theory in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* -- wait until the crisis point when there's only one possible choice to make."

Brennus glanced at his watch.

I looked down at my wrist. 9:57. Either he would come in the next few minutes or we would be sitting here for awhile.

"So, um, what do you think your one possible choice is going to be?" I asked.

"I dunno," said Brennus. "I'm just going to graduate and then do whatever... There he is! I knew this would work."

A rusty brown sports car had pulled into the parking lot of Billy Dee's and a short, thin man with dark hair who looked in his early twenties got out and went inside the building.

Brennus stretched his arms over his head and groaned with the exertion.

"Now we just sit here until he starts his route," he said in the middle of his stretch.

"I like the women in E.M. Forster's novels," I said abruptly. I was thinking of our

previous discussion in Dairy Queen. "I think Margaret Schlegel is the best of all his women. I mean, I think she represented something..."

I paused to think.

"What?" asked Brennus. With any other guy that would have been short for, "What the hell are you talking about?" For Brennus it was, "What did she represent?"

"A blend," I replied. "A blend of two types of people. Those who live to know and those who live to possess. Margaret Schlegel knew that by marrying Henry Wilcox she was blending those two worlds together."

"But wasn't she selling her soul?" asked Brennus. He didn't really believe that, he was just testing me.

"No because she knew that the world hadn't been built by Schlegel's, but by Wilcoxes. And she knew that to function in this world, one must be a Wilcox. When Helen was complaining that considering all of the interesting people they had met on their travels, it was too bad that it was the Wilcoxes they kept bumping into, Margaret replied, but interesting people can't find us houses. When she needed to find a new home it was Henry Wilcox who helped her, not one of her artistic friends."

"She's the only balanced woman," agreed Brennus. "Oh look!" The thin young man was loading his van with boxes of, no doubt, potato chips, sugar-covered doughnuts, chocolate bars. Other drivers had arrived in their various vehicles and were similarly loading their vans.

"Everyone else was a mixture of intense and controlled," I continued. I was not going to let this topic go until I had completely impressed Brennus with my ability to have a literary discussion.

"They were repressed," said Brennus taking his eyes off the men and their vans and looking at me. I think he was getting into it to.

"Adela Quested," I said. "*A Passage to India*. Like we were saying, an exotic country that awakens in her all of her erotic desires. Of course her British fiancé seems too tame after she realizes the depths of her feelings. Her unfulfilment. She's exposed to her desires only to have them remain unsatisfied."

I knew I sounded kind of hazy. But the important thing was I was finally learning to let my ideas flow.

"It's her fiancé's mother..."

"Mrs. Moore," I interrupted. "And her fiancé is Ronny."

"Anyhow, it's Mrs. Moore who isn't frightened by India's exoticness," said Brennus.

"Right. But she's old, so the sexual desire isn't a strong force and also, she's experienced so she can accept this new country that is so different from England and work it into her philosophy of life without upsetting all of her previous held ideas."

"True," said Brennus.

"It's seems like E.M. Forster liked to take his conservative characters and stick them

in a lush, exotic environment to see how they'd respond," I said. I was loving this and thankfully it takes a long time to load a Billy Dee Snack van.

"Italy," said Brennus, instantly understanding where I was going. Of course we'd had this conversation before which helped. I guess all people, even the most creative, have the same conversations over again.

"Of all his women, only Harriet Herrington in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is unaffected by Italy."

"Yeah," said Brennus pausing to recall. "She's the one who keeps asking about her inlaid box."

"That I *lent*, not gave, *lent*," I said, imitating Judy Davis's prim English accent. I had seen the movie as well as read the book. "Caroline Abbott, however, would have given herself body and soul to the Italian."

"So, why did Forster do that? I mean, what was his point?"

"I dunno," I said, thoughtfully. "But there are always those cultural differences. None of Forster's characters could cross them. Adela Quested can't have her Indian and Caroline Abbott can't have her Italian. Lilia in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* proved that. Her Italian husband wasn't willing to concede to her English ways. The only romance that works in Italy is in *A Room with A View* where Lucy Honeychurch and George Emerson meet, but they were both English!"

"And they had to go back to England before they could get together," Brennus added. "I think he's done." Brennus was looking across the road to where the thin dark man was lifting an empty hand-truck into the back of the van.

I leaned back in the seat, refreshed from our exchange. Finally we were getting somewhere. Correction, finally *I* was getting somewhere. Brennus was already there.

As the Billy Dee driver climbed into his van, Brennus casually turned the key in the ignition. Quietly the engine responded. Like in the movies. Engines either roar to life or purr like a cat, depending on the situation. When the Billy Dee driver pulled out onto the road Brennus let another car go by before following.

I was struck suddenly by the retardation of the situation. I had read Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys growing up and this just seemed like a cheesy game we were playing -- something that works in books but isn't something you do in real life. But I didn't want to ask Brennus if he'd ever read the Hardy Boys since it might sound offensive.

But then again, what if I laughed as I asked it. You know, "Oh, ha ha ha, have you ever read the Hardy Boys? This is kind of something they would do. Oh ha ha ha!"

As I was working through this in my mind, Brennus was fiddling with the radio. Tyler isn't exactly a compact city so we'd be driving around for quite awhile.

Finally Brennus found a station he liked, classic rock instead of country.

"*Start me up*," hummed Brennus tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as his head moved to the music.

I stared out the window at the passing scenery -- car dealerships, burger joints, the occasional liquor store, gas stations, a bridal shop.

The song ended and an advertisement for motor oil came on. Brennus began fiddling with radio dial again.

"SAVED! Saved, brother! I tell you, do you COMPREHEND what that means? The soul that sinneth shall die! Do you want to BURN in hell-fire for all eternity?"

Brennus rolled his eyes.

"There's some neo-paganism for you," he said. "Did you know that the Bible doesn't say we have an eternal soul? That guy just said it. The soul that sins *dies* and we all sin. The eternal soul is a pagan concept introduced into the church by oppressive leaders who wanted the people to live in terror of being thrown into hell-fire for all of eternity if they didn't do everything the priests said. There's a lake of fire in the Bible, but without an eternal soul a person would just burn up and that would be the end of them. You don't go to church, do you?"

"Uh, yeah, I do."

Brennus sighed.

"I guess you have to if you live around here. But did you know that Christmas and Easter are pagan holidays that were celebrated long before Christ was born? Christmas was a celebration of the returning sun and was in honour of some god's birthday. Easter was a pagan fertility celebration. Even Sunday wasn't kept by the early church. They met on Saturdays because the fourth commandment said to rest on the seventh day. I mean, really, if you go to the average church in America today, you might as well be going to the temple of Mithras or Astarte. Which means, you might as well be worshipping Satan."

There was a long pause.

"I take it that's why you're not a Christian," I finally said.

Brennus shrugged.

"I don't care much for church."

Brennus switched the radio off which was still playing the preacher.

"I tell you this day you shall not see hell if you give your soul to the LORD!" Assuming a drawl, Brennus picked up where the preacher left off. "I tell you brother, ALL have sinned and come short of the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! But he came to REDEEM us! He came in his INFINITE LOVE to SAVE our souls! YOUR soul, brother! Do not be condemned to the fiery torments of hell! Do not be like the rich man begging Lazarus for a tiny drop of water to cool his burning tongue! REDEEM the time! Accept the Lord! Accept Jesus Christ as your PERSONAL Lord and Savior! And he will bring your RICHES! SPIRITUAL riches to fill your heart and satisfy your every longing! You need never be lonely again once you've made that commitment to HIM!"

I wasn't too pleased. My mother had never taken me to church but somehow Wilson's family had gotten it into their heads that I was a spiritual orphan and had been

taking me to church since I was ten. Not having a father, the idea of God the Father had been really comforting for me.

I didn't know anything about what Brennus had said, but I did know that without the love that Jesus talked about, we were all doomed because people are selfish and don't care if they ruin someone else's life. Look at my own father. A weekend fling and he doesn't even look back.

"Now what is the price of spiritual riches, brethren? HALF of your income, brethren? Forty-percent of all you earn? Thirty percent? Twenty-five? No sir! The Lord only requires ten percent! Can you put a price on peace of mind? Does God want you to PAY to be happy? No sir! He wants a FREEWILL offering, given from the heart, so that this WORD might be preached unto all the nations! And I am that INSTRUMENT that God has chosen to preach HIS word! So y'all send me your money and I'll send you a receipt that's TAX DEDUCTIBLE! Bless y'all!"

The Billy Dee van was still ahead of us, a blue pick-up truck between him and us.

"Wonder when he's going to make his first stop?" said Brennus in a regular voice. "Oh good."

The van was making a left turn into the parking lot of a bank. We made a right into the parking lot of a Dairy Queen. The driver got out and went to the back of the van. Out came the hand-truck which was loaded with boxes and then rolled around the back of the bank, presumably to some side door.

"Not a really good chance for you to meet him," said Brennus. He pulled a wallet from his back pocket. "Go buy us some ice-cream cones."

I suppose the idea was he'd stay in the car in case we had to make a quick getaway. An image of me jumping through the open passenger door of the car as it was driving past me while trying to balance two ice-cream cones flashed through my mind.

I took the five dollar bill Brennus handed me and went inside the small Dairy Queen.

A young woman with bright blond hair teased in an attempt to maintain it's perm was behind the counter stuffing napkins into a silver box.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said looking up.

"Um." I glanced up at the menu board. "Two vanilla-dip ice-cream cones."

"Is that your boyfriend out there?" she asked looking through the glass at Brennus who was staring at the Billy Dee van.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

"He's cute," she said as she reached into the box for two cones. "He reminds me of my cat."

"Really?" I said.

"Yeah," she said turning towards the ice-cream machine. "He's really cute. Kind of

ginger-colored. NOT orange. I guess kind of dirty-blond."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Simon," she said as she coated the cones in chocolate. "He needs a lot of attention though. It's like, he's always waking me up at 4:30 in the morning to make me let him outside. But, it's like, we've got this understanding." She put the cones into one of those cardboard carriers and I handed her the five dollar bill.

"It's really important to bond with your cat," she said ringing up the order and handing me back my change.

I nodded as I stuck the money in my pocket and picked up the cardboard carrier.

"See ya," I said.

"Yeah," she said, returning to her napkins.

I stepped out into the bright sunshine.

"Did you know it's really important to bond with your cat?" I said as I got into the car.

"No," said Brennus. "Where'd you hear that?"

"The girl behind the counter," I said handing Brennus his cone and then reaching into my pocket for the change.

Brennus glanced at the window and was distracted by the posters.

"I love the specials here," he said. "Only in East Texas could you get a sundae big enough to ski on for 99 cents." He took a lick of his cone and glanced back at the Billy Dee truck."

"Uh-oh," he said as the driver came out with his empty hand truck. He took another giant lick of his cone and started up the engine.

The driver climbed into his seat and was backing out of his spot. Brennus maintained his position until the guy was back on the road and then we resumed the comfortable position of one car between us and the van.

"So, tell me about yourself," said Brennus conversationally. "Father? Mother? Brothers? Sisters?"

"Well..." I took a deep breath. "Just a mother, actually. My father was an Italian construction worker..."

"That's right!" said Brennus. "I remember you telling me. The Italian! You know, in many ways I admire the Italians' primal simplicity, if you'll allow me to use such an expression. They have religion and family and that's enough for them. None of that Anglo-Irish sense of displacement. No need to make a spiritual pilgrimage to the desert, for example, to find some sort of manifestation of the absolute. They eat, they drink, they love, they hate, and in doing so, they *live*. The Celts were that way once but somewhere along the line we became complicated. Too introspective maybe."

There was a pause. I wondered if I should continue telling him about myself.

"So, you never hear from him?" asked Brennus.

"Hear from him? I haven't even met him. I don't even know if my mother knows his name. I mean, his last name. His first name was Giuseppe and that's why she named me Jessie. You know, they kinda sound alike."

"You're a tragic figure, Jessie," said Brennus. "I don't mean, you're pitiful or anything. I just mean that you could be a heroine from some Gothic novel."

While I was deciding whether to say thank you or whether to ask what a Gothic novel was, the Billy Dee truck made a turn into a gas station.

"This is our chance!" said Brennus. "I'll pull up right beside him and you get out to fill up the tank. Then look over and smile at him. He'll probably smile back and then he'll look inside the car to see if you're alone and he'll see me and he'll recognize me and I'll get out to say hi and it'll all seem like a great coincidence!"

I didn't bother to tell him that in this part of the country if a guy smiles at your girl, you're not supposed to get out and say hi, you're supposed to get out of your car and bash his face in. I sighed internally and was grateful that Wilson had taught me how to fill up his truck once.

Brennus pulled up beside the Billy Dee truck and I got out, still holding my ice cream cone, and went around to the back of the car. While reaching for the gas nozzle I casually glanced at the guy filling up his van. But he knew the rules of the country. He wasn't going to make eye contact with anyone and was staring absentmindedly at his gas tank while he filled it up.

I inserted the nozzle into Brennus's gas tank and loudly cleared my throat. The Billy Dee van driver glanced up. I smiled.

"Dry throat," I said casually. He was short and scrawny and I didn't want him to think I liked him. "Must be dust."

He nodded and glanced at the driver's seat of the car I was filling up. Brennus was waiting.

"Hey! Hi!" Brennus leaped out of the car. "Remember me?"

The guy looked nervous.

"Louie, right?" Brennus jumped over the island to shake Louie's free hand. I decided that we'd had enough gas, especially since we'd started the day with a full tank anyhow, and pulled out the nozzle.

"How are you?!" Brennus was acting as if he'd just found his best friend from grade two.

"OK, I guess," said the guy. At this point he seemed to realize that Brennus wasn't going to punch him, but he was still unsure of Brennus's motives.

"So," said Brennus conversationally. "What have you been doing?"

"Uh, workin' mostly."

"Yeah!" said Brennus glancing at the Billy Dee van as Louie pulled the gas nozzle out of his tank. "I have *always* wanted to take a ride in one of those things!"

"Uh..."

"I mean, what's it like to make deliveries?" Brennus asked, as if he were a Hard Copy reporter getting the low down.

"Uh, it's really nothin' special..."

Louie turned and started walking towards the gas attendant in the little glass box. Brennus continued talking along side of him, and I never actually heard what was said but when they came back Brennus parked his car in the furthest corner of the gas station and we both got aboard the Billy Dee truck to join Louie on his deliveries.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Mom, I want to go to university," I say. I'm sitting on the couch flipping through some course selection guides that I picked up last year in my guidance counselor's office and never bothered to return. I am in lust, complete lust. *Studies in Ancient Assyria. Postmodern Literature. Celtic Migration Patterns. Contemporary Philosophical Thought. Studies in Nihilism.*

"What was that?" My mother came out of her bedroom towel drying her hair.

Caught up reading the description under *War in Celtic Society*

I forget to answer.

"So when do you get a ring?"

"What?" I look up.

"The ring," says my mother sitting down on the couch. "When is he gonna give ya the ring?"

"Oh, Wilson," I say biting my lip and closing the catalogue. "I dunno."

"Whaccha lookin' at?" asks my mother nodding towards the catalogue.

"Umm." I glance down at the battered catalogue. "I think I want to go to university."

"Really?" My mother leans forward and drapes her wet towel over the back of a chair. "Why?"

"Oh, you know, just to learn..."

"What would you major in?" My mother is still leaning forward.

"Oh, maybe history, maybe literature..."

"Literature?" My mother sits back. "Why not accounting or business? Something practical!"

"Well, I'm not really..." I pause trying to think. "...*Interested* in business or accounting. I want to read about ancient history and stuff and know about physics and all the laws and read literature and all that."

"I don't get it," says my mother looking annoyed. "What does Wilson think about this?"

"Oh, I haven't said anything to him."

"Well, do you think he's going to pay for this?" demands my mother. "You'll have just enough money to buy yourself a little place but I don't think he's going to want you to be goin' off to school. And where're you thinkin' of going? Tyler?"

I look down at the catalogue. This one happens to be for Radcliffe.

"I dunno."

My mother reaches forward and takes the catalogue from my lap.

"Boston?!"

I just look at her.

"Jessie." My mother leans forward. "You don't realize how lucky you are! All the education in the world wouldn't have made me happy! I would have given anything to have a husband."

I don't know what to say.

"Maybe I don't care if I'm happy," I suddenly think and without even realizing, say out loud.

"Jessie." My mother tries again, this time her words come out slower as she tries to formulate an effective argument. "Why do you need to know all this stuff? I've made more money by takin' an accounting course than you would knowin' about some bunch of old people who died a long time ago."

"That's not really the point..." I start to say until I realize the futility of trying to explain when I'm not even sure what the point is.

"Just think about it," says my mother. "Wilson's a good guy. You'll have a good life."

* * *

"Unsatisfied desire is the gateway to the infinite."

Brennus had convinced Louie to stop off for a six-pack and while Louie reluctantly drank a beer, Brennus and I were working our way through the other five. It was a source of tremendous fascination for Brennus that you cannot be arrested in Texas just because you have an open can of beer in your car. The cop has to actually see you drinking it before he can do anything. He had heard that somewhere and I wasn't even sure if it was true. Of course, seeing as we were minors surrounded by open beer cans, it wouldn't be a strong case for us.

"C. S. Lewis talked about it," continued Brennus taking a swig. "You know, because we feel these desires that can't be satisfied, we know there's got to be more to life than this, though maybe not necessarily *in* this life."

Brennus leaned back against the van wall. He had gallantly let me have the front seat while he reclined between boxes of potato chips in the back of the van.

"Like you think, there's at least ten dimensions and we only live in the third, spatially speaking. But like, any sort of being that lived in the fourth dimension, just one step higher than us, would have the ability to walk through walls and appear and disappear at will. I mean, think about it. There's more to life than what we see with our third dimension eyes." Brennus took a huge gulp, finished off his beer and reached for the final can.

"I don't really get it," said Louie. "Like, are you talkin' about ghosts, or what?"

"I'm talkin' physics," replied Brennus. "We understand the fourth dimension in terms of time, but not in terms of space. Spatially, we live in the third dimension."

When Louie didn't respond Brennus continued.

"You might see something that looks like a ghost in that it walks through a wall and then disappears all together, but it might just be someone living in the fourth dimension."

"Are you sayin' there're people livin' in some fourth dimension?" asked Louie.

"I dunno," said Brennus taking a swig of beer. "I really don't know. Maybe from another planet. Or maybe angels."

"Well, if there are ten dimensions," I said. "Where are the other six?"

"Well," said Brennus. "One theory is that before the Big Bang there was a ten-dimensional universe although it was explosive and split into two universes, one with four dimensions, namely ours, and one with six. Our universe expanded while the one with six dimensions contracted until it was nearly invisible. It still exists. We just can't find it. So essentially, the Big Bang and our expanding universe was the result of the split between space and time."

There was a pause.

"Y'all seen *Speed*?" asked Louie abruptly. "It's an awesome movie. Just rented it last night. Got that *Billy and Ted's Excellent Adventure* guy in it."

"Keannu Reeves," I said politely.

"Y'all like him?" asked Louie. "I saw him in that surfer movie with the *Dirty Dancing* guy."

"Patrick Swayze," I said. "*Point Break*."

"Yeah, that's the one," said Louie, making a left turn into a car dealership that presumably had a snack machine in its office. "I'd sure like to try a bit of surfin' some day."

Louie parked the van in front of the dealership, hopped out of the driver's seat and went around back to load his hand truck with boxes.

"How old do you think he is?" asked Brennus when he had disappeared through the glass doors of the office with his load.

"Oh, I dunno, twenty-three," I said.

"I think he might be older," said Brennus.

We sat drinking our beer until Louie returned.

"How old are you?" asked Brennus when Louie climbed back into his seat.

"Twenty-six. Why?" said Louie putting the van into reverse and pulling out of the spot.

"Twenty-six!" said Brennus. "Did you know Einstein was twenty-six when he discovered that E equals MC squared? Alexander the Great was twenty-six when he conquered Asia. Who do you think has had more of an impact on the world?" Brennus wondered out loud. "I mean, Einstein's discoveries led to the hydrogen bomb and

Alexander's conquests resulted in the spread of Hellenization. Hellenization affected the Roman Empire which later made the spread of Christianity possible."

"Hmmm, that's hard," I said when it was obvious Louie wasn't even going to touch that one. I think Louie had resigned himself to the idea that he had just picked up two aliens from outer space and was hoping that if he treated us nice we'd go home at the end of his route.

"It is," agreed Brennus.

"Like, don't take this the wrong way or anythin'," said Louie, "but are you two some sort of *religious* people, or something?"

"We are on a pursuit for truth, if that's what you mean," replied Brennus.

"But, I mean, are you Christian?" Louie was speaking slowly as if each word was a separate unit. "... or are you one of those *New Age* people..."

"Truth," said Brennus. "We seek truth because truth is never the problem. It's the interpretation of truth that presents problems. It's funny, Jessie and I touched upon this in the car earlier. Take Christianity, since you mentioned it, possibly one of the most maligned systems of belief despite, or more likely probably as a result of, our Western culture being built on its tenets. It's judged by its papal corruptions, its moral restrictions, its ability to provoke wars and rarely by its truths. But if God actually manifested himself as a man that is big. Automatically, the atheists, the Buddhist wannabes, the nature-worshippers would have to reevaluate their thinking. If God really walked on this earth, is it necessary to find the meaning of life in tree-worship?"

"So you're saying you're Christian?" said Louie.

"I'm saying every truth is misunderstood," replied Brennus.

"You do believe in all that thou-shall-not-kill and all that?" asked Louie. "Our laws are a poor representation of Christ's teachings," said Brennus. "We enforce the law, thou shalt not murder, not because murder is morally wrong, but because we don't want to be killed. We don't steal because we don't want to be stolen from. Self-interest, not brotherly love, lies at the core of our laws. No, the truths of Judeo-Christianity have only been shallowly skimmed," said Brennus as I stared out the window at the passing car dealerships.

"Well that's good," said Louie. My only explanation for this incongruous remark is that he was relieved that Brennus seemed to accept the Ten Commandments.

"The horror, the horror," whispered Brennus.

"What?" asked Louie.

Brennus didn't reply. Louie put on his flicker and we turned into the parking lot the Observatory.

I was too busy puzzling over Brennus's words to be moved by the grandeur of the Observatory and to have any fear about what we were going to do now that we were here.

It was years later before I picked up Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and came

across those words, *the horror, the horror* and desperately tried to recall in what context Brennus had murmured that dying statement. When I remembered that he had mentioned the words, brotherly love, I was chilled by the realization of what Brennus had been saying. Kurtz, the man in *Heart of Darkness* who had uttered those final words, had been worshipped as a white god in black Africa. Yet a scrap of paper, a footnote, among his possessions had revealed his true feeling, *Exterminate all the brutes!*

Yet I understood Kurtz's fiancée, oblivious to everything except that she loved a universal genius, desiring only to treasure every sigh and every word that he uttered.

"Now y'all just stay here while I deliver this stuff," said Louie as he pulled into a spot and shut down the truck.

"Oh we can help," said Brennus leaping out the side door which he had been sliding open.

"Uh, I don't think..."

But Brennus already had the hand truck out and was loading it.

"Potato chips?" asked Brennus, pulling out a box. "M & M's? Chocolate chip cookies?"

I opened my door and stood on the pavement, squinting into the sun.

"Look!" Louie was facing Brennus and I could tell it was showdown time.

"How many loads do you usually take into this place?" Brennus quickly asked.

"Well, two."

"OK, so Jessie and I can save you a load," said Brennus handing me a box of potato chips, which I reluctantly took.

Louie sighed.

"OK, but you'd better not do anything..."

"Like what?" asked Brennus sounding genuinely puzzled.

"Well, like anything that might cost me my job."

Louie pulled some more boxes out of the back of the truck. Brennus piled another box of potato chips in my arms. Thankfully they were light.

"As soon as we get in there, follow me," he whispered.

I nodded behind my boxes. I had figured that Brennus wouldn't be content just seeing the snack machines.

Louie had taken over filling the hand truck and was balancing it against himself as he shut the back doors of the van. Brennus was loaded down with three boxes of oatmeal chip cookies which I imagined were a lot heavier than potato chips. We followed Louie as we headed for a side door.

Despite the circumstances I was excited. No one I knew had ever been in the Observatory and if I saw Jack Nicholson just casually walking down a hallway, well hey, I was planning on inviting him home for dinner.

Louie rang a buzzer by the unobtrusive white door. The door slid open and we

entered into a little white room. A man behind a desk in a security outfit just stared at us. I don't think that there was anything *that* unusual about us, I just think he was one of those types who stares.

"Billy Dee," said Louie.

"Three of you?" asked the man.

"Summer students," replied Louie. Brennus must have been sending him mental vibes to come up with an answer.

"Ain't it a little early for summer?"

"They're college students."

"Great job," the guard sneered at us. This coming from a guy who spends his day in a little white room.

"Thank you," said Brennus courteously.

The guard pressed something underneath his desk and a door slid open. We were in the Observatory! It occurred to me that maybe after this was all over I'd send an anonymous letter to the Observatory warning them about their lack of security, particularly with a moron guarding the door.

We were in a hallway. The walls were creamy beige and although the hallway was devoid of any kind of furniture or sign of life, it didn't seem sterile, it seemed professional. I realized it was the doorways that gave the hallway its grace. Instead of your basic rectangular, they were arched. The doors were made of a polished cherry-wood. I'd always thought the Observatory's colour scheme would have included silver chrome.

"The staff room is just up here," said Louie as we marched down the hall.

Only Louie could have called the room we entered a staff room. I would have called it a lounge, or a sitting room. The six scattered chairs and the long couch were all made of black leather. One wall was lined with a wooden bookcase filled with elegant leather-bound volumes. There was a small sink and counter in the corner, both done in a marble finish. In another corner, on a cherry-wood end table, was a coffee-maker and a collection of china mugs. The chrome and glass snack machine up against another wall looked out of place, but presumably, even the sophisticated scientists of the Observatory liked to have a snack on their coffee break.

"Why isn't anyone here?" asked Brennus as he dropped the boxes onto the floor. I immediately put my load down on one of the chairs.

"Careful!" said Louie looking down with concern at the cookies.

"Sorry," said Brennus glancing at his watch. "I mean, it's twelve o'clock. You'd think there'd be someone here."

"I think a lot of them go out to lunch," said Louie as he unlocked the front door of the snack machine. "It's usually pretty deserted when I'm here."

That's all Brennus needed. He'd grabbed my hand and we were halfway to the door.

"Where're you goin'?" asked Louie, startled.

Brennus didn't answer.

Louie was torn. The snack machine was wide open, boxes were scattered everywhere, but Brennus was now flying down the hall dragging me along. Louie decided to follow. I don't know whether it was to save his job (although he couldn't have expected to get a lot of accolades for leaving the snack machine open).

Brennus had let go of my hand in order to try door handles. Just in time. My hand had been about to break a sweat.

"Whatcha doin'?" At least Louie had the presence of mind to hiss instead of yell.

Brennus put his fingers to his lips. He had given up on all of these side doors and was heading straight for the sliding doors at the end of the hall. I tried to imitate his purposeful stride. The doors slid open just as we reached them, but not for us. A man in a white shirt, tie, and dark slacks was on the other side. He too was moving with purpose. He and Brennus exchanged glances, thankfully sparing Louie and I from scrutiny. Our threesome made it through the door just as it shut which made me realize that the doors weren't automatic. We had gotten in because that man had been coming out. As we had been walking towards the doors I had wondered what the little black box beside them had been and of course, I knew now. It was for access cards.

We were in a classroom-size room covered in giant pictures of star systems. Although the room was painted cream, the posters made it feel like night. The furniture in the room consisted of several rows of desks all facing a gigantic screen. We were at the back of the room. There was a man working at one of the desks. It looked like he was sorting slides. He didn't turn to see who entered the room, as if he was used to people passing through.

Brennus paused only for a second before continuing forward toward some smoked glass doors. I liked the look of those doors. There was no little black box beside them. Brennus pushed his way through the door, pausing only a nanosecond to make sure I caught it.

We were in a room not unlike the one we had just passed through except that instead of desks, this room had a counter. The counter ran around the room, square shaped, except for a tiny opening at the front of the room so that someone could enter into the middle if he desired. The walls in this room were bare but the counter was covered with papers and photos, as if the people working here had just taken a quick break and would be coming back soon.

Brennus was already going through the photos. Louie was paralyzed with fear. I didn't know what to do.

"These all seem to be of the same thing," said Brennus.

"What is it?" I asked joining him to look down at one of the photos.

"It's like a star rotating around something except you can't see what it's circling."

I picked up a couple of the photos. I could tell what he meant. The star that these

people were charting had been circled in each photo, or else the pictures would have been meaningless shots of the night sky. The star appeared to be moving around some giant area except that it was just a black plot in the sky.

"There's only one thing it can be!" said Brennus holding one of the photos out a few feet away from his face. "It looks like a black hole!"

"No way!" I said.

"But why chart a star rotating around a black hole?" asked Brennus. "Not that it has to be rotating..." He had picked up some of the other photos and was comparing them. "It may just be different angles of the same shot..."

"I don't get it," I said.

"Maybe we should go," said Louie suddenly.

"This could be big," said Brennus. He was staring at the photos.

"Wait a second!" I said suddenly. "Wait a second! This thing was built to replace that Super Collider, wasn't it? That place that was supposed to figure out the theory of everything?"

"Well, actually, it wouldn't have had the energy..." Brennus stopped when he had the same thought as me. I don't know how I suddenly had this flash of insight. We only talked about black holes once back in freshman science. "Maybe they're examining ways to use the *energy* from the black hole to accelerate everything in order to figure out everything...!"

"I don't get it," said Louie looking nervously at the glass doors.

Brennus was happy to explain.

"The idea with the Superconducting Super Collider is to have two protons inside of this long tunnel, one traveling clockwise, the other counter-clockwise. When they've achieved a speed as close as possible to the speed of light, the scientists would cause them to collide. The energy generated would be tremendous; it would be like simulating the Big Bang. The debris of the collision would hopefully reveal a clue to the ultimate form of matter, you know, the smallest possible particle, etc., etc."

Louie looked as if he still didn't get it.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

"See, the tunnel would have to be surrounded by magnets in order to bend the proton and antiproton," continued Brennus, staring longingly at a polished wood door in the corner of the room. It had a black box by it. "A magnetic field..." He started walking towards the door. When he reached it, he tried the handle. It didn't even turn. Brennus sighed.

"Oh well." Brennus turned away.

"But I think Jessie's right." He was examining a photo. "I read an article about measuring the energy in cosmic rays, but it also talked about measuring the energy in black holes. Supposedly in the middle of the Milky Way galaxy there are millions of

them. The idea was that it should be done with an orbiting spacecraft. This star must be an orbiting spacecraft!" Brennus was thinking out loud. "But you don't need a Superconducting Super Collider to do that. I mean, to measure the energy of black holes is a separate project all together."

"Maybe this was never a substitute for the Super Collider," I said excitedly. "I mean, in the sense that it simulated a Super Collider. I mean, it's still looking for a theory of everything, and all..." I tried to think. "There were always just so many rumors," I concluded. "No one knew anything for sure."

"Probably rumors started by the Observatory," said Brennus. "Or, at least, encouraged by it."

Brennus was pacing back and forth. Once again, I felt silly. Like we were Nancy Drew and Ned Nickerson. *The Case of the Observatory.*

"In the future they might be able to harness the power of black holes. I mean, there are millions of them so it's an infinite power source. But these things are dangerous. They'll suck in anything and everything. If it ever got out of control and approached the earth it would burrow to the center of it and God only knows what would happen to this planet."

"I'm leaving," said Louie. This had nothing to do with our discussion and everything to do with the fear of being caught.

"I wonder what's behind that door?" said Brennus, glancing back at the corner. "I think we can safely assume there was never a collider here, but the question is, what is here? Did they build a spacecraft to orbit this thing and then somehow send it up secretly?"

"But why isn't the government in on this?" I asked. "I mean, why is this a private project?"

"Well, for all we know, maybe the government is in on it. Or maybe whoever funded this project doesn't trust the government after they cancelled the Super Collider. Or maybe some physicists just want to get a jump on everybody else and go down in history as the men who discovered the theory of everything."

"Let's get out of here," said Louie. He hadn't moved since his threat to leave. He was too busy staring apprehensively at the sliding doors as if waiting for the guards and the German shepherds to suddenly come bursting in, guns pointed.

"OK," said Brennus, folding one of the photos and sticking it into his back pocket. Thankfully Louie didn't see this.

We exited the room and passed quickly through the next one without the scientist turning around. Fortunately you didn't need an access card to exit the doors. The hall was still empty. We had only been gone from the lounge for about ten minutes, if that.

Brennus helped Louie fill the snack machine and they were done in five minutes. If anyone had come into the lounge and seen the open snack machine, they must have

assumed that the Billy Dee boy was just in the john, not that I'd seen any washroom facilities in our brief visit.

We reemerged in the hall with a lot of empty boxes on the hand truck and headed back towards the room we had entered through.

"Took your time," said the security guard glaring at us.

"I couldn't resist some of that yummy gourmet coffee," said Brennus.

"Fag," said the security guard.

Brennus winked at him as we exited.

Louie nearly fainted as we stepped out into the bright sun.

"I have never been so scared in my life," he said to himself.

"Of that little guy?" said Brennus. "I could have kicked his teeth in before he even stood up."

Louie sighed.

"I'm takin' you back to your car and I don't wanna ever see you again," said Louie as stuck the hand truck and empty boxes back into the van.

"Ohhhh." Brennus sounded genuinely remorseful. "C'mon Louie! Don't talk that way! Hey Jessie, do you have a pen and paper?"

I got into the front of the van and reached for my purse which I had stuck under the seat. Thankfully I had a pen and an old receipt.

Brennus scribbled his number on it and handed it to Louie before he climbed in the side door.

"You call me if you ever need anything," he said. "I owe you big time."

Louie sighed and stuck the piece of paper in his pocket. We drove back to the gas station in silence.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Louie called two days later. Brennus and I had seen each other at lunch the day after the Observatory break-in but he hadn't joined me and Jeannie.

"Ladies," he had said as he passed, nodding.

I smiled. We had no formal agreement not to tell anyone of our visit because I knew it went without saying. So here I was listening to Jeannie talking about her date with Billy, a trip to Dairy Queen, like this was supposed to be the most thrilling thing in the world. Oh the stories I could tell...

Brennus called me the next evening and said he was on his way over to pick me up. Louie needed to talk to us. I told my mother Brennus was helping me with an English paper, which was true enough since Brennus had been indirectly helping me with all of my English papers since I met him.

Brennus had grabbed a six-pack from his aunt's cupboard since we were meeting Louie in a field down one of the many dirt roads in Texas.

Brennus parked the car under a tree, we hopped a fence, and started walking through the field. I have no idea how he and Louie had decided on this particular field and how they had both found it. I mean, fields are usually picked spontaneously. You drive up with your friends and a 12-pack and say, "This looks like a good one."

But sure enough, Louie was in the middle of it waiting for us. We were still a few feet away when he started talking.

"Listen guys. They know someone broke into that room. My boss told me this morning. Asked me if I knew anything about it..."

Brennus sat down on the grass and opened one of the beers. Then, as if he had just remembered his manners, offered one to Louie. Louie took one. No man, no matter how adverse the circumstances, turns down a beer. I helped myself and joined Brennus on the grass who was by this time lying on his back staring up at the first stars of the evening.

"They're gonna track 'em down!" said Louie between gulps. "They're gonna track *us* down! They haven't called the police, but..."

"What!" Brennus sat straight up spilling half his beer on his shirt. "They haven't called the police?"

"No," said Louie sounding annoyed as he shifted his position. He was still standing and I don't think he appreciated this seemingly irrelevant tangent in the conversation. "My boss said he heard the guy say that no one, under any circumstance, was to call the police. You know, if my boss found out it was *me*, for example, he was just to contact the Observatory."

"That is amazing," said Brennus resuming his position on the ground. "They really *do* have something to hide."

"Yeah, but they're investigatin'," insisted Louie. "They're probably dustin' for fingerprints! We left fingerprints all over that place!"

"They're not calling the police so what good are fingerprints going to do them if they have no police records to match them with?" Brennus spoke slowly as if to a moron. "Besides the fact that none of our fingerprints are on record, anyhow."

"Listen you..." Louie stood in front of Brennus's horizontal body. "I'm not gonna be hauled off to jail because some little twerp wanted to see inside the Observatory! I am gonna turn you in myself!"

"You idiot!" said Brennus sitting up. "They'll never find us! And even if they do, they aren't the police! They don't want the police involved so they'll never turn us in! All we have to do is play dumb, act like we didn't see anything, and they let us go! What're you afraid of? That they're gonna tie us up and throw us in the dungeon? Send us up in their spacecraft?"

Louie grabbed Brennus by the shirt and jerked him to his feet.

"You're goin' down, buddy."

Louie slammed a fist into Brennus face.

I think I screamed.

Brennus responded instantly and with savage fury. It was impossible to tell in the increasing darkness whose fist was connecting with whose face, but I distinctly remember their two bodies crashing into the trunk of a tree and both of them plunging to the ground only to resume the combat.

I was completely helpless. But I don't think Brennus would have wanted me to interfere anyway.

After a few minutes of rolling around on the ground, Brennus removed himself from the entanglement. Louie was lying on the ground, still conscious but not too keen on moving.

"The problem with a guy like that," said Brennus taking a deep breath, "is that he thinks he can control chaos."

He crouched down.

"We are not telling anybody about our visit to the Observatory," he said to Louie.

Brennus started walking towards the fence. I followed. We climbed into the car and drove along the dirt road in silence. It was pitch black. I knew the rising sun would reveal Brennus's face to be bloody and bruised. I wished I'd had the presence of mind to grab those three remaining beers. I felt like I needed one.

I didn't see Brennus for the next three days. I figured he didn't want to make a public appearance with his face a mess. Although a bruised face can be a source of pride

to many men around here (especially if the other guy looks worse), I knew it was something Brennus wouldn't want to have to explain to anybody.

He finally phoned me.

"Oh, hey!" I said. "How are you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, obviously not wanting to dwell on the preliminaries. "Listen, I've spent the last few days in the University of Texas library looking at every single one of their astronomy books. First of all, I found this interesting one that was talking about the future of astronomy and it said that in a few years we should have earth-based instruments that will be more effective than the Hubble space craft. Well, I think the Observatory has achieved that."

"Really?" I said. That sounded impressive enough.

"But here's the big thing, Jessie."

"Uh huh?"

"About that photo I kept, remember?"

"Of course."

"Well, there was nothing that showed that particular star formation with that black hole in the middle, although I found plenty of pictures that match the star system. That star, Jessie..."

"Uh huh," I said.

"Well, it wasn't a star."

"It was a spaceship, huh?" I said. It was so good to hear his voice again.

"It's not a spaceship," said Brennus.

"So what's left?" I asked. "What is it?"

"It's earth."

There was a dramatic pause. Suddenly I was afraid.

"What does that mean?" I said trying not to let the terror reach my brain.

"I have no freakin' idea."

* * *

It's funny how despite the threat of earth being sucked into a black hole, a year later I'm still flipping through a university catalogue.

I've read all the course descriptions, now I'm staring at the tuition fees. \$600 a class, plus \$50 just to apply. And I don't even want to think about the cost of renting an apartment and supporting myself.

If only I'd studied a little harder the last few years I might have gotten a scholarship, or something...

As my mind wanders I end up thinking about what I always end up thinking about...that last day I saw Brennus.

Graduation is supposed to be the biggest day of your life but I still think about it as the last day I saw Brennus. There was the cap and gown thing, the photos, the parents, the refreshments, the streamers, but all that fades when I think of me and him standing there by the wall of our school drinking non-alcoholic champagne and him casually saying, "I think I'm going to head east. My aunt's giving me her car 'cos she's getting a new one."

"Will we write?" I asked. I'm afraid my desperation was probably scrawled all over my face and oozing through my every word.

"Sure," he said, as if, of course we'd write, that wasn't an issue.

"So, uh, when do you think I'll see you again?" I asked. It wasn't even like we were boyfriend and girlfriend. I suppose that whole time we were just friends.

He shrugged.

"I honestly don't think I'll be coming back here," he said. "But when I find a place, I'll send you a letter and you can come and visit me sometime."

It wasn't like he'd send for me and I'd come out and join him. I'd *visit* him. And then I'd come home.

Then he'd hugged me.

"It's actually been a great year," he said as we came out of the hug. "Thanks a lot." His voice was sincere. But I didn't want sincerity. I wanted passion. I wanted tears from him. Hell, I could feel my own tears coming.

"No problem," I managed to say.

I guess at that point his aunt came up and then I called my mother over and she hit it off with Brennus's aunt. The irony was they actually became friends and met for lunch a couple of times before Brennus's aunt moved to Alaska. Brennus and I just stood there, not awkwardly but sort of at a loss, and let them talk. Then we drifted apart and my mom and I were invited to go out to dinner with Wilson and Jeannie and Billy's families and I never saw Brennus again. His aunt told my mother that he had gone home that night, packed up the car, and taken off to Florida.

It had always amazed me how Brennus had dropped the whole Observatory thing once he thought he had figured out what was going on there. It was as if he'd lost interest, although how anyone could lose interest in earth rotating around a black hole, I don't know. I certainly didn't. But what could I do? I couldn't tell anyone since what we had done was illegal and even if I did tell anyone what I knew, what could they do? Make the black hole go away? Whether the black hole was merely being monitored by the Observatory, or whether they were somehow trying to tap its powers, I suppose I'll never know.

The phone rings and I put down the catalogue.

"Hey."

"Oh, hey sweetie," I say. I always know it's Wilson since he never identifies himself.

"I got some free time. I'll pick you up and we'll go to Longview and check out the rings."

It's funny because Jeannie and Billy have been going out forever and he still hasn't bought her a single piece of jewelry. She is so jealous of me.

I look down at the catalogue, still open to the tuition fees.

"Sure," I say.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

If it weren't for Brennus I would still think that stars are for wishing on. But after him telling me one night as we were looking up at them that they were the result of hydrogen gas compressed by gravity, I just don't want to attach any of my dreams to them. The sun is a star, he explained and then proceeded to outline the history of such a star -- hydrogen runs out and starts to burn helium resulting in a red giant, when helium runs out gravity begins to crush the star producing a white dwarf, continuing to crush until you have a supernova, and then eventually a dead star, a neutron.

A black hole, he told me, is the final result of a dying star as gravity sucks all nearby light into it.

In five billion years, give or take a few, when the sun reaches its red giant stage, the earth will be consumed by the sun.

I don't know what happened to the black hole. The Observatory is still functioning as it always did and there have been no news flashes saying earth is about to be lost to an approaching black hole. (Though I suppose a black hole wouldn't approach us like some killer shark. We'd suddenly be pulled out of our orbit and sucked into it. I guess at that point we'd be beyond news flashes.) Living with a pragmatic guy like Wilson has almost made the black hole threat seem like a game Brennus invented to make life in East Texas a little bit more exciting.

I just finished reading a novel about a girl back in the 1800's who wanted more than anything to be educated, except that her family and her fiancé were completely against it. So she saves up her money and goes off to Chicago and enrolls in college. She's very happy. She's educated. She's *liberated*.

I'm sitting here, drinking a cup of coffee, looking out the window of mine and Wilson's trailer. Should such liberty cost a couple of thousands of dollars a year? Should the reward of education be a piece of paper at the end of four years? And was this girl really happy? I don't know.

The more I think about Brennus, the more I realize he was a liberated individual long before any university got a hold of him. The more I read on my own, the more I have to come to terms with Brennus's contradictions as well as the contradictions of our

relationship. He liberated me by enslaving me. Maybe Brennus would have blamed my situation on the South which still has a tendency to discourage their women from pursuing higher education. But it would have been an academic issue for him, not something that would anger him. Brennus wasn't fighting any battles on my behalf. Brennus wasn't my savior. In fact, just the opposite -- he almost made me completely useless for anyone else.

And yet I can't hate him because to be able to love is the greatest strength I have -- take that from me and I am a pitiful creature.

It's been over a year since he last wrote. After I wrote back I never heard from him. I'll never take that trip to Miami I used to dream about so if I ever see him again, it'll have to be somewhere between Longview and Miami.

Wisdom has a way of screaming in the streets and we have a way of sticking in earplugs and going ahead and doing what we want anyhow, except that there's never a time when we don't regret ignoring wisdom. I wished I'd just held onto my memories and never bothered sending him those long letters. A postcard at the most would have been better. And the more I sent, the more I had to continue. To stop would have been to acknowledge my lack of wisdom.

So now I'm left trying to translate my memories into something I can live with, some sort of respectable victory. But the truth is, he left and he didn't take me with him. And he never came back.

Life is unsatisfying. I mean, life *hurts*. Maybe that's why people like to read so much, to try to find a world that *is* satisfying and to forget their own pain for a while. But the problem isn't with fiction or with reality. The problem is when you mix the two. Like when you take a real person and imagine him in an unreal situation. That's when life starts to suck because your own life feels so inadequate. That's when people start to get depressed. So I try not to let myself fantasize about what it would be like to meet Brennus again.

Wilson works with his dad and brings home a steady paycheck. I work part-time in their office. With the rest of my time I've taken up gardening our small plot of land. Jeannie and I have joined a Woman's Club in Tyler that gets together every month. And of course, I read a lot. I've just discovered Simone de Beauvoir. I'm reading *The Second Sex*. After this I'm going to start on *The Mandarins* because I've heard it's really good. I've found a great bookstore in Longview that will order anything for me that's still in print. The older lady who works there loves to talk about literature.

* * *

"Look!" said Sharon McCormick to her husband, Jett. She pointed. Camouflaged by grass, some green glass glittered in the bright sun.

"It's just part of a bottle, honey," drawled Jett. His wife hadn't stopped saying

"Look!" since they had arrived in Dallas three days ago. They had finally gotten around to checking out the spot where Kennedy was shot. They were from Shreveport, Louisiana taking a belated honeymoon and he was beginning to regret they hadn't just gone fishing since his wife couldn't very well say "Look!" to every fish they caught.

"Yes, I know," she said impatiently. "But it's not just a piece. It seems to be a whole bottle buried. And look! I think there's something in it!" She crouched down and with her fingers began to dig around the bottle top, being careful not to cause too much damage to her manicure. The dirt was loose and it wasn't long before the bottle was in her hand.

"I told you there's something in it!" She stood up to show him.

"What is it?" Jett leaned forward to examine the bottle.

"It's a message! In a bag!" His wife was clearly the more excited of the two.

"Well," sighed Jett. "Open it up and see what it is." It was as if he was resigning himself to the inevitable.

Sharon McCormick quickly realized that her fingers were too large and the bottle too long to retrieve the message by hand. She seated herself down on the grass and began pulling out items from her purse.

"Honey!" protested Jett, crouching down to pick up the traveler's checks from the grass. Sharon ignored him. She had found what she was looking for. A nail file.

Very carefully she inserted the nail file and began to draw the bag up to the neck of the bottle. Unfortunately, the impossibility of the situation was obvious. The paper had unrolled in the bag and there was no way that it was going to make it through such a narrow opening.

"Here honey." Jett took the bottle from his wife and stood up. He walked over to a tree and smashed the bottle against the tree.

"Honey!" said Sharon. "Now there'll be glass everywhere! Some poor little child might cut his foot..."

"Honey, how many poor little children play barefoot on the grassy knoll where Kennedy was shot?"

He had a point, and besides the piece of paper in the bag lay among the shards of glass. Sharon McCormick carefully opened the bag and pulled out the piece of paper.

"Why isn't this strange!" she said. "Something on both sides. Different handwriting though."

Jett took the piece of paper from his wife. On one side, someone had scribbled, "Jackie planned the whole thing." On the other side, scrawled in smaller writing, "I love you."

"Ah, isn't that sweet," said Sharon.

"What, that Jackie planned the whole thing?" Her husband turned to stare at her.

"No, silly. The 'I love you.'"

"Jackie planned the whole thing," mused Jett handing the note back to his wife as

he stared off into the distance. "Do you think it means Jackie Kennedy? It's gotta. Now there's a thought. No one ever thought she did it. Hey, honey!" He turned to his wife. "Maybe this is a message left by that second gunman! Hold onto that note! It may be important! I wonder if I could sell the idea to that Oliver Stone guy..."

His wife stuck the note in her purse, took his arm and they headed back towards the Book Depository.

THE END