

# Third Warp

by

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*Dedicated to those needing an escape into a life you've never imagined.*

## Chapter 1

A gentle bump out of nowhere and, for the split of a second, Scott Hanson soared lighter than air. Dizzy, his vision slightly blurred, he tightened his grip on the steering wheel of his Ford Taurus. The notion he might be having a heart attack (at 35?), that he might keel on the spot, cross over into oncoming lanes and kill someone other than himself, stole his breath.

Thank God, the four-lane was deserted.

Still, an odd feeling lingered, a bad after-taste if you will, a vague sense of light slightly altered.

Maybe a taste of vertigo. Sure, that might explain it.

The hood of his teal-green sedan seemed a shade or two bluer to him now, strangely enough.

Perhaps that was just the heightened awareness a brush with death might bring.

But how would he ever know, having never brushed up against death in his 35 years in any meaningful way?

Not two miles from his small ranch, everything--well, nearly everything--appeared the same. The countryside a little greener perhaps than he remembered this morning, but hell, when was the last time he'd paid any real attention to something as insignificant as scenery? Landscape he'd looked at for over five years. Treeless hills that greened in spring, yellowed throughout summer and fall, dull brown by winter--that is, when the acreages scattered about this little Montana river valley weren't buried under the whitest of snow.

Like a curtain, he thought, uneasy yet, for no good reason at all.

Purposely, he sent his Taurus across the empty oncoming lanes to sidle up on his mailbox, stunned to see not Hanson, but *Hansom* lettered in white on the steel-gray box.

Instantly irked, figuring some local kid's idea of a joke, he yanked open the aluminum door to a single letter instead of the usual load of junk mail and past due notices.

One innocuous #10-business envelope of pure white linen.

Hand addressed in block printing to Scott *Hansom*, not Hanson.

No return address, no postage even.

"Hansom, my ass," he muttered and ripped open the missive.

The logo centered at the top of the single page consisted of a round field of navy blue dotted with stars and stamped with the red letters TWIG.

*Alternate Time, Inc.*

*A division of Third Warp*

No street or email address, no company website, not even a phone number. No date either. He skipped over his mailing address properly aligned left to read:

*Dear Mr. Hansom,*

*Congratulations on your recent decision to take advantage of our offer. We hope you find our latest time-line continuum to your complete satisfaction. If, at the end of your 14-day trial, you find unacceptable the many opportunities and amenities afforded with this, our finest product to date, you may cancel and owe nothing.*

*We appreciate your business.*

*Sincerely,*

*B.S. Deviltree, CPO*

Baffled, Scott looked to the "amount due" column, his heart promptly skipping several beats at his gasp for air.

*Life as you knew it.*

The "remit by" box was blank.

"No," he protested softly, barely aware of speaking aloud. "Insane."

Life as he knew it? What kind of shit was this? He glanced about warily, stung now by the surprising lack of any traffic on the nominally busy four-lane highway between Vaughn to the east and Augusta to the west.

The idea that he might be the victim of a professional prankster (not some rank teenage amateur) came and went so fast, he wondered if he'd stopped long enough to consider it at all. The impulse to wad the letter up and toss it to the floorboard with the rest of the trash zipped by quicker yet. He laid the page on his lap and flicked on the car radio, something he was sure he'd meant to do earlier, seconds before that gentle bump out of nowhere gave birth to fears of a heart attack.

Static. Nothing but, no matter which way he sent the digital scanner on seek.

He shut the radio off, keenly aware of a lack of movement now. As though nothing and no one outside himself lived and breathed.

Alarm gave way to monumental denial, and safe behind that shield for the moment, he let the car idle the dusty gravel drive, passing the ancient birch and cottonwoods shading his house and yard.

His laundry still on the line, the jeans and shirts, underwear and socks immobile in testament to an unusual lack of any breeze. Turning off the car's engine returned a silence thick and heavy, undisturbed by even so much as the chirp of a bird.

His sizable herd of Black Angus cows and calves, head down and grazing the lush pasture behind the house when he'd left for town that morning, were nowhere to be seen.

Could've broke through the fence or maybe off in the trees along the river, he decided, dismissing the nagging doubt that this assumption traveled far too wide of the mark.

The sun overhead hazy, as if filtered, despite the bluest of cloudless skies.

Like a curtain.

He opened the car door and, upon leaving his seat, the letter escaped his lap, see-sawing to the ground, the paper blinding white against the sandy dirt. Scott bent over to retrieve it, the type looking lighter, as if the words might be fading.

The minute his hand touched the page, the letters grew bolder once again, sharp black and clear.

He picked up the letter a second time, then reached inside the car for the envelope, which abruptly burst into flame, edges curling in upon themselves in the space of two horrified breaths before just as suddenly dying out, leaving the tan cloth seat wholly unscorched. A second later the ash liquefied and disappeared like mercury through the pores of the skin, yet not the slightest residue marked the spot.

The hackles on his neck rose to meet the chill crawling up his spine. He slammed the car door, glancing suspiciously about on his march up three concrete stairs to a square landing that constituted the sum of his back porch.

Someone had to be watching...had to be...probably laughing their ass off to boot.

Through the back door and small utility room into the light and airy kitchen he trudged, uncertain as to what he should do next. He stopped near the double sink to re-read the letter, then turned the sheet over to look for more information, a number he might call to cancel this free trial, just in case this wasn't someone's ridiculous idea of a joke.

Just in case he believed.

No phone number, nothing, no way to contact anyone.

He stared at the page until the type blurred, ready to let it drop from his hands should it display the slightest proclivity to flame as the envelope in which it had arrived

Abruptly angry with himself for buying into such nonsense, Scott wadded the page furiously, as though the paper might stick to his hands, and whirled about to lob the white ball into the garbage can between the refrigerator and stove, stopped in the wind-up to the pitch by the astonishingly empty container.

Hadn't he planned a run to the dump outside of Vaughn later that afternoon (if he could get that old Ford pickup started)? The white receptacle between the refrigerator and stove had been overflowing when he'd left that morning to do a little business at his bank in Great Falls. All seemed fine then, his regular loan officer out sick (again!), the pinch hitter the same jovial fellow he remembered. Kidding, laughing, *sign here, Scott.*

Bill S. DeVillery. Bills, he reminded Scott with that silly grin on his angular face.

*Great name for a loan officer, don't you think, Scotty?*

As if Scott hadn't heard that line before--two times before--the first being over five years ago at the signing of the original loan, when the bank rep he'd dealt with throughout the process called in sick and Bills had stepped in with many apologies (and Scott's permission no less). The second instance had been almost a repeat of the first, Scott having applied for an extension on that annual balloon payment deadline.

Three times now Bills had been called into the lineup when Scott's regular batter failed to step up to the plate. Three. As in Third...?

Scott shivered and smoothed the crumpled letter back to a wrinkled rectangle on the counter, then returned to the car for the packet of loan papers he'd signed this morning.

Hadn't he admitted just hours earlier to the grinning loan man with yellowing teeth almost too large for his smirky mouth that he preferred the solitude of his ranch, that he sometimes wished people would simply leave him alone?

And Bills had replied, "So, you generally find people annoying? Is that what you're saying?"

"Real pain in the ass sometimes." Hadn't he said that? Or words to that effect? And even smiled at the garrulous loan man?

Who immediately asked, "But, wouldn't you be bored without them? Aren't you lonely now?"

"Well, a decent woman might be worth the hassle."

Bills had snickered at that, a knowing glance, a suggestive hike of his pointy, pencil-thin black brows. "A quiet woman, eh?"

They'd laughed together then, Scott certain Bills was referring to his ex-wife. Who could forget her? Tongue wagging constantly, mouth geared permanently to high nag, as if her life's vocation had been to hound Scott his every waking moment whenever he was within earshot. Bills had met her but once, at the conclusion of the original mortgage process five years ago. Apparently, once had been enough.

Same fanciful bitch who'd tried to take the ranch, and failed, (thank God for a smart judge) but not until Scott had been forced to take a second mortgage, in part, to pay his attorney.

And while signing the papers this morning, hadn't he and Bills both agreed that society itself was in serious trouble because of the overall ignorance and insensitivity of people in general?

Yes, Bills had nodded agreeably then, adding that most people are over-educated to the point where they can't see the simplest of truths anymore.

Odd the statement had struck him at the time, but not odd enough for Scott to delay his escape from the city a minute longer by asking Bills to explain what he'd meant.

Back at his kitchen counter, Scott separated the sheaf of papers from the legal size white folder (compliments of the bank), seeking the man's signature to compare with the signatory of the letter.

Bill S. DeVillery and B.S. Deviltree shared the same flourished B, the same S, the same D-e-v...

"Nuh-uh," Scott said, startled by his own voice shattering the silence.

Dead silence.

Dead.

Like maybe he was now?

He backpedaled from the kitchen counter, away from the fearful wrinkled letter lying next to the ultra-smooth loan agreement.

Suddenly, he ached for the reassurance of sound, any sign of life outside himself. He grew acutely aware of his staccato respirations, nausea fomenting in the pit of his stomach, sweat beading across his forehead although the temperature of the room, of the still air outside, had not before been at issue. The summer day was perfect, neither too hot or cold, now that he chanced to think of it.

As if the heat of the sun was regulated.

By a curtain?

His radical heart painfully thumped his ribs, forcing his hand to his chest, disbelieving, wanting to deny he was wide-awake and not sleeping through the worst nightmare of any in recent memory. The pale yellow walls, the white cupboards, the sunflower yellow countertops began to move, dragging the double-hung windows dressed in olive green, the almond refrigerator and stove into a tight spin until the ivory ceramic floor tiles rushed right up to smack Scott square in the kisser.

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"Free trial, huh?" Scott said, angry at the notion he might be scared shitless now.

Regaining consciousness, he'd been groggy, uncertain initially how he'd gotten there on the kitchen floor with his face throbbing, but upon getting to his feet, the papers spread over the countertop brought back everything, most especially the fear.

How did anyone cancel a free trial with no phone number to call, not even an address on that letter with his last name misspelled. By one letter, the last.

If he believed.

Did the phone even work?

He snatched the black receiver from the cradle hugging the kitchen wall nearest the living room entry, relieved to get the usual dial tone. In tapping zero for the operator, he was more than willing to wade through untold automated menus just to hear a real human voice, to reassure him he was yet alive and not in any danger of losing his mind.

"Thank you for calling Alternate Time, a division of Third Warp," a computer-generated monotone began. "Unfortunately, all of our representatives are either on another line or out of the office. Please leave your name, number, and a brief message after the tone and we will promptly return your call. We appreciate your business."

He pulled the receiver from his ear to glare at the offending device, as if that might change the outcome, then tapped the plunger to kill the line, making certain when he got the dial tone that he pressed only zero for the operator.

"Thank you for calling Alternate Time, a division of Third Warp. Unfortunately--."

He chucked the receiver at the cradle, the clatter too loud, foreign to his ears, the plastic device bouncing along the tile floor before coming to rest against a baseboard at the limit of its curly tether. Out of the receiver hummed the dial tone until the expected recording broke in to tell him if he'd like to make a call to please hang up and try again.

Laughter followed, the similarity striking and terrifying at the realization of just whose laughter he'd heard. After enough silence had elapsed that his heart calmed to a manageable level, he scooped the receiver off the floor, hand trembling like an old man with a palsy in putting it back to his ear.

The automated recording began without any prompt from his end. "Thank you for calling Alternate--."

Frantically, he depressed the plunger to get the dial tone anew, then began punching numbers he knew by heart--his parents, the neighbors, near and distant family and friends.

"Thank you for calling Alternate--."

"Thank you for calling Alternate--."

"Thank you for calling Alternate--."

He hung up the phone in defeat and leaned against the wall for support. The urge to sob, then guffaw came and went.

Scott turned first to the counter, then to the sunlit windows overlooking his make-do kitchen table, not truly seeing anything beyond bewilderment and fear.

Going mad. Sure, he was; had to be; insane, nuts, one brick short, one oar free of the water. What other explanation made any sense?

The sun hadn't moved, he noticed with refreshing alarm. Not an iota, it seemed. In all this time, since he'd fainted and fought with the phone.

Was he trapped now? In some kind of limbo perhaps? Suspended between life and death maybe? Had he gone to hell like his pious mother always suggested he would if he didn't get his ass to church on a more regular basis?

If he was, in fact, dead.

Or was he only dreaming, out cold, in a coma, possibly lying in a hospital bed somewhere from the heart attack at that bump in the road out of nowhere? Sure, that could be it. He was on life support, zonked on morphine, imagining everything, most especially this alternate time.

His hands to his face, fingers touching his swollen nose, rubbing his brown eyes, satisfied his mind that his skin and bones and sandy hair were real enough.

But his cattle, where had they gone? What about his horse? He raced outside, ignoring the immobile sun and shadows that hadn't changed in a dead run past his car and the large Quonset hut shop/ garage for the small barn.

The corral behind the square wood structure was as empty as the surrounding pastures. Quiet as the birdless trees with leaves that never moved in an ever-restless breeze that had somehow been persuaded to cease.

Daylight seemingly filtered, the temperature of the motionless air perfect. The phone line working--sort of. What about power--electricity, lights, the well water?

He hurried through the open barn door to the switch plate screwed to a bare wood wall support, and the fluorescents overhead blinked to life. Back outside at the automatic waterer serving the corral, he lifted the float to trip the regulator, relieved to see the crystal-clear water flowing as easily as it always had whenever the pump on the well was working properly.

Cupping a hand under the flow, he lifted the water to his nose, the familiar stink missing. He frowned, let the oval regulator plop back to the tank with a tiny splash, and inhaled deeply. Not even a hint of manure. As if someone, or something, had decreed that manure stunk and was therefore not allowed, like the rotten egg odor normally associated with the iron-rich water from the well.

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After a quick look inside the large Quonset showed nothing amiss, Scott returned to the house, realizing the moment he re-entered the kitchen that his biggest mistake probably lay in the fine print of the loan contract. He'd made only a pretense of skimming the tiny type, unwilling to wrap his mind around legalese for his hurry to be finished with the hassle and get back to *life as he knew it*. He'd trusted (and how incredibly naïve was

that?) Bill S. DeVillery, someone he'd only met twice before, to draw up a legal document outlining the terms of the agreement, never imagining for a minute that a certain clause had nothing whatsoever to do with interest rates, repayment schedules, penalties for default, or even Santa, for that matter.

The free trial was right there, third paragraph from the top--Third Warp's 14 days of Alternate Time. Almost a word-for-word repeat of the letter in his mailbox, the addressee's name changed (by one freaking letter!) to protect what? The guilty? The condemned? Starting when though? And if the sun never moved, the wind never blew, the day never changed...

Stuck on Day One? Forever?

His own signature stunned him completely. His usual scrawl left little room for doubt he'd signed *Hansom*, instead of Hanson. In fact, that *m* was the most legible of all the letters of his last name excepting the *H*.

Now that he bothered to notice, the agreement had his last name misspelled throughout.

Dumbfounded, he let the papers back to the counter. What could he do? How did a man cope with such an outrageous turn of events? To whom would he complain, or plead his case?

*The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.*

Who'd said that? Longfellow, wasn't it? No, that Walden Pond guy--Thoreau.

Scott abruptly remembered the high school lit class he'd failed miserably, laughing with his buddies over the stupidity, the waste of time learning useless thoughts left to the world long ago by ancient, dead men.

But now, instead of youth and big dreams, there was no mass of men, life was far too quiet, and Scott was...

desperate

for the sun to move, the shadows to change, the wind to blow, the silence to relent.

Day One.

Forever?

Might this be Hell?

He had to be asleep, in the midst of one doozy of a nightmare, and to prove the contention, he pinched himself, hoping the pain might jolt him awake. He gained nothing for his effort, but a throbbing red mark on the flesh of his left forearm, the hurt melding into anger, despair blooming to a full-blown fury.

Scott strode across the kitchen, snatched the phone, and jabbed zero at the dial tone, waiting until the automated recording played out to the small beep.

"This is Scott Hanson," he said, his voice rising to a shout. "Not *Hansom...Han-son, son, Han-SON, you pricks. There's been a HUGE MISTAKE. Number's 555-3383. You call me back RIGHT AWAY.*"

Impotent, that's how he felt upon slamming the receiver back to the cradle. Now what? Wait? Or do what instead? Fix fence, seek his cows, look for his horse, drive back to the bank in Great Falls, something, anything to take his mind off this, and let the answering machine pick up in his stead? Go on about his business, tend to his affairs, and take a chance on missing the call, possibly *the* most important call of his life?

The black hands of the round clock above the stove established the time--12:33, the second hand caught in the act of sweeping the three.

Three...As in Third Warp?

Even his phone number bugged him now: three fives, three threes and an eight. He'd met Bills exactly three times in past five years.

Everything bad happened in threes, didn't it? Airline crashes, deaths in the family. Three was bad, worse than seven maybe, yet far below one, the loneliest number.

Reading too much into a simple phone number, he was sure. Or so he told himself.

Morose, he sat down at the card table, his kitchen table since the divorce over a year ago, and looked through the dusty panes of glass to the empty green pastures fronting the tall, leafy cottonwoods lining the banks of the Sun River.

More frightened than he'd ever been in his life, and never so helpless to do a damn thing about a situation but wait, something he'd never been good at the whole of his life.

Just sit and wait in quiet desperation for the phone to ring, to break this heavy silence weighting his very soul. Mentally begging at turns the lazy sun resume its normal march across a sky bluer than blue, or the green

leaves of the elms and birches shading his house to shiver in the delinquent breeze. If only the second hand on the clock would pick up its orbit.

So deep in thought he was that the hum of something, an engine perhaps, snuck up on his thoughts, the sudden awareness causing him to dash through the living room and out the front door. Tripping and tumbling to the grass, on his feet the next breath, he leapt the concrete irrigation ditch in a single bound to sprint for the four-lane highway.

A thick wall of clouds hid the snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountain Front. He sighed with relief at a dark form rounding the curve to the west, watching with mounting anticipation a vehicle pass Everett Kepler's, then Steve Banner's place, the glint of the sun off the front bumper like the flash of camera announcing he was no longer alone.

A maroon four-door Chevy Celebrity slowed to a stop at his waving arms, a blonde behind the wheel.

He covered the twenty feet she'd left between him and the front end, ignoring her wide eyes in his rush for the driver's side door, babbling at the open window his joy over seeing another living soul, and too late noticed the muzzle of a gun.

A resounding crack, lightning pierced his chest, his jellied knees sending him to the asphalt, his final thought before death took him centered about one word.

Impatience.

## Chapter 2

Scott blinked, squinting at the bright sun overhead, uncertain where he was until remembering the letter, the gunshot, the blazing pain to his chest (gone now, astonishingly enough), the maroon car, and the frightened woman. He scrambled to his feet, the staring blonde behind the wheel wet-eyed and mouth agape.

"You shot me," he cried, hand to his chest.

His fingers not sticky wet with his own blood, no hole in his blue button-down shirt, no pain, nothing but his disbelieving breaths, short and hard won. The motor revving to a whine, tires screeched in acceleration.

"Wait," he yelled, throwing left and right hooks at the clouds of white smoke. "You're the only person I've seen for hours. Please, wait, wait..."

His shouts faded with his hope. Near tears, he watched the Chevy grow into a dark lump moving steadily away, all the while feeling incessantly of his chest, fingering inside his dry lapels that should, by all rights, be soaked with his blood.

No telltale odor of burnt rubber, though her escape had been smoky as...hell.

Not another soul on the road.

Hope flared anew when the car made a crisp u-turn to head back his way, as if the pretty girl in the plain white shirt had changed her mind.

Perhaps she wanted to apologize.

Or chance killing him again.

Well, life in limbo apparently had benefits he hadn't thought to consider. She'd shot him point-blank and he wasn't even scratched, although the recall of that bullet piercing his chest was too vivid to be anything less than real. He poked a misshapen wad of lead about the asphalt with the toe of his cowboy boot.

No doubt about it--bullet was every bit as real as the gun.

He rubbed the forearm where he'd pinched himself, then looked past his rolled up sleeve. No angry red welt, no bruise, not even a slight twinge where a throb had formerly been.

Was he immortal now?

The resultant shiver of excitement was a bit unsettling. Maybe she'd shoot him again and he'd know for sure. What if he just stepped out in front of her car, let her mow him down? He nixed that idea with a snort. If bullets didn't work, something else might, and he wasn't ready to be dead yet. Not by a longshot.

The deceleration of the engine indicated her intent to slow, perhaps even stop.

What if he'd missed his call?

He glanced over his shoulder to his front door, then looked to the woman parked now in the middle of the road. She eyed him suspiciously from behind the wheel, her open window little more than ten feet away, the Chevy's motor purring at idle.

"Who are you?" he said.

She never answered, simply studying him, as if debating his caliber.

"Not going to hurt you," he said calmly. "Don't blame you for shooting me either, if that's what you think."

If only he could avoid the nagging question of why he wasn't dead, the notion of immortality hanging there in the back of his mind like a new coat waiting to be trotted out of a closet.

Still she said nothing in reply, and he took a tiny step toward the car, then halted as he might do in first approaching a skittish, unbroke horse.

"Really, I understand you're afraid," he said. "I'm scared shitless myself."

A long hesitation, a frown at the windshield, and then she switched off the motor.

The utter silence crept him out, too eerie to be anything other than wholly unnatural.

Remembering his earlier impatience (driven home with the force of a bullet, no less) he took another small step toward the frightened driver.

"Are you stuck in my alternate time?"

Not until the words left his mouth did he appreciate how ridiculous the question sounded.

She tilted her head, a look of puzzlement, then glanced to the passenger seat, waving a white paper at him the next instant. Could it be *that* letter?

Caution dictated he not rush right over to satisfy his curiosity. "Could you show me that please?" he asked, patiently awaiting a nod of her blonde head before nearing the open window.

No sense getting shot twice over something so trivial as impatience. Now, perhaps if someone had shot him earlier in his life, up until the very minute he entered the church to marry his ex-wife, he might not be in this predicament at all. No need for a second mortgage or refinancing then, no signing a loan agreement with odd clauses buried in the fine print. No stuck on Day One.

No immortality either.

Scott stopped just close enough to the driver's open window to scan the missive in the young woman's trembling hand and learned she'd been caught in the same trap, though how was the next mystery to be solved. Dorothy Wilsom was her name--Dorothy, like in the Wizard of Oz, Wilsom as in...

"Is your last name really Wilson?" he asked.

She glared briefly, curled her upper lip as if she were about to snarl, then squinted as if she thought better of taking her anger out on an innocent bystander, and nodded vigorously.

"Well, someone misspelled mine, too," he said, noting from her letter that she lived in Augusta, thirty-five miles west of where he stood.

"How'd you get here?" he asked.

Dorothy laid the letter on her lap and gripped the steering wheel in both hands.

"You drove here?"

She stared at him, tipping her head to one side, her face scrunched in a disbelieving frown, then grabbed a handful of blonde locks from her shoulder and shook them at him.

Just what she was trying to imply?

Insult gave way in a breath to humor and he smiled. "Fair enough. That was pretty stupid of me, I guess."

Dorothy cast a troubled gaze to her lap and shrugged her thin shoulders.

"Don't be sorry," he said. "I know I scared you. I must've looked like a crazy man." She nabbed a .38 revolver from the seat beside her and dropped the weapon into a black leather handbag. He shoved his hands into his jean pockets. "If I were you, I might've shot me, too."

Yep, someone should've shot him five years ago, he decided, before he married the Bitch. What're friends and family for? Where were they all now? He squinted at the peppering of his sinuses, turned for a look at his little gray house, the front door standing wide-open, worrying yet about the return call, then back to her.

"Dorothy, how about a cup of coffee? I live right over there."

Indecision played across her features, delicate brows shifting up, then down over blue eyes narrowing, then widening, her lips pressed together. A final glance at him and she twisted the key to re-start the engine.

On the walk across his lawn, her wine-colored sedan idling around the corner and down the shady drive past him to the back of the house, he wondered at the lack of mosquitoes, of insects in general, especially flies, then realized with a start that she hadn't said a word. Before or after she shot him, not a sound had passed her lips.

"A quiet woman," Bills had said, and they'd both laughed before Scott signed away *life as he knew it*.

Nothing funny now, especially if... (God, no)...had Dorothy always been mute? The alternative was too sickening, too obscene to consider for very long.

He made the front door with every intention of greeting her at the back of the house, stopped by the flashing red light of the answering machine stationed beneath the ragged white shade of the thrift store lamp on a scratched end table abutting the right arm of his worn tan sofa.

Damn.

Scott pressed the button, barely registering the slam of his back door, and quiet boot heels on the kitchen tile nearing the living room.

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"Mr. Hansom, as our company strives to provide the best customer service throughout the known Universe, we are eager to address your every concern. Please call us back at your convenience. Thank you for calling Alternate Time, a division of Third Warp."

Same computer-generated voice he'd heard before.

Scott looked up in disgust to Dorothy's furrowed-brow concern, realizing not a second later that she, being mute, would have a much harder time contacting the company and canceling the free trial. Perhaps he'd counted upon just that, this devil named Bills.

"Bastard," Scott muttered, and a fierce scowl swept Dorothy's visible concern aside.

She raised both hands, shaking rigid splayed fingers, as if she might the next minute throttle the neck of the devil who'd persuaded her to sign on some dotted line.

"Yeah, I want to kill him, too," Scott said.

She dropped her hands to her denim-clad hips, then shrugged and turned away, but not before Scott noted one small tear glistening on her cheek.

"Hey, now," he said softly.

She swiped her face with a sleeve of her shirt, then looked at him, and he spread his arms, thinking she might just need a hug.

Dorothy showed him an upraised hand in a cease and desist, then lifted her chin resolutely, her eyes slitted.

Scott accepted the rejection, understandable he supposed, and immediately trying for casual and cool, shoved a hand in a front pocket of his jeans. "You know a guy named Bill DeVillery? Bills?"

Her lovely eyes widened and she nodded, fingers moving in what he gathered was sign language.

"Paper?" he said and she whipped her folded letter from a back pocket. He nodded and said, "I'll get you a pen," then stepped past her to the kitchen, yanking open drawers on either side of the sink, rooting through owners manuals he'd never looked at for appliances he'd never purchased that the Bitch had taken with her when she left.

Dorothy almost smiled in accepting the writing implement, then he pulled a folding chair out from the card/kitchen table.

"I invited you in for coffee, didn't I? Let me get that started. You have a seat." Over the sound of water gushing through the filter on the tap, he said, "You hungry?"

He turned his head to glimpse her genuine smile.

"You are, hungry? Sandwiches all right?" he asked.

Nodding, she returned her attention to the blank backside of the letter in front of her, the pen moving slowly.

By the time the coffeemaker was at work, she'd stopped writing, little more than two lines.

All sorts of curious, he quickly assembled two fat ham and cheese sandwiches, the wheat bread slathered with mayonnaise, aware of her interest, her eyes on him, watching him work. The scent of roses delighted his nose, and he guessed her perfume the source, annoyed with himself for entertaining the briefest consideration of a confirming sniff behind her pretty ear. He set a clean mug and a plate with the sandwich before her.

Well, she wasn't hard on the eyes, he decided, pouring the coffee, and at the same time, upset that the fresh-brewed smell had overpowered the roses for the moment, and dismissing the idea, the temptation really, to confirm her perfume as the source.

She tapped the page, then bent her head to eat while he read:

*Signed a contract with Bills in Augusta this morning!*

*Letter in my mailbox when I returned.*

He looked up with interest. "What kind of contract, a mortgage?"

Dorothy frowned at that, and shook her head, then took up the pen.

*Book contract. Story of my life.*

He sat back, chewing thoughtfully, barely tasting the ham and cheese for his curiosity over what this young woman might've accomplished that made her short life worthy of publication. He swallowed, about to inquire when she leaned over to scribble *Your name?*

He grinned then. "Scott, Scott Hanson, not Hansom either, like on my letter."

She smiled at that, and tipped her head to one shoulder, as if to say maybe, maybe not.

"You think I am?" he asked.

Dorothy hiked her brows, another bob of her head to the opposite shoulder.

"You do, you think I'm handsome?"

She averted her eyes, then allowed a sideways flicker of a glance at him.

"You're not bad yourself," he said, flushed with pride, his mouth open to take another bite of sandwich when he realized how callous his reply might've sounded.

"I take that back," he said, waiting until she gave him a shy look, and then added, "You're gorgeous, stunning, a real knock-out." He licked his forefinger, pressed the tip to the table, and said, "Ssssss, hot."

She huffed, her shoulders shaking, in what he assumed from the smile on her face might be laughter, her cheeks coloring pink. Then she took up the pen again.

*Going to the post office to return this letter and drove into a fog, stuck on some kind of loop.*

A fog? Like a curtain? "Did you try the phone?" he asked, chagrined by her stare. "No, I suppose you didn't."

She rolled her eyes, then began stroking her throat with the fingers of one hand.

"Have you always been...unable to talk?"

Dorothy shrugged, as if to say, so what.

A quiet woman. Scott breathed a little easier then. No one or nothing had taken her voice away just to serve him a fantasy, or nightmare, as the case might turn out to be.

But how could Bills be in Augusta with Dorothy the same morning he was in Great Falls with Scott?

Well, at least he wasn't alone anymore.

Unless she decided to leave.

Where would she go? Would he try to stop her? What if there were others out there, not quite as nice or respectful, or with any manners?

The world as he'd known it had been full of people, many with no morals whatsoever. What if others were stuck in the same alternate time and...

He looked down to the notebook, to the last line she'd written.

*Call me Dot. Dorothy's that girl in the Wizard of Oz.*

"Oz," he muttered, meeting her eyes. "Kind of stuck in Oz now, I guess."

She laid the crust of her sandwich on the plate, as if she'd lost her appetite.

Scott wasn't hungry either.

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"Scott Hanson, *Han-Son*, son, nnnnnnn, H-A-N-S-O-N-N-N. I've got Dorothy Wilson, Wil-SON, not Wilsom, here, too. I want to speak to Bill S. DeVillery, or B. S. Deviltree...Bills, I want to speak to Bills-- NOW."

He replaced the receiver and turned to Dot. "Don't know what good it'll do."

She got up from the table to take her plate to the sink. He rushed to intercept her.

"Here, let me."

They eyed one another, the small plate their sole connection, then suddenly she was flushing, relinquishing the dish, and he was looking away, the aroma of roses sweetening every short breath.

He set the plate in the sink, his heart beating wildly in the growing apprehension she might up and leave him all alone.

A step toward the table, and he met her again, *his* plate their connection this time, so surprised at the blueness of her eyes, almost navy under long dark lashes, that he fumbled the snap in taking her coffee cup and spilled the dregs down her white shirt in trying to recover the ball. Her pivot on a heel to face the kitchen windows, as if she might be considering her next move, Scott found more troubling than the gaffe with the coffee.

Quick to deposit the dishes in the sink, he cleared his throat to apologize profusely, offering paper towels to help clean the mess he'd made of her, more than a little anxious that she waved him off without even turning around.

Her step toward the back door forced the question past his lips.

"Where would you go, Dot?"

She stopped and turned, bit her lip, crossed her arms over the fresh brown stain, refusing to meet his eyes.

"I won't try anything, if that's what you're worried about," he said. "I promise."

A snort and she raised her head to stare at him, as if trying to decide his honesty, or questioning his character perhaps.

"I'll always be a gentleman. I give you my word."

A squint, a slight shake of her head, a glance at the table. Suddenly, he knew what she was asking, realized a portion of her unimposing nature, and smiled.

"No, I truly don't want you to go." He knitted his brows, his grin fading with the onset of the truth. "I told you this earlier, but I'm scared shitless. You must be, too."

The initial shake of her pretty head led to a downward hitch at the corners of her mouth.

"Stay here for now," he said. "At least until we get this all straightened out." Get back to regular time, he thought, although immortality with a beautiful, and quiet, woman was not without immense appeal. "I'll keep my distance." He crossed his chest (the same spot a bullet had punched earlier) with his fingers, inclining his head, praying he might convince her. "Scout's honor. You won't have to shoot me again."

Abruptly, she snatched the pen from the table to scrawl, then held up the backside of the letter like a shield.

*Why?*

"What do mean?" he said, more to himself, never taking his eyes from her, the paper she shook at him.

"Why won't you have to shoot me again or why do I want you to stay?"

She pursed her lips, her eyes slitted now, a slight turn of her head.

"We're obviously in this together, aren't we?" he said. The question of what though, he quickly sidestepped at the twinge of trepidation in his gut.

Dot tilted her head, the letter dropping slightly, then she raised it again.

"I don't know any more than you do."

She snatched a blonde link and let it fall back to her shoulder.

"Look, I won't try to stop you if you want to drive off, but right there on that page," he pointed at her cursive script, "you said you were stuck on some loop." He paused, then asked, "Did you see anyone else out there?"

She frowned, the letter dropped to one side.

"How many times did you drive by my house before I came outside?"

Dot held up three slender fingers.

"Three times, huh?" That stinking number again. "Wonder how long I was passed out then." A questioning shift of a brow, almost a smirk on her lips, and he chuckled softly in chagrin. "Ok, I admit it. I fainted."

She lowered her head to a soft huffing sound, her version of a giggle perhaps.

"I suppose you didn't though. They do say women are tougher than men." Her grin and furtive glance prompted him to add, "At some things, not all."

Dot gave him a full-blown smirk and he smiled right back, then she looked down at the brown stain, pinching her shirt between finger and thumb.

"Clothes? You mean, you'd like a change, right?"

At the tilt of her head, he said, "The bit--I mean, my ex-wife left some of hers." He appraised her slim figure and said, "She was fatter than you though."

That quick grin of satisfaction didn't get past him and he said, "You can wear any one of my shirts you want."

She mimed a needle sewing a seam with both hands.

"No, I can't sew."

Dot slapped herself in the chest several times, a frown on her face.

"Well, if you want to play tailor, be my guest." He headed toward the living room, motioning her to follow. "I have a few boxes of her crap in a spare bedroom."

He snapped his fingers at the recall. "Some of her old jeans might not be too big. She wasn't near as fat when I married her. Probably left the stuff behind because she can't fit into it any more."

Took everything else of any use though. Remembering the day he opened the back door on a largely empty house, how his voice had echoed about the rooms, Scott started through the kitchen entry into the living room, Dot on his heels.

At least *she* wasn't leaving--not yet anyway.

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Dot made her first real sound in examining the clothes, a soft hitching squeal, troubling Scott until a look her way assured him she was beside herself with amusement.

Ruffles and lace, padded shoulders she dismissed with a toss, loud shirts and frilly dresses discarded into one of two boxes from whence they'd been liberated into a pile on the floor. Raising a pair faded jeans to eye level in appraisal, folding them neatly to place beside her on the bare wood floor. An old flannel shirt, maroon plaid with long sleeves, added to the kept stack along with some plain t-shirts in black and navy blue, another pair of jeans, the rest of the Bitch's clothes apparently not to her taste, nor Scott's either. All he'd ever seen in those boxes was his hard-earned money gone to waste.

In hindsight, it again seemed such a damn shame someone hadn't cooled his jets by shooting him five years ago. A simple flesh wound could've changed his entire future. His father might've done exactly that had someone thought to offer him a gun. He'd never liked the Bitch, though his mother had initially adored her, fell for the sweet innocent girl routine, just like Scott. Yes, his father had counseled him privately to wait and not hurry, to be...patient. Let the true colors shine on through.

Unfortunately, that second brain between his legs only had one thing on its mind.

And where were his friends when he needed them? Trolling the bars, like he'd done, hoping to score--on behalf of their impatient second brains.

Then she'd gotten credit cards with interest rates high enough to pass for usury (thanks for nothing at all, Congress). He'd cut up more than one set belonging to his ex-wife, simply flabbergasted when she got more.

Not until the divorce did he know the true depths to which he was jointly indebted, the refinancing of the original mortgage, plus the second necessary to pay not only his lawyer, but also the monthly obligations he'd chosen to take on rather than give that bitch a dime of alimony. Thank God, she'd agreed to the terms.

At least the debts he might pay off--someday. Alimony to a real Bitch too smart to get married again could have him paying literally for the rest of his life.

Horse trainers, even recognized experts in their fields were nothing more than a luxury when the economy took a nose-dive. That's why he'd run cattle as well. Neither enterprise was doing particularly well the

moment he'd crossed unknowing into an alternate time. Still in the black, however. Barely. Over there, on the other side, in real time.

Immortal, perhaps, *and* debt free? A beautiful woman to share this life without the interruptions of other bothersome people? Who wouldn't be tempted?

If they were the only two trapped here.

Was this Heaven? Or a milder brand of Hell, courtesy of one Bills D-e-v-i-l...DeVillery, Deviltree, whatever name he might call himself.

Could Bills be the modern Beelzebub?

*Holy shit.*

Dot gathered two pair of jeans and five shirts into her arms, a quick glance around the meager furnishings in the room.

No bed, no dresser, a night stand but no lamp, a rickety chair in a corner that probably should've been thrown out long ago, an old television that no longer worked on the floor next to a dead clock-radio that read 5:03 p.m.

The sun still high overhead as if it was only a little past noon.

Stuck on Day One.

"Let me show you where you can change," Scott told her in response to a crease in her forehead that appeared to indicate worry or concern. He pivoted on a heel, unsettling questions following him from one room to the next.

Threes and fives. Three pair of jeans and five shirts and when he'd looked, that old clock radio said 5:03?

Disconcerted anew, he stopped at his open bedroom door, gesturing toward the unmade (never made) double bed, glad he'd thought to pick up his dirty clothes and wash them at least, wondering if they would ever dry on the line, troubled by the distinct odor of a dead sock overwhelming the rose scent (odd that was, when manure didn't smell any more than the water or smoking tires did--normally), the crusty corpse spotted on the floor at the foot of the dresser where he must've dropped it and never bothered to come back to look.

"Sorry about the mess," the smell, he wanted to add, wrinkling his nose.

She shook her head and stepped away into the living room, depositing the neat pile of clothing on one end of his couch. She patted the dark brown toss pillow he'd used under his head while watching the 13-inch portable television.

"No way, lady," he said with mock indignation. "You're taking the best room in the house, if it comes to that. I'll sleep there."

She flashed a killer smile and shook her head, then plopped down on the sofa before looking up at him, almost as if in challenge.

"You're not going to argue with me now, are you?" One admittedly positive, though sad, aspect about her was the fact that she'd never be able to yell at him on anything but paper.

Her resultant grin appeared to invite him to "bring it on."

"Was it the sock?" he said in earnest. "I'll get it out of there. I can open a window--."

Her upraised hand interrupted, the smile faded from her face, and she looked up to the ceiling, jabbing her forefinger at the textured finish.

"Oh, right," he said, resignation creeping into his tone. "Sleeping arrangements might never become an issue if the sun doesn't ever go down."

He knew he should be tired by now, considering the events of an astounding day, but he wasn't. Still, could be simple excitement keeping him from realizing his fatigue, or her blazing introduction into his life, her presence in general.

Would he get tired eventually? Have to sleep, even though the sun might be fixed in the sky?

Stuck on Day One? Never to eat or shit, or sleep again?

The phone rang, startling him from thought, his feet slow to react.

"We apologize for the automated response. Bill S. DeVillery is out of his office for the rest of the day. He will promptly return your call--first thing tomorrow. Thank you for your interest in Alternate Time, a division of Third Warp. We appreciate your business."

Dot loitered just inside the living room, listening probably when Scott stared at the answering machine and muttered, "Tomorrow? We're stuck on Day One."

A clap of her hands and a pointed finger turned his attention beyond the picture window to a man striding boldly along the middle of the highway, head down, eyes fixed on the road. Hair so black the sun glinted blue highlights, his long-sleeved shirt blood red, his jeans from the look of them almost new, heavy black boots on his feet, the skin of his face and hands whiter than white as if the sun hadn't seen him in years.

As if he'd been secreted away in a cave for a millennia.

Or rotting in prison for life.

Dot rushed to her purse on the kitchen table. Before Scott had a chance to breathe, she had her gun in hand, a grim determination on her face.

"What good's that going to do?" he whispered when she rejoined him, certain he didn't wish to draw the man's immediate attention, unsure as to the reason.

She stroked her throat, a scowl on her face.

"You know that guy?" Scott asked, the pit in his stomach answering him before she again touched her throat. "He took your voice?"

Her grimace taking the angry scowl, her mouth working, forming words soundless as the day itself.

His own rage caught him by surprise, then he turned to look once more out the picture window, and met the man's icy stare.

A moment later the red-shirted man resumed his march down the road, west toward Augusta.

### Chapter 3

"Just put that away. You know that gun's not going to kill him," Scott said, hurrying to the living room window, feeling of his chest. "Didn't kill me."

Her boot heels clumping the floor, the clatter on the coffee table behind him assured him she'd at least agreed with him on something.

The man in the blood red shirt veered toward the near side of the road and disappeared behind the thick copse of lilac bushes lining the next drive a tenth of a mile away. The Banners, a reasonably nice family, owned the house and five acres fronting Scott's section of 640 long before he ever signed the first mortgage. Their five kids left gates open sometimes on their way to and from the river, although they were very helpful when Scott later had to round up his meandering cows. He tried padlocking the gate nearest their house, but then they either went to the next or bothered him all the time, and he with too soft a heart, despite his irritation, not to stop whatever he was doing to unlock it for them.

Just another irritation, he'd thought numerous times, a royal pain in the ass when he was really irked, but now he wished they, and not that red-shirted man Dot was so eager to kill, were still over there.

Maybe they were.

Shit, should've thought to check their place, he supposed, dismissing the guilt at remembering he'd tried to call them along with everyone else he could think of earlier. He would've seen the kids though, this too nice a day to stay inside, if any one of the herd had been around. Too late to do anything now.

He turned around to face her and she still working her mouth as if she might tell him the story, then joined her at the kitchen table when she reached for the pen and his notebook of accounts lying on the counter from which she ripped a fresh sheet of paper.

*ARSON*, she scrawled in huge letters, followed by *MURDERER*. She humphed a bit, then bent over and wrote, *My parents, sister, two brothers*.

Words escaped Scott.

*7 YEARS OLD*, she scribbled angrily. *Fireman rescued me. HIM!!!!*

"He set the fire?" Scott asked softly, wondering if they shouldn't start patrolling the grounds like night watchmen. Except night did not appear imminent, stuck as they were on Day One in an Alternate Time.

With a fireman/arsonist/murderer they likely couldn't kill.

From heaven back to hell in the matter of a few scribbled words.

Dot's eyes narrowed, a slight nod, her mouth working as if she desperately wanted to say more than mere writing would allow.

"Are you sure it's the same guy?" Scott asked. "He didn't look old enough--."

She uttered a raspy squeal, clapping her hands to her cheeks.

"I don't doubt you, but that had to be," he paused to appraise her age, "fifteen or twenty years ago. Right?"

The pen moved over the notebook, then she held it up. *Don't understand yet, do you?*

"So, you're saying what? He might not have aged like you or me?"

She whipped the page over, then bent to scrawl, *24 when convicted.*

"Probably around forty-four now then," Scott mused, thinking of his father approaching sixty years old, who still looked only fifty--maybe. "Well, he *was* too far away to see his face all that well." He touched her arm. "Are you sure?"

Her eyes widened, her mouth working furiously, wisps of noise escaping with each short breath.

Scott's hand fell away from her arm and he nodded. "Ok, I'll take your word for it, but Dot?"

She looked at him.

"What can we do?"

Scott nearly peed his britches when a dog barked, then growled just outside the back door, breaking the silence he was just on the verge of thoroughly detesting.

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The Banner's red Irish setter was obviously distressed, startled into a new round of frenzied barking when Scott opened the back door. Growling every other breath, dancing toward, then away from Scott's porch steps. Unfortunately, the dog had never liked him, Scott figuring some time ago that Reefer had sensed his frustration with the kids and viewed him as some sort of threat to welfare of the family.

Well, Scott might've throttled any one of those five kids half a dozen times, if given a chance. And no witnesses.

"Easy, Reefer," Scott said to the frightened dog. "Easy boy."

The setter snarled, then wheeled to face his own home, barking furiously at the bushes and trees a moment, as if trying to say, *I'm not scared of you, asshole.*

Plainly, he was scared shitless. And how he'd come to be trapped in Scott's alternate time, only God knew. Or Bills.

Maybe both.

There wasn't time to delve into the larger implications of who was responsible for what and why. Not after Dot nudged Scott from behind, as if to let him know she was there, prompting Reefer's stare at this new and strange person slowly descending the three concrete steps. Ground level, she squatted, her arms out, and after a moment's cautious hesitation, the damn dog trotted into her embrace, his pink tongue washing her face.

Scott realized a temporary jealousy, thinking the dog mighty lucky to whiff that rose scent up close and personal, like he wanted to do. He dismissed that with a tired sigh, a wary eye scanning the trees along his drive to the tops of his lilac bushes and across the flat three acres of dry grass to the next line of lilac bushes doing a very good job of hiding all but the black roof of the Banner's sky blue house from view.

No sign of that blood red shirt, thank God.

Scott wishing he was Reefer for another sundry second, or ten. Brushing the longing aside in the understanding he had far more important things to worry about now.

It was not inconceivable to assume the man had broke and entered, maybe pilfered Steve Banner's attire, and might now be dressed like a woodsman right out of Eddie Bauer. Or worse yet, what if he'd stolen some of that camouflage gear Steve wore at hunting season to fool the deer. Not that Steve was much of a hunter--his oldest boy was a much better shot, easily filling his father's tags each season after Steve failed to fill his own.

Dot rose to her feet, patting her newfound companion on his red head, the dog still anxious, frenetic even, ever turning back toward his home, as if he might loose a bark and go after the intruder any second now.

She came toward Scott on the square porch landing, Reefer jumping ahead of her, snarling, front paws on the top step, as if he might move Scott out of her way.

"Reefer," Scott said sternly, "this is my house. And don't you forget it."

Dot stroked the back of the stiff-legged dog eyeing Scott suspiciously as if he might take out his anger on the next available male human, especially after that other guy had chased him off.

She gripped the dog's jaw, turned his snout to her easily, then gestured at Scott and tapped her chest as if to say, *Mine*.

Scott wished he was, too, unable to deny that much at least.

Then she abruptly and without warning, loosed the dog to hug Scott tightly. He whiffed roses then, up close and personal, and sweeter than he'd imagined they might ever be, her wavy hair soft in tickling his chin and throat, her arms wound around him, his hands instinctively homing in on the small of her back. He was prickly all over alive, the scent of roses forever imprinted on his mind and associated with all manner of pleasant, if not short-lived fantasies about her.

She turned within his embrace to eye the dog, who tilted his head one side to the other, as if this were the most astonishing sight he'd never anticipated, just as stupefied by this turn of events as Scott it seemed. Then, regrettably, she dropped one arm from around Scott to put her hand out to the dog and Reefer hurried to lick long, slender fingers and receive a pat on his head for good measure.

A sour blast of fresh skunk preceded malicious laughter drifting out of the trees, which stiffened the dog that leapt from the porch into a wild round of barking. Scott nudged the lovely Dorothy behind him.

"Reefer, shut up," Scott hissed repeatedly until the dog wore himself down to raised hackles and low growls. Warm fingers curled into Scott's hand, and glad of his rose-scented immortality, he courageously searched the bushes, seeing nothing at first, Dot behind and a little to his right.

"Fine-looking woman you got there," came a shout after a buzzing sound, like a mega-insect accompanied a shadow passing over the dry grass from the Banners' lilacs into the nearest treetops.

The dog barked frantically, rushing forward to wheel and return--repeatedly staring up at the crown of the closest tree.

"Who are you?" Scott countered in a yell above Reefer's continual yap, Dot's fingers about his own tightening their grip.

"You first." Hysterical laughter, maliciousness underlain.

Dot squeezed the blood from Scott's hand.

"Who-are-you?" he shouted angrily, enunciating every word.

The stink grew stronger, as if a skunk had just now sprayed the surrounding vegetation. "You need a name before you go?"

Scott cautioned himself to remain calm, thinking impatience, that nagging word, but on its heels came a recall of Steve Banner's hunting rifle--with scope.

His gut said *duck* a split second before his ears registered what his mind decided might be a gunshot (more than one?). Reefer's wild barking abruptly silenced, an invisible fist slammed Scott's chest, knocking him back a step into Dot, and then he was in the dark, a faint beep sounding somewhere off in a black distance.

He blinked at the immovable sun overhead, on his feet at the sound of shattering glass, racing his heart to rush inside the very moment the dog leapt to all fours-life and dashed toward the open back door, the collision spinning Scott, tangling his legs, and sending him hard to his ass on the concrete landing.

A low growl, a shout of surprise capped by yet another gunshot, and Scott was back on his feet and through the door, ignoring broken plates crunching under his boots and a horrible breath-taking stench, preparing to dive into the fray between Dot and her camo-shirted attacker wrestling on the living room floor, the dog lying immobile in the foreground.

"What the fuck?" the man cried, a gape of pure stupefaction at Scott. "I put you down."

Dot hiked a knee to her chest and caught him with a boot heel square in the cluster. In a two-handed grab at his crotch, he pulled his hands from her neck, dropped her gun beside a rifle (Steve Banner's?), and fell aside of her, the shot-for-the-second-time Reefer just rousing himself back to life.

The silence returned, heavy and dreadful, the air skunk-flavored and nearly unbreathable.

"Are you all right?" Scott jerked her up by the elbow to her feet, the dog realizing thankfully the greater threat lie on the floor, apparently unconscious.

To kick the shit out the bastard was particularly tempting, or beat his head in, crush his skull with a hammer, but what good would that do?

Scott was convinced he couldn't kill the prick with any weapon at hand any more than the prick could kill Scott.

Even Reefer seemed hesitant and confused as to how to proceed.

Maybe Scott ought to cut his heart out, but he couldn't stomach the idea of filleting the man. A steer, yes; human, no.

Dot was crying noiselessly, massaging her throat until the arsonist/murderer lying on the floor groaned, then she snatched her gun from the carpet and unloaded the chambers into him, the gunfire deafening in the room, the acrid smell of burnt gun powder churning the skanky stench from Scott's nose.

"What good is that?" he asked her, his voice muffled to his ears. She didn't answer, but instead snagged the maroon flannel shirt from the pile of jeans and t-shirts, turned her back on him, changed shirts before Scott had time to look away in his fascination with the six bullet holes in the man's head, neck, and upper chest.

No blood, not a drop, just neat little holes. Each smashed bullet slowly surfacing as if the flesh knit itself back together from the inside out.

What if he *had* filleted this man? Would the body simply recreate the parts it needed to go on living?

Or did regeneration depend on the vital organs, damaged or not, remaining in place?

Dot pointed at the rifle, and after Scott snatched the weapon from the floor, she seized his hand, pulling him through the kitchen, snagging her purse on the way outside, her gun stuffed in her waistband. Reefer the dog stayed right on Scott's heels.

"Wait," Scott cried and freed his hand of her grasp. "What're we doing now?"

The phone began to ring, Dot's eyes widened, then narrowed, a scowl on her face, shaking her head, a jab at her car.

"Leave? We can't just leave," Scott said, "this is *my* house." But she wasn't interested, hurrying toward the Chevy, the summons to the call cut-off in mid-ring, then a male voice said, "Bills, been a long time, hasn't it?"

A demon speaking with the Devil himself?

Scott was all sorts of tempted to brave a firestorm and the inevitable brawl with an arsonist/murderer for the opportunity to scream insult upon epithet at the asshole who'd gotten him into this perplexing (ok, terrifying) mess in the first place.

Dot twisted the key to the ignition, the motor roared to life, and Scott did the only thing he could.

Tossed the rifle on the floorboard below Reefer, slammed the rear passenger door, and jumped into the shotgun seat an instant before she backed the car.

The murdering arsonist came grinning to the back door.

"Scotty," he taunted, "Bills wants to talk to you."

Dot's answer simply to hammer the accelerator, Scott raised a hand through the open window above the roof of the car and flipped the arsonist/murderer the bird.

"You'll pay big for that."

The threat faded, Scott all sorts of skeptical. What was the guy going to do--kill him?

How?

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No doubt Bills wouldn't have been on the phone by the time Scott kicked the shit out of the arsonist to get there. No way would the murdering fireman simply hand over the receiver either. Probably a thinly-disguised effort to tempt him away from Dot.

Like he'd fall for that in any world, real or alternate.

She'd been right to get them out of there, but where were they going? She'd said herself she'd driven into some fog, stuck on some sort of loop on the road. Still, putting a few miles between them and a convicted killer might buy some time.

Until what though?

They might be the only other humans for the bad guy to torment, making them attractive targets, especially if no one ever died.

Stuck on Day One.

With a beautiful woman he wouldn't touch unless she invited the contact; a dog named Reefer who'd eat him for lunch if given a chance. And an arsonist/murderer who couldn't kill them any more than die himself at their hands.

Hell. Had to be.

Surely he was dead to the normal world, died when he came through what was undoubtedly a curtain in Time, tricked into Purgatory by the Devil himself (fuck you, Bills), to be pursued eternally in a world where sleep, even food probably wasn't necessary, a dog that hated him, and she a temptation for both good and bad, Scott and ?

What was the asshole's name? A glimpse of Dot gripping the steering wheel, staring intently at the road. Not like he could ask her now. The pen and paper were back at the house, on the table, the keys to his Taurus--*on the kitchen counter.*

Crap. The bad guy'd probably read both the letters they'd left behind. Probably laughing right now. Unless the type had faded like before.

Scott's old Ford pickup parked out there in the Quonset shop/garage, hood up--*keys in the ignition.*

The fire-loving murderer had at least two opportunities to follow, chase them down even, if that old Ford would even start. What were the odds he'd fail to do that?

Slimmer even than the lovely Dorothy, stuck in an alternate Oz with...was Scott the Straw Man, Tin Man, or Cowardly Lion?

Certainly not the Wizard, that's for sure. Bills apparently had that job all sewn up, but then, didn't the Wizard ultimately turn out to be good at the end?

Bills good? Fuck that, no way in...Hell?

Nix on the Cowardly Lion, ditto for the Straw Man. Tin Man, that's who Scott was. Perhaps. Shot twice in the heart and still walking around as if his skin were metal, bullets bounce right off, like Superman.

Yeah, Superman. Too bad Scott couldn't fly around the world and flip Time back a day. Skip signing the loan agreement, skip Bills, but then never meet the lovely Dorothy, a fascinating, beautiful, and *quiet* woman. Damn. At least she didn't have a Toto, unless Reefer counted.

Scott looked out his window to a familiar place zipping by--the Hoyle's. Their fields of grass ready to be swathed and baled into hay, forward of clusters of cottonwoods at the foot of uneven yellowing hills the Sun River had cut over Time. The Hoyle's tan two story a hundred feet of gravel drive from the road. A flash of white--and yipping.

"Stop," Scott cried, bracing his hands on the dash the instant she braked the Chevy to a screeching halt.

The motor idling, she squinted at him, her expression indicating he'd better have a good excuse.

Just how was she able to say not a word and still make him feel as if he was almost in the doghouse?

Must be a woman thing.

"Could you back up to that driveway?" he asked. "Thought I saw something moving there."

Dot flung her arm along the back seat, Scott all the while wondering why he was the least concerned by another four-legged pest, the Hoyles' miniature poodle, Weenie, if that's what he'd seen. Another freaking dog that didn't like him, like Reefer there in the back seat. Well, never hurt to have a buddy, even dogs needed pals.

And would that be Dot's Toto then?

Aw, shit.

The tiny white poodle was frantic, leaping about like a cotton puff gone spastic before the Chevy rolled to a stop near the front porch. Menacing growls and irritating bursts of yapping, the high-pitched sound piercing in a time wearing silence like a heavy winter coat.

Weenie had to be scared shitless, just like the rest of them. Scott put his hand on the door latch, startled out of the car when Reefer barked in response, the sheer volume hurting Scott's ears.

"Shut up," he said to both, neither paying him any attention. Reefer scaled the seatback to exit the car through Scott's open door. Both dogs quieted long enough to sniff noses, then as if they decided in some secret dog communiqué that Scott was their primary threat, they joined up to batter him with sound.

Why he'd even bothered to insist they stop for the raggedy ass little shit amazed him, but not as much as the abrupt silence when Dot exited her door, the engine's idle but a murmur of testimony to how well she'd maintained the car. Almost as well as she apparently maintained herself.

She skirted the front bumper under the watchful eyes of both canines, pausing to incline her head, a stern expression on her face. Reefer and Weenie seemed appropriately cowed then, much like Scott sometimes when she looked his way.

"Dogs don't like me," he felt compelled to remark.

Her flash of a smirk chagrined, then she lifted her head, pivoted on a boot heel, and both dogs followed her obediently around the front bumper. At the sweeping gesture of her arm, Reefer leapt from the front to the backseat, and then she picked up that pissant poodle and sat down behind the wheel, settling the little dog in her lap.

Weenie eyed Scott with healthy suspicion, baring his tiny white fangs, almost as if he grinned in victory. *Fuck you, bud, got the best seat in the house. Eat your heart out.*

Reefer hanging his head over Dot's shoulder, resting his lower jaw on a well-made breast, Scott all sorts of unnerved, brushing aside latent rose-colored fantasies waiting his attention to rise and come to life.

(Damn second brain) He studied his empty hands. *Well, maybe...someday?* He glanced between both dogs, eyeing him as if he were lunch on two feet.

Right.

She circled a tight u-turn in the Hoyle's wide drive to head back to the highway, throwing Reefer's head from her shoulder in maintaining his balance, Weenie ever on guard.

A glance in the rearview mirror, and Dot's face distorted with anger, perhaps even fear, her foot jamming the accelerator, prompting Scott to fight g-forces to turn and look beyond Reefer to his Taurus, which appeared to be gaining on them.

"Goddamn it," he muttered, and faced forward, his fearful, thumping heart, his knotted stomach making his lungs work for air.

Dot shoved her bag at him, and when he didn't react, she leaned over to fish out the handgun, along with a box of bullets.

"Reload?" he asked.

A grab of her blonde locks, a shake, and she was focused on the road, Scott left with only one thing to do, futile as he might think the exercise.

He fed bullets into the clip, wondering about the rifle on the floorboard in the back. No ammo for that, but what did it matter anyway?

How many times could a man get shot in this alternate time and live to tell about it?

God, he hoped he wasn't going to be the test dummy for that.

Wind roared past the open windows, Dot pushing her Chevy to better than a hundred, and still the dick manning Scott's Taurus closing in on them. For once, Scott wished he wasn't a Ford man.

Then a glimpse at the rearview mirror and Dot lifted her foot from the accelerator, Scott looking to the side mirror in time to see his Taurus careen off the road and bounce through a bar ditch. He leaned out the window to watch his car do a full roll over a barbed-wire fence into a plowed field, coming to rest on its top.

"Keep going," he cried, gesturing at Dot, dismayed to see the arsonist/murderer climbing out of the wreck through the driver's side window.

She mashed the pedal, squealing the tires, flying toward the crest of the big hill leading to the small town of Vaughn.

At least cars weren't alive. Probably couldn't remake themselves.

His car, too, dammit. His wreck now.

Should've kept his middle finger to himself.

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Two convenience store/gas station/casinos flanking either side of the tire place on the left, the tiny bank branch next to the Vaughn Post Office between the two bars on the right all looked normal enough--except for a complete lack of traffic.

Scott wondered about locked doors, but not in time to venture a suggestion that might slow their progress over Muddy Creek Bridge and onto the freeway entrance ramp headed south for Great Falls. Dot's Chevy gained the interstate, rounded a curve onto a straightaway into thick fog that swallowed even the front hood to the windshield. Alarmed, he was about to ask her to slow down when the cloud abruptly dissipated, the sun returned, and they were running seventy on the same four lane that ran past his house, but well west of his place. Miles west, closer to Augusta than Vaughn, the cloud wall behind them wholly obscuring the Rocky Mountain Front.

Dot pounded the steering wheel in what Scott assumed was frustration, but never let up on the gas. So, that's what she'd meant by fog and big loop.

"Hey, what if you go north instead of south on the Interstate?" Scott asked.

A narrow-eyed squint at the windshield told him she'd tried that already.

Three times she'd driven by his house before he'd come outside. She wasn't dumb. Maybe he should keep quiet until he thought things through. Avoid the appearance of stupidity instead of removing all doubt. A man thing, undoubtedly. Sure, like she hadn't figured that out yet.

His fisted hands sweaty, he wiped them on his jeans, glancing past her to the scenery whizzing by on their left.

"Say, what if you go back the other--?"

Her glance of annoyance cut him off. Tried that, too. Apparently.

Would he ever learn to think before he spoke?

Damn.

The Christophes place on the left, Everett Kepler's small house and double car garage flew by on their right, then Dot slammed on the brakes, throwing Scott at the dash, his arms bracing instinctively for impact.

A thump at the front bumper, thud-thud, a squeak of dismay from Dot, and the car screeched to a halt. Weenie shoved aside upon her quick exit of the vehicle.

Ignoring the hostile poodle, Scott whipped his head around for a look behind. Dot knelt in the road beside what looked like another dog immobile on the asphalt. Her anguished look to the car and he popped open his door.

"Stay," he ordered, not that he expected either dog to listen.

Weenie led Reefer out the open driver's door.

Scott ran after them, and as if on cue, the bane of ranchers the nation over lifted its large furry head, and a pink tongue flickered over Dot's fingers.

"He'll be fine," Scott said, nervous and wary, wondering where the arsonist/ murderer was right now.

"Can't kill anything here." Even with a bumper, doing better than sixty.

Shit.

She patted the coyote's head, the canine's close cousin a bit slow to get to his feet, wobbling and leery of his two next of kin until tentative sniffs of greeting had been exchanged. Then, all three eyed Scott with extraordinarily healthy suspicion.

Three! That cursed number. And the third a fucking coyote, no less.

"We're not taking him with us," he said, regretting the words (think before speaking!) the moment her back stiffened. She slowly rose to her full height, arms crossing her magnificent (don't go there, he cautioned himself), her glower louder in total silence than any yelling, even from his mouthy ex-Bitch.

"Aw, come on now. A coyote? We have to haul him around, too?"

Her eyes slits a sheet of paper couldn't get between, three canines staring at him (three, for chrissakes!) like he was a threat to be vanquished with a wave of her hand, his remains perhaps fed to them later as a treat.

"Crap," he muttered, then said, "Oh, all right. What do I know anyway?"

He turned to head back to the idling car, stopped by her arms tight about his waist, pressing that full bosom (stay down, second brain) to his chest. Compelled to fold his arms about her, his hands homed in on the lovely curved small of her back, as if they knew their place better than his conscious mind ever would. His head bowing instinctively, eyes closing, then opening wide after her lips brushed his, the rose scent a constant pleasure to his nose.

She smiled up at him as innocent as a child, then broke away to lead her four-legged trio back to the idling Chevy, Scott left to straggle behind, disappointed and weak in the knees. Reefer and the coyote invited to

sit in the back seat with the sweep of her arm, Weenie scoring that desirable spot on her lap, Scott riding shotgun, wiping the sweat off his brow with a swipe of his arm, and wondering how in the devil the day, this perfect day, had gotten so hot all of a sudden.

His second brain more than ready to rise up and scream, *Pick me, pick me.*

Now she motored down the road sedately, as if ferrying a precious carload of children, not a backseat owned by an Irish Setter and a fucking coyote (of all the shits), the Weenie on her lap, and Scott all out of sorts.

They passed the Banner's, then his place came up on the right, and she pulled into the drive like she hadn't left in a supreme hurry earlier, tires squealing. His back door wide open, Scott heard the phone ringing, and forgetting all caution, leapt from the car, taking the three concrete steps of his porch in a single bound.

The foul odor of skunk, a loud buzzing, then a gunshot gave him pause in the kitchen to slap all points of his upper torso. Convinced he hadn't been hit a third time (three!), the furious barking forced him to decide between answering the phone or investigating the root cause of this latest commotion.

Sure, the arsonist/murderer would be waiting to ambush them (how did he get back here so fast?), but Dot had an Irish Setter/coyote/poodle layer of protection, not to mention a .38 she seemed more than eager to use. The barking retreated at a second round of gunshots over and above the odd buzzing noise, and figuring she'd handled the problem temporarily, he turned to the ringing phone, desperate to win their release from this Purgatory.

His hand lifted the receiver, the answering machine whirring.

"Just hold on there, asshole," Scott cried out at the irritating click of disconnection.

"You prick!" he shouted, hammering the receiver to its cradle and cracking the plastic casing. Afraid it might no longer work, he tapped the plunger to return the frustrating dial tone, and then carefully replaced the handset.

God, he wanted to kick the shit out of someone or something, and dashed to the back door, hopeful the murdering fireman might still be within reach. He was happy yet at the same time mildly disappointed to see Dot trudging from between trees, Weenie under one arm, the other two members of her canine corps trotting on either side of her, the muzzle of her gun inches from the coyote's head.

The pervasive stench of skunk poisoned the air, the odd buzzing waning rapidly in the distance.

She looked up at him, then averted her eyes and shrugged, as if to say she'd missed or something.

"Chase him off, did you?" Scott asked.

Her frown was disappointment in the purest sense of the word. She climbed the steps toward him, closed in for a peck on his lips, as if the act was mundane, a woman returning home from work to her man, then led her three four-legged bodyguards into the kitchen. Again, leaving Scott to bring up the rear.

Damn, if this wasn't the best and worst day of his life.

Stuck on Day One.

With a message waiting on his answering machine.

"Shit, that bastard," he muttered, damn near tripping over dogs and coyote in his hurry to get to the end table in the living room and punch the pulsing red light out with a jab of his forefinger.

Then the sun, as if realizing it had been terribly remiss and for hours, zipped over the western horizon, plunging a world Scott had never known into darkness illuminated solely by a full moon hanging in the starlit sky like a lunar placeholder.

So, were they stuck on Night One for a while? How long then? An equal amount of time or what?

And where was the murdering fireman? Out there somewhere, plotting more havoc on this night of the immortals--three canines, a beautiful woman, and Scott, the village idiot.

Which added up to five. Like the three fives in his phone number?

Where did the bad guy fit in then? And what about the 3383?

Thirty-three ate three?

Making far too much of a damn phone number, Scott reminded himself, careful not to kill the answering machine like he might've already done the phone.