

Doors That Lock Behind You:

An alternate history of and by Dean Browell

The opposite of an autobiography.

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CHAPTER ONE

He shut the door to the crimson Ford Escort with what would be the last stiff pull in the parking lot of Ahner-Jackson College. It was a satisfying sound that peaked over the hum of the engine and masked the tinny din of “Closing Time” playing on the speakers inside. Packed to the brim with a badly damaged futon, several hundred pounds of t-shirts and CDs and a rolled up carpet that threatened to pop out both the front and rear windshields, the Ford Escort made an awkward turn out of the lot that narrowly missed a BMW parked nearby.

The decision had been made.

Other than the larger, over-arching decision about the direction of his life, there were other decisions that were far smaller but he treated with possibly absurd importance. Among them: to leave at exactly 4:07 p.m. Eastern Standard Time from his four-year institution as this was immediately after the last possible moment students were allowed in their dorm rooms and therefore, the highest likelihood that people outside would see him leave; his room had actually been vacated by 3:00 p.m., but he'd deliberately remained inside reading a stray magazine and comic book for an hour (but pretending to sweep) to bide his time until exactly 4:07; to ensure that the Resident Assistant at the other end of the hall had left, thereby avoiding an awkward goodbye between two once-friends whose relationship had soured; to be sure that by leaving when he did that by nightfall he would have only been able to travel a few hours and would need to make a surprise stop for possible overnight accommodations; and finally, to play “Closing Time” as if it imbued the moment with some sort of magical importance or, in fact, to pretend like this was a pivotal moment in a movie or television drama. As the comedy team he admired might say, he had a ruthless efficiency and an almost fanatical devotion to pop.

Dean and his Escort with a subtle white racing stripe sputtered through the short neighborhood that surrounded the college and onto the major interstate that intersected nearby. He chewed his lip a bit at the significance of the moment (regardless of the primarily manufactured weight of it) and made “Closing Time” play again. As he rolled through the smaller streets before the interstate he took note of the massive blind spot caused by a 2’ diameter carpet resting to the right of his head. That would be trouble changing lanes on 95, he thought.

Flooring it in the acceleration lane brought the pitiful red car to the appropriate speed to enter the flow of the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. Dean hit the back button on the rickety CD player near the cup holder. The song played again and Dean began an even deeper contemplation.

It was 1998. Being an intern suddenly had a bizarre new connotation thanks to the president, Diana was dead and Seinfeld was over. There was already a finality that a door was slamming shut on what we thought we could depend on.

What Dean had decided was to take a bit of an adventure. To throw caution to the wind. To pack up, pick a heading and set sail. By himself. Or as he would often say to his only-child id, to travel with the only person he could really understand.

The very act of making this decision meant disappointing a large group of individuals, some of whom had a large stake in what Dean was supposed to do immediately after college, and some who just acted like it. In the former category rested a soon-to-be-ex-fiancée who had frankly had enough of his wishy-washy crap. Also in that camp were his parents, who wouldn’t likely do more than shake their heads at the thought that AFTER college he decides to go all bohemian. Didn’t he get that out of his system already? And didn’t it seem like he had so much going for him just to throw it all away?

Dean replayed a completely fantastic set of scenarios, arguments and reactions with all of these people. Often he would set the mental vignettes to music so as to provide the

appropriate dramatic cues or points. It was a long car ride and while he did have a book on tape to tackle the idea of re-living an incredibly stressful playground somehow seemed a more interesting way to pass the time.

The decision also meant disappointing his two best friends. The friend that knew him the longest would think he was being extra and especially irresponsible. The other would be disappointed that plans wouldn't put Dean very close or even seemed to include his friends at all. In fact, as best as any established peer could tell, Dean would be pretending that the last 22 years didn't happen.

He would be pretending it didn't happen, insofar as anyone knew of his decision yet. The act of leaving was essentially the sole public move Dean had performed at that point. They'd figure it out soon enough. A phonecall or three would confirm it and they would probably not end well.

If Dean had been perfectly honest with everyone, which was increasingly unlikely in the wake of the mess he was leaving behind, he was scared shitless. He was unable to imagine the unknown that lay before him after four years of relatively rigid schedules and processes. For while Dean thrived on making life up as he went along, he depended on life's regularity in order to slip between and through. He felt like he had more control the more he and those around him depended on life's systems. And so the very notion of the post-college landscape was terrifying.

He remembered another decision that echoed this one. He wasn't sure why he hadn't thought of it before. Dean had been around six years old. While his parents were out for an evening, his visiting grandmother made dinner as it rained outside. While they usually had a spectacular relationship, there had been an argument. Dean was, for a six-year-old, furious. He lay on the couch in the family room and made meticulous plans on how he could live on his own should he run away. Quietly, while Grandma stirred a

boiling pot in the kitchen, Dean snuck upstairs and filled a plastic bag with a judiciously chosen group of favorite toys. He snuck back downstairs. A few moments later he managed to slip into the garage. And a few moments after that he was out of the house, covered by his raincoat. Dean remembered how the anger and frustration carried him nearly half a mile down the road. He remembered the rain and the cold and yet it did not deter him. It was only when he began to imagine his Grandma's reaction when she would realize he was gone that his steps slowed. His pace drew to a crawl as he realized if he ran away he would never see her or his parents again. The weight of his decision became a crushing guilt that even the act of leaving might be enough to change things in a significant way, even if he eventually came back. He began to notice the wet cold in his boots. He noticed that his raincoat wasn't doing a very good job of protecting him. That his bag of toys was already wet and that he actually didn't have any idea how or where he would eat much less subsist. He'd made a horrible mistake. He turned around and plodded slowly back. And as the realization that his Grandma may never trust him again sunk in, the six-year-old Dean ran back full-tilt, splishing and splashing down the long road. He could hardly remember having walked as far as he had. Halfway home, his bag of toys broke open, spilling out into the puddles. He started to cry. Two shimmering lights pulled up from the direction of home and came to a stop nearby. His Grandma, in her housecoat and a Buick, had found him.

Dean was driving in silence now. There was no calculated soundtrack playing. In fact the only sound he could pay attention to was the snuffle of recognition as he began to tear up. What hadn't occurred to Dean until he got about 76 miles from the parking lot was that the fear and guilt of having made his decision would be so overwhelming.

He had made the wrong decision. An exit would be taken by the Ford Escort. A phone call would be placed. And a return would be made to the interstate, this time going in the opposite direction. Suddenly, the entire experiment was over.

Dean had managed to make two life-altering decisions in a single day, ending where he began.

But what if?

CHAPTER TWO

“Let it be said, there is simply nothing to prepare the Earth for the confluence of a Tesla cassette tape playing in an Italian Catholic church built by midgets.”

Dean paused for a moment, still wondering if he understood what “confluence” meant. The journal hung lazily across his leg, its pages and spine flopping with every bump up the mountain in the tiny car. His dad had helped him construct the sentence to kick off a few pages of drawings. “Confluence” sounded... diarrheal. He scratched it out and chose another word, one that his Dad didn’t give him: “craziness.” Sounded more natural. At least, to an 11 year old.

Dean encountered the silent hiss signal that his Walkmen had reached the end of his tape. He jammed the eject button, flipped the white cassette over and in about twenty-three seconds he was listening to “Modern Day Cowboy” again in all its hair-metal glory. He went back to drawing pictures of the mountains. The Italian Alps.

They were in Italy, South Tyrol. Germans called it Innichen. Italians, San Candido. The Alps along the Italian-Austrian border hid many of these towns and only a few were terribly well-frequented. On the way up the mountain they had seen the familiar five-rings of the Olympics on the end of a ski jump. They also saw a dozen cars careening the opposite way, making Dean’s mother’s knuckles white and the door handle nearly buckle under the nervous grip. The quality of the international driver’s license program stood in question as Dean’s father guided the tiny blue car up the enormous inclines.

The hotel, the only one by anyone’s count, was very plain but with some spacious rooms to maneuver near the lobby. Most importantly to Dean it had a Game Room which included exactly two ancient arcade cabinets and a ping pong table. The musty room had a single working light over one side of the table, which in the afternoon gave

the room an incredibly dull feeling, not helped by the fading green paint or the low sound of a bootleg Spy Hunter video game. The Peter Gunn theme via midi synthesizer gave the entire Italian Alps experience a vaguely James Bond feel. The Game Room was what it was, but Dean enjoyed it. And he enjoyed it largely alone as he was the only kid in the hotel as far as he knew.

It was in what passed as the Game Room of the hotel that Dean first met Christopher. Technically, he wasn't a kid in the inn. He was a local. At 15 he seemed to know more English as a second language than Dean had grasped as his first. Christopher was the son of the manager of the inn and Dean had spotted him a few times in the first few days, doing odd jobs or reading outside on the stoop. Exchanging smiles but not words, it was nice to know there was another soul under the age of 40 somewhere in Italy. Christopher's black hair contrasted with Dean's lighter brown, but otherwise they both could have been young adults from any country in Europe or America. On the fourth day, Dean found Christopher intensely concentrating on a run of Spy Hunter in the game room. They awkwardly introduced each other and promptly didn't speak again until the end of Dean's visit.

For nearly a week they were to enjoy San Candido at a science conference Dean's Dad was attending. There would be dinners. Small excursions to local must-sees. The town itself had a strangely organic feel, helped by hundreds of years of architectural similarity. Short slopes, tin roofs, rounded windows and a bleached brick peppered with stone sides guided the eye as one strolled through the town. Dean shuffled along the stone roads with his family, usually with his Mom and a few other scientist-spouses as they went from site to site. The Franciscan Abbey was particularly interesting, with its graveyard of iron crosses, and there was the occasional small museum. Just looking up was awe-inspiring as the Dolomites peeked peaks above the town.

But for all of San Candido's experiences there was one that easily stood out and became the subject of Dean's journal. The midget church. A few on the trip had spoken of it, but only Dean's family decided to venture out to it.

Any structure to be so many miles, or kilometers, or football fields away from San Candido was notable. Towns of that size, around three thousand people tops, rarely had too many buildings anyone might want to visit (or at least easily visit) so far outside the town. At least not without nearly reaching another similar-sized town. But as the car pulled up to the small domed structure at the crest of a hill, it was clear this was no ordinary building.

Dean's parents got out of the car and had to gesture to Dean to remind him to leave the car too, as he was just blankly staring at the weird church. It looked to be made of a weird stucco, almost a light adobe quality to it as its dome reached about two stories high with a chimney on one end. There were a couple of very small windows. They approached the wooden double doors. The doors were only about as tall as Dean's mother, around 5'5". They were heavy and jangling with old iron locks and chains. Even the rings on the door were barely large enough to get three fingers in to pull. After all, it truly was a church for little people. Not children, but rather a community of dwarves or midgets or whatever the most politically correct term was for those of less-than-average height hundreds of years ago. It was their church and Dean might imagine simply a structure that had typical church qualities but of smaller proportions. Dean would be wrong.

Inside, everything was suddenly very strange. Dark and full of rough-hewn stone, any doorways were a challenge, all steps half the width and length the family was used to. The first room was immediately a compact stone sanctuary of small pews, which again made sense to Dean – but it was the dioramas that flanked each side of the small sanctuary that immediately drew attention. These three-dimensional vignettes depicted scenes of Christ's life – with the entire cast of figures as little people. Jesus himself was "normal" sized, but the participating figures of Apostles, Romans and more were tiny in comparison. It carried through to his crucifixion. The curator of the church (now more of a museum) acknowledged it was unusual. And indicated with a nod that the

group move into the next room. Even through his broken English and thick Italian there was an anticipation that the family had not seen anything yet.

For a comforting noise, Dean pulled his headphones on and pushed play on his Walkman. Tesla helped him feel less weird. More like an observer. Less like someone who had stumbled into a religious version of Land of the Lost.

They moved through the small hallway, all hunched and taking the quick, low-lit turns in stride as they reached a strange second room. It was not unlike another chapel, although there were no pews. No seats. Just a wide room that ended in a stone lump. That was almost coffin-shaped. It had a large hole in the top and a small stone step that would have helped a smaller person see into the hole. Dean's parents walked up cautiously as the curator invited us to look. Inside, was a life-sized, sculpted model of Christ, crudely painted and clearly asleep. Dean jumped back a bit when he saw it. The image of a casket with Christ in it would stick with him for the rest of his life. And not in a good way.

Back at the hotel, his family would talk about the unusual trip over a game of ping-pong. His parents retired to the lounge where they caught up with colleagues and friends from the conference.

Still piqued by the odd church experience, Dean lingered in the Game Room and contemplated spending his last few lire on a few plays of the Spy Hunter arcade cabinet. After Dean's first game, Christopher wandered in.

"Hi," They both exchanged. Christopher watched Dean play another game, and Dean returned the attention as Christopher played. Dean wanted badly to bring up the midget church, but feared offending Christopher. So he didn't.

If he had, maybe they would have exchanged addresses and become letter-writing friends. Or maybe not.

As it was, the “bye” they would exchange would be the last words they would exchange.

For ten years. Until the accident on Interstate 95.

CHAPTER THREE

Mitsuo and Catherine held hands for a few moments before Catherine fully leaned in and allowed herself to be held by Mitsuo's arms. The wind spit a drizzling rain at them as they sat on a large rock on Yorktown's coast. Catherine began to cry. Mitsuo, glad Catherine was facing the river away from him, also shed a few tears. He had spent nearly twenty years ensuring that his sister would never see him cry. To have that sense of strength, however contrived, come crashing when his sister needed him most would be a terrible price of weakness in his mind.

Of course, Catherine wished she could see Mitsuo cry. What he perceived as strength she thought was a cold indifference. This went double in how he perceived their parents. His lack of emotion, or at least his neglect to show any in front of his sister was the cause of many of her decisions. Not the least of which was Catherine's decision several years ago to take care of her ill mother. Despite his toughness, Catherine couldn't leave her Mom with Mitsuo. Catherine felt their mother needed her serenity rather than his strength at that time.

Catherine closed her eyelids and tried to keep warm in Mitsuo's arms. Her brown eyes shielded from the rain, she recalled the many times she'd cried recently. It had been a hard few years taking care of her mother. When Catherine and Mitsuo's mother first moved in with Catherine, it was something akin to a serial comedy show. The mother-daughter dynamic always tends to change when one begins to think residentially versus just simply visiting one another. Throw in a dash of stroke and the most routine patterns become an unwelcome adventure. Despite being the youngest of the two, Catherine knew that Mitsuo wouldn't have handled their mother's mood changes well. The sheer repetition of the most mundane remarks, questions, gestures, events and changes in environment made the day a constant reminder of the recent flurry of strokes. Mitsuo dutifully checked in every day, usually appearing on the living room screen and providing a welcome familiar face to Catherine and a new face to their mother who had to be reminded by the second year who Mitsuo was. Catherine had

struggled to adapt her apartment to a lifestyle outpost that could accommodate a seventy-year old and a forty two-year old. Catherine's career as a painter kept her pleasingly homebound anyway, but she found herself without the energy to paint very much even when her mother was asleep and without need of care. Most days Catherine found she would stumble into the late afternoons without a shower or even getting out of her pajamas. Her mother's legendary long, caramel hair was trimmed short to keep its upkeep easy. The things they once both did for themselves or one another were reduced to a baseline shorthand to produce just enough personal pride as to feel adult, but not so much as to feel very human. Completely unintentionally she'd let herself go, she would remark to friends over coffee when she was able to leave her mother in a nurse's care for a day a week; the very act of dressing up to attend a simple hour of socialization being the highlight of a week for Catherine after the first year. In many ways she lost as much of her life as her mother had. When a fall happened under the care of a nurse, Catherine decided she wouldn't take advantage of leaving her mother's side ever again, despite the fact that she didn't blame the nurse. The watch became more intense. Patience, long frayed, was in short supply. Catherine accepted Mitsuo's offer of money to keep the healthcare aspect aloft and eventually to pay for her own apartment's mortgage. Catherine found herself doing little that would be considered living herself, but refused to allow her mother to be put into assisted living of any kind. It wasn't that she didn't believe in it. She just had her reasons.

Catherine's reasons for not submitting their mother to a facility where she could be taken care of without also draining her own life were not known to Mitsuo. Mitsuo chalked it up to the famous stubbornness of the women in their family (which he also exhibited, they would all point out during the course of his life). Catherine had a much better reason than just stubbornness. She knew of the original eldest sibling. That child, a boy, had been born premature and through no circumstances that science could avail, died soon after birth. It led to the adoption of Mitsuo. Catherine arrived after a second natural attempt, two years later. But one evening after her 16th birthday Catherine's mother sat her down and told the story. The story of how every single night her mother had wept by that tiny boy's crib side. How she could not give up.

That the women of their family knew no limit to devotion and love for family. It was a speech that stuck with Catherine. Stuck so hard that she could not bear the thought of dislodging it for the same woman that spent those night's beside a bedside of a brother they would never know.

After three years of taking care of their mother, Catherine awoke one morning to find her mother passed into her final sleep. She called for Mitsuo and he traveled across the country from Chicago immediately. In a matter of hours he would be there to help her cry among family.

Cross-country travel was prohibitively expensive for Mitsuo and Catherine. Especially Catherine, who had very little money to begin with and after years of not painting much, not to mention not selling much, her reserves were drained. Not that Catherine was all that great at saving to begin with. Thankfully, Mitsuo was much better at saving. And if Catherine was honest with herself, she'd note that Mitsuo was just better at earning money, period. His entrepreneurial skills afforded him a career that Catherine would never hope to attain, nor wish upon herself. And yet, she appreciated it in a light she never had before as Mitsuo sustained the tail-end of Catherine and their mother's healthcare and lifestyle. When the money ran out, and it did at times at a trickle and others as a great geyser, Mitsuo was there without a batted eye on the living room screen, more than happy to immediately transfer funds.

Two days after the funeral, Mitsuo traveled with Catherine to the bank of the York River in Virginia. Such a trip was customary for their family, a habit that began after their grandfather's death. They took the prescribed early exit several miles out of the way in order to make the right approach, down the Colonial Parkway's parallel path along the river. With the windows open and music up loud, as their family was wont to do, they careened with fixed, thinking expressions as they noted the beauty of the changing leaves and the swath of blue provided by the river beside them. A particular rocky area, away from the more commercialized beach area near the Coleman Bridge, remained a favorite place for Catherine and Mitsuo to find solace. The lapping waves,

the relative silence, the cool rocks (especially in the fall in which they gathered after their mother's death), and the lack of passersby meant a uniquely alone feeling one did not get often. Catherine found the sound of the waves to be the most helpful. The wind seemed to try to compete but it was always the waves that won, in Catherine's mind. The water seemed to try and reach her, to add additional arms of familial comfort. It made her comfortable to talk to Mitsuo, to tell him about their mother's final days.

Unbeknownst to Catherine, Mitsuo wasn't just listening to her thoughts on aging. He was also listening to a particular mix of songs chosen just for the occasion. Not coincidentally, they were chosen the last time she began a monologue about their lineage. The subtle, clear and pea-shaped inserts in his ears were hidden by his wool cap, and the way they utilized subtle-vibration harmonics meant no one other than Mitsuo could hear the music anyway. Mitsuo gestured slightly with a finger and changed a track. He'd found a song or two he liked going some old play count information his Mom's computer had. A song or two named in what was his grandfather's collection sounded interesting. He had the titles sought out and downloaded to the flash strip behind his ear. One track, "Lake Michigan" by Rogue Wave, had an aquatic reference and wall of jangled sound that seemed appropriate to Mitsuo for thinking in the rain at the riverside.

Mitsuo thought of his grandfather's funeral and how he sat on these same rocks beside his mother. His mother cried as well, under Mitsuo's then teenage arm, which shook as he tried to be strong for his mother for what felt like the first time. While he was older now, it wasn't any easier for him. In fact, this time it was much worse.

Over the last three years he not only watched his adopted mother's health decline, he watched the burden on his younger sister increase. Usually in the morning as he settled in at the office he would gesture for his camera to flick on and speak with his family across the country. While he appeared larger-than-life on their living room screen, they usually were contained to a small box on his office display where he could also track

that morning's news, the opening stock market numbers and more. Mitsuo was a multi-tasker if he was anything. And a businessman. Throughout his life he had been the child who not only would have opened the lemonade stand, but would have bought all of the lemons from the competing stand at a premium in order to have perpetual exclusivity. His actual example, of how he raised money selling chocolate to lease a field near the high school for 9 months a year, on which he created an incentivized student parking program that provided dividends such as: not getting his ass kicked by any athletic team, never having to do his Chemistry homework, and of course, plenty of cash for dates and a new car. The latter he had to hide from his parents. Doing so unsuccessfully from his sister resulted in her needing to be bribed as well, and suddenly she had a much better grade in Chemistry as well. Mitsuo's relationship with his mother had been one of adversarial love, often sparring intensely on everything from politics to chores. Despite what appeared a contentious bond, their intense respect made Mitsuo a devoted son (if rarely a quiet one) and his mother an ardent fan of her son's skeptical mind. Once she taught him about truth, she knew Mitsuo would speak it to power.

Mitsuo hugged Catherine a little tighter in light of his maternal memory. Catherine smiled, and twin tears rolled down her face, between her lips. Kissing the top of her head, Mitsuo suggested they go home. Reluctantly, because her home had not been solely her own in several years, Catherine agreed. The two stood tall on the rocks and hopped their way back to the grassy picnic area. Mitsuo held his arm around Catherine as they walked back to his sleek rented cruiser. As they approached, it began to purr in ignition and rose slightly above the ground. The top slid back and the stair folded down to the ground as they neared even closer. Just before they climbed in, Catherine turned back to the water.

"I guess the next time we come here it'll be for one of us."

Catherine sighed. Mitsuo nodded. They stepped into the car and felt it buoy as they sat. The top slid closed, the stair folded in, and immediately the windows pulled

downward as a mix of their mother's favorite music began to blare and drift off. Mitsuo and Catherine were carried off into the distance, the drizzle still coming down.

It was the year 2077.

And with their trip back up the parkway, Mitsuo and Catherine finished saying goodbye to their mother, Addison Jade.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was raining, and therefore Dean was listening to music from England. That's pretty much how it worked in his world of planning, wherein all sorts of environmental conditions (real and contrived) would dictate habits. It meant making a concerted effort to actually find music from that region of the world when the mood or meteorological event struck.

This particular rain began relatively soon after he turned his car around on Interstate 95.

It meant fumbling with the large album of Compact Discs, all slid into their sleeve pockets in order of their release date (Dean silently thanked his fiancée), in order to find the then most recent release from The Verve, from the year before ('97). Specifically he was groping for the haunting, "Bittersweet Symphony" to accompany his dramatic life decision. He slowed a bit to accommodate his pawing through the bible of music. It was important he find the disc. Nothing helps contemplative dramatic life decisions like a great violin part and a lackadaisical vocalist.

He popped the CD onto the spindle of the portable CD player, ensured the cassette-tape adapter was firmly engaged and hit the play button. And then he tapped the repeat button.

The rain was pounding Dean's car, nearly drowning out the music and demanding his wiper blades be swiping the windshield at a rate that nearly obscured view entirely. The storm had picked up fairly fast after he turned around, and he took it as a sign that he was entering a cleansing period of his life. Yes, this kind of event – any kind of event, really, could be turned into an omen for Dean at this point in his life. He had a passion and talent for interpreting nearly any supposed serendipitous moment as one of complete alignment and signal on a higher scale. It was a wonder he wasn't more religious, as much as he was in love with symbols and ritual. In fact one would think had

he been raised more religiously he would have aimed for Bishop. But as it was Dean found his ritual in much grander events and found the dogma of any church relatively limiting. He enjoyed the life between moments to not dictate the next action, but rather affirm or reaffirm past actions. This would eventually evolve into a realization that he could interpret any coincidence religiously and it immediately shot dead the logic of any man-made religion.

However in late high school and college there was one rather odd series of coincidences that only seemed to happen when he had made a decision that was important, or rather one in which would eventually be important: a light would go out. It seemed unusual or silly to tell anyone else about so Dean rarely did. But he believed. After recovering from a particularly bad breakup, Dean walked outside of his dorm toward the campus center and looked up at a street-lamp; the bulb went out. Dean drove home from a life-affirming concert with a close friend and after a game-changing conversation they both noticed the lone streetlight at the neighborhood entrance go out. After the first time he told someone he loved them, the nearby light went out. The interpretation of this kind of coincidence floated as he got older. At first he thought it was some strange activity where the emotional power of a decision or situation had some sort of electric effect. Never witnessing the effect on anyone else, Dean later began to think it was specific to him and that a comic-book sort of energy was being transferred from him due to being happy, thereby knocking a light out. Towards the end of college, once he noticed that some of the same lights that went out often came back on, the perception changed from something he was doing to something a higher power was doing to signal to him a form of approval. This latter interpretation hung on for a long time and resulted in the holistic religiosity Dean held onto for the remainder of his undergraduate career. A few people who were close to him, usually romantically involved, began to notice the light-out phenomenon too, but it was hard to tell if it was merely because he pointed it out or because they were indeed validating his observation. He continued to think it was a special phenomenon, but was beginning to sense that perhaps his entire situation was pure coincidence beyond his control or involvement and that his sense of each act was based on what he was bringing to a

moment of pure coincidence. The light going out would become his path of enlightenment and then disillusionment. It would coincide, not coincidentally, with his realization that he could manipulate others by simply creating what appeared to be extraordinary circumstance. He would consider a career in public relations.

Regardless of Dean's career path, his automobile path was clearly ahead of him, despite his inability to see it past the rain. It came down in sheets. All vehicles had slowed by a few miles per hour to cope. Every overpass contained a car or motorcycle (or two) that had stopped to wait out the storm. The hills rose a bit around the sides of the road. It created a bit of a trench-run effect for the cars heading toward the more heavily trafficked parts of the state. Dean moved awkwardly into the far right lane to compensate for his own slow going, letting more brave drivers careen through the tempest to his left. One in a dark blue car did. It completed its pass of Dean's hatchback by moving into the right lane, but still did so at a fast rate.

It kept going. Then it moved past the lines of the lane. It was sliding.

The blue coupe, as though it was a marble on a half-pipe, moved almost dream-like across the lane and up the side of the embankment, all four wheels making the trip up at a perpendicular angle, but the car quickly slamming upside down. The vehicle had finally come to rest on its own head after a jarringly fluid motion around, across and up and over, right in front of Dean's Escort. Everyone nearby applied his or her brakes. Dean was able to swerve to the left at a wide enough angle, as were others. It all happened in about five seconds. When those five crucial seconds were over, a car rested on its head, engine still running, wheels still spinning and passengers scrambling.

Dean parked on the side of the road, along with a white pickup truck and a van of some sort. The immediate instinct was to leap out and help but everyone suddenly remembered at once that it was raining cats and dogs outside. A pause to think about

how to do this. A glance in his rearview mirror showed the car to him again, steam rising, lights coming on inside as someone from the backseat struggled to get a door open. It dawned on him that fooling with an umbrella out there wouldn't be of much help. He pulled his sweatshirt's hood up and dashed outside.

Dean approached against traffic, the lights of both the overturned car and those oncoming an unwelcome distraction. The man from the pickup truck was soon behind, and via an inside light, it looked as though a woman in the stopped van was on a cellular phone, no doubt calling the police.

Dean was no fan of coming at this car from its nose. He remembered one thing from some late-night cable show on survival and it was that while the engine is running, it might spark a fire. And thanks to years of watching Hollywood films, Dean's concept of what happens when there are engine fires included massive explosions that could level blocks of a city, much less make a scorched stain of a recent college grad in a Nine Inch Nails hoodie. Dean took a wide arc as he approached, taking note of the smooth tire tracks left on the embankment as he made his way to the back seating of the blue car. Only up close in the painful rain could he see that there were three people in the coupe: a young man in the backseat, another of the same age (possibly a teen) in the front passenger seat, and an older man who had been driving. It looked like they were all conscious enough to try and get out.

The windows had blown on one side of the car only, and from the back seat the one boy was furiously and fruitlessly trying to get the door open.

"Come out the window- open the window or go to the other side!" the man from the pickup smartly shouted.

Maybe the truck-man was a volunteer firefighter or something, Dean surmised. He was big enough for it, and the rain seemed to run away from his huge frame with camo pants and tank top. He had work gloves on ("Had he been driving with those on?") and

helped to force the window down, or up rather, so that the young man inside could crawl out.

Dean made his way around the car to the driver's side where the removed windows helped to give a clearer view of the occupants. Unfortunately, the news only got worse. The driver was not awake, and in fact looked very unconscious. What Dean thought was a teen in the passenger side was more of a young man, probably Dean's age or a little older. The man was panicking and trying to get the driver's seatbelt off. He referred to the driver as his uncle. The young man muttered something repeatedly but Dean couldn't hear from the rain and the low roar of the still ongoing engine.

Dean shouted, "Turn the car off!"

The young man could barely hear Dean and seemed more frustrated that it was the car Dean was worried about.

"Engine fire- we have to turn the car off so there's not an engine fire!"

The young man understood, turned off the car and tossed the keys out the opposite broken window.

"Help my Uncle," he begged.

Dean went to work, clearing the pieces of glass away that were still in any way attached or in the way on the driver's side window. Now that he was closer, Dean could tell that the father wasn't bleeding in any way. The pickup truck man and the kid from the back seat were around on Dean's side now and helping to maneuver an unconscious man from the driver's side window. The driver was thankfully not very tall but was a heavy, short man with a very Italian look to him. Dean wondered between pulls if it the driver had hit his head... Maybe had a heart attack? He had no idea. Dean was a Drama major who read comic books.

They were able to pull the uncle clear and the woman from the van, along with a teenage son of her own appeared with an umbrella and a towel. They tucked the towel under the uncle's head and held the umbrella over him.

"The police – someone's on their way."

"I'll go get some more towels." Dean offered helpfully and halfway to his car he wondered if he actually had any he could reach. After some searching he came back with a hand towel with red and green peppers on it and a 10,000 Maniacs concert t-shirt.

The oldest young man who had been the passenger used the hand towel to clean the uncle's face up and devotedly opened several buttons of his shirt, rubbed the uncle's hair and worriedly scurried about looking to see if the cops were on their way. The teen from the backseat held his hands behind his head and walked around the turned car in the rain, shaking his head in disbelief.

The scream of the sirens tried to cut through the power of the rain. In a few long moments the police and an ambulance were there. Shortly a fire truck and a wrecker joined them. After a few statements it was clear it was time for the first-responding witnesses to leave and let them take care of the situation. The uncle was loaded up into the ambulance with the teen and the young man turned back to the car to pull a few affects out. When he did, he shook the hand of the pickup truck man, the woman and son from the van, and finally Dean. The young man sincerely looked everyone in the eye. Dean was moved by his ability to give them any attention at all. Soon everyone was scurrying out of the rain.

Dean returned to his car, which he had left running, still playing "Bittersweet Symphony" at volume setting 11. Secretly, Dean was thankful that he hadn't instinctively locked his

own doors and therefore his keys inside. He'd done that before in his zeal for checked-and re-checked habits like locking doors. Twice.

A big breath later, he removed his soaked hooded sweatshirt and laid it across the giant carpet that looked like a column of fabric wedged the length of his car. He turned off the music and breathed deep again. He paused to consider what an unusual experience that was. He put the car in drive, watched for a lull in traffic and carefully got back onto the interstate. Dean thought about whether he did anything all that special, but regardless he was glad he stopped. Perhaps if he hadn't turned around, no one would have thought to tell those boys to turn the engine off and something more terrible would have happened. Or even more likely, had he not slowed to put his music on just a few minutes earlier, he might have been more directly in their path and ended up as a part of the accident rather than an observer.

Dean had plenty of time to contemplate the various possibilities. He put his music back on. As he passed under a street lamp, the light blinked out.

And Christopher lived. Christopher's uncle, however, did not.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mitsuo adjusted his earpieces, took a deep breath, and jumped.

For whatever brief seconds he had after the leap, his thick black hair buffeted against the air. He thought he might tuck his legs in for a moment and try a somersault, but he didn't really feel like going that route. And by the time he decided, he was halfway to his destination.

A heartbeat or two later, Mitsuo pierced the water. His entry was clean and uncomplicated by many ripples. His toes seemed to drag in like a vapor trail.

He continued to travel after breaking the plane, arcing and swimming parallel with the floor of the pool. Reaching the smaller side ladder, he pulled himself out of the water and began another climb up the long platform ladder to dive again.

This time he took a few seconds to survey what lie outside the pool area's windows. There in front of him, splayed out like a gray-organic landscape of asphalt vines and towering metal trees, was Chicago. The pool and diving platform were held high atop a skyscraper, part of a private club. Mitsuo was a member, but only by association. While he was well-off, he was not rich by his era's standards. Only a long friendship with the owner of the club allowed him to come in on the occasional morning and "set himself" as Mitsuo would say. It was a crucial routine that he performed on the days where he anticipated the most stress. It usually helped.

And Mitsuo just had to get in a few more dives on that particular morning or he would never be calm enough to handle the merger meeting.

Drying off forty-five minutes later, still listening to a classic rock radio station in his waterproof ear-inserts, Mitsuo strolled back to the locker room. "Kiss Off" by some

band The Violent Femmes II (supposedly comprised of relations of the first incarnation, some ninety years hence) were still jangling and jamming in his left ear as he removed the right piece. Drying them off, he placed them in his hanging pants pocket. He was instantly sorry as he was assaulted with soft jazz from the high-rise gymnasium's speakers. He showered a little too hot and returned to his hanging pin stripe suit.

A leisurely change and he was relaxing from his relaxation. Mitsuo sat with a coffee and the morning news on a tablet in the corner of the gym's lobby, enjoying the sunrise over his adopted city home. In many ways, he felt that his move to Chicago had given him the opportunity to have a city of his own. Beneath the surface of his city choice was a conscious choice to adopt something his own. As the adopted child of his own family, this was his chance to make himself the steward of something. He would always love Virginia and the opportunity it gave him, but Chicago was his. His town. He would give his parents tours and show them his favorite restaurants and places to think. He would have his own universe of friends and a job that kept him so busy that friends were barely an option.

The latter frightened his family a bit. But they should never fear their priority in Mitsuo's life. No matter how stressful his days at work were (and they were, very) his family were in many ways his oasis from the storm. They were a distance away that made in-person contact infrequent, but thankfully technology had closed that gap. And in a thought of that responsibility, Mitsuo rose and took the elevator down just a handful of floors to his office. Strolling in, he greeted his assistant as they had just arrived at the office themselves. A long hallway past, he entered his office and flicked on his desk's screen as the sun reached a bright enough point to illuminate the city outside his floor-to-ceiling windows.

He placed the video call to his sister Catherine. It read as, "busy." Catherine not taking the call would be unusual, but not totally unimaginable, Mitsuo thought.

Soon enough, a knock on the side of his office door distracted from any familial obligation.

A harried and nervous man entered Mistuo's office without waiting for the invite. It was enough to warrant alarm as this man's nervousness had a direct impact on Mitsuo's faith in that day's meeting.

"Damon, good morning. Ready for the big day?"

"No. Not really. No, no, no..." Damon twisted his hands inside one another, briefly picking at his knuckles before jutting them into his pockets self-consciously.

"You'll do fine. I know you hate being put on the spot, but I think it's important they hear from a real engineer what our capabilities are," Mistuo's voice drifted into more company speak and Damon could barely focus enough to pay attention. Damon's comb-over at age 33 was signal enough that either he was prematurely aging or had pulled out his hair in anxiety. His constantly blinking eyes betrayed an otherwise handsome face in the same way his fidgety mannerisms betrayed the intelligence of a man who could design incredibly complex systems in a virtual space. Perhaps his ability to deal with things on a software level prevented him from dealing with them on a reality level, Mitsuo considered.

Damon was the quintessential train wreck of a software engineer. Not the strong, silent, would-be athlete engineer of yore, but rather the introverted mess that resulted in an adult unable to handle most social situations. Or so Mitsuo thought of him. Mitsuo, a relatively good judge of character, was mostly right.

Damon didn't agree with Mitsuo's assessment of the meeting to come, but he trusted that Mitsuo would not put him in such an antithetical situation unless it was necessary.

"As long as you'll be there to keep the jackals at bay."

“They’re not jackals, Damon. They’re clients that could become something more.”

A strange silence hung as they each pondered, in their own way, the implications of the day.

And as Mitsuo had pierced the water that morning, a voice from someone not in the office penetrated the brief calm of their thoughts.

Mitsuo forgot that he had left his screen on call-back and his sister’s voice startled him.

“Mitsuo, Mitsuo... answer me. It’s mom, she’s-“

Mitsuo didn’t need to hear the rest of the answer, but he did. In less than an hour he would be on a plane, his assistant shipping his luggage separately and the logistics of an impromptu trip overtaking his week. The decision was so instantaneous it was if no decision had been made at all. It simply was. His family came first. Chicago, his adopted home and all of the occupational accoutrements were secondary and always would be. The meeting on the merger would have to happen without him, and it did. Mitsuo was ready to accept its failure if necessary. There would be other meetings.

Mitsuo’s mother had died. That was all that mattered. And so he left.

CHAPTER SIX

Like a hand whose fingers stretch out simply because they can, Wan Chai's buildings stood in defiance of Kowloon on its opposite shore. It was five years before all of Hong Kong would be under Chinese control again for the first time in 99 years. While the occasional inflammatory t-shirt was sold in the markets, you would hardly know such a fundamental change was near.

It was 1992.

In a faded yellow taxi, Dean and his family were escorted through the freeways through Kowloon. He immediately noticed that all of the signs were in English first, then Chinese in smaller print on every street sign. At least those signs they passed slow enough to notice. His walkman lay clutched in his palm for dear life, playing a mix tape of some favorite tracks. Something kinetic and frantic, Ministry's "So What?" mirrored the mode of transportation.

Dean practically pressed his face up against the taxi window, fascinated at the sheer amount of humanity stacked in apartments like cord wood along the road. While not necessarily tall, each building was wide and seemed to cheat with the height of each story, like a reverse Disney effect, some architectural torture as living spaces were further and further compressed the higher they lived. The taxi careened at a speed that certainly felt unsafe. Certainly no more unsafe than the landing they had just done via airplane, heading straight for a mountain before sharply diverting to the runway. In fact the very tiled hallway that dumped them out into a fast-paced road seemed to be an unceremonious welcome to a city that was bustling with or without the Americans that had come to visit. Once again, Dean's father had a conference that brought them there, and once again it was to a city that jarred and stunned Dean's sense of culture and place in the world. For a 15 year old, it was an impressionable place to say the least.

The taxi crossed the water and arrived at Harbour View Hotel, one of many English-named buildings and one of the two hotels built practically atop the Hong Kong Convention Centre. Later, Dean would chuckle at the fact it rested near Gloucester Road, a name more familiar to a boy raised in Yorktown, VA near his own Gloucester and the butt of many jokes in school. The glass façade of the Centre rippled out toward the harbor. In the dark, Dean would be forgiven for mistaking the area as even more sprawling than it really was. After a room (or two, as there was an issue with the first assignment of 1457 before they landed in a Harbour-facing 2342) Dean and his family fell fast asleep, victims of jet lag and the unusual evening's travel already.

The morning felt like a trick had been played.

As the sun slammed the room's windows, it became clear that they had not arrived in any ordinary city. Half-gleaming, half-groaning under the weight of its population, Dean's room faced a harbor filled with Chinese junks (smallish skiffs that an entire family might live on). They bobbed as if dancing to a silent beat and bore sails like a dinosaur's fin. The window to the room exhibited the shear intensity of a flat glass pane against an equally flat glass building, and looking at a downward angle nearly induced vertigo. The city begged for exploration. It was difficult for Dean to not imagine what jumping and gliding from such a height would be like.

Kowloon, the poor brother to Wan Chai's gleaming financially viable side, sat in an almost defeated stance across the harbor, separated for most travelers by the Star Ferry. Wan Chai's skyscrapers seemed to fall all over one another, Dean would note, in a way that Kowloon mirrored the way people were living on the other side. While Wan Chai was absurdly clean, full of glass, silver and steel over concrete, Kowloon was all concrete, wood, paper and flesh.

A trip to the Jade Market in Kowloon confirmed any suspicions of the economic divide.

Dean strolled with his parents, all three far paler and obviously American than anyone they passed on the journey. They passed the electronics stores that lined the initial roads from the Star Ferry, they passed in and out of alleyways with dangling chickens and whole squid as if from an alien planet all alongside streets teeming with life and death. Women stared from stoops. Men played dice and cards over wooden boxes. A man with a large goiter stared at them for the length of one street, his hand full of cards going unplayed as Dean and his family shuffled by. The smells were powerful enough to nearly render them meaningless as they crashed together to make no identifiable palette. The sights were enough to impression a teen to what life really could be like in a city other than he had ever seen.

They did find the Jade Market. The large series of tents appeared almost suddenly within the buildings. In a scene reminiscent of one part flea market, one part medieval magic shop. Instantly one would forget the now culturally far-removed electronics dealers and skyscrapers. Along the gray slab floor, caked with dirt, rested dozens of small tables, semi-broken chairs and boxes upon boxes of jade. All shades of green from emerald to milky white.

A few purchases for well below what even the smallest piece would go for in the states, and the family returned to the Star Ferry, and then the hotel.

An excursion on another boat not unlike the Star Ferry brought them to Lantau the next day. It docked with the sparse harbor outcropping where a few cars lay in a semi-dormant state at the base of a hill. Which led to a mountain. Which led to a monastery at the very top and what was being built: the world's largest Buddha.

Dean and his parents boarded a school bus that had seen its heyday decades before and began to travel up the side of the steep mountain. Occasionally, maybe mercifully, cows

forced the bus to slow to a creaking halt before it quickly tried to ascend the ledge of a road at break-neck speed.

Finally they reached Ngong Ping Plateau at the top of the mountain. The bus poured its twenty or so passengers out in front of a red wall with golden letters reading in English than in Chinese: NO GUNS. NO MEAT. Dean walked to the doors of the humble complex that operated as a monastery. When he turned around before entering, he saw the giant bronze statue of Buddha. It towered 85 feet into the air, but its massive pedestal was still being constructed.

When he turned away from it, he nearly ran into another American tourist, who was exiting as Dean was entering. The small boy deftly dodged Dean only to run into Dean's father with a comical timing. They all laughed, the boy rejoined his parents leaving the monastery with him and continued.

Many years later, the island would bear a theme park, an entirely new airport and more. The Buddha would watch as the island changed.

Dean's Hong Kong visit would be an incredibly formative one but the only obvious result would be the eventual middle name of his daughter many years later.

The less obvious result, was the fate of the small boy Dean almost collided with.

CHAPTER 7

Christopher spent the rest of the night, and much of the following day, in the hospital emergency room. As his cousin oscillated between hysterical and completely inert, Christopher had little time to contemplate the loss of his uncle in the larger scheme of things. It was his cousin who was in the process of losing a father, after all, and Christopher had no business feeling as though his feelings took any sort of priority.

The emergency room waiting area had the distinct smell and feel of an area that was highly sterilized and yet affected by every sort of malady. The people in the room seemed spent or used (and they were the relatively healthy ones). A selection of colors had been chosen to no doubt add a mood of serenity or hope but inadvertently gave the room a feeling of beige and baby blue defeat.

By the time Christopher's uncle was pronounced dead, from complications resulting from the heart attack as well as strenuous preexisting conditions, the entire event was a blur. It was midday and still cloudy outside. Christopher was actually in a coffee shop across the street when his cousin came in to tell him. They hugged, almost left time and space to cry but instead parted ways as his cousin went to rejoin his mother. Christopher had decided to stay for just a few moments. Gather his thoughts and his heart.

"Dammit," he said into his hands, running them across his matted black hair, long and slightly unkempt from sleeping in the chair. He started to sip his coffee, but found himself still holding the cup en route to his mouth ninety seconds later.

Christopher had been in the process of receiving a ride from his uncle and cousin after flying in from Italy. Christopher had completed the last visit home for quite awhile, knowing full well his next trip wouldn't be until at least Christmas. Christopher's uncle had insisted they pick him up and stay for a few days before his summer plans and new job took hold. Christopher was preparing to start teaching literature at a small college

in the states, but not before an eventful summer of travel. The several-month excursion would be a way of getting his last moments of freedom before his first university job. It had been a long several years, going to school in the U.S., finishing graduate degrees and working full-time while going back to Italy when possible to help his family run the inn. Ultimately he would help them retire, working to fix up the place in order to attract a buyer. They were successful and three days before he left for America again, Christopher helped to transition the hotel to new owners. The pride and heartache of watching his parents hand over the keys, in nearly an idyllic manner usually reserved for car commercials and television dramas, was difficult. But not as difficult as getting on the airplane back home. And not as difficult still as arriving only to bear witness of a jarring accident that took the life of his mother's brother.

Christopher touched the sore spot on his forehead with his left hand while his right still held the paper coffee cup in the air. He wasn't hurt, not really, he would tell himself and others. He realized he needed to get back to everyone else. Especially since he represented his branch of the family (a position Christopher never really liked to fill, but knew it was a necessity at meals, holidays and especially days like this one). He discarded his cup and started to walk across the street.

Four stragglers prepared to cross the street with him. They easily looked like the racial and cultural mosaic that America represented and Christopher took note. Clearly the group did not know one another but they likely lived within the same area. Two women, two men. Two African Americans, one white and one Hispanic, by Christopher's assumption and count, began to cross. United by geography at best, complete randomness at least, the four crossed the street and split up their separate ways in the lobby.. His own story and presence was evidence of the latter. An Italian who lived nowhere near that particular hospital, who had no great reason to ever be walking across the street in the grand scheme of things, was out of place.

Christopher studied the idea of that group, how these individuals may never see one another again. How fate can play high stakes and low stakes. How chance can shape

things. He even thought back to the afternoon before, wondering openly about the car crash. The overturned car, so quickly joined by several witnesses who immediately offered help. He would likely never see them again, nor had ever seen them before.

Christopher was wrong.

Christopher rejoined his family, shared the moments he needed to share, and began to plot his course. He had a lot to think about and the start to his summer piled on even more thought.

In just a few months he would begin a relatively successful teaching career. Christopher would begin his survey course of European Literature teaching forty young minds.

He would teach a young man who had visited Hong Kong.

CHAPTER 8

To say Damon was methodical would be an understatement of his lack of self-control. One might be forgiven for thinking a need for strong personal order would beget self-control of the utmost volume but with Damon it played out differently. It often displayed when he could not restrain himself from manipulating environments and situations until he was comfortable.

One such example was his hotel room.

Damon would enter a hotel room and immediately head for the stationary. Specifically, one of the common pads of paper found on the desk or near the phone. He'd be sure the copyright or trademark information at the bottom of a sample piece contained some indication of the hotel, then scribble his room number down in a corner. Tearing the paper off in as small piece as possible without missing the numbers, he'd stash it in his wallet. The reasoning was, later if he was intoxicated or tired and couldn't remember his room number, he could find the paper in his wallet. Or, if his wallet was lost or he was in some way incapacitated, someone with some brains could figure out where his hotel room was and therefore, who he was. He imagined authorities approaching the front desk and asking who was in room 203 to discover the owner of a wallet or identity of a body should his I.D. be stolen from the small leather square. He had covered all the angles.

Other angles in his hotel room would be covered mostly by his stuff. He immediately unpacked everything. He adjusted items on the desk, on the dresser, in the closet. Hanging all that needed to be hung in the closet but rarely using the drawers (as he too often forgot clothes and left them accidentally).

Of course, he'd set his wake-up call with the front desk but not until calculating his back-up alarm with the clock radio in the room.

In the bathroom, his issues really took hold. His leather pouch full of toiletries were neatly unpacked and spread around the vanity. Complimentary soaps were opened. Shampoo and conditioner were placed behind curtains. Towels were arranged. If company were expected, he would avoid using the toilet paper and instead use tissue so as to suggest he had not defiled the bathroom yet. His attention to paranoid detail also meant standing in the empty tub and deciding where to hang his bath towel in the morning (obviously so he wouldn't need to worry about groping for it post-shower).

All of these things had to be done, of course. It was simply how he lived. It was how he visited a hotel. And it didn't matter if he stayed one night or six...the routine was the same.

Damon paced his hotel room the day of the big meeting. He had been flown in specifically to give a presentation on his software and while, yes, he was the leader of the technical team behind the programs, and yes, he knew his subject backwards and forwards, he was not the "expert witness" Mitsuo had assumed. With Mitsuo gone on his family emergency, Damon had a difficult situation on his hands.

He had not dealt with it properly.

When the flat image of the wall's screen blinked on, Damon's nerves caught on fire. In the room of businessmen and businesswomen was this awkward drunk in a polo shirt and khaki's, he thought. He stammered. He tripped over his words. He caught himself before accidentally uttering an expletive but managed to skip over an entire portion of his presentation. One of the 3-D demonstrations did not show properly. On several occasions Damon felt at least half of them were disgusted with him.

Damon was being too hard on himself. While Damon had eyes like slits and a smile that exposed teeth like a shark, he was a relatively homely man but at least one with a lot of

visual character. His presentation did not go as bad as he thought it did. It was not ideal, and likely not good by most standards, but he did convey what he needed to.

What Damon and Mitsuo needed to do was convince a hovering car manufacturer that their improvements to the navigation system were enough to keep their business. While Damon placed an emphasis on the actual system and the tweaks in the last product cycle, Mitsuo had guessed, correctly, that this was mainly an issue of price. In fact, the deal had likely already been sealed by the time Mitsuo placed a single call on his way to the airport that guaranteed a discount. He hoped it would mean those in the meeting would be less critical of Damon, regardless of his performance. Mitsuo was right of course, they had no questions for Damon. That did not make Damon feel any better.

Damon paced his room, still paranoid about the meeting and uncomfortable in the foreign (if correctly adjusted) hotel space. He faced the window and chewed his nails, sat for a few moments before re-sitting elsewhere, tapped his ill-fitting dress shoes furiously, and eventually sat at the room's desk with his head in his hands and placed a call to his head of design.

"Hey."

"Hey, how did it go?"

"Awful. I had to do it by myself."

"What? How is that-"

"Mitsuo bailed. He had to leave. Family emergency-"

"What family, he doesn't have any-"

“Don’t interrupt me,” Damon shouted at the screen, clearly upset. He was red-faced and sweating. He tapped the screen and killed the outgoing video stream. He didn’t want to be seen.

“O-okay. Sorry.”

“This is bad. We could all lose our jobs if we screw this up-“

“But what more can we do, it’s in their hands now-“

“I SAID DON’T INTERRUPT ME!”

“So-Sorry...”

Damon picked the lamp up from the desk and tossed it against the nearest wall. It bothered him on many levels that he did that and he grew more upset that now his room was in discord after it had already been cleaned by housekeeping. He was even more mad now. And yet it seemed to help. The release. The brash action. Damon was stroked by the slight power trip.

“What was that crash? Are you okay?”

“I told you to stop interrupting my train of thought. This is unacceptable. Where else have you been cutting corners?”

“What – I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the voice and face on the other end of the phone nervously replied, shaky and uncertain.

“Phillip, you’re fired.”

CHAPTER 9

Catherine wrapped her hands around the cup of hot chocolate and stared out the second-floor window on the corner of Cary and Foushee Streets in Richmond. From her position at a table, near a tall window over-looking the street she could see the cloudy skies and imagine the wind that carried leaves that high.

Against the gray horizon she noticed the planes passing in the distance and wondered which one was Mitsuo's, finally taking off on his return to Chicago.

She sipped her cup and briefly scanned the coffee shop. Against brick walls hung paintings, including one of her own from years ago. Years, she thought to herself, indicting the absence of painting in her life as she took care of her mother. Well worth it, of course, she further determined, but still a life on hold nonetheless. She liked this coffee shop, one of a few that dotted Cary far past the bohemian area her grandfather always crowed about. How times had changed, she nearly spoke aloud.

Strange music tinkled out of dropped-ceiling speakers at Catherine. She abruptly decided to use the tiny clear ear buds Mitsuo had bought for her. She had only asked for her mother's music mix he had concocted from old computer files, so she was a slave to memory once again. An old digital file, a cover by family friends of "Falling Slowly" (she didn't know the song) played so only she could hear it.

Catherine grew nervous as her first real morning alone approached. Mitsuo was gracious enough to stay an extra day but he was gone as of this morning now, on his plane back to his reality and his life. Catherine could no longer use his brief crutch and delayed returning to her now empty home for as long as she could.

She stared out the window as though the city would stare back and potentially blink first. The tower of the Jefferson Hotel, now some 182 years old, stuck out amongst the

buildings of a college campus. The vanilla structure, a relic of a city long since paved over, stood proud but awkward. It reminded her of her mother, barely standing to say the pledge of allegiance at a baseball game. Proud but almost involuntarily participating in a ritual no one would carry out if she was gone.

Her cup of hot chocolate was already drained when she went for another sip only to be disappointed. The strange din of songs by a band Modwheelmood drifted into her ears. Catherine felt light-headed. The air seemed to shift outside.

Catherine was reasonably certain she was daydreaming. She'd usually entered a mood like this when painting, where the hours slipped by and all physicality lost its meaning. Usually she was just powered by action and determination, if not vision. But here, sitting in a wrought-iron chair in a second-floor coffee shop, framed by picture rails and fragrances of kona coffee, she was fixated and entranced enough with her frightening future that when things began to happen outside she didn't believe them. At least not at first.

It wasn't until a sleek hover car slammed into The Jefferson Hotel's nearly two-hundred-year-old construction that she twitched and realized it was actually happening.

It didn't start like that at first though. Despite her unusual mood, what was going out just outside her window was very gradual but very real.

All hover cars came to a slow and orderly stop. And like a stage curtain, it was as if tiny wires were lifting up on the blanket of hover cars that crisscrossed the city. A few of them when stopped at an intersection began to lightly float upward, awkward and adrift. Like unmoored boats, one out of five simply seemed aimless. But this drift became a more severe problem.

Running largely on solar and electrical energy, typically the automobiles hovered only a few feet off the ground. It had afforded some interstates two-story traffic flow but for the most part they took to the streets not unlike their combustion ancestors. They had fail-safes so, like most vehicles, they couldn't simply continue locomotion without input from their drivers. Even more important was the limitation of expending energy to float at all. Outright flying in them was impossible without draining tanks, and so internal restrictions were set there as well to prevent stray and dangerous joyriding.

This was different. All over the city, what began as a light, dream-like lifting of a few hovering cars turned quickly into dozens of thin machines now balloon-like past three-story windows, expending fuel and panicking riders. Nudges into buildings followed by rubs of the thin rubber bumper around them against brick and steel began to occur more frequently. Soon the entire city appeared like a fractal of vehicles all turning in place and wandering slowly in various directions with no discernable pattern or preference.

Then, thirty seconds of complete chaos.

Many of the cars, Catherine couldn't determine exactly what ratio, began to increase their speed suddenly, sending them violently thrusting in any direction. End-over-end and careening, they started a metropolitan twitch that turned nudges and bumps into crashes and impacts.

One car cartwheeled from a stopped position into a bookstore, top-first. Another sent itself into a busy fourth-floor gymnasium. Most only reached beyond the third story of a building thanks to momentum, but it was enough to cause complete and utter shock to all of those in any vehicle, on the streets and scattering away from windows in any building near the road.

Catherine found herself, even six feet from the window, the closest person in the coffee shop as everyone stood behind her. She sat, unmoving. It was all so hard to believe. She could hear muffled screaming under the music in her ears. She saw people diving from their hover cars and scrambling to get into buildings.

And then she saw the most devastating of actions as a hover car that had apparently built up speed as one of the few traveling in a straight line cut through the air like an arrow. Her eyes followed it and her head jolted when it stopped, having slammed into the tower of The Jefferson. It halted, lodged inside the tower.

It all ended nearly as quickly as it began. The cars, if they had energy left, floated downward and rested on the ground. Others fell straight from their position in the sky. And in less than five minutes the city was covered in husks of unmoving, spent cars. One jutting from one of the oldest buildings in the city as a grim reminder.

Catherine was in shock. She whispered to herself Mitsuo's name. A few of the coffee shop patrons around her panicked and called loved ones. The owners raced to turn on the news. Catherine touched her earbuds to sync with the phone in her wallet pocket and asked it to call Mitsuo.

“Mitsuo... oh god Mitsuo do you know what's going on?”

Mitsuo did not, but as he spoke to Catherine while he was on the plane he could see the flicker of screens in several passenger seats all switch to a news channel featuring what looked like a hover car junkyard.

“Mitsuo what's happening? Is it happening everywhere?”

Mitsuo swallowed hard. It was not, it seemed, happening everywhere as he switched on the news in his own seat. Something horrible had happened in Richmond. Involving, quickly apparent to Mitsuo, a malfunction or disruption of the cars' systems.

Catherine breathed hard, now crying. Mitsuo's silence was not helping.

"Cat, I'm sorry but I have to call you back. Stay inside, I'll call you back in a moment."

Mitsuo's plane was abuzz with the incident. He slunk into his seat and face the window as he made a very quick, but not private enough call.

A personal phone in Richmond went unanswered as it was with the man who had just jumped from the top of The James Center.

CHAPTER 10

“You’ve got to do it for me. Seriously, you just gotta...”

No answer.

“Come on...”

A little more reluctance passed and then an, “Okay.”

“YES!” Catherine punched the air, more than a little drunkenly, and fell back on her dorm bed.

As Catherine understood it, the deal had just been made that on a Thursday in 2053 a college acquaintance would do for her something she had never been able to pull off. For all her creativity and relative intelligence, she just wasn’t any deeper into computer programming than any other art major was. She knew her programs and everything lifestyle oriented she could possibly want but didn’t have the first clue how to manipulate a system much less hack it. For that matter, she was smart enough not to try. But an amorous boy could help.

Batted eyelashes aside, it wouldn’t take much convincing for one boy who had his eye on Catherine since a group of them got together to play a quiz game at a nearby pub. He saw Catherine as the wily, extroverted artist she was, slipping in and out of a crowd like an eel through a reef. The young man, barely 18 but holding his own in the collegiate classrooms, was the epitome of introverted and completely out of his element in the wood and tile establishment, awkwardly sitting, re-sitting and adjusting on a stool

near the wall. He could only hope to watch her dance with others and only hope harder she might speak to him eventually.

He took the first opportunity he felt comfortable with: the end of the night's duties to walk her and a friend back home. He joined one other male volunteer with the two young women and spent most of his time trying to convince the other young man not to pee in the street.

They all converged on Catherine's dorm room, already occupied by other friends and her roommate, playing music games and aping rock star poses towards the bright screen capturing everyone's attention. They barely noticed the crew coming home, and Catherine took up roost on her bed, cheering on the performance of some long-defunct "classic" rock song like, "Shut Up and Let Me Go" by the Ting Tings. Eventually, Catherine pulled her crossed legs up onto the bed and finally turned her attention to the would-be-suitor who had been waiting all night for such a moment.

"So. What's your story?"

The young man told a brief tale of his computer science major, a long love of braking and repairing electrical components both virtual and real, a poorly maintained parental relationship, a hidden desire for the music of the 1970's ("Like what the Puritans listened to?" Catherine joked), and a forethought dream of settling down with three kids on a farm someday. The last bit he wished he hadn't said the moment it fell out of his slightly inebriated mouth, but he was relieved to see she hadn't heard that part due to being distracted by the game again. Catherine did turn her attention back to him though.

"So, you're a computer guy."

"Yes."

“Well then maybe you can help me.”

More than anything at that point in her life, Catherine wanted to make her brother Mitsuo happy. Sure she had her own goals and wishes, but after a contentious Thanksgiving holiday she had decided to completely focus on a single Christmas gift for him. She wanted to find out who Mitsuo’s real parents were. After some cajoling, he would agree.

“So you could find out?” Catherine was excited that this random boy held so much promise. He was as excited as he gets that this girl paid any attention to him whatsoever. Just her leaning in towards him made his palms sweat.

“I think I could. Or I know people who could.”

This was not entirely a lie, but the stature of the comment was a bit beyond his true power. The truth was, he did know an excellent hacker. He had no idea how good, but he had to assume and project that it would be good enough. His own skills, whatever they consisted of, were more for components. But his buddy was the hacker he would need, and the one he needed to call as soon as this evening would end.

Catherine was giddy. Mitsuo had confided in her that he did want to know, although there were no plans to make contact. Aside from genetic information to signal hereditary medical issues, Mitsuo’s real heritage stay locked away in Byzantine computer systems.

“Ooooh my head’s gonna kill me in the morning...” Catherine lamented after the lengthy conversation. She leaned back on the bed again.

The young man was gentlemanly enough to not stare at her even though her eyes were shut. However he did look over when he heard her snoring and knew the evening had drawn to a close.

He stayed for a few more minutes, amazed that Catherine could sleep amongst the din of the party, but not knowing anyone else he took his leave. He got halfway down the hall before he woke his hacker friend up from a deep sleep.

“Phillip. I need some help...”

A week later, Catherine sat on her bed once more with the interested young man at her feet. This time, he brought a few pieces of printed paper, as though he were scared to show her on a computer for fear of being caught.

He explained how he did use a friend’s help. Phillip was the accomplice who actually took on the project as a bit of sport and had easily uncovered the names. It was the act of then digging up more information that Catherine’s would-be-suitor partook in.

“I- we- found only a few things that might help explain who Mitsuo’s family was. One was an article on the accident that killed his parents, so that’s sad...”

“Awww,” Catherine immediately teared up. She truly hadn’t anticipated hearing that Mitsuo’s parents had died. She was aware it was a possibility, but secretly she had hoped she could convince Mitsuo to seek them out and meet them. Now that option was clearly gone.

“Here’s their names and a photo,” the young man pointed out a few photos, a pair of names and an address. A packet of several pages remain on the floor nearby.

“What’s the other thing, the long piece. Who wrote that?”

“That’s actually about Mitsuo’s grandfather. It’s the eulogy given at this funeral. Someone blogged it way back when.”

“Aw, that’s sweet... it’s really long,” Catherine picked it up and leafed through it.

“Oh yeah, just skim it for a sec- it really details everything. The connection with Hong Kong, when the family came over to America...”

“Who gave the Eulogy?”

“A professor, probably an old friend. Dr. Christopher Stefania.”

CHAPTER 11

Dr. Christopher Stefania leaned back in a wooden rocking chair on his porch. It was only a day into winter break but the second evening was already full of awaiting precipitation. He sipped an Irish Coffee and closed his eyes. Christopher could hear the flakes pass through the trees. He could feel the air came down off the surrounding mountains.

It was his second winter as faculty at this small but special college nestled in the western mountains of Virginia. So far so good, he felt. The rented home, further tucked among wicked curves lapping a nearby mountain, contained every inch of atmosphere he needed to pretend he was back in Italy, among the similar environs of San Candido, Italy. Christopher had taken on two additional, symbolic roles at the college: one of the exotic young man from Europe that resulted in constant questions and tittering among female students suddenly more interested in literature than if they had taken it from the retiring older professor down the hall; and two, as the token foreign professor who the small population of foreign students could identify with. The latter role he embraced, knowing full well the stranger-in-a-strange-land syndrome had to be amplified in such a remote location. He often played host for student breaks they simply couldn't afford to fly home for or the occasional special holiday meal they didn't want to eat at the local Dairy Queen.

And on this occasion he was hosting Oda. Oda was a well-traveled Japanese student who wouldn't be able to return home for few days after the academic calendar's prescribed break. But thankfully, Christopher often thought, Oda was also a great conversationalist and student. They had become friends despite the automatic ambassador hat Christopher wore. So sitting on the porch, swaying in the rocker while bundled in as many layers as they could, they would be forgiven for being mistaken for awaiting Salvation Army donations.

Oda also enjoyed the quiet. It especially contrasted his dorm, which always oscillated between incredibly full and noisy to noisy because of its relative emptiness. If he was being completely honest with some as close as Christopher was to him, he might offer that the Irish exchange student was simply too loud even if no one else was in the building. But this kind of stoic silence, with someone he deeply respected, was exactly what he needed to get his mind off of the tumultuous life of the alien student and relax.

Eventually, Oda spoke.

“This is perfect Dr. Stephania.”

“It is. And please, call me Christopher. Especially when we’re psychologically light years from campus.”

They laughed a bit before it was too cold to take in such cold air. Christopher went to sip at his drink to find it spent.

“Time to refuel. Want more?”

“Yes please,” Oda accepted graciously and they both scrambled inside, where a fire was prepared. Christopher shared the house with a college staff member, a young woman who worked on the college website. She had long succumbed to the wills of the fire’s warmth and fallen asleep with her laptop on a couch’s corner.

Inside the strum of a guitar could be heard from a compact disc of Christopher’s favorite musician to listen to in cold weather, the Idaho-born Josh Ritter. It was surprising to Oda that they hadn’t heard it while they were outside, or maybe they had simply tuned it out.

They stepped over a sleeping dog or two, passed through a central parlor containing a piano and several old posters from Italy (mostly football stars and an old travel advert

for the Alps) and made their way to the kitchen to refresh the now empty mugs. Oda inquired as to whether Christopher played football, or soccer as the other students called it. "Not as well as I would like," he replied, refilling the cups.

Returning to the porch, they took their bundled posts and restored the scene. Be it the movement or the liquor, conversation had stirred in them and soon late evening philosophic discussion took hold, as it is wont to do.

They discussed life abroad. Oda noting how influential an early trip to Hong Kong was in his early concepts of culture. Christopher noted how meeting tourists at his family's hotel helped broaden his worldview as a boy.

They discussed politics, but only briefly as it was clear Oda's capitalistic nature didn't mesh well for smooth discussion with Christopher's more socially-minded worldview.

And they discussed fate. This conversation lasted even as they reconvened inside to get out of the deep chill and drink some water. It was a good discussion, even by academic standards, Christopher would later recall. As Oda struggled with fate as a given, Christopher challenged that fatalism steals the beauty from moments like these on the porch of a hundred-year-old farmhouse. Christopher did not like the notion that appreciation was preordained, nor did he feel that such a theory was supported by the attitudes of many people he had met over the years. And what to do with coincidence, Oda inquired? Christopher began to reveal the cracks in his academic armor. Perhaps he was satisfied with the answer of existence as something beautiful and complex enough that

Maybe coincidence was meaningless on its face, Christopher wondered. But making the most of such things is an art all its own. Christopher was a great believer in the educated guess, and preparing one's mind for luck's favor. And to that point

“The world is so large, statistically some things should never match up,” Oda pondered, probably a mug of Irish Coffee too far to articulate past the statement.

“But they do. They do whether we know it or not. So we try and make the most of every connection, no? Because we don’t know which ones might be our hidden saviors.”

“Like a kid from Nagoya sitting on a farmhouse’s porch in Appalachia with a man from Italy?”

A smile crept across Christopher’s face like a widening fault line.

“Yes. Exactly that.”

Oda thought he understood. He would get plenty of chances to ask Christopher to elaborate over the course of his life.

Oda fell asleep in one of the largest, most engulfing chairs in the living room, near the fire. Christopher simply left him there, happy that his friend and student had found some measure of peace, albeit aided by Irish Coffee. Christopher climbed up the stairs to his room and took a moment to notice the snow still taking its time tumbling down from the heavens.

Christopher would remember this night well. Well enough that when he would outlive his young friend Oda he would speak of this very evening at Oda’s funeral. And he would keep in touch with Oda’s wife and children for as long as Christopher himself would live. It would be safe to assume that Christopher would have been sad to know Oda’s own child would orphan a son too.

CHAPTER 12

Mitsuo was confused, fearful and furious in a swirl of emotion that threatened to send his blood pressure to heights never felt. Even a few minutes removed from the initial shock he was still reacting in a raw way reserved only for someone who felt incredibly responsible for something.

He paced the small lounge at the rear of the airplane, carrying only the thin, baseball-card-sized screen from his wallet that replayed news stories of the Richmond incident. Eventually the two people trying to enjoy the lounge left, uncomfortable with the manic circling and loud calls. Once they left the tiny 5' by 5' area Mitsuo sat down and tried to place another call. Nothing.

He placed a call to the second person he was trying to reach. For the first time in thirty-seven tries, someone answered.

Mitsuo blurted out his first questions before he ever heard a voice, "Damon, where are you? Have you seen what's happening?"

There was a pause.

"Damon, are you there?"

A groggy but definitely "there" Damon finally responded, "Yes. And yes. And to your first question, I'm in Virginia."

"What are you doing in Virginia? I just left there," Mitsuo demanded. Finally a release for the anger and embarrassment had arrived and he was using the opportunity to expel the emotion.

"I came down here to see Phillip. His office is down here-"

“I know his office is down there, he’s the first one I tried to call. He’s the only one working on the project in Richmond. Why did you go to Richmond after I left? Does our department have anything to do with-“

“I don’t know. I don’t know. But...”

“But what?”

“Maybe. I’d say it’s likely.”

“What?” Mitsuo was livid. What had been released as anger came back to wash over him as fear and guilt.

“I was angry. Angry at you and the position you put me in...”

“Me? With the meeting? Damon did you have anything to do with what’s going on in Richmond, the systems, the cars, it looks like-“

Damon cut him off, embarrassed and angry in his own way and practically spitting, “I fired Phillip. I fired him after the meeting.”

“Damon we got the deal, you did fine why did you-“

Damon shouted back, “I know! Stop it! Stop it! I know it was wrong, okay? I know!”

Mitsuo realized that calm was needed and that the situation was suddenly, somehow, even more fragile than he had anticipated.

Mitsuo muted the call, took a deep breath, and rejoined, “Damon. Damon I need you to tell me. Does anyone on our project have anything to do with what’s going on? In your calm, expert opinion.”

“Yes. I think so.”

There was a great pause.

“Why do you think so?”

“Because our engineers know where those software trip switches are and we have access to them. And because I didn’t tell HR I fired Phillip. I thought I could make it up to him. In person.”

“And so he still had access to everything.”

Damon began to cry. He could only mutter, “Yes.”

“Okay. Okay I know you’re feeling guilty. We need to get you to help. I’ll someone come pick you up. Where are you, I’ll have someone come get you-“

“That won’t work,” Damon replied, which caused immediate alarm in Mitsuo’s already worried mind. He was scared of what Damon might do to himself in this guilt.

“Damon, don’t talk like that. We’ve been through a lot together, you can’t blame yourself for what happened, let me-“

“No, you can’t send someone to get me unless they’re in a helicopter.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m in a company hover car. And I’m currently several stories up, stuck in the tower of that fru-fru hotel you always stay at.”

CHAPTER 13

He shut the door to the crimson Ford Escort with what would be the last stiff pull in the parking lot of Ahner-Jackson College.

Unfortunately for all of Dean's careful planning, he hadn't planned on being asked to make another stop on his way out. One of Dean's closest friends had convinced him to make one last stop before his long journey. It interrupted his train of thought, or even the train of his life, as Dean was busy deciding to run out on all of the plans he'd made up until this point. This meant delaying the playing of any especially momentous song that Dean had saved for his grand moment of rebellion, so he drove with his well-worn cassette of Radiohead's *The Bends* murmuring in the background. His nervousness surrounding being pulled off-schedule allowed him to focus on irritating details like the sound of the tape being pulled inside the player. He turned "Just" up loud enough that he couldn't hear himself worry.

This entire detour hadn't been in the plans, as at that point Dean was to run out on his soon-to-be-family and friends old and new for a bohemian lifestyle. He would eventually turn around from that decision while on Interstate 95, but at the very moment he sat with a person that knew him frighteningly well and that person didn't know Dean was ready to walk out on the relationship, every relationship.

Over a pint of ale he and one of his closest friends stared at the Richmond skyline from the patio of their favorite brewery. There was a few smiles and a few sighs at the passing of college careers and what the future held for them both, Dean uneasy that his friend didn't know his whole story as plotted. It was especially difficult because this was no mere college friend. There was no such thing for an only child cut from Dean's cloth. No, some friends took on a legendary status in Dean's world and became his brothers and sisters. He knew that they couldn't always see him with the same intensity of role, after all, most of them had actual siblings that fulfilled those slots, but he hoped

that his devotion and loyalty to them was an asset. Which made his plans to break away that much more difficult and probably, unlikely. He wrestled with it in a way he had never meant to, in front of his friend who happily sipped a brown beer next to him.

Dean wondered to himself, “Should I tell him now? Save myself the phone call later?”

Just as he had mustered up enough courage to do so, his friend spoke.

“Dean. I got an idea. Something I want to share with ya.”

Dean swallowed hard, considering all possibilities including the one where his friend had guessed Dean’s plan to run away, “Yeah?”

“I’m thinking of going to Chicago. And I want you to come with me. Bring Corri.”

Dean was aghast inside. His friend couldn’t possibly mean this... a third option? It was enough that Dean was torturing himself with two, but this would change everything. This would mean preserving some of the risk and some of the safety. This, Dean thought to himself, could be better decision. His mind raced, all facets of the decision and their impact on his life from his perspective in the context of his life at that point...

As Dean considered between the now three possible outcomes, it was if a phantom version of Phillip repeatedly jumped and fell along the darkening height of a building in the Richmond skyline, right before his eyes. And then didn’t jump. And then did. And didn’t.

Dean struggled with his choice as time itself struggled with the consequences.

Christopher and Catherine and Mitsuo and Addison and Oda and Damon and Phillip waited for his decision.

And as anyone does with any choice in any given moment, Dean made one.

FINIS.

Doors That Lock Behind You:**An alternate history of and by Dean Browell**

The opposite of an autobiography.

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