

MIRROR - MIRROR

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DAVE LINDSAY

A NOVEL BY

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MIRROR-MIRROR

A Novel

By

Dave Lindsay

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DAVE LINDSAY



Mirror-Mirror follows the release of *Encore*, a futuristic fiction novel published in 2000. The author's spirited imagination is unwavering, but it's his flair for conveying those astonishing visions that attract his readers.

A successful athletic career and an ardent passion for the sport have spawned a series of literary works that will deliver an insightfully entertaining history of High Diving, America's original extreme sport.

To learn more about Dave's literary projects, visit his websites: DLBooks.net or KunzeEntGroup.com

A carpenter in 2008 purchases a peculiar mirror only to learn that it conceals a mystical portal that enables him to travel through time seven years into the past. So he contacts his younger self in 2001 and uses knowledge from the future to build a phenomenal empire. But when a full-scale nuclear war takes place in 2008, Vinni Cross becomes the last man alive on a desolate planet. He and his younger counterpart must use their unique capabilities to save the world and their precious wife from nuclear annihilation.

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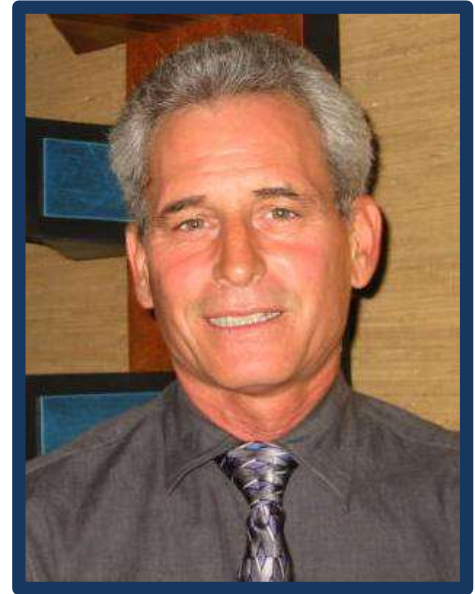


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A note from the author...

Just when it appeared that writers and filmmakers had taken the concept of time-travel in just about every conceivable direction, my latest book comes along to add another intriguing twist.

I would contend that the possibilities are virtually endless, limited purely by one's imagination. *Mirror-Mirror* invites you to climb inside the mind of an average man whose haphazard activities while traveling back in time inadvertently change the course of history. Put yourself in Vinni's shoes and contrive your own scenarios as he struggles through a series of bizarre situations and monumental challenges.



As always, I leave the final judgment up to the reader. Regardless of how well written my books are, they at the very least accurately convey my vivid imagination. The objective is to ensure that the story is credibly captivating and creatively entertaining. The untapped regions of our minds are as vast as the universe itself. There really is no end to the sphere of creativity. The intent is to inspire visions that are truly unique to each reader. So, please use your imagination to enhance the story.

The critics love to get caught up in evaluating the grammatical errors and inappropriate punctuation. If that's your focus, you certainly won't be disappointed, but you'll end up missing out on something very special. So, please don't dwell on my 'style' of writing or the mistakes made in the process. Set aside your red marker and enjoy the story which is truly fascinating. Cheers!

For more information about the author and his other literary projects, please visit the DL Books website: www.DLBooks.com

Dedication

Mirror-Mirror is dedicated to my beautiful wife Gayle who has been an absolute blessing. She has stuck by me through thick, thin and everything in between, and there has been an awful lot of in between. Thank you for sharing my life!

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	<i>Man in the Mirror</i>	6
Chapter 2	<i>Only the Young</i>	21
Chapter 3	<i>Leaving Las VEGS</i>	40
Chapter 4	<i>Please Come to Boston</i>	51
Chapter 5	<i>Good Vibrations</i>	60
Chapter 6	<i>My Generation</i>	85
Chapter 7	<i>Ball of Confusion</i>	102
Chapter 8	<i>If I Could Turn Back Time</i>	112
Chapter 9	<i>Where the Streets Have No Name</i>	121
Chapter 10	<i>Marooned</i>	136
Chapter 11	<i>Gentle on MY Mind</i>	146
Chapter 12	<i>It Couldn't Be Better</i>	152
Chapter 13	<i>Into the Mystic</i>	161

CHAPTER 1

Man in the Mirror

A flamboyant high-pitched chant ended another drastically overpriced sale at an estate auction in Cody's Corner, a tiny little community about thirty miles northeast of Daytona Beach.

"SOLD for thirty-six-fifty to..." the auctioneer declared with a well-punctuated hesitation. For the frail silver-haired woman, he wittingly added, "one of the prettiest little ladies in town. Show 'em your number, sweetie...number one-forty-two. And we're off to the next item up for bid on 'Tommy's Price Is Right'."

Vinni Cross was a master carpenter by trade and a proficient picker. He shook his head in disgust at the ludicrous selling price of an old brass bed but credited the talented caller who had succeeded in establishing some very high standards for the sale. It was clear that any genuine bargains at this auction would be few and far between. Since he had driven more than an hour to attend, Vinni was determined to leave with something.

His specialty was old wooden furniture and décor pieces that required some restoration. Refurbished antiques accounted for a large portion of his modest income. So, he slipped away from the crowd to browse some of the less desirable items and that's when he noticed the mirror. A very old and rather odd-shaped full-length mirror had been haphazardly propped against the wall of a dilapidated shed in the back.

The peculiar mirror was mounted to a matching base with decorative bolts on each that allowed for angle adjustments. It was larger than most, nearly eight feet tall, and some sections were almost four feet wide. It certainly lacked luster, but Vinni concluded that it was at least two hundred years old. It was the exquisite design and the intricate woodwork of its handcrafted frame that caught his eye. The shape reminded him of a jagged edged hole left in a glass picture window after a brick had been thrown through it. He envisioned it mounted directly to a wall. In the right setting, it could conceivably create a similar effect.

The mirror had obviously been buried in someone's musty cellar for several years. The frame's original lacquer finish had faded to gray and the delicate wood was pitted and ready to split. Images reflected in the discolored glass of its face were distorted and there were strange jade-colored metallic streaks imbedded deep in the glass. Vinni had pretty-good idea what was involved in mitering the joints of so many unusual angles. The fact that someone so long ago could have cut the glass to fit so precisely amazed him. Only a true connoisseur of the trade could fully appreciate the skillful craftsmanship that went into its original fabrication.

The back panel was clearly a meager afterthought and had obviously been installed by an amateur. He thought it was rather strange that a bland sheet of weathered plywood had been heavily nailed to the back of such a beautiful frame, but that was a question he would soon have an answer for. Even for a craftsman like Vinni, restoration would be a challenge, but its potential seemed unlimited.

In its day, the mirror was undoubtedly an elegant piece. To him, it was simply a diamond in the rough. Even in its dreadful condition, Vinni figured it would fetch several hundred dollars at this sale, but he also knew that the right collector would pay considerably more for it once it had been restored. The initial challenge was to purchase it at a fair price.

If Vinni knew then what he'd come to know later that night, he would have paid any price. The peculiar mirror was simply a façade designed to conceal a treasure more valuable than anyone could possibly have imagined. He slid the piece behind a large armoire to minimize its exposure. An old rocking chair under a shady oak tree provided him with the perfect place to relax until the slow-moving auction reached the old shed.

If six feet is considered tall, Vinni was an inch shy with short wavy curls of light gray hair tucked under a faded St. Louis Cardinals ball cap. Dark olive-colored skin served to compliment the distinguished Italian features that dominated his appearance, but it was his mild-mannered Romanian heritage that shined through in his soft-spoken personality.

He had celebrated his forty-eighth birthday on the 12th of August in 2008, exactly one month ago to the day. The whimsical dreams of becoming a successful entrepreneur had diminished a long time ago, but his reputation for quality workmanship was impeccable. Word of mouth in the region generally kept the one-man operation as busy or slow as he wanted. A meek form of semi-retirement was a goal that a conservative lifestyle could conceivably enable him to achieve in the next ten years or so.

Vinni was also an avid poker player with a knack for reading people and he noticed that the auctioneer had his eye on another exquisite item waiting in the wing. It was in his best interest to expedite this nominal sale. Vinni studied the crowd's reaction as an assistant shuffled the mirror into the staging area.

"It looks like Jimmy has a rare antique mirror to put on the block. This vintage piece of 17th century history has certainly seen better days, but it's qualities like those that make an item like this priceless." The inept understatement set the stage. "So, let's start the bidding at a paltry five for this eye-catching relic. Who'll give five hundred?" The lack of bidder response indicated that the starting bid was way too high.

"Alright, I'll admit it needs a little work. Let's take it down a notch. Who'll get the ball rolling at three?" There was still no apparent interest. "Surely someone will give me two, two hundred then." Vinni was rarely first to bid, but the number was getting attractive. "C'mon folks, don't let this rare beauty get away from ya. If nothing else, it'd make a nice decoration for your husband's man cave," he said with a bold chuckle, but the stubborn crowd refused to yield. "Alright then, you start this show. C'mon now, somebody give me a number."

Vinni took advantage of the rare opportunity. He stepped forward in his faded bib overalls and spoke with an air of humorous sarcasm, "I'll give ya a buck for it, Tom." The ridiculous bid spurred an influx of muffled laughter from the crowd.

Vinni was a regular and the auctioneer knew him well. He leered at Vinni with squinted eyes to express his discontent. "Alright, we've got our first...bid," the caller proclaimed without repeating the number. "Now let's get serious. Who'll give me a hundred?" Almost as if in support of his bold ploy, the crowd remained silent. Vinni glared at the auctioneer with raised eyebrows and a staunch devious grin. "C'mon people, surely someone will give me a legitimate bid. I'm open to any number, any number at all."

Vinni leaned forward with his hand to his ear and in triumphant subterfuge spoke out with a smirk, "Let's hear those magic words, Tom."

The auctioneer was now wearing a humble frown and paused with a hopeful glance at the crowd before surrendering. "Alright," he mumbled in a muffled acquiescence. "...item number 382 is GIVEN AWAY to...what's your number Vinni?" Vinni flashed his card, "number sixty-four."

"Thank you, sir," Vinni said with a modest bow, which enticed smatters of applause from the small gallery. As Vinni strolled away, he could hear the faint sound of the humiliated auctioneer's voice in

the background trying to reverse the diminishing tide of his proceedings.

"Jimmy. Let's bring out that magnificent 1963 Chevy Impala. Folks, have I got a classic for you? This baby is in A-1 condition, fully loaded and, folks, she's sat untouched in a garage for twenty-two years."

Vinni tossed a half-assed salute in the caller's direction and laid a dollar on the registration table. It was more awkward than heavy, but the stout wide-framed mirror was difficult to carry. A fellow picker stepped up to help wrestle it over to Vinni's 1987 Chevy pickup, which sported a sun-faded apple-green finish.

"That was a pretty slick move, Vinni," the man complimented with sincere admiration. "I sure as hell wasn't going to bid against ya, but by the looks of it, you might have gotten what you paid for. This thing's in pretty rough shape."

"This thing has a lot of what I call character, Sam. She just needs a little TLC. Give me a few weeks. By the time I'm done with it, I'll get more than my money's worth out of this thing." That too would prove to be another ironic understatement.

"For a buck I guess you can't go too far wrong," the man declared with a slap on the fender, which sent specks of rust fluttering to the ground.

"Easy now, Sam. Rust might be the only thing holding this old tank together. I sure do appreciate help," he said as he finished strapping it down. The truck sped off down the long gravel driveway with a thick mixture of dust and white exhaust fumes swirling in the breeze behind him.

Vinni lived in a ninety-year-old house on the inland outskirts of Daytona Beach. The two-story home was built on an eight-acre parcel of sturdy sand. It wasn't much really and was in constant need of repair, but it was home. He never married and had lived alone most of his life, but he seemed perfectly content. The resale of woodwork was his primary source of income. There was a large barn full of unique items that were in the never-ending process of being restored. He was well-known at the regional flea markets and fairs for the quality of his workmanship.

By the time he got back to Daytona, it was already getting dark. So, he backed the truck up to the well-lit front porch, grabbed a few hand tools from a toolbox mounted over the bed and began loosening the

bolts that anchored the stand to each side of the frame. He slid the mirror out of his truck and maneuvered onto the well-lit porch but made the mistake of leaning it against the wall while he unloaded the base.

It wasn't so much the loud crash that made him cringe with shrugging shoulders and gritted teeth. It was the thought of spending his evening cleaning up the tiny fragments of shattered glass that made him wince. The huge mirror was lying face up on the wooden deck. Vinni was just hoping that the frame was still in one piece. If it was, there was an outside chance of salvaging it.

He looked down and much to his surprise saw his oxidized reflection staring back. He blew a breath of astonished relief into the cool autumn air. "This must be my lucky day," he said without knowing just how lucky he was about to become. He lifted it up and onto its edge but used a flowerpot to hold it in place.

An old carriage bolt lying on the deck was now imbedded in the thin plywood backing. He grabbed the hammer from a loop in his overalls and pried it from the splintered wood. The bolt was more than 2" long and the frame was less than 2" thick. For some reason, the bolt didn't shatter the glass. Vinni quickly dismissed the seemingly insignificant detail, but it was a valuable clue as to what the rest of his night had in store.

He slid a frozen pizza into the oven and, while his gourmet dinner was cooking, dragged both sections up a set of stairs to the second floor. Like the rest his house, the bedroom was nothing more than an extension of his workshop. The reassembled mirror was so tall that almost touched the ceiling. He walked it carefully into an open corner. After a brief inspection, he headed back downstairs.

The appetizing meal went down fast while watching an enthralling episode of "24" that he had recorded. It was around 10:30 PM when he climbed the squeaky stairs to retire for the evening. He stripped down to his boxers and studied the distorted image of his well-conditioned body in the newly acquired mirror, then climbed into bed and clapped twice to switch off the light.

The ritualistic barrage of 'to do' thoughts began to sizzle in his head, which was resting face up on the pillow. Suddenly, he saw an unusual spot shining on his wall. He watched it for a few minutes and searched the room trying to detect its source. The puzzling mystery finally got the best of him. So, he climbed out of bed and presumptuously walked over to the bedroom window.

Aside from an overhead light attached to his workshop in the distance, it was pitch black. Even the moon was well hidden by an overcast sky. So, he opened the window to a chorus of cricket music that filled the air. A group of fireflies illuminating themselves in the surrounding trees was the only other light he could see. When he turned around, the mysterious spot was still there, which sparked a quest to solve the mystery. Just as Vinni started to approach it, the spot just as suddenly disappeared. That added even more comical confusion to the stupefying anonymity.

Vinni wasn't a believer in the paranormal, but when something falls short of a logical explanation, the mind begins to wander, and all sorts of peculiar thoughts start creeping in. After several minutes, he gave in to the bizarre anomaly and climbed back into bed, but every few seconds or so, a curious eye would slide open.

Within a few minutes, again out of nowhere, the strange spot suddenly reappeared. Vinni went into action. The blanket flew to the side as he leaped to his feet to investigate. It would seem, based on the direction the light appeared to be coming from, the mirror should be blocking it. He waved his hand in front of the mirror, which did nothing to interrupt the flow. Then, as illogical as the conclusion may have seemed, passed a hand between the backside of the mirror and the wall. When the beam of light transferred onto the palm of his hand, he fearfully jerked it away as if it had just been burned. The harmless ray of light was again shining on his wall. Curiosity quickly transformed into a challenge.

He gripped the frame and slid the mirror away from the wall. As he jockeyed it back and forth, the strange ray of light danced across the wall in perfect unison. There was no doubt about it. The mysterious light was somehow coming from the back of this mirror.

Vinni spun the mirror ninety degrees and began to inspect it more closely. Aside from the bolt-hole created when the mirror fell on the porch earlier that evening, it was a solid piece of wood. He positioned his right hand behind the hole with the peculiar light shining on it and stretched out his left hand on the front side. 'If the light isn't shining through the mirror, then where could it be coming from?' When his face moved towards the hole for a closer look, the light was soon shining directly into his eye. An array of mindboggling questions began filling his head.

He cautiously pressed his eye toward the perforation as if he was peeking through an old keyhole. Much to his awestruck amazement, he found himself peering into another distinctly different room. At this point, the only thing he knew for certain is what he wasn't seeing.

This wasn't a room in any part of his house or a place he had ever seen before. He continued observing the new and very bizarre odyssey.

A shadow of a person crossed the path of his limited line of sight, which made Vinni's eyes fly wide open wide. He snapped back to avoid being seen by whomever or whatever it was, but timidly brought his eye back to the slit and watched as a woman walked calmly toward a closet. She retrieved a light blue robe hanging from a hook on the door and laid it out on the bed.

He felt a little like a perverted moron in some sort of peep show booth, which was a disturbing thought, but this was somehow different, much different. An unprecedented form of morbid intrigue was prompting his behavior. He still had no idea what he was observing or if was even real, but there was nothing within the realm of normal about it and he simply couldn't resist the urge.

Before long, the woman was standing directly in front of him on the opposite side of some sort of multi-dimensional two-way mirror. The menagerie of inquisitive thoughts was momentarily put aside when the lovely young lady began shedding her garments.

Putting on a show, apparently for his eyes only, was a vivaciously attractive stripper in her late twenties. She shook down her long dark hair from its pinned-up bun. Clad only in a matching set of black lace panties and rather sheer brassier, the woman began studying her own feminine features on the opposite side. She struck several sensual poses as if auditioning for a photo spread in a risqué magazine. Vinni's initial thoughts were that 'someone' had 'somehow' generated the peculiar show exclusively for his amusement and he was obsessively glued to the private motion picture.

The woman turned and stretched one of her long sexy legs back toward the mirror, then shifted her position and pulled her robe to the side. With her back to the mirror, she glanced over her shoulder to scrutinize the curves of her well-shaped buttocks. The woman suddenly had a look of visible concern and, as she moved closer, seemed to be peering as deeply into the mirror as Vinni. It appeared she had spotted his eyeball leering at her.

Logic dictated that since he could see her, she must be able to see him as well, and that caused another very swift retreat into the shadows. He pressed his ear against the plywood but couldn't hear any sounds. It took a few moments to work up the nerve, but Vinni's hazel-colored eye was soon fixed back on the strange aperture. Regardless of what he was seeing, he wasn't quite ready to suspend the activities.

He was relieved to see that the woman was simply inspecting a tiny blemish on her forehead. After several seconds of looking at the only flaw Vinni could find on her body, the young lady backed away and twirled gracefully with a tug to tighten the cloth belt of her satin robe. This time when she crossed the room, she disappeared through a doorway and with a quick flip of a switch, the light was extinguished.

Either the woman wasn't aware of his presence or she didn't care. Both were eerie notions to consider, but as far as Vinni was concerned, the performance was simply part of the 'show'. For the time being however it appeared to be over.

Vinni stared into the darkness until his eyes grew weary of the strain. Within minutes, he had started another more vigilant inspection of the bizarre mirror. Some rather callused fingers glided down the edge of the frame carefully tracing every square inch of its surface. He made several feeble attempts to pull at the plywood, but because an excessive quantity of strong nails had been used to attach it, he'd need some tools. So, he scampered down the stairs to retrieve his hammer and chisel from the nail apron he had left sitting on the kitchen counter. Then he rushed back up three stairs at a time.

The lights were still out on the other side, so he began prying at the joint of the plywood with the claw of his hammer. Some sort of very strong adhesive had also been applied, which made its removal even more difficult. For a reason he'd never know, someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to seal this 'thing' off.

The nails were somewhat rusty, and the glue had lost much of its adhesive strength through the years. Vinni's persistent efforts were finally beginning to separate the plywood joint. He worked his way down from the top until the panel was loose enough to pull free by hand. The frustrating task took more than an hour, but with a final forceful yank, he ripped the plywood backing away.

There was now a full-length crystal-clear window that matched the dimensions of the peculiar multi-angled frame. From the front, and at first glance, it seemed as ordinary as any other hand-crafted mirror. This one however had been cleverly designed to conceal some very unusual features. Vinni stood back at a safe distance and stared into the extraordinary abyss.

Though it was still quite dark, faint moonlight through a window provided him with just enough illumination to make out most of the items in the woman's room. Vinni's heart was pounding as the trepidation began to intensify. Shifty eyes nervously explored the unusual surroundings. Whatever it was, it was something extremely

special.

One of man's most innate fears is the terrifying apprehension of the unknown. In contrast, man has an equally compelling urge to explore such mysteries. Vinni was psyching himself up to face that challenge. With a sweaty palm, he slowly reached out and lightly pressed the fingers of his open hand toward its surface. He took a deep breath and cautiously bent his fingers to touch it. A strange surge of numinous energy raced through his fingertips. That prompted a swift withdraw in response. He rubbed nervously at his affected fingers to alleviate the tingling sensation. "My God," he said on the chance He might be listening. "What the hell is this?"

It took a few moments to muster the courage, but he prepared for another attempt. When his tingling fingers began dissipating through the surface, he pulled away again, but almost as quickly put them back. The eerie feeling had a stimulating effect that seemed to encapsulate any portion of his body that contacted the plane. He was enthralled by it and was beginning to enjoy the new experience.

When he shoved more of his arm through, he noticed that the portion of his body that penetrated the plane disappeared on the other side. That frightened him into another full retreat. He shook his arm vigorously to thwart the odd sensation and to assure that his extremities were still intact. He was becoming even more inquisitive and prepared for himself more experimentation.

He took a very deep breath and grabbed on to each side of the frame to brace himself, then cautiously pressed his nose toward the invisible plane. With his eyes clinched shut, he leaned his head into the unknown. The interesting sensation filled it to the depth of penetration, but once it passed through to the other side, the feeling quickly subsided. He was still holding his breath as he slowly opened his eyes. The enhanced perspective provided him with a much broader view. He could see that the woman's bedroom door to the right was closed and he appeared to be alone.

As the fears began to diminish, the level of confidence started to increase. The tentative journey continued by pressing his entire left arm through the plane. Though he couldn't see or feel the limb, he was somehow fully aware of its presence. His body parts were in some way cosmically whole, but in another, completely invisible on the other side. He tried to take a breath but breathing proved to be a non-necessity in this strange dimension.

Another full retreat served to assure that he could. His new 'window' seemed safe enough, but there was still some uncertainty about

venturing too far. There was no way of knowing for sure that if he stepped all the way through, he could get back. The next move was contemplated with much the same consternation as an adventurous astronaut on his first spacewalk.

Vinni held on tightly to the edges of the outer frame and at a snail's pace stepped through with his left leg, but kept his right foot firmly planted on the solid floor as his upper torso leaned through. He was now straddling the base of the mirror with half of his body on each side. He certainly had nothing to validate the sense of security, but he essentially felt quite safe. Finally, with one more very awkward motion, his entire body finally disappeared through the mystical portal.

He was in a sense standing inside the woman's room, but there certainly wasn't any physical evidence to prove it. He turned back toward the mirror half expecting to see some sort of reflection but espied a similar window that provided a peculiar view of his own bedroom instead. He leaped back through to instill some additional confidence and his body quickly reappeared in his room with all its parts intact.

A huge swaggering grin was now dominating his face. He was thoroughly enjoying his new and rather unique capabilities. Several more leaps in and out served to remove any lingering doubt. So, the next time, he would stick around. The digital clock on the woman's nightstand was the brightest thing in the room and read 11:25 PM, but when he instinctively looked down at his wrist, there was nothing there to see. So, he looked back through the portal at the clock in his bedroom. Wherever it was he might have been, the time was the same.

There was a sense that his entire body was shaking in nervous anticipation, but at this point, all he had was a lot of unanswered questions. The only way to find out what this crazy apparatus was all about was to begin exploring this strange new world. He was careful not to touch anything as he wandered through the novel surroundings.

The bedroom window provided him with a clear view of what appeared to be an ordinary American neighborhood. It wasn't obvious enough to spark any suspicion, but what he failed to notice was the age of the vehicles parked on the street. There was a distinct difference and, though it seemed irrelevant to him at the time, the variation was furnishing some valuable clues.

As Vinni was moving rather casually through the room, the door suddenly swung open. The woman reentered and flipped on the lights. His presence was sure to inveigle an alarming reaction. It didn't. So,

Vinni froze in place with a look of startling fear on his invisible face. The woman nonchalantly moved toward him, almost as if she was walking up to greet him. Vinni couldn't muster the momentum to move from her path. Surprisingly, her body simply whisked through his as if he was some sort of poltergeist. The experience added another very interesting fact to the list he was compiling.

His body may have been indiscernible, but something unusual transpired as their particles collided. Both felt an odd surge of energy from the other's presence. For her, it was more like an eerie chill that prompted a slight hesitation to explore the sensation, which she quickly dismissed and headed for the bedside nightstand. The experience simply generated even more confusion.

The woman opened a drawer and pulled out a small revolver, which was set casually to the side, but the prospect of a gun being on hand made Vinni even more nervous. A hasty escape through the portal seemed like the only option, but he chose to remain motionless until a change in the circumstance warranted such action. In the silence, another interesting fact came to light. He could now hear every sound around him, even the TV from down the hall. That fact enticed him to consider the distinct possibility that he could be heard as well.

After retrieving a small white diary, the woman sat on the edge of the bed reading silently. Convinced that he was for the moment relatively safe, Vinni started moving slowly toward her. Just as he was about to glance over her shoulder, some sort of noble dynamic kicked in. Some men wouldn't have given it a second thought, but he suddenly considered himself an intruder. Since he was a man of principal with a reputation for high moral ethics, his conduct instilled a sense of disgrace. It was as if he was spying on this woman and the thought troubled him. He respectfully refrained.

She made a few quick entries in her journal, placed it back in the drawer and headed for the bedroom door where Vinni had come to be standing. As she pulled it open the substance of the wood passed through Vinni's spiritual being causing another unique sensation. He was surprisingly unalarmed by it and even found it to be somewhat amusing. This was simply the tip of cosmological iceberg. He was only beginning to discover the vast extent of capabilities the mirror had to offer. The lights went out and the door closed. Vinni was alone again and free to ponder his next move.

His eyes weren't open when he pressed his head through the hollow wall, so he didn't see the wiring his spiritual presence passed through, but he felt the racing surge it caused. The brief disruption also caused several lights on that circuit to flicker through the

house. Vinni paused to consider what had transpired and spontaneously spoke out loud, "Holy shit."

"What's that, honey?" the woman's voice rang out from somewhere down the hall.

"Did you say something?" a male voice echoed back from another room.

"I thought you did," she said with a smirk and some quick rationalization, "...probably just the TV."

"That's funny," he said under his breath. "You hear things I don't say and don't hear the things I do."

"I don't hear what?" she blurted back at him. The man rolled his eyes at his wife's response, which seemed to verify his claim.

Any doubt was gone. Vinni's voice could clearly be heard. The enlightening fact was both disturbing and somewhat refreshing, but he would have to be considerably more cautious from here on out. It certainly wasn't his intent to 'haunt' these poor people, but in some strange way, that's exactly what he was in the process of doing. There still weren't any clues as to where he was, what he was or how it all came to pass, but so far, there wasn't much about the experience he didn't like. It was uncharacteristic quality for a guy like Vinni, but this man, who came from a rather uneventful mundane existence, was having fun.

A quick trip down the hallway led to a family room where the man of the house was tilted back in a recliner with his face buried in a rumpling newspaper. A mug of cold beer was sitting within easy reach on the table next to him. His wife was in the kitchen dipping a bowl of chocolate ice cream. Vinni strolled slowly into the center of the living room and positioned himself directly in front of the man's chair.

The headlines on the front page of today's newspaper sent Vinni into a state of startled amazement; "AMERICA UNDER ATTACK - TERRORISM ON U.S. SOIL". He looked again to confirm the date; Wednesday, September 12, 2001. He stood in stunned silence and was lost in flabbergasting confusion. When he stepped through the portal, less than an hour ago, it was September 12th, but it was Friday, not Wednesday, and the year was 2008.

Though he couldn't experience the actual sensation, he was overwhelmed by a distinct sense of shock. There didn't appear to be

any other explanation. So, if what he was seeing was real, this mirror of his had somehow transported him exactly seven years back in time.

He wasn't a well-educated man, but he knew enough about science from the many documentaries he'd seen on TV to know that according to Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the prospect of time-travel was theoretically possible. Although modern science still considered it a farfetched notion, it was considered possible. To rise above the illogical conclusions that his racing thoughts were conjuring, he tried to focus on the principals of practical common sense and rationale. This had to be some sort of peculiar dream and maybe it was drug-induced, but this experience wasn't like any dream he ever had before.

As much as he wanted to, he simply couldn't dismiss the facts and was reminded that, in such a vast obscure universe, anything is possible. A special news bulletin bellowing from the TV caught the attention of everyone in the room. The man, his wife and Vinni all turned listened intently as the journalist began a follow up segment on the prior day's tragedy. Vinni could see the shock in their faces and recalled his reaction to the same disaster when he experienced it himself seven years ago.

'Is any of this really possible?' he tried to rationalize silently to himself. The lady was now walking towards him from the left, so he instinctively leaped out of her way. This time, in a fraction of a second, he found himself on the opposite side of the room. He hadn't just stepped to the side. He had moved from her path at lightning-speed. The discovery of another unique attribute prompted more awe-inspiring thoughts to fill his head.

Vinni studied the headlines on the man's Boston Globe Democrat and did his best to remember as many details as he could. To test some of those new capabilities, he slid down the hall and into the bedroom in split-second increments. One last visual inspection of the mirror would conclude his little trip. It was identical to his in every respect right down to the faded wood finish. With a quick hop through the jagged window, he was once again in his bedroom and, more importantly, in his own time. His physical traits were fully restored, and he was able to recall every aspect of his visit.

Vinni wouldn't waste any time either. He literally ran down the stairs to fire up his computer and began entering an assortment of Google search commands. There it was. The front page of the Boston Globe Democrat from September 12th in 2001 with the headlines and print identical to those he had just seen in the couple's house. He rushed back up the stairs, grabbed the plywood panel and loosely reapplied it with a few taps of his hammer. He wadded up some tissue paper and

stuffed it in to temporarily fill the bolt hole. Before he'd make another move, there was some extensive research to do.

Initially, sharing his amazing discovery sounded exciting, but he couldn't think of anyone he could trust enough to share something of this nature with. He sifted through a stack of loose files on his desk to retrieve an old address book and started going down the list on each page searching for potential candidates. He then paused with his finger marking a number and started dialing. Before he finished, he saw his own reflection in a normal mirror on a nearby wall and slowly lowered the receiver.

Vinni had become the man in the mirror and, as far as he knew, he was the only man alive that knew about it. Disclosure of a discovery like that, even to your closest friend, just didn't seem like a good idea. He knew all sorts of people, but true friends were a rare commodity. A person is lucky to have even one in a lifetime, but Vinni couldn't think of any. A decision of this magnitude would require a great deal more deliberation. For the time being, the remarkable discovery would remain a deep dark secret.

The remainder of that night was spent considering the realm of seemingly limitless possibilities. He was sure that he could somehow capitalize on this concept and enhance his inevitable future. He wasn't quite sure how to go about it, but he found the notion tremendously invigorating.

The next several hours were spent researching bits and pieces of information initially perceived as pertinent. Page after page of data from the corresponding timeframe was collected; long-shot sports scores, stock market performers, winning lottery numbers and Real Estate investment opportunities. It all seemed to be there for his benefit.

Since everything that crossed the plane became invisible, nothing could be physically carried through the portal. There would be no notes to carry with him and the potential would be drastically limited to memory, a trait he wasn't well known for. There was one other problem to contend with. The only one way this could work was if he had a partner in 2001 to deliver the information to.

Vinni would have to persuade someone in the previous time period to participate in his little scheme, but that would also mean opening himself up to an unknown element of risk. The key to his success would depend on his choice of partners. The right person would have to be someone he could trust implicitly, but who?

After pondering the question for most of the night, the only practical candidate became rather obvious. 'Who could possibly be more trustworthy than me?' The intriguing thought was most compelling and there didn't seem to be any logical reasons why that person couldn't or shouldn't be the younger version of himself.

With a little more help from the Internet, it was easy to narrow down where he was in 2001. The finish carpenter was living a relatively simple life in Edwardsville Illinois, a small community just across the river from St. Louis, MO. The next time through, that is where he'd be heading.

Security was critical. To guard against most of the foreseeable predicaments, Vinni would instruct his former self to obtain the mirror in 2001. The portal needed to be more accessible and, since it was presently in a house somewhere in the Boston area, street maps of the region were used to narrow down the search. Once the approximate location was determined, arrangements to retrieve it were expected to be simple.

It was 4 AM when Vinni wrapped up for the night, but sleep didn't come easy on the morning of September 13th, a date that was destined to be the most incredible day of his life.

CHAPTER 2

Only The Young

Vinni wrestled with a numb arm to answer the phone when it rang at 8:00 AM. "Hello," he managed in a garbled voice as the events of the previous night began to resurface like a freeform nightmare. A quick glance at the mirror confirmed that the recent experience didn't stem from some weird paranormal dream.

"Yeah Phil," he said softly into the receiver, "you're absolutely right. I should have called, but I can't make it today." The voice at the other end seemed persistent. "No, I promised I would, and I'd be glad to take care of it for you, but I'm tied up with another project right now and just can't get away today. I'd be glad to reschedule."

Vinni was disturbed by the man's abrupt attitude. "It's a closet door Phil. Another day or two isn't gonna kill ya," he cited as the frustration began to inflate. "Look, if you're in that big of a hurry, there's a butt-load of other guys out of the hall that can install it for you." Vinni paused while the man aggressively expressed his dismay. "Look," he said to end the call abruptly, "I don't need this in my life right now. Find someone else." He clicked the phone off and fell back onto his pillow.

Though he regretted the conversation and hastily burning a bridge with a long-time customer, Vinni had much bigger invisible eggs to fry. Even if he was wrong about his time-travel gizmo, a man with his talent would never go hungry. But, if he was right about this thing, there were going to be some very drastic changes taking place in his life starting today.

An early riser doesn't usually struggle so much to roll out of bed, but the night had been exhausting. He fired up the coffee maker, which was conveniently located on the bedroom dresser, and performed a full thirty seconds of moderate stretching before shuffling his way to the bathroom. Since he would soon be invisible in another dimension, hygiene wasn't expected to be much of a concern, but he showered and

dressed as if it were any other day.

This workday started with the exact measurements of the back of the mirror. A quick sketch noted the dimensions of each intricate angle. The next couple of hours were spent in his workshop fabricating a new door he'd install to conceal the portal. The door would look just like a typical back panel but would be mounted with interior hinges and would have a locking device that he could secure from the other side. There would be just enough space for his hands to manifest and unlatch the door when he was ready to return. Lights were even being installed to illuminate the portal-side when closed. It wasn't the most elaborate security system in the world, but it was expected to prevent someone from stumbling onto his little secret while he was 'away'.

Every now and then, work would stop to brush up on the material printed out the night before. Like a high school kid cramming for a final exam, it was a struggle to absorb so much information. A handy set of cheat sheets were stapled to the inside so they could be seen clearly from the other side without passing back through.

At 11 AM, Vinni Cross was standing in front of his enchanting window sorting through an array of mixed emotions. Thoughts of changing history were a little frightening, but just as equally inviting. With a chuckle, he stepped through to begin his radical adventure. The self-closing coiled hinges pulled the new door closed behind him and latched shut automatically.

The uncanny ability to move rapidly in this peculiar dimension would be a plus, but exactly how to travel between two distant points was still an uncertainty. The objective seemed simple enough, get from the house in Boston to his old home in Edwardsville, but it would still require a little guidance. So, once he located the Logan International Airport in Boston, he'd simply hitch a ride to St. Louis on a commercial flight from there. When he arrived and was in more familiar territory, he could get his bearings and find his way to the quaint college town.

A quick step through the exterior wall of the woman's empty bedroom put him out onto the lawn. Dorchester was easy enough to locate on a map, but he felt a lot like a lost tourist with no real sense of direction. He looked up at the sky. "Now that's something I haven't tried yet." After little more than a thought, he was soaring upward to get a geographical birds-eye view. In a split-second, he was hovering over the congested streets of the city.

"Wow," he said to compliment Einstein's conjectures. So far, most of Albert's theories were proving to be consistent with Vinni's state

of being. $E=MC^2$ appeared to be in force. The matter that made up his physical body in 2008 had apparently been mystically transformed into an obscure form of electromagnetic energy. Since gravity had virtually no effect on his enhanced physique, the new mode of transportation was a lot like flying at incredibly fast speeds without wings. It was the type of sensation a person could only experience in a vivid dream.

It didn't take long to spot an airplane descending for a landing in the distance. He zeroed in on the target and, in a matter of moments, he was inside the empty airport terminal. Since his visit coincided with the recent 9-11 attacks, most air traffic had been drastically restricted and, on this day, there were no flights scheduled for St. Louis. There was however one flight leaving for Chicago and he figured that was close enough, but it was in the processing of departing.

A quick maneuver put him at the departure gate, but the plane had already begun to taxi. A casual leap through the sealed door of the Boeing 747 provided easy access. Although he could no longer experience the actual ambiance of a commercial flight, there were plenty of empty seats in the First-Class cabin and a spot near a window provided with some free space. Sleep deprivation was no longer an issue in this new spiritual state, but Vinni's mind was racing so fast he couldn't have slept if he wanted to.

Most of the passenger conversations were understandably centered on the recent twin tower attacks and the dangers of flying in such a hostile environment. Vinni's train of thought was of course focused on something entirely different. The invisible man was experiencing one of man's most innate desires, the actual ability to travel through time.

The plane had been in the air for almost an hour when an intriguing thought prompted another playful experiment. 'I wonder what would happen if...' he thought to himself as he pressed an arm through the nearby window. He expected to feel the force of the air whisking by at 300 MPH, but there was no atmospheric resistance whatsoever. That enticed Vinni to take the test one step further.

As his entire body filtered through the wall the fuselage, and several electrical conduits inside, another tingling sensation emerged. The maneuver had inadvertently disrupted the circuitry for some of the airliner's electronic equipment. A young copilot in the cockpit was quick to comment on the strange anomaly. "What the hell was that?" he asked the captain with alarming concern.

"What was what, Barry?" the captain replied.

He pointed to the overhead panel as he expounded, "That whole row of landing gear instrument lights was flickering."

The captain observed for a moment then said, "They look fine to me."

"Sure. They're fine now, but they were flickering like candles in the wind just a few seconds ago." The copilot's eyes were fixed on the on the panel with a look of profound concern.

The captain reached up to toggle a few of the switches. "As far as I can tell, everything looks normal," he said before taking a casual sip of coffee, but he could see that his co-pilot was genuinely concerned. "Hey. Relax will ya?"

"Relax? Four planes get hi-jacked and are used as bombs to attack America. Now the lights on the control panel of plane at 30,000 feet start blinking for no reason. I find it kind of hard to relax."

"Okay, Barry," he defended. "We'll keep tabs on it, but it's not going to do us any good to worry about it. If we run into a problem, we'll deal with it."

"I'd rather deal with it before we have a problem if you don't mind," he argued. The senior pilot smiled in response to the rookie's trepidation.

Vinni was now flying alongside peering in through the window of the cockpit. "Howdy, boys," he yelled out over the sound of the engines. "A beautiful day for flying, eh?"

Vinni had never seen the inside of commercial cockpit and thought it might be an enlightening experience. Again, without considering the potential ramifications, he passed through and into the cockpit. This time, the electrical surge was much stronger and had clearly interrupted the circuits that monitored the jet engines. Vinni watched as the flight crew responded to the fluctuations.

"Tell me you didn't see that," the copilot stated profusely.

"I saw it, Barry. I've been flying for twenty-two years, but I've never seen anything quite like it before. You'd better run a full systems scan. Let's see if we can't pin this thing down."

The Captain confirmed each item on the checklist verbally as the copilot rattled off a series of digital data from the computer screen. "That's weird. Everything checks out. But things like that don't just

happen without a reason. What do you think caused it?" the co-pilot asked.

"I don't know, Barry, but I'd rather be safe than sorry. We're only about forty minutes from Chicago, but it wouldn't hurt to apprise O'Hare." He toggled a switch on the communication module. "O'Hare tower, this is American niner, two, four, niner. Do you read me? Over?"

"This is O'Hare Tower. We read you, but you aren't scheduled for radio contact. Is there a problem? Over..."

"Well, O'Hare, we can't exactly classify it as a problem, but we have experienced some irregularities with some of the indicator lights on our instrument panel. We've run a complete check and all systems appear to be functioning normal. The analysis reads negative. I repeat; the computer analysis reads negative. We just thought it would be best to apprise you of the situation. Over."

"Roger. Are you requesting emergency assistance? Over,"

"Negative, O'Hare, we are not currently requesting assistance. Unless we encounter further difficulties, our situation will not require emergency procedures. Over."

"Roger, Niner, two, four, niner. We will alert emergency crews of your situation and place them on standby. Please keep us informed of your status. In accordance with the recent guidelines issued by Homeland Security, we are required to report all unusual activity. As a precautionary measure, the NSA will be monitoring all transmissions for the remainder of your flight. You are instructed to switch your radio frequency to...four, two, eight, seven. I repeat; four, two, eight, seven. Over."

"Roger, O'Hare, switching to frequency four, two, eight, seven. We will continue to monitor the instruments and notify you of any other abnormal activity. Thank you kindly, O'Hare. Niner, two, four, niner...standing by."

Vinni blurted out a verbal sigh of relief, "Whew!" He covered his mouth with his invisible hand and silently observed the reaction of the flabbergasted crew.

The captain and copilot both seemed to be locked in a stunned staring contest. The copilot eventually shook his head to inform that it wasn't him. The captain tilted his head to the side with wide open eyes and a raised a suspicious brow. After an extended period of deafening silence, the captain finally spoke. "There ain't no way in

hell I'm calling that one in."

Vinni was absorbed in an apologetic grimace and made a hasty retreat through the interior cockpit door. He stood near the exit in the first-class cabin. As the plane approached Chicago, he decided to make an early departure. St. Louis was a straight shot south of Chicago. He shouldn't have any problem finding the way home from there. "Thanks for the lift," he said out loud.

Upon hearing the comment, the flight attendant turned to the only passenger in the vicinity and said, "You're quite welcome, sir. I hope you enjoyed the flight."

The confused man heard the voice too. "I beg your pardon?" the short stocky man replied timidly.

The polite flight attendant responded with a puzzled smile. "Would you like another drink before we land?"

The man looked down at his glass, which was nearly full. "No, mam. I think I've had more than enough," he stated with shooing fingers instructing her to take the glass away. He palmed his pale face and rubbed his eyes. "Hell, I may quit drinking all together."

Vinni inspected the exit door carefully before stepping through. In the blink of an eye, he was hovering high over Lake Michigan watching the plane fly off in the distance. "What a trip," he said with the ability to speak freely. "Let's see now. St. Louis has got to be somewhere in that direction. Once I find Interstate 55, I'm good to go." He picked an angle pointing southeast and quickly found the highway that would lead him home.

Within a matter of minutes, the unmistakable landmarks became quite visible in the distance. Thick clouds of white smoke from the steel mill in Granite City and several oil refineries in the area were bellowing their disgusting pollutants into the sky. Vinni knew exactly where he was and headed straight for the old house in Edwardsville just off Main Street on the north edge of town.

At the time, work was limited to short-term projects for a variety of construction companies, and opportunities changed from day to day. His research couldn't nail down which project and where he was working that day. Something at the old house might provide a clue and seemed like a good place to start. With his particles parked on the lawn out front, Vinni waited patiently for his younger self to return. At 5:30 PM, after nearly two hours of wasted time, a more in-depth search ensued.

Vinni recalled doing some free-lance work for the owner of a local tavern. He didn't drink much anymore, but back then, VC was a regular customer. So, there was a good chance he'd find his former self seated at the bar.

The barroom door was wide open to allow a cool autumn breeze to flow through. There, leaning out over a pool cue preparing to make a tricky little bank shot, was the much younger version of himself. A flood of former memories began filling his head and the level of anticipation started to amplify. Although he desperately wanted to expedite the proceedings, an attempt to make contact in a public setting would be very risky. He'd have to be discreet and hold out for a while longer.

V-48 hadn't played pool in quite a while, but the situation invited him to recall just how good he once was. A smooth skillful stroke sent the cue ball rolling softly toward its target. The eight-ball bounced from one rail to another, then slid effortlessly into the corner pocket.

A quick high five from his opponent and a few other players served as ample acknowledgment. Not one person volunteered to compliment him on the marvelous shot. As usual, and in typical flamboyant fashion, Vinni would take care of that himself.

"Look out, boys," he said enthusiastically with a sharp elbow pump. "Vinni Cross is hot tonight." He snatched up the five-dollar bill that had been reluctantly tossed onto the table and shoved it into the front pocket of some filthy jeans. "Have ya ever seen anything like it, Frank? What a shot!" Even Vinni-48 from 2008 was shaking his head in disgust.

"That was a wonderful shot, Vinni," a quaint voice complimented from her seat at the bar.

"Thanks, toots," V-41 said with a smirk in response.

V-48 remembered every detail and the haughty celebration. As the evening progressed, even more memories of his barroom activities began to resurface like an emerging submarine. "Kathy," V-48 inadvertently said out loud as he recalled the girl's name. Ironically, she was the only person who seemed to catch his little slipup.

"Yes," the attractive brunette directed to V-41 in response.

"Yes, what?" he answered back.

"Didn't you call me?"

"No, but if you play your cards right, I might," V-41 said with fluttering eye lashes to entice a response from his buddies.

"Well, if you didn't call me, who did?" she demanded, but her question was answered by a room full of shrugging shoulders.

It was a very strange experience. V-48 was in essence somehow reliving moments from his past. The observation continued, but silence was maintained for the rest of the evening.

Fifteen minutes later, V-41 lined up for a simple bank shot to end another game. "Eight-ball, cross-side," he announced.

That situation sparked another revelation for V-48. 'Ah oh. You're gonna scratch, boy.'

The eight-ball dropped in as intended, but the cue ball inched its way toward the corner pocket. "Slow down," V-41 yelled at the ball, "Stop!" The ball hinged on the edge before falling in. "Holy shit," he barked in frustration. "I didn't just do that. Did I?" He tossed his stick onto the table and slapped down a five-dollar bill. "I guess I did. I lose, Joe, but you damn sure didn't win!"

"Whatever, Vinni. All I know is, I get the money," his chubby opponent reminded with a cocky grin.

Vinni couldn't believe how much his life had changed in just seven short years. He was amazed by the many things about himself he was reminded of but had forgotten. His life in 2008 was considerably more mild-mannered. His rather nasty temper had faded away and was rarely, if ever, seen. 'As much as I hate to admit it,' V-48 said to himself. 'I can see what a real jerk I was back then. Maybe this mirror is just what the doctor ordered. It might just provide the attitude adjustment you need.'

V-48 was looking forward to the thrill of sharing the big secret with his former self. The astonishing irony of the notion was preventing him from thinking things through properly. His version of the concept was packaged neatly into a simple-minded plan. He had never really stopped to consider the full scope of that challenge or the foreseeable repercussions. As he and his new partner would soon learn, changing even minute fragments of the past can result in a devastating impact on the future.

"How about another game, Vinni?" his opponent inveigled.

"Nah, I haven't even been home from work yet. I need to grab a bite to eat and I'm overdue for a douche."

"You can say that again," a friend agreed with a hand waving in front of his nose.

"Piss off, Pete," he replied. "We've put up with the pungent fragrance of your nappy ass all night."

"I'm wearing cologne."

"Cologne? What's it called, Cesspool Number Nine?" he said with a bold laugh as he headed for the door. With a few lame gestures, he bid a fond farewell to his friends. "Night, everybody."

Kathy called out to him as he made his exit. "Are going to call me or not?"

"Not," he said softly under his breath for the amusement of his buddies.

"Do you have my number?"

"Oh yeah. I've got your number right here, babe," he said with a firm grip on his crotch.

"Asshole!"

V-48 couldn't agree more and was shaking his indiscernible head in disgust. He followed his younger self out to his truck and positioned himself in the passenger's seat. As soon as the truck engine started, V-41 reached for the volume knob to crank up the stereo. Music was one of the many interests the two still had in common. They liked their music crisp, clear and loud.

Getting V-41's attention wasn't difficult. V-48 simply inserted his hand into the guts of the car radio, which created some very irritating static. "Damn it," V-41 barked with a bang of his fist on the dashboard. V-48 removed his hand to reestablish a clear signal and the familiar Marshall Tucker Band tune returned. The annoying process was repeated over and over for the duration of the ride. By the time he got home, V-41 was extremely frustrated. He stormed inside, tossed a frozen chicken dinner into the microwave and headed straight for the shower.

After finishing his bath, V-41 sat back in his recliner with a sad excuse for a meal and pressed a button on his remote to increase the volume on his 37" TV. He switched to the History channel to get away from the rather depressing 9-11 reports which seemed to be dominating the airways. As if the ride home wasn't annoying enough, V-48 stuck his hand through the cable wiring to interrupt the TV signal as well. He was having a bit of fun with it. Each time V-41 started to get up and address the problem, V-48 would remove his hand and a clear picture would miraculously return.

The cat and mouse game continued for several minutes. V-41 was now standing in front of his chair ready to tackle the issue if it happened again. Just as V-41 relaxed back in his chair, static filled the screen again. "Damn it," he barked out in frustration. "What the hell's the matter with everything today?"

"It's not your TV, Vinni," V-48's voice said softly to initiate the introduction. V-41 gripped the arms of his recliner and his eyes widened in fearful astonishment. "It wasn't the radio in your truck either." V-41 was frozen in a deaf silence. "I know you can hear me." V-41 remained frigid, but slowly shook his head up and down to acknowledge. "I really wish there was another way to approach this, but we need to talk."

Though the voice had a familiar ring to it, V-41 couldn't put his finger on the identity and certainly didn't consider the actual source. He looked over at his stereo to confirm that it was off. He naturally assumed that someone was perpetuating an elaborate hoax and figured that someone had tapped into its speakers. Before he gave in, he was determined to figure out who was messing with him and how they were doing it. "I guess you got me with this one."

"No worries, mate," V-48 said to coin an Aussie phrase they used often. "The good news is nobody's messing with you. This is for real and I'm here for a reason. I'm closer to you than any friend you ever had, and that includes Stan Burk when you were twelve." V-48 suspected that the use of a familiar name would help to put him at ease. It didn't. "I know these are some unusual circumstances, but there's really nothing to be alarmed about. Matter of fact; I don't think I could hurt you, even if I wanted to. More importantly, though. I'm here to help you."

Perhaps it was the familiar tone of the voice or some strange sense of relationship to it, but V-41 was finally beginning to relax. His guard was up, but the trepidation was gradually decreasing and was replaced with extreme curiosity. He was still searching for the source of sound as he spoke. "So, just who might you be?" he asked nervously.

"We'll get to all the fascinating details about me in a minute, but first we need to establish some ground rules. Believe me when I say that I know it's not your nature, but you've got to be more open-minded right now than you've ever been in your life. Before you go jumping to all those incorrect conclusions, you need to hear me out completely. Since it's coming from an unseen voice in the night, it may seem like an odd request, but I'm asking you to trust me. In many respects, we're actually in a very similar boat here."

"You think so? Well, mine feels a lot like a sinking ship," V-41 declared decisively in response as he continued his search for the source of was certainly a masterful practical joke. "I'll bet your boat actually floats."

"Alright. I've got to give you that one. I do have a slight edge on ya, but here's the deal. The voice you are hearing is from the future, the year 2008. I wish that I could fully explain it, but to be completely honest, I don't really understand it myself. This whole thing only started yesterday when I bought an old mirror. As it turned out, the mirror concealed some sort of multi-dimensional portal. This thing enables me to travel back in time, exactly seven years. That's how I got here. I don't understand much about it either, but some sort of strange transformation takes place when I go through. My physical body is somehow converted into some form of spirit-like energy. Obviously, my voice can be heard, but as far as I know, no one in the past can see me."

"Well, that explains everything," V-41 replied in a spoofing tone. "You're an invisible voice from the future."

"I know. It sounds crazy, but it's true. I'm standing right here in front of you. All I know is; when I go back through that portal, I travel back to my own time in 2008 and my physical body is restored again. I don't know how. I just know that it works like that. Oh, and you'll find this to be interesting too; you are the first person I've contacted."

"Well, now. That makes even more sense. A spirit from the future travels back in time and, out of all the brilliant people on the planet it to choose from, this mysterious voice elects to contact a sad-sack Sir Galahad like me, a carpenter in Edwardsville."

"Believe it or not, that sums it up pretty well."

"Well, sir. Considering who I am and what I do for a living, I'd have to say that you are one extremely ignorant time-traveler," V-41

expounded with a swaggering grin as he settled into a realization that this strange voice apparently posed no threat. "Since you chose a half-assed construction worker to serve as your spiritual medium, I'm inclined to classify you as a complete idiot."

"Oh yeah? Well, it just so happens there is a very good reason why I chose to contact you. By the way, I happen to know that you are an excellent carpenter, far from half-assed. Once you have a clearer picture of what is transpiring, we'll see who the idiot is."

"A clear picture of the invisible man? That's a good one. I'm a nobody, for Christ's sake! Oh shit! You aren't going to make me build an ark or something, are ya?"

"Noah. That's funny. I promise, Vinni. No ark. Maybe the 'why you' part of this equation would be a good place to start. Think about it. If you could travel back in time, who is the one person you know you could trust more than anyone else?"

"I don't know," he replied sarcastically. "It's not like I've given it a whole hell of a lot of thought. Matter of fact; I can honestly say that the question has never even crossed my mind."

"Until yesterday, it hadn't crossed mine either, but I have thought about it. After some extensive deliberation and careful consideration, I concluded that there is only one person I would trust with a secret like this."

"And in your profound wisdom, you decided that person was me?"

"That's right, Vinni. You didn't even have any competition. You were my only choice."

"If even one iota of what you're saying is true, what makes you think you can trust me?"

"Because I am you," V-48 stated resolutely.

"Come again?"

"I'm too old to come again," he replied to recite an old saying their grandfather used to utter. "Seriously. You and I, are one in the same."

"Whoa," his reply came in complete and utter disbelief. "Now you're telling me YOU are ME - from the future?"

"It sounds pretty weird when you say it, but that's a fact - so

to speak."

V-41 started to snicker aloud then the slow chuckle rapidly boiled into exhausting laughter. "Alright. Alright. That's enough, Bennie. The gig is up. C'mon out."

"Sorry, sport, it's not Bennie and this is no practical joke." He hesitated. "Listen to it. Doesn't my voice sound a little familiar to you?"

V-41 quickly refrained. "I don't know. Maybe it does - a little."

"Sure, it does. It's your voice."

"Bennie, you little shit-disturber you. I've got to hand it to you, slick. You really had me going there for a minute, but consider your ass busted." He got up and started another in-depth search for the hidden speakers.

"Vincent Cross," V-48 scolded like their mother used to. "Set your ass down and shut the hell up!"

"I beg your pardon?" he defended abhorrently.

"You heard me. Sit down." V-48 knew there had to be a way to convince his younger self, but he was running out of ideas. "I didn't expect this to be so difficult, but I can see it's going to require another approach. How about this? Ask me a question only you could know the answer to, something about your past, anything?"

"Bennie knows all kinds of stuff about my past."

"Maybe he does, but I know things Bennie couldn't possibly know. There are things only you know. Go ahead. Try me." V-41 sat silently for a moment. "Ask away."

"Okay," he said with a long hesitation. "When I was about nine, I shot a gun for the first time."

"It was a pellet gun that belonged to your neighbor, Jerry. You aimed at a bird perched on a telephone line in the backyard and killed it with your very first shot. Then, you held that helpless Cardinal in your hands as it died. That was one of the saddest days of our life."

"Hmmm," V-41 murmured with a look of befuddled confusion, "and the second time I fired a gun?"

"You were about thirteen. It was on the shores of the Mississippi.

Some friends were egging you on. So, you fired your cousin's twelve-gauge shotgun at seagull flying overhead. One shot sent the defenseless bird fluttering into the river. Its mate circled the body as it drifted down the river. We had only shot a gun twice in our life. Two shots, two birds and we killed them both. We never really got over that sad fact. The thought of killing another innocent creature bothered us so much, we didn't fire another gun until we were twenty-five or so and that was at clay pigeons."

"Wow," V-41 slowly began to concede. "I damn sure never told anyone about that."

"No. We never did."

"Alright. You got my attention with that one, but I've never told anyone who I lost my virginity to either."

"I haven't thought about that in a long, long time. It was Danny Tate's mom when we were fourteen. That was another experience I'll never forget."

"Okay, okay, okay."

"Need more proof?"

"Hell no. This is embarrassing, man. Let's just say, at least for the time being and since I don't really have a choice, I'll give in for now. But I'm warning you. If I find out you're messing with me, I'll kick your ass all the way back into 2008."

V-48 laughed. "Fair enough."

"My guard is up, and this is going to take some getting used to, but you can count me in for now. If any of what you're saying is true, what exactly are you proposing here?"

"Well, I'm open to suggestions, but did come up with a few ideas that seem to have some potential. Grab a pencil and paper, top right-hand drawer," V-48 began with another chuckle. "One of the things we need to do is get a hold of the contraption that got me here. The mirror is presently located at a house in Boston, which makes traveling to Edwardsville a bit inconvenient. It's kind of weird thing to think about, but if someone else finds this thing before we manage to secure it, they could change what I already did. The conversation we're having right now might never even have taken place at all."

"Whoa. That is kind of weird. So," he said with a curious laugh, "how are 'WE' and the rest of the world doing in the future anyway?"

"The world is getting bigger faster and there are still all sorts of problems to contend with, but it could be a lot worse. As far as WE are concerned, meaning you and me; we are making a decent living in Daytona Beach, but still don't have much to brag about."

"Daytona? So, I finally make it to Florida?"

"We do but isn't all we hoped it would be. Ours is a pretty meager existence."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear that. Did we ever get hitched?"

"Nah, the women we're attracted to don't seem too interested in us and the women who are, we don't want anything to do with."

"Some things never change. So, tell me about this mirror of yours."

"There's not a whole hell of a lot to tell you really. Believe it or not, I picked the damn thing up for a buck at an estate sale yesterday. That's another long story. The mirror is nothing more than a fancy veil designed to conceal this crazy portal. It's truly amazing how well the crafted frame matches the actual shape of the window itself. But, unless I'm wrong about it, this mirror is our ticket to some incredible changes."

"You said it was sealed up."

"Yeah. There's no way to know how long ago, but someone who knew about this thing went to a great deal of trouble to hide it. They practically welded a sheet of plywood to the frame to cover the portal. It's safe to assume that whoever sealed it probably had a good reason for doing so, and that concerns me. You don't just walk away from something like this unless there's a good excuse."

"So, you're the only one who knows about this thing?"

"I can't say for certain. It's not like I was the first one to find it. As far as we know, this thing has been around for a long time, maybe hundreds, thousands, or even millions of years. It wouldn't surprise me if the Egyptians used it to pull off some of those incredible engineering feats of theirs. If they had a portal like this at their disposal, it would at least explain how they managed to obtain the technology to build some of those incredibly precise structures."

"Ahh, the ancient astronaut syndrome. So, who do you think sealed

it up and why?"

"That, we may never know, but by the condition of the wood on the backside, it appears to have been sealed up at least a hundred years ago and probably more. The way I see it; if anyone alive knew about this thing, they'd have gone to similar extremes to protect it. It's just a guess of course, but something might have happened to its previous owner. They either died with their secret after sealing it up or they got lost in the past before they discovered it in the future."

"The grandpa quandary. They wouldn't be alive to discover it in the first place. Right?"

"Hell, I don't know, man. It's possible. There is an endless string of strange scenarios to consider and the possibilities are mindboggling. What do we know about stuff like this?"

"So, you found this thing in Florida in 2008, but in 2001, it's somewhere in Boston?"

"Yeah, and the people in Boston have absolutely no idea what they've got. Since I can't physically recover it, I need you to get a hold of this thing before they stumble on the portal. As long as they believe it's nothing more just an old mirror, I'm sure we can persuade them to sell it for a reasonable price. But be prepared to pay any price for it. How much cash do you have?"

"I don't know, somewhere around \$1200 I guess."

"That's not a lot to work with. Do you still keep it in that cigar box behind that false panel in the wall over there?"

"As a matter of fact," V-41 stammered in reluctant admission.

"That's enough to get us started, but to accomplish all we're going to do, we're going to need some serious cash. Tomorrow, you'll buy yourself a lottery ticket for this weekend's Powerball. Write these numbers down before I forget them; two, nine, twenty-four, thirty-three, forty-one and sweet sixteen. The jackpot is 250 million, but it'll take some time before you'll get that check."

"I'm going to win the lottery?"

"The lottery and a whole lot more, pal. That will eventually provide some real start-up capital, but we've got to come up with some seed money in the meantime."

"Cool, but if I win the lottery, whoever was supposed to win,

won't."

"I didn't say it was a perfect system. For every action there's an opposite reaction. There will undoubtedly be some negative repercussions as a result of anything and everything we do. So, we should make all our acquisitions in moderation, but even at a moderate rate, you're going to become a very rich man in a very short time. Of course, by virtue of the proverbial timeline, I become even wealthier in the process. We are in essence each other's ticket to fame and fortune, but it only works if we work together. Everything we do from here on out, we do as a team. If we can stay healthy and on the same page, I don't see how we can lose."

"Cool."

"So, are ya up for little vacation?"

"I guess so. Where to?"

"Vegas, man. Where else?"

V-41 was doing his best to contain his excitement, but the possibilities we're finally beginning to sink in. He stuttered his redundant response in a casual tone, "C-o-o-l!"

"I know I used that word a lot in the past, but I grew out of it. I've even grown to despise it. Is there any chance I could get you to stop saying 'cool'?"

"Probably not, but I'll work on it."

"Cool. Now, there are a few long-shot sporting events you'll be placing some heavy bets on out there. It increases the odds considerably when you know who the winners will be," V-48 said with a laugh.

As grandiose as the elaborate scheme seemed, V-41 still had reservations. "I've got to tell ya, the whole thing sounds almost too good to be true and we know all-too-well what they say about things that do. Twelve-hundred dollars is a lot of money and I worked my ass off to earn it. I'm the one putting it all on the line here. Just how sure are you about this scheme of yours?"

"As sure as we've ever been about anything. It may seem like a lot of money right now, but twelve hundred is pocket-change compared to what you're going to have in a few days. We'll have to keep the red flags small and to a minimum though. It would be best if we spread the winnings around and place modest bets at several different casinos.

They frown on cheaters out there and we sure don't need any thugs tracking you down. We'll hit it hard, parlay our winnings and get the hell out of Dodge before anyone figures out what happened. They'll never know what hit em."

"What a great scam!"

"Wait until we hit the stock market and start investing in some sweet real estate deals. When we get back, you'll be able to start hiring a team of employees to do a lot of the legwork for you. If I'm right, we're on our way to becoming one of the richest men in the world. When we get back from Vegas, you'll have more than enough money to properly secure that mirror. Once it's in our possession, I'll be able to hop back and forth with ease."

"That will be our top priority then."

V-48 began to expound on some other considerations. "We won't know of course until we get a hold of that mirror, but there's a chance I can use it again to travel even further back in time. We could theoretically reinvent what we're doing now and escalate progress with each interval. See where I'm going with this?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to. That would be very cool."

"It may be 'cool', but don't forget one very important thing; everything we do will, to some extent, change history and, if something happens to one of us in a previous time, the game is over for all of us. We've got to be extremely careful how we live our lives. You're right though, this could be very cool."

"So, when do we leave?"

"There's no time like the present. Book the Red Eye for Vegas tonight and buy your lottery ticket on the way to the airport. Just to keep things in check, you'd better cancel any plans or appointments for the next few days. You'll also have to sever some ties with most of your friends and associates. In the long run, it will be well worth it."

"Hey, that reminds me. I've got a date tomorrow night."

"Bonnie Burns, I believe," V-48 injected as the enhanced version of that memory surfaced in his own mind. "Trust me. You don't want anything to do with that one. She's a hottie, but the only reason she's going out with you is to make Big Jake jealous and it works too. That no-neck gorilla will be wiping up the barroom floor with your ears. That's one memory I can live without."

"Damn," he said with disappointment on his face, "I thought I was gonna get laid."

"No worries, mate. Pretty soon, you'll be able to get laid anytime you want." He laughed at the thought before adding, "By the way, that laptop of yours is a dinosaur. When we get back, get yourself the latest and greatest computer you can find, one to match that new car you'll undoubtedly be buying. Matter of fact, you'll be able to buy the best of everything."

"Now, that is way cool!"

At 4 AM on Friday September 14th, V-41's plane was touching down in Las Vegas. All the fall sports were in full swing for the weekend, and it was time for the games to begin.

CHAPTER 3

Leaving Las Vegas

Vinni's cab arrived at the Bellagio Hotel on Friday at 5:30 AM. At that hour, there was minimal activity on the casino floor, and it was relatively quiet. V-41 stopped in front of one-dollar slot machine and sat down. V-48 waited for an opportune moment then whispered softly in his ear, "What the hell are doing?"

"I'm getting some extra cash to work with," he muttered as he inserted a five-dollar bill. "Go on, make it pay off."

"I'm not a magician, you idiot. I can't make a slot machine pay off."

"How do you know? It's not like you're an expert at any of this stuff. Give it a try."

"I don't think psychic powers are part of the package."

"You messed plenty with my radio and TV. C'mon," he ragged, "what have we got to lose?"

"About \$1200.00 if we aren't careful," V-48 inferred before reluctantly conceding. "Alright. Alright. You get five spins and that's it. If this doesn't work, we head for the room. Agreed?"

"Oh, ye of little faith," he urged as he tugged at the lever. V-48 stuck his invisible hand inside to disrupt the circuitry. The red seven of the first reel lined up on the pay line and then the white in the middle, but the blue seven stopped just short. "Damn that was close. You almost had it. Do it again."

A little old lady sitting at a machine several feet away had begun observing V-41's strange conversational behavior and was leaning to listen more intently. This time, when Vinni spun the reels, the lights overhead began flashing. "That's what I'm talking about," he said with a quick strut in a small circle around his seat. "That's a forty-four-

hundred-dollar payout," he exclaimed for V-48's benefit with elated excitement.

"Which, I emphasize once again, is peanuts," V-48 reminded. "Get your winnings and let's get the hell out of here before you attract any more attention."

A cute little attendant with long red hair arrived within minutes to verify the jackpot. "Congratulations, sir. We're kind of slow this morning. So, it shouldn't take long to process. I'll be right back with your winnings. Cash or check?"

"Cash, please. Not bad, eh?" V-41 murmured through the side of his mouth. "You probably have all sorts of capabilities you don't even know about yet."

"Maybe, but this isn't the time or place to start experimenting. The idea was to fly under the radar, not through it."

"Relax. We just quadrupled our bankroll." V-48 refrained from commenting as the attendant walked back up to count out his jackpot.

"Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three and forty-four hundred. Congratulations, sir. Have a wonderful day."

"Thank you," he said as he began stuffing the wad of cash into his pocket. "You have a great day too."

V-48 leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Tip, dipshit."

"Oops," he said to the disappointed attendant with an outstretched arm. He peeled off a hundred-dollar bill from the roll. "This Bud's for you. Thanks."

"Thank you, sir."

"This Bud's for you," V-48 jokingly mimicked. "Can we go now?"

"I was born ready." V-41 said just before he noticed the little old lady who still hadn't taken her eyes off him. She continued pulling at the lever of her machine with a blank stare fixed hard on him. "Go on," he urged V-48. "Make her day. Looks like she could use the money."

V-48 felt a similar compassion. "Alright. I'll give it a try."

"Here ya go darlin'," V-41 said with a huge smile. "Let me rub a little VC luck on that thing for ya." The look of bewilderment never left her face. She just stared into Vinni's wild Italian eyes as he

massaged the window of her machine. Her demeanor and facial expression never changed, even when the jackpot lights began flashing.

Vinni smiled at her and blew her a kiss. "Congratulations," he said to the petulant old lady who never spoke and showed no emotion whatsoever. This peculiar stranger may have been responsible for the sudden windfall, but he made her nervous. She was anxious to see him leave. Vinni rolled his eyes and walked away.

It was nearly 7 AM when Vinni settled into his hotel room. "We've got plenty of time before the sports action gets rolling," V-48 advised. "Why don't you get some rest while I scope out the odds at a few of the casinos."

"Rest? Surely you jest. I didn't fly all the way to Vegas just to get some sleep and I don't think I could, even if I wanted to. Let's find us a poker game."

V-48 laughed out loud. If there was one thing they would always have in common, it was the thrill of a good poker game. "That's a rather intriguing thought. With me at your side, you could tear up a high stakes game."

"Damn right I could."

"A stout Texas Hold 'em game should be easy enough to come by, even at this hour. I'll slide around to see what I can find."

"Make it a good one," V-41 prodded.

V-48 returned within minutes of leaving. "They've got a 200-400 game going in the high-roller room. How long has it been since you played in a game that steep?"

"Let me think. NEVER! Since you can't say anything out loud, we'll need some silent signals."

"Agreed. If you've got the nuts, you'll know it. I won't have to do anything. Just play your hand. When you have the winner, I'll pass my hand through your right arm like this." As he did, it created a very mild tingling sensation. "Can you feel that?"

"It's kind of eerie, but yeah. I felt it."

"I'll do the same thing to your left arm if you should fold."

"Right - winner. Left - fold. Got it. This is gonna be fun!"

V-41 hustled out the door and down the elevator. V-48 slid down the shaft and was waiting at the bottom as the doors slid open. "Are you there?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah, I'm here, but we'd better keep a tight lip for a while."

"Alright, then. Let's do this."

Vinni approached the brush at the elaborate Bellagio poker room. There were only a few tables, and most were short-handed. "What's the highest stakes game you've got?"

The female manager was very polite. "What's your pleasure?"

"A loose game of Hold 'em, but I'll take a tight one."

She began to read from a list of lower stakes games. "I've got a five-ten on table two and a twenty-forty game on eighteen."

"I was actually looking for a game with a little more beef."

Although he didn't come across as a high roller, she decided to test him and offered the alternative he was looking for. "I've got a shorthanded 200-400 game in the V.I.P. room."

"That's more like it. How shorthanded?" he inquired.

"You'd be the sixth player."

"Perfect." When an unknown out-of-town player sits down with some heavy hitting locals, they are generally perceived as an easy mark. But Vinni had played for years and was a very solid player. He had won several big tournaments in the Midwest and could typically hold his own at just about any table. Tonight of course he would have an invincible edge.

While Vinni was waiting to be seated, V-48 whispered in his ear. "You aren't going to believe this; Frank Farnsworth is in that game. You get to play against the legend himself."

"That is super cool," he whispered with enthusiastic anticipation.

"Your name, sir?" the manager asked as she escorted him to the table.

"Vinni, Vinni Cross."

The manager offered a brief introduction to the table of professional stone-faced players. "Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce Vinni Cross. Mr. Cross, this is Sam Sloan," she directed with an open hand toward a large man wearing a black leather vest and a gold golf hat. "Frank Farnsworth," The world-famous poker champion who needed no introduction smiled and tipped his infamous ten-gallon hat.

"It's an honor sir," he said to the man everyone knew as Frisco Frank.

"Barney Pierce," she continued. The leather on Pierce's weathered jacket was much smoother than his wrinkled face, but he reached out a heavy hand to greet him. "This is Marv Donavon." The very distinguished well-dressed man with manicured nails and perfect hair stood but didn't offer to shake hands.

"Mr. Donavon," Vinni acknowledged with a comparable nod.

She finalized the introductions with a smile as she introduced the most arrogant player at the table. "And finally, this is Cigar George Crump."

The man with a thick twelve-inch cigar protruding from his jaw didn't even bother to look up. "Are we gonna play patty cake or cards?" he said with the mouthful of cigar muffling his words. The brash demeanor seemed to indicate that the man wasn't having the best of luck at the table. Little did he know his day was about to get worse.

"Mr. Crump," Vinni said nonchalantly.

"Cigar George," the man sternly corrected with an intimidating eye contact. Vinni rolled his eyes and nodded.

"Player's checks?" the manager asked.

Vinni rolled out his clump of cash and handed her thirty-five hundred dollars. "Eighteen-hundred in black, three watermelons, a couple of hundred in red and the rest in green I guess." The fact that he didn't request any white checks indicated to the dealer that Vinni was the type to offer a good token when deserved. Vinni always liked the thought of having a dealer that's routing for you.

"Welcome to the table," the dealer said to greet him. "You're just in time for the big blind, if you want it."

"I'll take it," he said with a quick toss of two black chips. Passing on an opportunity to post his blind behind the button would most likely be perceived as ignorance on the part of an inexperienced

player. The ploy usually worked rather well.

Silence and cigar smoke filled the air of their semi-private room. The cards were pitched out rapidly and skillfully. "Mr. Sloan," the dealer offered to initiate play. The man seemed to be growling as he folded with an abrupt toss his cards toward the muck. That was followed with prompt action by Mr. Crump who flipped four black chips into the betting arena. "Raise."

"Raise. Four hundred to call," the dealer announced. Farnsworth was quick to call, almost as if he was prepared to raise himself. Donavon reluctantly folded and Pierce forfeited his small blind.

Vinni looked down and tilted up the corner of his cards to reveal 'Pocket Rockets'. Catching Aces on the very first hand, and at a table with this kind of action, could only be attributed to some very rare unadulterated luck. He didn't need any help to play this hand and elected to slow-play his powerhouse. "I'll call," he said as he slid in another two chips.

That was the beginning of a long and prosperous winning streak. He wasn't sure if he was being perceived as a talented player or just a very lucky one, but Vinni and his secret partner dominated the table. Within three hours, Vinni had accumulated more than forty-eight thousand in winnings. Although he was feeling a little guilty about cheating, he was certainly enjoying the experience. Before the next hand was dealt, he felt several wisps of energy surge through his left arm. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me," He got up and walked toward the manager's desk.

"May I help you, Mr. Cross?" His winning play had earned the respect of the players and the attentiveness of the management staff.

"Yes, mam. I'm picturing a thick juicy filet mignon. Can you fix me up?"

"Of course. How would you like it prepared?"

"Medium-rare with a big old baked sweet potato and a double order of green beans."

"Would you like it served at your table?"

"Nah, I'm due for a break. Have it delivered to room 1486."

"Consider it done. Enjoy your breakfast."

"Thanks." He looked at his watch to confirm the time. It was

nearly 11 AM when he climbed aboard a nearby elevator.

"I have to admit, that was fun," V-48 advised, "but we need to stay focused. We've still got a lot of work to do."

"C'mon Vinni, I've never been so hot in my life."

"You aren't hot, dipshit," V-48 sarcastically reminded. "You're cheating. Remember?"

"Yeah, I know, but it feels like I'm hot."

"That poker game paid off rather well and the boys behind the cameras don't pay as much attention when it's someone else's money you're winning. That stakes us for more and bigger bets on tonight's sporting action. As much as I enjoyed the poker game, we've got bigger fish to fry, and this is where the real cheating starts."

"It won't be as much fun though," V-41 said in reluctant concession.

"This is about making money. There'll be plenty of time for fun later."

"You sound just like our mother."

"I'm a whole lot more than your mother, brother. I'm your living and breathing soul. It's my job to take care of you and yours to take care of me."

"Nag, nag, nag."

When they arrived back in the poker room, the short-handed table was now surprisingly full. The word about Vinni's lucky streak had spread quickly. Four more professionals had been recruited to help end it.

The manager entered to inform him of a change. "The players would like to change the stakes to no limit."

"I'm sure they would," Vinni said to openly express his dismay. Even with his secret weapon, Vinni felt like a target on a point-blank shooting range. He looked each player in the eye, then directed his comment to the manager. "Seat open," he said smugly in frustration. He just smiled and walked away.

"Bold move, pal," V-48 whispered with admiration.

"That pissed me off. I know we'd have kicked ass anyway and it would have been fun to play it out, but it's the fact they planned to set me up that bothers me."

"I hear ya, but those guys are going to remember you for a long time. We'll do it again. Shush," he said in a whisper as the cashier approached.

"Congratulations Mr. Cross." The manager counted out several stacks of large bills. "That makes forty-nine thousand, three-hundred and forty-five dollars. That's a pretty good day on a table with that group."

"That's a good day on any table," he said with a wink.

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At 4 PM V-48 was waking his former self from a short nap with the world's worst rendition of a song their mother used to sing to them as a child. "Good morning to you. Good morning to you. With sunshiny faces, we're all in our places. Good morning to you. Good morning to you."

"Oh my God," V-41 said with his ears buried in a pillow. "It's even worse when you sing it. What time is it?"

"It's party time, partner, a little after four. The Bellagio is a nice place to stay, but their sports book has some heavy odds. Since we'll be placing some big bets here tonight, we won't want any ties. You'd better check into another hotel."

"A plush suite, eh?" he inveigled with a hopeful smile.

"How about the presidential suite at Caesar's? That's just what a cheater needs to maintain a low profile. You're going to be the guy their watching on a lot of security cameras and they've got some sophisticated equipment. They'll know who you are and will be unleashing the dogs trying to find out how you pulled it off. I'm thinking a two-star joint like the Beaver Inn. It's off the strip and, by staging a few losses there, it'll look more legit."

"The Beaver Inn?" he complained with a toothbrush lodged in his mouth. "Surely, we can do better than that?"

"You just don't get it. We settle for less now, so we can enjoy the super fabulous luxuries later. In a few days you'll have more money than you know what to do with. And, once you have won the lottery, people will be expecting you to splurge, and you won't stand out so

much. You've just got to be patient."

"Unless our traits have changed drastically in the future, patience has never been one of our virtues. I like to zig and zag. I dig in and go, man."

"I know you do, Vinni, and you will eventually. Once you collect your lottery winnings, spending large sums of money won't raise near as many brows. Even then, a lot of powerful people will be watching every move you make and trying to get their share of the action. We've got to be careful and make sure it all looks legit. Now, get dressed and let's go have some real fun."

"Cool!"

"God. Did I really use that word all the time?" he said to himself aloud. "I guess I did."

They spent the rest of their Friday night shuffling by cab from casino to casino placing a variety of bets on several long-shot sporting events and a several horse races. To maintain a low profile, they limited their bets to five thousand on any one event and never more than fifteen thousand at any one casino. By the end of night one, they had already accumulated more than two hundred thousand in winnings.

The next day, V-41 was placing bets on several college football games. But V-48 noticed a familiar face that seemed to be showing up at each casino they visited. V-41 was clearly being followed and the thought of being tailed by casino personnel made them very nervous. This guy however just didn't fit the role. He had an old pair of faded blue jeans, some worn out canvas deck shoes and a floppy sailor's hat. This guy resembled Gilligan from the old TV show more than a security agent, but everywhere they went, the man wasn't far away.

It was risky, but V-48 decided to approach the stranger verbally. "What do you want?" he said in a bold voice out of the blue. The man pressed his back against the wall and searched with his eyes. He shook his head in fear to imply nothing. "Who do you work for?"

Regardless of who he might be speaking to, the man decided it was in his best interests to answer honestly. "The railroad, Southern Pacific, retired."

Vinni wasn't sure what to think. "You're following that guy over there. Why?"

"Well, sir. The guy doesn't seem to lose. Every time I see him at

the cage, he's collecting another payout. I figured if I watched him closely enough, I might learn a little something and bring home a winner or two myself. That's it. I'm not looking for any trouble. So, I'm out of here. Okay?"

Once V-48 realized the man was nothing more than an innocent bystander and posed no threat, he backed off on the scare tactics. "I think that would be a real good idea. So, we understand each other then?"

The terrified man was literally shaking in his shoes and Vinni was feeling a bit guilty about the treatment he had put him through. The man was just about to make a hasty departure when Vinni spoke again, "Hey!" The man halted in his tracks.

"Yes, sir," the man respectfully replied into the air.

"You seem like a pretty nice guy. Are ya?"

"Yes, sir. I've never hurt anybody in my life."

"I believe you. So, here's what I'm gonna do. I'm going to let you in on a sure thing. Take a leap of faith and bet on Silly Willy in the fourth at Belmont. He's a 13 to 1 underdog, but I have it on good authority it's the old boy's day to shine. That guy you've been following just bet five grand on him to win. If I were you, I'd do the same, but a deal is a deal. You never saw him before, and we don't see you again. Fair enough?"

"Yes, sir! Never saw him. And you won't see me again either. That's a promise."

"Okay, then. Good luck to you and use some of your winnings for a good cause or I'll come back and haunt your ass. Go on, now. Hit the bricks." The frightened man hightailed it towards the nearest exit.

"Whoa. He took off like a scared rabbit. What the hell did you say to him?" V-41 asked suspiciously.

"He's harmless, but I told him to quit following you or I'd haunt him for the rest of his life."

"Ooh. That's cruel, man."

"Yeah, but I also gave him the tip on Silly Willy. He'll be a happy camper in a couple of hours."

"We're just an old softy. Aren't we?"

"If you can't spread it around, what's the point in having it?"

"I couldn't agree more. I can see it now. Modern Day Robin Hood steals from the past and gives to the future."

"Before anyone can read that book, we've got to write it. Let's finish what we started."

Their concept was working well and according to plan. V-48 spent most of his time racing back and forth between Boston and Las Vegas to retrieve information from the notes he had tacked to the interior panel of the new door. It was a rather grueling schedule for V-41, but V-48 felt as fresh as a young child. By Sunday evening, they had amassed winnings of nearly two million dollars.

Cashier's checks would be too risky. An ID would be required, and it would create a scary paper trail. So, V-41 purchased several stuffed animals at various souvenir shops and filled each one with bundles of cash. It was easy enough to have them shipped to his home in Edwardsville via a variety of UPS stores. He was only carrying a modest \$30,000.00 in a money belt.

When they arrived at the airport, V-48 made another suggestion. "How about one more trip before we call it a day?"

"Okay. Where to?"

"Unless you have something more pressing, I hear Boston is nice this time of year."

"Now you're talking. I can't wait to see this mirror of yours."

"Don't get too excited. We don't know if it will work, but once we have it, it won't take long to find out. Rent an unmarked cargo van at the airport in Boston. You'll need it to drive the mirror back to St. Louis."

"Cool."

Just four days after the original discovery, V-41 had amassed a small fortune. Once they arrived in Boston, their phenomenal link to the past would soon be secure.

CHAPTER 4

Please Come to Boston

When he arrived in Boston, V-41 spent the balance of his Sunday night in a quaint family-owned motel within a few miles of the woman's home. Bright and early the next morning his white cargo van was parked on the street outside the couple's home in the Dorchester area. The mirror was almost within reach.

At 9 AM, Vinni rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. V-48 darted through to search the house. "She's gardening in the backyard," he said in a soft whisper.

Wearing a suit and tie, and dressed to play the role, V-41 walked around the side and casually approached. Dorchester wasn't known as an unsafe neighborhood, but he certainly didn't want to startle her. "Excuse me," he said with a smile.

"Can I help you?" the woman replied nervously as she pushed the small shovel into the ground and stepped back.

"Is this the Avery residence?"

"I'm Shelby Avery."

"Hi. My name is Benny Cunningham," he said with an extended hand, which she reluctantly shook.

Vinni looked more like a salesman or a bill collector than an historian. "What can I do for you, Mr. Cunningham?"

"I realize this is a little out of the ordinary, but I've been engaged to track down some estate items which were inadvertently sold off a few years ago. The heirs of that estate are trying to reinstate the collection. I have reason to believe that you may be in possession of one of them."

"I seriously doubt it, Mr. Cunningham," she said with a hand

guiding his attention to the obvious. "It's not like we're antique collectors or anything like that. My husband has accumulated plenty of junk through the years, but most of it is just that, junk."

"I see. The piece I'm looking for is an irregular star-shaped mirror. It would be rather old."

"Oh," she said with a look of astonishment. "We do have an old mirror that my husband picked up at a garage sale a few years ago. It's not in the best of shape, but I suppose it could be considered an antique."

"May I see it?"

"I don't know," she replied with a hesitation. "It might be better if you came back when my husband is home. People around here are a little leery about allowing strangers into their house."

"I can appreciate that, but I am on a rather tight schedule. I assure you though, if it's the piece we're looking for, the estate would be willing to pay a very fair price for it."

"I don't know what a fair price would be," she said recalling that her husband had paid \$50 for it. "I've got to be completely honest with you, Mr. Cunningham. You may not even want it after you see it. This thing is kind of neat, but it's in rough shape. My husband had the best of intentions, but he never got around to fixing it up. One of his buddies was supposed to buy it about six months ago and agreed to pay 300 dollars, but we haven't heard from him in quite a while."

"I'd offer you more."

She was thinking of how handy some extra cash would be and was hoping to double their investment. "You seem harmless enough. Come on in and I'll show you what we've got. If it's what you're looking for, I guess it wouldn't hurt to hear an offer."

"That's very kind of you."

"Excuse the mess," she said as they entered the bedroom.

"No worries," he said as he spotted the eyesore standing in the corner. "Wow. It does need some work, doesn't it?" Curiosity prompted him to conduct a rather extensive inspection.

"Yeah, but my husband's pretty good at stuff like that. He always felt it had a lot of potential."

"Your husband is a wise man. You'd be willing to part with it?"

She chuckled. "To be honest with you, I'd be happy to get rid of the darn thing, for the right price of course."

"The family I represent has a fairly broad budget and you seem like an awfully nice lady. Would five hundred be considered a fair price?"

The look of bewilderment was obvious. "To be honest, I'd have considered a lot less. I'm not out to gouge anybody here."

"The kind gesture is very much appreciated. Take the offer, Ms. Avery. The estate can afford it."

She brushed the hair away from her eyes and smiled. "Well, if you're okay with it, I'm certainly not going to argue. We'll call it a deal." They shook hands to finalize the transaction.

Vinni felt a bit guilty as he counted out five one hundred-dollar bills. "Here you go."

"There's a lot of other stuff around here I'd be willing to sell," she inveigled like an over-enthusiastic shop owner.

"Thank you, but our search is very item-specific."

"Hey. It was worth a shot," she admitted. "The least I can do is give you hand loading it into your truck."

"That would be great." When she turned away, Vinni dropped another five hundred on her bed.

They shuffled the mirror down the hall and out into the driveway. After it was loaded, the woman had a sad look on her face. "Don't know why, but I'm going to miss that old thing. I can't explain it, but there's something peculiar about it. Oh well. It's good to know it'll end up where it belongs."

"I'm confident it will. Thank you very much."

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Cunningham. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Shelby," he said with a wave as he climbed in the driver's seat. "So, how did I do?" he said into the air.

"She would have taken a lot less," V-48 said as V-41 joined in to add in unison, "but she's a nice lady." They laughed together as they

drove off.

"Now, all we have to do is get this thing back to your place safe and sound. So, for God's sake, Vinni. Drive carefully."

"Hey, I'm a very good driver!"

"So am I, but shit has been known to happen."

They spent most of the long drive to St. Louis discussing plans for their futures. V-48 would constantly reassure himself with an occasional glance, but it didn't seem to matter. Regardless of where in the world the mirror happened to be at the time, Vinni's path back to 2008 was secure. Home in 2008 was now one short step away.

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They arrived at the house in Edwardsville just after noon on Tuesday. V-41 made a few calls and arranged to purchase a piece of property he had his eye on for a long time but until now couldn't afford. The twenty-acre farm had a nice little secluded house on it. For the time being, it seemed to be the perfect place. A cash deal persuaded the seller to give him immediate possession.

Upon receipt of his upcoming lottery winnings, their future acquisitions would be even easier to attain. A new 12,000 square-foot home was scheduled to be constructed on the property and it would be built with an elaborate vault to protect their surreptitious tool. The portal would soon be stored within and the two would be able to conduct their business more expeditiously, securely, and in complete secrecy.

V-41 would of course distance himself from most of his friends and what remained of an estranged family. He was starting a whole new life, and the extraordinary changes in V-48's life were about to radically exceed all expectations as well.

The morning of September 19th, a Tuesday in 2001, brought the moment they had been waiting for. The unveiling began. "Alright, Vinni. Rip the back off this thing and let's see what we've got."

This time, a high-speed diamond-bit grinder was on hand to make cutting through the nails a relatively simple process. V-48 stood by anxiously peering over V-41's shoulder as the thick sheet of plywood was peeled away from the frame.

"Damn!" V-48 exclaimed with grave disappointment. "I thought for sure it would be there."

V-41 set the plywood sheet to the side and turned back toward the mirror. "Holy shit!" he blurted in utter astonishment.

V-48 responded in utter confusion. "What?"

"What do you mean, what? I'm not blind, ya know. I can see it!"

"What, Vinni? What do you see?"

"Hell, I don't know, but it's sure not the back of some mirror."

V-48 stepped toward the mirror and attempted to penetrate the surface, but he simply passed through it like he would any other object. It certainly didn't provide the access he was expecting and hoping for. "I don't get it. I don't see anything."

"Well, I sure do," V-41 said with bolstering enthusiasm as his outstretched hand brushed at the surface. V-48 watched as his fingers disappeared through the plane. "Whoa!"

"I'll be damned. It is there. I can't see it or pass through it, but apparently you can. Describe what you see?"

"I'm not sure. It's dark, but it looks a little like the inside of some warehouse or something. You can't see this?"

"No, but I think I'm starting to get the picture. It would seem I am only permitted to pass through once. I've gone back as far as I am allowed to go. I'm just guessing here, but if I'm right, you'll be able to travel back another seven years or so."

"Oh. I get it. You can only go back seven years and I can go back another seven. Right?"

"That's what I'm thinking, but we won't know for sure until you try it out. This of course changes everything though. We'll have to develop a new game plan."

"So, you think I should go through?" V-41 said with obvious reservation.

"That's the only way I can think of to know for sure. Are ya up for it?"

"I guess so, but that's a pretty freaky thought."

"Not nearly as freaky as it was for me. At least you'll have a guide. I can tell you what to expect and how to maneuver on the other

side. The potential here is still phenomenal.”

“It sure is.”

“There’s one more test to run though. I’ve got to pass back to 2008 and make sure this door hasn’t slammed shut on me. But if we can leap back and forth at will, we’re on our way. Pardon the pun, Vinni, but I’m going back to the future.”

“And when you go back through, you get your physical body back. Right?”

“Hopefully, just an older version of you. Let’s find out.” V-48 walked around to the front of the mirror. He could still see the inside of the door he designed, but it seemed different somehow. “I’ll be back,” he said to halfheartedly quote the famous line. V-41 could only stare at his own distorted reflection as V-48 slipped back to 2008.

V-48 watched as his fingers reappeared in the small void between the plane of the portal and the door. Instead of the latch he had originally installed, the press of a button now unlocked the door. It opened automatically to reveal the first indication of some rather significant and dramatic changes. His initial response was one of mystically awestruck astonishment. Instead of reappearing in the old bedroom of his former Florida home, he stepped into a huge and very elaborate high-tech vault with polished stainless-steel walls.

Virtually everything had instantaneously changed. In the seven-year period since V-41’s acquisitions, V-48 had already amassed an incredible fortune and built an impressive empire. Along with all the former memories, an array of daunting new memories began to surface. An entirely new series of very different events had transpired, and Vinni Cross was no longer a lowly carpenter.

Though he had never seen them before, the new surroundings were somehow strangely familiar. In addition to all the previous memories, there were very distinct memories of every facet of all the new changes that had taken place over the past seven years. Even the secret code required for locking and unlocking the elaborate security system in the new mansion was somehow fresh in his mind.

He entered a series of numbers, and the sophisticated vault door began to swing open. Vinni stepped into a familiar but never seen passage that led through a huge walk-in closet adjacent to his new and very elegant bedroom. Although there were peculiar memories of it all, he was still invited to enjoy the enthralling thrill of experiencing it all for the first time.

"Holy shit," he said to reiterate V-41's recent response. He stepped into the stylish bedroom. "Wow! This is unbelievable!"

A brief journey through his new three-story mansion on the West Coast led to a great room which boasted a thirty-five-foot vaulted arch-shaped ceiling. Yet, there were distinct recollections of designing it, picking out the décor and the process of selecting all the contemporary furnishings. It was an enhanced version of the dream home he envisioned as a young man. Regardless of the method used to attain it, the magnificent complex was somehow home, and it was all his.

A wide marble staircase with peculiar inlaid glass wound down from the second floor and emptied into a large foyer. A set of beveled-glass doors to the rear led to a paved balcony overlooking the mouth of an inlet leading out to the Pacific Ocean. A decorative two-story boathouse was situated on the bay at the far end of a lavish five-acre garden. To the west of the peninsula, waves of the Pacific were crashing onto the rocky California coastline. Although a lifestyle such as this was beyond his wildest imagination just a few days ago, in some bizarre way, he felt entitled to it. The intricate time-travel plan had worked perfectly.

After a very brief inspection of the new premises, he returned to the vault. Although it was overlooked on his way in, a huge satin banner had been draped over the top of the staircase. It read, WELCOME HOME VINNI! He couldn't wait to share the experience with V-41.

"Vinni," he called out into the darkness. There was no answer. "Hey. Where are ya?" It didn't take long to arrive at the obvious conclusion. V-41 had stepped through his version of the portal. "I would rather you had waited, but I can't say that I blame you." He smiled at the thought of his own curious nature.

A few moments later, V-41 reappeared through the portal. V-48 watched as he conducted a rather nervous examination of his extremities. "Whoa," he said out loud.

"That seems to be the typical reaction," V-48 said to alert him of his presence.

"You're back. So, what's life like in 2008 now?"

"Unbelievable, Vinni, simply unbelievable! I didn't stick around long enough to see it all, but what little I did see was beyond amazing. It's all still kind of strange and a little weird, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. What did you find out?"

"Well, sir. The mirror's in a warehouse in Tacoma, Washington. I flew up to get an aerial view like you told me. That was so cool."

"Seven years?"

"Right on the nose."

"Apparently, seven is the magic number. Next time, we'll know your whereabouts in 1994 and can arrange to contact our younger self again. Once we get V-34 into the loop, we'll get the mirror transferred to a secure location in his time-period. Assuming he can travel back another seven years, everything we do will be multiplied even faster. So, tell me. Do you still think I'm an idiot?"

"Nope. Matter of fact, you might just be one of the wisest men I know. I can't tell you how glad I am you decide to choose me. This is truly remarkable. We've found us a whole new world."

"Since people can hear you and your energy will interfere with electrical currents you pass through, you'll have to be extremely careful. And don't forget; everything you do has a direct effect on me. Everything you accumulate will eventually be mine. So, from here on out, you check with me before making any big decisions. Like it or not, we're a team now and we're in this together, but I'm the captain. Every change made must go through me. Got it?"

"Yeah. I got it!"

"When you pass through, there's no way to reach you on the other side. You'll be completely on your own. And, since I can only communicate with you in 2001 by voice, we'll schedule meetings at regular intervals to make sure we stay on the same page. Remember, I'll end up with a memory of everything you do and every decision you make."

"Cool."

"You really need to expand that vocabulary of yours."

"What would you like me to say?"

"There's a boatload of other adjectives out there. Try awesome, fantastic or incredible. I'll take anything besides cool."

"Those words are cool too."

"Yeah, cool," V-48 said sardonically with an invisible shake of the head. "Listen, I'm going back to experience some of the new

luxuries in my life. We'll touch base tomorrow morning and, for God's sake, Vinni. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"No worries, mate."

"Seriously, Vinni. Don't mess with this thing too much until we know more about it."

"Relax, man. Go enjoy your newfound freedom. How rich are you by the way?"

"By the looks of it, I might just be the richest man in the world," he replied so as not to reveal the overwhelming enormity.

To have an actual conversation with yourself stimulates an untapped region of the mind and sparks an entirely new realm of extraordinary rationale. What had been experienced thus far was just beginning of some huge steppingstones. For the first time, Vincent Cross was poised to accomplish a limitless realm of great things.

CHAPTER 5

Good Vibrations

It was a lot like traveling into an incomprehensible dimension, a world jam-packed with perpetual change. Vinni's quick trip took him back to September 19th, but it was once again Friday in 2008.

"I live in a virtual palace," he said to describe his fabulous surroundings. He flipped a switch on the granite-lined walls to start a set of jets that sprayed water into the center of a large circular stall in the center of his massive master bath.

After a long relaxing shower, he spent several minutes in the oversized walk-through closet selecting his evening attire. "Man, I've got good taste," he declared while browsing the extravagant wardrobe. A mauve colored shirt was accented with a daring silver tie that complimented a dark turquoise suit. The ensemble seemed appropriate for his first evening of pure self-indulgence in his new life of ultimate luxury.

With an aberrant pep in his step, he scampered down the stairs towards a great room where a glossy black convertible Ferrari F430 Scuderia was parked to serve as part of the décor. In 2008, the Scuderia packed a significant punch in the form of a 4.3-liter V-8 engine that produced an impressive 503 horsepower at 8,500 rpm and 347 pound-feet of torque.

The press of a button on a nearby panel started the rumbling engine. Another opened a set of camouflaged bi-folding doors designed to blend perfectly with the pattern of the wall. The elevated platform beneath the automobile lowered to the floor level and, with a quick 180-degree spin, the sports car aimed outward.

"Now that is cool," he said to mimic his younger self as he sped out onto the winding circular driveway. An automatic gate at the entrance to the two hundred-acre estate slid open. With a sudden turn onto an empty road, he sped off with a specific destination in mind.

The winding two-lane highway paralleled the Pacific coastline and the moonlight was glistening like a line of dancing lights on the ocean swells. His exclusive subdivision was situated about eighteen miles north of San Diego.

Most of the extravagant homes along the route were considerably smaller than his and, though just a few days ago he would have been, he was no longer awed in the least. It was an odd sensation but, mingled with a peculiar awareness of his new surroundings, were subconscious recollections of his former life. The blend of bizarre emotions from the past and new ones from the present endowed him with an exhilarating sense of reveling appreciation.

Even the road he was traveling for the first time was oddly familiar. He followed it instinctively to what had somehow become his favorite hangout. The unique establishment was known as Brandy's Bluff, an exclusive bistro so named to emphasize its many meanings. Brandy was famous for her excellent cuisine, but the lodge also had a spectacular setting on a bluff overlooking the ocean. Many of her clients were attracted to the outstanding musical entertainment she booked. Brandy's guests paid well for the privileges they enjoyed, but the quaint semi-private setting offered them a rare opportunity to socialize with some of the world's top musical artists.

One of the main attractions for Vinni was the tremendous number of high stakes bluffing that went on behind closed doors. Brandy's elaborate backroom catered to an elite class of elite poker players, people who could afford to lose rather large sums of cash in a single night and often did. It was the perfect playground for the rich and famous, an exclusive club that Vinni had become a member of.

A young sharply dressed valet hustled out to open the car door. "Good evening, Mr. Cross. Playing cards tonight?"

"Just dinner, Tim. Is Brandy here?"

"Yes, sir. And she's always happy to see you!"

"She's always happy to see my money," Vinni quickly corrected with a humble grin. The valet smiled as he slid behind the wheel of Vinni's sumptuous sportscar. "If I catch you driving over 140, I'll have your ass," he warned with a pointing finger and a promising smile.

"Yes, sir. Enjoy your dinner."

Vinni strolled up to the entrance where an attractive woman greeted him with a gleaming smile. "Good evening, Mr. Cross. Will you be dining with us tonight?"

"I will."

"Would you like some company?"

"Not tonight, Karen." Services such as these were commonplace at Brandy's. Since Vinni was a single man, it seemed he often took advantage of them. The hostess reached for a large leather-bound menu but was waved off with a confident smile. "I'll seat myself if you don't mind."

"Of Course. Make yourself at home."

"Set me up with a bottle of your best champagne though. I'm celebrating tonight."

"Champaign, it is. May I ask what we are celebrating?"

"Life, my dear. I just got a new lease on mine and it looks like a lucrative long-term deal."

"Congratulations."

Several familiar faces greeted him from various spots in the dining room. The faces of these strangers were paradoxically familiar. "How are ya, Bill," he said to a very distinguished gentleman sitting with his much younger wife.

"Wonderful, Vinni. Couldn't be better."

"Glad to hear it. And how's that new rowboat of yours holding up?" he scoffed.

The man laughed at the witty reference to his new 200' yacht as he rubbed his shoulder. "It's a little tough on the ole arms, but so far, she's getting me where I'm going."

"Oh, yeah. I hear lifting all those twelve-ounce weights can be exhausting. We'll have to take her out bass fishing some time."

"Let's do," the man said gleefully. Vinni winked at him and blew a kiss to his lovely wife. He extended several more smiles to others that acknowledged while walking toward an empty table in the corner.

"Vinni," another robust man called out softly. "They've got one hell of a game tonight. It's as loose as a goose and there's a lot of cash on the table."

"There's nothing I enjoy more than taking money off a poker table, Frank, but tonight, I came in for some of Brandy's fried lobster."

It didn't take long to notice a stunningly beautiful brunette sitting alone just a few tables away. The candlelight on hers seemed to enhance some striking facial features and glistened off her long silky hair. Even with all his futuristic past recollections, hers was a face he'd never seen before.

Vinni tried to be nonchalant, but just couldn't take his eyes off her. "Who's the lady, Keith?" he inquired as the waiter poured his first glass of wine.

The reply came quickly and without looking up, "I've never seen her before. She came in with Mr. Cortez."

"Juan Cortez?" The waiter acknowledged with a nod. "You've got to be kidding me." Any woman sitting alone in an establishment like this was a rare occurrence, but one as attractive as her, never. Sadistic irony began to stir. Even her outfit was eye-catching, but elegantly simple. What Vinni saw in this woman was a distinctly innocent quality that seemed to set her apart from Brandy's typical clientele. The woman seemed somehow out of place.

The thought prompted a quick chuckle. Just a few days ago, a lady like her would have been considered way out of Vinni's league. In the new realm of financial superiority that he was now privy to, even a vivacious woman like her seemed attainable. Not one memory he could conjure even came close to matching an attraction like this. Childish infatuation rapidly developed into a bona fide obsession. The opportunity to meet this handsome woman would not be forfeited.

"Usual?" the waiter indulged. Vinni's preoccupation with this woman was rather obvious. It took a few moments to catch up. "Mr. Cross?"

"Sorry, Keith. Yeah, fried lobster would be great. And ask Brandy to pay me a visit when she gets a chance."

"You've got it."

It wasn't long before a very elegant lady with long natural red hair and wearing a sheik blue evening dress approached. "Well, well, well. If it isn't Vinni Cross. To what do I owe this pleasure and where have you been hiding?"

"Did ya miss me?" Vinni asked with a huge smile as he stood to greet her. He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Brandy, my love. You

look absolutely ravishing."

"Thank you," she said in a shy tone to humbly accept the compliment. "And you're looking rather dapper yourself."

"Got a minute?" He pulled a chair out and invited her to sit down with an open wave of his hand.

"Of course. The word on the carpet is you're celebrating, but then again, if the Vinni Cross I've come to know wasn't celebrating something, I'd be worried."

"Certain circumstances in life have a way of furnishing us with special things to commemorate. Champaign?", he offered as he poured a glass.

"Thank you." She placed her chin on the knuckles of her clasped hands and rested her elbows on the table. Vinni's eyes were clearly trained on something other than her and she had a pretty good idea what was distracting him. "So, what can I do for you, Vinni?"

"I'm not normally one to impose, but..."

"Umm hmmm," she urged as he lifted a finger from his glass to point. Brandy answered before any words were spoken, "Taken."

"That's what I heard, and by none other than Juan Cortez of all people?"

"Apparently."

"Brandy, you and I both know the guy is nothing more than a two-bit drug-peddling weasel."

"That may be true, but the weasel has plenty of cash and enjoys spending large sums of it here. What can I say?"

"I know, business is business, but I don't get it. What's a class act like that doing with a skanky little jerk like him? It just doesn't make any sense to me."

Brandy glanced over at the woman then wittingly informed, "Her date has been in the back for more than two hours."

"And left her sitting there the whole time? What an asshole!"

"No argument there, but like I said, he has some pretty deep pockets," she added with a shrug of the shoulders. "I know for a fact

that the lady has already turned away several bold advances. Perhaps, if the right guy was to say the right thing at the right time...well, you just never know. She's got to be bored. Shall I inquire for you?"

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all. Let me see what I can do. By the way, there's still an empty seat at that table. Should I hold it for you?"

As intended, the invitation triggered a thought. "That's not a bad idea."

"Consider it done," she said with a slight tilt of the head. "This is shaping up to be one very interesting evening."

"If I end up playing in that game, you can count on it," he exclaimed.

Brandy sparked a conversation with the lady who only took a casual fleeting glimpse in Vinni's direction. He lifted his glass of Champaign as a signal. It may have been nothing more than hopeful thinking, but there appeared to be a hint of intrigue in her eyes. The woman however had obviously rejected the offer. Brandy advised with a raised eyebrow and a frown as she walked by.

Women weren't exactly his forte and, while this lovely young lady was considered well out of his league, Vinni was experiencing a sense of determination he had never experienced before. He wasn't ready to give up so easily. With a nervous swagger, he paraded right up to her table. Though his reflection could be seen in the window, she didn't turn around until he spoke. "No strings," he said with his fingers mimicking the motions of a puppeteer.

"Strings?" she bounced back to mordantly acknowledge his presence. It was then she turned towards him and, from the moment their eyes met, destiny began dictating their future.

"Well, there may be one or two. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Vinni Cross." He boasted with an extended hand, but she shunned the urge to shake it. Though she was somewhat enamored by the man, immediate acceptance could be perceived as easy pickings and she made sure the point was clearly understood.

"And what is it, exactly, that Vinni Cross wants?"

"I've got a pretty long list and I'd love to fill you in. May I sit down?"

She reluctantly gave permission with a nonchalant wave but started the conversation with a rather arrogant statement. "It's going to take a lot more than money to impress me, Mr. Cross."

"Oops," he said with a quick retreat into a defensive martial arts stance. His many years of experience at the poker tables made him an expert at reading his opponents. Based on her 'tells', he was fully prepared to chalk this one up to a misread and move on. "It seems I've made a mistake."

"Pardon me."

"Sorry for the intrusion. I just came in for dinner. I wouldn't want to waste your time or my evening trying to convince you I'm not an asshole. Have a nice life, lady," he mumbled with an artificial smile. Winning a lady like this over was going to require a great deal more than intellectual tact. "And for your information," he added, "I haven't got a dime to my name, but I am a great guy. I'm the type of guy that would travel through time for the right woman. For a moment there, I thought that might be you. Good night."

"Well, now," she said with a fervent smile that seemed to shatter the rather thick block of ice she was encased in. She quaintly extended a hand. "I've never met a broke time-traveler before. I'm Sierra Chardon."

"Well then, Sierra. Consider this is your lucky day."

"That remains to be seen and I'll be the judge of that."

"Fair enough, your honor." With an ostentatious look on his face, he took a few moments to study her eyes. "This may sound a little strange, but you bear a striking resemblance to my first wife."

The mention of a wife wasn't the type of flattery Sierra was expecting or hoping to hear. "Is that so? What is she like?"

"I couldn't tell you. I've never been married," he said with crooked grin. The halfhearted attempt to make an impression seemed to be working.

"I should have seen that one coming." The motion for him to join her was coupled with big smile as she estimated his age. "So, you've never been married?"

"Nope," Vinni said decisively. He was extremely nervous but leaned back to infer that he was quite comfortable. "Sierra Cross. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" No man had ever been so forward and the

urge to smile was overwhelming. "I couldn't help but notice that your table is set for two. Your husband?" he asked to determine the status of her relationship with Juan.

"I was with someone when I came in, but I can assure you it wasn't my husband. The man I marry would never leave his wife sitting alone unless he was looking for a divorce. My date has been playing poker for the past couple of hours. So, to answer your question; I've never been married either and I expect to be single long after I leave here tonight."

"I wouldn't count on it, if I were you," Vinni said with another haughty chuckle. "I agree. You certainly deserve better. So, who's your date?"

"The sorry excuse for a man I came in with is a guy by the name of Juan Cortez. Heard of him?" Vinni raised an eyebrow to acknowledge. "It seems that Mr. Cortez has the couth of a rabid dog and the manners of a crocodile."

"I know the guy and I'm inclined to agree, which prompts me to ask the obvious question. Pardon the cliché, but what's a girl like you doing with an idiot like that?"

"I don't usually get fooled so easily. He seemed nice enough when I met him the other day, but, as I found out tonight, the man has a bit of a temper and tends to be very possessive. This was my first date with Mr. Cortez, and my last."

"Why don't you just leave?"

"I know the type well enough to know that if I left, I'd never hear the end of it. I just don't need the additional headaches."

"I hear ya," Vinni said with a long hesitation before laying out his proposition. "Listen. It's just a thought, and it's your call of course, but I just might have a way of getting you out of this little pickle you're in."

"Really?"

"I've played poker with Juan a few times. He's not very good, but he can afford to lose and usually does. The man already despises me. So, I'm thinking he can be coaxed into gambling away the honor of your company."

"Excuse me?"

"What I am suggesting is this. I believe I could orchestrate a scenario whereby Juan would be enticed to gamble away his date. You would be the stakes, so to speak."

"Are you suggesting I pose as some sort of prize in a ridiculous card game?"

"Hey," he said in a defensive tone, "I didn't say it was a great idea, but it would seem to beat the alternative." Sierra was obviously offended by the thought of such a preposterous notion, but Vinni attempted to allay her concerns. "Look, I despise the man and how he makes his money. I took about four hundred from him in a game a few weeks ago. He'd like nothing more than an opportunity to win it back."

"Four-hundred dollars?"

"Four-hundred-thousand," he clarified with a humble grin. "As much as the man hates to lose, it seems he can accept defeat at a card table. If my little plan works, it might just provide you with an unconventional but easy way out. Like I said, no strings on my end. It's worth a shot. Isn't it?" She appeared to be considering the proposition. "You certainly have nothing to lose, and it might even be fun."

"I have to admit, the thought of sitting here alone for who knows how long doesn't exactly thrill me," Her reaction hinged on a slight smile. "And, what happens if you lose?"

"That's a hard question to answer because I rarely lose, but I'd probably have to drop a few big ones. But that of course is my problem. Your situation, on the other hand, couldn't get much worse than it already is."

"Alright, Mr. Cross. I'm listening. What's your plan?"

"Brandy will get me into the game, and I'll set him up with some intimidation and a few confidence-building wins. When the opportunity presents itself, I'll drop my little bomb."

"And, what's in it for you?"

"I get to be your knight in shining armor and maybe get an opportunity to get to know you better. Even when I pull it off, you won't be the least bit obligated to me. I promise."

"Well," she pondered, "I can't say that I'm overly thrilled with the idea, but you're right about one thing. I don't have too many options."

"Or I could simply drive you home."

"That's not an option. Juan is the type who would go berserk."

"So, we have a deal then?" Vinni asked with an extended hand.

"Not so fast, Bucko," Sierra said with a waving hand flagging Brandy down. "I'd like to ask you a quick question." Brandy nodded her approval. "Mr. Cross here has claims to be some sort of wizard at poker. How good is he really?"

Brandy smiled at Vinni then winked at her. "He's one of the best players I've ever known."

Brandy's vote of confidence seemed to seal the deal. "Well then, Mr. Cross."

"I prefer Vinni," he requested with a bold smile.

"Vinni," she repeated with a shake of his hand to finalize their agreement. "I guess I'm in."

"C-o-o-l!" he said energetically before re-directing. "Brandy, would you be kind enough to escort Ms. Chardon to the poker room in about fifteen minutes or so?"

"Certainly," she said with a finger snap to get the waiter's attention. "Mr. Cross will be dining in the back after all."

"Okay," Keith answered casually. "Consider it taken care of."

"We'll see you in a bit then," he informed Sierra before strutting off.

The haughty Cortez was dragging a large pot with some rather lame cards when Vinni entered the room. As usual, the man was playing very loose, which was a plus for Vinni, but it also makes a player dangerous. "What's the game, Jake?" he asked the dealer to announce his presence.

The dealer acknowledged with an acknowledging smile, "Good evening, Mr. Cross." Brandy had arranged for strategic position. Juan sat two seats to his right.

"No Limit Omaha," another friendly face at the table informed.

"You'd better deal me in then." With a finger pointing at the Hispanic man, he said casually, "You look a little familiar. Don't I

know you from somewhere?"

Juan's reply was augmented by a strong Spanish accent. "Yeah! I'm the guy you trapped in a bad beat a few weeks ago."

"Let me see, now. Was that on a Friday night? I was in seat one and were you in seat four? And there was about nine hundred in the pot? I had four jacks and were you holding four deuces? Yeah, now that you mention it, I vaguely recall the game. What's the name again?" The remarks were intended to antagonize the man and the ploy seemed to be working.

"Juan, Juan Cortez. If you wanna play in this game, you need some serious money, Mr. Cross. And this time I'll be taking it from you!"

"I'm a little strapped for cash at the moment," he proclaimed, "but I think I can manage about two. Max, fix me up and bring us a new setup will ya?"

"Two-hundred-thousand ain't shit at this table," Cortez arrogantly advised.

"How much have we got there, Max?"

"Two million, sir."

"Will that do, Poncho?" he said with a wink to commence an extensive series of intimidating gestures. There were six other players in the game, and they all knew Vinni. Though he had never actually played with any of them before, there was an array of insightful memories that flooded his mind.

Vinni would play virtually any hand Juan raised on regardless of the cards dealt and it only took about twenty-five minutes for the first opportunity to challenge his mark.

"Twenty-two thousand," Cortez boldly announced.

"Let's make it fifty," Vinni declared.

"You didn't even look at your fucking cards," the Latino cautioned. He threw in even more chips for a re-raise.

Vinni shot a meaningless glance in Juan's direction. "I didn't need to look at 'em, Poncho. I call." The dealer flopped the first three cards, the six of diamonds, eight of spades and three of clubs. "It's your bet, slick."

"Juan!" the man sternly corrected. "I bet fifty thousand and I dare you to raise me."

"Oh, man. I wish you hadn't done that. If there's one thing I simply can't resist, it's a dare. The man dared me," Vinni said to the man seated on his left. "I guess I'll have to make it an even hundred." Vinni was wearing an arrogant smile designed to further agitate the man.

"I call this man's bet and I'll check to him in the dark."

"In that case, the appropriate thing for me to do would be to bet it in the dark. Right? One-hundred-thousand to go," Vinni aggressively pursued.

The dealer turned the next card, the ace of hearts. Juan quickly raised Vinni's blind bet. "Three hundred thousand!"

An ace was the worst card that could have hit the board. "Dollars?" Vinni stated with a grimace. "Maybe I'd better just call."

"Maybe you should look at your focking cards," Juan urged as the dealer pushed the river card into position, the five of clubs. "This time, I bet! Half a million."

"It wouldn't be fair to take all your money on one hand. I'll be nice and just call," Vinni politely conceded. The four cards were still lying untouched. "So, what are you so proud of, Poncho?"

Juan turned up his hole cards. He had a pair of queens to go with them, but when combined with the cards on the board, his pocket aces translated into a strong set. He pressed his fingers down hard on the cards to hold them in place. "The winner, I believe!"

"Oh? A set of aces is an excellent hand, but unless the rules have changed, three aces don't beat a straight. Go ahead, Hank. Turn 'em up." The player to his left slowly reached for Vinni's cards and turned them over one by one; the four of diamonds, the king of diamonds, the jack of hearts and then he peeked at Vinni's last hole card and began shaking his head. "And the seven of hearts makes a straight," Vinni said to finalize the hand, "Right?"

"I'll be damned," Hank announced with a slow roll to show the seven of spades.

"Oops. The seven of spades will do," Vinni bragged.

"That is amazing," another player said resolutely.

"What the fuck?" Juan roared in an irate tone of voice. Another VC bad beat at his expense sparked a silent rage. He ripped the four cards in half and tossed them into the air then stormed away from the table.

Vinni was boasting with a bit of soft laughter to ensure the intimidation factor hit home hard. Knowing which button to push and when are traits that Vinni had mastered long ago. "Don't be angry, Juan. I got frisky and a little lucky. Poker is a cruel game and shit happens. C'mon, sport. Sit back down," he prodded. "You can win it all back in one hand."

Juan calmed himself quickly and returned to lean on the table with a look of profound determination. "Heads up, man. Me and you."

"Heads up? That'd be fun for me and you, but what about the other players?"

"C'mon, big shot. Let's do it!"

Vinni was still dragging in the pot when Sierra made her entrance. The timing couldn't have been better. "Well, well, well," he cordially addressed. "I don't think I need it tonight, but a pretty little girl like you could bring a guy some luck." He patted his hand on the cushion of an empty chair next to his. "I've got a nice comfortable spot for you right here, honey."

"The girl is with me, asshole!"

"Oh," he said humbly. "I'm sorry, Poncho. No harm intended, but way to go, tiger. She's quite a catch. You're a lucky man to have a beautiful woman like that in your corner."

"Forget about her. Hold Em. Heads up. Or are you afraid to play me?"

"Me? Afraid to play you? I just raked in a million-dollar pot, Poncho, and most of the money in it was yours. It's gonna be hard top that. What else have you got?"

"Anything you want, man."

"Well, now. This might just get interesting after all. Let's see, now. You say the lady is with you. Right?" Juan acknowledged with squinting eyes. "You've been avoiding her all night anyway. Why don't we play for her?"

"Are you a fucking crazy or what?"

"Probably or what, but you did say I could play for anything. That's the only thing you've got that I'd be interested in. But hey, if the stakes are too high, I understand."

"Wait just a minute," Sierra abruptly injected. "I am not someone's commodity to be bartered with for your masculine amusement. Forget it, Juan. That's not happening!"

"Well, Poncho. It looks to me like the deal is off," he implied with a grin and another daunting wink. He began to stand.

Juan was clearly considering the proposition and the very thought was enough to infuriate Sierra. "Juan," she beckoned to repudiate.

"Shut the fuck up bitch," he growled.

"Juan," Vinni reprimanded, "that's no way to talk to a lady."

"You want to play for the fucking girl? Alright, big shot. We play."

"How dare you?" Sierra barked with an angry sneer. "You don't own me!" The statement was intended as much for Vinni's ears as Juan's. "You'll take me home this very minute and I mean NOW!" she demanded.

Juan looked through her with cold dark eyes. "Sit the fuck down and shut the fuck up. I said we play."

There was a moment of extended silence as everyone in the room began to consider the intensification of the circumstances. In this game, there would be no ghostly advantage like V-41 had. Considering Juan's disposition and the potential ramifications if he were to lose, the end-results could prove to be devastating for Sierra. Any chance of a relationship with Sierra was now hinging on the outcome of a card game.

"Alright, Juan," Vinni semi-reluctantly agreed with another reassuring wink to the bewildered lady. "I'll play. Heads up for one hour. The man with the most chips wins. Fair enough?"

"Not quite, Mr. Cross. If you win, you get the girl. What do I get if I win?"

Vinni paused to consider the stakes. "I don't know. What's a girl like that worth to ya?"

"How about everything you have on the table. That's almost five million."

"Where I come from, that's considered a bargain. I guess you've got yourself a deal, Poncho," Vinni declared with reassuring eyes fixed on the prize. "I'd like to state for the record, if the lady was with me, you couldn't have come up with a figure high enough."

"Deal the fucking cards," Juan crudely commanded the dealer.

A small group of spectators took up positions around the table. Both started with one million in chips each. Everything else remained on the table but was set to the side.

Vinni played smart, waiting patiently for the opportunity to strike. Juan was playing loose and rather wild, which made him extremely dangerous, particularly in a heads-up game. If Juan got lucky at the right time, Vinni could easily lose. Finally, after about forty minutes, the hand they were waiting for found its way to the table.

It is the potential for having the second-best hand that makes poker so challenging. Vinni knew the odds, but more importantly, he knew how to read his opponents. In the long run, the better players generally come out on top, but on any given day or any hand, the worst player can take down the best of the best.

Vinni was holding the king and queen of Spades and had raised the pot to \$100,000 before the flop. Juan quickly re-raised another hundred. Vinni loathingly called. The stage was set for the epic showdown.

The dealer's flop brought the Ace of hearts, the Jack of spades and the Ten of spades. The board gave Vinni an ace-high straight and provided him with a straight-flush draw, the highest possible hand. Based on the pre-flop action and the quick raise, Vinni concluded that Juan most likely had a set of aces or jacks.

Vinni checked to Juan, who quickly bet another \$200,000. Vinni followed up with a casual call. Juan was an aggressive player, which meant he would probably push hard on the turn even if the card failed to improve his hand. Unfortunately, the turn card was the Jack of diamonds, a terrible card for Vinni. Juan undoubtedly had at least a full house and there was a distinct possibility he was now holding four of a kind. In either case, Vinni's hand was now worthless. There were only two cards in the deck that could save him, and the odds were stacked heavily in Juan's favor.

"Fifty-thousand," Vinni said to entice the anticipated raise.

If the flamboyant gambler had a strong hand, he wouldn't want to chase his opponent off with too large of a raise. Juan downplayed the strength of his hand with a very modest raise instead, "I bump it fifty."

The lack of aggression was an obvious tell. Vinni was convinced Juan had four of a kind. A full house would have been pushed a lot harder to protect it. Vinni did however manage to accomplish his primary objective. The river card would be delivered at a substantial discount.

"Sorry, Poncho. I can't throw these cards away. I've got to call ya," Vinni said with the power of positive thinking in full force. Stranger things had happened lately. Whether it was luck, fate or destiny, Vinni's miracle card hit the board. The nine of spades gave him the ultimate poker hand. The only thing that could make the bad beat any sweeter was if Juan was indeed holding four-of-a-kind. Vinni started the action with a two-hundred-thousand-dollar bet.

Because so much was riding on this poker hand, Sierra was fidgeting nervously. It wasn't so much the prospect of Vinni losing that bothered her. It was the thought of how Juan would react if he won the hand. Vinni knew that even the slightest glance in her direction could be construed as valuable information. The expression on his face never wavered. He stared aimlessly into Juan's eyes.

It was Juan who thought he was springing a trap. The verbal bet was exactly what Vinni was hoping for. "Everything," Juan said boldly in response, as he luridly shoved several stacks of chips into the pot. "I'm all-in."

Vinni hesitated, but only long enough to train his vision on the trophy seated several feet away. "Everything?" he challenged for verification.

"You heard me."

"And that includes the lady?"

"I said everything. Didn't I?"

Vinni flipped a single solitary chip into the air to signify his commitment. Juan broke out of his poker face with a smug curling lip as he turned the cards over to flaunt his four Jacks. "I'll be damned. Four Jacks. That is one hell of a hand, Poncho. Matter of fact; that's the same hand I had when you lost the last time we played."

Vinni thumbed at the edge of his cards until Juan reached for the pot. When he did, Vinni placed his hands on the pot as well and asked with the impression of desperate gloom, "What are the odds?"

"That I would have four Jacks?" Juan arrogantly boasted with astute pride.

"No, sir." Vinni replied with a condescending shake of the head, "that I would have a straight flush?" He snapped the two cards between his fingers and softly pressed them onto the felt.

Muffled comments began echoing through the room. "You have got to be fucking kidding me," Juan blurted with gritted teeth. He gripped the rail of the table and the small crowd pulled away in anticipation of it flying across the room. Juan took one very deep breath instead. He gracefully snatched his sleek leather jacket from the back of his chair and said, "Mr. Cross, you are one lucky mother-fucker."

"That I am, Juan," Vinni replied with another huge grin aimed at Sierra. "That I am. I might just be the luckiest man in the world!"

Juan proceeded to make a hasty, but somewhat dignified exit. He paused for a moment in front of his date and attempted to formulate some sort of witty remark but found himself at a complete loss for words. In dejected embarrassment, he darted out of the parlor. Vinni leaned back and released of a huge sigh of relief into the air. He glared at Sierra with a profound sense of genuine humility coupled with an air of tremendous pride.

Although undoubtedly relieved herself, Sierra still felt victimized by how her fate was sealed. It was resentment, not appreciation, he saw in her eyes. After a short 'who will flinch first' contest, she marched out of the room without a word.

"Damn," Vinni spouted to express his disappointment for the small crowd in the room. "It looks like I come away emptied handed after all, but it was well-worth the gamble."

"Gentlemen," Brandy inferred with a painted smile, "I think it's safe to say we are witnesses to one of the best hands ever played at Brandy's Bluff. That one's going down in Brandy's Hall of Fame. That was incredible, Vinni. Tommy, let's get a picture." Vinni posed with Brandy behind a huge stack of chips and holding the winning cards.

"That, my love," he said with no room for debate, "is what you call pure unadulterated luck. Jimmy, me boy. I don't know how you managed to pull that nine of spades out of your ass, but that card saved a lovely young lady from a tremendous amount of heartache

tonight. Brandy, make sure that excellent dealer gets twenty-five out of there."

"Thank you, Mr. Cross. Thank you very much," the very appreciative dealer beamed as Brandy raked out the dealer's tip.

"It looks like there's about six million on the table and another two in your racks," Brandy declared. "Cashing in?"

"Not tonight. Put it on my account, Brandy. I'll be back to collect soon enough. You folks have a great evening."

"You too, sweetheart. Good night."

He shuffled out the front door, where the valet had his car waiting. Vinni tossed his suit coat behind the driver's seat and gave the valet five one hundred-dollar bills. "I had a good night, Tim."

"When you have a good night, I have a good night," the valet eagerly replied. "Thank you, Vinni."

Just as he was about to climb in, he sensed a piercing stare and turned around to find Sierra leaning against a stone column. He rested his folded his arms on the roll bar. "So, are you going to marry me or what?"

Those were the last words Sierra expected to hear and his comment prompted a huge humble smile. The valet hustled over to open the door as she strolled towards the passenger's side of the car. Her eyes remain locked on his as she climbed in without a word. Vinni slid into the driver's seat and they raced off down the hillside.

"I'm not a wealthy woman," she began to confess as they traveled along the coastline.

"That's okay. I'm not really broke either," Vinni buoyantly replied.

"Obviously. So, what is it you do, for a living I mean?"

"Well, I suppose you could say I'm in the business of acquisitions. I have a knack for acquiring things of value."

"You make it sound as though you are a thief. You aren't, are you?"

"Of course not," he answered before hesitating to reconsider, "at least not according to the dictionary definition."

"I think you are an excellent thief," she said with reveling passion.

"You do?"

"You managed to steal my heart tonight, and I was pretty sure no one could get past my security system."

"Well, now. If I managed to pull off a heist like that, I'd consider retiring."

"If you intend to keep me around, I'd highly recommend it."

"It's only fair to warn you. I'm an all-in kind of guy. I intend to treasure you forever," he declared.

"Isn't that sweet? Another admirable quality exposed. So, you have concluded we have what it takes to last forever?"

"I'd bet seven years of my life on it," he replied with insightful assurance.

"Someone once told me, it's not really gambling when you're betting on a sure thing."

"A wise person, I'm sure. By the way," he finally asked presumptuously, "where would you like me to take you?"

"Home I suppose."

"And where might that be?"

"Home is where the heart is. Right?"

"My house it is."

The short ride to Vinni's house was consumed by a sea of tranquil thoughts. A great many changes had taken place in very short period and Vinni wasn't sure how it would all play out, but the latest development was the most wonderful of all. For the first time in his life, Vinni had fallen in love and was beginning to experience the genuine meaning of true happiness. 'Not too shabby for an old carpenter from Daytona Beach,' he thought.

Vinni's extravagant sports car was certainly impressive, but Sierra's interests had peaked at the dinner table. The attraction was genuine and, though it didn't stem from the prospect of an affluent

financial statement, the magnitude of Vinni's estate was breathtakingly overwhelming. "You're kidding? This is your house?"

"It's the place I call home," he said casually as he pressed the button to open the doorway through the living room wall.

"Wow. That's a handy little feature."

"Yeah, I thought so. I never cared much for things most consider typical. Would you care for a nightcap?"

"A glass of Merlot would be nice," she said softly as stepped from the car and began gawking at the lavish decor. "And how many people live here?"

"Just two," he said quite casually, "two if you decide to stay that is."

It certainly was an intriguing invitation. "If I did," she said lethargically, "how often would we actually see each other? The last thing I want is to become a victim of the golden cage syndrome."

"The more time we spend together, the better. I'll leave that entirely up to you, but as much as you like." He handed her a glass of wine and took a sip from his.

"This is an excellent wine, Vinni. It has a unique citrusy aroma with a supple, almost creamy finish. Where is it from?"

"That's a product of VC Vineyards, a Napa Valley winery I acquired several years ago."

"It wouldn't surprise me if you told me that you stomped the grapes yourself." Her sense of humor was beginning to break through and, though her level of intellect was quite profound, it was her down-to-earth personality that he found so very refreshing.

"I just market the stuff." Since very little in the romance department had changed in the past seven years, Sierra's tantalizing presence was revolutionizing his perspective. In all his memories, both old and new, he couldn't recall experiencing such an awesome feeling of comfort and contentment.

Sierra couldn't recognize or comprehend the subtle changes that were constantly taking place around her. Drastic changes were overlooked and usually attributed to peculiar moments of déjà vu. Although Vinni was aware of all the changes, his world somehow seemed quite normal.

He led her out onto the balcony to experience the breathtaking view of the Bay. "My God, Vinni. This is the most magnificent sight I've ever seen."

"And it's twice as beautiful tonight. We could take a moonlight cruise if you like," he offered to flaunt one of the estate's many amenities.

"Some other time perhaps. I'm quite content. I've always believed that it's the company you're with that makes where you are special."

"Couldn't agree more. It's amazing to me though. I never realized until tonight just how gloomy this place was. Your presence quite literally lights up my life and I think that's especially cool," he said in recollection of a recent conversation with himself.

She was surprised by the idle and regular use of the somewhat juvenile term in reference to romance. "Cool?"

"Sorry, I was just reminded of an old expression I used to use when I was younger." He chuckled as they stepped back the opening. The sliding glass doors closed automatically behind them. Sierra became fixated on a very unusual table that served as a centerpiece in his foyer. "Do you like it?" he asked.

"I love it. I've never seen anything quite like it. Where did you get it?"

"I made it."

"You did not!" she tested. "You made this?"

"With my own two hands. You might say that woodwork is a pious hobby of mine."

"It is absolutely gorgeous," she said with earnest admiration. "You truly are a man of many talents."

"I've had a few creative moments in my day." Since his hands were so well-manicured, it was hard for either of them to envision the abrasive calluses that garnished them just a few days ago. Some sound advice to his former self also served to keep him in tiptop condition. Vinni was in excellent shape for his age.

"Apparently," she said while trying to conceal an obvious yawn.

Vinni interpreted the signal and decided to put her mind at ease.

"Your room will be the first door on your left at the top of the stairs. It has a full bath, its own wet bar and pretty-much anything you might need. I'm sure you'll be quite comfortable, but there's a phone in every room. So, if you need anything...anything at all, don't hesitate to ring me on the intercom. Just dial 777."

"Thank you, Vinni. I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Unfortunately, I have some business to take care of in the morning but shouldn't be gone too long. When I get back, maybe we could spend the rest of the day together."

"I'd like that."

"Believe it or not, you are the first woman to grace these floors since I've lived here."

"Am I now?" she asked with obvious doubt. "And you have lived here how long?"

"You might say I just moved in."

"Really?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said with a smile. "If you get hungry, the kitchen is right through there." He pointed. "The library is through those double doors and there's an exercise room right down that hall. If you like to bowl, the game room is down those stairs." Again, he pointed with one finger lifted off his wine glass.

"A bowling alley?" she questioned in amusing astonishment.

"Yeah, I know. It's a little corny, but I used to be pretty good at it when I was a kid. So, putting a couple of lanes in seemed like a neat idea at the time." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I've rolled a ball or two in my day as well and I wasn't too shabby either. We'll have to play sometime," she said to eliminate any sense of awkwardness and put him at ease.

"You're on." Though it took him a few moments to muster the nerve, he felt compelled to tell her. "Never in my life have I said these words to any other woman; make yourself at home."

"That's a first for you too? What are you, like twenty-two?" He rolled his eyes and pumped a thumb upwards. "I was being facetious Vinni," she clarified with her lips pressed into a comical frown. "I appreciate the gesture though. I believe I will make myself at home."

Where is your room?" she asked with another curious grin.

"I'll never tell," he said to infer that there would be no inappropriate advances tonight. He smiled boldly as he added, "but if you play your cards right, I'll show you some day."

"That's cool," she said to mimic his use of the idiom. A timid smile expressed his appreciation.

Sierra liked everything about Vinni and what woman wouldn't relish the luxuries she was surrounded by? The house was certainly elegant, but in a masculine sort of way. It could certainly use a woman's touch.

Vinni's intentions were subtle, but straight forward. He wanted to ensure that there was no undue pressure. He had a seemingly innocent disposition and extended to her tremendous respect. By comparison to most of the men she had encountered, Vinni's old-fashioned Midwestern manners were a welcome reprieve. Perhaps it was because her roots stemmed from a small Iowa town, but their karmas just seemed to click and were apparently in synch.

"I'll see you sometime tomorrow, then."

"That's it?" she said with a perplexing grin. He answered with another innocent shrug of the shoulders. "You're not even going to try to kiss me."

"You wouldn't have let me," he scoffed.

"True," she admitted.

Vinni leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "If I was looking for a piece of 'apparatus', I'd have been barking up an entirely different tree. I can't say that I understand it, and I don't even know what 'it' is, but there is something very special about you, Sierra. I look forward to having you around and I'd like to think we're got a shot at the long haul."

"To the long haul then," she toasted with the clang of their glasses.

Vinni did his humble best to express his concerns for her well-being as he escorted her up the staircase. "I'm sure that someone somewhere is worried about you. Feel free to use the phone."

"I won't be using the phone," she said to emphasize the fact that she had no one to call.

"Listen. More than anything, I want you to be truly happy here. It won't work for me unless you are. There will never be any bars on my windows. If at any time you are so compelled, you are free to walk out that door."

"I'm not planning on going anywhere anytime soon."

"You should know. I have lived alone all my life. I've heard men brag about the extreme joy of true love, but the right girl just didn't come along for me. So, I've never really experienced 'it' for myself. I think I got my first taste of what 'it' might be like tonight."

"I've also known guys who have crawled into a bottle trying to escape the sorrow of a broken heart too, and I can honestly say I've never had one of those either. Contentment has worked well enough for me through the years, but there comes a time when you've got to ask yourself that age-old question, Is it worth the risk? For the first time in my life, Sierra, I'm prepared to learn the answer. I could end up with a broken heart and, if I do, I guess I'll have to learn to deal with it, but for the first time in my life, I'm ready to take that chance."

"You really mean that don't you?" He nodded in humble submission. "You're a true gentleman, Vinni Cross, and those are some pretty rare qualities to come by in this day and age."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm no saint, but you won't find another man on this planet who will try harder to please the woman he loves."

"Wow! That's a bold statement, cowboy."

"At my age, it doesn't make much sense to beat around the bush. Who knows? We might discover we aren't meant to be. If we are though, I see no reason to waste time finding out."

"I'm in no position to make any promises either, but I'd kind of like to know the answer to that question myself. One day at a time then?"

"One day at a time it is. As much as I'd like to spend the entire night getting to know you, it's already been a very long day for me. So, with your permission, I'll say good night."

"Permission granted. I can't thank you enough for what you did for me tonight, for everything. Maybe we can make up for some of that lost time tomorrow. Good night, Vinni."

"The pleasure was all mine, Sierra. I am so glad you're here." He

leaned forward to kiss her once again, but this time on the lips and her body instinctively pressed into his. He refrained from acting on the urges that were welling up inside and pulled away with a heavy sigh. "Whoa! Sleep tight, Sierra."

She kept the door cracked open with an ear straining to hear his footsteps or other sounds that might provide some clue as to where Vinni's room might be. There were none. She smiled and closed the door.

Vinni sat up in his oversized bed with his arms folded behind his head. With his eyes wide open, he stared intensely through the glass ceiling into the heart of the cosmos beyond. Fate had provided another new and very interesting twist to his very complicated life. Vinni was in love.

Thoughts of what his life might have been like with Sierra if they had met years ago began to stir in his heart. A strange new hunger impelled more intriguing possibilities. Since the mirror gave him the power to enhance his past, he was beginning to envision a scenario whereby he could arrange to meet Sierra earlier in his life. Even if orchestrated properly, he knew a time-travel stunt like that would be risky, but it was conceivable and therefore achievable.

It was a form of greed driven by exotic fervor, something very new to Vinni, but many wars throughout ancient history had been fought over such obsessions. Love, the most powerful force in the universe, had begun to saturate the depths of Vinni's soul.

CHAPTER 6

My generation

Vinni awoke early on Thursday morning with a myriad of thoughts about Sierra fresh on his mind. But there were many things to discuss with V-41 and he had a schedule to keep. In addition to the various time-travel projects now underway, Vinni was now contemplating another intricate twist.

Once V-41 had established contact with V-34, more and even greater drastic changes would soon be taking place. That prompted V-48 to begin considering the well-warranted concern of how tampering with the past could potentially infringe on the future. One careless decision made by any of his former selves could easily impede his plans or cause an unforeseen anomaly to occur. Though it seemed like an inconceivable challenge, V-48 had to find a means of establishing and maintaining another form of control over the constant changes that were taking place hourly and often on a minute-to-minute basis.

It had only been eight days since he discovered the mirror, but changes initiated in 2001 were being amplified significantly in 2008. Vinni had already accumulated wealth beyond anything anyone could have imagined. His life had never been consumed by self-indulging voracity, at least when it came to money or power, but it was now being influenced by a much more powerful force.

A passionate desire for life's most precious gift was enticing him to consider the conceivable dangers of time-travel. The prospects were sparking a new series of questions. What would happen to his relationship with Sierra if the portal was inadvertently lost or somehow 'closed' while he was on the other side? The thought of being trapped forever without her was more disturbing than any other scenario he could conjure. The power of love was changing his perspective of life and his perception of time-travel.

Every hour spent with V-41 in 2001 was now perceived as an hour lost with Sierra in 2008. Though he would rather have been at breakfast with his new companion, Vinni was preparing to pass through to the

newly acquired home of V-41 instead.

"Good morning, sunshine," he said to announce his presence.

"Hey there, old man," V-41 replied into the air. "Did you get some sleep last night?"

"Not much," V-48 said without alluding to the reason why. There was uncertainty as to how V-41 might respond. Though he wanted to share the details of his latest and greatest discovery, something in his heart compelled him to refrain. The emotional impact Sierra was having on his life would, at least for the time being, remain a personal secret.

"I'm putting together a team to do most of the legwork for us. That will free us up to spend more of our time enjoying these new lives of ours."

"You did well, Pal. In 2008, we've amassed quite an empire and life has taken on an entirely new meaning." The genuine potential of their capabilities was beginning to sink in. "So," V-48 inveigled, "maybe we should consider how far back to go with this thing."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just thinking out loud here, but if each one of us can only travel back in increments of seven years, how far back do we take this?"

"I don't know, but we've got to assume there's no end to it. I suppose we can go back as far as the portal allows."

"We could, but with each step we take, there's an increased element of risk. What if we make a mistake?"

"We're bound to make a mistake or two, but we can always travel back and fix 'em if we do. Right?"

"At this point, that's nothing more than a safe assumption, but we don't know for certain. And, at some point, there's an age limit to consider."

"Excuse me?" V-41 was clearly confused by this new topic of conversation.

"What I mean is; we can't exactly communicate this kind of technology to a seven-year-old kid. At some point, we either stop the chain all together or bring someone else into the loop. That would of

course open things up to a whole new spectrum of risk."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Frankly, I hadn't given it much thought, but I don't think it's necessary to go back any further than eighteen or so. I mean, how much wealth does a person need anyway? At the rate we're going, we could rule the world if we wanted to," V-41 said suggestively.

"We probably could, but would you really want to?"

"You've got to admit. That's a fascinating thought."

"It is, but we're messing with shit we only know a week's worth of facts about. I think it would be best to keep thoughts like that on a distant back burner. Where and how it all started to begin with makes me a little leery about where and how it might end."

"How do you think something like this got started?" V-41 asked.

"That's anybody's guess. It might have been some sort of tear in the fabric of space and time. It could be that someone found a way and developed the technology to pierce it. But at least one other person knows or knew about this thing. Where are they now? What happened to them?"

"Maybe they died."

"If they did, which side did they depart on? I'm convinced that death doesn't exist once you pass through. So, it was most likely on the physical side. Or it could be that the presence of our portal predecessor, or predecessors, could conceivably be floating around somewhere in the past."

"Wow. That is a scary thought."

"There are a lot of things we haven't put a whole hell of a lot of thought into. If there is someone else from an earlier period lingering on the other side somewhere, all they'd have to do is figure out where the portal is. If they were to relocate the mirror before we discover it, we've got a real problem on our hands. Since you've got to know where that portal is in order to find your way back to the present, we'd be screwed."

"Do you think that's possible?"

"Hell, I don't know. I guess anything is possible, but because of how and where we found it, I just don't think that's an issue of concern. If they were out there, I think we'd have known about it or

heard from them by now. Who knows? The point at where this thing originated may not even be in this world. As far as we know, the next trip we take could lead us to some new cosmic dimension in another galaxy."

"But, since we can see through to the other side before stepping through, we should be alright. Shouldn't we?" V-41 asked pessimistically.

"I suppose so, but we can't know anything for certain. Every time we pass through, we open ourselves up to some freaky possibilities. If anyone in this little chain of ours screws up, they ruin it up for everybody. And, if we can't find a way to fix it, it's all over. The fat lady starts singing. And, if one of our former selves gets killed along the way, we're all dead. Right?"

"I reckon so."

"We need to develop a means of keeping each other in check. I need to know every move everyone is making before they make it."

"I hear ya."

"At the rate we're going, there's a good chance we'll end up becoming the most powerful man in the world. With that privilege comes a whole lot of responsibility. Do we really want that kind of accountability?"

"Maybe we do. Maybe we don't."

V-48 continued to shed some rational light. "It's just me, which is of course you, but I can think of a lot of messes that mankind has managed to get itself into through the years. If it is possible, I'd sure like to straighten some of those mistakes out if we can. Maybe we could prevent a lot of tragic events from taking place. The big question of course is, should we? Do we, does anyone, have any business intervening in and changing historical events? I'm thinking probably not."

V-41 finally chimed in with some thoughts of his own. "I'm inclined to agree, but can you imagine what might happen if a device like this fell into the wrong hands? What if someone with an evil heart got a hold of this thing? The whole world could go to hell in a handbasket overnight. A guy like Hitler wouldn't have hesitated to use it to make the world a better place according to his warped view of supremacy."

"But isn't that in essence what we'd be doing?"

"To some extent maybe, but we're the good guys. Right?"

"And just because we're nice guys, it's okay for us to screw with history?"

"It does get kind of freaky when you look at it from that perspective. If there was some law of the universe dictating what can and can't be influenced by these capabilities, I think we would have been tested by it already. All we can do is what we believe is right and hope for the best. If something does go wrong, we'll just have to deal with it as best we can. Bottom line, we've got to be prepared for anything."

"Great minds think alike," V-48 said with snigger. "So, with all that weighing on your heart, are you ready Freddie?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Are you sure?" V-48 asked with obvious discern.

"Yes, Mom." V-41 rolled his eyes to express his dismay at the lack of faith. "I'm ready."

"Okay, Pal. Good luck." The entrance door to the room containing the mirror closed behind him and latched shut. V-48 could only watch as V-41 disappeared through the plane to begin his own spiritual trip back to 1994.

Since V-41's objectives would take a few days to complete, V-48 returned to 2008 with plans of spending the balance of his day with Sierra. It was 10:15 AM when he knocked on her bedroom door. There was no answer. He scampered down the stairs to search the huge house. Taped to a fresh pot of coffee on the kitchen counter was her hand-written note:

Vinni,

Thank you so much for last night. I woke up this morning feeling as though I've known you all my life. I think we may have stumbled on something special. I look forward to every moment we spend finding out.

I shouldn't have left without speaking with you first and I hope you don't mind, but I caught a cab and will be in San Diego most of the day. I have a few things to pick up at my apartment and an old friend to check in on. I'll be back in time for dinner. Love, 'S'

It certainly wasn't the greeting he was hoping for or expecting, but he was very understanding. The extra time would enable him to make some arrangements for a romantic candle-light dinner to be served on the veranda. Vinni wanted their first real date to be extra special, a night she would never forget. Everything in his life seemed perfect, but fate had an entirely different scenario and a variety of extraordinary twists in store.

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V-41 read the headlines of the Tacoma News Tribune to confirm the location and the date. Since September 19th fell on a Monday in 1994, peculiar adjustments had to be made accordingly. Equipped with nothing more than a few good ideas and some sound advice from V-48, he began to experiment with his unusual capabilities.

It was 9:30 AM Pacific time when he jettied up into the sky over Tacoma. As V-48 had instructed, he picked a direction in accordance with the morning sun and, in a flash, darted off at a phenomenal speed on a south-easterly heading. He slowed down as he approached a range of snowcapped mountains. 'The Rockies,' he presumed. He swooped down to view a sign along Interstate 70 which read, "DENVER NEXT FIVE EXITS."

He picked another point on the horizon and sailed effortlessly through the sky at speeds he could barely fathom. When he approached what he presumed was the St. Louis area, he decelerated to search for familiar landmarks. "That's not St. Louis," he blurted. "Kansas City maybe?" He swooped down to confirm. "Oops," he said with a snicker as a billboard promoting the Indianapolis Speedway caught his attention. "I guess I overshot my target."

He backtracked following Interstate 70 West and at a much more manageable speed. In a matter of minutes, he was descending on his mark. "Lovely," he said to describe the familiar smog-filled skies of the surrounding area. He was soon descending on the same house he was living in when V-48 had contacted him, but the house was empty.

Footsteps on the back porch signaled that someone was coming, but it wasn't V-34. The door opened and in walked Sandy Bridges, one of the girls he was dating at the time. A whimpering puppy greeted her at the door. "Hello, Snoopy," she said in a childlike voice. "Awe, is the poor baby missing his daddy? Come here, sugar." The nine-month old Golden Retriever fumbled anxiously on its hind legs to lick at the friendly face.

Vinni remained silent but was beginning to recall the peculiar memories. Snoopy would develop into a genuine companion. 'What a great

dog,' he thought to himself.

"I'll bet your hungry, aren't you?" she said as she approached a cabinet in the kitchen. She grabbed a bag of puppy food, poured some into an empty bowl and filled his water dish at the sink.

As the hungry pup began woofing down its dinner, Sandy pressed the play button on Vinni's answering machine. "It's time to replace the siding on your home and we know you'll want to take advantage of our winterizing special..." She quickly pressed the erase button and it advanced to the next message.

"Hi there," a sexy female voice began, "I just wanted to let you know that I had a great time Friday night. I'm looking forward to next Saturday. Call me when you get back and keep your hands off those Georgia peaches. I'll see you soon. Bye, sweetie." It brought a proud smile to his invisible face as he recalled segments of the evening the caller was referring to.

Sandy, on the other hand, was furious. "You son of a bitch," she said in angry frustration. "You've messed in the wrong nest, buster." Vinni was treated to an entirely new perspective of all the trouble that message had caused. Sandy stormed toward the back door and, in her fury, kicked the helpless pup across the floor.

"You bitch!" Vinni blurted instinctively.

The young lady froze in position and turned slowly to scour the empty room with a questioning glare fixed on the puppy, the only apparent candidate. Vinni did his best to mimic the growl of an angry Doberman. With a look of unrestrained fear in her eyes, Sandy scampered out the door.

Vinni spoke compassionately to the whimpering pup. "Hey, little buddy," Its little ears perked up at the familiar sound of his master's voice. "Are you okay? I can't believe she did that. She was mad at me and took it out on you, didn't she? Sorry about that, Snoop. Don't worry. I'll get her back for that one." The dog sensed Vinni's presence and was prancing eagerly. "I wish I could scratch those ears for you, but that's one of the many things I just can't do. You were the best dog I ever had. The bad news is, we've only got a couple of years before you'll get hit by a car. I'll see if I can't find a way to keep that from happening." That would be another item added to his growing list of intriguing challenges.

Sandy had offered to take care of the dog while Vinni was working in Atlanta. Logan, the girl who left the message, he'd only met recently. Though the details of the incident were very fresh in his

mind, they somehow seemed irrelevant. His focus remained on the purpose for this visit and the message served as a reminder where he was at that juncture. So, he slipped outside and jetted off in the direction of Atlanta Georgia.

It was 11:00 AM EST when he arrived at the construction site in Alpharetta, a rapidly growing suburb northeast of Atlanta. V-34 was working alone on the roof installing some plywood sheathing. That gave V-41 an opportunity to study the situation and conjure up a game plan.

It was a very hot day with temperatures in the upper 90s and V-34 had shed his shirt to absorb some of the tanning rays. Sweat was dripping from his face as the well-built carpenter crawled across the plywood deck with nail gun in hand. With the rhythm of a drummer, he set a quick pace to anchor the sheathing. V-41 was invited to recall just how proficient he was at the time.

"Vinni," V-41 said softly to begin the strange exploit.

"Yeah," V-34 said as if answering a fellow worker.

"We need to talk."

The sound of a voice wasn't enough to entice him to quit working. "About what?" he replied as he paused to reload. He set his nail gun to the side and plopped down with his arms resting on his knees expecting to find a coworker standing over him. The puzzled look on his face said more than words ever could. He shifted his stunned expression from side to side and over each shoulder. He let out a puff of wind through his lips. "Damn, it's hotter up here than I thought."

He was just about to commence, when V-41 threw his second pitch. "It is pretty warm isn't it?"

V-34 fell back onto the seat of his pants. "Alright, what the hell is going on here?"

"Look, I'm no expert on how to go about this, so bear with me. Can you sneak away for a little while?"

"You have got to be shitting me."

"Yeah, I know. A voice in the air seems more than a little strange, but this is for real. You've got to hear this."

"There are only two things in life that I've got to do," he began, but V-41 finished the familiar phrase for him.

"Pay taxes and die."

V-34 shook his head as he began to realize that he was apparently answering a voice in his head. "Oh my God. I am losing it, man. That's all there is to it." He pulled a neatly rolled joint from his shirt pocket and stared at it as if it was the culprit.

"Jamaican Black. Some of John's stuff if I remember right."

"Say what?"

"You bought it from Johnny T. in Centerville before you left."

"And you know this how?"

"Trust me. I know."

"Who the hell are you anyway? And where are you...exactly?"

"This really isn't the time or place to get into all that. There are too many people around. Tell Bernie you're not feeling well and take the rest of the day off. I'll fill you in on all the fascinating details on the way back at the motel. Believe me, if it wasn't important, I wouldn't be here."

V-43 was obviously confused, but equally intrigued. "I can't just take off work."

"If someone sees you talking to yourself, that's going to be a lot harder to explain. All I can tell you is the same thing I was told when it happened to me. I know it's not an easy thing to do, but you've got to trust me on this."

"First and foremost, if you really know me, you know I can't afford to take any time off. I need all the hours I can get. Secondly, I... Wait a minute. What the hell am I saying and who the hell am I saying it to? I am literally talking to myself! I really am losing it!"

"You're not losing anything."

"That's it. It's gone."

"You're fine, Vinni."

"I'm glad someone thinks so, but I'm hearing imaginary voices."

"You aren't imagining anything. This is for real and I'm for

real."

"No way, Hosea. Hearing voices in your head is one thing but listening to them and carrying on a conversation with them is another. I'm not quite ready for the schizophrenia factory."

"If you'll listen closely, you'll realize it's not really such a strange voice. It should sound rather familiar. The fact is, as difficult as it may be to believe, this is the most important conversation you're ever gonna have. The bottom line is I'm not going anywhere. So, you just as well take some time out and listen to what I've got to say."

"The thought doesn't thrill me, but it certainly doesn't seem like you're going to shut up either. I guess I don't have much of a choice. Do I?"

"Not really."

"Holy shit," he said humbly and with a frantic look of atonement. "This isn't God, is it?"

"No, partner. It's not God, but it's not the devil either."

V-41's intriguing statement inspired a new perspective. "Well then, if I am going off the deep end, I just as well get it over with. Alright, voice, but if this turns out to be a practical joke, somebody's going to be wearing their ass for a hat."

"It's no joke, Vinni. It's an awesome opportunity."

"It damn well better be."

"That's the spirit. I'll be in your truck."

V-34 was shaking his head in disbelief but collected his tools and started down the ladder. As he was climbing down, he noticed another carpenter perched on a scaffold just below the roof. The man had clearly overheard the odd conversation and had a very strange look on his face. Vinni glanced back at him with an embarrassing frown and shrugged his shoulders.

"Pops," he yelled to his supervisor over the loud sound of high-pitched table saw. "Got a minute?"

"No," the old pudgy unshaven guy exclaimed. "What?"

"I'm not feeling too good. I really thought I was going to toss

my cookies up there."

"Take a break then."

"Actually, I was thinking I'd better take the rest of the day off and head back to the room."

"Hmmm..."

"C'mon, Pops. Have you ever seen me slack off?"

"Can't say that I have, but I'm already shorthanded."

"I know you are, Bernie. I'll make it up to you, but there's something weird going on. I've got to get the hell out of here. I'm sure I'll be fine in the morning."

"Go," Bernie incited with another short sentence, a grumpy frown and whisk of his hand. "Go!"

"Thanks, Pops." He peeled off his nail apron, flung it over his shoulder and strolled across the red clay to his truck. "Okay," he said with distinct uncertainty as to whether anyone might be listening, "Are you happy now? I just let my crew down." He waited with skeptical curiosity for a reply half hoping it wouldn't come.

"I know that wasn't an easy thing for you to do, but I promise to make it worth your while," the voice replied.

"You're still here?"

"I am and I'm not going away for a long, long time. You'd better get used to the idea."

"Alright, now that you have my undivided attention, what's the deal?"

As they drove down the highway, V-41 began the long, detailed explanation. When they arrived at the motel, it was merely a brief stop to pick up some belongings. By 11:45 AM they were in route back to St. Louis and would soon be on a plane to Seattle. This time V-34 would retrieve and secure the mirror before the Vegas festivities began.

Since the mirror was being stored for an eventual estate sale in an auctioneer's warehouse, it didn't take much persuasion to convince the manager to sell it. V-34 purchased it for \$200 and, to expedite things, arranged to have it crated. It was loaded on the same plane to

St. Louis and would soon be securely stored in the basement of his home in Edwardsville.

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"Okay, I've done everything you asked. I've flown across the country to buy some godforsaken mirror and I'm almost broke," V-34 said to his new invisible mentor. "What now?"

"This is where the fun begins. First, you'll buy a ticket for the Missouri Lottery, which you will win by the way. Then we head to Vegas, where you'll make some serious cash and start building your bankroll. When we get back, you'll collect your lottery winnings, which will be about 180 million. After that, you'll get involved in some lucrative Real Estate and stock investment deals. From here on out, you, me, and our counterpart in 2008 all get a little wealthier every day. Pretty cool, huh?"

"If you can pull that off, it certainly wouldn't suck."

"And, if everything goes according to plan, you may get to take a little trip through time yourself."

"You mean WE, right?"

"No, sir. That's the only drawback. Each of us can only travel back seven years. We'll delve into all the details later, but there are a lot of other things you'll need to learn first. Every aspect of everything we do must be carefully coordinated with our future self in 2008. That's where it all started."

"Cool," V-34 said in utter amazement, "but this sounds like a very freaky trip you're taking me on."

"You have no idea, pal. I've got all kinds of info for you and the sooner we get started, the sooner we get rich. I can only imagine what we're worth in 2008."

"I haven't been to Las Vegas in ten years. Any chance I'll have time to play some poker?"

V-41 laughed out loud, "Like you've never played it before. You're going to love this."

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Once V-41 and V-34 returned from Vegas, V-48 conveyed more instructions and arrangements were being made to purchase the

California property, but now in 1994. Vinni's construction experience came in handy, particularly when it came to the design of the secret vault. V-48's hindsight perspective prompted them to incorporate several intricate enhancements.

As part of the new guidelines that V-48 had established, V-34 and V-41 would not pass through at will. Each generation would remain in constant communication and the number of portal trips would be kept to a strict minimum. Any intervention would be carefully considered and cautiously calculated. Since the proverbial buck inevitably stopped with him, all objectives and transactions had to be cleared through V-48.

Because he was instantaneously aware of every action taken by his former selves and had distinct memories of each operation, his was the perfect method of verification. With each generation, the potential for ramifications became more palpable. Every exploit added more complicated issues and concerns for each of them to consider. The future was in perpetual chaotic change and, though it sometimes seemed difficult to fathom, it somehow made perfect sense.

Though it seemed like months or years, it had only been three weeks since V-48 had discovered the mirror. Vinni never had a problem coping himself, but he often wondered what effect the ongoing changes would have on Sierra.

For her, the ongoing drastically altered aspects of her life seemed quite natural. When each time-travel change occurred, any previous memories were simply replaced with new ones. By controlling the magnitude of change in the past, Vinni managed to minimize the impact on Sierra. Her best interests were at the heart of every decision he made. Because he also had memories of every change that occurred, the life-changing enhancements for Sierra often provided him with some comical and rather entertaining situations to observe.

Sierra might go to bed in the California mansion but wake up in their new home in the Hawaiian Islands without ever noticing the radical change that had taken place. While walking through a hotel room in Paris, she suddenly found herself on the deck of a new yacht with no recollection of having been in Paris. There were numerous confusing moments that seemed odd, but Sierra typically chalked them up to peculiar cases of déjà vu. Each significant change was simply perceived as part of her normal everyday life.

While V-34 and V-41 were busy building his empire, V-48 was spending most of his time enjoying all the luxuries the portal had provided and spending precious time with the woman of his dreams. All of Vinni's private jets and floating palaces had been equipped with a

special room where the portal could be secretly stored while they traveled. Because Vinni had to keep in constant contact with his associates, the mirror was never far away. From the plains of Africa to the dirt roads of Mongolia, he and Sierra set out to experience all the wonders of the world.

V-48 was still working on a plan to enhance his memories with Sierra. Although he wanted to share the many joys of his relationship with his former selves, he was reluctant to impose on their freedom. But he also knew, if one of his former selves was to fall in love with someone else, his love affair with Sierra would be jeopardized. That of course was an emotional quandary he desperately wanted to avoid.

Rather than sharing his love for Sierra with his former self, he was devising a plan to arrange for a happenstance meeting. He was convinced that, if he met her on the street, V-41 would somehow recognize her as his soulmate, just as he had. There was a lot at stake if he was wrong, but if he could secure another fourteen years of memories with Sierra, the risk was worth taking. If the plan worked, Vinni would get to experience the thrill of falling in love with her for the first time all over again.

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During a cruise through the Greek Islands, Vinni felt compelled to check in on the team's most recent activity. Some very unusual changes were taking place and he felt the urge to take care of business. It would mean interrupting the deluge with Sierra, but as always, and though she never knew what his work consisted of, Sierra was very understanding. He staged a mock departure by helicopter, then disappeared through the portal stored in the hull of the yacht.

V-41 had bid a temporary farewell to V-34 and stepped back into 2001 where he now found himself in a pre-dated version of V-48's elaborate mansion on the sunny shores of Southern California. An additional property in Hawaii had already been purchased and the architectural drawings were complete. V-41 was now experiencing the unusual menagerie of newfound memories and the rapid succession of dramatic changes. It all seemed to be for the better and everything, at least so far, was going precisely according to plan.

In a matter of days, fourteen years of phenomenal and rather complicated changes would take place in 2008. The acquisitions now being made by V-34 were rapidly culminating into a virtual citadel. In accordance with V-48's instructions, V-34's team had begun developing a new estate in the Hawaiian Islands near Maui. In what seemed like a matter of moments, the island was mystically transformed into a personal paradise for V-41 and an even more spectacular complex for V-

48. Since he now had the financial means, V-48 was setting his sights on another earnest objective. His genuine intent was to enhance the world and make it a better place for all its inhabitants.

After absorbing some of the peculiar transformations, V-41 reentered his vault and flipped a switch to alert V-48 as to his presence. V-48 approached the retinal detector, which triggered an electronic device to open the camouflaged wall in his private quarters where the mirror was now stored. He noticed V-41's beacon and passed through to greet him.

"Hi there," he said in a rather distinguished voice.

"Vinni, me boy. How's life in the future?"

"Couldn't be better. Things are obviously going well for you too. Your visit to 1994 was obviously successful and quite productive."

"In a matter of days, I became a billionaire. So, yeah. I'd say it was productive."

"My portfolio has been amplified a bit as well," he laughed. "This thing has taken us much further than I had ever imagined. I have more money than I could possibly spend."

"That may be, but you've got a seven-year head start on me."

"As you'll soon learn, money isn't everything. There are only so many toys a guy can store in his attic, and we have one very large attic. What I'd really like to do is use our capabilities to solve some of the issues and problems that plague society. There are countries still fighting age-old wars over ludicrous religious beliefs. Terrorist activity in 2008 is at an all-time high and the United States is a prime target."

"I hear ya," V-41 stated. "What Bin Laden did to the World Trade Center is still fresh in my mind. Almost four thousand people died, and over what? Most of these terrorist groups honestly believe they're doing god's work. They have no remorse and there is a never-ending line of lunatics waiting in the wing. These people are willing to sacrifice their life for what they've been brainwashed to believe in. How the hell do you combat something like that?"

"I don't know, but what they did on 9/11 is nothing compared to what they intend to do. In 2008, they have access to advanced military technology and nuclear weapons, and they're anxious to use them on us. It's an absolute mess."

V-41 paused for a moment before continuing, "As much as I despise the vigilant methods of expressing their dismay, it's kind of hard to debate the sad fact. The United States hasn't exactly set the best example of what democracy is or should be. It's no wonder they perceive a capitalistic society like ours as a road to ruin. In many ways, I suppose it is. When 4% of the population owns 90% of the nation's wealth, something is terribly wrong. Greed is an evil instrument."

V-48 added some more of his thoughts. "Al Qaeda and ISIS aren't content with destroying morality alone. They see democracy from an entirely different perspective. Their perception of 'We the People' is much different than ours. Authoritarian regimes are the countries our armies have fought and died for to defend."

V-41 picked up where V-48 left off. "Political corruption runs rabid and violent criminals are free to roam the streets. Drugs and guns are available to anyone who can afford to buy them. Violence is at an all-time high worldwide. You're right. Democracy is a far cry from a perfect system and it's a sad fact that We the People can no longer trust our own government."

"People in this country have allowed too many problems to get way out of hand. I'm not sure how, but if we're in a position to do something about it, maybe we should."

"Whoa, Captain Marvel. Slow down and get a tighter grip on those reigns of yours. Making a little money is one thing, but you're talking about changing the world. That's some heavy-hitting stuff. We'd better think long and hard before we step into that arena. Who are we to fix anything and how would someone like us go about it?"

"Well," V-48 injected, "we've been blessed with the financial means to sponsor a global coordinated operation. We already know most of the mistakes that mankind is going to make and the people responsible for them. It seems to me we could prevent at least some of them from coming to fruition."

"It's hard to say. I'm not sure if we've been blessed by this contraption or cursed by it but attempting to rectify global catastrophes is a dangerous game to play. I can relate to where your heart is, Vinni, but let's face one very important fact. The truth is, we are nothing more than a half-assed carpenter and I don't think we're qualified for the job."

"Jesus was a carpenter and look at all he accomplished."

"Yeah, but as I recall, his old man provided some divine guidance, God in the flesh and all that. For some reason, I just don't think we

can count on him to lend us the same support." He went on to add, "And that's another thing. What about the potential religious ramifications? If we set out to change world history, who is to say we wouldn't be, or haven't been already, messing with God's plan? We still believe in God in 2008, don't we?"

"Of course, we do, but he also placed this technological marvel in our hands. We wouldn't have it if he didn't want us to. Maybe he provided to us for a reason. Maybe it's our destiny. Maybe we were chosen to play this role in God's plan for the future."

"I think 'maybe' is the key word here. Before we go trekking off on some feeble-minded philosophical campaign, MAYBE we should learn a whole lot more about this mystic portal of ours."

"Time," V-48 said with an arrogant laugh, "is the one thing we have an unlimited supply of."

"Which is all the more reason to take it slow."

"You're right, there's no reason to rush, but if we are holding the key to world peace, there's nothing I'd rather do than unlock that door. We've got the world in our hands and a tiger by the tail. We need to start thinking globally."

"Everyone wants the world to be a better place but assuming responsibility for something like that makes me more than a little nervous. We used to dive off the canal bridge when we were kids, but, even then, we knew what was below the surface of the water."

"So, we take it slow, but I truly believe we could make a difference. We can make the world a better place to be."

V-41 understood the compassion that his older counterpoint had expressed. It would, after all, be his view in another seven years. Though he shared much of the same fervor, he was certain that common sense, logic, and level-headed thinking would ultimately prevail. There was much more to consider than the views of one person. And, as they would soon learn, the future has an extraordinary way of changing the way a person thinks and how they look at the world.

CHAPTER 7

Ball of Confusion

October 20th, 2008, started with another pleasant day on the island estate. V-41 slid back to 1994 to assist V-34 who was preparing to schedule contact with the next generation, V-27 in 1987. An irreversible chain of life altering events had been set into motion.

The mirror, which was now encased in a contemporary polished frame, was the centerpiece of an extremely large and very extravagant vault containing a wide array of sophisticated high-tech equipment. Constant change continued to be an everyday occurrence, but an elaborate network of computers had been programmed to track and document all the changes as they unfolded. The success of his endeavors had instilled a sense of infallibility and the prospect of manipulating world events was beginning to seem even more conceivable.

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Suddenly, a bright red warning light began flashing on an overhead terminal. This particular security system was installed specifically to track the activity of nuclear weapons. Vinni was flabbergasted by the only conceivable explanation. A few moments later, the emergency alert siren on the island began to sound in the distance.

"Oh, my God," he said in terrified astonishment, "This isn't happening!" He began flipping various switches to monitor an array of projections on a variety of screens. He was now watching the same activity being observed by high-level military personnel in underground shelters around the country and throughout the world.

Broadcasts from various television stations were fed into a split-screen format on several other monitors. Emergency bulletins and shelter instructions were flashing on every screen. "Shelter, my ass," Vinni blurted in response. "Sierra," he yelled out in a desperate plea. She had left for the local market more than an hour ago. There was no way she could make it back in time.

Several local security cameras monitoring the neighboring communities showed scenes of people running ramped in the streets, shrouded in disoriented confusion. The ground beneath his feet began to shake as several missiles were launched from nearby subsurface silos. In the distance, trails of more missiles shot from submarines moored near Pearl Harbor and facilities constructed on the ocean floor breached the ocean surface. Vinni felt like a helpless child. He could only gaze in stunned astonishment as a cavalcade of speeding missiles began rocketing into the sky.

He could only watch as a shower of multi-colored streaks raced in an array of various directions. Live television broadcasts showed scenes of utter chaos in the congested streets of every major city. New York, Los Angeles and Chicago were in complete panic. Colliding vehicles had created an impassable barrier of mangled steel that obstructed traffic on all roadways. People were forced to flee on foot around and over the maze of twisted vehicles. Each person seemed to be seeking their own warped version of what a potential means of escape might be.

"This just can't be happening, not now, not ever. Sierra, my love," he cried out as any chance of saving her diminished. "Where are you?"

Vinni glared at the menagerie of warheads that began to spray out over the planet from each of the incoming missiles. Even in all the confusion, he noted that certain desolate regions of Alaska had been spared from the pelting array of incoming strikes. Time, the one commodity he thought there was an unlimited supply of, had run out. Mankind's most lethal weapons had been unleashed and would soon be bombarding the planet's surface like carefully guided meteors.

He continued to observe the melee as he backed towards the mirror and watched in fervent terror as several incoming warheads appeared on the horizon. "I love you, Sierra," he screamed as a bright flash filled the monitor. The initial shockwave sent Vinni's body hurling into the portal and back into the spiritual silence of 2001.

V-48 stared hopelessly into the portal from the other side as the window to his world slammed shut. The light from red-hot molten rock and fiery debris lit up V-41's vault as it whisked the plummeting portal along an exploding path of nuclear annihilation. The tremendous surge of invisible energy that penetrated the portal dissipated into the air like harmless radio waves in 2001. Slowly, the glow of melted steel began to fade until only pitch-black darkness could be seen in 2008. In a matter of moments, the entire world Vinni knew was gone.

In silent bewilderment, he began reflecting on all that had

transpired. Invisible tears were flowing as he considered the life he would now be destined to endure, an invisible spirit living in the past and without the one thing he cherished more than life itself. There was nothing he could do and nowhere to go. He could only wait patiently for V-41 to return. His new perspective of a world eradicated by nuclear war quickly transformed into raging anger and incomprehensible desperation.

Almost instinctively, visions of a potential rescue mission began to culminate. If there was a way of averting the inevitable catastrophe, he would find it and fix it. There was one thing he still had on his side, time and just enough knowledge of the future to foreseeably save it.

After more than an hour of restless abandon, V-41 finally materialized. "Looks like I've got company," he said gleefully.

"You completed the infrared detection system?" V-48 asked despondently.

"Rigged it up this morning. I can now register minute traces of electromagnetic energy. You, my friend, now have an infrared fingerprint. I've even got the team working on a way to give you a visible appearance using a small field of infrared lasers. It's kind of like a holographic projection. You'd have to be positioned directly in the field, but I think it's going to work. Pretty cool, huh?" There was a moment of dead silence. "Well, what do you think?"

"That's great, Vinni. You did good."

"Ah oh. That's not the happy-go-lucky voice I've grown to know and love. What's up?"

"You aren't going to believe it, Vinni" V-48 began

"Are you kidding me? After all I've seen, I'd believe just about anything."

"They did it, Vinni. They really did it."

"Work with me here. Who, did what?"

"A nuclear war. A nuclear war just took place in 2008."

"You're shitting me, right?"

"I wish I was. I was working at the console in the vault when all hell broke loose. I had to dive into the portal to escape the

obliteration. As far as I could tell, the whole world was on the brink of complete annihilation. I just don't see how anything, or anyone, could have survived. My God, Vinni. It was unbelievable."

"I can't even imagine."

"Trees, rock, steel; virtually everything around me started crumbling and burning like flash paper. No simulation I've ever seen even comes close to depicting the actual effects. That was the most incomprehensible display of extraordinary power I've ever seen."

"Holy shit," V-41 said under his breath with his head hanging down in sorrow.

"My world, and everything in it, is gone. Kaput," he emphasized with a verbal whistle.

"Who started it?"

"No way to tell. There simply wasn't enough time to study it. I'm not even sure where the first strike came from. There were no warning signs either. Global trading in the Middle East was at an all-time high and the U.S. was in the process of negotiating a new trade agreement with China. North Korea was developing nuclear capabilities, and we know how much they despise America. It's conceivable that Al-Qaida might have orchestrated some sort of an attack, but who knows? As far as I can tell, I don't think anybody saw this coming."

"That doesn't surprise me. Who was first to strike back?"

"It appeared to be the United States. A short-range nuclear missile was launched from a submarine in the Mediterranean shortly after the first incoming missile was detected."

"If the attack was targeting Israel, that would make sense."

"The response started a chain reaction. It looked to me like every nation on the planet that had nuclear weapons started firing their arsenal at any and every adversary. Apparently, every nation that had a grudge against another took advantage of the opportunity to end it once and for all. There were missiles streaking across the sky from and to every continent. They all started blowing each other up."

"What about the portal?" V-41 asked.

"I have no idea. After seeing what I saw on the other side, I have my doubts if it even still exists," he said as he stared into the void on the other side. "I can't see a anything on the other side,

nothing."

"Have you tried going back through?"

"To what? Even if the portal is still intact, it's buried in a mountain of rubble and the radiation levels have got to be off the charts. But what we can and will do of course is relocate it to a safe place before the attack begins. Once you do that, I should be able to pass through and check things out."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do? This isn't a ME thing, sport. This is a 'WE' thing. The question is, what are WE going to do?"

"I don't mean to sound insensitive, but it was your world that got wasted, not mine."

"You're right. Your world is just fine, for another seven years, you moron. Don't forget. My present is your future. That's what we're talking about here."

"You're right. My bad. I don't know what I was thinking. Sorry," he said in concession. "Consider it rephrased. What are WE going to do?"

"Well, the one thing we do know is what's going to happen and when. There must be a way to prevent it and that's what we're going to do. It's a sad fact, Pal, but we've become the only person who can save the world. And how's this for kicker? If we don't find a way to fix this mess, I'll be stuck here with you, for the rest of your life."

V-41 sat back and ran his fingers through his hair. "I see your point, but how do we go about pulling something like that off?"

V-48 was silent for a moment. "I don't know, Vinni, but we've got seven years to figure it out. Do you remember that place in Alaska where we went hunting back in '98?"

"Sure, Tok. I remember."

"From what I could tell; that region didn't take any direct hits. I'm thinking that would be a good place to build a new hunting lodge. Have 34 start construction of a new facility up there, something we can build deep into the mountainside for extra protection. Then, when the time comes, relocate the mirror to a vault inside the complex. That way, I'd at least have access to the mirror. If we stock it with enough supplies, I should be able to survive the aftermath and several

years of nuclear winter if necessary."

"And what? Live alone like some sort of hermit, a freak in nuclear exile?"

"Maybe, but at least I'd be alive. I'm wide open to suggestions here. Feel free to toss ideas on the table. Bottom line, I don't have a whole hell of a lot of options." His train of thought quickly began to change as he began postulating. "Maybe we can recruit a team of people to live there. When I go back, I'd at least have some company and, if we aren't successful, maybe the species would have some chance of survival."

"And what? Repopulate the planet like some sort of Noah's Ark?" V-41 shook his head. "There's got to be a better way."

"If there is, we'll figure it out. I sure don't want to live alone for the rest of my life, and I can't say I fancy the thought of being stuck here with you either," he said in a tone that expressed all too well his desperation.

"Yeah, but I'll be here for you."

"That's somewhat reassuring, but it would be pretty-weird though. I'd be stuck in your time like some sort of spirit floating around watching you relive my life. As much as I enjoyed having lots of money, I'd be perfectly content to just get my life back."

"Well," V-41 began to rationalize, "I've grown partial to the new modified version of our lifestyle. So, let's hope it doesn't come to that. We should have more than enough time to figure things out. Somehow, some way, we're going to get you your life back. I promise."

"I'd sure hope so."

"Here's what I'm thinking," V-41 said with a chuckle to lighten the grim mood. "This has got to be the weirdest conversation a person could possibly have, and I can't even believe we're having it, but I'll do whatever it takes. We'll be exploring a whole lot of unknown territory here and it could get a little tricky, but with faith, nothing is impossible."

"Listen, Vinni. I know what I'm asking and it's a lot to ask of anyone, but keep in mind; every time you smell a flower, enjoy the taste of a fine wine, or take a bite of succulent lobster, when you hold a beautiful woman in your arms, those are all things I will never be able to experience again if we don't fix this. More importantly, Earth is destined to become another desolate planet and life as we

know it will cease to exist. I'd sure hate to waste some of God's greatest creations."

V-41 sat silently for what seemed like the longest time and then finally spoke with overwhelming compassion, "We'll find a way."

More than anything else, memories of Sierra were eating away at his invisible heart. As much as V-48 wanted to share the menagerie of emotions concerning his loss, he refrained and kept them locked away in his mind. If they were successful, Vinni would have his most valuable treasure back.

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The next several days were spent hashing out ideas and exploring some rather radical plans. V-48 selected a site near Tok, Alaska and the new hunting lodge/fallout shelter would soon be in place. The portal would remain intact, and V-48 would be able to return to whatever was left of his world.

V-48 monitored activity in the mirror daily. Once the work had been completed and the mirror had been relocated, he would be able to see the results on the other side. It took several days of careful coordination with V-34, but V-41 returned from the past to report that all the arrangements were complete. The new facility and the mirror were now in place in 2008.

"Well, here goes nothing," V-48 said with an encouraging light now glowing on the other side.

"Good luck, buddy."

He stepped through to find himself in a self-contained titanium vault. Although the exterior had been constructed to resemble an elaborate hunting lodge, the portal was now in a protected vault deep inside a mountain.

The first vault door led to his private quarters. Though it was safe from radiation, a harsh sub-zero temperature attacked his vulnerable skin. He retreated to the warmth of the main vault where some protective gear had been hung for easy access. He dressed to face the harsh elements.

Once inside the main cabin, he flipped a switch on a generator to restart the system. The overhead lights slowly began illuminating the plush interior walls. It was then that he noticed the team of twelve people assigned to the facility. Their bodies were huddled together in a frozen heap. He closed his eyes to pray in a moment of sad silence.

The electromagnetic impulse of the nuclear blasts had disabled all the electronics. The generators and the elements had taken their toll and the team was able to reset the system. The group had nowhere to go. Though Vinni had never actually met them, there was an abundance of fond memories consisting of them. They were, in a rather bizarre manner, some of his closest friends.

Vinni would of course rescind the decision to place them in that precarious predicament. Although it would mean dying in a nuclear blast instead, it would be a quick and honorable death. They deserved something better than the slow torturous agony of freezing to death. It would also mean that Vinni would be facing the bleak barren world alone, a horrific burden he would be forced to bear.

Since the only way to save Sierra would have been to drag her through the strange portal, she would, for the time being, remain a victim of the nuclear holocaust. To rescue her by means of the portal seemed selfish and even somewhat cruel. She was in his view better off dead than being trapped with him in some spiritual existence in the past or being alive in the devastated landscape of the future. He chose to forge ahead with the many wonderful memories locked in his heart and would cling to the hope their lives could somehow be restored.

He walked over to the soot covered control console of a very sophisticated computer system and brushed away the thick film that had collected. He flipped another switch to start up the exterior cameras mounted at various locations on the mountain. Although it appeared to be fully functional, there was nothing but static-filled screens. The effects of the nuclear blasts had either disabled the cameras or covered their protective dome with so much snow and ash, they were no longer functional. If the antenna on top of the mountain was still intact and, if there were any radio signals being sent, he should have been able to receive them. The airwaves were deathly silent.

One other camera had been installed in a shielded bell beneath the antenna on top of the mountain. He pressed another button and the protective walls surrounding it began folding down. An electronic arm wiped away the collection of frozen dust. The camera began rotating inside the bell-shaped housing. It was his first glimpse of the outside world.

The barren landscape of the Alaskan tundra seemed to be drastically intensified by the effects of nuclear winter. A combination of snow, filthy ash and thick dust still filled the air. The terrain, which would normally have been drenched in sunshine twenty-four hours a day, was shrouded in mystifying darkness. Strange electrical streaks raced through windswept clouds of dust like perpetual heat lightning

in a dark prairie sky.

Vinni knew that if the rest of the world was anywhere near as desolate as the remote site in Alaska, it was doubtful that any other human being anywhere else on the planet could have possibly survived. Nuclear war had transformed Earth into a desolate uninhabitable planet.

He bid farewell to his friends with a sad reassuring smile and stepped back into the warm vault. Although it meant instantaneous devastation, his friends would be granted an opportunity to live the very best of what their limited lives had to offer. They would not be forced to endure the awesome despair of absolute seclusion. He stripped off the protective boots and heavy coat, and somberly disappeared through the portal.

"Well?" V-41 eagerly enticed.

"The portal is intact, but that is one very desolate planet back there." He stuttered as he added, "The team didn't make it. Trust me. They'll be much better off without that burden. Even if they had survived, there was no life left for them to live anyway. Take good care of them. As it stands, there's virtually nothing for me to go back to."

"Don't give up hope just yet. I came up with another idea."

"Lay it on me."

"I say we go straight to the top on this one."

"Meaning?"

"Maybe you should pay a little visit to the White House."

"The White House, huh?"

"Why not? They're the ones pulling all the big strings anyway. A voice in the night might convince the President to take an alternative course of action. If we can get him to see the light, he can take it to the U.N." V-48 was silent as he considered the scheme. "It's certainly worth a shot."

"You might be on to something there. They wouldn't have to know how I got into the past, just that I'm from the future. We could keep the mirror hidden in the Alaskan facility. Assuming that the computers are intact, I'd have full access to enough information about future events to convince him that the threat and future is real." He paused again. "If we were to accurately predict a few key events, he'd have

to know we are telling the truth.”

“It might just work.”

“Prepare a draft to the president. I’ll get you his private email address and we can route it through a cyber maze. They’ll never be able to track it. Tell him to expect a late-night visitor this Friday night. What’s the date again?”

He brought up the calendar on his screen. “Friday would be the 26th.”

“Perfect. If he knows someone is coming, maybe my voice won’t come across as a complete shock.”

“How do you think he’ll react?” V-41 chuckled.

“Hell, I don’t know, but I hope it scares the living shit out of him. If that’s what it takes, I’m all for it. We’re about to put a kink in the political hose.”

“I say, go for it.”

V-41 coordinated with V-34. A lot of equipment was secretly transported to the Alaskan facility, which was about to become the headquarters for their new covert operation. V-48 spent time scouting the layout of the White House. V-41 was putting the final touches on the latest edition of his infrared energy detection system. A secondary detection unit would be delivered to a remote location for pickup at the appropriate time by the President’s secret service detail.

Vinni knew it would make Cross Enterprises somewhat vulnerable, but the fate of mankind was at stake. Regardless of how it all played out, they had set the stage for the most unusual political debate in world history.

CHAPTER 8

If I Could Turn Back Time

V-41's urgent email message was read by the President on Friday morning, but it had been given about as much consideration as an invitation to a high school prom. It was late, about 2 AM, on October 26th when V-48 entered the bedroom of President George W. Bush. His wife was representing the United States at the funeral for an Egyptian ambassador. So, the president would be alone.

Vinni stood at the foot of the bed and whispered to wake the Commander and Chief. "Mr. President." There was no response. "Mr. President, sir," he said in a slightly louder voice.

"What?" the president mumbled as he attempted to gain his composure.

"It's time for your meeting, sir," Vinni answered respectfully.

"Meeting? What time is it?"

"It's about two o'clock, sir."

"In the morning?" he complained with rousing vigor.

"Yes, sir," Vinni replied.

"Well, this better be damned important! That's all I've got to say. So, who is it and what the hell do you want at this hour?"

"It's Vincent Cross sir."

He was clearly confused by the declaration, "Who?" He rubbed at his eyes and reached to turn on the bedside lamp. His eyes began wandering around the room with the same puzzled look anyone else might have. "What the hell is this?" He reached toward a buzzer to alert the secret service.

"That's not necessary, sir. You're in no danger and what I have to say is of the utmost importance." The president refrained, but his

hand remained hovering over the alarm button. Vinni took advantage of the brief reprieve. "You received an email this morning informing you that someone would be contacting you tonight. I'm the one who sent it."

"That's it!" He slammed his hand down on the security buzzer.

"They won't find anything," Vinni advised cynically just before the door burst open.

Within seconds, six secret service agents had surrounded the bed and were searching with their weapons drawn. "What is it, sir? What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," the president said with a hint of embarrassment in his voice. "Quiet! Just listen." Each man was rigidly frozen in a defensive stance, slowly turning in place with the red laser beams of their automatic weapons bouncing off various objects around the room. They were clearly prepared to take any action necessary. The president was sitting up but remained in his bed. "Well," he said to entice a response from the mysterious voice. There was nothing but silence.

"I don't hear anything, sir," one of them men whispered.

"Me either," another exclaimed.

The president ran his hands through his hair and then down his face. "Shush," he commanded again. After another long period of pure silence, he began to reconsider. "Hell, I don't know," he said in an unconvincing tone and to minimize the embarrassment. "Maybe it was a dream," he amended with uncertainty and mostly to convince himself.

The agents slowly began holstering their weapons. "There was nothing on the infrared monitor, sir."

"Are you absolutely certain?"

"Yes, sir," the senior agent replied, "but it has been one hell of a week though. I've had a few nightmares myself."

"A nightmare. Yeah, that's probably what it was. It's just my imagination." He sighed with a cockeyed grin. "Let's just forget the whole thing. Go on back to your posts."

"If it'd make you feel better, I'd be glad to stick around."

"No, Steve. That won't be necessary. I'll be fine."

"Alright, sir. I'll keep the team on high alert just in case. Give us a buzz if you need us."

"I will. Thanks, boys."

"Come on, men. Let's give the President some privacy. Good night, sir."

"Gentlemen," he said to dismiss them. The President knew that it was no dream and remained sitting up with the light on. It took a few minutes to muster the courage, but he finally spoke into the air. "You're still here. Aren't you?" he asked lackadaisically and with increasing trepidation.

"Yes, sir. I'm still here."

He clinched the sheets in a fist. "I knew it."

"Again, I assure you there is nothing to be afraid of, but it's imperative that you hear what I have to say."

"I can't say I relish the thought, but it doesn't look like I've got much of a choice. So, who the hell are you and what do you want?"

"I'm Vinni Cross, sir. You received an email from me this morning. I was standing beside you in the oval office when you read it."

"Message?" He shook his head in confusion. "What message?" He thought for a moment. "Oh yeah. I did get a strange email, something about a meeting, but what does that have to do with this intrusion?"

"The email informed that you'd be contacted tonight. I'm simply following up."

"This may come as a shock to you, Mr. Cross, but most of my constituents contact me by phone or make an appointment with my Chief of Staff. This is the White House, you know? I'm not usually greeted by strange voices in the middle of the night. So, before you talk to me, you've got some serious explaining to do. And you can start with how the hell you got in here in the first place." He paused and looked around the room again. "And, for that matter, where the hell you are."

"You're certainly entitled to an explanation, but it's rather complicated. I'm not at liberty to delve into all the details just yet, but I am here. I'm standing right next to your bed. The fact that you can't see me should provide you with some indication of just how convoluted this situation is."

"Vincent Cross, huh? The billionaire?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Vinni began to expound. "In one very strange sense of the word, I am Vincent Cross, but in an emblematic physical sense, one could certainly argue that I'm not."

"You're either Cross or you aren't. Which is it?"

"Again, sir. It is extremely complicated. I know this is going to sound a little far-fetched at first, but I'm Vinni Cross - from the future."

"Oh, bull shit," he expressed with excessive sarcasm.

"I'm sure it appears to be just that, but in complete honesty, sir, that's the absolute truth. I'm from the year 2008."

"The billionaire, Vinni Cross, from 2008?" he indulged with profound vexation.

"That's correct."

"If you expect me to believe that load of crap, you're off your rocker, son, and you're barking up the wrong tree."

Vinni chuckled at the analogy. "I assure you; I am of sound mind and yours was the only tree I could think to bark up. All I'm asking is that you hear me out on this. Since they won't play much of a role, in this case anyway, I'd like to dispense with the formalities if I may."

"Fair enough, Mr. Cross. We'll consider the formalities dispensed with."

"Well, George. If you think this is bull shit, you haven't heard anything yet."

The President was clearly baffled by the bizarre notion but intrigued as well and gradually caved in to Vinni's perseverance. "Let me be clear on one thing. I'm not saying that I'm even remotely considering the possibility, but assuming I was, the first thing I'd want to know is how you managed to accomplish this incredible time-traveling feat of yours. Do you want to give that a shot?"

Vinni sighed aloud heavily. "It's like this. I discovered this portal, literally stumbled upon it. I have no idea know where it came, how it got here or how it works. All I know is that I can pass through it. When I do, I travel exactly seven years back into the past and,

when I do, I no longer have a physical presence. I become the invisible spirit that's standing before you now. People can hear me when I speak. They just can't see me. Truth be known, that's how I attained my extraordinary level of prominence and wealth. That's also how I got into your room undetected."

"Uh huh," the President skeptically replied with vague acknowledgement. "Seven years into the past and invisible."

"I know how absurd it sounds, but it is the truth."

Vinni's sincerity seemed to be swaying the President's disposition. "This portal of yours, where is it? I'd like to see it."

"I'm sure you would and so would a lot of other people if they knew about it. That little secret will never be revealed. I'm already taking a huge risk just by being here. You are now the only other man alive who knows the portal exists. I'd like nothing more than to show it off, but I've learned my lesson the hard way. This thing is dangerous. At least for the time being, it's imperative that we keep this little secret between us."

"Alright. Call it our little secret then. Now let's see if I've got my ducks in a row here. You have in your possession a portal that allows you to travel through time - seven years into the past."

"That's correct," Vinni reiterated for clarification.

"You traveled back from the future and became the invisible man, so to speak. A voice that claims to be one of the wealthiest men on the planet is speaking to me. That's an eerie thought. If I was buying in to your bull shit, which I'm not by the way, I'd be inclined to be more than a bit leery of your intentions. It makes a man in my position wonder if this isn't some sort of coup d'état, a scheme to take over the world."

Vinni chuckled aloud. "On the contrary, sir. My intentions are quite honorable. I have in essence traveled through time to save the world."

"Well, ain't that reassuring? And what exactly do you plan to save the world from?"

"The future, Mr. President, a future that no longer exists."

"Come again."

"On October 20th in 2008 a full-scale nuclear war takes place."

The world, and virtually much everything in it, is destroyed, everything except me that is. The portal in my possession provided me with my only means of escape. If it hadn't been for this gateway to the past, I wouldn't be talking with you now."

"You're joking. Right?"

"I wish I was. In seven short years, life as you know it, as all mankind knows it, will cease to exist. Unless we take evasive action and alter that future, the world faces complete and total annihilation. As it stands, there is no world for me to return to and the prospect of living like some sort of ghost in your world isn't a very appealing proposition either. My only hope is to find a way of preventing this catastrophe from ever occurring."

The President finally climbed out of bed clad only in a pair of boxer shorts and quickly grabbed a robe. He was now pacing the floor as he argued his position like a lawyer in court. "You tell one hell of a story and in a very convincing fashion I might add. I hear what you're saying, Mr. Cross, but that's one gigantic pill you're asking me to swallow. It's not that I'm unsympathetic, but even if that story of yours is true, you've got to look at this from my point of view, son."

He continued as if speaking to a room full of adversaries. "With the failsafe system we have in place, I find it hard to believe that any situation could arise that could conceivably trigger a full-scale nuclear attack. Besides, the United States has the largest and most powerful nuclear arsenal on the planet. I can't imagine any country with kahunas big enough to pick a fight with us. It's that supremacy that keeps them in check and nuclear war off the table."

"I can certainly appreciate your viewpoint, sir. Until yesterday, I perceived the potential in much the same way. If I hadn't witnessed the melee for myself, I'd be inclined to agree. Unfortunately, that's also where the problem stems from. Most of the world has conformed to the belief that no country would ever consider an exchange of nuclear weapons. Mankind has entrusted its fate to governments and computer systems. Since people no longer see nuclear war as a legitimate threat and refuse to acknowledge the potential, no one is prepared to deal with consequences. That is precisely why the war in 2008 escalated to a full-scale exchange."

"Who started it?"

"I don't have access to enough information just yet to determine who started it or why. I hope to learn the answers soon enough but consider who to be irrelevant. Because it took place with virtually no

warning whatsoever, I'm inclined to presume that it was the unforeseen act of a terrorist group. It appears that a short-range missile was launched from an unknown location in the Middle East, possibly Iran. I was however able to ascertain where the first retaliatory missile was launched from in response."

"And who fired that?"

Vinni hesitated to answer, "We did, sir. It was fired from a U.S. submarine in the Mediterranean Sea."

"That's ridiculous. Only the most extreme extenuating circumstances would prompt a retaliatory strike."

"With that thought in mind, let's consider what we do know. Jerusalem appeared to be the original target. My thoughts are based solely on speculation at this juncture, but since the United States has a long-standing alliance with Israel and is sworn to defend her, our missiles may have been fired in her defense. There wouldn't have been time to respond with conventional weaponry."

"Several countries have extensive nuclear capabilities in 2008, but only a few have a failsafe system in place as sophisticated as the United States. It could be that a computer error caused the missile to fire inadvertently. Even if it was a full-fledged attack or an act of terrorism, we may never know who planned the attack. For that reason, it doesn't seem to matter which country launched first. Every country with nuclear capabilities went on immediate retaliatory alert. It would appear the computer systems of each nation took over and responded automatically. That of course sparked an irreversible chain reaction."

"Since they retaliated with multiple strikes directed at the United States, Russia and China probably perceived the launching of our missiles as a potential threat to them. Israel's enemies took advantage of the confusion and fired on several targets throughout the country. The strikes escalated rapidly. For each missile fired by every other country, American forces responded with ten. By the time the first missile hit its target, every nation's arsenal was exhausted."

"That's too incredible to fathom."

"The wheels of nuclear annihilation were rolling and there was no system in place to stop it. These, Mr. President, are the indisputable facts."

"I'm here to tell you. That's one hell of a story, son, but it is far from indisputable evidence. All you've given me to go on is hearsay from a voice that claims to be from the future. Based on some cockamamie

story about a war that won't even take place for another seven years, you expect me to initiate some sort of formal proceedings to prevent it?"

"Actually, with a little help from me, that is exactly what I am suggesting you do."

"Hells bells, boy. Even if I believed your story, which I don't by the way, just how would you propose we go about it?"

"I have access to specific information pertaining to future events that will occur over the next seven years, events that would be impossible for anyone to predict. I'm willing to share enough information with you to validate my claim. My only objective is to convince you the threat is real. With me on your side, I am confident we can avoid this disaster."

"It's an enormous challenge and will require some carefully calculated tactics, but you are the President of the United States, for God's sake. If the world leaders won't listen to you, maybe they'll listen to me. But to avoid my direct involvement, I'll need your full support."

Vinni's focus was on selling the objective. "I don't know if we can prevent that first missile from being fired, but I believe we can develop a system to detect and destroy it before the retaliatory panic sets in. At the very least, we should be able to persuade the U.S. Armed Forces and every other nation to refrain from firing their weapons in response."

"The way I see it, you took an oath to defend America against all threats, foreign and domestic. As far as I know, there are no rules of engagement that limit your obligation to the present. I'm just a humble patriot who is committed to the same things you are. You however have an astute responsibility. The two of us may be the only hope humankind has for a future."

The president was pessimistic, but somewhat receptive. "You do realize that what you are suggesting is without a doubt the most bizarre farfetched political ploy ever conceived."

"Yes, sir. I suppose it is."

"I'd have to apprise the Joint Chiefs of Staff who will undoubtedly think I've flipped my lid."

"I realize it places you in an awkward position, but I'll be present at your meeting. They will see for themselves the threat is

genuine. I will also arrange for my counterpart, Vinni Cross from your time period, to communicate directly with you as well. He can convey most of the specifics electronically. However, to guard against infiltration, my former self will remain in protective seclusion, but he'll be actively involved in the proceedings. Anything that happens to him happens to me. So, the whereabouts of the portal will never be revealed." He paused for a moment. "My calendar is fairly flexible. When would you like to schedule your meeting?"

"Give me a couple of days. Let's aim for Monday morning."

"It won't be easy, and it may take some time to instill some confidence, but I know we can pull this off. We've got to."

"You're right about one thing, Mr. Cross. This sure isn't going to be easy. I'm skeptical, of course, but until I have reason to believe otherwise, we'll forge ahead." He yawned and stretched his arms. "It is the middle of the night. So, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to get a little shot eye before the sun comes up."

Vinni chuckled. "Of course."

"I wish you luck, Mr. Cross. If any of what you have told me is true, I suspect you're going to need it."

"I will indeed."

"Oh! By the way," the President added to conclude their summit.

"Yes, sir."

"I do have an office, you know. I'd prefer to conduct business there if you don't mind. Since you got in here, I'm assuming you can get in there just as easy. During business hours would be a refreshing change as well."

"I'll keep that in mind. Good night, Mr. President."

"Back at ya, Mr. Cross."

CHAPTER 9

Where the Streets Have No Name

"How did it go?" V-41 eagerly inveigled upon V-48's return.

"It's hard to say. He seemed somewhat receptive, but he's also understandably cynical. He's not yet sold on me or the prospect of time-travel, but he got a good earful. There will undoubtedly be an investigation into the entire Cross organization. That will probably include an in-depth search for you and the mirror."

"What do you suggest I do?"

"There is no trail tying us to the cabin. So, you should be safe at the Alaskan lodge. You might want to contact V-34 and get a team of IT guys started on an untraceable line of communications and a video feed to the White House. You'll be using that line for all White House correspondence."

"Great. Instead of enjoying my new life, I get to spend my time in solitary confinement. We," he inferred to emphasize the fact, "might be saving the world and your ass, but it's me who will be making all the sacrifices."

"Consider it a minor imposition and it's only temporary. Look at it from my perspective. The next time you step through that portal, look at yourself in a real mirror. That's true confinement, my friend. So, bear with me will ya? Until they are convinced otherwise, we're going to be considered a major threat and we need to be prepared for anything."

"It's just not fair."

"No, it's not and I am sorry, Vinni. If I had known all the trouble this portal was going to cause, I might never have used the damn thing to begin with. It was probably for a reason just like this the portal was sealed it up when I found it. Nobody has any business messing with the past, present or future. So, if we manage to get this

mess straightened out, I'm thinking we should get rid of this thing for good. I'd be fine with living our lives one day at a time just like everybody else."

"I'm inclined to agree, but we'll have to turn the world upside down and inside out before we can even consider getting rid of it."

"That's for sure. He doesn't need to know why, but make sure 34 supplies you with everything you need. Make sure it's owned and operated by an unrelated untraceable entity. To be honest, Alaska's not such a bad place to be confined to."

Although he felt like a criminal in hiding, V-41 was for the most part content. In anticipation of a negative response, they were monitoring all the activity at each of the Cross facilities. Within a few hours a swarm of secret service agents and a brigade of military personnel had surrounded the California estate and several of their branch offices. V-48 was anxious to express his dismay. Within minutes, was standing beside the President in his Oval Office.

"That was a pretty bold move, George," he said to initiate the conversation bright and early on Saturday morning.

The President was clearly startled. "Damn, I wish you wouldn't do that." He pressed a button under his desk to start a hidden voice recorder installed that morning.

Vinni was adamant. "A full-scale investigation into Cross enterprises?"

The President wasn't surprised to learn that Vinni was aware of the investigation. "Of course! We're talking national security here and there's just too much at stake. You didn't really expect the United States to sit on its thumbs, did you?" He continued rather arrogantly. "If you don't think a strange voice in the night claiming to be from the future warrants a full-scale investigation, you're the one with a problem. Give me a little credit, Mr. Cross. I'm no idiot. When someone pokes a hot stick up my ass, I aim to find out why."

"I would have been surprised if you hadn't, but I do hope you've gotten that out of your system. I'm here to take care of business. The sooner we get started the better. When is your meeting?"

"Already had it."

"Now, that I didn't expect. How did that go for you?"

"They think I've lost my marbles. I spent most of my time trying

to convince them that I'm not off my rocker," he replied casually. "I'm not too fond of the idea, but we may have to play it your way for a while. What I don't need is another political rival blowing purple smoke up my ass. So, this claim of yours had better be legit."

"It is, but you're gonna need both sides of the isle on board for this to work," Vinni stated with a chuckle.

The President sat back in his chair and placed his index finger over his lips. "Right now, I've got a voice and, so far, I'm the only one who hears it. If I'm to have any chance of convincing my colleagues that you are real and that this threat of yours is genuine, I'm going to need some ammunition. Tell me, Mr. Cross. What else does this future of yours have in store for us?"

"I've given that some thought. It might be fun to start with the winners of Tomorrow's NFL games."

"Football? You table a threat of nuclear war and offer me football scores? For some reason, I envisioned something more along the lines of intellectual enlightenment."

"It may not have the same impact as a plane crash, but it should be rather convincing. At this juncture, that's my only objective," he said with a giggle. "Later today, you'll receive an encrypted message from my cohort. The attached file will contain the final scores for each game. Prior to tomorrow's games, print out copies, place them in sealed envelopes and distribute them to your key personnel. They should be instructed to keep their packages on their person, and they should remain sealed until their meeting with you Monday morning. The intrigue alone should generate some interesting conversation, but I'm looking forward to seeing their faces when they open those envelopes. I'll be on hand to follow up with a verbal dissertation."

"I have to admit, that sounds like an interesting little demonstration. If you can pick the winners of every game, it will definitely get their attention."

"They'll not only have the winners of each game, but detailed statistics as well. It should be a real eye-opener." Vinni was silent for a moment before he added another intriguing comment. "It's just a thought mind you, but it might be fun to place a friendly wager or two."

"I'll say this, Mr. Cross. I like your style, but if the statistics don't match up, I'm going to look like a complete idiot."

"They'll be accurate. By the way, you'll need a password to access

the file when it arrives," Vinni added. The President jotted down the peculiar characters as Vinni read them off then pushed the paper in the general direction of the voice for verification. "That's it. You'll be receiving a message shortly. I'll get out of your hair for now. Have a nice day, sir."

"Yeah. You as well."

V-48 headed straight for the Alaskan facility. The message to the President had already been drafted and included details from the front page of the Monday edition of the Washington Post. V-41 made a few entries on his computer and the email was on its way.

The president seemed more intrigued by the notion than skeptical of the concept. After reviewing the information, he downloaded the file into a secure folder on his personal laptop. To guard against infiltration, he printed all the copies himself. Each packet was labeled "TOP SECRET" and had the Presidential Seal. A brief note was attached with his instructions. If the information contained within proved to be correct, it would be difficult to question the authenticity.

The President's Sunday afternoon was spent in front of several TV screens curiously watching the outcome of each game, which were unfolding precisely as Vinni had predicted. Even though the results included a painful loss for the President's favorite team, confidence in Vinni's futuristic claim was growing.

The Monday morning meeting had been scheduled as requested, but the President secretly called an emergency meeting Sunday night. Vinni was monitoring the activity and was unknowingly in attendance.

"Open your packages, gentlemen," the President instructed.

One of the men was quick to question, "Football scores?"

"That's right, Jim. The results of every game played today, and they've been in your possession since yesterday. I'm telling you, boys. We've either got an incredible breakthrough here or one very serious problem on our hands. Tom," he addressed, "what do you make of all this?"

The five-star general was anxious to voice his opinion. In a cold hard voice, he said, "There's no question, the information is accurate. If Mr. Cross, or whoever this intruder is, somehow managed to pick the winners of each game, I'd have been impressed, but this guy provided us with statistics. We've got rushing yards, passing yards, and he even outlined a few of the plays. In my mind, we'd be foolish not to

consider all possibilities. It's his intentions that concern me and I don't care if he claims to be Christ Almighty. Any man with some sort of time-traveling gizmo poses a definite threat to national security. If he has an ulterior motive, I want to know what it is."

"But," the President amended, "that's just it, Tom. If his intentions were perfidious, what could the guy possibly have to gain by apprising us? It would have been in his best interests to keep it a secret. The way I see it, if he had some sort of political or military agenda, I think we'd have known about it by now."

"That's the beauty of a plan like this," the director of the Navy inferred. "He has nothing to gain unless we are aware of the powers he possesses. Now, he can use it as leverage against us."

"No. I just don't think that's the case, John," the President argued more objectively. "I've had conversations with this guy, and I get the distinct impression he is sincere. Besides, if he is who he claims to be, he is already one of the richest men in the world. He certainly doesn't need any monetary compensation from us. I'm telling you; this guy is concerned about the future. This nuclear war of his doesn't even take place for another seven years. If he told us a nuclear war was gonna to happen next week, we'd probably be at DEFCON 3 by now. All I'm saying is, it's not going to hurt to hear the man out. If he truly has come to us for help, we've got to at least explore this thing with him and consider lending our support. If he proves to be a threat, that's another matter entirely and we'll have to deal with it. We should be prepared for anything and respond accordingly but we must remain openminded."

"I'm sorry, sir," began another, "but so far, all we have are sports scores. I certainly haven't seen enough evidence to convince me that the world is at risk of some futuristic threat of war. The only thing he's provided us with is some relatively meaningless information."

"I agree," the President continued, "but let's put ourselves in his shoes. The football scores were merely a way of getting our attention. If you asked me, I'd say it was a rather clever tactic." He held up the newspaper. "This is the front page of this morning's Washington Post for Christ's sake. Cross is painting an incredible picture here."

An aid approached and handed him a document. "Here's another one for ya, boys. We just received another email from Mr. Cross. According to him, Barshefsky and Quan-Sheng are in the process of signing an exclusive Trade Agreement as we speak. I certainly wasn't apprised of any such meeting. If that proves to be true and none of you guys have

any Intel indicating such activity, I'd be more inclined to work with him and fire your asses."

The door to their private room opened and the presidential aid stepped back into the room. The President signaled him to come over and the aid whispered in his ear. "Thank you, Henry," he said to the young man who made a hasty exit. "There you go, gentleman. We just received confirmation. Russia and China just finished signing and they were more than a little curious as to how we knew about it."

"Mr. Cross is also aware of our undisclosed strategies for the terrorism coalition. He even knows the name of the operation and that hasn't even been released to some of the people in this room. He clearly has no plans to use that against us. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong, but it seems like the guy is doing his best to convince us."

Vinni was listening intently and was pleased to learn the President seemed to be supporting his position. He understood the reluctance of his colleagues but was confident that in time he would be able to sway them all.

Admiral Jefferson Brown, Secretary of Defense, spoke next. "Mr. President, this 'voice of yours' claims to be that of a man from the future. Yet the most elite forces on the planet haven't been able to locate Mr. Cross in the present. That's no coincidence and, quite frankly, that fact makes me a little nervous. If he's as sincere as you make him out to be, a meeting with the man would be a huge step in the right direction. I'm just not ready to buy into this time-traveler notion. As far as we know, this is some high-tech hacker and nothing more than an extremely elaborate hoax."

The President quickly responded. "I hear what you're saying, Jeff. I'd be more concerned if you weren't a little skeptical. Cross, or at least his voice, is supposed to be present at the meeting tomorrow morning and you'll all have an opportunity to express your concerns. I want the best of the best working on this. If this is some sort of hoax, let's nip it in the bud. So far, there's no evidence it is. So, we've got to give this guy the benefit of the doubt and an opportunity to lay his cards out on the table. If he has a hidden agenda, it's up to us to force his hand and trip him up if we can. But if he can sell us on this futuristic war concept, we've got to be willing to listen."

"If Cross is from the future and he has some sort of time machine, I want that son of a bitch on our side. Can you imagine what an impact this kind of technology could have on a global scale if it fell into the hands of North Korea? More importantly, if Mr. Cross really is on a mission to avert a nuclear war, we took an oath and have an obligation to help him anyway we can."

The men reluctantly acceded to the President's wishes, but the lack of faith and cynicism was obvious. Vinni now had a much better idea of what he was up against. He knew he had his work cut out for him, but the next day would prove to be an enlightening experience for everyone present.

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V-41's untraceable video transmission link was up would be operable for the meeting. V-48 would simultaneously be in attendance. Vinni's infrared energy detection systems had been delivered and completely dismantled by the team of scientists and security personnel assigned to inspect it.

In a brief report to the President, the head of that investigative committee informed that the technology utilized to develop the system was that of an advanced nature and far beyond the capabilities at their disposal. Although they couldn't envision a practical application for the unit, they were convinced it was safe. It was still in the experimental stage of development, but it would enable a peculiar variation of V-48 to be visible at the meeting.

"Well?" the overanxious general prodded impatiently.

"Trust me, General," the President responded with confidence. "If he's not here already, he'll be here. Mr. Cross," he said into the air. Blank questioning glares on the faces of the skeptical officials set the mood.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Vinni answered. "Present, but not necessarily accounted for."

While most of the men seemed mesmerized, the President was somewhat relieved. He began a casual conversation to initiate the proceedings. "That was quite a demonstration yesterday. The odds makers would have been impressed."

"I trust no illegal wagers were made," Vinni stated humorously to help ease the obvious tension.

The President smiled. "I may have placed a few bets with some of my distinguished colleagues across the aisle." His statement prompted some chuckles from most of the men in the room.

It was hard for anyone to camouflage their curiosity and distinct look of shock. "You can see and hear us, Mr. Cross?" one of the men asked.

"Loud and clear, sir."

"The Vincent Cross we're a bit more accustomed to, we haven't been able to locate. Where might he be hiding these days?"

"Mr. President," V-48 began, "if you would be kind enough to type in the following web address; CROSSTIME.org." He did so and within seconds, V-41's smiling face appeared on the screen.

"Good morning, gentlemen," V-41 addressed the group. The surprise appearance prompted several questioning glares to bounce around the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Cross," the President said with a curious glance of his own.

From the onset of their meeting, the President's team of I.T. experts began a series of futile attempts to track down the location of Vinni's transmission. The silence prompted another response from V-41. "I assure you, gentlemen. There is no trickery involved here. I'm coming to you live via an encrypted and untraceable feed."

V-48's voice quickly filled the room. "Perhaps we should begin the proceedings and address the matter at hand."

"You have the floor, Mr. Cross," the President directed.

"As I'm sure the President has already explained; I discovered some sort of mystical portal that enables me to travel seven years back in time. I have used it on numerous occasions. Obviously, when I do, my physical body transforms into some sort of invisible form of electromagnetic energy. I can't be seen, only heard. However, the energy detection system we delivered was designed by an elite team of scientists. It detects minute traces of atomic energy. If you would be kind enough to initialize the system," he inferred. A nervous aid reluctantly flipped the power switch. "You'll be able to see a vague holographic rendition of my presence."

Vinni stepped into the detection booth and a faint static image appeared for the first time. A series of laser beams within the frame projected a fuzzy 3-D image of Vinni's upper torso. It appeared as a colorful hologram illuminating the minute energy particles that now made up his meager existence. It certainly lacked definition, but Vinni's features, movements and gestures were clearly visible.

V-48 continued to expound on the novel concept. "Initially, since I had virtually no idea how to utilize the device, I chose to establish

contact with my former self, the man you see on the computer screen. We are in essence one in the same. I'm simply the older model. In hindsight, it may not have been the wisest of decisions, but I used the portal to build myself an empire. As remarkable and monumental as the notion may seem, it was a relatively simple achievement. What I suspect you'll find to be even more extraordinary is the fact that this portal has only been in my possession for a few weeks." That statement prompted a barrage of hostile murmurs.

"Until now, it hadn't been necessary. So, I have never disclosed details of the discovery or its capabilities to anyone other than my former self. The circumstances have obviously changed. The Cross organization has taken steps to ensure that this device will never be utilized for political or military gain. Its whereabouts will never be revealed. However, for the sake of sustaining the anticipated arguments, I intend to demonstrate the awesome capabilities we presently possess."

"First of all, I'd like to state for the record that I am a humble God-fearing man. I have no evil ill-minded intentions. What I witnessed a few days ago in 2008 was quite real and the most terrifying experience you can imagine. I stand before you today as all that's left of life in that future. There is virtually nothing there for me to return to. In 2008, I am quite literally the last man left alive on the planet, which is one very disturbing prospect. Even with the most advanced protective gear, I seriously doubt I could survive the devastating aftermath. Even if I could, it's certainly not a life I'd cherish living. This however is much more than a personal quest. It is of the utmost importance for the entire human race."

"On October 20 in the year 2008 the world as you know it will be annihilated by a full-scale nuclear war." Vinni paused briefly to allow the men to absorb the notion. "It was only by virtue of our unusual portal that I managed to escape, but I was on hand to witness the catastrophe firsthand. I can still use the portal to access what's left of my world, but it's not a very pretty picture. The devastation is far beyond your wildest imagination and, unfortunately, that's what is in store for you and your descendants. My present in 2008 is your inevitable future."

"I realize that mine is undoubtedly the most unusual request you'll ever be asked to consider, but I'm also presenting you with a rare opportunity. It's up to us to prevent this ludicrous tragedy from ever taking place. So, to ensure that I have a world to return to, I need your help to alter the future."

The general was anxious to speak. "That's a very compelling speech, Mr. Cross, but I'm more the devil's advocate type. If what you

are saying is true, interfering with the natural course of history sounds like an extremely risky proposition. I'm not so sure mankind has any business meddling in the realm of the metaphysical, much less altering the future. To be completely honest, I'm not the least bit convinced you are from the future. Other than some imposing hearsay, there is virtually no solid evidence whatsoever to substantiate your claim. Even if what you're telling us is the absolute truth, there is no way of knowing what sort of injurious impact our influence might have on the future. It seems to me, there would be a distinct potential for negative implications. We could conceivably make things worse."

"With all due respect, general," Vinni stated boldly, "I can't envision any implication that could exceed the obliteration of all life on the planet. It's mankind's radical influence and its development of such weapons that got us into this mess. There is no greater danger to mankind than weapons of mass destruction. You can refer to them as a deterrent all day long, but they were built to be utilized. Is it really such a surprise to learn that the weapons man created were in fact eventually deployed? Are you truly shocked by the fact they would lead to mankind's proverbial demise?"

Vinni was frustrated by the man's failure to acknowledge what he perceived as a profound truth. "This is no time to be challenging the extent of your obligations as a nation. Regardless of the outcome of mankind's wayward journey, you are being extended a unique opportunity. You have a legitimate chance to prevent a disaster and I'm here to help. I didn't ask for the job and certainly don't want the responsibility, but I am the lone wolf here. For whatever reason, the task of saving the world has been allocated to me. Since I have nothing to gain and everything to lose, that alone is my sole objective. My only purpose, in what's left of my meager existence, is to save the future of all mankind."

"I understand your concern, Mr. Cross," the President inferred to shift gears. "We've also invited Dr. Weingarten to join us. He is a scientist that specializes in the field of atomic energy and cosmology. Doctor."

"Mr. Cross, it's an honor to be a member of this elite team. I for one am convinced you are indeed from the future. It's not that I doubt your intentions, but as I'm sure you know, there are serious risk factors that must be taken into careful consideration. Any information about the future divulged to us could conceivably have a devastating impact on post-history for us and pre-history for you. If we know a catastrophic event is about to happen, perhaps we have some sort of responsibility or duty to prevent it if we can, but human beings that will have died will live and people who will have lived will die. A man destined to be a great leader may never be born. The

potential quandaries are endless."

The doctor went on to expound on his perspective. "Virtually every aspect of life as we know it can and will be affected by how we choose to respond to what we learn from you. We are venturing into a new dimension of understanding. We must approach any decision with extreme caution. In-depth studies must be conducted before we can foreseeably commit to any such endeavor. Computer programs can be developed to test our theories. What you are asking is for us to assume that responsibility based solely on the declarations of one man. That's simply not practical."

"Dr. Weingarten, I'm quite familiar with your work and I understand your disinclination," Vinni said before beginning his rebuttal, "but if you refrain from taking any action for fear of making a mistake, you will have done your country and the world the greatest disservice of all. Everyone in this room would be assuming responsibility for the annihilation of life as we know it. Considering the potential consequences, your argument is in my view completely unacceptable. Granted, this event won't impact you or your families for another seven years, but that's certainly no reason to put it off. Any commitment to prevent a nuclear war, regardless of when it takes place, is an honorable decree. You are ethically and morally obligated to make the same commitment. As elected officials, you all have a sworn duty to defend your country. I'm simply asking you to fulfill it."

The Secretary of State spoke. "What sort of plan are you proposing to thwart this so-called disaster of yours? Surely you aren't asking us to fight a war that hasn't even begun."

"No, sir. I propose we take a diplomatic approach. I'm suggesting the United States take the initiative and contact the leaders of all the other nations and warn them of the impending future. A letter to each delegation prophetically outlining the events that lie ahead should serve to coax most of them into working together to prevent it."

"Even if we can't prevent the first missile that sparked the exchange, we can conceivably avoid the full-scale retaliatory strikes that follows. The United States will have the benefit of a powerful 'voice', one that can span even the most secure of international facilities. As the president can attest, I can speak directly with the leaders of every country and use my influence to establish an unprecedented realm of peace. If we're successful, the end-result will be a secure future for you and a thriving world for me." He pointed to the computer screen. "Peace is our only hope. Although I'd much rather proceed as a representative of my country, I am fully prepared to take any step necessary, with or without the blessing of the U.S."

government. If necessary, I'd go public with it if that's what it takes, but I'd much rather have your support."

The room was quiet, each man in silent thought. Though Vinni seemed to be successfully swaying the panel of distinguished politicians, not all the men were convinced.

The Secretary of Defense, a large black man dressed in full military attire stood to make his position known. "The notion of time-travel is a very intriguing concept, but according to Einstein it is at best merely theoretically feasible. If you ask me, to embark on an anti-nuclear war strategy based on contentions of some godlike voice is considerably more than a little far-fetched. It is in my view preposterous. We are the most powerful nation in the world. Such tactics would undoubtedly be perceived by our adversaries as weakness."

"We live in a day and age when technology is so far advanced almost nothing is impossible. I'm convinced there is a more practical and rational explanation for all these strange anomalies. As far as we know, this holographic display is nothing more than some sort of military propaganda. Our enemies could be sitting in a situation room somewhere laughing their asses off at the very thought the United States of America would even consider such philosophical malarkey. Before I would even consider exploring such a ludicrous notion, somebody's going to have to put a lot more in front of me than a few football scores and an invisible man. We are the United States of America, for god's sake. We deal in facts, gentlemen, not fantasy and science fiction. We're entitled to a lot more proof than some pious voice from the future."

"Name your poison," Vinni arrogantly inferred.

"Excuse me."

Vinni was clearly offended and his patience was wearing thin. "Tell me, Mr. Secretary. What exactly would serve as a means of appeasing your concerns? Please be specific. Perhaps you'd like to know a little something about your future or your political career. That's easy enough for me to obtain, but would you really want to know?" He hesitated and then presented a format that the men could more easily relate to. "What about the results of the upcoming elections? Would you like to know who's in and who's out of office?"

"Gentlemen, please," V-41 said through the monitor to minimize the stress. "I think what my cohort is trying to say is..."

"I know exactly what he - you - whoever the hell it is was saying," the Secretary blurted. "Christ almighty! I don't even know who or what

I'm talking to."

The President spoke to relieve the increasing tension. "I think you've made your point, Mr. Cross, and I understand your concerns, Tom, but it's kind of hard to argue with the man's logic. We'd better be very careful about what we ask for. There's a real good chance we might get it."

The Secretary made no effort to conceal his dismay. "If you are who you say you are, a loyal American patriot, prove it. Take a trip to China and retrieve some inside information."

"You just don't get it, do you? That man right there," he directed with a holographic finger pointing at V-41, "is the most loyal American patriot you've got. As for me, I don't even have an inhabitable planet to call home, much less any national security interests. I don't give a rat's ass what China's intentions are, and I can't make my position any clearer. I will not allow my capabilities to be used to satisfy anyone's political or military objectives. If it's a spy you want, I'm not interested. Games like those are what got us into this mess to begin with."

"If you're not interested, gentlemen, I'll take my case elsewhere, but I'm not wasting your time or mine discussing meaningless political and military agendas. There's only one scenario to consider here. You either work with me to accomplish the objective or I take my little time machine overseas. It's that simple, gentlemen. As far as I'm concerned, those incoming missiles can fly right up your..."

"Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Mr. Cross," the President said to re-establish some semblance of control. "We seem to be getting a little off track here. Let me say for the record, I agree wholeheartedly. You are in the right place and we are here to help. The last thing we want is Mr. Cross working with some other country. We need to focus our efforts on what's best for the United States and all the other people on this planet of ours. If there's an objective to be achieved, let it be that the men in this room elected to take the appropriate action. If the United States can somehow save mankind from an imminent doom, democracy will stand tall in the end."

"With all due respect, sir," the Secretary stated boldly. "We don't have a clue what we're up against here."

"I realize that, Tom, but if Mr. Cross is speaking the truth, we have quite a challenge ahead of us. Even with substantial evidence, convincing our adversaries we have their best interests at heart won't be an easy task. We will of course take the necessary precautions to protect national security, but I intend to focus on Mr. Cross's

objective. Until we have a reason to believe otherwise, we've got to assume that the world is in jeopardy of destruction."

"Of course, sir," the subdued Secretary reluctantly replied.

Though he was encouraged by the President's proclamation, Vinni was disheartened by the obvious lack of support. If a despondent colleague attempted to take matters into his own hands, the fears of what could conceivably happen began to weigh on his heart.

Vinni spoke passionately and with extreme degradation. "Gentlemen, this is simply day one. I realize it will take some time to establish a genuine level of trust. So, I will continue to provide necessary updates on future events to help instill confidence in our mutual objectives, but you simply must consider it from my perspective. If we don't succeed in stopping this catastrophic event from occurring, I'll most likely be imprisoned here for the rest of my life. I already have an idea what kind of life that would be. I certainly don't want to be stuck in your world and I think it's safe to assume most of you wouldn't want my voice whispering in your ears for the rest of your lives either. That said, perhaps we should call it a day. I sincerely appreciate your time, but keep in mind; you'll never know when or where I might be listening."

"Needless to say," the President began with stern eyes peering out at his colleagues over his reading glasses. "I want a very tight lid on this one. Anything and everything discussed in this room, stays in this room. I can't even imagine the pandemonium it would create if the media got a hold of this. No leaks, gentlemen!"

The President adjourned the meeting with a few final words. "We appreciate your time as well, Mr. Cross. We've got a pretty-clear picture of what's at stake and we're going to help you get the job done."

"Thank you, sir. Good day, gentlemen."

"Thank you all," V-41 added to signal his exodus.

A hodgepodge of vague farewell murmurs filled the air in response. As V-41's video feed faded from the monitor, V-48's image disappeared from the detection booth.

"Do you think he's gone?" one of the men asked.

"Are you willing to gamble on that, Sam," the President stated emphatically. "Granted, we've got a lot to discuss and, if anyone has something to say, I want to hear it, but if I were you, I'd choose my

words very carefully." There was an extended period of silence as each person considered the possibilities. "That's an intriguing notion, isn't it? Someone could know what you are saying about them behind their back," he said to infer that any comments about him could be overheard as well.

As suspected, Vinni remained in the room to listen in on an extensive series of post-meeting comments and discussions. It may have stemmed from a fear that Vinni might take his technology elsewhere, but the majority seemed to be climbing on board.

By taking such drastic measures, Vinni had opened a futuristic version of Pandora's Box. There was now a long list of variables beyond his control. Vinni's crusade had begun, but he could never know for certain if his campaign was heading in the right direction.

CHAPTER 10

Marooned

It took a little longer than expected, but V-48's efforts appeared to have been successful. The war that he was trying so desperately to prevent was avoided. It never took place. In a matter of days, a new inviting light was shining through the portal. He couldn't wait to return to his revitalized world and to hold Sierra in his arms again. Fate, however, had another astonishing development in store. They would ever know what led to the events that followed, but everything in the lives of Vinni Cross was about to change.

Before returning to 2008, Vinni spent some quality time in the vault with V-41 casually contemplating revisions to plans for their future. Suddenly, the all-to-familiar red light started flashing on V-41's console. For V-48, it was like watching a rerun of a horror movie. There was a sense of entangling fear in his voice, "You have got to be kidding me." V-41 turned his attention to the alarm light flashing above. "This can't be happening again, can it? Not now! Not after all we've already been through!"

"I can't believe this," V-41 said calmly, but with a firm grip the table. "Those idiots started another war. What do we do?"

"Get ready to jump," V-48 declared. "You'll have to find some way to stop this thing. It's our only chance."

"It doesn't look like your plan worked out so well," he sarcastically replied with an angry glare.

"We don't have time to argue about it. It's happening again right before your eyes. We don't have a choice."

"What went wrong?"

"Hell, I don't know, Vinni. It only takes one fool to start a war. Unfortunately, you'll be on your own this time. It's up to you and 34. Hopefully, you can talk some sense into these imbeciles. If

you can't pull this off, the party's over for all of us."

"And I'll be the one stuck in the past."

"Maybe, but you won't be dead. I can only imagine what the future has in store for me. I'd much rather be alive as a spirit in the past than be the last man on Earth. You've got to stop this, Vinni!" He looked at the computer screen. "Check it out." The display showed an array of incoming missiles targeting the immediate area. "Secure all the data you can and try to determine where the first strike came from. Relocate the mirror as soon as you can, and make this future go away!"

V-41 switched on the outside cameras. "Holy shit!"

"You haven't seen anything yet. "We've got about five minutes."

"How do I prepare for this?"

"You don't," V-48 said in a soft humble voice. "You do what you can and hope for the best. Your heart is in the right place. I'm scared too, partner. If you aren't successful..."

"I know, I know. Trust me. I'll find a way."

"I'm so sorry I got you into this," V-48 stated with earnest remorse.

"It's not your fault, Vinni. There are just too many ignorant people out there who live to oppose one another. They'd prefer to destroy the world to spite a nation. A nuclear war is inevitable. Even if we manage to fix this, it's going to happen again someday. I'll do what I can."

"Even if you don't pull it off, you've got to admit one thing. It may have been short one, but it was one hell of a ride!"

"It sure was and I can't thank you enough for sharing it with me. If we don't see each other again..."

"So be it, I suppose, but" he hesitated before finishing his sentence, "if we do, we've got to lose the portal. It's got to go away forever."

"Agreed," V-41 said before pausing to consider his lack of options.

"Incoming," V-48 advised as they made their final preparations. "I guess that's it then." They moved silently toward their respective

sides of the mirror. "Getting to know you was an incredible experience and a genuine honor. You're a good man Vinni Cross."

"Back at ya, pal. Good luck!"

"God's speed!" They both glanced back at the screen and, as the first explosive flash lit up the sky, they stepped through and were simultaneously vaulted in opposite directions through time. V-48 and V-41 were now separated by an impenetrable fourteen-year gap that their mystical portal could no longer breach.

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V-48 stepped cautiously from the portal in 2001 and back into the protective Alaskan vault in 2008. There, he experienced the purest form of complete silence. How long it might take for V-41 and V-34 to achieve their mammoth task was an unknown factor and there was a distinct possibility they might not achieve it at all. For the first time in a long time, V-48 was once again alive.

He wasn't too eager to explore the ravished barren environment but had to determine exactly what he was up against. The flip of a switch started up the exterior cameras to provide a view of the exterior atmosphere. Perpetual blizzard winds had blown mounds of icy soot across the rugged terrain, but the sun had begun to filter through the dusty darkness that had engulfed the planet since the war in 2001. Most of the atmospheric dust had settled. Frequent and fierce thunderstorms were in the process of cleansing the atmosphere and washing away the soot that had collected on the surface.

The world seemed new-fangled and unexplored. Like the period after the extinction of the dinosaurs, nuclear winter had reshaped the vast uninhabited landscape and there were virtually no signs of life. Microorganisms had only just begun their multi-million-year quest to revitalize a new version of life on Planet Earth.

Only minute traces of radiation were registering on the instrument panel and the outside temperature was a balmy -32 degrees. So, Vinni clothed himself in his protective Alaskan suit and prepared to face the peculiar elements.

He opened the vault door, stepped out into the general quarters and pressed the reset button to start the emergency generators. As light began to fill the large steel cavern, Vinni was reminded of the team previously found huddled together in the frozen grave. The space was now tranquilly empty. The irony of it all, and a wide variety of outlandish quandaries, played heavily on his mind.

He took a deep breath as the large metal door leading to the outer tunnel of the cave opened. He shuffled across the grimy floor towards the dim glow of faint sunlight. As he stood at the edge of a cliff gazing out over the windswept valley below, flakes of filthy snow began collecting on the fur-lined hood wrapped around his face. Through the specially designed goggles protecting his eyes from the harsh effects it was plain to see the war had taken its toll, even on Tok.

Like a space traveler who had crash landed on a strange planet, he was completely alone. It was the most helpless feeling a man could ever experience and it reminded him of a phrase that Sierra would often use in jest, 'Not if you were the last man on Earth'. Her facetious words began to take on new meaning.

Not that there was anywhere in particular to go, but he knew he couldn't stay where he was. Regardless of where his new unpaved road might lead, it was necessary to forge ahead. V-41 had seen to it that every conceivable provision and a few unexpected luxuries were on hand.

He slowly approached another set of huge steel doors and pressed a small red button to open them. Though he'd never actually seen the vehicle V-41 had designed, he had peculiar memories of its conception and development. The monstrous all-terrain train vehicle resembled a giant caterpillar was designed to maneuver through almost any terrain he might encounter.

The strange SUV stood taller than the roofline of most single-story homes, was nearly as wide as a two-lane road and almost seventy feet in length. The framework supported three individual compartments that were linked together by flexible passageways. The three cabins were carried on twenty-four indestructible tires that were more than eight feet tall. It was equipped with numerous technologically advanced features and many of the so-called luxuries of home. His love for music inspired the installation of an incredible entertainment system, which boasted a vast library of Vinni's favorite tunes and a seemingly endless supply of videos.

There were enough supplies and fuel on board to last for three months or more. Several substations had also been constructed in various locations throughout the country to keep the provisions replenished. Though there was no anticipated need, the vehicle was equipped with a state-of-the-art self-defense weaponry system and plenty of ammunition. The front was also designed with a steel armor plate angled to displace any debris in the rover's path. The machine was well designed for its intended purpose, to get Vinni Cross anywhere he needed to go.

The only other item left to be loaded was the mirror, his only

real lifeline. Unless V-41 accomplished his objective, it served as a useless link to a past that no longer existed. It was mounted on the wall behind the driver's seat to provide immediate access so he could monitor any significant changes in 2001. After a few hours of preparation, Vinni began his long and treacherous journey south.

The next morning, he took one more hopeful glance into the empty mirror and set out to explore his new world. With a modest glimmer of hope, he fired up the engines and began maneuvering the vehicle through the tunnel. With the flick of an overhead switch, the massive double doors leading out of the cave and into the unknown slowly swung open. He gripped the controls, an elaborate set of motorcycle-style handlebars, revved the engine and released the clutch. The huge caterpillar roared slowly out the door and down a winding worn out path leading to the valley below.

The faint sunlight was still shielded by an atmospheric haze, but a break in the winter weather had provided some rather calm conditions for his departure. He stopped at a ridge to peer out over the barren valley before descending toward a new ambivalent life.

For an entire day, his 'cat' trekked effortlessly toward Vancouver through heavy snow and some very rugged terrain. Several small cities he passed along the way were, for the most part, still intact, but there was virtually no sign of life. Finally, late on the first night, he drove over a mountain to get his first glimpse of the once fabulous city. Vancouver had obviously sustained numerous direct impacts. Its beautiful buildings, which formerly graced the skyline of the peaceful harbor town, had been reduced to gray gloomy sepulchers. Heaps of rubble created by several massive blasts had been hurled in every direction. All the manmade structures had been remolded into a string of mangled monuments.

The vehicle rolled slowly down one of the city's main thoroughfares. Streets, that were once lined with tall skyscrapers and contemporary architecture, were flanked with heaps of twisted steel, scattered stones, and strewn debris. His heart sank at the endless sight of skeletal remains trapped in the tangled webs of warped steel. Magnificent buildings had been mangled like a child's toy caught in the blades of a powerful lawnmower. The disfigured landscape was overwhelming, but the most devastating aspect of all was incomprehensible loss of life. The morbid spectacle provided a firm indication of what to expect as he ventured on.

With tears trickling down his cheeks, he said softly into the air, "What in the mind of any man could condone such a meaningless atrocity?" He steered the vehicle east and away from Vancouver.

It wasn't long before he encountered the first of many obstacles. Disfigured bridges that once offered convenient access across the inland waterways had been reduced to lines of twisted pillars jutting up from the depths of the murky water. Like the pioneers of early America, Vinni was forced to reroute and explore a natural means of accessing the region beyond. The extravagant machine offered many tremendous advantages, but GPS satellite maps weren't one of them. Digital maps on a large monitor would be his only guide to circumventing each inevitable challenge.

"Lord," he said to the only foreseeable entity left to call on, "I like talking to you, but it's just you and me now. Any chance I could get you to respond? If this is the life you have in store for me, I'm not so sure I want to live it. If Vinni doesn't pull off that miracle, what am I going to do?" He waited patiently with wandering eyes half hoping for a verbal answer, but it never came. After inspecting a map of the immediate area on the computer screen, he dredged off in a new direction and with a rapidly deteriorating outlook.

Chicago was the next destination. If there was someone else left alive, there was a very slight chance of finding them there. If, as he suspected, it proved to be another wasteland, he'd steer south to Florida in hopes of finding a much more suitable climate.

Vinni followed Interstate 90 to the east, but the path was constantly impeded by one obstacle after another, and progress was limited to a few hundred miles per day. So, the trip to Chicago took a few days.

The occasional glances over his shoulder at an empty scene in the mirror were becoming far less frequent. The instantaneous gratification that Vinni had grown accustomed to was over. If V-41 was successful, evidence of the achievement would be immediately discernable. Until then Vinni couldn't pass through to 2001, where the portal remained encapsulated in a shroud of volatile debris. Even in his non-physical state, there was virtually nothing in 2002 to return to. Since there were no new memories and no light in the portal, his faith in the potential for a successful restitution began dwindling rapidly.

At noon on October 31st, Vinni celebrated Halloween on the outskirts of Chicago. From a distance, not one recognizable landmark remained on the frozen tundra or could be discerned in the confines of its massive ruins. Access to the interior of the windy city would be dangerous at best and probably next to impossible. Convinced there was nothing to be gained from jeopardizing an attempt to reach the inner city, he would instead detour around the outlying suburbs and continue

heading south.

Locations of the Cross substations dictated his route. Each underground shelter had been stocked with canned goods and plenty of fresh water. There was plenty of anything and everything he'd need to survive. The only thing he lacked was the one thing impossible to find, companionship. It had only been a matter of days and already the loneliness was beginning to consume him.

Thoughts of what living as a spirit in the past would be like prompted him to consider what the spiritual life might have been like for God. 'If I was God, a spirit that had existed alone for billions or trillions of years, my objective would have been to satisfy the ultimate desire for companionship. No wonder you created the universe!'

Like a pioneer on a lonely trail, his obscure wagon train headed south with rock 'n roll music blaring. He sang along to an old Bee Gees tune that seemed more than apropos; "Lonely days, lonely nights...where would I be without my woman? Lonely days, lonely nights...where would I be without my woman?"

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After a few more days of slow but expedited progress, Vinni arrived in Miami Beach. In comparison to the normal climate, it was still a bit on the chilly side with temperatures hovering around a modest sixty-five degrees. Although the sun was still masked behind a thin yellow haze, the region was experiencing a gradual warming trend.

It didn't take long to find an elaborate house that still had most of its structural integrity. The one he chose had a large boat dock where he hoped to eventually park a large sailboat, an elegant cabin cruiser and an assortment of watercraft. As time passed, it became a challenge just to keep himself amused. Much of his time was spent learning to play guitar and writing his memoirs. He didn't put too much effort into the lengthy journal, which he figured no one would ever read anyway.

The caterpillar's generator provided more than enough electricity to operate any device that was still operational. A local music store that hadn't sustained too much damage furnished him with plenty of instruments and enough sound equipment to create a makeshift stage. He created a rather elaborate laser-lighting system and hooked up an extremely powerful amplification system. Most evenings were spent absorbed in some rather creative and quite lavish self-indulging rock 'n roll performances. Since his hair had grown rather long, he seemed to fit the role. Initially, in the early stages, he lacked any real ability, but after several months of haphazard practice, he developed

an array of impressive talents.

Five months had now passed. Any hope of being rescued by his counterpart was all but exhausted. V-41 had apparently been commissioned to perform an impossible task and his efforts appeared to have been unsuccessful.

Even though his future was looking rather grim, he was still practicing good hygiene, but the desire to maintain his outward appearance had diminished. His rather shaggy gray hair now stretched down past his shoulders and a scruffy beard covered most of his face. Vinni had transformed into a glorified beach bum; the futuristic hermit V-41 had alluded to in a recent conversation.

Since clothing was easy enough to come by, he rarely wore the same set of clothes twice. He would often wear them for days at a time before disposing of them in ceremonial bonfire rituals. There were also plenty of times when he'd stroll around in the nude. Since his ship clearly wasn't coming in, he simply didn't care anymore, but somehow managed to retain his sanity.

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It was another night, like most of his nights, he fell asleep in his hammock with visions of Sierra dancing in his head. His love for her was the only thing keeping him alive. The next morning, however, he was awakened by an unfamiliar sound. He focused intently on what sounded a little like the faint blast of a distant ship's horn blowing out at sea. He sprang up so fast he literally fell out of the hammock and rolled across the ground, which he failed to notice was now covered with plush green grass.

He raised his hand to shield his eyes from the brilliant sunlight that was now beating down through the palm leaves. He was so enthralled by the sound; he overlooked all the other obvious clues surrounding him. Unusual beads of sweat were dripping down his forehead and he was dressed in an entirely different attire.

Like a modern-day Robinson Crusoe, he froze in place to listen more intently while his eyes twitched fiercely. As if by reflex, he attempted to adjust to the sunlight that was now bleeding through the green leaves of several tall palm trees, which were also swaying softly in a rather warm tropical breeze. It took a few moments to realize his surroundings had changed drastically. The concert stage and boat dock were gone. It was then that he saw a young couple racing their wave runners over blue ocean swells. A smile as bright as the hot sun began to stretch across his face.

"Thirsty dear?" the most beautiful voice he ever heard called out from a familiar balcony. His heart was racing with excitement. He ran towards Sierra and embraced her in a suffocating hug.

"I simply cannot begin to tell you how happy I am to see your smiling face. He kissed her passionately.

"That must have been some dream you were having," she said with a look of puzzling confusion.

"You have no idea," he stated emphatically. "Get dolled up, babe. I'm taking you out for the best dinner ever! I've got something to take care of first, but I'll be right back. I promise!"

She was quite perplexed by his exuberant behavior but knew all too well that when Vinni Cross set his sights on a celebration, there was no telling where it would lead or what it might entail. The reason for his parties never seemed to matter. She simply welcomed every opportunity to share in all his joyous occasions.

Although it took considerably longer than expected, V-41 had managed to achieve their objective. The war that separated them several months ago had been averted. His life, at least to some extent, was apparently back on track. V-48 couldn't wait to slide back to 2001 and share his enthusiasm.

Sierra was lost in bewilderment but had grown accustomed to his bizarre and rather hasty retreats. Vinni headed straight for the secret vault in basement of their Hawaiian home. From inside the mirror, which was now suspended from the ceiling, V-41's informative light was flashing.

"Hey," he shouted gleefully as he leaped through, "Anybody home?"

A warm friendly voice answered from an adjacent room. "In here," he answered eagerly. "I was starting to get worried about you, man. I was beginning to think you didn't make it."

"You were worried?" V-48 said with a heavy sigh. "You can't even imagine. That was one incredible experience," he said without delving into the details. "So, you pulled it off!"

"Yeah, but," he said with a sigh of his own, "you wouldn't believe what we had to go through."

V-48 chuckled out loud. "The memories are already resurfacing. All I can say is, I'm so glad you did. This fabulous world of ours is one very lonely place without people in it. I can't begin to tell you

how much I missed seeing you. You saved my life, pal. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"It was the least I could do, considering," he said with a laugh of his own. "Considering where I would have been trapped if I hadn't. Fixing my predicament fixed yours. All-in-all, we're both extremely fortunate."

"We sure are. As much as I'd love to sit and chat, I've got to get back. I left the most wonderful woman in the world waiting for me back there."

"A woman?" V-41 said with astonishment in his voice.

"That's another very long story, Vinni," he declared with a heavy breath. "One of these days I'll fill you in on all the fascinating details. Our top priority will be figuring out what we're going to do with that damn mirror."

"As always, I look forward to your thoughts, but it sounds like you've got more important things to take care of. So, go on. Get out of here, you knucklehead."

"Thanks again, my friend," V-48 said with an air of genuine sincerity.

"You're quite welcome. We'll talk soon."

CHAPTER 11

Gentle On My Mind

The paradoxical crisis that had temporarily shattered their lives was finally over. History had once again been altered and life on the planet, even with all its disgusting political and social upheaval, was back to normal. The inhabitants of Earth would never know what Vinni Cross had saved them from.

It was agreed that the mirror was just too dangerous to keep around and the time had come to dispose of their inimitable treasure. But before that happened, there would be one more monumental change made to their illustrious past.

Though Sierra would never be aware of it, their romance had ended abruptly. When she vanished, the separation created an unbearable void in Vinni's life, one he was determined to ensure would never separate them again, at least by means of the portal.

Now that his reason for living had been restored, Vinni was on a new mission to maximize its impact. He came up with a unique plan to research Sierra's personal history and determine her whereabouts on a correlating date in February of 1995. His strategy was to arrange for his former self and Sierra to be in the same place at the same time, which would extend an opportunity for them to meet by chance. Any decision to establish a personal relationship would be theirs and theirs alone.

In his mind, if V-34 and Sierra hit it off as expected, V-48 would be rewarded with an extended history of romantic bliss. If for some reason they didn't, Vinni was prepared to live with the consequences. He believed Sierra was his soul mate. So, regardless of when or where in history they might meet, they were destined to and would surely fall in love again. V-34 would get to experience the thrill of falling in love just as he had in 2008 and, if everything went according to plan, V-41 would be blessed with the memories of experiencing those wonderful emotions too. V-48 would get to experience an additional supplemental version. Though it may have been somewhat selfishly motivated, V-48 truly wanted to share the sensation of unconditional

love with his former selves. And, in so doing, he would extend his romantic interlude with Sierra by another fourteen years.

Vinni could only determine Sierra's approximate whereabouts on the designated day and coordinated a scenario for a potential happenstance meeting. Sierra would be spending the entire day on the Wharf in San Francisco. So, Vinni scheduled V-34 for several meetings to finalize a few business transactions, which ensured he'd at least be in the general vicinity. If he was right, there was a chance the two would cross paths.

V-48 couldn't be on hand to observe, but as fate would have it on February 15th in 1995, V-34's eyes were drawn to the gorgeous woman walking in his direction. For him, the magnetism was immediate and overwhelming. When Sierra got closer and their eyes met for the first time, something very special occurred. Almost as if by some form of divine intervention, V-34 followed his heart and instinctively made the necessary advances. The encounter sparked the beginning of a new and extraordinary love affair.

V-41 could only observe with intense anxiety as a flood of new memories and strong emotions began to consume him. Recollections of the romantic interlude began filtering through his heart. It was much the same for V-48. Not only was Sierra back in his life, but their glorious love affair had instantaneously been amended with fourteen years of extended history.

Although V-48 was invited to cherish the memories both encounters, Sierra would never be able to recall meeting him in 2008. That was a sacrifice Vinni was willing to make. Every moment V-34 spent with Sierra was now shared by V-41 and V-48. The infatuation was as brand new for V-48 as it was for V-34 and V-41. In 2008, Vinni and Sierra were now celebrating their fourteenth anniversary. The sudden change in their life sparked an interesting conversation with V-41.

"As you know," V-41 suggestively advised, "there have been some fascinating developments and a wonderful new addition to our past,"

"How about that? Absolutely fascinating! Ain't love grand?"

"It sure is, and what a delightfully ironic coincidence it was. 34 just happened to be on that wharf when Sierra strolled by."

"Yeah. That was rather ironic, wasn't it?"

"Maybe a little too ironic."

"Pardon me?"

"I may be hanging myself out on a pretty-thin limb here, but I'm curious. What was the name of the woman you were so anxious to get back to?"

"Hmm," V-48 began to concede. "Busted, huh?"

"Well, I'm no Fellini, but didn't have to be to figure that one out. You had me arrange for 34 to be on that wharf most of the day to finalize a few irrelevant deals that could have been wrapped up in an hour. That made me a little suspicious, but once they met, it was rather obvious."

"So, I screwed up then?"

"Are you kidding? Sierra's the best thing that ever happened to us. I understood and appreciated what you were trying to do. All I'm saying is, you weren't very good at covering your tracks. How come you never mentioned her before?"

"I didn't want to spoil the surprise. I wanted you guys to have the same experience I had. If I told you about Sierra, it wouldn't have been the same. You aren't planning to fill 34 in, are ya?"

"Of course not. Meeting Sierra was the happiest day of his life and mine. I wouldn't ruin that for any of us, which brings me to another point. I can only imagine the massive heartache you must have endured when you lost her. Losing someone you love is hard enough, but not being able to share the feelings you had for her had to be difficult for you."

"Yeah," V-48 said with tremendous sigh, "that was kind of tough. As you now know, having her in my life means more than life itself."

"She's a very special lady. How did you meet her anyway?"

"What would you say if I told you that I won her in a poker game?"

"No way!"

"Like I said, it's a long story anyway. I think it would be best if we left my memories of meeting her where they are. We're all extremely lucky to have a woman like her in our lives."

"We sure are."

With the addition of Sierra in their lives, each of Vinni's younger generations had more than they had ever dreamed of. Life was for them as good as it could get. There was however still one last piece of business to attend to. Since the dangers obviously outweighed

its advantages, the phenomenal mirror simply had to go.

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V-41 had taken steps to ensure that the approach to resolving their recent war paradox was more of a covert mission. It didn't require exposing his presence and the fact that a time-travel portal even existed was never revealed. Life was in most respects back to semi-normal and it was time to eliminate the threat.

They were faced with another incredible challenge. How do you dispose of something that is virtually indestructible? This plan, above all others, had to be executed flawlessly by V-34 in 1995. First and foremost, they had to ensure that no one else could ever stumble on the portal again. They had the luxury of access to technology and capabilities that didn't exist when the previous owner tried to close the gate. They also had the financial wherewithal to see it through.

It was V-41 who came up with the idea, but all three generations were in unanimous agreement. They would load their precious cargo onto a space shuttle and have it launched into distant outer space. The plan would unknowingly be carried out by a team of astronauts who believed the task was part of an exploratory space mission financed by Cross Industries.

It took nearly a year of careful coordination, but with the technological assistance of V-41 and V-48, V-34 designed a seal-tight titanium shell that would completely encase the portal. The thin cylinder would be loaded in a separate rocket-propelled module that also contained a payload of deep space telescopes. The STS-67 Space Shuttle Endeavor was scheduled to launch on March 2, 1995. On the third day of their mission, the Cross module would be jettisoned, and the portal would be propelled into deep space.

The CROSS-34 capsule was promoted as an independently funded mission to conduct a heat-image survey the Andromeda Galaxy. The assignment was portrayed as a mission to take photos and retrieve data pertaining to Andromeda's Super Massive Black Hole. If all went according to Vinni's plan, the mission would be aborted shortly after the module had been launched and the iniquitous portal would simply disappear forever.

As a precautionary measure, Vinni had installed a small transmitter. If it ever found its way back to within a liberal 40,000-mile range, its signal would be detected by an exclusive receiver located at the Alaskan facility. It would also trigger a receiver installed on Vinni's wristwatch. If the portal ever returned, Vinni would be the first to know.

The prearranged fate of the mission was to fail miserably, at least as far as the rest of the world was concerned. The capsule would appear to self-destruct within hours of being launched from the Shuttle, but the module carrying the portal would be jettisoned into outer space. The explosion, which would be witnessed by the astronauts, would ensure that no one in the near or distant future would ever even think to search for the debris. The module and the portal would simply vanish.

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In 2043, the portal was little more than vivid memory. Since 1995, Vinni and his wife had managed to live a relatively normal but luxurious life. At the age of 83, V-48 was perfectly content. He was still an extremely wealthy man with controlling interest in a network of high-tech companies, but his life was no longer influenced by the mind-boggling quandaries of perilous time-travel. Although he wanted to, he never disclosed the time-travel escapades to Sierra.

As manipulated fate would have it, he and Sierra were wed in October of 1995. They had everything they wanted in life anyone could want, everything except children. That was one facet of life that for some unknown reason they simply weren't destined to enjoy. Although parenthood wasn't destined to be one of the luxuries they enjoyed, having each other seemed to provide more than enough to offset the empty realm.

The balance of their life together was spent jet-setting to various continents and sailing the seven seas on an elaborate yacht, aptly named Sierra's Portal. Together, they experienced many of life's most glorious pleasures. Even old age failed to hinder their undying love.

It was late in the afternoon on a warm December day in 2043 when Vinni found his most cherished possession lying motionless on the cabin floor. His well-trained staff took immediate and appropriate action, but Sierra still hadn't regained consciousness when her stretcher was loaded onto their private helicopter. Their ship was anchored about two hundred miles north of Perth, Australia where a team of doctors was standing by. Vinni never left her side.

After an extensive series of tests, the doctors disclosed their very disheartening prognosis. Sierra had contracted Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a rare and fatal form of brain disease that only affects about one in every 1,000,000 people. The disease typically claims the life of its victims within a year of diagnosis and there was no known cure. Although Sierra handled the news admirably, Vinni was of course devastated. One day in the not-too-distant future, an illness was destined to take the life of his loving wife and the only means to

save her had been launched into outer space. Without the benefit of time-travel, Sierra was at the mercy of this dreadful disease.

The tremendous wealth and political influence could only be used to make her as comfortable as possible. The end was inevitable and his reason for living would soon perish. A lifetime of regrets began to consume him.

CHAPTER 12

It Couldn't Be Better

May 15, 2044, provided Vinni and Sierra with a beautiful clear sky in the South Pacific. It was 10:00 PM. Their vessel was moored for the night and their jaunt to the Fiji Islands would conclude in the morning. They were sitting alone on the upper deck when an unusual beeping sound began to fill the air.

The faint unfamiliar noise prompted Vinni to explore their surroundings. It took a few moments before Vinni finally lifted the very old wristwatch to his ear. A tiny red signal light was flashing on its screen. Fate, or some other supernatural force, had another unusual surprise for Vinni Cross. The portal was on its way back.

"Oh, my God!" he said with a look on his face that bordered on a combination of desperation and elation.

"What is it, dear? What's wrong?" Sierra asked nervously. Vinni dropped his head. "Vinni, what's the matter?"

Something in his aging heart compelled him to offer up a long overdue confession. Considering the circumstances, his soul mate deserved to know the whole story and the truth. "I'm not sure how to begin or even if I should."

"You're scaring me, Vinni. You're not ill, are you?"

"No honey, I'm fine, but I've been keeping a deep dark secret from you for decades. In more ways than one, it looks as though my little secret is about to resurface."

"Secret? What in the world are you talking about?"

"Come with me," he said with an extended hand. She held on tightly as they shuffled slowly down a narrow set of stairs to the elaborate computer room on the lower deck. There, he could monitor the network of government satellite systems and, of course, track the location of the cylinder.

He flipped a switch for the onboard intercom system. The urgency in his voice as he spoke to their pilot gave Sierra an indication of just how serious the situation was. "Mike, I need you to prep the chopper for immediate departure. I want it ready to go in half an hour."

"Yes, sir," the pilot replied vigorously and without question. Since his services were typically used for shuttles to various ports of call and usually with plenty of advanced notice, the pilot presumed that Sierra had suffered another attack. "Where to, Mr. Cross?"

"What's the closest airport?"

"Fiji is about two hours out by chopper."

"Make the arrangements and call headquarters. Have Jimmy meet us there with the jet and file a flight plan to Brisbane."

"Australia?"

"That's right. We've got some urgent business to take care of."

It had been years since Vinni conducted any urgent business, but Mike knew better than to question any decision Vinni made. "Yes, sir. I'll get right on it. Traveling alone?"

"Not this time, Mike. Sierra is coming along, and we'll need to fly under the wire on this one. I want everyone to keep this on the ultimate QT."

"Yes, sir. I'll have the chopper ready and waiting."

"Thanks, Mike."

He made another quick call. A familiar voice on the other end answered, "Cross International."

"Brad. It's Vinni."

"Well, hello stranger. It's been awhile. What are you up to these days?"

"Sorry, Brad. I don't have time for casual conversation. I've got a situation and I need your help. I want you to organize an underwater recovery operation and get your team to Australia ASAP."

"You've got it, Vinni. When do you want to get started? And, what are we recovering?" the man responded to assure his commitment.

"Pronto! A portion of the payload from our Andromeda mission in 1995 is about to reenter the atmosphere. It'll be splashing down about sixty miles off the coast of Brisbane in about 18 hours. I want our team on site for the splashdown if possible. I can't afford any mistakes on this one, Brad. I need you to head this up personally and put your best team on it. I'm taking the company jet and will meet you in Brisbane first thing in the morning. Arrange to lease a salvage recovery vessel there and bring along any extra equipment you might need. The water isn't too deep in that region, but what we're looking for is relatively small."

"You're talking about a very expensive venture, Vinni."

"I know and I don't care what it costs. I need this done. Can you make it happen or not?"

"It'll happen."

"The capsule's trajectory will undoubtedly be tracked by an assortment of governmental organizations and I suspect they will be deploying teams to investigate the site as well. We've got a significant head start, but it won't take them long to catch up. I want to get in and out long before they arrive."

"I'm on it, Vinni. I'll see you in Brisbane tomorrow."

"Thanks, Brad," Vinni said before turning his attention back to Sierra who had a profound look of trepidation in her eyes. "Oh, man. This is going to be such a long story," he began with an air of shameful regret. "Pack a bag, honey. I'll fill you in on the way."

They boarded the chopper and lifted off. Vinni tried to come up with a short version of a very long story. "You've never asked, but I'm sure you've wondered what the source of my wealth is."

"It wasn't my place to ask. You weren't the type of man to be involved in anything illegal, so it didn't matter. Don't tell me you've been doing something illegal all these years."

"No, nothing illegal, not as far as the law is concerned anyway. Believe it or not, it would probably be a lot easier to explain if it was something that simple. This one, however, is a bit complicated." She gazed at him with a look of utter confusion. "Do you remember that space mission, the one I funded back in '95?"

"Of course. You sent a probe to explore the Andromeda Galaxy. As I recall, it exploded after launch or something like that."

"Well, there's a little more to the story. The truth is it didn't exactly explode. We just led the world to believe that it did. The objective was to make sure that its payload got lost forever. Until now, I was convinced we had succeeded. There is no simple explanation, and I'm not even sure where to begin, but"

"Vinni? If there's a problem, we'll work it out. We always do. So, it wasn't an exploratory mission?"

"No."

"A lot of your work was top secret, so I never asked. What kind of mission was it?"

"What would you say if I told you it had something to do, in a round-about way, with time-travel?"

"Time-travel? Two hours ago, I'd have told you that you were full of crap, but considering all the hoopla, I've got a sneaky suspicion you're not."

"I almost wish I was."

"Okay. So, you were researching a way to travel through time?"

"No, Sierra. I wasn't looking for it. That was an ability I already had. The objective was to get rid of it."

"You invented a way to travel through time?" she asked in bewildered astonishment.

"No. I didn't invent it. I simply discovered it, and that was quite literally by accident and before I met you."

"You discovered it?" she asked. He nodded. "Before we met?" she scoffed with sarcastic overtones in her smile.

"Well, kind of before and kind of after. Like I said, honey. It's complicated. The fact is, I wouldn't even have met you if it hadn't been for time-travel."

"Wait a minute, Bucko. Let's back that boat of yours up a little. This is getting weird."

"I know it is, babe. Unfortunately, it's going to get a whole lot weirder before I get done explaining things. It's really important that you keep an open mind here."

"Okay, dear. The doors of my mind are wide open. Shoot," she said

snidely.

"This is gonna be kind of hard to grasp, but I met you for the first time on September 19th in 2008 at a place called Brandy's Bluff."

"We both know that's a load of crap. We were married '95. We have been to Brandy's on several occasions, but that's not where we met, dear."

"Yeah, we were married in '95, but that's because I wanted to share more of my life with you. So, by traveling through time, I arranged to meet you fourteen years earlier. That's how much I loved you, and still do by the way," he emphasized with a reassuring smile.

She began to chalk the proclamations up to the sad fact that her husband was getting old and apparently senile. "That's a fascinating story, dear, but you don't really expect me to believe it, do you?"

"No. I can't say I expect you to, but it's important that you do. You deserve to know the truth."

"And you're saying the truth is my husband can travel through time?"

"At one time, I could travel through time. I could and did."

"But you can't anymore?"

"No not since that space mission in '95. You see, I discovered the portal in 2008. That's when I began traveling through time, but all my time-travel activities ceased when we sent the portal into space."

"So, you found this portal in 2008 and got rid of it in 1995?"

"That's right. At one point, I could travel back and forth at my leisure, but only seven years into the past. I couldn't go any further back myself and could never travel forward in time. So, I contacted myself seven years younger and recovered the portal again in his time. As it turned out, he could travel back another seven years to 1994. So, it was my former selves that did all the traveling prior to 2001. Is this starting to make sense?"

"Not even a lick, slick."

"I don't know any other way to explain it. That's just the way it worked. Seven years was as far back as I could go. Oh, and the other peculiar thing about it was, when I ventured into the past, I became like some sort of an invisible spirit. I could converse with people

and be heard, but I couldn't be seen. It's like my body became some form of minute electromagnetic energy."

Vinni was trying his best to explain, but there was no overcoming the look of pessimistic apprehension. She just wasn't buying it and he couldn't blame her. "Look, I know it all sounds crazy, but the only way I could see to reach back further in time was to contact the younger version of myself in 2001. Once we located the portal in his time, he could travel back another seven years and we repeated the process in 1994. There was one instance where we planned to travel back to 1987, but that never happened. So, we never went back any further than 1994."

"So, you, all of you, traveled backwards in time?"

"In a sense, it was me who did all the traveling, but I did most of it through my former selves. I have distinct memories of everything."

"And you traveled back to 1994?" she began to ask nonchalantly, still unconvinced that he had traveled through time at all. He nodded. "But not any further back than that?"

"That's right. We probably would have if we didn't run into some serious complications."

"Complications, huh? Like what?"

"There were a couple of real doozeys. The first paradox was a nuclear war that took place in 2008. That forced me to dive back into 2001. I lost you temporarily on that one. It took some doing, but we managed to prevent that war from taking place. Unfortunately, it somehow inadvertently sparked a different nuclear war in 2001 instead."

"So, my feeble-minded husband prevented one nuclear war and started another?"

"I know. It's kind of hard to comprehend. I didn't start the wars, but I'm here to tell ya, they happened. It's the honest to God truth, Sierra."

"It's funny. You'd think I'd recall a couple of nuclear wars."

"There's nothing to recall because I prevented them from ever taking place."

"I take it back, Vincent Cross. You are so full of crap those wild blue eyes of yours are turning brown. Matter of fact, I think you're totting a hefty load there, Bucko."

"I know it sounds farfetched, honey, but I have no reason to lie to you. It's the truth, Sierra. I swear."

"It's all rather convenient, if you ask me. Everything you just told me is completely unverifiable. It sounds like a science fiction fantasy to me, Vinni, pure fantasy. As much as I hate to say it, I think you've lost your marbles, honeybunch. If you honestly expect me to believe any of this crapola, you're even more disturbed than I thought. I do know a great therapist though."

"Hells bells, wife." he said a profound look of despair. "Maybe I'd have been better off I had kept my mouth shut about it."

"There's a thought," she said in profound agreement.

It was frustrating for him, but her doubt was understandable. An appropriate explanation was going to require a great deal of tact and a detailed description of the mind-boggling chain of events. Since they would soon be boarding the jet and had another long flight ahead of them, he elected to hold off for the time being.

During the lengthy flight to Brisbane Vinni took Sierra on his incredible journey and shared the whole enchanting story from beginning to end. The enlightening accounts included the intriguing details of how they met for the first time twice.

Sierra seemed to be at least skeptically convinced, but it was time to address the situation at hand. "This watch of mine has a receiver in it. It communicates exclusively with a transmitter built into the space capsule that contains the portal. The alarm we heard last night alerted me to the fact that the portal was returning to Earth. I can't for the life of me imagine how, but it apparently found its way back from outer space."

She could see the trepidation on his face and sensed it in his voice as he expounded. "We found out the hard way just how dangerous this thing is. In the wrong hands, it could have devastating consequences. So, when it splashes down, we've got to find it before anyone else does. If the wrong guy gets his hands on this thing, the world will never be the same. Once we've secured it, I've got to find another way to hide it from humanity."

"I would think there'd be a practical use for an apparatus like that."

"There is only purpose I plan to use it for. We can use it to find a way to cure that disease of yours. If I can avoid it, I'm not about to lose you again. After that, we've got to find a new hiding

place for it."

"Do you really think you can prevent it, the disease I mean?"

"I don't know anything for certain, but if it's possible, I'll figure out a way."

"Alright, Mr. time-traveler. This portal of yours. Where is it exactly?"

Vinni entered a few commands on his laptop and a geographic grid popped up on the screen. A flashing red beacon served as a tracking device for the module and a green light pinpointed the splashdown site. He pointed with his finger. "It'll be landing right about there in a few hours."

Vinni coordinated the rest of the arrangements while in route to Brisbane. Brad Barnes, the man who would head up the underwater expedition, was a former Navy Seal and one of the best in his field. He was also a key figure in the Cross organization. He had procured an excellent team equipped with a state-of-the-art mini submarine that was being flown in on a cargo plane. A recovery unit disguised as a shark research ship would meet them in Brisbane. By 10 AM the next morning, the team would be on their way to the landing site. Axle Taylor, Vinni's chief mechanical engineer, was stationed at the facility in Alaska. He was in route as well and would be shuttled out by helicopter to meet them at the at the splash zone.

The recovery team had been instructed to remove the lightweight cylinder within and leave the transportation module on the ocean floor. The intent was to allow any agency pursuing the object to recover what would be perceived as some insignificant remnants of the former space mission. Since the portal was incased in its own titanium cylinder, the recovery personnel would have no clue what it was they were retrieving.

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By 6 PM, the very efficient team had already completed their mission and the portal was safely on board the ship. The cylinder was quickly loaded onto a waiting helicopter. Vinni expressed his appreciation with promises of a generous bonus for each member of the crew before taking off.

As Vinni and Sierra were making their way back to Brisbane with the precious cargo, they flew over several naval ships bearing flags of various countries. The ships were obviously in route to the splashdown site, but Vinni's team would be at a private port in New Zealand long before they arrived.

Vinni, his wife and the cylinder were transported from Brisbane by jet to the Alaskan facility where the magic mirror once again rested securely in the confines of the massive vault. The facility hadn't been utilized in many years, but it had been well maintained by the on-site staff and was still in tip-top shape.

It was Sierra's first visit to the site, and she was clearly in awe of her surroundings. Vinni was anxious to alleviate any lingering doubt his wife might have, and she was eager to see a demonstration. It was finally time to reveal his most guarded secret.

CHAPTER 13

EPILOGUE - Into the Mystic

Vinni was just as intrigued at eighty-four years of age as he was when he first discovered it, but this time there was an even more inviting prospect to consider. Since the portal had been hovering in outer space for the past thirty-six years, to pass through now would undoubtedly present an exclusive opportunity to explore an unimaginable region of the distant universe. And, if it proved to be safe, Sierra would get to experience Vinni's legendary time-machine herself.

The cylinder that encased the portal was suspended by a set of overhead cables. Sierra was standing on the opposite side as Vinni cut away the glimmering steel with a laser torch. The section of lightweight metal fell to the floor. Because the reflective material had been removed years ago, it revealed nothing more than an invisible window.

"So, this is your big secret?" Sierra asked with a look of bewilderment.

"This is it, but you won't see anything from this side," Vinni said as he spun the peculiar object 180 degrees and began to remove the rear panel. "Keep in mind, this thing has been traveling through outer space for the last fifty years. There's no telling where in outer space it was seven years ago. Regardless though, it's our only point of access to the past." He lifted the rear sheet of steel and set it to the side.

"Oh my God, Vinni," she gasped. It was as if they were staring through the lens of an enormous telescope. A sea of very bright stars and an array of peculiar nebulas captured their attention. Her face was trained on the fabulous vision with a look of astonishing wonder.

"Amazing, huh?" he proclaimed. She could only respond with a half-baked smile and a slow nod. "Watch this," he said with an arrogant grin as his hand pierced the plane and disappeared.

"Holy crap, Vinni," she responded in a shudder. She was finally seeing for herself what he had tried so hard to convey. The reality rapidly sank deep into her soul. It didn't take long for her to ask the first of many questions. "Is it safe?"

"Oh yeah," he said with a reassuring nod. He took her trembling hand and slowly guided it to the surface.

"Dear God," she said as the mystifying sensation surged through her arm. "That's remarkable!"

"It sure is," he agreed. "Hey, I've got an idea. I never even considered the prospect of space travel before, but it's got to be phenomenal. I'm going to travel back and contact you in the past. By the time I get back, you'll have a brand-new set of memories."

"You aren't really going through that thing, are you?"

"Of course, I am, but don't worry, sweetheart. It's perfectly safe. Although its location in space will add a new twist, I'm certain I can find my way back to earth from wherever I come out."

"You're sure?" she said seeking clarification. "And what if you can't?"

"Don't worry. Space is one thing I know a little bit about. I won't be gone too long," he reassured with a warm kiss as he prepared for another new adventure.

She could only watch as her beloved husband vanished into thin air. "Vinni, are you there? Can you hear me?" There was no reply. She stared into the abyss for several minutes and began pacing. After a few minutes, she pulled a chair up to the window and waited with a finger tapping nervously at her lips and occasionally at the portal.

"Hi there," Vinni from 2044 said to his former self to announce his presence. "Guess who is back in town."

Sierra was nearby but far enough away that she couldn't overhear the conversation. "Ah oh," Vinni in 2037 replied. "This is going to be bad news, isn't it?"

"It is more like a good news/bad news kind of thing. The bad part of the good news is the portal obviously found its way back. We just recovered it yesterday."

"How in the world did that happen?"

"I don't know, Vinni. It's like the darn thing is on some sort of

cosmic leash. I think I've got it covered though. So far, there doesn't appear to be anything to worry about, but the portal was in outer space, man. Getting back here was one incredibly spectacular journey through the Milky Way. And by the way, Sierra now knows all about it. I told her everything."

"Wow. That was a bold move. How did she handle it? Is she okay with it?"

"Well, I can honestly say she was more than a bit shocked, but yeah. I think she's fine with it. Matter of fact, I intend to bring her along on the next trip. We do however have one more serious issue to deal with. Sierra will be contracting a rare and fatal disease. I'm hoping there's something we can do about it. Unless we find a cure, she doesn't have much time left and I don't want to lose her, Vinni."

"Wow. I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear that. I'll get a research team working on it straight away."

"Thanks, captain. It's not nearly as easy as it sounds, but you'll need to open up and tell her about this, about us."

"Okay, Vinni. I'll fill her in. It sure is good to hear your voice again though."

"Yours too, pal. When I get back, Sierra and I will have an enlightening conversation as well."

As Vinni in 2037 began to share the time-travel concept with his wife, Sierra in 2044 immediately began to experience a recollection of the conversation. "Oh my God," she said to herself in flabbergasted astonishment. "I remember."

A few moments later, Vinni reappeared through the portal. "Hey, good looking. Did ya miss me?" he asked with a huge smile.

"Vinni, this is so incredible, kind of strange, but absolutely incredible!" she giggled.

"I must admit, though. This was a new on me too. I'm convinced that Einstein was wrong. Light isn't the fastest thing in the universe after all. I was soaring through space at speeds much faster. Talk about strange, the portal was about halfway between the Andromeda and Milky Way galaxies, hundreds of light years away from Earth. Yet, I could pinpoint the coordinates and plot an accurate course with no problem at all. In a matter of minutes, I was back on Earth. Babe, you have got to try this."

"Oh no. Huh uh. I'm not climbing in that spiritual cage of yours."

I'm an old lady, Vinni. Even if I could, I'm not so sure I've got any business soaring through space at my age."

"That's the beauty of this thing, sweetie. Age is no longer a factor on the other side. You don't have a physical body that wears down. You'll feel like a little kid again and, trust me, that's a great feeling. C'mon, go with me."

"I don't know, Vinni." The prospect was certainly intriguing enough, but she was wrestling with the bewildering thoughts of exploring the unknown and an inner fear of violating some aberrant preternatural laws of nature. It's not every day that a person is invited to challenge the metaphysical and delve into a spiritual dimension of supernatural life. It took several minutes for her to examine her emotions and collect her thoughts.

"Coming, dear?" he beckoned.

"Oh, alright. I guess I am. I just wish I knew where the hell I was going."

"Trust me, my love."

With that, they crept slowly through the plane together and, like two specs of weightless energy, began floating through the captivating realm of the universe. Though they couldn't physically see each other, there was a sense of distinct overwhelming awareness of each other's presence. Floating in the silence of deep space was the purest form of genuine serenity either of them had ever experienced. Their existence was no longer dictated by the molecules and elements around them.

There was no sense of heat or cold and, since oxygen was no longer a requirement, there were no breaths to be taken. If there had been, the panoramic sight would surely have taken it away. They were experiencing a supernatural level of ultimate consciousness, a realm of infinite splendor that human beings could only dream of.

"Vinni," she said to the only other entity in her midst, "I've never felt so alive, but I've never been so scared either."

"I know, honey, but don't worry. Just stick by me," he said. As if they were somehow joined, she adhered to his presence and they sped off through the astounding vastness of the cosmos. In a matter of moments, they were weaving their way through the outer arms of the Milky Way and rapidly descending on the Sun's solar system. "Behold," he said in a deep dark voice to accentuate the spiritual perception. "That tiny blue spec straight ahead is our planet. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"That's the most fascinating sight I've ever seen. Are you sure that's Earth?"

"Home, sweet home, my love."

"Wow! In the overall cosmic scheme of things, Earth really is a miniscule speck, isn't it?"

"Nothing more than a fragment of cosmic dust. Wait until you see this," he added with angelic flare. They were now swooping down on their home in the Hawaiian Islands. "Shall we wake up the family?"

A sense of perplexing trepidation absorbed her. "Oh! I don't know, Vinni."

"Hi, guys," Vinni said to inform them of their arrival. By this time, his counterpart in 2037 had already informed Sierra and prepared her for the visit. "Say hello, honey," he said to entice his spiritual companion.

"Hi," Sierra from 2044 said to initiate the conversation.

"Wow. Is that really you?" Sierra in 2037 replied in response.

"It is," she replied timidly. "I can't believe it, but I'm here. What a strange feeling it is to be talking with myself."

"Isn't it though," Vinni of 2037 said to the spirit of his elder self's wife. With his wife's hand in his he spoke to Vinni of 2044. "So, what are your plans for the portal?"

"To be honest, I'm not quite sure just yet. If forty-nine years of hurling through space wouldn't get rid of it, we'll have to figure out another way. This mystical anomaly has got to end with us though. As it stands, the only other existing link to the future rests somewhere between the Milky Way and Andromeda Galaxies. Without the portal, no one on Earth could possibly gain access to it out there. I'll make sure the portal goes away, but it'd probably be best if no one ever knows where or how, not even you, at least for another seven years. If something comes up and you discover an urgent need for the dreadful thing, you'll have the option to change your mind if or when the time comes."

"I doubt it," Vinni of 2037 resolved. "We've had more than our share of adventures. We've got more toys than we'll ever need, and time-travel isn't all it's cracked up to be anyway."

"Oh," Sierra of 2044 advised her younger self, "you'll want to spend September of 2039 somewhere else besides Santa Cruz. A phenomenal

tsunami will be rolling through. It wiped out most of the islands. We were at the mountain retreat on the main island and managed to escape the devastation. All we lost was the boat. We stuck around and did what we could to help and set up a relief fund, but you guys should probably establish a warning system for the island before it hits."

"Will do," Sierra of 2037 assured.

"We'll make plans accordingly and have an emergency response team standing by," her husband amended.

"I'm sure you girls could find all kinds of things to talk about, but we really should get back to the future," Vinni's spirit proclaimed. "We've got some plans to make as well. Remember; the more you two enjoy your lives, the more we enjoy ours. So, have fun!"

"Cool!" Vinni in 2037 said contemptuously to finalize the visit with an old cliché. "And I promise, we'll get a team of doctors working to find a cure for that horrible disease. We aren't going to let anything happen to the woman we love. Are we, Vinni?"

"No, sir, not our girl," he added. "So, I guess we'll be seeing you guys later then."

"Bye, guys," Sierra in 2044 said to bid a sad farewell, "and good luck to you two."

"I hope you can remember all this," her former self said with tears welling in her eyes. "Good-bye."

"She will, honey," her companion informed. "Bye now."

"That was unbelievable," Sierra of 2037 said to her husband who embraced her as their future spirits drifted away.

"I hated keeping all this from you for all those years. I was only doing what I thought was best at the time."

"I know you were, dear, and you did the right thing," she replied with a kiss on the cheek.

"Do ya love me?"

"More than ever."

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Vinni and Sierra took the scenic route back to the portal and traveled through many regions of space. When they stepped through and

back into their aging bodies within the vault, they stood facing each other considering their inevitable future in silent reflection. It seemed that both were experiencing a similar train of thought, but Vinni was reluctant to expound. "That was quite an experience, eh?"

She shuffled toward him and sank into a warm hug. "To say the very least," she said with smile. "I think I'll miss it."

There was a long hesitation before Vinni finally inferred, "You don't have to, you know?"

"Excuse me?"

"I think you know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"We may be old and gray, but we certainly don't have to feel it."

"Vinni, you aren't suggesting what I think you are suggesting, are you?"

"Probably," he said with a shrug.

She looked at the portal with sagging eyes. "You want to go back through, don't you?"

"Don't you?" he asked softly. She hesitated to answer. "I don't think it's so wrong to relish the thought of feeling young again and there's no reason why we couldn't feel that way forever."

"Forever is a long time, Vinni," she warned.

"Not if we stay here. We're just two old farts pissing in the wind, biding our time until the angel of death comes knocking. I don't know how much time we've got, but there isn't a whole lot of life left in this world for either of us. Our modest quality of life is going to start dwindling."

"That's what couples do, dear. They grow old together."

"I don't mind growing old. It's dying I have a problem with. If dying is the only thing we really have left to look forward to, I don't think I'd mind passing on that. Unfortunately, if we stay here, we probably won't go out together either. More than likely, one of us will at some point be left alone. If you go first, I can't imagine living the balance of my life without you in it. Seems to me we've got an option here. The portal provides us with an alternative, an opportunity to extend our lives for who knows how long, maybe forever."

Granted, there would be a few drawbacks, but the quality of life on that side beats the heck out of what we've got left on this side. All I'm saying is, it's something to consider."

"I don't know, Vinni. The thought of cheating death is kind of like cheating God. I'm not so sure we're supposed to cross that line."

"I'm not so sure that we're not. If God didn't want us to have this thing, it wouldn't be here right now. Right?" She nodded in vague agreement. "The prospect of living like a revitalized spirit in the past sounds a whole lot more intriguing than living like an old geezer struggling to survive in the present. There's one thing we know for certain; if we stay here, we grow old and die."

"I am thinking about it, but" she said defensively, "once we make our choice, there'd be no going back. Right?" Vinni nodded. "If heaven is real, and you know I believe it is, we could be missing out on eternal life, God's greatest gift. If we go through that portal, we may never know what God's version of a heavenly afterlife will be like. If it's as special as the bible says it is, beyond our wildest imagination, we could be making the biggest mistake of our lives."

"Maybe, but" he argued with a witty declaration of his own, "that future is built purely on faith. We don't know for certain that heaven even exists, which means we'd be escaping life's inevitable demise. Even if there is a heavenly afterlife, I may not be entitled to it. There aren't any guarantees God intends to extend an invitation to me. Since we're bible-believing Christians and good God-fearing people, we might very well be candidates. If our names aren't written in the Lamb's Book of Life, the only other alternative isn't so appealing. There's a chance I might be slated to spend eternity in hell. No one will know the answer to that question until Judgment Day. So, in retrospect, we could actually be avoiding a very bad thing."

"It never ceases to amaze me how you manage to develop such odd one-sided perspectives and twist things around to justify your objectives. I swear, you make it sound like a poker game."

"Well, it is, kind of. A poker player doesn't fold his cards when they believe they have the best hand. You said it yourself; if you're betting on a sure thing, it's not really gambling. Pardon the pun, but I'm simply playing the devil's advocate here. At least we know what's on the other side of this line," he declared with a finger pointing at the portal. "Life after death is a complete mystery."

She stood firm in her refutation. "The bible says that the rewards of heaven are far beyond your wildest imagination, which means it is more phenomenal than anything we can envision. I believe that heaven is a lot more than some glorious resort with pearly gates, gold streets

and marble mansions. Even I know the universe is expanding at an accelerating rate. So, it's safe to assume the process of creation is still in its infancy. That would mean that God's creation process is just getting started. There is a lot more to His afterlife than materialistic things like fields of beautiful flowers. You and I now have an enhanced perspective."

She went on to describe her vision. "I can envision living out eternity with new heavenly bodies, whatever they may be like, and serving as God's assistants. There are hundreds of trillions of galaxies out there and plenty to go around. There are more than enough galaxies to ensure that each of His followers have their own. I can imagine God granting each of us with an opportunity to create worlds within our own galaxy on His behalf. Since we couldn't even begin to fathom what we might create or how, that is a Heaven truly beyond the realm of mankind's wildest imagination. And, since every form of evil will be eradicated for eternity, heaven will be absolute perfection. If that's the eternal life God has in store, I don't want to miss out on it."

"Wow. I've never looked at heaven quite like that before and you could be right. We might be missing out on an extraordinary afterlife, but it's still based on faith. There is just no way of knowing for certain until he wakes us up from that deathly sleep. We don't know if that heaven of yours is what he has in store, but we know what lies beyond the plane of that portal. That's our safest bet. I do however want to make one thing abundantly clear. I'm not going anywhere without you. I'd rather die and go to hell with you than live as a spirit in the past without you. So, the final decision is yours. Either way, I'm with you until the very end."

"I feel the same way. If we did go through, there'd be no coming back?"

"I suppose we could if we decided to, but it would be complicated and a bit risky and we'd only have a seven-year window. After that, I doubt if we could come back."

Sierra gazed into the portal in complete silence and for a very long time. Vinni had considered her enlightening perspective of the biblical afterlife, but still perceived the portal as their best option. She would not be pressured into a decision and to reassure her, he offered, "We don't have to decide right now. We have plenty of time to think about it."

"Nope! I've made up my mind," she proclaimed decisively. Vinni was anxious to hear the verdict, but Sierra remained silent for another extended period. She seemed uncertain about her choice.

"Well," Vinni urged.

"Hold your horses, Bucko. It's not like I'm picking out a dress here."

"Okay, honey," he said with another reassuring smile. "Take your time."

"Let's do it!" she said resolutely.

"Do what?" he asked seeking clarification and confirmation.

Again, she was silent before responding. "We'll go back," she finally announced softly with her head shaking from side to side. "God help us. When the time comes, we'll go through."

Vinni was elated. In his heart, he believed wholeheartedly it was the right choice. "Are you absolutely certain, Sierra?"

"No," she said with a tone of duress in her voice. "So, if we're going to do this, let's get it done before I change my mind. I am a woman you know. When would we leave?"

"Well, it'll take some time and careful coordination. We'll have to make sure that the portal gets lost in the process and ensure that no one else can ever discover it. I suppose everything could be ready in a week or two."

"I sure hope we're doing the right thing, Vinni."

"I can't explain it, but for some reason, I believe we are. I'll start making the arrangements tomorrow, but until we actually step through, you'll have an opportunity to change your mind."

The consequences of that choice were beginning to sink in, but once she had made her decision, she never once questioned it. Their relationship had been reinforced with an endearing bond and their view of eternity had been given an everlasting facelift.

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Vinni spent the next several days preparing an old military vessel for its final voyage. The portal was installed in the wall of an airtight titanium vault built into the framework of the old ship's steel hull. Hundreds of explosive charges with wireless detonators were strategically placed at various locations. As far as the demolition team was concerned, the vessel was being sunk to create an artificial reef. Only Vinni and Sierra would be on board when it arrived at its final resting place, which would never be revealed.

The night before they were scheduled to sail, Vinni hosted one last extravagant party, a true celebration of life. Neither of them had close family ties or enduring relationships to contend with. The event simply extended one last opportunity to socialize with the many friends and associates they had shared their life with through the years. They were closer to some than others, but most were considered casual acquaintances. The lack of social ties might be perceived by some as a sad fact, but Vinni and Sierra considered themselves fortunate. They weren't confronted with the grave emotions that most endure when forced to leave a loved one behind.

Their yacht set sail for a secluded location about 300 miles northeast of Hawaii. It was a brisk Sunday morning on May 15th in 2044 when the entire crew was dismissed. The isolated site ensured that the military ship and its surreptitious cargo would come to rest in one of the deepest chasms in the North Pacific.

A map to the location and instructions were left in a secret encrypted file that only his former self could access. If a catastrophe was to occur within the seven-year window, Vinni's younger self would have an opportunity to activate a remote transmitter to enable its recovery. Even if a foreign salvage team were to stumble upon the wreck, the portal itself had been well-disguised and adequately concealed to prevent its discovery.

The seas were calm. A pleasant breeze wisped softly across the deck. The two had been blessed with a magnificent star filled sky, which seemed appropriate for their final night of life in the physical world. The two shared one of their favorite meals on the upper deck, a delicacy they would normally have taken for granted. The night was complimented by several bottles of the world's best and most expensive champagne. Since their infinite interlude would allow for an eternity of conversation, few words were spoken. Idle chat didn't seem necessary.

They were perfectly content with one another's company knowing that, once they had committed to the ultimate decree, they would never again experience the simple act of touching one another. Most of their final hours were immersed in every form of physical contact they could contrive. Even at the age of 84, they made love as passionately on this night as they had when they were young. It was a disturbing thought to consider, but aside from occasional glimpses of their former selves and the many fond memories they would cherish forever, they would never again peer into the precious eyes of their loving companion. Their lips would never meet in another fervent kiss. Every passionate aspect of their physical lives would be relinquished forever.

Like lovers caught in a desperate quandary, they prepared for the ultimate sacrifice. Aspects of life that most couples would typically take for granted were genuinely cherished. They held each other tightly throughout the night. At 6 AM, as difficult as it was for them to surrender their magic touch, the time had come to leave their old lives behind and begin their new spiritual adventure.

Although they were engrossed in a peculiar sense of immense trepidation, the dreadful dismissal of their physical emotions was incongruously overcome by an even more prevalent sense of exhilarating euphoria. The designated time had arrived, and they watched as the elaborate yacht drifted off to sea.

The two were now standing in front of the portal staring silently into the spiritual abyss. Vinni placed the detonator in Sierra's hand. He would not spend an eternity wondering if he had mistakenly coerced Sierra into making the decision. She responded with the most heartwarming smile he had ever seen on her beautiful face. With virtually no hesitation, she pressed the red button.

"We've got about thirty seconds," he advised with a confident smile of his own. "Are you ready?"

"Ready, Freddie," she said. They held on tightly to one another's hand as they stepped through and beyond the point of no return. They looked back from their enhanced spiritual perspective to observe the monitors situated within the vault. They watched as several cameras mounted at various locations throughout the ship captured the series of devastating explosions. The ship's massive steel hull split in two and began filling with water. The ship began to sink quickly and rapidly reached a depth where the faint rays of sunlight were finally filtered out completely. A deep ocean drenched in darkness now separated them from their only connection to their former life.

The ship had become an underwater tomb, but only for the portal entombed within it. Much like the afterlife depicted in the Bible, they began their new spiritual journey. Their lives would never be the same, but they would be together forever. The balance of their existence as spiritual entities would be spent exploring the depths of God's infinite universe. It was the ultimate paradigm of unconditional love. They would share a new and peculiar form of phenomenal joy.

In a way, Vinni and his compassionate wife became gods that day, spirits of the future dwelling in the past. They were God's blessed ambassadors chosen to spread the gospel of genuine love throughout His universe. Such love could only have been instilled by their Heavenly Father. Their future was yet to be determined, but if it was the Will of God, perhaps after millions or billions of years, they might one day find a means of circumventing their omnipotent destiny. Perhaps

they will someday discover a fortifying path that could somehow inveigle a new form of physical manifestation.

Considering how they got where they were to begin with, the bizarre notion didn't seem like such a far-fetched prospect. Until they discovered another supernatural anomaly, or until something else occurred to change their apparent destiny, they would reign like gods with their version of supreme power to influence and alter the future of life on Earth and, if life existed elsewhere in the universe, perhaps they will find it and influence it as well.

Since their quest was conceived in the purest form of absolute love, it didn't seem so inconceivable to consider that perhaps they had somehow been appointed by God Himself. Maybe it was their destiny to serve as an eternal example of what He intended for all of mankind.

If a spiritual life was their decree, their undying love would undoubtedly be perpetually subjected to the overwhelming presence of absolute evil, the domineering force that has permeated life on Earth since the beginning of time.

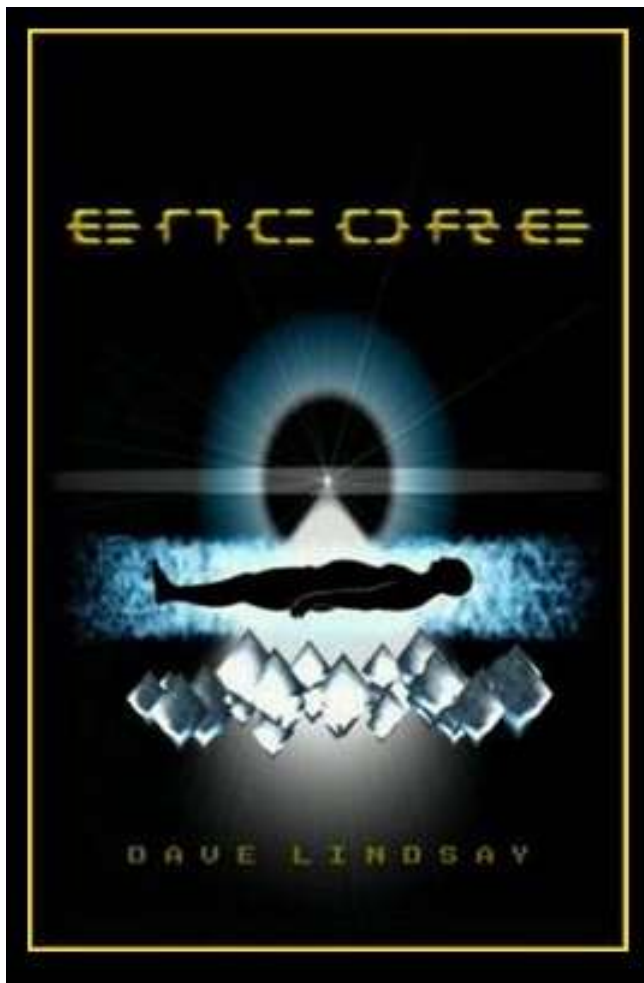
None of us will ever know for certain, but if Vinni and Sierra Cross were chosen for this monumental mission, mankind should consider saluting the Creator's magnificent selection.

Father Time and Mother Nature are watching...

THE END
and yet a new beginning!

Thank you for reading **Mirror-Mirror**! If you enjoyed the story, kindly pass the book along to a friend. Dave welcomes your comments and sincerely appreciates your feedback. Send your thoughts via email to Author@DLBooks.com.

If you enjoyed reading "**Mirror-Mirror**", you may also like "**Encore**", Dave's first novel.



Encore takes the reader on an intriguing philosophical voyage into the scientific realm of theological tenet. The story, which was inspired by an actual theory, is presented in an enlightening novelistic format.

Cryonics is no longer a farfetched science-fiction philosophy. At facilities like ALCOR in Arizona, more than 1200 bodies are currently in preserved in a unique frozen state. Participants, like the great Ted Williams and many others, were wholeheartedly convinced they could cheat death and one day return. Scientists claim it's merely a matter of time before technology will enable the successful rejuvenation of a human being.

The first person in modern times to return from the dead will of course receive unprecedented and monumental media acclaim. They will become world famous.

We simply cannot be so contemptuous as to contemplate the potential for such an insurmountable scientific

achievement without considering the theological implications that are inherently linked. Dave invites the reader to consider the pragmatic pious questions that scientists have failed to or refuse to ask.

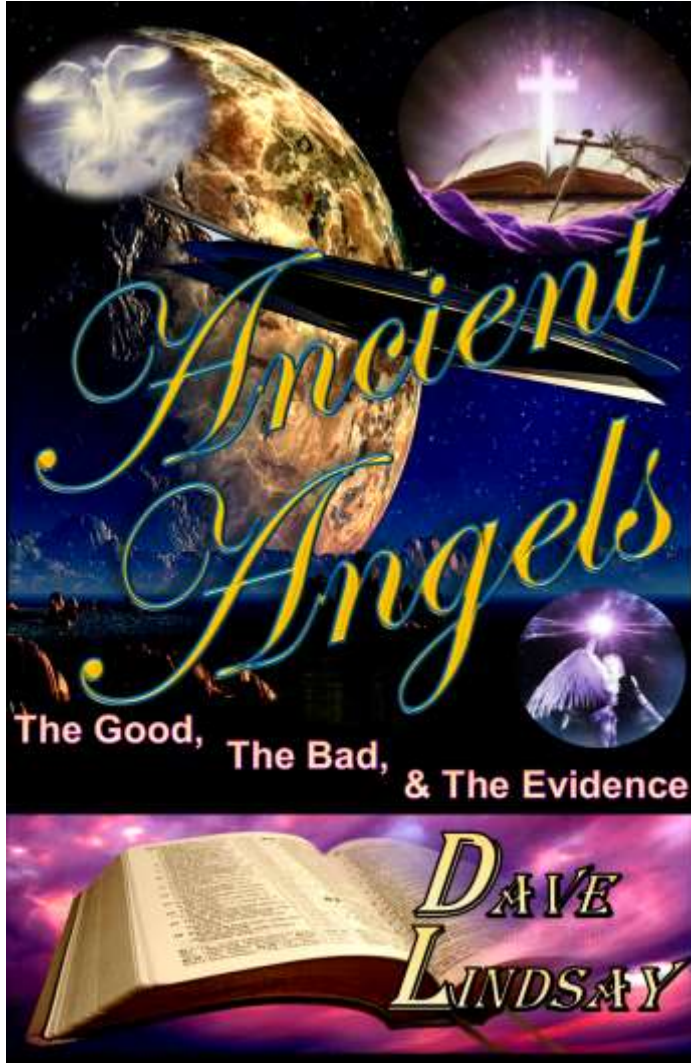
If, as the Holy Bible indicates and most religions contend, the human soul truly exists and departs the body when a person dies, will it return upon Cryonic rejuvenation? **Encore** explores the most phenomenal scenario of all. If it doesn't, the Cryonics platform could conceivably serve to create a window of opportunity for Satan to unknowingly fill the spiritual void. Could science inadvertently provide a socially acceptable means for the evil entity to manifest himself as the fabled Antichrist in the form of a rejuvenated man?

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Ancient Angels

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There is one question that even the most fail to ask. If Satan and his fallen angels are real, where do they reside? Concerning the whereabouts of the angels who were cast out of heaven, the Bible is quite specific. Most religions rarely if ever discuss the facts and/or overlook the biblical scriptures which provide us with all the fascinating details.

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