

1

The past followed Greg like a haunting spirit threatening to rule his mind. Caroline had retreated into the restroom to collect her thoughts and regain her composure. Maybe pacifying him would ease his pain and lift his mood. Three years ago she had married a cheerful, outgoing guy with a quick wit and sense of humor, not the glum and depressed man at the restaurant table.

A promising evening of elegant dining and enjoying the symphony had now collapsed because of Greg's bizarre behavior. Two drinks would not make him boisterous and self-deprecating. Even when drunk, he never before indicated something traumatic had occurred back in high school, yet he would not specify why it affected him so deeply. She wanted to make things right again.

Her long black hair fell over her silky red evening dress. Buying the dress now seemed a wasted effort. Whether she brought him back home or traveled into the symphony, she at least had to find the root of his problem. She nudged open the restroom door. Across the restaurant, the firelight darkened his graying hair and he stared into a half filled Champagne glass.

She crossed the room deliberately, determined to remain upbeat.

" Greg, you wanted to see that clairvoyant before we catch the train... " She sat down slowly. As he peered mournfully through his gold rim glasses, his wide jaw dropped and he shook his head.

" Greg, *what* is wrong?"

His mouth twisted like an unraveling knot. " I don't want to talk about it."

" All right."

Greg tapped his fingers repeatedly on the white linen tablecloth and shook his leg below. He swished the Champagne around the chilled glass. " You don't understand, Lina. This is an anniversary for me."

" Anniversary?"

" December 20, 1968. The date of my accident."

" What accident? You never talked about any accident."

Again he was captivated by the Champagne bubbles.

" December 20, 1968. I started that day with the sharpest reflexes and with two good eyes."

Caroline leaned forward, her round face tense, and she squinted her moist hazel eyes. Greg, your bad eye. You said it was congenital."

Greg looked like a man about to have the taut gallows rope draped around his smooth skinned neck. " No, it's time I told you, Lina... December 20, 1968, at four thirty-one, p.m., I went crashing into the backboard during a high school game."

" You never told me... "

" No, it's all right."

She held his sweaty hand, knowing he must have carried this inside for years. " That was Paul Revere High School, right?"

He continued as if he really were back in 1968. " Yeah, Reedsville, Pennsylvania... on the Emitsburg River. I was... *good*, Lina..." He turned toward the connecting sports bar. " Yeah, I'll go see that gypsy fortune- teller. Ben said this woman would scare the yell out of you!"

" My uncle can be melodramatic and he loves the paranormal."

" There were college scouts hounding me all the time. I played all the summer leagues in 68'. By fall no one could touch me. In December, we finalized things with UCLA. I was signed by UCLA, Lina!"

" Really?"

" Damn right. I was ready to play college ball and beyond... Screw it, I want to hear my fortune." Greg stood, gazed toward the bar corridor and sat down again.

" Why didn't you tell me any of this?"

" Not important."

Caroline squeezed his huge hand. " Honey, this is awful. I had no idea that-"

" It all ended right in the old high school gym. Next morning when I came to in the hospital, I knew right then and there. It was

all over. No UCLA. No college career. No professional career. The crowds cheering in the gym. The big games. All gone. Everything. It was all over, Lina."

" Listen, maybe we should go home. We can-"

" I don't know when I first started hanging around Marco St. Germaine. My big opportunity, now that I had lost basketball, to become a man. See how much I could drink. Marco is serving time for murder. I was right next to him when he did it."

" You were what?"

" We were riding around town and smashing pumpkins on the streets. You know, Halloween pranks. We were going sixty miles an hour and Marco targeted Merle Keaffer on the state highway. He killed Merle Keaffer, Caroline. He hated Keaffer and wanted him dead. I was the one who testified against Marco."

" Why were you with this guy?"

" I was seventeen and had lost everything."

He stood abruptly, Caroline rounded the table, and pressed her hand against his peppered hair. Tears glossed over his dark eyes. Maybe the fortuneteller would take his mind off the accident. She put her arm around him and escorted him into the coatroom. Greg paid the attendant and retrieved their coats.

He helped with her coat. " I should have told you about this before, Lina. I feel like a jerk."

" We all have things we'd like to forget." She took his arm again and looked toward the bar corridor. " What do you say we get our fortune read?"

" Sounds good to me. I could use a little song and dance at this point." Now he sounded like old Greg again.

As they entered the smoky lounge, a jazz band played atop the hazy blue-lit stage near the bar and a few couples danced across the parquet floor. But Caroline slowed and then stopped as a white haired woman, reading Tarot Cards on a candle lit, green felt table, lifted her deep set eyes.

Greg moved past bar patrons and through the dense air. He loosened up and swayed with the music. He grabbed Caroline, spun her around, laughing, as he went forward. " This is great. "

" Ben believes in all this spooky mumbo-jumbo." Caroline tried to avoid the woman's penetrating dark eyes.

" Your uncle would drop his life's savings if this gypsy here could get it to pay off for him in the sixth race, Caroline."

" Are you saying... Are you saying that Ben has a gambling problem?"

" Yeah, the problem is that he can't win."

" He wouldn't dare tell me that."

" I hope Ben *does* win it big."

He put his arm around her again as they strolled near the stage and were precariously close to the woman. Caroline compulsively turned. The old woman set the colored Tarot cards on

the felt table and her dark placid eyes ignited as she stood and pointed.

" Why is she pointing at us, Greg?"

" I don't know... the old bat."

" She'll hear you!"

The woman lowered her hand, slowly stepped onto the rug and shuffled with an almost painful gait. Her waxed face, more wrinkled at this closer distance, and her dark expressive eyes made Caroline recoil behind Greg.

" What the hell is going on here?" asked Greg.

The gypsy raised her crooked index finger toward Greg and spoke in a husky, thick foreign accent. " Go home. Do not go to the city. Stay away from those forces that lurk beyond your control..."

" Why would you tell me to go home?"

" Your life is in danger."

Caroline cringed and grabbed her husband. The old lady turned, but did not go back to the table. Instead, she squeezed down a narrow paneled hall near the kitchen. Greg broke free and chased her as Caroline trailed behind. He caught the old woman near the **EXIT** sign as she prepared, without coat or hat, to leave the building.

" Why? Why is my life in danger?"

Caroline stopped about ten feet behind, clutching the stainless steel food racks as the lady raised her head ever so slowly. Her coal black eyes reflected some inner turmoil. " One more time I will say.

You must go home. If you do not go home, you will never reach your destination. For I can hear wonderful music and I see the lights of the city. But there is evil here. Evil is after you." She shuddered as if she were trying to expel demons, closed her eyes and her voice grew louder. " But this does not have to be! Go home before it is too late!"

" I don't understand. *Evil?* What is it you see? Why should I fear going to the symphony? How can my life be in danger?"

" Immutable forces that form the rivers of fate," She rolled her eyes upward to the whites. " I sense these forces of evil. Evil... My mind, it travels through the wakes that are left behind by evil. Beware young man, the rivers of fate are converging on your life!"

With that, she pushed the metal door bar and moved under the glowing red **EXIT** sign and into the snowy parking lot. Then she simply blended into the storm.

Caroline, her dry mouth hanging open, ran to her taller husband.

" Holy shit!"

" I'll second that," said Greg, still looking outside.

" Greg, get me home now."

Greg's face tightened. He looked into the falling snow and then faced Caroline. " If we go home now... we'll always wonder about tonight."

" Who cares? I don't even want to go out in the parking lot! That woman-"

" She gets paid to scare the hell out of the people. It worked with Ben, but we're going into Chicago."

He took her hand and they walked outside, but Caroline shivered uncontrollably. Greg embraced her as they reached his Volvo. " Lina, that old lady is crazy and I'm going to prove it." He popped the locks with his remote and then panned the parking lot, but the woman had slipped away. They got in the car and he started the engine.

" No, I hear what you're saying, " said Caroline. " If we don't go into Chicago, we'll always believe what she said was true."

" It was just an act!"

" Academy award performance... All right. Get me to the train station, Provost. We're going in town."

2

Once on the train and speeding into the city, Greg had her laughing and she felt as if she had been imagining trouble in the restaurant. He held her hand as they neared the stop and the snow fell gently under glowing street lamps. When she saw the Christmas bulbs along the boulevard, she tapped his shoulder and pointed out the window. He smiled and looked outside as the train speakers suddenly began playing Christmas melodies.

At their stop she took Greg's arm and quickly exited the train. The snow tapered off only a few blocks from the symphony hall, but the lengthy boulevard was transformed into a magnificent winter scene and the bare, snow sifted tree branches lining the road were strung with clear lights in the cooler air.

Greg alerted her to the department store display ahead. " This reminds me of Binghampton's Department Store back in Reedsville. And the Christmas lights back home. They used to hang the bulky old colored lights from building to building."

* * *

The old lady's dire predictions faded once they were inside the hall. The symphony stage, decorated in an ornate Victorian motif, lifted her spirits, and allowed an illusion of a simpler time. Despite the formal nature of the event, Greg slowly put his arm around her and comforted her from the earlier fears. The night was ruined and she deeply loved her husband.

Her time with Greg passed much too quickly. Hundreds of tapered white candles were lit before the final musical selections. A single flute and a crisp French horn added a sense of tranquillity, and when the concert ended, silence bolstered an overall feeling of peace.

Greg seemed pensive as they reached the outside steps. A hint of snow returned to the air, but as they stepped onto the sidewalk, he remained deep in thought. Then his face froze and his eyes darted back and forth through the crowd. "Caroline, let's get out of here..."

"Greg, what's the matter?"

He physically pulled her back to the sidewalk. "I could swear to God I just saw Marco St. Germaine back there, but that's impossible. He's in jail for murder."

"I think you just have Paul Revere and Reedsville on the mind tonight."

"I know what I saw." He alternated glances down the sidewalk.

"You're starting to frighten me!"

The brightly colored Christmas lights reflected in his glasses as he scanned the snow-lined street. They were stuck in the crowd, but Caroline saw an opening ahead. As she turned and gazed skyward past the symphony hall pillars, she felt a violent push, and nearly lost her balance.

In the confusion she did not understand what had happened and she held onto Greg as more people shoved them back. A quick cracking volley cut the cold, night air and Greg's body tensed. His glasses flew as he cried out and collapsed in her arms. She fell with him to the sidewalk. Fifteen feet away an unshaven, balding man with beady eyes held out the smoking blue steel barrel of a small revolver. He sneered at her momentarily, fanned the gun and everyone scattered. Then he leaped onto the wet pavement and fled down the boulevard. Caroline's fingers sunk into the sponge wetness of her husband's bloodied white shirt.

" Greg," she said in a whisper and then lost control. " Greg! They've killed my husband! They've killed my husband!"

Reality blurred. Emotions ran ahead of perceptions. Two men appeared from the crowd, bent down, and loosened Greg's collar. The gawking people formed a large circle around them as several other men pushed the crowd back and cautioned the onlookers to give Greg some air.

Despondent and fearing the worst, Caroline watched them perform CPR. Another human being's breath pushed into Greg's lungs, moving his blood-covered shirt, and at that moment she

knew he would die. She closed her eyes, thinking back to the restaurant, the old woman's dire prediction, and Greg's prior reference to Marco St. Germaine.

An ambulance approached, the siren louder, and bright lights flashed everywhere as the police took over. Their blasting radios crackled and echoed through the symphony hall pillars. Greg could not have survived the round of bullets. Two men in white uniforms placed Greg's motionless body on a stretcher, hooked up a number of tubes, and lifted him into the red and white ambulance.

A police officer helped her inside. The door shut tightly and they lurched forward. With a tight blue oxygen mask secured over Greg's mouth and nose, and EMT's hovering over his body, for a moment she almost believed they might save him. She leaned against the wall, helpless now as the ambulance sped over the bumpy city streets and she tried to convince herself Greg was never shot.

He was whisked into the emergency room and two police officers escorted her into a small office. Someone gave her a cup of coffee. She gripped it in her hand and listened to their questions. Nothing made sense until the police fed the information about Marco St. Germaine onto their open radio channel. His name, broadcast over the short wave, sent terror through her emotionally drained body. She still hoped that Greg might somehow survive the surgery, but she had to wait. Her mind was cluttered with the

image of the gypsy woman and the darting Marco St. Germaine, pumping bullets into her husband.

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A nurse handed her another cup of coffee as an officer strode back into the office. His lips pursed and she thought Greg had died, but he told her about a bloody shoot-out less than six blocks from the symphony hall. Marco St. Germaine, Greg's high school acquaintance, was gunned down by pursuing officers and died on the street.

" He escaped from Attica in New York forty-eight hours ago," said the cop.

" Greg helped put this man in jail and nobody bothers to tell us there was an escape?"

" I'm sure it was some kind of slip-up."

" Slip-up? A slip-up and now my husband is dying!"

She closed her eyes momentarily and almost sat down, when a doctor in green fatigues, mask loose at the neck, and an operating room nurse, appeared in the doorway. The officers outside stared at her as the doctor crept into the office.

" I don't want to hear the words! No, no, no."

" Your husband died ten minutes ago, Mrs. Provost," said the doctor, performing his duty. " You have my condolences. We did everything we could."

Caroline clenched her fist, holding it below her nose as a surge of emotion jolted through her stomach and filled her sinuses and tear ducts. Only minutes ago Greg was alive and held her hand. How could he die in this surrealistic act of revenge? She fell to the chair, buried her head in her hands and wept.

" Caroline."

She slowly looked at her uncle's big blue eyes, jowls, and bushy white hair. She immediately lunged from the chair, threw her arms around him and cried into his heavy coat. " Oh, Ben! Ben... Greg is dead, Ben."

" I know, Caroline. They just told me when I came in. Just hold on... Hold on."

She locked her arm around him and they started back into the corridor. The pain would lessen. She knew that. At ground zero of the blast it would not get any worse. Somehow things would get better. Painful times were ahead, but never would she suffer the hurt when her husband's life evaporated before her eyes on a snow covered Chicago Boulevard.

3

Even after six months the pain still persisted. Finally back teaching math, but consumed by December's events, Caroline thought of Greg constantly. Her devotion to her students would not erase the terrible tragedy infecting her life, and as summer vacation approached, Ben arranged a ten-day Caribbean cruise, commencing on June fifteenth.

The weather, although pleasant for two weeks, changed radically on the fifteenth. An unusually dark and a heavy humidity hung in the late spring air as clouds accompanied a cold front, causing severe thunderstorms and heavy downpours.

Caroline left late for the airport. She packed newly purchased clothes and Greg's high school yearbook into her suitcases. In less than an hour she had to meet Ben on the plane, and the shortest way to the airport, averting any rush hour traffic, was the rural roads. She would easily catch the plane if she hurried.

She reached into her carry-on as she drove through the rain, and as she had on quiet afternoons at the cemetery, she slid out Greg's red and black high school yearbook. The inside covers contained a black and white overlay of Paul Revere High School, and in varying inks, the simple verse of Greg's school friends was

scrawled across the school's large stone columns and front steps. She was drawn to the wide quadrangle slabs and their symmetrical alignment to the clock tower above. Beautiful old trees spread over the walkway, and in front of a long adjacent wing, was a parking lot filled with large, dated cars. She turned the pages quickly until she found Greg's formal high school picture.

Thinner, hair darker and shorter, Greg wore a narrow solid tie and white shirt. He had an optimistic glow and no glasses. Under the black and white picture an impressive array of credits ranged over his four years at Revere. He had no nickname, just Greg. " Damn, I can't begin to tell you how much I miss you, Greg."

She had written to Reedsville, Pennsylvania. The responses, both from the newspaper and the police confirmed what she had suspected. Greg was truthful about his relationship with Marco St. Germaine. Marco had maliciously killed the young hitchhiker. Bought to trial and convicted mostly because of Greg's testimony, Marco was sentenced to life imprisonment.

She thumbed to the picture of Mark J. St. Germaine. No credits were posted under his photograph, but he had acquired the nickname, Marco. He maintained a blatant and defiant stare. Although dead, his evil bypassed time.

Then she turned directly to the candid shot of Marco, clad in his black leather jacket; collar turned up. He smoked a cigarette butt with one leg perched on the school's wide steps. She slammed

the book shut, stuffed it in the carry-on and concentrated on the road.

At first the rain only smeared the windshield, but soon the showers pelted the car as she sped across the countryside, and the lightning, followed by the cracking thunder, flashed intermittently. Leaves whipped by her window, some sticking to the windshield before being swept away by the wipers. Caroline squinted and tried to see through the mass of surging water. She prayed she would not breakdown alone on the road in an uninhabited area.

She chugged up the steep slope, but upon reaching the crest, bright, blinding headlights burst over the next hill. The windshield was a translucent mass of water and light. Her first reaction was to push the brake pedal, but the car fishtailed. She swerved, nearly hitting an oncoming truck as she fought to regain control.

In the mirror she saw the truck's red taillights blend into the darkness and she gripped the wheel, breathing erratically as she realized how close she had come to being crushed. But as she paralleled the water covered, yellow highway line, she saw something ahead; possibly the East Greenwich Bridge. In the haze, the fuzzy outline metal girders spanned the small river, but someone wandered along the road. Caroline slowed, leaned forward, and put on the high beams again.

A hunched over woman with ghostly white hair, wearing in a dark knitted shawl, shuffled along desolate road. Caroline's heart pounded as she approached and less than a hundred feet away the

gypsy from the restaurant turned. Instinctively, Caroline accelerated and passed the dark eyed woman, but skidded across the metal grid. She kept the pedal down and sped up the opposite riverbank. In the mirror, the bridge moved into the darkness and she raced down the narrow road.

With only two miles to the highway, Caroline thought she had hallucinated. That old woman was not walking in the rain. Caroline breathed deeply, dismissing the sighting as part of her grief, and she neared a long row of trees close to the highway. Soon, she would be on her way to the airport.

But as she moved under the trees, the East Greenwich Bridge reappeared, and the white haired woman stood on the grid, within the storm's turmoil. " No! No! This *can not* be happening!" Caroline jammed her foot on the brake pedal, spun the car like a out of control and fishtailed toward the hill. The Volvo engine whined as she consistently checked the rear mirror, accelerated away from the gypsy and up the hill. She flew over the crest, but saw East Greenwich Bridge and the gypsy at the bottom. Not knowing how to break the cycle, she methodically stopped the car, backed up the hill. Escape from the bridge and the woman seemed impossible. Gritting her teeth, she brushed the gas pedal, and at incredible speed, whizzed by the woman, bounced over the bridge, and careened up the other side. The gypsy and the bridge faded into the night. " Yes! Yes!"

The delay might cause her to miss the plane, but at least the nightmare would be over. She nodded when the green interstate sign's white letter reflected in the headlights. As she signaled and moved up the curving ramp, the cars zooming down the highway reassured her the woman was gone.

She looked over her shoulder, and prepared to pull onto the highway, but when she turned, the East Greenwich Bridge materialized and the woman waited for her. The car, overtaken by an unknown force, slowed, and the steering locked. As she passed the woman and rolled forward, she stared through the swishing wipers. She raised her hand to her mouth at the sight of the fringed shawl, straw white hair, and deep eyes.

Again she went by the woman. She stopped in the middle of the bridge, but could not leave the car when she pulled at the door handle. In the mirror the old lady moved through the red taillight glow. Caroline slammed her foot against the pedal, revving the engine, but she remained stuck on the bridge. The rain tapped a persistent chorus over the car roof and the wipers seemed followed the cadence. She bashed the wheel.

" Damn this!"

The woman's ghostly form appeared at the side door. In unison, the electronic locks popped up, Caroline continued clawing the handle fell into her hand, and she backed against her door. A chilling air accompanied the gypsy into the car. " No! No!"

" I... am aware of your problem." She had the same heavy accent, but, despite the showers, she was not wet.

" Why are you in my car?"

" Do you prefer to leave things the way they are?"

" I don't understand. How is this possible? This can't be happening. I don't believe you're real."

" I assure you, Caroline. I am real and this is real. As real as it can be."

Caroline jabbed her finger. " You knew that Greg was going to die last December. And I don't know why you are out here in the middle of nowhere and why I keep coming back to this bridge."

" You have come back to where you need to be."

" Don't talk in riddles with me. I want to know why this is happening!"

She raised her dark brows, hardly moving her mouth and spoke as if she were chanting a Latin mass. " It is not necessary you know. I have asked you a question: Would you prefer to leave things the way they are?"

" Are you talking about Greg being dead?"

" I am aware of the flow of change all around us." Then she paused, folding her hands as she looked upward.

" What is all around us?"

" There are other realities all around us, twisting and turning, as is their nature. Vast whirlpools of existence. Like a mighty river

flowing from the source. Only you can choose, Caroline. Only you can choose to become a part of these primordial forces."

" I still don't understand."

" It is you who can become the catalyst, the agent of change. Neatly sewing the fabric of time. You, Caroline, can annihilate the present. You can turn these forces and prevent your husband's untimely death."

" No, that's impossible. Greg is dead. How did you know that Greg was going to die?"

" I have said that I am aware-"

" You knew Marco St. Germaine, didn't you?"

" You cannot understand... I am one with forces beyond your comprehension. I can gather the energies for you, Caroline, but you must be the catalyst. I will return to nothingness, but you will participate."

" But you knew Greg would die! And I miss my husband!"

" And if you had listened, your husband would be alive now... No more delay. Board the plane with your uncle but understand the implications of your actions from this moment onward."

Caroline, overwhelmed and confused, closed her eyes. Breathing carefully, she attempted to compose herself, but when she opened her eyes the woman had vanished. She turned in the seat and looked at the rear window. " Where are you?"

She had control of the car again, inched forward, but as she crossed the bridge she sensed, like that night at the restaurant, she had entered another realm on the edge of existence. She zipped up the far hill, glanced in the mirror and was now cognizant of forces beyond her control.

4

Relief swept over her when she saw the airplanes taking off and landing at the airport and she steered toward the concrete parking garage. The dashboard's green digits showed she still had time to get onboard. Maybe the bridge incident was a dream and the old lady, a manifestation of her desire to have Greg again. She took the ticket, maneuvered the car inside the parking garage, and found a space. Her heart beat faster as she popped the trunk and scurried around the car. She grabbed her bags from the trunk and jogged to the terminal.

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As they processed her tickets and her bags started down the conveyor, she debated whether to tell Ben about the gypsy's encounter and was still indecisive as she trotted down the carpeted plane ramp. The flight attendant smiled and Caroline squeezed into the aisle. Ben, seated halfway down the jet, had a most unusual grin and waved as she neared the seat.

"Caroline, I wasn't going to believe her, but I have to ask you."

" I'm sorry, Ben. Believe who?" she asked, securing her carry on.

" That gypsy woman."

The same nervous tightness she had experienced back at the East Greenwich Bridge now tingled through her stomach. Her face tensed as she slowly turned toward her uncle. " I'm sorry..."

" She said you were frightened back at the bridge."

The flight attendants soon marched down the aisle while checking the overhead compartments. Caroline stepped over Ben and fell stunned into the window seat. " This is crazy."

" She said I would finally strike it big," said Ben, buckling his safety belt. Ben told her the gypsy said they would both now have to redefine Greg's sudden death. Confused how the woman could be in two places at once, Caroline said nothing, buckled her own belt and stared out the window as the plane backed from the busy terminal.

" Caroline, she talked about the forces of fate. How they would converge in a new way."

The plane now turned and took its position on the runway, but burgeoning pressure tugged at her emotions. She looked down the mist swept terminal's lighted windows and paused for a few seconds to gather her thoughts. " Ben, I don't understand what is going on here."

He excitedly opened his large blue eyes. " The paranormal."

" Oh, God! I must be finally losing my mind." She nervously pushed her fingers back through her thick hair.

" Caroline, have a little faith, will you? He modulated his voice.

" There are things that exist out there. Things beyond our control."

The plane was now at the end of the runway.

" Right. You've been telling me all this for years. Like those voodoo experiments that you were involved in. You and your palm readers and séances. I won't let myself start believing in that stuff, Ben."

" Okay, then how did I know about the bridge?"

The jet's mighty engines roared and the craft shot forward, pushing Caroline into the seat as she searched for answers. As the airliner quickly gained speed, the terminal, city buildings, and ground blurred.

" I don't know how she knew. I just want this plane to get airborne and land in Miami. Then I want to be sitting on the ship's deck, sunning myself, and get away from everything."

The plane tilted upward, leaving the ground, and the blue runway lights disappeared into the passing fog and clouds. Rain skimmed the outside window and lightning flashed through the sky. She put on the cabin headphones and twisted the channels as Ben extended the sports page. When the storm turbulence threatened, Caroline gripped the headphones, aware the old

woman frightened her more than the weather. She leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes.

When they finally cleared the clouds and leveled within a field of bright shining stars, she dragged the headphones over her head. Ben continued reading the paper as she held his hand. "

Ben, I'm sorry."

" Ah," he said with a gracious smile and he moved his hand through the air.

She turned and stared into the half lit, convoluted cloudbank extending to the horizon. The plane gained altitude a short time later, heading south, but Caroline, although dismissing what she had seen, grew uneasy.

* * *

The storm system stretched to Florida and lightning continued to illuminate the gray cloudbanks, but turbulence remained throughout the flight. The sudden shifting not only unnerved her, but caused the belt to rip at her waist. She wondered how the plane could withstand such pressure without breaking apart.

" What the hell?" asked Ben. He woke and blinked his eyes as they bounced and he peered out the window. " I've never seen anything like this."

" Must be the night for it. Don't worry, Ben. In half an hour we'll be on the ground."

" Yeah, but will we be in one piece? You watch, Caroline, they're going to divert us somewhere. You watch."

Caroline grabbed Ben when the pilot brought the plane into the storm. With the nose pointed down the jet pierced the thick clouds, the thunder shook the aircraft's shell, and the once distant lightning flashed like a strobe across the darkened cabin. A prodigious crack jolted them, causing lateral movement as the fog whipped by the free falling plane.

" Ben!"

" He knows what he's doing."

" He does?"

The plane's angle and rapid acceleration convinced her they would crash. A sudden death meant she would feel nothing. Was this the way the gypsy would reunite her with her dead husband? Then she heard the plane engines start and the jet gradually leveled out. She saw a starry sky and city lights across the landscape. The pilot spoke on the intercom, apologizing for the turbulence and promised a smooth flight into the city.

" I thought we were goners," said Ben.

" Remind me to make train reservations on the way back. I have to use the restroom, Ben."

" Be my guest."

Caroline unbuckled her seat belt and stepped by her uncle. The plane casually sustained a lower altitude. She steadied herself on the seats and moved to the rear. Two people, grungy characters in faded jeans were already in line. The man had unwashed long hair, side burns, and a jersey with colors twisted into the fabric. His girlfriend, hair equally as unkempt, wore a green army jacket. Caroline folded her arms and waited to use the restroom.

" Bummer," said the man, his eyelids heavy.

" Yeah, bummer," replied Caroline.

His girlfriend went in the bathroom first.

" Reb-buck?" he asked, staring at her sneakers. " Ree-buck... What are those some kind of astronaut sneakers?"

" No."

Then he reached over, lifting up her wrist. Annoyed, she quickly retracted her hand, but the man seemed perplexed. " That watch is weird. No hands. Like some kind of countdown clock. You with NASA?"

" No, I'm not with NASA."

" How come this space race with the Russians? They're people, too. Not just communists..."

" What?"

The guy lit his cigarette and held it in his hand as he turned.

" Too much spending money to go to the moon when we could be feeding poor people." Someone emerged from the other restroom. The longhaired guy exhaled in her face and entered the

bathroom. Caroline stared at the door and wondered about his attitude. A few moments later the woman in the army jacket opened the other restroom door and also gazed down at her watch.

" Don't you start," Caroline said as she moved inside.

* * *

Caroline washed her tired face with cold water and removed a paper towel and wiped her eyes as the pilot came over the intercom again.

" Ladies and Gentlemen, we are on our final approach to Philadelphia."

She opened her green eyes and the mirror reflected her astonishment and she turned to the tiny perforated ceiling speaker.

" *What?*"

" We apologize for any inconvenience on this flight. Outside weather conditions are clear and the air temperature is fifty-two degrees."

Caroline threw the paper towel toward the waste container and pushed the door open. Ben, already coming down the aisle, had the same bewildered expression on his face. He opened his mouth several times to speak, but he could not get the words out.

" Ben, what the hell is going on here?"

The pilot asked everyone to take their seats while the plane landed. Ben had tears in his eyes and shook his head. " Caroline, what does your watch say?"

" June fifteenth." She looked at her watch again.

" 1993?" asked Ben.

" Yeah."

" I just saw a newspaper, Caroline, that read: September 30, 1968! People are reading magazines for September and October of 1968, Caroline. I saw Time Magazine!"

" Ben, look. I don't know what we're doing in Philadelphia-"

" She altered reality, Caroline. Somehow she has sent us back in time. Don't you see?"

" No," said Caroline, shaking her head.

Unable to believe Ben, she stumbled down the aisle and leaned over to view the reading material. The flight attendant approached her. " Miss, we will be landing. If you would take you seat."

" The date. What is today's date?" asked Caroline. " Well, today is the thirtieth."

Caroline stared as she slowly backtracked down the aisle. With her brow tightened she faced Ben and then dropped into the seat. Ben buckled her seat belt. As the plane pitched downward, she stuck her cheek against the window glass as her uncle held her wrist. " Correct me if I'm wrong, Caroline, but isn't Greg's

hometown, Reedsville, about sixty or seventy miles from Philadelphia?"

Caroline slowly nodded, mesmerized by the streetlights and plazas below. " How can we be back in time?"

" We are here for one reason: To prevent Greg's accident, Caroline. He was hurt sometime in December of 1968, correct?"

" December twentieth..."

" Don't you see? You have a chance, but more than that, Greg has a chance not only for his career, but the possibility of staying away from that creep, St. Germaine."

" I suppose."

" If he doesn't hang around St. Germaine, he doesn't implicate him in the hitchhiker's death. There would be no motive for revenge..."

As the plane made the final approach, she nodded and slowly moved her eye from the city lights, across the landscape to the horizon. Images of the black and white yearbook pictures moved like ocean waves in her thoughts, captivating her with the notion of Greg being miraculously alive sixty or seventy miles inland. She sat back as the plane prepared to touch down and glanced briefly at her uncle's almost drunken grin.

" A younger Ben Thatcher is alive in Detroit."

Ben nodded, his blue eyes lighting up. " Thirty-eight, living with Amy on Canal Street," he said, thinking for a few seconds.

" This is unbelievable!"

" You got that right, Maestro. You know, I can't explain it... I don't want to explain it, but I do feel we are here to prevent that accident."

" Yup. I learned long ago that you just can't explain or understand everything."

Again, she thought about the yearbook and the pictures not yet been taken. The plane taxied and soon approached the terminal as she kept pressed her nose to the cold window. This was really the past, 1968. She again tried to reason it through, but Ben understood. No explanation, logical or otherwise, could fully explain her presence back here.

When the plane stopped, Ben stepped into the aisle with the other passengers, reached up, and pulled down the carry on luggage. Caroline studied her new surroundings. Men ruled the business world, wearing white shirts and narrow solid ties. Most did not yet spot side burns or longer hair. Sneakers and jeans were the attire of the young, skirts were shorter, and some woman had long hair.

She moved into the flow, clung to her uncle as they inched forward, and now contemplated how they were going to live within this time period. They had little cash, most of it from the future, no jobs, and no background. Ben cordially thanked the flight attendants and Caroline walked with him up the ramp. " You're so chipper, Ben."

Ben looked as if he was scheming when he pointed at the flight listings. " Look, Caroline, we left Chicago on Flight 32."

" There is no flight 32 from Chicago."

" And we arrived on Flight 11."

" I don't know how you can be so excited. We're back here in 1968 with money from 1993, no jobs-

" September 30, 1968."

He nodded his head, but his eyes were ablaze with activity. They neared the baggage sign and started down the stairs.

" So?"

" The World Series, Caroline."

" Forget the World Series!"

" I remember that series as if it were yesterday. The Tigers beat the Cards four games to three... And in November, Nixon will become President of the United States."

" Look, I'm as amazed as you are about being back here, but we have some serious problems."

Ben shrugged his shoulders as they reached the baggage area. He had a dumb grin and remained unfazed even when their bags never showed up. They climbed the stairs and wandered aimlessly through the terminal. With only her carry on and no change of clothes, Caroline panicked.

" Ben, listen to me."

" Look, a Nehru jacket," said Ben, pointing to a young man passing by, wearing a coat with no collar.

" You're walking around here like you're a kid at the zoo. I don't know about you, but I'm scared."

" Don't fret." He pointed to his right. " I want you to wait for me in that restaurant."

" Why, what are you going to do?"

" Give me your money, Caroline."

" What?"

" I'm going to convert the currency, my dear." She reluctantly reached into her wallet and emptied out the money into his hands.

" Only bills, harder to trace. Get yourself something to eat. I'll be right back."

" Ben," she said, holding his wrist. " You have my money."

" Sweetheart, everything is going to be all right. Stay cool. I'll be right back."

Caroline watched him traipse across the terminal, past open areas, without the security, metal detectors or the x-ray scanners of the future. Then she entered the restaurant, seating herself at the counter. The food aromas accelerated her hunger pangs as she picked up a laminated menu. The cheaper prices surprised her and the even possibility of Ben not converting the money did not stop her from ordering a sandwich, fries, and coffee. She half finished the sandwich when he arrived back ten minutes later and winked when he saw her at the counter.

" Good to see you smile." He sat down on the stool next to her.

" We have cash."

" How can we have cash?" she asked, finishing the sandwich.

" Cabbies. I broke all the bills. The hundreds first. Then the smaller denominations. They'll never trace it, Caroline. That money will be so far scattered. We have enough now."

" Enough?"

" Right, to get us to Reedsville." He ordered a hamburger platter and coffee.

" Now, there's an intriguing thought, Ben. Traveling to Reedsville. Where my husband is seventeen years old and... alive. You know, I can't even fathom Greg actually being alive again."

Ben nodded, thinking as he sat. The waitress served the coffee and he spoke with the cup to his lips. " When I unload all the money, we can get a room or apartment."

Caroline remained apprehensive. She had dreamed of having Greg back and of things being changed for the better. But to actually be back in 1968, burdened with the fragile responsibility of altering history, overwhelmed her. " Then what, Ben? Do we live like hermits until December twentieth? God... And how do we prevent that accident?"

" I don't know," he said, setting down the cup. " I don't know."

She pushed her fingers back through her hair. " And what if we are successful? Then what? Do we just roll along through history? That old woman... where is she? "

" I don't have those answers either. But I would think that we have to be very careful about changing the future because we could be changing things that might affect you and me... Or maybe she put us outside that realm. I just don't know."

The waitress slid Ben's hamburger platter across the counter. Caroline smiled nervously and shook her head as she saw their reflection, warped like an apparition in the chrome napkin holder.

" If we were going to be so prone to change things, why would she have sent us back over two months before the accident?"

" I told you," he said, his mouth full of hamburger. " Some things can't be explained."

" Either way," she said, gently putting her lips together, " Greg is *alive* and those forces of fate are pushing us toward Reedsville. And I honestly don't think there is anything that is going to stop me from seeing my husband again."