

STOP



MIKEL J. WISLER

Stop / Wisler

68,500 aprox. words

STOP

A Novel

by

Mikel J. Wisler

Based on the screenplay by Mikel J. Wisler & Jedidiah Burdick.

Mikel J. Wisler

www.mikelwisler.com

mikelwisler@gmail.com

For Jim Stump.

PROLOGUE

"Time is a relentless bitch," the animated and eccentric Dr. Amos Jeffries had once said during a lecture at a theoretical physics conference. "It's nature has yet to be fully understood or appreciated. In so many ways, we hardly grasp what time truly is. But it's effect on us, like gravity, is undeniable. And like gravity, we are beginning to peel back the very substance that makes time-space function. If we can ever peel back the veil on the true nature of time, the implications will be broad-reaching and earth-shattering. In essence, we will be forced to rethink our assumptions about what comprises reality."

The inescapable nature of time has made it such that it seldom is the subject of most people's inquiries into how the universe works. How does one even begin to investigate something so seemingly beyond human cognition? Time has remained an invisible yet powerful river that drags us forward in its inevitable current. And yet, it's been a more than a century since Albert Einstein first published his papers on special and general relativity. With the introduction of relativity, the troubled understanding of physics purely from a Newtonian model finally eroded. What became clear to physicists, and eventually the rest of the world, upon understanding the implications of relativity is that time is not the constant and rigid dictator of reality that it was thought to be. Time could be stretched and manipulated. Time and gravity are intimately connected, both invisible and yet ultimately more than mere forces or vectors through physical reality that orchestrate every moment of our lives. They are dimensions, substances in their own right. With

Stop / Wisler

relativity came the realization that true simultaneity of any two events might be an illusion.

As theoretical physicist, string theorist, and author, Brian Green observed in his book, *The Elegant Universe*, "According to special relativity, no longer can space and time be thought of as universal concepts set in stone, experienced identically by everyone. Rather, space and time emerged from Einstein's reworking as malleable constructs whose form and appearance depend on one's state of motion." In other words, how we move through the universe has an important and undeniable effect on how we experience time. Of course, daily life seems little affected by relativity given the need for incredible changes in gravitational forces or acceleration in order for any individual to experience the plasticity of time. After all, time might stand still when something moves at the speed of light, but who on Earth at the beginning of the twenty-first century has any hope of actually experiencing such a thing?

Quantum mechanics further stretched our understanding of time and physical reality. Then came string theory in our continued attempts to reach a unifying theory that can expose to us the true nature of existence. Our notions of a multi-dimensional universe have been rapidly expanding in new directions. But time marches on, and caught in its current, our lives continue. We age and die. And yet, our relationship with time remains an ever-present mystery.

Quietly chipping away at the conventional understanding of time and space, a trio of scientists set about an ambitious project in the late twentieth century. The process would take more than two decades to begin showing promising results. Not all of them would live to see the tangible fruit of their theories and research. Helming the project was the animated

Stop / Wisler

and at times lovable and at other times obnoxious Dr. Amos Jeffries, whose persistent ambition carried the project through remarkable challenges. What few saw coming were the dangerous—even destructive—implications of what Jeffries and his colleagues had uncovered.

In the wake of the incidents one summer in Maine that coincided with the publication of the research Dr. Jeffries and Dr. Noah Glenn had conducted over the course of twenty-two years, the scientific community and the world were forced to deal with a new understanding of time and the very real ethical implications involved in its manipulation. There was no legal precedent to equip law enforcement to deal with this new reality and most people could scarcely accept the facts of what unfolded in mere days in Maine that summer as more than a wild story that belonged only in a tabloid. And yet, the eyes of every scientist turned to Maine and to the people who stood at the very center of the unfathomable events that exposed to the world so much more than a mere abstract new theory of time.

Stop / Wisler

LEVEL ONE

"If we could see in four dimensions, we could look through time just as easily as we look to our left or right. If we looked at a person, we could see every event in that person's life. If we wondered what really happened during some historical event, we'd simply look to find the answer."

- Jeffrey Bennett

"The meta-lesson of both relativity and quantum mechanics is that when we deeply probe the fundamental workings of the universe we may come upon aspects that are vastly different from our expectations. The boldness of asking deep questions may require unforeseen flexibility if we are to accept the answers."

- Brian Greene

CHAPTER ONE

The woods were dead silent again—not a good sign. Not even the thick air dared to stir a slight breeze among the gnarled branches that reached out like arthritic limbs frozen in desperation. The boy walked slowly between the tall trees, a stick in hand that he held out and let tap against the trunks as he moved. No birds called to each other. In fact, there was no other sound other than the crunch of the dry leaves beneath his feet.

A loud thump brought the boy to a stop, the thin branch in his hand still stretched out between trees. He tried to control his breathing. His racing heart threatened to break through his sternum. Why had he come out here? How had he got here?

Slowly, the boy turned around, looking back through the tree in the direction that the sound seemed to have come from. He saw nothing. But his skin crawled with the sense of some ill presence. The thing was out there. He knew it. Why had he come here?

“Dad?” the boy tentatively called out.

Only silence greeted him. No breeze stirred to offer some release from the heat. He longed for a bird's song to lighten his heart but none came. He looked around, slowly moving closer to a thick tree that reached up into the high canopy of leaves above him. As he stood by the tree, he took a step backward. His back struck something. But this was no tree trunk. It wasn't rough and hard like a tree.

He whirled around, stick raised. It stood before him, as it had before. The reaper towered over him in its black flowing hooded robe. An inky sleeve

Stop / Wisler

lifted and a black hand with slender pointed fingers reached out towards him. The boy scrambled backwards, losing his footing on roots and leaves and tumbling to his back.

The reaper towered over him, hand still stretched out, black fingers seeming to grow longer and sharper, ever reaching for the boy.

"DAD!" the boy screamed.

#

Jake Howell awoke again. He always awoke right around this point. He no longer even jumped or stirred. He simply opened his eyes, which were greeted by the dim red glow of the alarm clock on the night stand. Next to him, Anne slept peacefully, undisturbed by his recurring nightmare. It had been quite a while since he'd had this one. How long exactly? At least a few weeks. Maybe a couple of months. It had been a welcome break. But now, as so often was the case, he'd have it again for a few more nights.

Once awake, the dream was not really all that disturbing—not an uncommon thing for most dreams. But dreams are more than a movie in one's mind. They are an uncontrollable and resolutely unreasonable riptide of emotions. Jake knew his response to the emotional reality of the dream seemed absurd in the light of day, but that didn't make the sheer terror it inspired in him as it happened any less powerful, or real. Once awake, it was like standing on the shore and overlooking the waves coming in on the beach. The feeling of that strong current pulling at his feet still seemed to tug on his body. *You got away this time. But will you again?* Jake sighed, staring up at the ceiling in the dim light. There would be no going back to sleep now. *You're a thirty-eight-year-old man with a Ph.D.,* he often couldn't help

Stop / Wisler

thinking, *not a child*. But it never made the haunting reality of the dreams any less powerful. Rising quietly from the bed, Jake crept out of the dark room, down the hall, and into the kitchen. He stood in the kitchen staring at the old cabinets, so familiar and yet so foreign. This had been his home, once. But that life seemed so distant now.

Jake scratched the short beard on his face. He had allowed it to grow long over the last several years, but cut it rather short recently now that he no longer felt compelled to maintain the appearance he'd grown accustomed to as a professor in a small liberal arts college. It had been a long summer at it was only June. He glanced at the cardboard box that sat on the kitchen counter. Only a few weeks ago, he'd used the very same box in his small office on campus. He had placed several books into it and carried it, along with several other boxes, out to his car. Jake had never imagined tendering his resignation after only brief time as a professor at East Covenant College. It had only lasted four years. Of course, before being offered the job at ECC, he had not really imagined taking a position as a philosophy professor for a conservative evangelical college. At this point, unpredictability was beginning to feel like his only constant.

Opening one of the cabinets to the right of the sink he found that his mother still kept the glasses in the same place. *Had kept*, he corrected his line of thinking. Pulling out a tall tumbler, he filled it with water and took a drink, staring out the small window above the sink. It wouldn't be long before sunrise now. There was so much work to do.

He looked back to the box on the counter. He remembered staring at the same box as it sat on his desk in his former office, noticing where packing tape had ripped off part of the brown outer skin of the cardboard at some point in the past. The college vice president, a short round man named Fred

Stop / Wisler

Somerset, had knocked lightly on his door and let himself in. The small office was only made more cramped by the boxes and stacks of books and file folders set about. Early morning sunshine had streamed through the old window, warming Jake's back where he stood.

"Packing up already, I see," Somerset said.

Jake remembered that word, "already." What was left to stick around for? The semester was over, and the administration had made its position clear. He had little choice. He both wanted and needed to make a clean break. Why did this feel like bad breakup? He wondered if this is how it might feel to have your spouse tell you in no uncertain terms that the relationship was over and you were no longer wanted or loved. Could anyone really linger? Maybe. But not Jake. Of course, Jake had to also remind himself that his relationship with the college had always been tenuous at best. And yet, he found that when everything went south, it still stung profusely.

"Yeah, I figured I should get a jump on it," Jake said, continuing to pull books off his bookshelf.

"I know it might be hard to believe, but I am sincerely sorry that things went this way," Somerset offered.

Jake stopped and looked into the man's eyes. He seemed genuine. Jake nodded slowly, unsure of what he should say to this. Somerset played his cards close to his chest, but he had always struck Jake as a man who cared deeply for the faculty he oversaw. Even now, Jake had no idea what the man really thought of the pseudo-controversy that had resulted in Jake handing in his resignation. He probably would never know.

"So am I," Jake managed.

"I heard you might get a job with them."

Stop / Wisler

The "them" Somerset was referring to was *Science and Mind*, a publication which Jake had been writing for off and on over the past two years. A few years ago, *Science and Mind* had made the deliberate choice to include distinctly philosophical discussions about the nature and future of science within each of its issues. Jake's doctorate was in philosophy of science, and one of his former professors recommended him to the journal when they began looking for new voices to include. What *Science and Mind* was doing flew in the face of assertions by many popular scientific voices, such as the late Stephen Hawking or Neil deGrasse Tyson, that philosophy is dead and the pure pursuit of science is what young minds should be investing themselves in. *Science and Mind* drew serious criticism for dedicating precious room in each issue to allowing both scientists and philosophers the opportunity to explore the broader questions about the purpose of science or even the nature of existence. Where the empiricism of the day might indicate science holds all the important questions the human species should be asking, the journal made a point of making room for those who dared to argue otherwise.

Jake began writing more and more for the journal and was soon attending events. He was often asked to be part of panel discussions on the ethics of science, which was the focus of his dissertation, after all. What had finally gotten him in hot water with the college was his position on the theory of evolution. Specifically, Jake Howell advocated for the full embrace and pursuit of current evolutionary science by students, and had even written a few articles that touched on this issue. He saw no contradiction between biological evolution and his own faith—though if pressed he would admit he was far from being the evangelical conservative type that his college wished he was. What seemed like a cultural battle that had faded into obsolescence decades ago suddenly had resurged with a volatility that had surprised many

Stop / Wisler

who fell in any number of places along the spectrum of perspectives on the issue of the universe's origin. Ken Ham, from *Answers in Genesis*, a notoriously die-hard Young Earth Creationist organization, had debated Bill Nye publicly on the topic of evolution. Both, of course, only represented diametrically opposed extremes. Jake had written an article about that too, pointing out that as post-modern thought increasingly threatened religious fundamentalism, there was a tendency on both sides for increased battle cries and new tactics to defend oneself against "the enemy."

Why must it be an either-or argument, he had written. But it seemed clear to him that fundamentalism had gripped either side of the isle, blinding people to the possibility of dialogue among people who might still walk away believing very different things about the nature of reality and how the universe came about in the first place. But the Enlightenment had brought about the sense that humanity could know reality with exhaustive certainty. The religious world had reacted with its own desperate need to claim exhaustive certainty. The rest was essentially a century's old shouting match.

This was the argument he had put forth in that last article, and that's exactly what had happened to the East Covenant College. Conservative supporters of the college who felt that views such as Jake's were incompatible with the doctrinal positions of the school and its affiliated denomination pushed hard for the school to take a stand. After all, if the school didn't take a stand on this issue, this would certainly establish a slippery slope which would drag down the moral core of the school, or so the argument went. All parties involved were careful never to single anyone out, but it wasn't too hard to figure out why all of this was happening. In the end, the board of trustees voted to implement a new official policy that did

Stop / Wisler

not allow faculty members to participate in public forums and/or write for publications where they might advocated for the advancement of evolutionary science, especially at the expense of abandoning what they perceived as essential Creationist doctrines. The position stopped short of requiring faculty from signing any sort of statement of belief in Young Earth Creationism, but functioned essentially as a gag order on anyone with a differing view. Dissenting voices were a threat to the institution's sense of certainty and unity.

The fatal blow that had probably done Jake in was his participation on a panel discussion at an academic conference where he was asked about the ethics of educational institutions promoting non-scientific views of the origin of biological life. He tried to express his answer carefully, but in the end, it was clear he felt that any higher learning institutions that denied the wealth of science that continued to validate and refine evolutionary theory did a profound disservice to their students, creating unnecessary cognitive dissonance between full integration and involvement in all fields of science by anyone coming from a background of faith. And so, not wanting to further cause cognitive dissonance for the college, Jake Howell sat quietly in his office in the religion and philosophy department of ECC on the south shore of Boston, Massachusetts, and tapped out his resignation letter on his laptop. He officially resigned a few days after the announcement of the school's new policy was made.

"So?" Somerset asked.

Jake realized he'd just been staring at his box of books. He hadn't answered the man's question.

"I'll continue writing articles for now, but I have not officially taken a position on the journal's staff yet."

Stop / Wisler

"But they offered you one."

"Yeah," Jake nodded.

"There's been some interesting articles out there," Somerset said, leaning against the doorframe. "Christian magazines, local newspaper, blogs."

"To be honest, I've been avoiding them," Jake answered. "I have no interest in the controversy."

Somerset gave a slight nod. "Yeah. I know." He stood straight and Jake felt sure he'd turn and walk out. Instead, Somerset stepped closer and said in a softer voice, "That's why I've always respected you. You're damn good teacher, Jake."

Jake blinked. He'd never heard the vice president utter a single profanity. As far as Christian liberal arts colleges went, ECC was not the strictest or most conservative by a long shot. But still, there was a certain expectation, a certain aseptic quality staff were expected to possess given the college's historical ties to a conservative evangelical denomination.

"Thank you," Jake grinned.

"Now, how about I help you carry some things down?" Somerset offered.

That had been only three weeks ago, and already it felt like a vivid but distant memory. He had felt like he was having an out of body experience at the time, numb and yet affected. He felt like that a lot, lately. He'd regularly find himself wondering how he'd gotten here. How had things turned out this way? There were people who were a regular part of his day-to-day life who suddenly he was no longer on speaking terms with. He'd never thought of himself as someone on the frontlines of a culture war, but that had not stopped these events from transpiring. In his moments of profound uncertainty, he'd wonder if he should have done things differently or if he was wrong. But then his logical mind would kick in and he'd walk back through

Stop / Wisler

the years of study and that led him to nuanced views on science and faith.

No. He wouldn't change anything he'd done.

Still, that didn't change the emotional impact of becoming a casualty or sorts in the resurging religious culture wars. Standing now in the kitchen of his mother's old house in the middle of the night, he felt like a ghost haunting his own body. He finished his glass of water, setting the empty tumbler next to the box with the rip on its side and made himself move quietly through the dark house and go back to bed. He'd try to not let his mind spiral into a swirl of rehashed arguments, but he also knew he'd fail.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr. Amos Jeffries stood before the large table of guests, glass raised in the air. His short white beard and hair gave his round face and smile a jovial, almost Santa Clause-like, appearance. He was skinnier than the traditional renditions of Ol' Saint Nick, but that didn't keep him from dressing up as Santa for local charity events during the holidays. Standing now in his elegant dining room, the lights dim and candles aglow, he certainly had a magical luminance about him, which he gladly leaned into.

"Thank you each for being here tonight!" he exclaimed. "This has been a very long journey. And it is far from over. In fact, the most difficult part is only about to begin. But, changing scientific consensus and making history have never been easy tasks to accomplish."

"What are you?" one of the guests jokingly asked, "Galileo?"

"Well, I hope the Catholic Church doesn't come down on us," laughed Amos. "But everyone from physicists to cosmologist might."

Everyone laughed and raised their glasses. Sitting with his wife to his right and seven-year-old son, Ethan, to his left, Jake smiled and raised his own glass of wine.

"Okay, okay," Dr. Noah Glenn waived his hand at Amos, jokingly indicating he ought to take a seat. His broad smile and bright eyes gave the aging scientist an almost childish look. "Take a seat, Amos. Let's eat already."

"Yes," Amos smiled. "Eat, eat, eat!"

Stop / Wisler

He sat down as everyone dug into the generous helping of food. There were a total of twelve people there. Most of them Jake had never met before. A couple looked familiar. Some were scientists, a couple apparently were influential figures in the world of private research and development for large organizations that had helped fund the decades-long work that Amos and Noah had been performing. Tucked away up in Maine, the two had been hard at work exploring something Jake had pushed from his mind for years. But now, here he was, suddenly brought back into it, even if only as a symbolic figure.

An older woman sitting near the end of the table asked Amos a question about the response to the current draft of their paper, which was about to be published in a scientific journal.

"Oh, you should've seen their faces when we met with them," Amos said.

"They think we're nuts," Noah interjected as he slopped mashed potatoes onto his plate.

"Well, you are nuts," Jake poked.

Amos and Noah laughed. The woman who'd asked the question shot Jake a dirty look. He wondered if his presence there that night threw off to the rest of the obviously important guests. He held his smile and nodded at her, never one to allow status and money to change his behavior. Amos and Noah were laughing, after all. That's all that mattered to Jake.

"When will it be published?" said a middle-aged bald man in what seemed to be a tailored suit.

"The first journal comes out next week," Amos offered.

"You're about to be famous," the bald man offered.

"Right, over twenty years of work vindicated," the woman grinned.

"Scrutinized, is more like it," Amos shrugged.

Stop / Wisler

"Violently opposed, most likely," Noah muttered as he reached for the basket of steaming rolls.

"Oh don't be a sour-puss," Amos laughed. "But yes, our work will now be studied carefully by the sharpest minds in the world. And, yes, that's more than a little intimidating. After all, this isn't the usual scientific development. It's more like we're throwing a big boulder into the pond that is our scientific knowledge. The massive ripples will affect almost everything."

"Or it could just be delusions of grandeur," the bald man smirked.

Amos barked a sharp laugh. "I you really thought that, I doubt your organization would have funded so much of our work these past years.

The bald man shrugged and smiled broadly.

"What exactly is your work?" Anne spoke up.

Amos opened his mouth in surprise. "Jake, you haven't told Anne about it?"

Jake, caught off guard stared at Amos, unsure what to say. Noah jumped in.

"It's not like he's been keeping tabs on us," he said to Amos. "I'm sure you have had much better things to occupy your mind these many years." Noah's eyes darted over to Ethan, who smiled at the old man.

"Yeah, I guess so," Jake said quietly.

"You study haunted places," Ethan suddenly spat out.

Amos and Noah chuckled.

"That's one way to look at it," Amos said.

"Thus the potential for controversy," Noah offered.

"Ghosts and gulls," a man at the other end of the table chuckled.

"It's just a matter of mistaken identity," Noah shook his head.

Stop / Wisler

"We have studied six so-called 'haunted' places here in Maine," Amos said. "And what we've found is going change science forever."

"Ah, theatrics," laughed the bald man.

"Out with it already," Anne laughed.

At this, Amos smiled and stood.

"Ah, time for a speech," Noah grinned.

"Oh hush," Amos waved him off. "Twenty four years ago, we embarked on a scientific journey to document and understand that which had been dismissed as mere ghost stories." He paused here and locked eyes with Jake. "We owe a great debt to your father, Edward Howell. He is the reason we're here today. His vision made all of this possible. And not a day goes by that we don't miss him dearly."

Jake forced his head to move, nodding slightly.

"Right here in Maine, we have painstakingly studied six locations where time parts ways with conventional knowledge," Amos resumed his explanation.

A few of the party guests exchanged looks of bewilderment. Only the bald man seemed completely unfazed. Jake figured he was the source of most of the funding and likely had a fairly intimate awareness of what had gone on here for the past two decades.

"They're not going to believe us," Noah chuckled as he continued to eat.

"We've documented hundreds of jumps through time," Amos said with a matter of fact tone betrayed only by his subtle grin. His eyes were aglow with delight. "We have gathered ample footage of these events, as well as data from atomic clocks that have helped to measure time displacement during these events."

Stop / Wisler

Amos waited, allowing the looks to become murmurs of disbelief. Jake watched him. Amos smiled now, his eyes traveling around the table, soaking in his guests' reactions. He was clearly enjoying this. "I know, I know," he said. "But we have evidence. This is no mere time dilation, but an actual bending of time."

"So how did you get from ghosts to... time travel?" the old woman said.

As if this was the prompt he had been waiting for all long, Amos said, "Jake's father started studying these 'haunted places' a long time ago. He documented several strange events. We now believe that people were merely happening upon these nexus points, or soft spots in the time-space continuum, and mistakenly labeling their experiences as paranormal. Our scientific understanding just needed to catch up in order to replace outdated superstition with empirical comprehension."

"So the ghosts aren't ghosts at all?" Ethan suddenly spoke up. "They're time travelers?" There was both a hint of awe and incredulity in the boy's voice.

Amos shot the boy a big smile, his eyebrows raised. "Ah, now there's a sharp boy! Maybe. Or maybe they just happen to be there when one of us manages to make an unexpected jump through one of these nexus points. Without a scientific explanation until now, people believed that they saw ghosts or apparitions. Especially if they saw someone they knew to be dead."

"Jake's right," the old woman said, "you are nuts."

Everyone laughed, including Amos, who clearly enjoyed the attention.

"Told you they wouldn't believe us," Amos sat back in his chair grinning.

"All will be made clear soon," Amos said. "But first I want to raise a toast." He again raised his glass of red wine. "To Jake's father, Edward. His

Stop / Wisler

daring vision has brought us here. We just wish he could be here to see this day."

He looked into Jake's eyes, pain and regret darkening his eyes momentarily. Everyone joined in the toast. Jake nodded his thanks and drained his wine glass with ease.

Next to Jake, Anne reached over and squeezed his hand.

#

Jake took another sip of his bourbon as he looked out the large windows in what Amos called his reading room. Only a single dark wood bookshelf stood near the fireplace. On it sat several rows of classic volumes that appeared essentially ornamental. Outside, light from the house fell onto the lawn and the trees at the edge of the woods. It was a nearly moonless night. Anne and Ethan stood by the windows.

"Dad," Ethan spoke up. "Did grandpa really help discover time travel?"

Jake stooped down to level with his son. "Pretty hard to believe, huh?"

"Believe it," Amos said, walking into the room.

He was followed by Noah, who also had a drink in hand. The two were a sort of scientific odd couple. Jake knew both since childhood and they had fulfilled the roles of uncles in his life, especially since his father had no siblings and his mother's sister had lived in Seattle until she succumbed to pancreatic cancer a few years ago. Amos had a certain charisma about him that made him a popular professor among students, even if he was not the most rigorous of teachers. He had taught physics for twenty six years at Colby College, in Waterville, Maine. As Jake got older, he wondered at the seeming mismatch between the small liberal arts college that employed Amos and his

Stop / Wisler

grandiose visions of scientific inquiry and discovery. While the school couldn't afford to fund the kind of research Noah and Amos had been engaged in, it did allow plenty of flexibility for Amos to both do the work and secure his own means for funding.

Noah was the academic heavyweight of the two. He had taught at MIT for thirty two years and was still teaching, though now only a select few classes. Five years ago he officially retired from teaching to pursue research in theoretical physics. But somehow he was always still called upon as his giftedness as an educator was undeniable. Where Amos was known as animated and eccentric, Noah had a quiet passion for the beauty of the universe and pursuit of discovery coupled with a dry sense of humor that made his courses particularly engaging to serious students.

The two men had met Edward Howell, Jake's father, at an international conference on theoretical physics years ago. Edward had been doing research for CERN in Switzerland at the time. But being native to Maine, he'd missed his old stomping grounds. He eventually secured a job at the University of Maine and continued theoretical research for CERN remotely until his own work with Amos and Noah demanded more and more of his attention. Jake had now distant and blurry memories of the three of them working together. But in the pictures in his mind, they all wore white lab coats and worked at a large chalkboard covered in equations that might as well have been Egyptian hieroglyphs. In all reality, this so-called memory had to be a creative interpretation of his childhood mind, more composite fabrication than recollection. It seems now more like a stock photo of physicists his father and friends had posed for than any factual recollection.

Amos indicated the large sofa. "Sit, please!"

Stop / Wisler

They all found seats. As she settled next to Jake, Anne said, "Thank you for such a lovely evening, Amos."

"It is my pleasure," he waved off the comment. "An honor, really! I'm just glad that it worked out for you three to be up here now. It just feels right, you know."

Amos and Noah claimed the recliners that sat at either end of the sofa. Amos leaned in closer to Jake.

"So, you sold your mom's old place?" Amos said more softly now.

"Yeah," Jake nodded. "We've been packing for the last couple of days.

"How have you been?" Amos asked, his voice warm with genuine concern. "I mean, really. How have you really been?"

"Eh, okay, I guess," Jake said. "It's a little hard to believe it's been six months. Still feels like her funeral was yesterday. But otherwise..."

Amos nodded.

"I was sorry to hear about your resignation," Noah spoke up.

"Yeah, there's that too," Jake glanced over at him.

"You know what I say," Amos reached out and patted Jake's hand. "It's for the best! Academic pursuit should never be encumbered by the arbitrary requirements of religious doctrine."

"Never?" Noah shot back, with a slight smirk. "How quickly you forget the profound contribution of many scientists of the past who shared religious worldviews. Take the scientific contributions of many Jesuit priests as just one example."

"Oh hush," Amos waved his hand again. "You never even completed catechism."

Stop / Wisler

"I know," Noah smiled. "I'm just saying that even this lapsed catholic still has a great deal of respect for the men and women of faith who contributed to science."

Amos wagged his finger at Noah as he said to Jake, "This is why it's taken us more than two decades to make any progress. I have put up with this one here."

They laughed, but none louder than Noah.

"But I mean it," Amos continued at last. "You are far too sharp of a mind to be bothered with such limitations. The world according to modern religious folk is too small. It's time for something new! It's time for something new for all of us!"

He raised his glass.

"Actually, the reason it's taken us so long," Noah piped up, "is that this one here thinks we should make a toast every few minutes."

Amos let escape a single, "Ha!" Jake grinned, shaking his head.

"Well, I'll tell you what we should toast to," Amos said, more serious now. "We should raise a glass to Laura Howell. She was a dear friend to us all and a loving mother and grandmother," he glanced to Ethan. Then his eyes returned to Jake. "Your mother was incredibly proud of the man you have become."

Jake nodded slowly. Finally, he raised his own glass. They toaster her memory. As silence returned following the toast, Jake ventured to change the subject.

"Now, I'm still not totally clear on what exactly your research has demonstrated."

Amos shook his head, "All in good time. Tonight let's celebrate the legacy of your father."

Stop / Wisler

Amos looked off, out the windows, into the darkness of the night. Jake watched him, a little surprised to see the man pass up an opportunity to talk about his work. But maybe it was harder to have Jake there at this moment than either of them had previously realized. Jake had to look an awful lot like his dad now. After all, he was nearing the age his father had been when he'd gone missing. Maybe it was harder for Amos and Noah than they let on. An old question resurfaced in Jake's mind. Did the work, their research, have anything to do with it? Did it make this night more bittersweet?

CHAPTER THREE

Anne pulled a stack of plates out of one of the kitchen cabinets. "What did they say about the sixth draft of the logo?" She said into the Bluetooth ear piece she wore. She placed the plates into a box and paused to listen. Jake finished wiping down the inside of an already empty cabinet and looked over at her. Anne rolled her eyes and smiled at him. She worked for an ad agency in Boston. Clearly, one of their clients was giving them a hard time or going back and forth without making a decision.

"Well," Anne continued, "Let them know that if they want that much of a redesign—and it's definitely a redesign—we'll be looking at extra dollars. I'm not asking the graphics department to keep putting in hours when we keep giving them what they ask for but they keep deciding they're not happy with it." She paused, listening. "Thanks, Jan! Yeah, we'll be back soon. Call me if they give you any grief. They knew the terms of the contract. Okay, bye." She hung up and pulled her ear piece out.

"One of those clients," Jake smirked.

Anne nodded. "You have no idea. How are you doing?"

"I'm good," Jake replied.

"You've been cleaning that cabinet for ten minutes. I think you're at least a little distracted."

He sighed. Had it really been that long? Anne did have a way of seeing through him. "Oh. Sorry. It's just... between this place and last night, there's so much of the past suddenly jumping out at me. And here it's only

Stop / Wisler

been six months since mom died. And yet, it's my dad's absence that really gets to me. Can't help but feel guilty."

Anne stepped closer to him. "Losing your dad when you were so young... I know it wasn't easy."

"Not knowing is the hard part," Jake looked down at the dirty rag in his hand. "The fact he just... followed by twenty years of not knowing what happened. They say time heals all wounds. Maybe with enough time we just get numb enough?"

Anne pulled him into a hug, placing her head on his shoulder. He held her there for a moment, allowing himself to feel this gesture on empathy. But of course, there was work to do and he didn't want to get drug down now by the powerful under toe of emotions and questions that lay ever in wait below the surface. So after a moment he let go and they parted.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm going to go see what Ethan's up to."

"Yeah!" Anne smiled, looking around, "He's been mysteriously absent for quite a while now."

#

He found Ethan in the living room, quietly scratching in his thick drawing book. The boy had a definite talent for drawing. Jake walked in, careful at first not to break the boy's concentration. When he had been younger, Jake too had been able draw quite well. But as he'd aged, he had spent less and less time creating worlds with a pencil. Now he dared do little more than scratch out stick figures. He hoped maybe Ethan would be able to keep up the habit and make use of the skill later in life.

Stop / Wisler

Jake approached slowly, peeking over his boy's shoulder. As his eyes focused on the picture, his breath caught in his throat and his heart skip a beat. There on the page of Ethan's drawing book, was a picture of a figure in a black cloak standing among trees. Ethan's pencil worked on a tree on the far right side of the picture.

"Ethan, what is this?" Jake said.

Ethan looked up suddenly. "Just a drawing," he said, startled.

"Why did you draw this?" Jake insisted, trying and failing to keep the desperate harshness from his tone of voice.

Ethan just shrugged. Jake sighed and knelt down. He had to calm down. Ethan had done nothing wrong. There was probably a completely reasonable explanation for this. He needed to slow down and simply talk to his son.

"Hey buddy," he said, "Sorry if I scared you. Dad's just really tired. I shouldn't have talked raised my voice. I do really need to know why you drew this."

Ethan looked into his dad's eyes for a moment before saying, "I saw it."

A chill ran through Jake. How had his son seen this thing that existed only in Jake's nightmares? He'd never told the boy about his dreams. There are enough things in the world to cause boys to have nightmares and Jake didn't want to contribute to it in any way without own private horrors. But now this?

"You saw it?" was all Jake managed to say.

"Don't be mad, dad," Ethan responded.

"I'm not mad," Jake assured him. "I just need to know."

Ethan nodded, then explained, "Yesterday, when we cleared out the attic, I found Grandpa's old movies, remember?"

Stop / Wisler

Jake nodded. They had discovered five boxes in the attic that contained old 16mm film canisters. Jake hadn't thought much of it. His dad had shot short reels of film while visiting various places that eventually became known as the nexus points, or soft spots, that Amos had mentioned the previous night.

"So last night," Ethan continued, "after we got back here, I sort of watched some of the movies. I wanted to see if grandpa, you know, had filmed the time travelers."

Jake's eyebrows shot up involuntarily. "You watched the movies?"

"Just some of them." Jake said.

"Okay," Jake nodded. "How?"

#

Light slowly poured into the garage in increasing measure as the garage door roused, the old motor groaning as the gears turned. Sunshine fell onto the old grey metal projector that Ethan had set up on top of a large plastic storage container Jake recognized as one of the boxes that likely held old Christmas decorations. At the back wall of the garage were several cardboard boxes staked up. Apparently, Ethan had simply projected the films onto those boxes. Next to the projector sat all five boxes of film reels. Ethan had gone to the trouble of carting them all out here. Knowing his son, Jake figured Ethan had been quite excited and wanted to make sure he could look through all the reels. But of course, he had not considered just how much of a time commitment this would have been. Eventually, he was called in to go to bed long before he'd worked his way through all the reels. And likely, he had

Stop / Wisler

welcomed the reason to abandon the increasingly tedious task—although now he seemed eager to show off his discovery.

Ethan and Jake stood at the door looking in at the musty two car garage. Only an aging hatchback sat on the right side. The left side was where Ethan had set up the projector. Further left was a small work bench where several tools still hung. They looked like they hadn't been touched in years. Jake was probably the last person to use any of them, and he hadn't done so since he'd moved out.

Ethan walked up to the projector and Jake followed.

"You figured out how to set it up?" Jake marveled.

Ethan pointed at a yellowed booklet next to the projector. "There's Instructions," he shrugged. "Plus, I've put together Lego sets that are more complicated than this."

Jake couldn't help but smile at his boy's confidence. It was true that Ethan had a knack for such things and enjoyed working with DIY robotics sets

that he'd asked for and gotten for his last birthday.

"So you're not mad?" Ethan asked, his confidence evaporating.

"No, buddy," Jake smiled at him. "I'm not mad. It's just..." How could he explain this to Ethan? Should he explain this to Ethan? It felt like he had to say something. But what?

"Show me how it works," Jake gestured to the projector.

"Well, I was worried the bulb in it would be too old and wouldn't work anymore. But I guess it still does, so that's good news," Ethan beamed.

"And then I followed the instructions for how to thread the film into the sprockets so that it properly goes through the projector and onto an empty reel on the bottom. You wanna see one of the films with a time traveler?"

Stop / Wisler

"Yeah, sure," Jake nodded. "Actually, I think we had a old projector screen around here somewhere. We should find that first."

Sure enough, it only took a minute for Jake to locate the old screen stuffed under the work bench. It was so covered in dust it was almost camouflaged. He brought it out and set it up in front of the boxes along the garage's back wall. It was stained in a few places near the edges, but otherwise was in rather good shape for something so old. It too must have sat in that garage untouched for years.

"I'll have to refocus," Ethan said. "The screen is closer than those boxes were."

Jake couldn't help but again be impressed with how observant Ethan was to such details. The boy definitely had an instinct for this.

"What are you two up to?" Anne called out as she walked up to the garage.

"Ethan found grandpa's old films," Jake explained.

"Films?" Anne said, walking in and looking down at the projector.

"From his time travel science research," Ethan offered.

Anne smiled, "Is that so?" She walked over to the boxes of film reels.

Reaching in, she pulled out an old composition notebook, its pages yellowed at the edges. Flipping open the hard cover, she looked down at the first page. Noticing what she was looking at, Jake moved closer, peering down at the notebook.

"What's this?" he said.

"Looks like research notes," Anne observed as she flipped the page.

Jake vaguely recognized the handwriting as belonging to his dad. He still had a few hand-scrawled notes his father had left him—mementos of a relationship abruptly cut short.

Stop / Wisler

"My mom never told me all of this was up in the attic," he said softly as Anne flipped to another page.

She looked up at the projector. "Does this old thing even work?" She handed the notebook to Jake, looking down at the projector.

"Yeah, it totally works!" Ethan beamed. "I figured it out all by myself."

"Wow," Anne smiled as she knelt next to the projector. "Good job, sweetie."

Jake closed the notebook and looked down at the other boxes. "Do the other boxes have notebooks?"

"I don't know," Ethan shrugged.

Jake knelt as well and opened one of the other boxes. Sure enough, there were more reels, and a notebook. Jake opened another and found the same. Then opening a third box, he found it only half full of film reels in metal canisters. Laying on top of the few reels was a film canister wrapped in a plastic bag. It was the only one like this. Jake reached in and pulled it out. A single word in fading white letters was printed across the resealable bag: evidence.

"What's that?" Ethan asked, excitedly.

"Not sure," Jake said, but his heart sped up. He had an idea of what it was, or why it was in that bag. Checking the date scratched in ball point pen on the masking tape stuck to the canister only confirmed his sinking suspicions: October 12, 1994.

"Is that what I think it is?" Anne asked, her voice soft and even.

Jake nodded, trying to keep his hands from shaking.

"What?" Ethan asked.

Stop / Wisler

"You're grandpa shot this film the day he went missing," Jake said, his eyes still locked on the reel in the bag.

Anne stood up suddenly. "Ethan, honey. Can you help me in the house?"

"I was going to show dad something," he protested.

"Okay," Anne said. "But when you're done, I need you to come in to the house."

She turned and leaned closer to Jake so she could whisper. "Don't you dare watch this with Ethan."

She turned and headed out of the garage without looking back. Jake watched her go. At first he felt insulted she would think he might let their son watch that reel. But he reminded himself that Ethan would want to see it and not even Jake knew for sure what was on that final reel of film. He'd been too young. His mother had never talked about it. Anytime anything came up about his missing father, she sunk into a deep silence. Was Jake even actually willing to watch that reel himself? Maybe it was just better to leave it all alone. But then again, there was likely nothing on that reel anyway. After all, his father had gone missing and nothing had ever come of the police investigation. That was likely the reason why the film reel had been returned to his mother. Apparently, she had never bothered to look at it again herself. It had gone into the box with the other reels and been forgotten about.

"Okay," Jake said, turning to Ethan. "Show me what you saw."

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethan flicked the switch on the projector. Light burst from the tiny lens, cutting through the dusty garage air, and fell onto the screen. The gears inside the projector's main body turned and began to pull through it the strip of old 16mm film. The machine hummed and clicked as it came to life. As the leader on the film reel came through, identifying letters and numbers flashed across the screen. Ethan twisted the focus ring on the small lens, adjusting for the fact that the screen was closer to the projector than the boxes he had been projecting on to before.

Jake stood, arms crossed, waiting.

On the screen, the leader rolled through and suddenly there were trees. Lush green leaves and tree bark filled the frame. Then, Edward Howell, in his forties as Jake always remembered him, walked into the frame. He had short dark hair and a clean shaven face. He wore light jeans and a polo, which hung off of his tall and slender frame. In his hands and carried a small chalk board. He held it up so what was written on it could easily be read on-camera: "July 18, 1993. Location #2."

"Grandpa did this for every location, I guess," Ethan said. "Saw him do it on several other movies."

Without even noticing, Jake stepped closer to the projected image of his father. On the screen, Edward walked out of frame. For several seconds the film continued to roll, just capturing the woods as a slight breeze moved the leaves. There was no sound to accompany the film as Super16 film stock had no magnetic audio track in favor of making room for a larger frame.

Stop / Wisler

Apparently, capturing audio had not been necessary to Edward's research. Jake stared at the screen, the sound of the projector becoming hypnotic. He'd just begun to wonder how much longer he'd need to wait or if he'd missed something when, suddenly, there was a rippling in the film, and the image became a bit dimmer.

"There!" Ethan shouted.

Jake blinked, glancing back at his son. "What? The rippling?" he asked. "The film's probably damaged. It's pretty old, you know."

"Nope. Look!" Ethan said with confidence as he pointed to the screen.

Jake turned back to the screen. Now the camera panned around the woods. The rippling happened again and the brightness of the footage increased.

Ethan stopped the projector.

"What are you doing?" Jake asked.

"I have to show you again," he said as he rewound the film. "You missed it!"

"I saw the ripples," Jake said, "and the film got dimmer."

"It's not that the film just got dimmer," Ethan shook his head, "it got cloudy."

Jake frowned with amusement. "Really?"

"Pay attention," Ethan said, throwing the switch on the projector again.

Jake once more turned to face the screen. The woods appeared again. He noted the angled sunlight cutting through the trees. The patches of sky he could see through the trees seemed clear. The sun was low in the sky. His father hadn't noted the time of day on the slate, but this must have been shot either early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

Stop / Wisler

The rippling happened again and the image became dimmer. But this time Jake noticed that indeed the light coming through the trees changed. It wasn't just dimmer, it lacked direction completely. Just like on a cloudy day, the light was so defused that it hardly cast any shadows.

"There!" Ethan pointed.

Sure enough, a figure in a black cloak moved between the trees further in the woods. Jake's jaw dropped. He stepped even closer to the screen now.

"See him?" Ethan asked, excitedly.

"Yeah," Jake nodded, "I see him."

The film rippled again and the figure was gone. The angled sunlight returned, cutting through the tree branches as before. Jake stared in disbelief. What had he just seen? Who was that walking through the film? He stood there trying to process what he had just witnessed. Finally, the film reel rolled out. Ethan turned the projector off.

Turning the lights back on, Ethan asked, "Is that what time travelers look like?"

"I don't know," Jake shook his head. "Are you sure that this film wasn't spliced together?"

"What do you mean?" Ethan asked.

Jake moved to the projector and pointed at the bottom reel that now contained the film that had just run through the projector. "Well, with film like this, if you wanted to combine it with other footage you shot, you literally had to cut it and then tape it together to another strip of film. That's how all movies were edited before computers."

Ethan walked up to the projector and popped off the bottom reel. "How could we tell?"

Jake put out his hand for the reel, "Well, let's take a look."

Stop / Wisler

Taking the reel, Jake uncoiled the film and held it up so he could look at the frames, using one of the long fluorescent light tubes humming on the garage ceiling as his light source. He uncoiled more and looked again. Ethan waited as this went on for several minutes.

"Hummmm," Jake said softly. "Here's there spot where the film changed back from being darker. But there's no evidence of a cut or any tape."

"So it wasn't cut?" Ethan asked, excited.

"Well," Jake handed the reel back to Ethan, "at least this copy wasn't cut. Maybe this is just a final copy made after someone cut the two films together."

"But why would grandpa have cut two films together and then made a copy of it that looks like this?"

Jake pursed his lips and nodded at his son. "That's a really good question. Why would grandpa have done something like that?"

"Unless you think grandpa made a..." Ethan looked off, searching for a word, "uh... a hoax! Why would he make a hoax? Like those fake big foot movies that people have debunked."

"Exactly," Jake nodded. "I don't know why grandpa would have made a hoax. And knowing that Amos and Noah have been working on this research for years now, I don't think any of this is a hoax. So, I guess this is the real deal."

"So that's a time traveler!" Ethan declared with a smile.

"Maybe so," Jake said. "Or maybe it's someone my dad happened upon when he traveled through time. It could be like Noah and Amos were explaining last night. A jump through time happens and people saw someone from the past and thought it was a ghost. We'll have to ask them about this when we get a

Stop / Wisler

chance. Thanks for showing me this! Now, I think your mom needs your help back in the house."

"I want to see the other movies," Ethan protested.

"No. Sorry buddy. There's too many. And we have a lot of packing to do still."

"I found this!" Ethan sighed. "Why can't I see it?"

"Maybe later, okay?" Jake said, patting him on the shoulder. "Here, give me that reel, I better get the film coiled back on to it. Maybe later we can look at more. Okay?"

Ethan handed the reel over and headed for the door. But as he did, he muttered, "Not fair."

Jake watched him go as he spooled the film back on the reel. When he finished, he set the reel next to the projector and looked into the half empty box in which he'd found the reel in the evidence bag. Sure enough, there was a notebook. Grabbing it, Jake leafed through its pages.

The date on the first entry was in February of 1994. His father had used some shorthand in noting his observations. Sometimes there was just a combination of capital letters and numbers. In places, however, the notes became quite descriptive. Judging from the number of entries, Either Edward had not shot footage every time he was out or he had not developed all of the reels he had shot.

Possibly, he simply had not kept all of the reels. Jake had a suspicion that if he were to check the dates on the reels of film against the notebooks, most likely he would find that the reels corresponded to dates where something notable had happened. Entries in the notebooks without anything noteworthy would likely have no corresponding reel. Without checking, Jake couldn't be sure. But judging from how short each entry tended

Stop / Wisler

to be—a page or two—and how many reels there were, there had to be far more entries in each notebook than reels of film. Jake recalled his father once telling him that science involves a lot of patience. How many times has his father gone out, camera in tow, burned through reels of film, and come back empty handed?

He looked in each box and found that each did have a notebook. So there were five composition notebooks in all. But each box probably only held thirty reels at most. There were probably no more than 120 to 140 reels. Jake stared down at the boxes and notebooks. What exactly had his dad been doing? Jake had been too young to really understand at the time. But Edward had taken Jake out a few times to help him with some of his short trips into the woods. He'd let Jake set up the tiny but heavy 16mm camera. Jake had proudly lugged out the small but heavy Swiss-made Bolex with its large zoom lens protruding from the boxy body and ergonomic handle. He would set up the tripod and make sure the camera was securely attached. His father would make sure the new film stock was loaded safely and ready for exposure. Jake often peppered his father with questions but Edward had only ever answered inquiries into his work in vague terms. Maybe he didn't feel comfortable divulging too much, or maybe he didn't want Jake repeating anything to kids as school and being made fun of for having a dad that was supposedly studying the haunted woods of Maine.

Jake continued to flip through the notebook he'd found in the box with the fewest reels until he came to the final entry only about two thirds through. The date of the last entry was October 11, 1994—the day before the final reel of film was shot. It had the usual shorthand and then some innocuous notes about the weather and the area. At the bottom of the page was a final sentence scrawled in his father's neat yet quick handwriting: "New

Stop / Wisler

location to visit tomorrow. Will it become location #7? I have a good feeling about this one."

Looking over to the box, Jake stared at the reel of 16mm film in the evidence bag. Why had his mother never told him about this? What was on that reel? Jake shook his head. It was probably nothing at all. Edward had gone out to a location he had hoped might be a new breakthrough and shot some footage. It just so happened that on that day he had never come home. Jake tried to think back to that day. Where had he been? What had he been doing? But the day was blur to him. He only knew the date because it had always been a somber day every year as his mother carried on in her quiet manner. Amos and Noah would stop by to check on them, as did several of the women from the church with whom his mother had been close.

Jake reached out and slowly picked up the bag with the reel. He looked at the projector then back to the reel. He knew he was going to look at it. Still, he hesitated. Maybe he was scared of what he might find on that reel, or maybe it was that he hoped he'd find something important on the film but would ultimately be disappointed. The most likely possibility was that the film contained nothing but shots of empty woods. And yet, it was in an aging police evidence bag. Jake stared at it, allowing himself to be in this moment a bit longer. Right now, as far as Jake's mind was concerned, the film reel might as well be Schrödinger's movie: presently containing both nothing special and something crucial about Jake's father's fate. Slowly, he opened the bag's resealable top and reached in carefully to take hold of the cold metal canister of film.

He managed to get away with only consulting the instruction manual once in the process of threading the film through the projector. He walked over to the door and considered closing it. But it was hot and it would be quite dark

Stop / Wisler

in the garage. He pulled it almost closed, but left it slightly ajar. This allowed a soft glow of ambient sunlight to enter the garage since the side with the door currently faced away from the sun. Next, he flipped the light switch and the garage went dark. The hum from the fluorescent lights vanished. Only a bit of sunshine indirectly coming into the garage allowed for a dim glow so that Jake could return to the projector without being totally blind. He walked back to the projector and looked down at it. Almost as if it moved on its own, his right hand reached down and hit the switch on the old grey metal machine.

Light burst forth from the lens like a bolt from Olympus. The screen lit up. The 16mm film was pulled through the machine with its usual humming and clicking. The film leader rolled through and suddenly, there were woods on the screen. Sunshine cut through the trees. The camera panned around the woods then cut. Next came a view of a creek, its bubbling water flowing by in silence. Then came more trees followed by shots of a clearing. This being a new location, his father must have simply been gathering some general footage of the area.

Jake stepped closer to the screen, his focus completely on the images. Because of this, he didn't notice the door open slightly as Anne slipped in. Anne stopped and quietly watched the film being projected.

The film cut again, but now the shot didn't move at all. The view was of more woods. On the left was a rather distinct tree with a large lump protruding from its trunk about eight feet from the ground and just before it forked into two large branches that reached up to the sky. It was like a large letter Y with a tumor. From the right side of the frame, in walked Edward Howell. He wore a flannel shirt and worn jeans and carried his chalk

Stop / Wisler

slate as he had in the other film. Positioning himself close to the center of the frame, he held up the slate, which read, "October 12, 1994. Location #7."

The world around Edward rippled even as he stood there. Eyes glued to the screen, Jake inched closer. On the film, something appeared to catch Edward's attention off camera. His eyes widened and he let go of the slate.

It dropped out of frame, which only reached down as far as his knees. Edward appeared to say something, but as there was no soundtrack on the film stock Jake could not hear him.

A sudden blur dashed through the frame and hit Edward with incredible force. In an instant, both Edward and whatever hit him flew out of frame.

Jake's heart leapt in his chest. Only when his hand cast a shadow on the screen did he realize he was reaching out to the image, his hand outstretched in a futile attempt at stopping what he'd just seen.

He stared at the screen as the film continued to roll. Was this it? Was the rest of the film simply a view of the woods? Jake wondered if he should go to the projector and stop it so he could back the film up and see the attack again. Attack... that was what it had been, right?

Letting his hand down, Jake was about to turn to the projector when movement on the left edge of the frame caught his eye. Someone walked into frame. It was not his father! This new person, a man, wore a plain grey t-shirt and dark jeans. This person was turned away from the camera and moved quickly. The man then stopped nearly center frame and ducked down, almost going out of frame.

The attacker frantically worked on something. Then, in a swift move, the attacker stood up and faced the camera.

A dizziness unlike anything Jake had ever experienced in his life shot through his whole body. Standing there on the screen—on the 16mm film that

Stop / Wisler

was more than two decades old—was himself. In the film, the Jake who was identical to the one standing in the garage watching the film, except for the blood stained hands, tear stained eyes, and an oddly pale face, stood up and with shaky hands and held out the chalk slate so the camera could see it.

Tears stained his face as he held out the slate and gasped for air. Seeing himself on the screen, Jake was in such shock he nearly forgot to look at the slate itself. His eyes darted down to it at last, catching the single word scratched out in bloody chalk: Stop.

Suddenly, the film reel rolled out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stark white light filled the screen. Jake could only hear the sound of his own heart throbbing uncontrollably in his chest and an odd flick, flick, flick, that persisted. His mind bounced in every direction, trying to make sense of what he had just witnessed. Finally, his mind managed to focus on one thing that he could make sense of. That sound, that flicking, was the end of the reel of film that had been pulled through the projector. The bottom reel was still turning, causing the tail of the film strip to flick against the box the projector sat on. Jake turned to the projector but stopped suddenly.

His eyes locked with Anne's.

"Jake," was all she managed to emit as a shaking whisper.

"What did you..." he said through his constricted throat. When had she come in? He had been so consumed with the screen before him that the whole world around him had simply vanished. What if Ethan had walked in?

Anne kept her eyes locked on him, her lower lip quivering in away he'd only seen happen a few times.

Flick, flick, flick.

"What was that, Jake?" Anne finally was able to ask.

"The last reel," he said, his eyes looking down at the projector.

He approached it slowly, as if the flicking bit of film protruding from the reel might actually be a stinger with some deal poison. Reaching down, he could feel his shoulders and back ache with the intense anxiety and grief

Stop / Wisler

that had suddenly attacked his body and mind. He flipped the switch on the projector. The garage went dark. The flicking stopped.

He looked to his wife. "I have to call Noah and Amos."

He moved quickly now, walking past her and pushing the door wide open. The sunlight blinded him. He squinted as he walked briskly to the house. His body still ached with the tension, but he pushed it aside. Entering the house barely registered to him. He suddenly found himself in the kitchen, the cordless phone in hand, starring down at its glowing digits. It took him a moment to realize that he didn't know Amos's or Noah's numbers by heart. It took him another moment to realize that he had their numbers in his cellphone which was in his pocket. *Get it together*, he thought, shaking his head. Removing his smartphone, he found Noah's number and placed the call. While he waited as it rang, Anne walked in. She stopped by the door, watching him. The call went to voice mail.

Jake hung up without thinking. What could he say?

Looking down at the phone, he found the number for Amos and called. It rang several times before he heard, "Hello. You've reached Dr. Amos Jeffries. I'm not able to answer the phone at the moment. Please leave a message after the tone."

It beeped and Jake took in a breath, trying to manage some control over his voice. "Amos. It's Jake. I need to talk to you and Noah. I tried calling Noah. But you guys must be working. Look, just call me back right away. I... I have to talk to you about... my dad's work. I found... Just call me right away!"

He hung up and set the phone down on the kitchen counter. Not knowing what else to do, Jake looked over to Anne. For a moment, they simply looked into each other's bewildered eyes.

Stop / Wisler

"Did you see that?" Jake asked, but immediately knew it was an unnecessary question.

Anne nodded. "I saw it."

"That was me, wasn't it?" Jake choked out. "That was me."

"That film was shot more than twenty years ago," Anne whispered. "You were just a boy then."

"I was twelve when my dad went missing," Jake said, starrng off into space.

"But that was..." Anne trailed off, thinking. "That looked like you right now. How is that possible?"

"You heard Amos last night." Anne shook her head. "Time travel? Really?"

"What else could it be?"

"Jake," she said, approaching him now, "think about this for a moment."

"That's me in that footage," he said softly, looking at her now. He took in a deep breath, trying to control the rush of emotions threatening to burst out at any moment. He focused on Anne's hazel eyes and said softly,

"Anne... did I kill my father?"

A tear slipped out of her left eye. It was promptly followed by one in her right eye. But she kept looking at him even as she reached up and touched his face.

"I don't know what any of this is," she said. "But I know you. And as long as I've known you, there's been this shadow hanging over you. You have missed your father for twenty years. You're not a killer, Jake. I don't know what I just saw, but you are not a killer."

Unable to contain his emotions any further, Jake embraced Anne, feeling her press her head against his left shoulder and wrap her arms around him.

Stop / Wisler

Tears came now for Jake, and he took in another deep breath to get control of himself. He couldn't melt down now. What would they say to Ethan? He couldn't let Ethan hear them sobbing in the kitchen.

Anne pulled away from him suddenly and looked into his eyes. "Jake, that reel was in a police evidence bag."

"Yeah," he said. "I think it was found about a year after my dad went missing. Someone turned it into the police. I remember hearing that there had been some new lead, that my dad's camera had been found. But my mom never let me see the film. Actually, I never knew they had given my mom the reel of film back. I asked her about it for months and she would just shake her head."

Images from the footage flashed through his mind.

"Do you think she knew it was me?" He muttered.

Anne wipes away a tear and pursed her lips. "I doubt it. We recognize you, but twenty years ago your mom... I mean, are we even really sure that was you?"

A sudden wave of uncertainty washed over Jake followed by the urge to return to the garage and watch the film again. Maybe it was just a mistake. His mind was just playing tricks on him. That couldn't possibly be him in that film.

Actually, the possibility that I am the one in that film is officially an option now, Jake thought. In light of the work Noah and Amos had been doing for decades—the work his father had been doing when he went missing—the possibility that an image of present-day, adult Jake was, in fact, burned into the chemical emulsion of a reel of film developed two decades ago was quite real.

Stop / Wisler

Suddenly, he felt a moment of clarity. Jake looked over at the kitchen counter, spotting his car keys near the door. He moved to them, snatching them up.

"What are you doing?" Anne demanded.

"I have to find out where that film was shot."

"Why?"

"I can stop this," he said. "You saw what I wrote."

"Jake," Anne shook her head, "let's just think about this for a second. We don't know what we just saw."

But Jake headed out the door, barely hearing her as she called to him, begging him to come back.

#

Being a relatively small town, Berne, Maine, had a small police force housed in an aging brick building. Jake knew exactly where it was. He still knew every intersection and back streets of Berne from his childhood and adolescence, mostly spent on a bike as he traversed the town with friends. He turned his silver Honda Crosstour into the parking lot for the station and found a spot. Throwing the car into park, he looked out his windshield at the two story red brick structure. Some part of his mind tried to bring up nagging questions about what he was doing, but his rush to uncover the truth after all these years—after what he'd just seen on that reel of film—was too strong. He checked his face in the mirror and whipped his eyes. He needed to keep it together. Getting out of the car, he walked briskly around to the front of the building.

Stop / Wisler

Stepping through the front door, Jake was confronted with the aging reception area that hadn't hardly changed in the intervening years since he and some friends had been taken in by the local cops after being caught spray painting the town's water tower. Those were simpler times, and Berne was simpler place. None of them had gotten into any real trouble with the law. Jake had been grounded for a month and had to pay for the paint to restore the water tower. And that's all the cops cared about at that point. He wondered what would happen—what did happen—to kids today doing similar things.

Sitting behind the high reception counter was a woman in her fifties, round and bright-eyed. Otherwise, the reception area was empty. Jake approached her.

"Well, good morning," said the woman, with genuine warmth. "How might I help you?"

"Hi," Jake said, suddenly unsure of how to proceed. After an awkward second he managed, "I need to talk to someone about some evidence on an old case. There was a reel of 16mm film turned over to the police about 19 years ago. It belonged to Edward Howell."

"Edward Howell," the receptionist frowned, thinking. "Does sound familiar."

"He was a scientist that lived here in town," Jake explained. "He went missing about twenty years ago."

The receptionist's eyebrows shot up with sudden recognition. "Oh yes! Ed Howell. Of course! Boy, it's been a long time since anyone's talked about him. You related to him?"

"I'm his son, Jake."

Stop / Wisler

She smiled, "Jake, of course. I'm Betty. Your mom and I were in the same Sunday school class. Wonderful woman. We miss her so much. Boy oh boy, you've been gone for some time. But your mom always talked about you. You teach at a college down in Boston, am I right?"

"Yeah," Jake said automatically. "Well, used to. Long story."

Just then, the doors behind Jake opened and two men walked in. Both were in uniform and carried coffee. The older of the two appeared to be in his sixties and had thin hair that was a blend of white and grey. The other was in his fifties and had short black hair.

"Oh, well, here are the men to ask," Betty indicated the officers. "Tom, this young man has a question for you."

The older man took a sip of his coffee, looking at Jake. He grimaced at the taste and glanced over at the other officer. "Fresh post, my ass."

"Want me to arrest her?" the other officer replied.

The older man smiled and shook his head, looking back to Jake. "How can we help you?"

#

Anne had stood in the kitchen, unsure of what to do. Jake was lost in his own mind, rushing to solve an incomprehensible puzzle. She knew this too well about Jake. He would become completely entangled in an issue and invest his mind exclusively in the pursuit of a solution. It's what made him good as a philosopher. But it meant he sometimes was absent, distant, or distracted, his mind rendering an idea from endlessly new angles.

Stop / Wisler

Now, he had just stumbled onto a challenge unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. She was stirred from her own thoughts when Ethan walked into the kitchen.

"Mom," Ethan said softly, "is everything okay?"

She looked over at her boy and smiled. What could she tell him? Had he heard them? Likely, he had. As she looked at her son, a sudden thought occurred to her.

"Do you remember where we put grandma's camcorder?"

"Yeah," Ethan nodded.

"Can you get it for me?"

Ethan darted off to retrieve the camera. "And get the the tripod too," Anne called after him.

Was she really going to do this? Was she going to dive into this madness herself? How could she not? She couldn't let Ethan see the last reel. That much she was sure of. But he'd want to help. He would demand to know what was going on. He was a sharp boy and he already knew something was happening.

By the time Ethan came back, Anne had devised a plan.

"I'm going to need your help with a very special project," she said. "Can you help me set up the camera and the projector? I want to transfer some of grandpa's old films to video so we can look at them on a computer."

"Sure!" Ethan beamed, no doubt excited to be doing that instead of packing up the house.

"And then, I'm going to need you come back in here and order us a pizza. You can order anything you want. Think you can do that?"

Ethan's eyes grew wide. "Yeah!"

"I mean, within reason, okay?" She managed a smile. "Okay, let's go."

Stop / Wisler

#

Tom Wilson, the Chief of Police, sat behind his desk. He was the older of the two men who had walked in while Jake had spoken to the receptionist. By the window, Detective Matthews leaned against the windowsill and sipped his steaming coffee, distractedly looking out. Jake sat in one of the two chairs that faced the Chief's desk. The office was sparse with only a small bookshelf that held binders and a couple of metal filing cabinets. A closed laptop sat on the desk. The walls featured a few certificates and a couple of pictures of several uniformed officers standing together. There was also a plaque with a picture of an officer. The name on the plaque said, "Detective James Fowler, lost in the line of duty." Jake looked around the room, trying to figure out how he could ask for what he needed without sounding crazy. *Too crazy*, he corrected himself. *Best I can aim for at this point is to try to not sound too crazy*

"So," Chief Wilson said, "you're Edward Howell's son?"

"Yes," Jake nodded.

"I'm very sorry," the Chief said. "It's been a long time since we had any leads."

"He went missing about twenty years ago, if memory serves me,"

Detective Matthews muttered without looking away from the window, his voice a low growl.

"Yeah, that's right," Jake said, unsure if he was supposed to respond or not. He figured he better not belabor this any longer. Turning to the Chief, he dove in, "I just learned about the film my father shot on the day he disappeared. It was in my mother's things. She passed away about six

Stop / Wisler

months ago, and we just sold her house. While we were packing things up, I came across it. The reel was still in an evidence bag. My mother never allowed me to see that film. She never even talked about it. Frankly, I forgot it even existed until I found it. I was wondering if you might have any more information on where that film was found."

"Oh, where was that?" Wilson said, looking over at Matthews.

"Baxter State Park," Matthews replied without missing a beat.

"Really?" Jake frowned. "Do you know where exactly in the park?"

Detective Matthews chuckled, shaking his head. He looked at Jake now and spoke. "Wish I knew. Some hikers found your dad's old camera. Said they happened upon it. They didn't think much of it at first. They didn't know anything about your father's disappearance. So, they took the camera to the film lab that used to be in Banger. It was Harry, the owner of the lab, that recognized your dad's camera and called us even before he developed the film inside it."

Jake nodded, trying to soak in this information quickly. The film development lab in Bangor had been the closest place that would have processed 16mm film at the time. That's where his dad dropped off all of his reels for development.

"So the hikers couldn't remember where they found the camera?" Jake pressed.

Matthews let out a sort of grunt that might have been his version of a derisive laugh. "They were not exactly exactly reliable sources. Think they were high even when Detective Fowler interrogated them. They just thought they'd found a nifty old camera. Unfortunately, Baxter State Park is some 327 square miles of wilderness."

Jake noted. "Were you on the case?"

Stop / Wisler

Matthews just shook his head.

"No," Chief Wilson piped up now, "Detective Fowler was in charge of your father's case. Detective Matthews here took over all of his cases after Fowler passed away some years ago. That film was the best lead we had on your father's case, but that was nineteen years ago. There hasn't been anything since. What's your interest in this now?"

"Well," Jake tried to choose his next words carefully. "I was just a boy at the time. I had never seen the footage before today. I just wanted to know where it was shot. I'd just like to know what happened to my dad."

Wilson nodded slowly, his eyes emanating sincere regret, "I'm sorry, Mr. Howell. I truly wish we had more information for you."

"You saw the film?" Matthews squinted at Jake. "So, I guess you know that we have good reason to think that your dad didn't just disappear? That this was in fact a homicide?"

That last word sent a sudden icy stab of panic through Jake. *Homicide. Of course it's a homicide!* In all the emotions that flooded him as he saw himself on that reel of film attack his own father, the practical and legal implications of what that film indicated had not fully occurred to him. And now, here he was sitting in the office of the Chief of Police for Berne. What the hell had he been thinking? He'd been so blind by his desperate need for answers he'd led himself to the very place he most definitely should not have gone.

But I'm innocent, his mind protested. *Well, at least I still am right now.* After all, he had no recollection of the events that he'd witnessed on the film. That had to mean that for him all of that had not yet happened. It might have been in his father's past, but it was apparently still in Jake's future. That meant that even if Jake was the one responsible for his dad's...

Stop / Wisler

he couldn't bring himself to quite complete that thought. At any rate, even if Jake was behind whatever had happened to his father, he hadn't done it yet. He wasn't guilty... yet.

But that wouldn't matter to these men. They would never believe Jake's tale of time travel or whatever was happening. The big paper Amos and Noah were publishing was not out yet. And even once it was out, it was sure to be met with the kind of incredulity and skepticism that a paper claiming to have found signs of intelligent life on Mars would be met with. It would be a long time before this scientific breakthrough became an accepted reality. In the meantime, Jake felt like he'd decided to go swimming with sharks. And only now that he'd already dove into the water did he recall that for some dumb reason he'd decided to soak himself in blood first.

Matthews and Wilson watched him.

"At any rate," Matthews continued. "We've never managed to identify the suspect in that film. Did you, by any chance, recognize the man who attacked your father?"

Jake could feel his heart racing. He tried to convince himself that they did not know that it was him in that film. But he still had to fight to keep himself from standing and bolting out of the office. *They don't recognize me*, he kept telling himself.

"No. Never seen him before," Jake said, in as matter of fact a manner as he could manage.

"Well, that was years ago. No telling where he is now," Matthews said, sipping his coffee as he looked back out the window. "Mr. Howell, I'm going to level with you, detective Fowler always felt there was more to your dad's case than we had been able to uncover. It drove him to keep looking."

Stop / Wisler

Looking down at his desk, Wilson nodded before saying, "That's right. The day Fowler was killed, he was out looking into this case yet again."

"What happened?" Jake asked.

"Someone shot him," Wilson said, staring off.

Jake swallowed hard. Someone shot the detective investigating his father's case? This new bit of information made Jake's mind swirl with a whole new tsunami of questions.

What had he gotten himself into? What had his dad gotten himself into? Did Amos and Noah know about this? Had his mother known?

"Who shot him?" Jake said.

"We've never arrested anyone in connection to Detective Fowler's murder. He was alone at the time. There apparently are no witnesses. And we've never been able to gather sufficient evidence to lead to an arrest."

"But you have suspects?" Jake pressed on.

Wilson grimaced. "As a matter of fact, we do not. I mean, sure, there were some folks in town who were not big fans of Fowler given that he'd busted them for drug dealing and what not. But, that's the thing. They were all behind bars at the time. So, unless they hired a hit on Fowler from Maine Correctional Center, it wasn't one of them."

"Could they have ordered a hit?" Jake asked, his questions coming out quickly without premeditation.

Matthews frowned at this. "Not likely. We're talking about low-life drug dealers barely scrapping by as it was. Not exactly the kind with the means to fund a hit on a cop. And family members all checked out with solid alibies. What's your interest in this?"

Jake looked from Matthews to Wilson, eyes wide. "It's just... another unsolved case. And he was out investigating my dad's case."

Stop / Wisler

The Chief narrowed his eyes as he looked at Jake. "Only two unsolved murders in my thirty-eight years with the department."

"I see," was all Jake managed.

There was a long and awkward silence. Jake tried to think of what to do next. Maybe he should just leave; thank them for their time and head home.

"You know," Matthews interjected now. "I'm ashamed to admit it, but it's been a few years since I've seen that footage of your dad's. Maybe we should take a look at it."

Jake's eyes went wide. His already racing heart sped up. He had to be visibly sweating now. He felt sure the color was draining from his face.

"Well," he stammered, "the film is back at my mother's old place."

"Right," Matthews nodded. "We gave the original back to her. Only seemed right given the circumstances."

Jake nodded, though he didn't really know what he was nodding about. He was trying to contain how relieved he felt.

"But we've got a copy on video tape around here somewhere," Matthews added.

Jake's mouth dropped open. *Of course they made a copy. You really didn't think this through.* After a second, he said, "I really just wondered where the film was found, is all."

"Well, maybe we should look at it anyway," Wilson offered. He looked at Jake, his eyes displaying a sincere desire to help. He glanced over to Matthews now and spoke, "What do you say?"

Matthews shrugged. "Worth a look."

Jake looked from one man to the other, feeling trapped. Not knowing what else to do, he popped up to his feet and jutted out his hand to the Chief of Police.

Stop / Wisler

"Gentlemen," he said, "thank you for your time. But it wasn't my intention to keep you from your work with my curiosity over this old case."

Wilson looked at Jake's outstretched hand without making any move to shake it or to stand himself.

"On the contrary, Mr. Howell," Wilson said softly, but with an unnerving firmness. "This is a quiet town. We've only had two unsolved murders in decades. Your father's case has always mattered to us. We'd like to bring this person to justice. It's never too late."

Jake dropped his hand, trying to control his breathing and remain calm, at least on the outside. He kept his eyes on Wilson, but he could feel Matthew's gaze upon him. What could he do now?

"Yes. Absolutely. Mind if I use your rest room?" Jake spat out the first thing that came to mind.

Wilson held his gaze for a moment before saying, "Down the hall, fourth door on the left."

"Thanks," Jake said before turning.

He had to will himself to walk slowly out of the room. As he stepped into the hallway, he heard movement behind him.

"I'll see if I can go fetch that old video tape," Matthews said, following him down the hallway.

"Thank you," Jake said, without looking back.

He reached the bathroom and pushed the door open so he could step in. Inside, he let the door close behind him before he stopped and stood perfectly still. His heart thumped inside his head and chest, making it hard to hear anything else. But he still managed to make out Matthew's footsteps traveling further down the hallway. A door squeaked as it opened and then clanked shut again. Silence.

Stop / Wisler

Jake pulled open the bathroom door, and did his best to walk casually. He kept his eyes forward, wondering what to do when he reached the door to Wilson's office door. As he approached, he could see Chief Wilson still at his desk, laptop open now. He'd put on glasses and squinted at the screen.

Jake moved as quickly and quietly as he could past the Chief's door, hoping the man was too focused on laptop to look up.

In the reception area, he walked as calmly as he could to the front door. As he did so he heard the receptionist pipe up, "Oh, were they able to help you, Mr. Howell?"

Jake stopped by the door and turned around, "Yes, they were. Thank you."

"Oh wonderful," Betty smiled. "You know, it's the most peculiar thing, your father's disappearance. Who would think something like that is possible in Berne."

"I know," Jake said, desperate to leave.

She opened her mouth to speak again, but the phone rang. Betty reached over and picked it up. As she did so, Jake turned and walked out the front door, cursing himself for showing up there in the first place. *The phone, you idiot. They can't see you over the phone. You should have just called!*

CHAPTER SIX

While Ethan was in the house putting in the call for the pizza, Anne ran the final reel again. This time, she aimed the tiny digital camcorder that had belonged to her mother-in-law at the screen and hit record. She stared at the screen, waiting for what was coming. Some part of her hoped that this time around it would be obvious that the man in the film was in fact not Jake. But as the events captured on the silent 16mm strip of celluloid unfolded at twenty-four frames per second, everything was just as it had been before. Edward was tackled and taken down. When the attacker finally stood and faced the camera, Anne had no doubt that she was looking at her own husband in that twenty-year-old strip of film. But this was Jake in a state she'd never seen him in before. There was a fury and desperation in his wild eyes. He seemed more like a cornered animal that knew full well it's death was imminent but would never lay down and accept defeat.

She wiped an involuntary tear from her right eye. The film reel rolled out and she stopped the video recording. Moving quickly, she pulled the SD card from the camcorder and slipped it into her laptop, which she'd brought out from the house. Locating the video file the camera had saved to the memory card, she copied it quickly to a folder on her hard drive before ejecting the card and putting it back into the camera. Ethan would be back any moment now, and she didn't dare let him see that final roll of film. She pulled the reel off of the projector and placed it back into the canister it had been in, slipped the canister back into the evidence bag, and the bag into her sleek black leather computer bag.

Stop / Wisler

Once Ethan returned, she enlisted his help in transferring more of the reels of film. He gladly dove into the work with her. Anne combed through the notebooks, looking for anything that might jump out at her. Ethan told her about Jake's keen interest in the figure in the black cloak that Ethan had been drawing. After that, Anne looked for any such references. In the back of her mind, she wondered if she should look again at the final reel in case she'd missed such a figure in black. But she'd seen it twice and hadn't seen anything like that. And she wasn't about to look at it again with Ethan there.

In the notebooks she found occasional references to a figure in black.

It seemed that this figure had not started showing up in any of the footage until well into Edward's research as the first reference she managed to find was nearly at the end of the third notebook. She instructed Ethan to load the corresponding reel of film.

On the screen, Edward Howell walked into frame and held up his chalk slate. It read, "July 12, 1994. Location #1" As Edward turned to walk out of frame, the world seemed to waver and ripple. Edward stopped before he was out of frame and looked around. Anne stared at the screen looking frantically for any movement. Then she saw it. A dark shape, deep in the woods and out of focus, moved between trees.

"Did you see him?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah," Anne said, stopping the recording as the film reel rolled out.

She looked down at the notebook in her hand and pulled out her smart phone. Tapping the GPS app, she looked up the name of the location Edward had written down for Location #1. It was a few miles north of Williamsburg. She dropped a marker on the map of Maine in her app. She would do this for each of the locations as she came across them.

Stop / Wisler

A sudden thought occurred to her. Where was Location #7? She grabbed the last notebook and went to the single entry in which there was a reference to Location #7. It was the final entry which was made the day before the final reel of film had been shot. It detailed what Edward had done at Location #5, which apparently had resulted in nothing particularly noteworthy. There wasn't even a reel of film that corresponded to that day as Edward noted that he didn't even bother to have that day's film developed.

But his notes did end with, "New location to visit tomorrow. Will it become location #7? I have a good feeling about this one." He made no indication as to where this location was. Had Edward been keeping it a secret? *Maybe*, Anne thought. *But seem unlikely*. He probably would have noted where the location was in his notes after his initial set of experiments that day. But of course, there were no notes for that day because, as seemed all too likely from the final reel of film, Edward Howell had not lived long enough to make such notes. *We'll have to ask Noah and Amos*, Anne told herself.

"What should I load next?" Ethan asked.

Only then did Anne realize she'd been so focused on what she was doing that she'd forgotten he stood there waiting for further instructions. She flipped back through the last notebook and found an entire with extensive notes.

"Let's look at this one," she said. "August 9, 1994."

Ethan excitedly dove into the work of locating the canister of film with that date. After a moment, he produced the canister from the final box and proceeded to load it onto onto the projector. Anne checked the camcorder. She'd need to charge the battery for it soon.

Stop / Wisler

When Ethan had the film loaded, he started playing it. Anne hit record. The usual film leader rolled through. Since this was apparently not the first time Edward had visited this particular location, there were no initial shots of the area. The film simply began with a locked down view of more woods.

Edward stepped into frame with his chalk slate. It read, "August 9, 1994. Location #4."

This time, Edward was able to walk out of frame before anything happened. In fact, nothing happened for a couple of minutes. Anne wondered if she'd gotten the wrong date and looked down at the notebook. Nope, it was the right reel. As she looked up, the woods on the film wavered and rippled. Anne watched carefully. A blurry figure deep in the woods moved among the trees.

But it didn't look like the figure in the black cloak she'd seen before. Were those jeans?

Anne approached the screen, careful not to step in the way of the camcorder. The world in the projected frame rippled again. Suddenly, the view shook and vibrated as if someone nearly tripped over the tripod holding the camera. Then the camera jerked to to the right and panned across more trees.

There, among the trees, was the figure in the black cloak. Ann couldn't see the face on the grainy film. Suddenly, it vanishes as the world distorted in another wave of ripples.

"What was that?" Ethan said. "There were two people that time."

"Yeah, I think so," Anne said, as she walked back to the camcorder and stopped the recording.

"But the one person didn't seem to have a black cloak," he pointed out.

Anne looked down at the notebook with the notes that corresponded to the reel she'd just seen. Skimming, she found a sentence that read, "Saw a woman in causal clothing, deep in the woods. Didn't get a good shot of her."

Stop / Wisler

Didn't recognize her. May have been just a passerby, but she vanished so quickly I find that unlikely."

#

Detective Matthews walked into his office. Just as in the Chief's office, a couple of old metal filing cabinets stood in the sparse place. Matthews walked up to one of them and pulled open the second drawer from the top. He knew just where the folder was. It had been years since he'd looked at it, but he knew exactly where it was. The hanging file folder was quite thick. But it had less to do with the amount of paperwork and more to do with the VHS cassette tape that was sandwiched in with the reports and documents.

Reaching in, he pulled the whole folder out and walked over to his desk. He removed the VHS tape and set the folder down next to a few pictures that sat on his desk. Holding the tape, he glanced down at an old picture in a small frame. Frozen in time were two men dressed in waders and ball caps, out by a river. They each held a fishing rod and grinned slyly at the camera.

The younger of the two men was Matthews some 22 years ago now. He'd been 31 at the time and not yet a detective. Next to him was Detective Jim Fowler, a tall man with a stocky build. Fowler had been 50 at the time. This was the way Matthews always remembered his mentor. Fowler had never gotten a chance to age much past that point. Three years later he'd been killed. The only other unsolved murder in Berne. Well, the only unsolved but confirmed murder. Fowler had not shot himself. Ballistics indicated as much. And while Edward Howell had apparently been murdered, with no body, no crime scene, and

Stop / Wisler

no evidence beyond a grainy bit of film that didn't explicitly confirm Howell was killed, it was not a confirmed homicide. But what else could it be?

As Berne's only detective at the time, Fowler had obsessed over Edward Howell's case. It seemed like he was always rehashing details of the case. *Wonder what he'd think of Howell's son walking in here out of the blue asking about this footage,* Matthews mused.

Matthews looked back at the tape in his hand. *It looks like some mysteries just keep coming back to haunt us.* He turned and headed out of the office.

On his way back to the Chief's office, Matthews decided it might be a good idea to go ahead and drain some of the coffee he'd had earlier. He ducked into the bathroom briefly before continuing down the hall. He noticed that the sink was dry, as it it hadn't been used yet this morning. The trash bin was also empty. *Didn't wash his hands,* Matthews thought of Jake. He headed out of the bathroom, careful to use a paper towel to open the bathroom door.

"Where's Jake Howell?" Matthews said as he entered Wilson's office and tossed the paper towel in the trash.

The Chief sat alone, looking at his computer. "Still in the bathroom," Wilson said, without looking up.

Matthews frowned, glancing back out the door instinctively. There was only one men's room in the small police station and he'd seen Jake walk into it.

"You mean the same unoccupied bathroom I just used?" Matthews said.

Wilson looked up from his computer, now frowning too. "Betty," he hollered to the receptionist.

"Yeah?" she hollered back.

"Did Jake Howell happen to leave by any chance?"

Stop / Wisler

"Yes sir," Betty chimed brightly. "Just a moment ago. Why?"

Wilson didn't answer. He just gave Matthews one of his cockeyed looks that signaled something felt off to him. Matthews looked down at the VHS tape he held and felt a stirring within his mind, a suspicion that something was very much off kilter here. He said, "How about we take a look at this tape anyway?"

In the corner of the office, behind the desk, sat an old TV/VCR combo. It was seldom used these days and had a thin layer of dust on it. Matthews popped the tape in and power up the TV. The image from the VHS was initially garbled. Then the old heads in the VCR adjusted their tracking and the image cleaned up some. Wilson and Matthews stared at the small curved screen of the old television. The film played out as they had always remembered it... with one notable new detail. Well it wasn't actually a new detail at all. Matthews was sure it had always been this way. It was a new realization based on new information.

As the film reel rolled out and the screen went to static, Matthews looked over at Wilson. In spite of being someone who was almost never caught off guard, Wilson's eyes were wide and his mouth hung open. As a matter of fact, for as collected of a demeanor as Matthews tried to maintain, at that moment he found he was positively lightheaded. How could it be possible?

"What the hell?" was all he could mutter.

#

Jake drove right through the town, managing to remain about as calm as cat on a burning branch. The red light at the main intersection felt like a year of his life. He tried to control his breathing while his eyes bounced

Stop / Wisler

between his mirrors. Would they still look at the tape if he was gone? Would the fact that he snuck out become an even stronger reason to look at the tape? He cursed himself again for not simply picking up the phone and calling. And yet, he knew his head was spinning with so many questions that he was bound to get ahead of his own best judgment. Anne was right, he should have stayed home. He needed to slow down. Had he already invited more trouble by showing up at the police station?

When the light finally turned green, he stepped on the gas pedal like the starting pistol of a race had just sounded. He quickly let off, realizing the last thing he wanted to do was get pulled over by one of the other officers. Had Matthews and Wilson already radioed the rest of the force to alert them to keep an eye out for Jake? *No*, he shook his head. *They have no reason to come looking for me. Well, until they watch the tape.* As hard as it was, he maintained the speed limit and drove steadily as the houses gave way to rolling fields.

He pulled out his cell phone and placed a call. It only took one ring and Anne picked up.

"Jake!" she said. "Where are you?"

"Honey, I need you to get Ethan and head home," he said in as calm of a voice as he could manage.

"What do mean? Why?"

"Just get back to Boston right now."

"Jake, what's happening?" Anne said, her voice rising in pitch. "You're scaring me."

"I made a mistake," he sighed. "I talked to the police. I wanted to see if they knew where my dad's camera was found. I just wanted to know where that last reel was shot. Or who found it."

Stop / Wisler

"Did they recognize you?" Anne said softly.

"No. Well," Jake swallowed, "not yet. I'm almost positive they're looking at the film right now. They still had a copy."

"So what are you saying? Is the police after you?"

"No, but they will be soon. That's why you need to head home."

"We're not going anywhere," she said, firmly. "You haven't done anything. And besides, you have our car."

"Oh," Jake sighed, realizing again how much his tunnel vision had hindered his ability to think clearly. "Well, you can always try my mom's car."

Just then, his phone beeped at him. He checked the screen, which indicated he had another call coming in.

"Honey, Amos is calling me," Jake said quickly. "I need to talk to him. Is there any way you can make and send make a copy of the footage? Maybe just shoot it real quick on your phone. I need to show it to Amos and Noah."

"Way ahead of you," Anne answered with almost a hint of sarcastic delight.

"Thanks!" he said.

Without waiting any longer, he answered the call from Amos.

"Amos?"

"Jake, I'm so sorry," Amos said in his usual jovial tone. "Noah and I had this interview with Time Magazine. Our article isn't even published, but already word seems to be spreading."

"Are you home?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Stay there. I'm on my way over."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bach played through the headphones of his Walkman. A mug of now long-cold coffee sat on his desk next to his ash tray where a cigarette butt still emitted a rising snake of smoke that leisurely coiled its way to the unfinished basement ceiling. The piles of papers on his desk regularly elicited a protest from his wife, but this was just how Jim Fowler worked. He stared down at a map of Maine which he'd marked up with highlighter and pens of various colors.

"Honey, are you still at that?" Judy said from the door.

Jim looked up with a smirk his wife knew all too well but he couldn't keep himself from wearing. "There has to be something I'm not seeing here," he said, removing the headphones and stopping the tape.

"There's probably a lot you're not seeing," Jody shrugged her slender shoulders. "Otherwise it would be a closed case."

"Well, yeah," Jim said, scratching the stubble on his face. "But, a guy like Ed doesn't just go missing. Just, puff, no trace. And then there's the film, and—"

"—The crazy crackpot science experiments or whatever," Judy shook her head.

Jim sighed and nodded. "Bit of a broken record, I know. Sorry."

Judy nodded, opened her mouth to say more but closed it again after a second. Turning, she walked out of his basement home office. Jim watched her go before he rescued the still smoldering cigarette for one last drag. He

Stop / Wisler

exhaled the smoke in a lament-filled sigh. Stubbing out the butt, he tossed the map on the desk and stood. He stopped there for a moment, staring down at the desk with its various haphazard piles. There was a pile for notes he'd taken while questioning Edward Howell's associates, his wife, former colleagues he'd gotten ahold of, people in town who knew him, and so on. At this point he'd talked to everyone he could think of and then some. He had a small pile for notes he'd made as he began to speculate about the possibility that Ed Howell had simply decided to find a new life elsewhere or had opted to end his own life. The nail in the coffin for those ideas came only a month ago when Ed's movie camera turned up in Baxter. He glanced at the video tape copy of the footage that sat in the middle of his desk. Contained on its magnetic strip was nearly conclusive evidence that this was a homicide, and yet no one seemed able to identify the assailant on the film. Who was that man, and who would want Ed Howell killed?

And where was the body?

Some of the boys at the station had started buying into the idea that the guy in the film was a hit man from New York, Boston, or elsewhere. They figured Howell had a secret gambling addiction or had turned to the mob in Boston as a means to finance his nutty research. Now, what exactly the mob wanted with Ed Howell's research was beyond all of them. But then again, a loan's a loan. And the mob's the mob. But the mob didn't just whack delinquent debtors. Then they'd really not get their money back. No, the mob just made their lives hell until debts and significant interest were settled up. Fowler had pointed this out on various occasions to his colleagues. Besides, what hit man looks that distraught and frantic? Was he a novice on his first job? And what hit man not only lets himself be seen on camera and doesn't destroy the film, but also leaves a cryptic message for anyone who

Stop / Wisler

winds up finding. The boys kept telling him it was probably a mob thing, a warning. Don't come after us. Stop.

"Maybe the mob actually kidnapped him and they want him to make some crazy contraption for them so they can walk through walls and rob banks," one of the new officers had laughed.

Fowler had shaken his head and muttered to the Chief, "You hear this? And I'm supposed to be the one who reads too much science fiction?"

Jim grunted as he stared down at his desk. Nothing really added up. He closed the notebook that he kept with his papers at home. In this notebook he tried to distill all the pages of notes down to something concise and coherent. He only ever wrote in it at home. It was his way of trying to slide the colors into place on this criminal rubrics cube. But it was late again and sleep beacons him. He walked out of the office and killed the lights, but his mind remained there with his stacks of paper and his notebook, working the problem over, trying to see things from a new angle, grasping for any missing insight he somehow had not managed to apprehend in more than a year. This had become his new nightly ritual. How many nights did he brush his teeth without even being aware of what he was doing?

Before he knew it, he found himself laying in bed, saying goodnight to Judy, and staring at the ceiling. He would try to distract himself, but the same old questions would nag at him, clawing for his attention. Tonight, however, he had an unexpected interruption to his thoughts.

"Why are you so stuck on this case?" Judy asked.

"A man was killed," Jim said. "A man from our town, we knew Ed Howell."

"We knew *of* Ed Howell," she corrected.

"It just doesn't add up. There has to be an explanation."

Stop / Wisler

"And what if it never adds up? What will you do then? Will you keep sneaking off to go over documents you've read a thousand times, to re-watch that tape you're not even supposed to have? How long, Jim?"

He swallowed hard and nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry. Let's get busy planning that vacation out west. I keep meaning to ask Matthews about that place he went to in California. I'll get on that. We'll get away from all this. I can clear my head."

Judy gave him a light kiss on his cheek and rolled over. Jim lay there, his mind still turning over and over.

#

She poured the coffee into the mug as she had so many times before. Laura Howell returned the coffee pot to the machine and sat down at the kitchen table. She wore a faded sun dress that hung limply on her vanishing frame. She looked down at her own mug of coffee which no longer emanated steam like the one she just poured for Detective Fowler.

He sat at the table, waiting patiently. Laura looked up at last and he could see those bright but heavy eyes. He watched those eyes as they scanned his own face, studying him.

"What is it today?" she asked.

"Same question as last time."

She shook her head slowly.

"Laura, I want to find the person responsible for this," he said in a softer tone, leaning forward. "I need to exhaust every possible lead."

"What would Jake know about any of this?"

"Ed took him out at times, right?" Fowler reminded her.

Stop / Wisler

"What am I supposed to tell him?" Laura muttered.

"You haven't told him about..." Jim trailed off in shock.

She shook her head. "How can I tell him after a year that it looks like his dad was killed?"

"Isn't that at least better than thinking his father might have left him?" Fowler shot back.

Laura stood with such force her chair fell back and slammed onto the floor. Her eyes were bright now with a fury Jim rarely saw. Her lower lip quivered as she tried to form words.

"Don't, you," she hissed. "Don't."

Jim stood up and walked around the table. He reached out for Laura, who pushed his hand away.

"I know this is hard," he whispered.

Laura's eyes now filled with tears as she vacillated between rage and grief. Jim again reached out and this time she let him touch her shoulder.

"I just want the truth," he said.

Her eyes shot up to his with sudden alertness. "The truth?"

"About what happened to Ed."

"And you think my son will suddenly be of help in a case that has been as cold as the arctic from day one?"

Fowler sighed. "It's just due diligence. I just want to make sure I do everything I can so we can—"

"—cleanse our guilty consciences?" Laura shot at him.

Jim let his hand drop, his mouth open, still meaning to form the next words he was about to say. Tears drifted down her cheeks but her stare cut into him deeply. He swallowed and tried again.

"I'm after justice," he said.

Stop / Wisler

"What if justice has been served already?" she asked.

"Ed didn't deserve this."

"But we did."

"What are you talking about?"

Laura took a deep breath and looked away. "Aren't we the ones who have to live with what we've done?"

"It's not like that," Fowler protested.

"Oh, isn't it?" she shot back, her eyes again filled with fire.

He stared at her, soaking in the heat from her glare. Even in the turmoil of this moment he could feel the stirring within him that had first pulled him to her. That fire. He reached out and caressed her face, his mind recalled the first time he had done so, the way her hand had rested on his chest, the way her dress had slipped off her bare shoulders, the way she'd looked deeply into his eyes as he entered her.

"Laura," he said softly, "this is not some kind of cosmic justice for what we did. Your husband was killed and I—"

"—You should let someone else handle the case," she said.

"That would raise questions. I just want to protect you. There's no reason this needs to get any messier than it already is."

"Protect me?" she laughed. "What about you? What about Judy?"

Jim nodded and looked down. "Yeah, there's that too."

"Why don't we get on with our lives?"

"Laura, you're not thinking clearly. What if Ed was killed by someone who might kill again? I can't just forget about it. What if someone else is killed by this guy? Do we want to walk around with that guilt on our shoulders too?"

Stop / Wisler

Laura looked at the clock on her wall. "I need to get to work. I'm not talking about this anymore. You can see yourself out, please."

She walked past him and headed upstairs. Fowler cursed under his breath before he heading for the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Crosstour turned on to the blacktop driveway that led up to Amos's house. It was a large historic colonial Amos had purchased several years ago. As Jake parked his car, he heard the ding of his phone indicating he had an incoming text message. He threw the car into park and looked down at the screen. It was a message from Anne. "Emailed you the video," it read.

With shaking hands, Jake got out of the car, put his phone in his pocket and began walking to the house before realizing he'd left the car door wide open. He walked back and closed it. He couldn't help but look around as if he might spot a cop behind any shrub or tree. The house was in the country. A large field stretched out to his left and woods to his right. The road was not particularly busy. A lone car drove by.

As he walked up to the house, he wondered how he could explain all of this to Amos and Noah. Where would he even begin? Reaching the door, he pressed the doorbell before remembering that Amos was expecting him and probably left the door open. Trying the knob, he found it was unlocked and let himself in.

Amos and Noah greeted him on the other side. Before he even knew what he was saying, words burst out of Jake's mouth.

"Where's your computer?"

"Well, hi Jake," Noah smiled.

But his smile faded quickly as he took in Jake's frantic state. Amos stepped forward.

"What's a matter?" he asked.

Stop / Wisler

"I have to you show you something," Jake said. "Where's your computer?"

"Here, here," Amos waved him in.

They headed into an ornate study Amos had set up in his home. The floor was hardwood. Old volumes and back issues of scientific journals lined the book shelves. A golden globe stood near the window. The desk was dark mahogany. On it was a sleek desktop computer.

Jake slid into the leather chair and logged into his email account.

Pulling up the email from Anne, he downloaded the attached video.

"Did either of you know about the last reel of film my dad shot?" he said, while the blue curved line that indicated the download progress worked it's way slowly into a full circle.

"The last reel?" Noah asked. "Oh, you mean the one that..." he trailed off.

"Where did you find that?" Amos asked.

"It was in my mother's things. She kept all of my dad's old films.

There was this one reel in a plastic bag." Jake looked up to the men standing next to him. "A police evidence bag."

Both men broke eye contact with him, looking off in different directions.

"So you knew about it," Jake muttered.

"Jake," Noah said, shaking his head. "You were only a boy at the time. Your mother didn't want to burden you."

"She was only doing what she felt was best," Amos chimed in. "And after that, when there were no further developments on the case, it just seemed best to leave things be."

"Leave things be," Jake repeated. "Let me believe my father simply went missing?"

Stop / Wisler

Amos sighed. "She should have told you. Maybe not then. But eventually. I encouraged her to tell you the truth. But..." Amos shrugged.

"You were so young," Noah raised his hands.

"I *was* so young. That's kind of the problem," Jake said, clicking the video the moment the download completed.

"What do you mean?" Noah asked.

"Twenty years ago," Jake said, indicating the screen, "I was just a boy. But how do you explain this?"

The video played.

"Jake, please," Amos protested. "I don't think we should—"

"This is important!" Jake insisted.

"What are you talking about?" Noah interjected.

"Just watch!" Jake raised his voice.

Reluctantly, the two men watched the old footage of their long lost colleague's demise. They stood petrified as the video played on the computer screen and an adult Jake held up the chalk slate with the word "Stop."

Jake hit the spacebar with force. The video froze with him still on screen holding up the slate. He looked over to Amos and Noah.

"Oh my God, Jake," Amos murmured.

"It can't be," Noah shook his head.

Jake got up from the chair and walked over to the window. He stared out, trying to gather his thoughts and control his emotions.

"What the hell am I doing in that film?" he said, softly, as he turned back to face the men.

Amos and Noah exchanged bewildered looks.

"Had you seen this before?" Jake pressed.

"No," Noah stammered. "Not exactly."

Stop / Wisler

"Which is it? No, or not exactly?" Jake said with more anger in his voice than he'd meant for there to be.

Amos raised his hands in a gesture for Jake to calm down. "About a year after your dad went missing," Amos began "someone found your dad's camera—"

"Yeah, I know," Jake cut him off. "Some hikers found it. But did the police show you this footage?"

"No. They never showed us the whole thing," Noah explained. "They showed us only a picture of this man... of... you, I guess... holding up that board. They wanted to know if we knew who that was. Of course, we didn't. At the time, that is. You were only thirteen."

Jake looked from Noah to Amos and back. Both men pleaded with him with sincere eyes.

"So," Jake said more softly now, "I'm going to travel back in time and kill my father?"

"We don't know that for sure," Amos stepped forward.

"How do the jumps work?" Jake pushed forward.

"Jake, slow down," Amos reached out and touched his shoulder. "You're in shock."

"How do the jumps work?" Jake raised his voice.

"We haven't worked out all of the exact details yet," Noah said. "That's been one of the perplexing aspects of our research. We have ample evidence that these jumps through time do happen. Everything from periods of missing time to measuring changes to the magnetic field in the direct vicinity. And of course, we have footage. But the exact *how* has been a challenge to pin down. Too many variables to eliminate. That's why we've taken years to get where we have."

"But you have to know something," Jake pressed.

Stop / Wisler

"There are a few patterns we have been able to establish," Amos granted.

"Like?" Jake asked walked around to the other side of the desk.

"Well, every jump seems to be unique," Noah explained. "They never seem repeat, as far as we can tell. In years of work we have never managed to confirm a jump to an exact same time on multiple occasions."

"How do you determine that?" Jake frowned.

"Well, we try to make as many measurements as possible," Amos said, "temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, light levels, any quantifiable indicators that we can compare against other jumps. When we're able to, we try to take bark, leaves, soil, any samples we can collect. Since these locations are all out in rural areas, it's not like there are news papers laying around with the current date on them."

"And we shoot video and pictures," Noah added. "To try to compare to other visual documentation we have that might help us confirm a jump to the same moment in time."

"And it never matches?" Jake asked.

"Not enough for us to confidently claim we have a confirmed jump back to a same moment in time," Amos said. "And that's beside the larger questions still surrounding what this means for humanity's admittedly limited understanding of what time is in the first place."

Jake shook his head, lost in thought. "Where's is Location #7?"

Amos and Noah exchanged another bewildered look.

"Location #7?" Amos asked.

"There is no seventh location," Noah shook his head.

"In my dad's notebooks," Jake paced around the room, "he kept records of all the experiments he was doing."

Stop / Wisler

"Yes, I recall," Amos said. "Those were the very early days of our research, your father used rather crude methods."

"There's no entry for the day he was..." Jake couldn't quite force the words out after all these years of living with a vanished father. "But on the day before, he made a note that he was visiting some new place and he wondered if it might become Location #7."

"I'm sorry Jake," Noah said. "We have only worked with the six original locations your father helped us identify. And those have kept our hands quite full as is."

Jake sighed and continued to pace.

"Let's take this one step at a time," Amos said, stepping around the desk. "Obviously, for you, Jake, this has not happened yet. You'd remember it, right?"

"Obviously," Jake said without looking at him.

"So what could you mean by 'stop'?" Amos asked.

Jake shook his head without stopping.

Amos watched him pace for a moment before speaking again. "I know this is a lot to take in. I can't even begin to wrap my head around this. But you need to calm down. Have a seat. How about a drink?"

Without waiting for a response, Amos walked over to a small, ornate liquor cabinet. He removed a bottle of Kentucky bourbon and three glasses. While he poured, Noah looked at the computer screen again where the image of Jake holding the chalk slate was still frozen. Jake watched Amos for a moment, finally stopping his pacing.

"While this appears not to have happened yet," Noah observed, "I imagine it will happen soon. You look much as you do right now. Your beard and hair appear to be the same length."

Stop / Wisler

"So what does this footage mean?" Jake asked.

"Well, it does mean we have evidence that we are in the presence of the first confirmed time traveler," Noah said.

"What do you mean?" Jake frowned. "I thought you had that evidence already."

"We have documented measurable discrepancies in time between atomic clocks," Noah began. "We placed several clock outside of a known nexus point. Then we'd take a few with us into the region where jumps seem likely to happen. If a jump happened, we could immediately compare the atomic clocks. They all start off in perfect synchronization. But never come back in perfect synch after a jump."

Amos walked back with a single glass of bourbon. He handed one to Jake. Then, returning to the liquor cabinet, he grabbed the other two he had poured and returned to the desk where he set one in front of Noah.

"So this discrepancy," Jake asked. "Is this some kind of time dilation like we'd expect from different motion?"

"Ah, you're thinking in terms of relativity theory. Good. That is one of the many questions we need to answer," Amos piped up. "I suspect we're dealing with a significant fluctuation in the gravitational field of a nexus point. Almost as if a tiny blackhole opened up right there for a split second".

"Like a wormhole?" Jake ventured.

"Maybe," Amos raised his palms and shrugged. "But that's likely not even close to being the right way of describing what's happening here. It's all so beyond our rudimentary understanding of this phenomena at this point. And that is why it is time for this to be brought before the scientific community of the whole world."

Stop / Wisler

"It could be some form of time dilation," Noah said. "But it's definitely not a traditional dilation in that we are not talking about two observers moving through space at drastically different speeds. Time dilation as described by relativity is something that only becomes truly quantifiable when dealing with incredible speeds. Subjects have to be moving near the speed of light relative to each other."

"Right," Jake nodded, distractedly staring down at his drink.

"But clearly anyone undergoing a jump has a different experience of time than someone standing just outside of a nexus point," Noah said.

"How big of a difference are we talking about?" Jake asked.

"Generally speaking," Amos spoke up, "fractions of a second, sometimes more. We have had instances where the clocks vary by several minutes."

Jake soaked this in, still staring at his bourbon. Some detached and purely academic part of his mind swirled with more questions about all of this. This was indeed a monumental development in humanity's understanding and interaction with time. For how pervasive and inescapable time is to human existence, its actually inner workings still remain shrouded in mystery. He could see in his mind's eye many paths of intellectual curiosity open up. Is time linear or cyclical or fluid? Where they dealing with multi-dimensional reality or a single time vector on which they could jump back and forth? How could their physical bodies travel through time without violating the known laws of physics? Of a wormhole were actually being opened in each of the nexus point, how did it not suck everything in the immediate area into it? But there was a much more real and pressing question that weighed on his primal mind.

"Can I change this?" he said, nodding slightly toward the computer.

Amos and Noah exchanged a tense glance.

Stop / Wisler

"I'm sure your work in philosophy of science has exposed you to enough theories on time travel to know that the notion of changing the past is... well, illogical." Amos said, softly, before sipping his bourbon.

"Time travel itself is illogical," Jake countered. "But... here we are."

"But we're coming to understand the nature of time-space as a multidimensional reality we can move through in various directions," Noah jumped in. "We've always understood the three dimensions of space that we regularly move through. But that doesn't preclude the possibility of moving through the other dimensions. In fact, this could be one of the fundamental difficulties we might yet encounter when it comes to contacting intelligent life from another part of our own galaxy. We can't simply assume their relationship with time-space will match ours in every way."

"Nevertheless," Amos sighed, "it seems highly problematic to contemplate changing events that have already happened. We're talking about paradox creation, which the laws of physics likely will not support or allow to happen."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Than what do I mean by 'stop'?"

"Maybe you meant to stop it from happening," Noah interjected.

"Noah thinks quantum physics does not prevent the changing of the past," Amos shook his head.

"Einstein's view of the universe was very deterministic," Noah continued. "But this is one area where relativity and quantum physics diverge significantly. There is real uncertainty within the quantum level, and our understanding of what time is and how it works is still so rudimentary."

"The arrow of time is determined by entropy," Jake suggested.

"That's one theory," Noah said. "But physicists like Richard Muller disagree, and with sound logic. While entropy dictates that things fall apart

Stop / Wisler

over time, it doesn't dictate the direction of time's arrow so much as give us a way of detecting which way its flowing."

"We're getting off topic here," Jake raised a hand. "What did I mean by holding up 'stop' in the footage?"

"Did you see yourself in that film?" Amos asked. "That is not the Jake I know. Something is terribly wrong with you."

"So what?" Jake shook his head. "I'm going to go nuts and kill my father? And 'stop' is just the ramblings of a madman?"

"Maybe you should go back to Boston," Noah suggested.

"I may have... may be about to kill my own father," Jake glared at Noah, "and that's the best advice you can come up with?"

Noah's mouth dropped open as if he wanted to say more, but he remained silent. He looked back at the computer screen and sighed.

Amos stepped closer to Jake. "This is beyond us. We need to clear our heads. Please, don't do anything rash."

"It might be too late," Jake mumbled. "By now the police will have looked at their copy of this footage. They'll recognize me. If I can change the past, that might be a good place to start. Going there might be the single stupidest thing I've ever done."

He glanced at the computer.

"So far," he added.

"Okay," Noah nodded, glancing at Noah. "Than maybe go back to Boston."

"It'll look like I'm guilty," Jake said, "like I'm running away."

"What other choice do you have?" Amos pressed.

Jake looked off, thinking. Finally, he said softly, "I can't just leave. There's something else I haven't told you."

"What is it?" Noah said, his eyes growing wider.

Stop / Wisler

"All my life, ever since dad went missing, I've had these nightmares. This figure in dressed all in black chases me through the woods. And now my son found these old films my dad shot. And in several of them, there's this figure in a black cloak."

Jake looked up to Noah and Amos. Their eyes were wide with shock and disbelief. He was likely beginning to sound more and more like a bonafide head case to them. Maybe he was in fact losing his mind. *No*, he told himself. *Ethan saw it too.*

"I thought he was just a nightmare," Jake continued. "Just a way my subconscious was dealing with losing my dad. Just a buggy man who took my father. But nightmares don't show up on old films. My son saw this thing on the films and showed them to me. Something far beyond anything I've ever imagined possible is happening here. So I have to know... I have find out what's happened to my dad. And if there's any way I can stop this from happening... I have to try!"

LEVEL TWO

"Based on our understanding of spacetime, there seems no getting around the idea that events in spacetime have a permanence to them that cannot be taken away. Once an event occurs, it in essence becomes part of the fabric of our universe. Your life is a series of events, and this means that when you put them all together, you are creating your own indelible mark on the universe. Perhaps if everyone understood that, we might all be a little more careful to make sure that the mark we leave is one that we are proud of."

- Jeffrey Bennett

"[Quantum mechanics] describes nature as absurd from the point of view of common sense. And it fully agrees with experiment. So I hope you can accept nature as She is—absurd."

- Richard Feynman

"Death signifies nothing... the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."

- Albert Einstein

CHAPTER NINE

Anne threw back the can of seltzer water and finished it. There were still three slices of the Hawaiian BBQ Chicken pizza in the grease-stained box. She had to admit she was pleasantly surprised by the boy's sensible order. But then, Ethan knew what he liked and tended to be very devoted to his passions. It was certainly the case with his own fascination with science and art. Math and history held less of his interest and as a result he tended to be more indifferent to those subjects. But he was a lot like Jake in how quickly he could dive into ideas.

She and Ethan had decided to eat in the garage, their lunch illuminated by the glow of the projector. She hadn't transferred everything, but much of it was now either on the camera's SD card or her laptop's hard drive. Granted, this was a crude manner in which to digitize the footage. But for the time being, it did the trick. It wasn't like there was a lab with 16mm film scanning capabilities anywhere nearby. Besides, that would cost a good bit of money.

Leafing through one of the notebooks, Anne happened upon the notes for one of the reels she'd already digitized earlier. It was the one in which the film had captured not just the figure in black, but another person as well. She looked at the location description and made note of it. She had now pinned all six locations on her GPS app on her smartphone. But she still wasn't any closer to working out where this possible seventh location might be.

Stop / Wisler

She looked over at the old hatchback that sat in the other half of the garage. She'd found the keys still hanging in their regular place in the kitchen. What were the chances that this machine would cooperate and run? When was the last time it had been driven? The gas in the tank might be too old and not burn properly.

Anne stacked all of the composition notebooks and slipped them into a reusable shopping bag she'd found in the pantry. She wished Jake would call. What was going through his head? She could barely bring herself to feel anything more than bewilderment at the notion that Jake had—was yet to—travel through time and attack his own father. *There has to be more to all of this*, she kept thinking over and over. *What are we missing?*

"Well, Ethan," she said at last, "do you think we should find out if grandma's old car still runs?"

"Where're we going?" Ethan's eyes glowed with excitement.

She could see so much of Jake in him in that moment. The curiosity and desire to solve a mystery or puzzle were certainly aspects he shared with his father. For all the boy knew this was all a very exciting adventure of discovery. How long could she keep the truth from him? Certainly not nearly as long as Jake's mother had kept all of this from him. But she had done so by completely shutting Jake out of this whole part of his father's life. Why had she done this?

"I want see what's at these locations your grandpa was filming," she said. "What do you think?"

"Really? Okay!"

"But we're going to have to see if this thing runs still," she indicated the car.

Stop / Wisler

Getting up, she opened the garage door behind the hatchback. The wooden door groaned and rumbled as it rouse and stopped with a loud clang. She opened the driver's door to the car.

"Should we pack up the movies?" Ethan said, squinting in the bright sunlight.

"No, we got most of them on the computer now," Anne said as she set behind the wheel and put the keys into the ignition. "Well, here goes nothing."

She turned the ignition. The motor turned over, sputtered, coughed, and... fired up. She stared down at the dash, waiting to see if any warning lights came on. To her amazement, none of them lit up. The gas gauge did indicate the car had less than a quarter of a tank.

"Thank you, God," she muttered. Then to Ethan she said, "Get in, we better get going."

Ethan dashed around the car and got into the passenger seat. As he buckled up he looked over at his mother and said, "Is dad going to be okay?"

Anne looked over with concern. How much did he know? How much had he picked up on?

"Yes, sweetie," she forced a smile. "We just need to... do a little homework."

"Are we going to become time travelers?"

"I don't know, honey," she said as she put the car in reverse. "First, let's get some gas into this thing, or we won't be traveling anywhere."

#

Stop / Wisler

They walked into large finished basement in Amos's house. The place was surrounded by pristine clean white walls and ceiling. Glass tables and desks were arranged on the light hard wood floor. Several computers ran. A large server tower in the corner hummed. There were maps on the walls. The tables ran along two of the walls forming an L. In the center were two tan sofas and a coffee table.

"This is our lab," Amos said, a slight smile on his face.

"You keep work close to home," Jake observed.

"After I was able to buy this place I figured why bother paying for a run down office that was too far away to be of practical use. We're close to the action here," Amos explained, walking into the room.

"How did you afford all of this?"

"This isn't the only work I do, you know," Amos said over his shoulder as he walked up to a computer.

Jake looked over at Noah who said, "He's done some work for NASA and some for classified projects for the defense department."

In spite of the more pressing issues, Jake couldn't help but ask, "NASA and classified projects?"

"Yes, yes," Amos said as he removed a map in a frame from the wall. "I have been helping NASA with theoretical development of Ion engines for a mission to Mars. What they've been using for unmanned probes are good, but we really need to ensure safety and durability if we're going to build a ship that carries people to another planet. It's pretty fascinating research. Traditional rockets won't cut it. Anyway, that lead to some some other work for another agency of the government. And... well, I can't exactly talk about the classified stuff. NDAs and treason and whatnot."

Stop / Wisler

He smiled big as he set the map down on the coffee table. The men gathered around it. Jake had to admire the man. He certainly was brilliant.

"You didn't get in on this classified stuff?" Jake glanced at Noah.

"I'm a pacifist," Noah grinned, "and lazy."

"For a lazy man, you spend a lot of time down here working," Amos said.

"He's just mad because I eat all his food," Noah said to Jake, "And make all the important breakthroughs in our research."

"One important breakthrough," Amos shot back and chuckled.

"What's that?" Jake asked, not quite interested in the fun banter at the moment.

"I determined that when a jump happens there is a significant fluctuation in the magnetic field immediately around a nexus point." Noah said matter-of-factly. "Ever wonder why your dad was shooting 16mm film in the 1990s when video cameras were plentiful and much cheaper?"

Jake frowned, "I do recall him saying at one point that video cameras didn't work for what he was doing."

"Right," Noah nodded. "We didn't figure this out until some time after your father..." Noah trailed off for a moment. "We found that the magnetic field disturbance interfered with most video cameras. At the time, video cameras stored information on magnetic tapes."

"The tapes would get erased," Jake nodded.

"Scrambled is more like it," Amos pointed out.

"The chemical process of shooting film was our workaround, initially," Noah went on. "Now we have shielded HD cameras that don't use magnetic tape or conventional hard drives."

Jake nodded, looking down at the map. It was an elegant map of Maine with six points marked. Each had a number next to it.

Stop / Wisler

"So, these are the six known locations?" Jake asked.

"These are the six we have been studying all these years, yes," Amos said.

"But my dad was attacked at location number seven. Where's that?"

"There's no seventh location that we know of," Amos answered. "We've investigated other candidates over the years, but none ever met the criteria."

"What about Baxter State Park?" Jake pointed down to the spot on the map. "They found my dad's camera there."

"We've never had evidence of a nexus point there," Amos shrugged.

"When they showed us the picture of the suspect—the picture of you—all those years ago," Noah added, "we assumed that the person who had attacked your dad had dumped the camera in the park. Obviously, that now seems unlikely."

"And," Amos raised a hand, "for a whole year we thought Edward had simply gone missing. We had no reason to think someone had..." He looked at Jake, sorrow in his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Jake."

Jake nodded and looked down at the map trying to gather his thoughts.

"You know," Noah said softly, "we stopped working for a long while, wondering if maybe something had gone wrong at one of the nexus points and Edward had made a jump and simply hadn't been able to come back. It really scared us."

"But when the police indicated that foul play might be involved," Amos added. "Well, this is really so hard to wrap my head around."

"Do you have copies of my dad's other old films?" Jake moved on, "We could compare them to the last reel."

Stop / Wisler

"Yeah, on an old hard drive somewhere," Amos nodded. "Your mom kept the originals."

"The Police Chief said something about a Detective Fowler that was investigating my father's case. But he was killed several years ago."

Noah looked off, thinking. Then, "Oh yes. I recall. That must be at least fifteen years ago."

"That's right," Amos sighed. "Jim Fowler. Horrible. His poor wife. I still see her every now and then at the store. I've known them ever since moving up here."

Jake looked off and thought for a moment. "So there's only been two unsolved homicides in Berne in decades, according to the Chief of Police. What's the likelihood that they're completely unrelated?"

"What do you mean?" Noah said.

"It just seems peculiar," Jake shrugged. "But maybe I'm losing my mind."

"Jim Fowler was shot, from what I recall," Amos pointed out. "Killed in the line of duty. I think it might have been a drug bust."

Jake nodded, but then added, "What if I talked to his widow? What if Detective Fowler had some information we're missing. They did say he was obsessed with my father's case. The current detective, huh... Matthews, he talked like Fowler thought there was more to my dad's disappearance than they ever figured out. Maybe Mrs. Fowler still remembers something? He had to have talked to her."

"What's the likelihood of that?" Noah asked.

"It does seem like a long shot," Amos added.

"But it's a start," Jake pressed on, looking at the two men. "Come on, guys. I've got absolutely nothing to go on here."

Stop / Wisler

Amos sighed and nodded. "We could pay her a visit. But her health isn't so good these days."

"I just need to know where she lives," Jake said. "I can go alone."

"Nonsense," Noah grunted.

"That's right," Amos said brightly. "We're going with you."

#

Detective Matthews stared at his computer screen, trying to fill out some paperwork he had been neglecting. But his mind was still consumed with the image of Jake Howell holding the small chalk board with the word "stop" hastily scrawled on it. How was that possible?

"Detective," came the voice of Samantha, a short college girl who was hired for the summer to help with updating the technology of the police department.

Matthews looked up at her. She stood in the doorway awkwardly holding the VHS tape. She nervously pushed back a strand of hair she'd dyed blue.

"So, I took a look at this tape," she said. "As far as I can tell, it has not been tampered with. This is the original tape, by all accounts. I mean, without sending this off to a much better lab with some pretty serious gear to have it looked over, I can't see how we could determine anything else."

Matthews pressed his lips together and nodded. "So no chance someone..." he waived a hand in the air, searching for words, "did something to the tape? Superimposed a new image in there or something?"

She shook her head, "No. I'm definitely not an expert on old technology like this..."

Stop / Wisler

Matthews's eyebrows shot up. "Old technology, huh?"

"Well, not old old..." she stammered.

"Go on," Matthews smiled.

"Well, this is an old tape, as far as VHS tapes go. It wasn't made yesterday. The image shows some degradation just from being played a lot and from being about nineteen years old now. The pattern of noise is consistent across the whole image. So if someone added something new to the tape, they did a damn fine job matching the noise, grain, and quality of this particular nineteen-year-old video tape. Not to mention the fact that this footage was originally shot on 16mm film. So to create a hoax, someone would have two levels of footage matching to do: match the original 16mm look and then the VHS copy look. Doable, but not easy."

"Maybe they tampered with the original film?" Matthews mused. "I'd have to get my hands on the original, and this Jake Howell guys said it was at his mother's place."

"It would be worth a look, but I doubt it will change much," Samantha said.

"Why is that?"

"Well, here's the thing. Maybe someone can match all the colors and noise from both the original film and this VHS copy. But the lighting and shadows are consistent. There's just nothing I can spot in the footage would make me think that the man at the end of the video was shot some other place and then added to the image."

"Oh, okay. You can tell that?" Matthew marveled.

"Well, I debunk faked UFO photos for this website a friend of mine runs," she said. "That's usually the dead giveaway of a faked photo. Shadow angles don't match between the UFO and the trees, things like that."

Stop / Wisler

"Ah," Matthews said, staring at her, unsure what to say.

"And I get why people want to fake UFO photos," she added. "But I don't get this. Wasn't it locked up in your office? Why would someone tamper with this tape anyway? What's in it for this guy to tamper with this tape and then show up here to talk to you?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Matthews murmured. "Anyway, I just wanted to check for sure. We have to cover all our bases."

He extended his hand to take the tape back. Samantha stepped in and handed it to him.

"Thanks for taking a look," Matthews said.

"You bet. Most interesting thing I've done so far," she said, spinning right back around to head out. She stopped and looked back. "Could it be someone related, like a relative that looks remarkably like this guy that came in here today?"

Matthews had to think for a moment about his possibility. Finally, he shook his head. "No. Edward Howell had an older brother who died some years before this footage was shot. Couldn't be him."

"Well, what else could it be?" she asked.

Matthews shrugged but offered no other response. Samantha headed out the door and down the hallway. Matthews stared down at the tape in his hands, then over at his computer. There was something else he needed to check. He knew Fowler had spent a lot of his off hours trying to work out this case. He had copious notes, documents, and other things he'd collected. He had kept copies to work on at home. He'd also had a copy of this tape. A second copy. Would Jake Howell's face be on that tape as well?

Matthews closed the screen to his laptop.

CHAPTER TEN

The black Chrysler rolled smoothly down the country road. Amos drove, both hands on the wheel. He maintained the speed limit, which normally would have been fine with Jake. But under the circumstances, he found it hard not to pressure Amos to step on the gas. Noah sat in the passenger seat. Jake, who sat in the back, leaned forward to talk to the two men. Clouds had rolled in and covered the sun, making what was once a bright summer day increasingly dim and muggy.

"These jumps through time," Jake said, "how long do they last?"

"Never more than a few minutes," Noah said, "as far as we've documented, at least."

"So you've experienced them?" Jake asked.

"A few," Noah nodded.

"What happens if you die during a jump? Where would your body go?" Jake said.

"Good question," Amos glanced up into the rearview mirror.

"There's still so much we don't know," Noah added. "And for obvious reasons, that is not something we have tested. I'm not even sure how we would test such a thing. We have been focused on documenting actual jumps and determining what conditions trigger a jump."

"Right," Jake mumbled, sitting back. After a moment, he sat forward again and spoke, "How big are these nexus points or soft spots? Can a person wander away from one of these places during a jump? Would they just stay in the time period they jumped to?"

Stop / Wisler

"Jake," Noah looked back at him, "I'm sorry. We just don't know. It's not like we've had the chance to wonder off during a jump."

Jake sighed, then nodded. He sat back, looking out the window as the trees that lined the road zipped passed. They reached an intersection where Amos took a left turn and headed into Berne.

"Now, when we get to Mrs. Fowler's place," Amos spoke up, "I'll introduce us. We may or may not derive anything useful from her. Her mind is no longer as sharp as it once was, I'm afraid."

The car pulled up to a small single story house in a residential neighborhood. The houses were mostly older, smile story homes, though some had a second floor. Amos parked on the street and the three men got out of the car and walked up to the house. The grey siding needed a seriously cleaning and the bushes and lawn had the disheveled appearance of a mangy dog.

Amos stepped up to the door and knocked.

Jake looked down and noticed several copies of the local paper still rolled up and in their clear plastic bags laying on the small cement front porch. This didn't instill a whole lot of confidence in him. But what else could he do? As if the state of this house weren't enough already, being back in Berne put him on edge. He glanced over his shoulder, looking out at the street. Maybe this too was another mistake.

The door opened slowly. At first Jake felt confused. The woman on the other side of the door appeared quite old. She had thinning wispy white hair that was unkempt and wore dress pants and a faded sweater in spite of the heat. Jake felt sure she must be much too old to have been the late detective's wife. How old had the man been? But he reminded himself that Amos had warned him the woman's health was poor.

Stop / Wisler

"Yes?" Mrs. Judy Fowler said softly. "Hello?"

"Judy, it's Amos. How are you?" Amos smiled broadly at her.

She looked at Amos for a moment, studying his face, apparently struggling to recognize him. Then her eyes widened and her lips parted.

"Oh, Amos. Hello," she said with a slight smile.

"This is a good friend of mine, Jake Howell," Amos indicated Jake.

"He's Edward Howell's son. And you remember Noah."

Amos put a hand out toward Noah, but Mrs. Fowler's eyes had locked on to Jake with sudden intensity. She studied him now with eyes that seemed simultaneously alarmed and groggy. Her head tilted to one side just a little as she stared at Jake for an uncomfortably long moment.

"Edward Howell," she said, her voice no more than a hoarse whisper.

"You're Edward Howell?"

"No, ma'am. I'm his son," Jake said.

She frowned at this, looking Jake up and down. She shook her head slightly and muttered something, but Jake couldn't make it out. She looked him in the eyes again and nodded.

"Come in, Edward. Come in. I have what you've come for," she said, waving her hand to the men, indicating they should enter. With that, she turned and walked slowly back inside her house. A gust of humid summer air kicked up dust as the men exchanged bewildered looks.

"Like I said," Amos explained, "I'm not sure how helpful this will be."

"Well," Jake shrugged, "we came this far."

They walked inside. Noah, being last through the door, closed it behind him to keep the wind outside. They found her living room empty. Jake looked around, wondering where she might have gone. They could hear shuffling somewhere in the house.

Stop / Wisler

"She thinks I'm my dad," Jake said quietly.

"We might be wasting our time," Noah lamented.

"After Jim was killed," Amos whispered, "she was never quite the same. The poor woman. I think it took such a big toll on her."

The shuffling grew louder and after a moment Mrs. Fowler returned to the living room. In her hands she held a small cardboard shoe box. Its top and corners were reenforced with masking tape which curled up at the end of each piece. The once bright colors of the branding were now faded and ripped in places, making it difficult to make out the exact brand. She walked slowly up to Jake and extended the box out to him. Jake looked down at it, unsure of what to do. But it was clear she meant for him to take it, so he gently grasped the box in his hands.

"What's this?" he asked.

"This is everything Jim put together when he was searching for you," she said, looking him in the eyes. "I've always kept it for him. Always kept it. Important to keep it."

Jake's jaw dropped open. He removed the lid and looked inside the box. There were only two items: a VHS tape and leather-bound journal. His heart beat hard behind his ribs as his mind filled with questions.

"Why did you keep this?" he asked, almost involuntarily.

"Jim wanted me to keep it," she answered. "He told me it was important. Very important. He searched so hard for you. So very hard." Her face contorted with sudden anger. "It drove him away. You took him from me, you know? Now you can take this from me. It's your curse to bear now."

And with that, she turned and moved to a worn recliner seat next to the faded sofa. She lowered herself into it carefully and then retrieved the remote to her television. She switched on the old cathode ray tube television

Stop / Wisler

set and sighed heavily like some great task had been accomplished at last. The din of a soap opera filled the room. Bewildered for yet another time that day, Jake looked over at Amos for any indication of what to do. Amos shrugged. It seemed that Mrs. Fowler was quite simply finished with her visitors.

#

The black Jeep pulled to a stop a few houses down. Behind the wheel, Detective Matthews removed his keys from the ignition and was about to get out of the car when he noticed something quite unexpected. He leaned forward, squinting at the sight through his windshield. Why was there a car parked just outside of the Fowler's place? *The Fowler's place*, he mused. *I still think of it as their place after all these years.* Judy was not one for having many visitors and the car didn't look like her sister's. Maybe it was just parked there coincidentally?

Matthews reached for the latch on his Jeep's door to open it, but movement at the front door of the house caught his eye. He froze, looking over in time to see three men stepping out of the house. His jaw tightened as he stared. *What the hell are you doing here, Jake Howell?*

There were two older men with Howell. It took Matthews a moment to place the right names with the vaguely familiar faces, but it came to him at last. They were the scientists with whom Edward Howell had been working all those years ago. What were they doing here? This was quickly becoming the most bizarre day Matthews could ever recall having.

His hand reached for the door release again, but again he stopped. As tempting as it might be to get out of the Jeep and talk to these three, his

Stop / Wisler

instinct for caution slowed his actions. Jake Howell had slipped out of the station earlier. He'd grown visibly uncomfortable when the idea of watching the tape had come up in their conversation. The fact that they had a copy of the footage clearly had not occurred to him. Or, was Howell playing some confounding game? The part of Matthew's brain—the dominant part, in fact—that was sure that the world was ultimately coherent and knowable protested loudly at Matthew's caution. *Just go out there and confront this fruit basket. He's clearly messing with you.* And yet, Jim Fowler's questions rushed to the surface. *What if there's more to this? What if there's some truth here we are just not prepared to understand?*

These two warring notions fought inside Matthews' mind. On the one hand, he apparently had legitimate evidence that clearly presented Jake Howell as the principal suspect in what clearly appeared to be the likely murder of Edward Howell. On the other hand, the evidence would be ludicrous to any judge or jury. Jake had only been a boy at the time of that film was shot and only a year older when the footage had been found and the police's VHS copy of the film had been made. But he appeared in it as an adult. Just what was going on here? Fowler's many theories that sounded more like *Twilight Zone* episodes rushed through Matthews' mind. Suspicion and curiosity mingled inside his chest in a rush of both trepidation and adrenaline. Something was incredibly wrong about all of this. Matthews wondered if this was what Fowler had often felt like. Had it been this swilling of logical paradoxes that had driven his predecessor to obsess over this case. But Fowler had not known that the man in the film was the adult son of Edward Howell. Yet, the mystery surrounding the case, the nature of the scientific research and testing Howell had been engaged in, and lack of a body or any further evidence of Edward's whereabouts had all compelled Fowler to believe

Stop / Wisler

there was more to this case than anyone had been able to uncover. In fact, it was Fowler's own commitment to the idea that sense could ultimately be made out of the case that kept him committed to sorting it out.

Matthew's hand slipped off of the latch to his Jeep's door. Outside, the three men reached their car and got in. As Jake opened one of the back door so he could climb into the back seat, the sight of what he held in his left hand sent a chill shooting through Matthews' chest and down to his stomach. Jake Howell had the box! He was certain it was the very same box Jim Fowler had kept his copy of the tape and his notes on the case. It had been one of Fowler's peculiarities—keeping copious notes in a special notebook dedicated to this particular case. And now, Jake Howell had it.

The three men appeared to not have noticed Matthews or his Jeep. Matthews' right hand reached out and placed his keys in the ignition but he didn't turn it. *Not yet*, he told himself. *Let them get going first*.

As the car pulled away, Matthews grabbed his radio and requested that an officer out on patrol stop by and check in on Mrs. Fowler, for his own peace of mind. But he couldn't go check on her now. He would lose them if he did.

#

"Well, that was certainly interesting," Amos said as he drove out of Judy Fowler's neighborhood.

"She seemed a bit confused," Noah said. "I'm not entirely sure we should have taken that box." Ha glanced back at Jake.

In the back seat, Jake had the leather bound notebook out. He leafed through its pages, scanning them quickly for anything that jumped out at him right away. Detective Fowler had made extensive notes about the man he'd seen

Stop / Wisler

in the film. He had a verbal description in his notes as well as the age range of 30 to 35 written down. He'd apparently checked every available criminal database at the time in an attempt to cross reference the footage against mug shots. Of course, he'd turned up nothing conclusive. A few possible matches came up, but these proved to be dead ends. The possible matches ended up being either deceased already at the time of Edward's disappearance or to have been securely behind bars several states away. In his notes, Fowler acknowledged the very real possibility that the man in the footage had no criminal record. But he certainly was doing his due diligence in leaving no stone unturned.

Jake scanned more pages as they drove, consumed with the notebook.

Apparently Fowler had spoken with Amos and Noah extensively at some point. He had kept notes about those conversations as well.

"Fowler talked to you guys?" Jake said.

"Oh yes," Noah nodded. "Several times."

"Naturally, he had lots of questions about our work since your dad apparently vanished while out doing a field test," Amos explained, "he had a lot of questions about what he might have been up to."

"And you guys didn't know about this test?" Jake frowned.

"No," Amos shook his head.

"You have to understand that your dad had a tendency to get very excited about an idea, and he could forget the whole world at times," Noah said. "He'd some times come in with some new bit of theory he'd been working on for some time. He liked to really have a sense of what he was getting into before presenting it to others, even to us. It like to really work things over first, not waste anyone else's time."

Stop / Wisler

Jake nodded, taking in this perspective of his father he'd never had the chance to observe for himself. It had been so long now that it had become difficult to recall specifics about his father. But the idea that the man might get lost in his work and forget about other things reminded Jake of himself. *I wonder if he were in my shoes if he would have made the blunder of showing up at the police station?*

"Seems like Fowler was curious about your work," Jake said, glancing down at the notebook.

"Yes, he showed a keen interest. But it was so early on in our research that we weren't able to offer him many specifics," Noah added. "You have to understand that back then we were quite unsure of what we were even dealing with. And had to be very careful about what we divulged about our theories as we were so far outside of the traditional territory of scientific research that we constenatly ran the risk of having our funding pulled or being blacklisted from publications or other academic work."

Jake looked down at the notebook and flipped through more pages. Around three quarters through the notebook the pages suddenly became blank. Flipping back, Jake stopped on the last entry.

"Where's Timber Field?" he asked.

Noah looked back at him. "It's just a few miles north of town. Why?"

"That's the last location Detective Fowler made notes about," Jake said. "He wrote here that he planned on taking a closer look at it since going over my dad's notes. Could it be the location in the final reel?"

"No," Noah shook his head, "Timber Field would be location number four or five.

"Number five," Amos said.

"What's at Location #5?" Jake pressed.

Stop / Wisler

Noah and Amos glanced at each other before Noah said, "It's just field."

"Well, I'd like to see it," Jake said.

#

Amos pulled the car off to the side of a country road and stopped. Jake looked out the window. A stone wall made of large rocks stacked neatly on top of each other ran along the side of the road. The field was an open space of knee high grass that led up to some woods in the distance. Dark clouds hung in the sky above the trees.

"This is Timber Field," Amos said.

Without hesitation, Jake threw open the car door and got out. The warm and humid breeze had picked up, indicating the likelihood of rain in the near future. The grass rippled in waves beyond the stone wall as if it too were a fluid. Jake walked up to the stone wall and looked out at the woods.

"What do you expect to find?" Noah asked as he got out of the car.

"Anything. Nothing," Jake said, without looking back. "I just have to look, okay? What else can I do?"

Walking down a few yards, Jake found a spot in the waste-high wall where the rocks had been disturbed and rolled apart. He stepped through the gap and walked into the tall grass.

"I'm not sure we're helping the situation at all," Noah said to Amos.

"I don't know what else to do," Amos shook his head. "Rather like his dad, isn't he? Look at him. So driven. I can't even imagine what he's going through."

Stop / Wisler

Noah muttered in agreement as he headed into the field after Jake. Amos him through the gap on the wall already scratching himself at the thought of big, mosquitos, and ticks. None of them noticed the black Jeep that crawled to a stop by the side of the road a quarter of a mile back.

"Where is the soft spot?" Jake called out to them as they approached.

"Exact borders haven proven rather difficult to determine," Amos called back. "But we are definitely close. We conducted most of our experiments further up, near the edge of the woods."

Jake headed toward the trees.

"Jake," Amos called out to him, "what do you honestly hope to find out here?"

He didn't bother to answer. Jake had to begin working things out one way or another. He figured he might as well begin with eliminating the possibility that what his dad had called Location #7 in the last reel of film was in fact just one of the six locations that they had already been studying. Why that might be the case, he couldn't imagine. At the same time, he had little else to go on and confirming that none of the known nexus points were the location seen in that final film felt like it might be some kind of progress. On top of this, Jake had had no connection to his father's work for the past two decades. He felt a need to do something, anything, to become familiar with his dad's research. What else could he do? Where else could he start in his quest to unravel this mess?

Jake stepped through the trees that lined the field. He looked about for anything that reached out to him with any sense of familiarity. There had been a particular tree in the footage on that last reel. The tree had had a large lump. Of course, maybe that tree had been cut down or blown over in a storm years ago. Jake had no way of knowing for sure. And yet, nothing about

Stop / Wisler

this particular woods stood out. But maybe he needed to go deeper. Maybe he was standing in the wrong spot, seeing things from the wrong angle.

Suddenly, the world around him wavered as if reality had suddenly been liquified. Jake's whole body felt incredibly heavy for a brief moment. His stomach turned, his head spun. For a split second he felt sure he was falling, then upside-down, then his feet pressed hard into the ground. Just as quickly as it had come, it all passed.

Jake blinked, looking around. He felt a strong desire to vomit. His body might have stopped moving—or feeling like it was moving—but his gut hadn't figured that out yet. Whatever had happened had really messed with his sense of balance and upset his stomach.

A cool breeze surprised Jake. It had been positively muggy a moment ago. He noticed that the trees were quite colorful around him, though the light seemed dimmer. A slight drizzle fell through the bright yellow, orange, and red leaves on the branches. Jake looked around, trying to spot Amos or Noah. Something moved between the trees to his left. Had they made it that far into the woods? The last he'd seen of them, they had been some distance from him back in the field.

Jake stepped toward the movement he'd just seen. His foot landed on a twig and it sent a sharp snap through the quiet woods.

Up ahead, a man in a trench coat turned around and faced him. "Who's there?" the man called back to him.

Jake stared at the man, unsure of what to say.

"What are you doing out here?" the man called back to him.

The man's face seemed familiar. Where had Jake seen this man before? He stood, frozen in place, unable to speak as his mind tried to work out why he

Stop / Wisler

felt he recognized this man's face. And then it came to him in a cold rush of dizzying realization--the plaque on the wall of Chief Wilson's office!

"Detective Fowler?" Jake said in disbelief.

"Yeah," Fowler answered gruffly, his frown slowly melting as he seemed to recognize Jake. "What? You?!"

In a swift move Jake barely registered, the detective reached under his trench coat and drew his side arm. He trained it on Jake.

"You stay put there!" Fowler ordered.

"Wait," Jake said, instinctively putting up his empty hands. "My name is Jake Howell. I'm Edward Howell's son."

Fowler shook his head, "Jake Howell is just a boy."

Jake looked around as the full weight of what he was experiencing came crashing down on his already confused and overwhelmed mind. Conflicting notions fought for dominance like stampeding bison. On the one hand, he knew well that he must have made a jump through time. On the other hand, the idea seemed so completely foreign and illogical he found himself more inclined to believe he was losing his mind. He looked up at Fowler.

"To you, right now," Jake said, "I am just a boy. But I'm not from here. From now."

Even as the words came out of his mouth, Jake felt their seeming absurdity like bile in his mouth. Even he could hardly accept what he was saying, and yet what other option did he have?

Fowler's eyes widened. "You best not play games with me," the detective growled, but something in his eyes told Jake that just maybe Fowler might believe him already.

"I'm trying to stop what happened," Jake insisted. "You saw the film. You saw what I wrote."

Stop / Wisler

"I saw you attack Edward Howell," Fowler countered. The Detective approached him slowly, gun still raised. "Why did you attack him?"

An absurd thought dashed into Jake's mind. *I guess I don't have to worry about Detective Fowler shooting me. After all, I still haven't attacked my dad in the last reel of film.*

"Hey," Fowler yelled at him. "I'm talking to you."

"I don't know," Jake shook his head. "I honestly have no idea why I would even attack my dad. But I haven't done that yet. For me, that hasn't happened yet."

"You're telling me you're a time traveller?" Fowler asked, an involuntary smirk manifesting itself as he continued moving slowly closer to Jake.

From behind a large tree Fowler had just passed, the figure in black stepped out, a gun in its gloved hand. Jake had only a second to register this. He shouted to Fowler, but the gun went off at the same instant. The loud blast echoed in the woods, causing Jake to jump involuntarily. A burst of red mist sprayed from Fowler's chest as his eyes went wide and his back arched. Fowler crumpled to the ground, rolling on the wet leaves as he gasped in horrible pain.

Jake looked up from the fallen man to the figure in black. The cloak over the head obscured the person within. The figure in black still held the gun up, a slender round barrel leading back to the revolver chamber. Jake stared in horror as images of his nightmares assaulted his mind. Suddenly, the long deadly pointing finger of the figure in his dreams made sense.

Range rushed through Jake. He sprang forward and grabbed the gun Fowler had dropped on the ground and pointed it up at the figure in black. Only, where was he? The figure was gone. Jake looked about frantically.

Stop / Wisler

"Stop right there!" came another voice behind him.

Jake recognized Detective Matthews' voice. But how had Matthews gotten here? Had he jumped back to the present? Jake looked over his shoulder at Matthews.

"Put down the gun," Matthews yelled.

Jake hesitated.

The world around them rippled and again Jake felt the disorienting sense of immense weight as his stomach turned. Again, his felt upside-down and then the sudden weight of his feet pressing hard into the ground. The moment the swirling sensation passed, he looked up to find that things were back to normal. The trees were green and dry, the air hot and muggy. Fowler's body no longer lay on the ground between Matthews and Jake. Also affected by the jump, Matthews rubbed his forehead, his eyes pressed shut.

Jake felt the impulse to flee, but Matthews looked up at him. He stood still, waiting for what would come next. Matthews looked down to the spot where moments ago Fowler had lain. With confusion in his eyes, he looked back up to Jake.

"What?" Matthews muttered.

Jake felt as if he were frozen in place, unable to will himself to do anything, to move any muscle. He still had his back to Matthews, but looked over his shoulder at the man.

"I said, drop the gun," Matthews yelled again.

Jake looked over in surprise to his right hand where he still gripped the gun he had grabbed. He dropped it, reacting as if he only just then had realized he held a viper poised to strike.

"Turn around!" Matthews barked.

Stop / Wisler

Jake complied and faced the man, instinctively bringing his hands up. Matthews had his own side arm leveled on Jake. He drew quick breaths, but his eyes remained locked on Jake. Jake looked around, taking in the surroundings. They were back now, but Matthews must have jumped with him. Somehow. He tried to replay in his mind what had just happened.

"You jumped too," Jake muttered.

Matthews looked down at the spot where Fowler's body should have been and back up to Jake. "What just happened?"

"We jumped," Jake said. "And then the man in black shot Fowler."

"Jumped?"

"It was," Jake searched for any way to explain. "You'd never believe me."

"Well," that's fine," Matthews growled, "you'll have plenty of time to try to convince me back at the precinct."

"Wait!" Jake pleaded. "I'm not a killer. I didn't do anything. I'm trying to stop all of this. I'm trying to stop the very thing that happens in that last reel of film my dad shot twenty years ago."

Matthews shook his head and said, "Jake Howell, you're under arrest for the murder of ..."

"Jake?" Amos called out from just beyond the woods.

Matthews looked off in that direction. In that instant, Jake's body moved even before he could make any conscious decision. The drive to escape took over him and he dashed into the woods at full speed away from Matthews. *He was about to arrest you, his mind screamed. Run!*

"Hey!," Matthews called out after him. "Stop!"

Jake's whole body contracted with a rush of fear as he heard the loud blast of a single shot from Matthews' gun. But nothing hit him. Instead off

Stop / Wisler

to the right and well above his head, he heard a tree branch splinter with the impact of the bullet—probably just a warning shot. But just a few yards ahead of him, Jake could see the sudden steep drop off where the woods gave way to a creek. He dashed full steam ahead and allowed himself to fall down the bank of the creek where he splashed into the cold water. Without hesitation, he stood and rushed across it and ran down its bank.

Several yards up the creek, a old tree had fallen, leaving a large hole in the bank where its massive roots had been pulled up. He was about to move in that direction when a thought popped into his mind. He looked back at the bank where he had come down. He's made a noticeable disruption in the mostly wet sandy banks of the creek. He couldn't just leave a trail for Matthews to follow. He trudged back into the creek and moved as quickly as he could to the fallen tree in the knee-deep water. Reaching it, he threw himself into the small dirt cave the ripped out roots had left when the tree had toppled. He pressed himself against the back wall and panted, trying to control his breathing so as to make a little noise as possible.

He tried to listen for Matthews, but his ears buzzed with adrenaline and rushing blood in his veins. Otherwise, all he could hear was the bubbling of the shallow creek. As he regained control of his breathing, he pulled his cellphone out of his pocket. He looked down at the glowing screen's top left corner, which indicated he currently had no signal and swore under his breath.

#

Amos and Noah froze at the sound of the gun shot that echoed through the woods. Nothing followed it, however.

Stop / Wisler

"We better get out of here now," Amos said, turning.

"But," Noah protested. "What about Jake?"

"He's running west, as far as I could tell," Amos pointed out. "If we get in the car, we might be able to meet up on the other side of these woods."

Noah looked back then followed Amos.

"We're in over our heads here," Noah said, catching up.

"I'm well aware of that," Amos shot back. "But we can't just leave Jake to fend for himself. He's a wanted man, but he hasn't committed a crime."

Noah reached out and grabbed Amos by the arm, stopping him.

"We do this," Noah said, sternly, "and we go down a path we can never return from."

Amos looked into his eyes and nodded. "It's Jake," Amos said softly. "Ed's boy. What else can we do?"

CHAPTER TEN

Matthews stood at the top of a bank leading down to the creek that cut through the woods, his heart racing. A warm breeze cut through the tree branches with a calm whisper that felt at odds with his still ringing ears. He looked up and down the creek for any sign of Jake Howell. Up ahead, the sandy bank of the creek seemed disturbed. Just across from that, on the other bank, Matthews could make out footprints. But they were concentrated in one spot and did not head off in any direction. So Howell had travelled either up or down the creek by walking in the creek itself to conceal his tracks. But which direction?

A several yards up the creek near a bend lay a large tree which had toppled some time ago. Matthew's eyes locked on to it for a moment, scanning it and the surrounding banks. He looked back in the other direction again before deciding to head toward the fallen tree. As he walked, images of Fowler being shot flashed through his mind. What the hell had happened back there? What had he seen? His hands shook with the remaining effects of the adrenaline rush and emotion. For an instant, he'd seen his old friend and mentor. Somewhere, buried bellow the drive to catch Jake Howell, Matthews could feel a desperate and primal desire to cry out, to go back to the spot where he'd witnessed Fowler's shooting.

Would it happen again? Could he stop it if it did?

He'd had a strange sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach the moment he realized where Jake Howell and the two scientists and pulled over. Timber Field. The site of Detective Fowler's unsolved murder. *Why this place*, he'd asked himself. He intended to ask that very question, along with many other

Stop / Wisler

now raging in his mind like boiling water. If only he could corner Howell and slap some cuffs on his wrists.

Matthews had pulled his Jeep over about a quarter of mile back from where Howell and the two scientists had parked. He cut through the adjacent field as quickly as he could. From a distance, he could see the three men walking through Timber Field. He worked his way up to the woods and crept closer to them. Only Jake Howell had walked into the woods. As he watched Jake carefully from about thirty yards, a sudden realization struck Matthews.

Howell stood in the very place where Detective Fowler's body had been found all those years ago. The woods could grow and change, but Matthews would always know that place, that damn spot. A rush of anger and resentment had come over him in that moment. Was this some kind of sick joke Howell was engaged in? Did he mean to lure Matthews out to this very place?

A second later, everything had warped around him as if the world were melting. His stomach turned and he felt as if he were a hundred times heavier. Pain shot through his head, causing him to close his eyes. When Matthews opened them again, he found that the world around him had changed. It was no longer summer, but clearly fall. With dizzying confusion, he watched from a distance as Jake seemed to talk to someone.

Matthews had approached as quietly as possible, ducking behind trees to keep from being spotted. When he heard the gun shot, he drew his own weapon and rushed forward. Nothing could have prepared him for what he had found. Even now he found himself starting to question of that was in fact what'd seen. Surely it couldn't have been. It was impossible. His rational might seemed ready to throw the rest of its faculties under the buss and declare his own lack of sanity as the root of this delusion.

Stop / Wisler

Matthews shook off the notion, knowing in his guts he had seen—had experienced—something undeniably real even as it was wholly unexplainable. Reaching the toppled tree in the creek, he stopped and looked around for any signs of where Howell might have gone if he had left the creek. The banks seemed undisturbed.

“Detective Matthews,” his radio crackled, causing him to jump slightly.

“Shit!” she spat as she grabbed his radio and stepped back from the bank.

“This is Matthews,” he said softly into his radio.

“Officer Reed checked in on Mrs. Fowler like you asked,” the dispatcher said. “Everything is fine. She’s just watching her soaps.”

“Thank you,” he said. Then, “I’m going to need you to put out an APB for Jake Howell. Murder suspect. Last seen in the woods of Timber Field wearing blue jeans and a grey t-shirt. Subject is white, in his thirties, about six feet tall, and has a short black beard and dark hair.”

He hesitated for a moment, wondering what else to say after what he’d witnessed. He certainly could not explain over the radio what he’d seen or what reason he had to believe Jake Howell was a dangerous suspect.

“Copy that,” the dispatcher said.

“The subject,” Matthews added, “is armed and dangerous.”

“Copy,” came the clipped response over the radio.

He lowered the radio and looked down the creek. If Jake Howell and continued up the creek, it would curve south and lead him back to town. Or he might have already found a place to scale the bank and run off in another direction. Meanwhile, the two scientists had remained back in the field. If he caught up with them, he could interrogate them as to what Jake was doing out there or find out what brought them out to the field in the first place.

Stop / Wisler

#

Anne dialed Jake's number again on her cell. again, it went directly to voice mail. She sighed, ending the call without leaving a message. She'd already left him two frantic and disjointed voice mails. She wiped a bit a sweat from her forehead. The air-conditioning blasted, but the old car's system was little match for the summer heat. Her phone's GPS app indicated to her she should take a right at the next intersection of the country roads.

Taking the right, the GPS then indicated she would arrive at her destination in half a mile. When she pulled up to place the GPS indicated should be location number one, she found only an overgrown trail leading back into the woods. She turned onto the trail and slowly proceeded. Ethan looked out the window with wide eyes.

"This is the first one?" he asked.

"I guess so," Anne said, flatly.

The unpaved trail curved to the right and then arrived at a small pavilion and a pond. The pavilion had stone pillars that held up an aging, moss-covered roof. The structure was mostly open. It must have been some sort of public space available for parties, family reunions, and the like, though it appeared unlikely that many made use of it anymore. It reminded Anne of the time she had been a bridesmaid in a wedding that took place in a similar location. She parked the car near the pavilion and killed the motor.

Immediately, Ethan threw open his door and got out. Anne couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm. *He thinks we're just here helping his dad learn more about grandpa's work, she thought. He has no idea what's at stake.*

Stop / Wisler

She opened her door and got out of the car, feeling the increased humidity in the air. Reaching back into the car, she retrieved the reusable cloth grocery bag that contained all of Edward Howell's old notebooks they had found with the film canisters. Looking up, she found Ethan standing in the pavilion looking up at the rafters the held up the old roof. She closed the car door and headed to him.

"Okay, buddy," she called out as she approached, "we're going to need to take a look at Grandpa's notebooks here and see if we can figure out where exactly location number one might be."

"Why?" Ethan asked.

"Well," Anne searched for what she might say. She couldn't just tell him she was looking for any possible indication that one of the six locations Edward had already been studying was in fact the supposed seventh location in the final reel—the reel she did not dare ever show to Ethan.

"Is it because you don't believe Grandpa was telling the truth?" Ethan said, more softly as Anne walked into the pavilion.

"No, it's not that," Anne said. "I just want to understand Grandpa's work. If all of this is true, then it's really something remarkable. Like, bigger than Einstein, or the moon landing."

"If this is true," Ethan frowned, repeating her words. "So you don't believe it?"

She looked off at the still surface of the pond. Maybe there was a part of her that didn't *want* to believe this. If it wasn't true, then the last reel was of no consequence. But how then did Jake appear in that twenty-year-old footage? *What if it really is a hoax? What if we are all being played for fools?* She shook her head, dismissing the questions. How could it be a hoax? And who would perpetrate such a hoax, and to what end?

Stop / Wisler

"How about we play a little game," she said at last. "You will help keep track of all the evidence that points to Grandpa's work being true. I will keep track of all the evidence that it might not be. After all, an important part of science is—"

"Testing a hypothesis!" Ethan blurted out with a grin.

"Exactly! So what do you say?"

"You're on!"

#

Armed and dangerous?

That's what Matthews had said. Jake played back in his head what had happened when Matthews had found him. Of course, he had been holding Fowler's gun, but he had not pointed it at Fowler. Had Detective Matthews not seen the man in the black cloak? Was it possible that in the confusion of experiencing the leap and then seeing his long-dead colleague that Matthew simply had not seen the other clocked figure? If that was the the case, than of course the detective had to assume that the gunshot that had echoed through the woods must have come from the gun in Jake's hands.

Fan-fucking-tastic, Jake sighed quietly in his hiding place. I'm now wanted for two murders I didn't commit! At this rate, I'll be a serial killer by tomorrow morning. In spite of himself, he grinned. Well, I was looking for a career change. Time-traveling innocent serial killer suspect has to pay better than philosophy professor.

He waited in silence as Matthews finished talking on the radio. Finally, he heard the man's footsteps quietly move away from the creek bank.

Stop / Wisler

Was he headed back? Jake wasn't sure. But he couldn't risk poking this head out yet. But how long could he wait? What could he do next?

Jake waited for several more minutes. Tree roots poked at him and he felt as if there were bugs crawling up his legs, though he couldn't be sure it wasn't just his imagination. He carefully checked his phone. Still no signal. After ten minutes had passed—which felt more like an hour—Jake decided that he'd better move. He had not heard anything else other than the soft babbling of the shallow and slow-moving creek and the call of birds that echoed through the woods. He had to do something!

Cautiously, he peeked his head out from his hiding place. Finally he scrambled up the bank of the creek, peering over the edge. He saw no sign of Detective Matthews. Looking back the way he'd come, Jake wondered what his best course of action was in this situation. Sadly, Aristotle's ethical mantra of finding the mean between extremes in this situation didn't quite seem to fit. *Damn you Nicomachean Ethics*, he mused. *I'm guessing Poetics is the book by Aristotle that might most help me now, seeing as it deals with ancient stories of tragedy.* He smirked and shook his head. *No, this is more like if Shakespeare wrote sci-fi. Tragic, twisted, and incredibly bizarre.*

He smirked at the thought. Maybe it was a testament to just how difficult it was to accept the reality of what was happening to him that he found himself humorously intellectualizing his situation now that the initial shock of all of this had finally begun to wear off. But a chilling thought crept up on him. Maybe this was like a science fiction tragedy play of sorts after all. What if like Oedipus, every choice Jake made only further set in motion the eventual actions that had already been prophesied? What if he had no free will in this matter and what he had witnessed on that final reel was already set in stone?

Stop / Wisler

You can't change the past, his mind screamed at him. But the image of himself holding that chalk slate up in the film played again and again in his head. He couldn't give up now. What if there was something yet he could do? After all, everything philosophers and physicists believed about time was certainly about to be called into question by the paper that Amos and Noah were about to publish.

Okay, Aristotle it is, he thought. *What are my extreme options in this case?* He lay crouched there, looking around and thinking. *Option one, I head back and turn myself in and hope that Amos and Noah have enough evidence to eventually exonerate me. Or*, another thought pushed its way into his mind, *enough evidence to prove my eventual and inevitable guilt.*

What was the other extreme option he could take? He tried to envision other scenarios and finally a chilling thought took hold of him. *I haven't killed my father yet. So if I kill myself now, I can't possibly be alive to travel back in time and kill my father. I could interrupt the series of events that will lead to me killing of my father by removing the one part of the equation I know I have control over: me.*

There was his other extreme! He could turn himself in and hope that highly controversial and speculative research that would certainly be debated and contested for years to come might somehow help exonerate him in the long run even though he had no empirical evidence to show that he had not killed his father and Detective Fowler. Or... he could kill himself right now.

"I guess running away is my mean between extremes," he muttered to himself.

He stood up, doing his best to ignore the thought that maybe his survival instinct simply pushed him to that conclusion. He'd waited long enough. He had to move. And he wasn't going back the way he'd come. Pulling

Stop / Wisler

out his cellphone so he could regularly check for a signal, he headed off into the woods, away from Timber Field and into a very uncertain immediate future.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Stooping, Matthews carefully used a pen to pick up gun Jake had dropped. He slipped the pen into the trigger guard and lifted the gun up so he could get a good look at it. It was an older model that had been a standard issue for the department years ago. Hell, it looked like what...

He lowered his head, trying to regain control of his mind as it overflowed with questions and emotions. It definitely looked like the weapon Fowler would have been carrying. Years ago, when Fowler's body had been found, his gun had not been found with him, in spite of the thorough searches done in the areas surrounding the crime scene. Could this really be the missing gun?

Pulling out an evidence bag, Matthews slipped the gun into the bag and sealed it. He could check the serial number on the gun back at the station and compare it with their records. If it was Fowler's gun, it would be a quick match. If it was, in fact Fowler's gun, then what Matthews saw couldn't have been some hallucination... or a ghost. *Slow your roll, buddy*, he told himself. *You'll probably find that there's no match on any database for this serial number and it's just one of those random strange things no one can quite explain.* Right now he might settle for unexplainable. He wondered if shrugging all this off as momentary insanity or an unsolvable mystery might not be more comforting than the alternative. If he did confirm that this gun was Fowler's could he really face the whole world of new questions that would arise?

Stop / Wisler

He stood up and tried to shake off the sinking feeling that he was loosing his mind. He'd returned to the edge of the woods by Timber Field and found that the two older scientists had left. Maybe it was the incredibly bizarre nature of what he'd witnessed, or maybe some other instinct slowed him down, but rather than rush out of there, Matthews engaged himself in the tangible work of investigating the crime scene—or at least what seemed to him to be a crime scene. Never mind the fact that he wasn't positive that in strict legal terms what he had witnessed actually constituted a crime. This was all so far beyond anything he had ever imagined.

In his mind, he could hear Jim Fowler's voice expounding some new and absolutely batshit crazy theory about time travel and other science fiction nonsense. His theory's had certainly made the weekly poker game with some of the guys from the force and a couple of the firefighters from town an entertaining time.

"It's not unheard of," Fowler had carried right on, in spite of the jeers from the other players. "There's a lot of mythology around the Stonehenge site, for one."

"Raise," said the Chief, throwing in four chips. "And Jim, if you catch yourself a bonafide time traveler, you be sure to call the folks down in Roswell."

The group laughed. Even Jim Fowler laughed. That's how he'd been. It was as if he simultaneously whole-heartedly believed something that defied logic was taking place in their own backyard, and yet knew full well it was utterly preposterous to take it seriously. Matthews realized only now how lonely it must have been. Jim was no idiot, but something had grabbed his attention, seized his imagination and instincts, and refused to let go. And now, for the first time in fifteen years, Matthews allowed himself to

Stop / Wisler

contemplate the possibility that whatever it was that had sucked Fowler in so deep had in fact cost him his life.

#

Amos stared at the road, trying to control his breathing. Noah sat in the passenger seat looking out his window. Neither said a word. The hum of the motor and the tires on the road provided a bed of constant sound against which the two men listened to their hearts beat with decaying franticness.

The chirping of a cell phone caused Amos to jump slightly and pull the steering wheel a little to the right. The car swerved slightly before he compensated and quickly regained control. Noah looked at him and it took a moment for Amos to realize that it was his cellphone that rang in the pocket of his thin grey suit jacket. Retrieving it, he looked down at the screen.

"It's Jake!" he spat out.

"Well, answer it!" Noah shot back, his eyes wide.

Accepting the call, Amos brought the phone to his ear.

"Amos?" Jake said on the other end.

"Where are you?" Amos asked.

"I think I got away for now," Jake answered. "I found a small road that cuts through the woods and just finally got a signal for my phone."

"What kind of road?" Amos said.

"It's a dirt road, pretty narrow."

Amos looked over at Noah, "He headed west like I thought." Speaking into his phone, he said, "Okay, I know that road. We're not too far away. Sit tight and we'll come to you."

Stop / Wisler

"Did you see what happened?" Jake asked. "I saw... in black... then detect..."

The phone beeped in his ear and Amos pulled it away so he could look at the screen. "Call dropped," it indicated. Amos sighed tossed the phone in the cupholder next to him and pressed down on the gas pedal.

#

A bird called in the distance, its song echoing through the woods with a sharp clarity that nearly hurt his adrenaline-buzzed ears. Jake knew he was alone, but he couldn't take any chances. A few yards away from the dirt road, he crouched in the woods by the thick trunk of a particularly old and mossy tree. He looked down at his phone again. The signal had vanished. Though the phone indicated he had two voicemails, he didn't bother with trying to check them just then. He waited for any sound of a car coming down the dirt road. Meanwhile, his mind kept replaying what he'd seen.

His nightmare come to life.

A long-dead cop alive again and then cut down.

At last, something caught his ear. He stood so he could press his body against the tree trunk and peered through the trees out at the road in the direction that the sound came from. If he didn't recognize the car—or worse, recognized it as a cop car—he'd have to hide behind the tree and move around the trunk in time with the car's passage in order to remain out of sight.

Finally, he could see a shape. He held his breath as he waited for it to come more clearly into focus as it moved in and out of view between tree trunks. It was approaching slowly but getting quite close now. At last, Jake recognized it the vehicle. Dashing out from behind the tree, he rushed to the

Stop / Wisler

side of the road. He stumbled out and stopped on the road, realizing too late he'd meant to stop sooner so as not to get hit. Amos slammed hard on the breaks and the car skidded on the dirt to a rocky stop, the front bumper less than a foot away from Jake's knees. Jake stared, mouth agape, at Amos and Noah inside the car.

Amos rolled down his window enough to yell, "Get in!"

Snapping out of it, Jake rushed around the car to the back door on the driver's side. Throwing it open, he dove in. Amos wasted no time and started driving even before Jake could close the door. He slammed it shut and leaned forward between the front seats.

"No one followed you?" he gasped

"No," Amos said.

"I heard Detective Matthews call in a search for me over the radio," Jake said. "What do we do now?"

"What happened back there?" Amos said. "One moment you were walking into the woods, then the next thing we know we hear that police officer yelling at you and you take off running."

"We heard a gunshot," Noah added. "Did he fire at you?"

"He thinks I'm dangerous," Jake shook his head. "I had to run. He thinks I killed my father. And... now he thinks I killed Detective Fowler."

"What?!" Amos and Noah said together.

"I think I jumped somehow," Jake said, trying to control his breathing.

"Suddenly everything was different. The leaves... it was fall. And I saw Detective Fowler standing there. He recognized me. Not as me, but, you know, he recognized me as the man in the film. He was going to arrest me. Then a man in a black cloak and hood showed up... and killed Fowler. And then

Stop / Wisler

Detective Matthews was there. I'm not sure how long he was there or what he saw, but I don't think he saw the actual shooter. He thinks I shot Fowler."

"Holy shit, Jake," Noah sighed.

"What triggered that jump?" Jake asked.

Noah shook his head, "We've been trying to work that out for some time. The presence of this other guy—Matthews, you say?—complicates it. Hard to tell for sure. Our theories are pretty general still."

"Well, I'm all ears," Jake said. "Anything is better than nothing at this point. So let's hear it."

The car bounced down the dirt road and reached an intersection with another dirt road. Amos kept going straight, putting as much distance between them and Timber Field as possible for the time being.

"Well, we thought for a while that there might be a specific moment, or point in time, to which each place is connected," Noah explained. "Like a specific event that each location would jump to. We called it our 'scratched record theory' because if it was true each location would operate basically like the damaged grooves in a vinyl record causing the needle to keep jumping back to the same location over and over. But jumps don't happen on every visit, and when they have happened, they haven't always been to the same moment in time, as far as we can tell. Otherwise we would always see the same thing. But sometimes we would jump and it would be winter, other times it would be spring."

"Are jumps always backwards?" Jake asked.

"Yes," Amos piped up. "So far, every indication we've had is that the jumps are always to the past. Though, to be fair, there are plenty of instances in which we have been hard pressed to be able to determine for sure if we've jumped back for forward."

Stop / Wisler

"Hard to know for sure too," Noah added, "since it's not like there's a calendar laying around at these locations to tell us we just jumped to next summer instead of last summer. But of the jumps that we've been able to cross reference with detailed data about weather conditions, we have some reason to believe jumps are at least predominantly to the past."

"Why would that be?" Jake frowned.

"Maybe the future doesn't exist yet," Amos shrugged. "It certainly would be consistent with certain cosmological models in which the present is the razor's edge of reality, cutting its way into the fast void that is the future."

"Or maybe it's just how jumps work," Noah added.

"Meaning what, exactly?" Jake pressed.

"Your father toyed with the idea that these jumps might actually be triggered by the observer. For my money, I think he was right. As far as we have ever been able to document, a jump never happens independent of a person being present to experience the jump. It's not like a theoretical wormhole in space that might be out there regardless of whether we know about it or not."

"So someone has to be there to cause a jump," Jake shook his head.

"It's the uncertainty principle at work, in essence," Noah continued. "We can't seem to remove the observer from the observation because without the observer there is nothing to document. But of course, the presence of an observer means a specific change to what we are able to document. To observe a jump is to cause a jump. But the real problem is that any given jump seems unrepeatable."

"Really?" Jake jaw dropped.

"Again, we're working with the best information we've been able to gather," Noah explained. "It's possible we're wrong about this, but in all of

Stop / Wisler

the data we have been able to gather, it sure seems to be the case that no two jumps in a given location have happened twice."

"And you're sure that you have to have a person there capable of observing the jump?" Jake pressed.

"We did a whole set of experiments with remote controlled equipment and round the clock recording," Amos pointed out. "Nothing. Ever. Not even a glitch in the gear."

"Okay. So it has to be a person. Maybe there's some sort of quantum entanglement between the observer and the time they jump to?" Jake asked.

"That's one theory," Noah nodded. "Your father and I had wondered if given a strong enough connection to a moment in time, a person might be able to trigger a jump back."

"Though we've never been able to conclusively prove that," Amos pointed out. "That's why we need to expand the scope of our work so more scientists can test our theories. Refine them. Maybe come up with better ones. If the observer is the catalyst for a jump, then we need more observers. We have to demonstrate that the jumps aren't simply random events or that they aren't being influenced by other factors we haven't accounted for. I'm still not convinced we can demonstrate that the person experiencing a jump is the one causing it."

"But clearly people can be at a nexus point and encounter someone who's made a jump," Jake pointed out.

"Yes," Noah said with a smile. "That much we do know."

Jake stared out at the road through the windshield, trying to soak in all the dizzying information. This was all too theoretical, too abstract. Meanwhile, he was wanted for two murders. Two murders. However, one currently lacked a body. Where was his father's body? Fowler's body had vanished,

Stop / Wisler

supposedly remaining in the past he and Matthews had jumped to. *Of course his body remained in the past*, Jake thought. *After all, they had found his body in Timber Field fifteen years ago. So where is my father's body?*

"These nexus points," Jake said, "only allow a jump in time, right? Not space?"

"Well," Noah raised his hands, "it's hard to say exactly what is happening at a quantum level. But in practical terms, the jump seems to be through time only, but always connected to particular geographical location. We assume that if you found a way to stay longer than just a few minutes, you could wander off to any place in the time period you jumped to."

Jake sat back and stared out the window. They had come out of the woods at some point. Now they traveled past open fields with only a periodic house dotting the landscape here and there. He continued working through what he was learning about the nexus points and how they worked. *So a jump only happens with someone there to trigger it. Why?*

He sat forward and asked, "What if there's something to my dad's theory? What if one of us triggered the jump back there? If you two didn't see it, it has to have been either Matthews or me. It doesn't seem likely that Fowler triggered it since it appears we went back in time to the moment when Fowler was out in Timber Field some 19 years ago. So, let's say the cause is a connection to a given moment. Who would have a strong enough connection to Jim Fowler's death?"

Amos and Noah exchanged a look, mulling this over.

Finally, Noah answered, "This Detective Matthews, it would seem."

"Right," Jake nodded. "Detective Matthews."

"What do you think?" Noah asked Amos.

"It sounds like the best theory we have right now," Amos shrugged.

Stop / Wisler

Noah looked out the windshield as he nodded. Suddenly, his eyes went wide and he pointed up ahead.

"Here!" he nearly shouted. "Stop up here!"

"What?" Amos glanced over at him.

"Pull over up here," Amos insisted.

Amos stepped on the breaks and took the right turn into a dirt path up a hill.

#

A strong gust of humid air pushed fluttered and agitated the trees as the as the tree men walked up the trail. Amos had parked the car near the entrance to a hiking trail which rose sharply at a rather steep incline. Noah led the way, several steps ahead of the other two.

"So what is this place, exactly?" Jake called out.

"This is one of he locations we have studied," Amos replied.

"It's up that way," Noah pointed up ahead and off to the right.

"What are we doing here?" Amos called out Noah.

"I have a hunch," he said.

They walked for a few minutes, Jake lost in thought. He glanced at Amos, who walked next to him. Sweat beaded on the older man's forehead, but he breathed with ease despite the effort of the hike. Jake, having not bothered to get much exorcise since losing access to the on-campus fitness center, felt a bit winded. But his mind continued to work on the puzzle that had become his life so suddenly.

Stop / Wisler

"So, supposing my dad's theory was right about how to trigger a jump," Jake said, watching where he stepped on the rising uneven path. "How could a person form a strong enough connection to a particular moment in time?"

"We've been asking that and many other questions," Amos said. "It's possible that you'd have to witness something at the nexus point. Something about being there for that moment leaves some sort of impression, possibly some truly mysterious form of quantum entanglement with those particular coordinates in space-time. One of the most peculiar aspects of a jump to me is how we can return to not just a specific moment in time, but the matching moment in space. After all, the the earth is moving, the universe is expanding, no two seconds take place in the same cosmic spot. But we'll... What is it?"

Jake was shaking his head, looking down as he walked.

"I didn't think Detective Matthews had witnessed Detective Fowler being shot fifteen years ago," Jake said.

"Hmm, good point," Amos mused as they continued their climb.

"Your dad," Noah called back to them, "once suggested the idea that maybe it's an emotional connection. We always gave him a hard time for that one. We can't measure an emotional connection to a moment in time. But he insisted that maybe a strong enough emotional connection tied to an event at the location could do the trick."

"Emotions?" Jake frowned. "That seems..."

"I know, I know," Noah smiled and continued walking.

"It's a rather unscientific theory at face value," Amos said. "I obviously have my own reservations with such a hypothesis. But, emotions are governed by electric impulses in our nervous systems. We're not sure how exactly these locations make the leap to a specific place in time, but

Stop / Wisler

possibly something about the unique neurological activity—which is nothing more than electrical impulses—of an observer with strong emotional connection to a specific event could serve as a trigger. It would be a matter of the brain's electrical impulses interacting with a nexus point in such a way that it provides the needed information for a jump."

"Like a catalyst," Jake suggested.

"Sort of," Amos bobbed his head. "A catalyst will cause a reaction every time when mixed with the same chemicals. But this isn't chemistry, and, like we said, we can't seem to make a second jump to the same moment in space-time."

"It just sounds so," Jake raised his hand, searching for the right word, "magical."

"Mystical," Amos smiled, "was the word your father used to describe it. But then, your father was more comfortable with mystery—even grand mysteries—than me, being both a spiritual and scientific man. But maybe the spiritual is simply that which we have yet to understand scientifically."

"Spoken like a true physicalist," Jake smiled.

They walked in silence for a moment, Jake's mind lingering on thoughts of his dad. What remained of the decades-old memories felt faded, warped with time. Naturally, his mind quickly returned to the image of his father being tackled in that final reel of film and Jake returned to the puzzle at hand.

"So, maybe if a person developed enough of a connection to an historical event, they could jump to that time?" he said.

"Well, it's all quite theoretical," Amos said. "If your dad was right, that would require a level of emotional connection to an historical event that might be hard to achieve without having lived through that event

Stop / Wisler

yourself. That could explain why we've never seen dinosaurs in our jumps, though Noah is still holding out hope."

Amos chuckled. But Jake was still processing all the possibilities, trying desperately to form a picture of how these nexus points, these soft spots in the time-space continuum, might work.

"But couldn't that explain what I saw back there?" Jake pressed. "If Detective Matthews knew Fowler well, if they were good friends and working on the police force together at the time of Fowler's murder, maybe Matthews really does have a profound and specific emotional connection to the moment of Fowler's murder even though he wasn't there 19 years ago. So, maybe he could have triggered the jump."

"Maybe," Amos nodded.

"Well, I don't see how it could be me," Jake shrugged.

"Here!" Noah called back to them.

Jake and Amos looked up and saw Noah standing several yards ahead at the top of the hill. Pine trees surrounded them now. Off to the right, a sharp drop gave way to a steep, rocky decent where a creek cut through the old woods. This creek flowed over rocks, not sand like the one in Timber Field. Reaching Noah, Amos and Jake looked round.

"Yeah, this is definitely within location number two," Amos nodded.

Noah looked at the two of them with wide eyes and a grin that made his whole face shine. "Oh my god," he said softly.

"What?" Jake asked.

"Are you feeling alright?" Amos frowned.

Suddenly, Jake felt his stomach turn and his body being pressed down as if it weighed substantially more. A ripple of light travelled through the world around them. Jake squinted in the dramatically brighter light. As his

Stop / Wisler

senses returned to normal, he blinked several times, getting his eyes acclimated to the brightness. Cold air stung his skin. Finally able to look around, he realized that snow hung from the tree branches and covered the ground.

Noah let out a short laugh, his breath billowing from his mouth in a cloud of steam that drifted out into the winter air and vanished. His eyes were fixed on something just off to his right in the woods. Jake and Amos looked over and discovered a man standing there. It took Jake a second to recognize the familiar face. It was Noah! A somewhat younger Noah, dressed in a winter coat and warm hat, his beard darker and longer, stood at the edge of the woods holding a Geiger counter.

"Holy shit," Jake muttered involuntarily.

"Unbelievable," Amos smiled.

The bewildered younger Noah stepped closer to them. "This can't be," he said.

"It is," Noah nodded. "It's really happening."

The younger Noah laughed, the sound echoing slightly. Suddenly, the Geiger counter he held began emitting a rapid succession of clicks. The world around them rippled again, and Jake felt the rush of dizziness and weight. A second later, it stopped. But Jake's stomach still felt queasy and his head hurt slightly.

Looking around, he found that the snow was gone. The warm, gusty, humid wind pushed against the three men as they stood at the top of the hill trying to regain their bearings. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Jake looked to the spot where the younger Noah had stood a moment ago. The movement of his head sent his stomach into a turn, and before he could stop himself he bent over of its own accord and he threw up.

Stop / Wisler

"That was a big jump," Amos said, rubbing his temples. "The bigger they are, the worse they feel."

Jake wiped his mouth and stood up. Amos stood next to them looking down at the ground, a frown of his face, as he pulled in controlled breaths and blew them out slowly.

"I always wondered when that would happen!" Noah said, his smile returning. "I should have known! It has be the strong connection I have to that moment. I recall feeling so frustrated with our research—that it wasn't going anywhere. It was a few years after Edward had gone missing and I just felt so lost. And then... this happened. As if a gift from God."

Amos looked up at Noah, "You never told me."

"I wanted to wait until it happened," Noah said. "Since I knew you'd be there to witness it."

"Well, that's amazing!" Amos smiled. "But maybe we should go before the police find us here."

Amos turned and stared down the path, his shoulders still hunched slightly as he kept his hands pressed to his stomach.

"Damn it," Jake said to Noah, "we should have pulled out a phone and shot some video. That was incredible!"

"Maybe," Noah laughed. "But I'll never forget..."

A blur of black struck Noah hard as he spoke. Noah yelled out in pain as his body was sent flying past the cliff's edge. Jake watched in horror as Noah's arms failed in a futile attempt to find anything to grab ahold of to stop his fall. He dropped at least thirty feet onto the protruding rocks below near the creek.

There was a thud and Noah's scream instantly become nothing more than a quickly fading echo. Jake looked over at the black figure.

Stop / Wisler

"No!" He yelled, charging at the figure.

The figure in black turned quickly and ran for the woods. Jake skidded on the dirt and gravel. His feet flew out from under him and he went down hard on his left knee, feeling a sharp stone stab him. Scrambling back to his feet quickly, he rushed after the attacker. But a second later, he saw the fleeing black shape simply vanish among the trees. He stopped as he reached the woods, staring at the spot he'd last seen the figure in black.

"Noah!" Amos called out behind him.

Jake turned, running back to the end of the cliff where Amos now stood, looking down. Looking over the edge, Jake saw Noah's contorted body on the rocks below.

He heard himself scream out, "Noah! Noah!"

"Oh my god," Amos muttered, his voice shaking. "Noah, no."

"We have to get down there," Jake said. "We have to help him!"

Off to his left, a bright flash of distant lightning caught Jake's eye. Amos looked over at him through tear-filled eyes.

"He's gone," Amos said. "That's too far to fall. To fall on those rocks like that..."

"We can't just leave him," Jake said.

"I know! I know," Amos looked back down. "Maybe we..." The boom of the thunder reached their ears and Amos looked up at Jake. "Look, there's a storm coming, and you and I alone are of no help to him now. You are a wanted man, Jake. We both are, most likely. How do you think this is going to look to the police?"

Jake's jaw dropped, but he held Amos' tearful gaze. "He needs help!"

Amos looked down at his fallen friend. "He's... we can't help him now. Best we can do might be to..." He looked around even as rain drops began to

Stop / Wisler

fall from the sky. "I don't think we can get down there. We're likely to slip and hurt ourselves. We need to call for help."

Jake pulled out his phone but Amos reached out and stopped him.

"We have to think carefully, my boy," Amos said, and then cleared his throat, his words choked by emotion. "This does not look good. We can and will get him help but we've stayed here too long already. That person, that thing, it could be back. And if you call the police now... If we stay here... Who will believe? We will be " Amos looked back down and gasped for breath before he spoke again. "Oh Noah, my dear friend. What has happened? What have we gotten ourselves into?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Anne looked down at the notebook she held. She had it open to a page where a hand-drawn diagram indicated the rough area of the nexus point in relation to the pond and pavilion. She took in a deep breath of the humid air and looked around. Ethan darted between trees several yards ahead of her. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Mom, is it going to rain?" Ethan called to her.

She looked up and tried to peer through the canopy of leaves but couldn't see the clouds above. It had grown increasingly dark as they walked away from the pond and into the trees. Now, it seemed to Anne, it was growing darker by the minute as the air grew heavier with cool moisture. Snapping the notebook shut, she dropped it back into the bag she'd brought along to carry all of the notebooks. She scanned the trees around her trying to see if anything might look remotely familiar from the films she'd been able to watch so far. *Who am I kidding? All the trees have changed. Nothing looks the same*, she sighed. But she recalled the footage on the final reel, and that was what she was really here to try to identify anyway. She thought back to that bit of film. She'd watched it several more times on on her computer while Ethan was busy. She had felt her mind travel through predictable patterns of shock, disbelief, outright denial, and then finally a strange sort of acceptance in which she started being able to look at other details other than the face of her husband.

Within the frame there had been an old tree with a rather large bulge, known as a burl. She recalled the term from a series of slick landscaping

Stop / Wisler

videos the marketing company she worked for in Boston had produced for a client who specialized in what they liked to call "landscape design." She'd managed the projects and learned quite a bit about the types of trees, grass, flowers, rocks, fertilizer, and so forth the landscaping company used or dealt with in their work designing green spaces in major metropolitan areas. *Funny what sticks with you*, she mused.

She looked around slowly, trying to spot any significant burl. It was a particularly large bulge on the tree that appeared in the footage, and the branches had spread just above it in a V shape. Even if the tree was much older now she felt certain it would still be quite recognizable. But would the tree still be there? She wasn't sure exactly how the jumps through time worked. Had Jake jumped back in time? If so, then what she saw in the final reel had happened twenty years ago and it was quite possible the tree was no longer standing. On the other hand, it might still be standing somewhere else—just not where she was currently looking.

But what if by some chance Jake's father had jumped forward in time, then the tree would most certainly still exist somewhere in the present as whatever happened in that last reel of film was not something Jake had experienced yet. It was in the future as far as she and Jake were concerned. Edward Howell's past was their future. Trying to wrap her head around that concept had caused her a couple of honest-to-God dizzy spells.

She wondered how Jake was holding up. Was his philosophical mind running wild with the implications of what was happening to him, analyzing things from a detached and abstract perspective? Or was he so overwhelmed by the weight of this unimaginable discovery that he couldn't think at all? She'd seen him swing between the two before as recently as his mother's passing. But that was different; it had been slow and expected. There was

Stop / Wisler

plenty of time to process and grieve at each stage. When the end had come, there had been loss, but there had also been relief and even peace. This, on the other hand, was sudden and seemingly illogical. She figured he'd likely try to...

A loud snap off in the woods caught her attention and she stopped in her tracks, looking around. The wind blew, but no birds sang. She felt suddenly as if there were eyes watching her from somewhere among the trees. She tried to find Ethan but saw no sign of him.

"Ethan?"

"Up here," he called back.

She moved forward more quickly, unsure of why she suddenly felt so uneasy. The snapping twig had likely been Ethan. But it had echoed in the woods, carried by the breeze, and she couldn't quite place it. *Your imagination is running wild*, she told herself. She had to admit that while the work that Jake's father, Noah, and Amos had been doing seemed to be strictly empirical, something about the footage Edward Howell had captured definitely had the feel of something almost supernatural. Sinister, even. Maybe it was just the influence of a whole host of horror movies that used the idea of "found footage" as the central device in their creepy storytelling. And yet, she couldn't shake off the feeling even now that she was being watched. Her skin crawled and she glanced about. As she walked quickly, she imagined how strange and frightening it must have been at times for Edward to have experienced jumps through time. No wonder people might mistake such an experience as having stumbled on to a ghost or apparition.

A sudden chill shot through her as the world around her rippled and distorted. She felt as if some invisible force spun her around as she walked. Then, as if she had been sucked down a hole, her body was pressed down by the

Stop / Wisler

invisible force. Just as quickly as it had come, the dizzying weight vanished. She felt queasy and blinked as her eyes adjusted to the increased brightness of the light in the woods. The sun was suddenly out. She felt disoriented as the trees around her seemed different. Her turning stomach threaded to overwhelm her, but she paused, looked straight ahead, and breathed slowly and deeply. It was an old trick she'd learned when she had been pregnant with Ethan and morning sickness—more like all day sickness—had plagued her for months.

"Ethan?" She said at last, as the nausea subsided. Her voice echoed through the quiet woods. There was no breeze now, just the warmth of a spring day and the chirping of birds.

"Mom?" he answered and moved out from behind a tree about ten yards to her right.

She made her way to him, but as she moved through the woods, something off in the distance among the trees caught her eyes. She looked out to her left and for a brief moment she saw a man.

Not just any man; it was Edward Howell!

He stood there, notebook in hand, looking at her. Next to him stood his old camera. She could just barely make out the sound of the motor of the camera whirring away as it rolled film of this very moment. She locked eyes with Edward and froze. He seemed just as surprised to see her out there as she was to see him.

She glanced at the notebook in his hand and then down to the one she held and the bag with other identical notebooks. Could it be? It had to be.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the world rippled again. The same feeling of being pressed down and spun about hit Anne with force. And again, just as quickly, it was all over. Her head hurt, and her stomach turned

Stop / Wisler

again, but she looked around anyway, trying to regain her bearings. The humid wind and dimmer light had returned.

Ethan, leaning against a tree not too far from her, doubled over and threw up. Anne, controlled her breathing and swallowed, willing the nausea away as she walked to her son. Ethan looked pale as he leaned on the tree trunk and waited for the nausea to pass.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" she asked.

"Mom, what happened?" he said, wiping his mouth and looking up at her.

He shook slightly and Anne stooped and took him in her arms. "It's okay, honey. I think we just travelled through time. How awesome is that?"

She looked him in the eyes and smiled. Ethan managed a weak smile in return.

"Does time travel always feel like that?" he muttered.

"I don't know," Anne shook her head. "Did you see Grandpa?"

Ethan nodded. "For just a second."

Excited, Anne stood and started to rummage through the bag of notebooks. She recalled a bit of footage where she'd seen something that might well have been this very jump. *That's impossible*, part of her mind insistent. And yet, she recalled the out of focus shape among the threes in one of the film reels. Could it be that she'd seen herself and not known it? Could her image really in a reel of film more than two decades old? After all, Edward's camera had been rolling just now and pointed in her direction.

Even as she pulled out a notebook she could sense the change in Ethan. He stood perfectly still, staring past her. The feeling of being watched rushed back over her like ice cold water that suddenly doused the fire of her excitement.

Stop / Wisler

Anne turned and looked over her shoulder. The figure, dressed in black from head to foot, stood a few yards behind her, perfectly still. Anne turned to face him fully, but even as she moved, the cloaked figure lunged! Ethan's scream rang out through the woods in all directions and bleed into the roar of fresh thunder.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tiny drops of water clung to the windshield as they drove in silence. Jake stared forward, his eyes focused on the slowly collecting first raindrops to be released by the dark grey clouds that now occupied the entire visible sky.

In his mind, all he saw was the figure in the black cloak striking Noah, again and again. Noah, eyes wide with panic, went over the edge, but Jake could never reach him.

Behind the wheel, Amos drove in silence. Jake glanced at him, noticing how he gripped the wheel tightly with both hands. His eyes, while resolutely on the road, brimmed with tears. His breathing was quick, as if he were working hard to keep back the swirling tide of emotions that had to be raging within him.

"What is happening?" Jake said, his voice cracking. "Why is this... this person, this thing... why is it killing?"

Amos shook his head, his lips parting as he let out a slight sigh. A tear rolled down his cheek.

Jake looked away, feeling the sudden rush of grief that threatened to break him. There would be time for that later, but right now he had an entirely new problem to solve. Suddenly, being a wanted man didn't seem all that important anymore. His need to find a way to stop what appeared to be his own act of murder was replaced by an overwhelming desire to kill whoever this figure in black was. He paused on that thought. Was that what he really wanted? To kill whoever the person in the black cloak? All other ethical

Stop / Wisler

considerations seemed to melt away in that moment. His own stated pacifism crumbled as his mind replayed the sight of Noah falling to his death.

But a new thought occurred to him. Was there a way to reverse Noah's fate? If he could jump back in time, maybe he could stop the attacker from pushing Noah over the edge. Conflicting notions swirled in his mind as he wondered if actually changing the past was even possible. That too seemed an illogical notion. But if changing the past wasn't possible, what was he doing trying to stop his own attack on his father?

Because, technically, that hasn't happened yet, he told himself. *At least for me, it hasn't happened yet.* Maybe there was something he could also do for Noah.

"We have to go back," Jake said.

Amos kept driving in silence.

"Amos," Jake said more firmly, "we have to go back."

"I'll go back once you are safe, Jake," Amos answered. "I won't just leave Noah there. I promise! But we have to get you somewhere safe so we can think about..."

"It's not that," Jake swallowed. "We can jump back and stop the attacker from pushing Noah off the cliff."

Amos looked over at Jake, his jaw dropping open as he contemplated the idea. "You're talking about changing an event that already happened," he said.

"Yeah. That's what I've been talking about all along," Jake shot back.

"Jake," Amos shook his head.

"We have to at least try," Jake pressed.

"Than why weren't we there?" Amos shot back. "If we saved Noah, why didn't we already experience that?"

Stop / Wisler

Jake searched for an answer.

"Because we don't," Amos answers flatly.

"Than everything is already determined," Jake shot back, "and we have no free will at all!"

"I'm afraid we have far less free will than your philosophy text books and religious beliefs might suggest."

"Than why are you helping me?" Jake mumbled.

"I can't not help you, Jake," Amos sighed, his eyes back on the road.

Jake looked out his window as the futility of all his efforts crashed down on him. There had to be some way to reverse all of this. If the act of jumping to a moment in the past was possible, then changing events in the past must also be possible. After all, what was he doing in the final reel of film if not changing the past. What sinister loophole in the laws of physics allowed for a jump into the past but no ability to change it?

A new and chilling thought occurred to Jake. Maybe what he had witnessed in that final reel of film his dad and shot was already an act of changing the past. What exactly would have happened if Jake hadn't jumped back to that moment and attacked his father? What if what was recorded on that strip of celluloid was in fact Jake acting of his own volition?

"How sure are you that we can't change the past?" Jake said softly.

"As sure as I am of anything," Amos said.

"What if it's not a matter of changing the past as we know it, but of creating an alternate timeline where Noah doesn't... fall?"

"You mean, a multiverse view of time travel?"

"Yeah. Maybe this is just one timeline we are experiencing," Jake suggested. "Where this version of ourselves exists. But maybe we can launch a series of events that play out differently in another timeline."

Stop / Wisler

"Back in 2011, there were a couple of physicists at the University of California at Santa Barbara that managed to create a quantum machine," Amos said. "They hope it will some day prove the existence of multiple universes. But I don't think they're there yet. But the idea of multiple timelines is certainly one that Noah and I cover in our paper as a very real possibility given the nature of these jumps."

"So we could possibly change the events in another timeline?"

"There are different schools of thought on that," Amos shook his head. "It's not all so straight forward. Do you know Michio Kaku?"

"No," Jake admitid.

"Kaku is a theoretical physicist who has proposed three theories on dealing with the paradoxes of time travel. His first theory is that anything you might do in the past if you travel back in time is bound to simply be a repetition of what has already happened. In essence, what happens is destiny. You can't actually go back and manage to do anything differently than already has been done. In that view, the past is... immutable. That certainly is the position of the more famous physicist and author, Brian Greene.

"The second theory Kaku proposed is that we might have some amount of free will, but that it's quite limited. So in the classic time travel paradox where you travel back in time well before you're born and try to kill your own grandfather, Kaku suggests that you might have the free will to choose to do so, but that other quantum complexities might shape your inability to cary out the act of killing your grandfather and create a paradox. So maybe the gun you're using jams up, or you just end up shooting yourself instead. Either way, you still can't manage to change the past."

Jake listened, watching Amos talk as he drove. The words flowed from the man's mouth with an odd detachment. Maybe he was wrapping himself in the

Stop / Wisler

safe cocoon of the theoretical, the academic. Maybe it was his way of temporarily delaying the onslaught of violent grief and shock and outrage. Amos stopped talking as he slowed down and took a left turn. Jake waited as Amos wipes away a tear and took a deep breath.

"What about the third theory?" Jake asked, at last.

"Is the multiverse theory," Amos said. "The act of traveling back in time actually splits off a new timeline where events might be carried out differently. So, in the grandfather paradox, maybe you manage to kill your grandfather. But in reality, the man you've killed is just an exact copy of your grandfather. You haven't managed to actually kill your own grandfather, father, and yourself. You've created a timeline in which those copies of your grandfather, father, and yourself no longer exist. But in your own timeline, the one you originally came from, they still do. After all, if you managed to actually kill your grandfather, you would not be able to exist in first place to travel back in time to kill your grandfather."

"Thus, the paradox," Jake sighed. "So you're saying I can't save my father."

Amos looked over at Jake with wide eyes. "Oh Jake, I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I'm not thinking clearly, just running my mouth."

"But according to these theories," Jake continued, "the best I can hope for is to create a timeline in which my dad doesn't die. But for you and I, in this timeline, he will always be dead."

"They're just theories, Jake."

"Yes," Jake sat forward with a sudden surge of energy. "Until now they have just been theories. But we can test them. We are testing them!"

"What do you mean?" Amos frowned.

Stop / Wisler

"I have to try to save my dad," Jake said. "And if I can, then I can save Amos."

"Jake," Amos shook his head again. "It's not so simple."

"What if is?"

"At best, you'll start a new timeline in which..."

Jake's phone rang, pulling him out of the spiraling conversation with Amos. He retrieved the phone from his pocket and saw that it was Anne calling him. He was unsure of what he could say to her, unsure if he even could talk to her right now. The thought crossed his mind to ignore her call and simply try to ring her back later. But when would it ever feel right to call her? At last, he answered.

"Hello," he said into the phone.

"JAKE!" He heard Anne's frantic voice in his ear. "Where are you?"

"Anne, I'm with Amos," he said, wondering if he should say anything else. But the tone of her voice sent a new wave of anxiety that travelled through his body like an electric shock. "Are you okay?"

"I was attacked," she said. "But we're both okay. Ethan's with me."

"What?!" Jake nearly yelled into the phone.

Amos looked over at him with concern. All Jake could image was the dark shape on the unknown man in the black cloak attacking Anne and Ethan.

"What happened? Where are you?" he demanded.

"We're at Location Number One," Anne explained. "And something happened. I think we jumped through time. I saw your dad. And then we were back in the present. But then... there was this figure in black, and he attacked us... He took the notebooks—your dad's notebooks. I'm so sorry!"

Jake remained silent for a moment, soaking all of this information in as best as he could in his frantic state. So the man in black had attacked

Stop / Wisler

her. But all he'd done was take his father's notebooks, just the notebooks and nothing more. A sudden involuntary gasp of relief erupted from his lungs.

"That's it?" he said, though he immediately regretted how that might sound to Anne. "I mean, he just took the notebooks. He didn't hurt you and Ethan?"

"He pushed me over," she said. "But then he grabbed the bag with the notebooks and took off."

"That's fine!" Jake said. "That's fine. Just the notebooks."

He didn't hurt them, he kept thinking over and over. *Not like Noah!*

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"We're back by your mother's car," Anne said. "And you're with Amos and Noah?"

Jake closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

"Anne, you shouldn't have gone out there. You should take Ethan and go back home. Get back down to Boston as quickly as possible."

"I can't just leave you," she said, her voice even in that resolute sort of way that Jake knew so well. There would be no changing her mind.

He wondered if she'd feel differently if she knew about Noah. But he couldn't bring himself to even say the old man's name, much less tell her what had happened. Not yet, at least. Instead, he looked over at Amos.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

"I've got an idea," Amos said softly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the west, the clouds had parted enough to allow the low-hanging sun to cast an eery light across the wet lend as Amos' car pulled up the long gravel driveway that cut through tall pine trees. Up ahead stood a small log cabin. Jake squinted at it through the wet windshield and then glanced over at Amos.

"This is yours?" he asked.

"Yeah," Amos said softly. "I've had it for just a few years now. I find I need a place to get away and clear my head. It's so peaceful out here. I don't bring people out often. It's been sort of a refuge. My fortress of solitude, you might say."

Jake glanced at the older man and wondered what he might need refuge from exactly, but now didn't seem the time to ask. Besides, Amos had always had a bit of a propensity for eccentricity. He probably felt the need to isolate himself for days at a time and work through the logical loops and causal knots that his work with the nexus points inevitably brought up. No wonder he and Noah had waited to publish for so long. How does one even begin to explain all of this without experiencing it first hand?

"No one will bother you out here," Amos added.

He parked the car and turned it off. Removing the keys from the ignition, Amos carefully detached a single key from the key ring and held it out to Jake who looked simply at it as the slow rain pelted the car's roof and windshield.

Stop / Wisler

"You'll need this to get in," Amos said. "There's some food inside. Nothing fancy, I'm afraid. Boxed things, mostly."

"You're not staying?" Jake asked, his eyes locked on the key in Amos' outstretched hand.

"I have to go back."

"But the police," Jake protested.

"I will deal with the police. It's not me they want. You just sit tight. I have to take care of Noah. We can't leave him out there. He deserves better than that."

Jake looked into Amos' pleading eyes and at last took the key from him.

"Thank you, Amos," Jake said softly. "I can't even... I should never have looked at that last reel. This is all wrong. I should have just gone home."

"What's done is done," Amos shook his head, his voice gentle. "You can't blame yourself. Now please, go inside and wash up. I keep some spare clothes out here for hikes. Grab whatever fits. I'll be back later to check in. Anne should be here soon."

"Thank you," Jake nodded, opening his door and felt the rain on his right arm. He stopped and looked back Amos. "I'm sorry."

Amos looked over at him with a frown. "For what?"

"Noah would still be alive—"

"No," Amos put up a hand. "You cannot blame yourself. We are little more than nearly blind men stumbling through a maze. We know so little of what is happening here."

"But if I would have—"

"If you would have, if you could have, if your father had, if I had, if Noah had," Amos shook his head and sighed. "I've lived with those kinds of

Stop / Wisler

questions ever since your father went missing. Only pain and self-inflicted torture lie down that path. Trust me."

Jake took in the sight of this seemingly wilted old man before him, the years suddenly pulling down on Amos' shoulders with unrelenting weight. Everything was unravelling right before his eyes, and Jake felt the squeeze of utter despair threaten to push all the air out of his lungs. He swallowed hard and reached back in to take Amos' free hand.

"I'm going to stop this," he whispered. "There has to be a way. And I'm going to figure it out."

#

Matthews stared at his hand on the steering wheel. He'd parked in the lot next to the police station some minutes before, but once he'd shut off the engine he'd frozen, his mind traveling back to relive what he'd experienced out in that field, in those woods. He just stared, but it wasn't his own hand he saw, it was Fowler's body on the ground. It wasn't the falling rain striking his Jeep he heard, but the gunshot that took Fowler's life. He felt lightheaded, which only further detached him from this moment and reminded him of the sensation that had washed over him as everything around him had wavered like some peculiar trick of light in a house of mirrors at a carnival. He was starting to feel like he was stuck in an endless maze of mirrors. His whole world had been turned upside down in just a matter of hours.

Hours. That was all it had taken.

Stop / Wisler

Now, he sat in his Jeep in the spat he parked in every day, and he felt like he couldn't even be sure he was awake. *Maybe this is all just the longest and craziest dream I've ever had.*

He looked down at the fresh scratch on his hand he'd gotten running through the woods. He had no idea when and how exactly he'd scratched it, but there it was. He'd been in hot pursuit of Jake Howell and likely run into a branch or rock. The recently dried blood formed a scab over the irritated and broke skin. The scratch throbbed.

His head throbbed.

Finally, he shook himself out of his mind, forced himself back to the moment and got out of his Jeep. With peculiar numbness, he walked into he building, barely noticing the rain that dampened his clothing. As he walked in, he heard the receptionist ask him something, but whatever she said didn't register either. Instead, he simply raised a hand and kept walking.

Hours ago, he thought. Just a few hours ago everything made sense. Now what?

Reaching the door to the Chief's office, he stopped and looked in. There, sat Chief Wilson, looking over some inane police report.

"We've got a problem," Matthews muttered.

Wilson looked up from the report, surprised to see him. "What?" he asked.

The Chief took in the sight of Matthews standing stiffly at his door, hair wet from the rain.

"What happened?" he asked Matthews. "You were just going to check up on Jake Howell."

Matthews stepped into the office and closed the door. Turning to Wilson, he shook his head. "You, uh... You're never going to believe me."

Stop / Wisler

"You're starting to worry me," Wilson said. "Sit down."

Matthews complied, looking down at the floor for a moment, noticing the mud and water drops on his boots. He looked up, his head a tangle of thoughts he was not sure he could sort through.

Finally, he said, "Do you recall those crazy theories Fowler had about Edward Howell's case? Shit about... worm holes and time travel."

Wilson smiled and nodded. "Sure. We couldn't get through a game of poker without him going on about some crazy theory he'd found that week or some new scientific insight that might be a clue into how time travel might work. I always told him he just read way too much science fiction. It was all those novels and magazines he collected, you know."

"What if he was on to something?" Matthews said, locking eyes with Wilson.

The Chief's smile faded and his eyebrows rose. "What the hell did you see?" he murmured. "I've never seen you so spooked."

Matthews pressed his lips together and swallowed. He could scarcely believe it himself, but he knew he had to tell Wilson. He also knew that things were about to become even more complicated.

If this is a dream, I want to wake up now.

He waited for a moment, his breath held, his head aching.

Shit.

"Fowler's murder and Edward Howell's disappearance," Matthews said slowly, "are the same case."

LEVEL THREE

"We shall see numerous instances in which physics or, even more frequently, philosophical interpreters of modern physics failed to draw all the consequences from some new revolutionary discovery mainly because they're thinking remained tinged by the influence of some classical habit. It frequently happens that within one and the same mind the true grasp of the mathematical side of the theory coexist with serious misapprehensions of its physical and especially its philosophical meaning."

- Milic Capek

"Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is a fundamental, inescapable property of the world."

- Stephen Hawking

"*Everything* is subject to the quantum fluctuations inherent in the uncertainty principle—even the gravitational field."

- Brian Greene

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Anne pushed open the unlocked door to the cabin. Beyond it lay darkness and silence. An aroma of pine needles greeted her even as the wet breeze from outside rushed around her. Ethan stood by her side and they both peered into the silent cabin. A steady drizzle fell, but they didn't move.

"Jake?" Anne said.

Tentatively, she took a step through the doorway. Ethan followed as if he were physically attached to her.

"Jake," she said again. "Are you here?"

The door to the bedroom swung open and in the dim interior of the cabin she saw Jake, eyes blurry, standing there. "Anne," he managed to croak out.

She rushed in and threw her arms around him. He hugged her tightly. But he didn't hold her for long. Almost as quickly, he pulled back so he could look at her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

But before she could answer, Ethan tackled his father. Jake scooped him up and held him tight.

"Hey, buddy," Jake said softly. "How are you?"

Ethan didn't answer. Jake looked to Anne. She felt the relief come to her now as she looked at Jake. But it was immediately followed by fear. Now that she felt safe her mind finally allowed itself to apprehend the full reality of what she'd experienced. She had jumped through time! As bewilderingly impossible as she wished to believe that to be, she had no other explanation for what she's experienced. And as if that hadn't been

Stop / Wisler

enough shock for one day, she'd also been attacked! Her knees felt weak and she could feel tears flowing into her eyes. But she took in a few deep breaths and looked at her husband. Jake's bloodshot eyes bore the marks of recent tears.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He sighed and said nothing for a moment. His eyes drifted off into the distance. Finally, he managed to speak.

"We should get some food," he said. "And we can talk."

She recognized the tone in his voice. It sent a cold, sharp stab of fear through her heart. Something was wrong—really wrong.

Jake set Ethan down and turned on some lights. Ethan moved slowly around the cabin, taking in the place. Jake went into the kitchen and began rummaging through cabinets for anything that might serve as dinner. Anne watched him for a moment, her mind still focused on the tone of his voice and his demeanor. What had happened?

Glancing over at Ethan, she moved into the small kitchen. Without words, they fell into working unison to scrounge together what they could for a meal. It was only at the sight of the bread and fruit in the fridge that Anne realized how empty her stomach was.

They didn't talk. There would be time later for talking. Right now, they were simply together. They arranged a meager meal at the table comprised of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, apples, and some water. As intensely as Anne had felt the hunger appear, it only took half a sandwich for her stomach to decide it had had enough. Everything was so upside-down, her own nerves, or mind, her body seemed perpetually confused. The stress of the day, her racing thoughts, now conspired to turn her hunger into a revolt. She sighed and pushed the plate away from her.

Stop / Wisler

With their meal finished, Jake and Anne left Ethan at the table where he busied himself with drawing in his art book. They entered the room, closed the door, and at last they spoke in hushed voices. Anne sat next to Jake on the bed. She stared down at the faded brown carpet, trying to take in what Jake was telling her.

She stared at one particular worn spot on the carpet, her mind hardly able to accept what she was hearing. In fact, she knew she would not have accepted this story a mere twenty-four or even twelve hours ago. How quickly—how maddeningly quickly—things had changed.

"I didn't want to leave him there," Jake said quietly. "But we couldn't get down. And after what happened at the other location. We couldn't risk being found there by the police."

"But Noah," was all she managed to say.

"I know," Jake nodded. "Amos is taking care of him."

She felt exhausted. Some time later the tears would come properly, but right now she just felt drained and unable to process the bewildering way in which her life, her family's lives, their whole world, had completely been ripped inside out—all in a single day. *Has it really only been a day?* Anne found herself thinking again. She traced her actions back through the events that had lead them to be in that cabin at that moment. Everything was happening so fast.

Jake reached out and took her hand.

"So what now?" she asked. "You're a wanted man?"

"Until I can prove that I didn't kill my father. Or Detective Fowler. Or Noah... I'm guessing."

Jake sighed heavily and looked at her. She looked up to meet his eyes.

"I'm in deep shit," he said. "Who's going to believe me?"

Stop / Wisler

He shook his head, looking off. But suddenly he snapped his attention back to her. "How's Ethan?" he said. "How is he handling things?"

"He's shaken up," Anne answered. "Don't think he fully understands what's going on."

"Well, then he's in good company," Jake managed a slight smile. "I feel like I just found out gravity is an elaborate hoax. Like, gravity and Santa Clause are the same thing."

She grinned slightly, but it faded quickly. "Jake, whoever attacked me, they just wanted those notebooks. As soon as he had them, he was gone."

"The notebooks?" he frowned.

"I know. Sorry," she closed her eyes and leaned her head back. "I shouldn't have taken them. I was just trying to help. I've skimmed most of them."

"It's fine," he said, squeezing her hand. "I'm just glad you're okay. You and Ethan being okay, that's all that matters. I saw this man... this thing kill two men today. You and Ethan are here! That's what matters."

"So," Anne pressed forward to the next logical question, "why just the notebooks? Why not kill me?"

Jake furrowed his brow, looking off as he thought. His hand let go of hers. "This person knows exactly what they're after. He was gone the moment Noah..." He trailed off, unable or unwilling to so speak the rest of the sentence.

She reached out and took his hand again. He looked at her and with his free hand touched her face. She winced as he touched a scrape on her cheek she'd forgotten about.

"We should get cleaned up," he said. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

Stop / Wisler

She felt soreness setting in all over her body from either the attack or just the tension she'd been carrying in her muscles. "I don't know. I haven't even thought about it. Just... running on adrenaline, I guess."

Jake caressed her face, looking at her.

"I had no idea he was... real," she said.

"Neither did I," Jake shrugged.

"How did you know about the man in black?"

"What do you mean?"

"Jake," she said, reaching up to pull his hand away from her face, "you've had nightmares about this cloaked figure for as long as I've known you. And now, I've been attacked by a man in a black cloak. You've seen him kill two people today. This isn't a coincidence."

Jake's eyes wandered off. He said nothing for a moment. Finally, his voice soft, he said, "I need a shower," and stood up.

#

He could hear the shower running as he walked around the cabin. Ethan looked up at the wooden beams that held the roof in place. Hanging from the rafters were several antique lanterns. It wasn't a big cabin, but it was welcoming, quiet, peaceful. It was certainly a change of pace for a boy accustomed to living in Quincy, on Boston's south shore. The rain falling outside provided a soothing soundtrack that made Ethan think that maybe he could find some hot chocolate mix and sit down and try to read or draw some more. He might have actually been able to do that if he hadn't just had the most insane day of his life. He wasn't even sure how he might begin to tell this story to any of his friends back home—or if he even should tell them at

Stop / Wisler

all considering how likely they were to think he had gone completely nuts. No, relaxing right now wasn't an option. He wasn't about to be able to sit still anyway.

On the table, his drawing book sat open where he'd left it. He'd been working on trying to draw the figure in the black cloak as best as he could from memory before he'd grown restless. This time around, he was drawing not based on his recollection of what he'd seen on those old 16mm films his grandpa had shot, but from the very vivid memory of seeing that haunting figure rush at his mom just mere hours ago. He shuttered as the image of the attack played out again in his mind. The figure wasn't particularly fast. It was purposeful, like it knew exactly what it wanted to achieve that that it would accomplish its goal. It made Ethan's stomach twist weirdly recalling the figure. Where before it had still felt like a fun game, like just a thing he'd seen on TV, now he'd seen it himself. He hoped he'd never have to see it again.

Ethan tried to distract himself as best he could in the tiny cabin. He had strict instructions from both of his parents not to go outside without them, but that seemed unnecessary given that it was raining and dark now anyway. And, as much as he hated to admit it, Ethan couldn't help but picture the figure in the black cloak lurking outside in the darkness, just waiting for one of them to step out of the cabin. No, he wasn't about to go anywhere.

He walked into the kitchen and fetched himself a glass of water in one of those mugs made out of a masons jar. After drinking deeply, he wiped his face and began to wander the cabin again aimlessly. He found a closet and opened it to discover there was a small washer and dryer unit that was stacked, one on top of the other. He recalled seeing one like that at his

Stop / Wisler

friend's apartment. He wondered if he could toss his clothes in there. He felt ready for a change but they hadn't packed for a night at a cabin.

Next to the closet was another door that looked exactly the same as the door that hid the laundry machines. Ethan tried it but discovered it was locked. Moving on, he squinted out the windows that faced the woods behind the cabin. The world outside was an uninviting grey streaked by falling rain. It was hard to even make out the tree-line in the dim light emitting from the cabin. Here he didn't linger long as the sight of the woods brought back anxious memories his imagination desperately wanted to amplify but he had no interest in experiencing just then.

Moving back into the cabin, he looked around the living room. A light brown sofa faced a small flatscreen TV. In the corner of the room stood short, hand-crafted bookshelf stacked with aging paperbacks. Approaching the bookshelf, Ethan scanned the titles while his mind replayed what he'd managed to hear of his parents hushed conversation. Something unimaginably peculiar was going on and all that Ethan wanted to do was to make sense of it. But now they spoke in hushed tones to each other, apparently not wanting Ethan to hear whatever they were talking about. He wished they would just tell him what they knew. With all the crazy things happening, he wished they would just tell him what was happening and get it over with. Not knowing bugged him. Maybe if he could know what was going on, he might be more brave.

An even more frightening thought pierced his mind. What if his parents didn't know anymore than he did? What if they had no way of knowing? Then how could they even be sure they were safe here in this cabin?

Ethan glanced over at the front door, then shook his head. He had to find something to do. He was going to really lose his marbles for sure. Turning back to the bookshelf, his eyes stopped on a particular book. It was

Stop / Wisler

an old worn copy of *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells. He'd heard of this book before. It was supposed to be a science fiction classic. He'd never read many old books like this one, but maybe it was time to give it a try. Plucking it off the shelf, he began to leaf through it. Unable to focus, however, he finally put it down and began looking for the remote for the television.

#

Anne, wrapped in a towel, leaned close to the mirror to examine the cut on her cheek. Jake showered, the steam billowing out into the small bathroom. She searched the medicine cabinet for any triple antibiotic ointment but found none. In fact, there weren't even any bandages, not that she needed one on the cut.

She felt fresh soreness seeping into the ribs on her left side. She must have fallen on something. She'd also scrapped her left knee. But at this point it wasn't bleeding, so she figured she'd be fine without a bandage there too, thankfully. Closing the cabinet she heard Jake crank the shower off.

"Holly hell," she said, "what I wouldn't give for a pizza delivery right about now."

Jake chuckled as he pulled the shower curtain open and fetched a towel. "Good luck getting delivery out here."

"Yeah, I guess I'll just eat the rest of my PB&J sandwich," she sighed. He nodded, serious now. "It's just tonight," he said. "Tomorrow, we are going to figure this all out."

"When is Amos coming back?"

"I don't know," he shook his head.

Stop / Wisler

"We can't just stay here," Anne, looked down at the floor.

"We're not just staying here," Jake said, stepping closer to her, his hand reaching out to caress he bare shoulder. "We need to rest. Then, when our heads are clear, we need to figure out what the next step is."

"What next step is?" she muttered.

"Some way to prove that I'm not guilty," Jake said. "Some way to... stop all of this from happening."

She looked into his eyes now and spoke softly. "Do you really think you can stop this?"

He looked back at her with weary eyes, his lips parted slightly, lost in thought for a moment. Finally, he said, "I'm not sure what I think anymore other than that I can't go to the police with a story about magical places that cause people to jump through time and some Darth Vader wannabe attacking people. It doesn't matter how much research Amos can show them, no one's going to believe me."

She searched his eyes as she tried to examine her own feelings about all of this. Certainly she knew that the jumps were real and that the man in the black cloak was real. But what if there was no way to undue all of this? Could this Jake she was looking at now, the Jake she'd loved all these years, really be responsible for his own father's disappearance? Did he kill his father? What if he had good reason to kill his own father?

"We'll figure this out," Jake said, forcing a smile. "There has to be an explanation for all of this. There has to be solution. We're just in some seriously uncharted territory. But we will figure this out."

She forced herself to nod.

Stop / Wisler

Jake had found an extra set of bed sheets and put them on the sofa in the living room. Ethan lay on the sofa and Jake drew the sheet over the boy. He looked down at his son who seemed somehow smaller to him than he remembered him being.

"We're right in the next room," Jake said, his voice soft with the weight of fresh grief. "Okay, buddy?"

Ethan looked up and nodded. He squirmed and freed his hands from the sheet. In his right hand he held a book.

"What do you have there?" Jake asked.

Ethan held it out so he could read the cover.

"The Time Machine?" Jake smiled, weakly. "A classic."

"Will you read it to me?" Ethan said softly.

"You want me to read this?" Jake grinned in surprise. It was either a fitting or a peculiar choice, depending on how one wanted to look at it.

"Okay. We haven't done this in a while. So yeah, let's read."

Taking the book, Jake flipped to the first page. But before he began reading, he had to ask, "Are you sure you want to read this? Maybe we should read something else." Ethan stared off at the ceiling. It was the boy's way to quietly protest by simply vanishing into the distance. Exhausted and with no will to debate the issue, Jake sighed.

"All right," he said. "We'll read this. Just a little bit, though. I doubt I can keep my eyes open for long."

Ethan cracked a smile. Jake looked back at the first page.

"Okay, let's see here," Jake began. "'The Time Traveller (for so it will be convenient to speak of him) was expounding a recondite matter to us. His grey eyes...'"

Stop / Wisler

"What's recondite?" Ethan interrupted.

"These old books have some big words in them, don't they?" Jake said with a smile. "I believe it means something that is hard to understand."

Ethan nodded, taking this in. "Recondite matter. I get it. Kind of like all the stuff grandpa was doing. So Recondite."

Jake smiled. "Better believe it."

Looking back to the book, Jake continued reading.

#

Anne lay in bed on the side furthest from the door. She faced away from Jake as he quietly entered the bedroom. He climbed into the bed and lay next to her. Reaching out, ran his fingers along her hairline.

"Hey," he said softly. "How are you?"

Anne rolled to her back and stared out past him. "I just can't believe any of this. This can't be real."

"I know," Jake said. "I keep thinking it's all a nightmare. I'm going to wake up and Noah will be just fine. But..."

He looked around, at a loss for words. Shaking his head and swallowing back the grief he feared he might not be able to control, he forced himself to breathe. He couldn't let it all out yet. Ethan had only just fallen asleep. He couldn't risk waking him. Instead, he returned to his more comfortable mental stance.

"There has to be a way to sort this all out," he whispered. "We're going to figure this out."

She looked at him and he could see the beginnings of tears gathering in her eyes. "But what if we can't? What if there's no fixing this?"

Stop / Wisler

"We can't starting thinking like that, or we'll..."

"Jake," she interrupted. "I just need to know you're scared too."

He smiled in spite of the tears that had begun to gather in his own eyes. "Scared? I'm fucking terrified," he whispered. "I wish I never had looked at that last reel of film. Maybe there's a good reason my mom kept this a secret all these years. I mean, do you think she knew?"

"How could she?" Anne asked. "You were just a boy."

Jake nodded then let out a long, exhausted sigh. "I wish we could just go home."

Anne reached out and touched his face softly. Her lips parted slightly as she looked into his eyes. He leaned in and kissed her. At first, it was a light kiss, a heart-broke and confronting kiss. But she slowly responded with more force, pulling him close—needing him close. He suddenly realized how desperately he needed to feel close to her. He kissed her harder.

She gave his shoulder a push to lift herself. Taking his cue, he lay back as she moved onto him. Reaching out, he helped her out of her shirt and then removed his own. He pulled her down on him, feeling the warmth of their skin together. Everything else faded away and all that remained was this moment, this woman who had put herself in harm's way to try to discover the truth behind something unimaginable, to try to help him. This woman who had always found a way to calm his racing mind and anchor him to the moments of life that mattered most. He kissed her deeply as his hands removed her underwear, knowing that he couldn't possibly ever get close enough to her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The bare branches of the leafless trees swung slightly in the cool morning breeze. Aside from the air cutting through the branches, the woods were silent. Edward spread the tripod legs and set it carefully on the uneven ground. With patience, he adjusted the legs until the level bubble on the tripod head indicated it was level. A young Jake watched him work.

Stepping back from the tripod, Edward looked over at the boy and said, "Jake, can you fetch me the camera out of the case?"

The boy sprung into action, reaching into the leather camera bag and retrieving the 16mm camera, which Edward had already loaded with film before making the trip out that morning. He walked quickly to his dad, holding the small but heavy camera firmly. Handing it Edward, the boy watched as his father took the camera and looked through the old viewfinder.

"Yeah, I think this will do," Edward said, bringing the camera down.

"So when you look through the camera like that, you see what it will shoot?" The boy asked.

"Well, almost," Edward smiled at his son. Always prone to precision, he held the camera out and pointed at the viewfinder. "You see, on a camera like this, the viewfinder is just a guide. It's not actually what the camera is going to put on film."

Edward stooped down so he could be on the same level as the boy. "See, this is the viewfinder," he said as he pointed at the rectangle of glass on the upper right hand corner of the camera body, "but this over here is the actual lens," he indicated the silver cylinder protruding from the center of the metal box with rounded edges that was the 16mm camera. "We just use the

Stop / Wisler

viewfinder to have an idea of what we're going to shoot. It's pretty good idea. But there's actually a little distance between the lens and the viewfinder. So there's actually a difference between the two images.

Photographers call that difference parallax."

The boy nodded, "Like, is it a big difference?"

"Not usually. But sometimes when you're trying to shoot very close to an object the difference can be quite noticeable. So it's always good to remember that when you set up the camera, you need to think about what's important, what needs to be seen in the frame. What do you want to be absolutely sure to capture on film. Don't put that too close to the edge of the frame or you might not capture it all. You always have to keep in mind..."

"I know. Perspective matters," said the boy as he grinned and rolled his eyes.

"Absolutely!" Edward said with a smile.

He tussled the boy's hair before standing. Attaching the camera to the tripod, Edward checked it again and positioned it so it was pointed towards a tree with a large lump protruding from its trunk. Then, walking out in front of the camera, he looked around and then back at the camera.

"This should do," he said. "What do you think, Jake?"

Jake approached the camera to look through he viewfinder. He stretched and strained to make himself tall enough to see through it. As he approached it, he saw a blurry shape inside the viewfinder that at first he assumed to be his father. As his eye drew closer to the viewfinder, a jolt of terror shot through him as he realized that what he saw was in fact the sinister figure cloaked in black. It was turned away from him, standing still. Suddenly, it jerked its head and looked back over its shoulder right at Jake. From within the hood, its eyes glowed red.

Stop / Wisler

Jake stumbled back from the camera and fell to the ground.

He heard himself gasp as he awoke. His eyes darted about the dim room in confusion. Where was he? Where was the figure in black. Where was his dad?

In a burst of painful relief awareness, he recognized the familiar patterns of waking from a nightmare. Slowly, as the dream faded, he regained his bearings and recognized the interior of the bedroom in Amos' cabin. Glancing over, he found Anne sleeping on her side next to him. He turned onto his side and sighed, partially in relief that the dream was over and partially due to the profound disappointment that the events that had led to him being in that cabin hadn't also turned out to be a dream.

She awoke gradually, sensing the sunshine glowing through the curtains. Anne slipped out of bed quietly so as not to disturb Jake. She figured that whatever their next step might be at this point, there was no need to wake him quite yet. Her body ached in several places. Her legs felt sore and her rib hurt where she had fallen the day before. She retrieved her phone and headed for the bathroom. Even squatting to sit on the toilet revealed new protest of pain from sore muscles and strained joints. Once finished, she walked out of the bedroom.

Ethan sat at the dining room table, the copy of *The Time Machine* open in front of him. He had helped himself to some cereal. The bowl sat empty next to the box. Ethan looked up as she approached.

"How long have you been up?" she asked.

He shrugged. "A while."

"Is the milk in the fridge any good?" She asked.

Stop / Wisler

Ethan nodded, going back to the book.

"Guess Amos must come up here frequently enough then," she mused.

Anne stared at the cereal box wondering if she should eat, but she felt no hunger. Rather, her stomach was still twisted in anxious knots that feared would not welcome much anything she might try to consume. Her mind fixated once more on the task of working out what was happening to them and how to stop all this madness. She needed to get Ethan to safety. She grabbed a glass of water in the kitchen and looked at her phone. She'd left her charger at the house. The batter was at five percent now. How long would they be here?

"Ethan, honey," she said, "have you seen a phone charger around?"

Ethan shook his head, not looking up from the book."

Anne sighed. "What kind of man stocks his cabin with fresh milk but doesn't have a phone charger handy?"

"The kind of man who has a TV but no cable or internet," Ethan muttered.

Anne smiled. "Well, it's good to see you reading."

Opening the map app, she zoomed into the area of Maine where she had dropped the pin marks as best as she could work out for each of the locations that Edward had been studying. A thought occurred to her: where was she right now in relation to those spots? She'd used the GPS on the phone yesterday to get to this place. But it had not been in the correct mode to display the places she'd pinned while giving her driving directions. And the thought of checking then had not occurred to her at that point. She'd been too shaken up by the attack for that to even occur to her.

She enabled her GPS signal on the phone and moved to the back door. She hoped she would have enough battery. And in an effort to make things as easy on the phone as possible, she opened the door and headed outside into the

Stop / Wisler

early morning sunshine. She walked several yards out from the cabin growing close to the woods with each step. The grass was wet and cold against her toes, but it felt enlivening to breathe in the fresh air and feel her feet on the rain-soaked earth.

She heard the screen door slap shut on the cabin and she glanced back. Ethan stood near the cabin, book in hand. He watched her with weary eyes.

"Mom? What are you doing?" he called out to her.

"Just checking on something," she said.

She stared down at her phone. At last the blue dot indicating her current location appeared. She sighed with disappointment. The cabin was nowhere near any of the six locations she had marked. *Of course it isn't*, she shook her head. She was about to turn off her GPS signal to conserve the tiny amount of battery power remaining when she realized that the map indicated that she was right at the edge of a large green block of land. She zoomed out so she could see more of the area on the map.

Baxter Stake Park.

She was right on the southern edge of Baxter State Park, the place where hikers had supposedly come across Edward's camera years ago. She stared down at the phone in utter disbelief. Why did...

She heard the flop of the book Jake held as it hit the cement back porch of the cabin. She looked over at him. He stood there, still as stone, eyes wide. He was staring right at her. No. Just past her!

She whirled around to find the figure in the black cloak standing a few yards away from her, the woods behind him. The figure moved at her. She turned and bolted toward the cabin. She felt the impact on her back as the figure tackled her. She hit the ground hard but immediately struggled to get up, fueled by adrenaline that helped her ignore any minor pain from the fall

Stop / Wisler

for the moment. The cold, wet grass only served as amplification for the adrenaline rush and she sucked in air, ready to fight. She threw an elbow back, trying to connect with the figure's head, but it missed. A sudden jolt of intense pain and a bright flash of light inside her eyes made the whole world spin.

As she collapsed to the ground, the figure's fist came down hard again on the back of her head. As blackness took over her, she could hear Ethan screaming.

The scream! It jolted Jake out of his sleep. He sat up so quickly his head spun. Had it been another dream? Then he heard it again. Ethan.

Ethan was screaming!

He jumped out of the bed and ran out of the room. Looking about for any sign of Anne or Ethan, he found only the empty cabin. It was eerily quiet in the morning light. Sunlight lit the room from the open back door. The screen door was shut but allowed the morning breeze to waft lazily into the cabin in a deceptively serene fashion. Dashing to it, he threw the screen door open and stepped outside. Ethan stood on the back porch staring out towards the woods.

"Ethan!" Jake exclaimed. "What's going on?"

Ethan pointed and Jake looked out at the woods. Then his eyes spotted something between the woods and the cabin. It took a moment for his confused and still waking brain to interpret what he was seeing. Crumpled on the grass, Anne lay face down.

She wasn't moving.

Stop / Wisler

"Anne!" Jake yelled as he sprinted to her.

He was at her side quickly, not even aware of how he'd slid to the ground and pulled her up into his arms. Blood seeped from the back of her head, soaking her hair.

"No," he muttered as he held her. "Honey, can you hear me?"

Her eyes fluttered momentarily, but she remained limp in his arms. He placed his ear down to her lips, forcing himself to be as still as possible.

At last, he heard her breathing.

He looked back at Ethan, who still stood frozen in place by the house, his shoulders visibly shaking.

"Ethan," he said, forcing himself to speak calmly as he could, "I'm going to need your help."

What followed was a blur to Jake as he instructed his boy to grab towels from inside the house and to get his shoes on. When Ethan was back, he had him hold a towel to his mother's head to help stop the bleeding. Jake couldn't judge how serious of a head wound it was, so he took no chances. He instructed Ethan to be as gentle as possible with her head, but to maintain pressure on the towel. Jake rushed back into the cabin and quickly threw on his jeans, shoes, and grabbed the car keys.

Running back out, he scooped up his unconscious wife and quickly walked around the cabin and to the car. Questions about what had happened swirled in his mind, but he dared not ask them now. He called out to Ethan, telling him to get the door to the back seat open.

As they rounded the cabin and came to the driveway, Ethan ran ahead to the old station wagon and opened the back door closest to them. Jake slid Anne onto the back seat. Once he placed her there, Jake turned to Ethan and

Stop / Wisler

knelt before the boy. He was only vaguely aware of the sensation of the sharp rocks of the gravel driveway pocking his knees through his jeans.

"Are you okay, buddy?," Jake said, holding Ethan's shoulders and looking him in the eye.

Ethan, eyes still wide, just nodded.

"I'm going to need you to do something really important," Jake continued. "Mommy's head is hurt. I need you to sit in the back seat with her and hold a towel to her head to help stop the bleeding. Okay?"

Ethan nodded again, but now tears began to fill his eyes. Jake fought his own rush of panic and the desire to melt down right then and there.

Jake swallowed hard and then spoke, "I know, buddy. I'm scared too. But mommy is going to be okay. We're taking her to the hospital right now. And the doctors are going to fix her up. I need to drive, so I need you to take care of mommy's head. Can you do that?"

Again, all he got from Ethan was a nod.

"Okay, here we go."

He stared at the road ahead, his mind racing with too many questions to bother counting. The strobing sunlight that shone through the passing trees made him squint. The radio crackled and the dispatcher's voice came through, "Unit 17, come in."

Matthews reached over grabbed the radio from the dash. "This is unit 17, over."

"We got the results on the gun you brought back," the dispatcher said "It's a match. That is definitely Detective Fowler's missing weapon."

Stop / Wisler

There it was. He had felt certain this would be the result, but this only raised more questions. Most of the now swirling thoughts in his mind were well outside of any reasonable territory for a detective on any police force to be considering. He shook all those questions aside and tried to focus on the normal questions—the standard procedure.

“The gun is in remarkable shape,” the dispatcher added. “Where did you say you found it?”

“I can’t talk about that yet,” Matthews said, flatly.

“Ah, copy.”

“Has it been fired recently?” he asked.

“Doesn’t look like it,” the dispatcher answered.

“Any prints on it?”

“Copy that. They did find prints. Two sets, by the looks of it. One was actually Fowler’s prints. But so far they didn’t get any matches in the system for the other set.”

“No. They wouldn’t. Thanks. Over and out,” he mumbled into the radio before hanging it back up.

The second set of prints would be Jake Howell’s, since Matthews had seen him holding the gun and ordered him to drop it. But he had no criminal records, so no reason for his prints to show up in the database.

What troubled Matthews, however, was the fact that the gun did not appear to have been fired recently. That meant it couldn’t be the murder weapon used to kill Fowler. Could Jake Howell actually have been telling the truth? Matthews certainly couldn’t make heads or tails of what he’d experienced the previous day out in Timber Field. But he’d definitely heard a shot and found Jake there with Fowler’s gun in hand. Just what the hell was going on here?

Stop / Wisler

He stepped on the breaks and made a left turn onto the driveway for the residence of Dr. Amos Jeffries. Parking the car in front of the large house, he wasted no time in headed to the front door where he pressed the door bell.

He could hear the muffled ring echo inside the house. He waited, but no one came to the door. Ringing it again, he glanced at his watch. It was still early. He felt sure Dr. Jeffries would have been home. Or was he was with Jake Howell, where ever that might be? Was his absence now an indication of his involvement with Howell?

Stepping away from the front door, Matthews made his way to the garage. It was a two car garage with a single wide door that had windows running along its width roughly at eye level. Matthews peeked in. There were two cars in the garage. Both had Maine plates. The one he recognized as the vehicle he'd seen Jake Howell, Dr. Jeffries, and Dr. Noah Glenn driving just yesterday.

Well, either Amos Jeffries was home and simply not answering his door, or he'd found some other means of transportation. Matthews sighed as he walked back to his car. The temptation to snoop more had never been stronger. But with just how bizarre this case had become in a matter of mere hours, his instinct was to play it safe. If he could find a compelling reason to think Howell was at the house or Jeffries was hiding something, he'd get a warrant and come back. *By the book*, he told himself. *This is already too crazy for any judge to believe.*

The car stopped abruptly at the entrance to the emergency room. Jake jumped out and threw open the door to the back seat. He had not called ahead,

Stop / Wisler

though his first instinct had been to do so. He realized he had to show up unannounced. They would be asking for his name, his wife's name, and details of what had happened. How would any of this look to the police in light of the events of the past day, he had no idea. But it couldn't possibly be bode well for him.

He carefully pulled Anne's limp body from the car and told Ethan to follow him. Immediately, the sight of a man carrying an unconscious woman into the ER entrance caught the attention of several people. A short nurse or attending in scrubs walked up to him.

"What happened?" she asked.

"She was attacked," Jake said, "a person hit her head several times. Probably has a concussion, or worse." He had managed to get that much out of Ethan on the drive to the hospital.

The woman barked orders to a young man in scrubs who quickly retrieved a gurney so that Jake could lay Anne down. He was barraged with questions immediately and did his best to answer as he watched them cart his wife away. Forms were placed in his hands without his even realizing it and he was instructed to sit-down and fill them out.

Ethan sat next to him. Jake stared down at the clipboard with several medical forms. Instead of filling them out, he retrieved his phone. He tapped out a simple text to Amos: "At the ER. Man in black attacked Anne." He hit send.

He sat there for a moment wondering if he should just run. But he doubted he could will his legs to carry him out of that place. A numbness slowly took over him. *Is there any point in running? Where would I even go? God, they can just have me as long as Anne is okay.*

Stop / Wisler

He returned to the forms and put the pen to the first sheet. He watched himself fill out the forms as if witnessing the whole thing through binoculars from a great distance. He could barely feel the pen in his fingers. Someone else made his hand move. Someone else wrote his name on the form, checked off the appropriate boxes, and retrieved a copy of his health insurance card from his wallet.

"Dad," Ethan said softly, drawing Jake back out of the haze.

"Yes?" Jake looked over at him. He hadn't heard Ethan speak other than to briefly answer his questions on the drive over. The boy managed to relay the basics of what he'd witnessed, but he'd hardly used a single complete sentences. Jake couldn't bear to imagine what his boy must have been feeling as he witness his own mother being brutally attacked. But a chill ran through Jake's heart at that thought. He didn't have to imagine. He'd seen the final reel of film. He'd seen his father attacked and killed. He pushed all of this away and focused on his son's weary eyes that threatened to release tears more at any moment.

"Why is the man in black trying to hurt us?" Ethan whispered.

"I don't know," Jake whispered back. "Can you tell me more about what you saw?"

Ethan looked off.

"You're sure it was the man in black?" he asked again. "Where you out there the whole time?"

Without looking back, Ethan just nodded. Jake reached out and put his arm around him. He pulled the boy close and just held him. Finally, he said, "I know this has been really hard. You're being so brave. I couldn't do this without you, buddy. I really couldn't."

"Mr. Howell," said a woman's voice.

Stop / Wisler

Jake and Ethan looked up to find a Doctor, a woman in her fifties, striding toward them. Jake stood up.

"Yes," he said.

The doctor reached him and then in a softer voice proceeded, "Your wife sustained a serious head injury, but she's stable. She's got a concussion and is suffering from brain swelling due to blunt force trauma. We've had to induce a coma for now until the swelling subsides. We don't know yet if there was any serious brain damage. But we need to keep her here until the swelling subsides. We're also going to need to run more tests to try to determine what, if any, damage her brain might have sustained. But right now she resting peacefully and we are keeping a close eye on her."

Jake nodded to all of this then asked, "Can we see her?"

They were ushered into her room several floors up. Anne lay in the hospital bed, her arm hooked up to an IV drip and a heart monitor attached to her. The sight of her like this nearly buckled Jake's knees. But he slowly approached with Ethan at his side. Her face showed no bruising, which felt surprising given the violent nature of the attack. But Jake recalled the deep indent her head had made in the soft grassy earth. That had to have absorbed a lot of the impacts her head sustained. He didn't dare think of what might have been the outcome had she been on the cement patio of the cabin.

Looking down at her, he brushed a strand of hair from her face and said softly, "I'm so sorry, sweetie."

Tears came now, involuntarily. He moved to the chair next to the bed and sat down.

"I'm sorry," he continued. He felt sure she couldn't hear him but the words forced their way out of his clenched, dry throat. "None of this should have happened."

Stop / Wisler

He looked off, letting the tears travel down his cheeks. Then, very softly, he said, "How did we get here? What is the meaning of any of this? Don't you take her from me. You hear me? I've lost too much already."

He leaned forward and rested his head on the bed next to Anne. A moment later, he felt Ethan's hand on his arm. He looked up at him.

"Dad," Ethan said, tentatively. "What if it was you?"

This nearly stopped Jake's heart. Did his son believe Jake had attacked his own wife? But Ethan hadn't seen the last reel of film. Why would he think Jake might be the one who hurt Anne?

"What?" was all Jake managed to say.

"There was another man," Ethan said at last.

Jake turned and faced the boy, eye to eye. "What other man?"

"There was another man who showed up," Ethan said. "After the man in black attacked mom, this other man ran out of the woods. He stopped the attack. He fought the man in black."

"Ethan," Jake said, "you're sure you saw another man?"

Ethan nodded. "He hit the man in black. He stopped him from hurting mom anymore. Then the man in black just got up and ran away."

"Which way?" Jake asked.

"Into the woods."

"And this other man," Jake said, "what did he do?"

"He looked at me and then ran into the woods too."

"What did he look like?"

Ethan's eyes moved around as he examined the mental picture he had of this mysterious second man. Finally, his lips parted, and he said simply, "Like you."

"You're sure?" Jake pressed.

Stop / Wisler

Ethan nodded and looked down at the ground.

"Okay," Jake said. "I believe you. Thank you for tell me, Ethan."

He pulled the boy into a tight hug.

Detective Matthews tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as he drove back into town, lost in thought as he one went over what he knew for certain so far in this incredibly bizarre case. The film appeared authentic, he'd witnessed something he most definitely could not explain, the gun he found Jake holding in Timber Field was definitely Detective Fowler's lost gun. He felt certain he had enough to arrest Jake Howell, but at the same time, would any sensible judge or jury believe all of this? Was it all simply too far outside the realm of convention to be considered a prosecutable case. Was there any point in arresting Howell knowing that the case would read more like an episode of *The X-Files* or *The Twilight Zone* than a legitimate crime? *One step at a time*, he reminded himself. *Don't get too far ahead of yourself. This is all happening so fast. Build the case. Get the facts.*

His radio beeped and he heard the dispatcher speak, "Unit 17, come in."

He grabbed the radio and spoke into it. "This is Unit 17, go ahead."

"We just got word from St. Sebastian Hospital that Jake Howell brought his wife into the ER."

"What? Is he still there?"

There was an excruciating pause before the dispatcher responded. "Yes. Looks like he's still there."

Stop / Wisler

“Alert the Chief,” Matthews said breathlessly into the radio. “We’re going to need every available unit to converge on St. Sebastian. I’m headed there right now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Chief Wilson and Detective Matthews marched up to the admitting desk at the ER. The place was quiet as the morning wore on. Both men produced badges for the short nurse sitting at a computer behind the front desk. She glanced at the badges only briefly.

"We understand that you admitted a patient here by the name of Anne Howell," Matthews said. "And that her husband, Jake Howell, brought her in. We need to see him right away."

The young nurse nodded. "Okay," she said. "I'm going to have to check on what room they took her to."

She picked up her phone and dialed a number. Matthews looked around the place. A few people milled about, an older man in a ball cap stood by the elevator, looking down at a magazine in his hands. There were some people in the waiting area, otherwise the place was relatively peaceful. The elevator dinged, and a few people walked out.

"She's on the fourth floor," the nurse said, hanging up the phone. "Room 417."

"Thank you," the Chief smiled politely.

"Was there anyone with her," Matthews inquired.

"Yes," The nurse nodded. "Her husband and son. Husband carried her right in here out of the blue."

"So they didn't call ahead?" Matthews frowned. "No ambulance?"

"Nope, just rushed in here."

Damn. No way to know for sure where they came from, Matthews lamented.

"And he's still here?" Matthews asked.

Stop / Wisler

"As far as I know," the nurse nodded.

Matthews glanced at the Wilson.

Jake sat at the bed, looking at Anne. Ethan sat in a chair next to him as he leaned his head against his father's arm. The door behind Jake opened.

"Jake," came Amos' voice.

Jake turned around, "Amos, you made it!"

Jake stood and embraced the man. Only as they parted did Jake notice the ball cap he wore along with the light sports jacket, jeans, and the magazine in his hand. Amos tossed the magazine aside and spoke quickly.

"I came as soon as I got your text," Amos said. "Jake, the cops are here. They didn't see me. At least, I don't think they did."

Jake stared at the wall for a moment, lost in thought. Finally, he said, "I should go turn myself in."

"I'm not sure that's wise," Amos shook his head. "No one will believe us."

"Yes, they will," Jake said, locking eyes with the older man. "With your help. They'll believe me. They have to."

Amos smiled weakly. "While I appreciate your sincere belief in my work, what we have experienced is so far beyond the scope of our research. I'm afraid they will just peg us as lunatics. All of this is still about to undergo serious scrutiny and peer review. I don't for a second assume people are going to just take my word when I'm making such a bold claim. If we had time to actually capture some of these events on film, gather hard data,

Stop / Wisler

maybe we could prove something. But, Jake... I'm afraid without proof... without scientific consensus... we have no other option."

Jake turned back to look at his unconscious and battered wife. "Then I have to figure out how to prove I'm innocent," he said, softly. "I have to save my dad. Then this all goes away. If that's even possible."

"Don't do anything brash," Amos cautioned him. "Go back to the cabin. I have to do a TV interview tonight. I couldn't cancel it at this late hour, and I don't want to call any undue attention to myself in light of all this madness. I need more time to work out how best we can get proof you are innocent. So, I'll come to the cabin tomorrow, and you and I are going to figure out how to stop this madness!"

Jake nodded and turned back. "What about Noah?"

"I've take care of Noah," Amos said, his eyes dropping to the floor and his shoulders drooping slightly. A second later, she shook himself out of this state and looked back at Jake. "Now go, before the police find you here. Anne is in good hands. I know the doctors here quite well."

Jake nodded. He turned back to Ethan, who still sat by his mother. Getting down on Ethan's level, Jake looked his boy in the eye and said, "Okay, buddy. Do you remember where the car is?"

Ethan nodded.

"We're going to play a game," Jake continued. "I need you to go get in the elevator we took to get up here. Go down to the lobby, and out to the car." He fished the keys out of his pocket and handed them to Ethan. "Wait for me there. I'm counting on you."

Ethan managed a slight smile and then nodded even as he swallowed hard.

"Now, go quick," Jake said.

The boy hopped up. "What about mom?" he asked.

Stop / Wisler

"She's going to be fine. The docs are taking great care of her. But we need to get out of here," Jake said.

"Dad," Ethan said, tentatively. "I don't want to leave."

"I don't either. But it's not safe for us to stay here."

Ethan's eyes widened. "The man in black?"

"No, but the police think I'm a bad guy, they think..." Jake sighed and looked up at the ceiling trying to regain control over the lump in his throat. "They think I did something I definitely didn't do. But until we can prove to them that I'm innocent they want to arrest me. And if they arrest me, I don't know if I will be able to prove to them that I'm innocent. So we have to sneak out of here."

Ethan pressed his lips together and looked at his mother.

"Why do the police think you did something you didn't do?"

Jake took a deep breath. "I'll explain everything. I promise. As soon as we get in the car and get out of here. But right now we have got to get out of here fast."

"Okay, let's go," Ethan said.

"Wait, I can't go with you yet. I have to sneak down, but I bet you can walk right past them, they're looking for me, really. Can you do that? I'll meet you at the car."

Ethan nodded again and walked to the door. He pulled it open and glanced back one last time before walking out.

"Here," Amos said, pulling off the Red Sox cap he wore.

Jake took it and put it on. "Thank you, Amos. For everything."

"Don't thank me yet," Amos said. "We still need to exonerate you."

Jake walked to the door and pulled it open just enough to peek his head out. The hallway was clear. He stepped out and started for the elevators

Stop / Wisler

before realizing what a stupid choice that was. If the police were on their way up, they might be in the very elevator car he might be waiting to ride down. He turned and looked for a sign that indicated where the stairs were.

At the other end of the long hallway he spotted the sign. He began walking, pulling the cap lower to his head.

His whole body jerked involuntarily at the sound of the elevator's ding which announced the arrival of a car. He could hear the doors rolling open as if they were unnaturally amplified. His heart raced. Several shoes clacked on the tile floor as people exited the elevator. Jake forced himself to keep walking at a calm pace. But he heard the feet stop suddenly. He could swear he felt eyes boring into the back of his head.

"Jake Howell," came Detective Matthews' voice.

Jake kept walking, hoping Matthews would assume the lack of response meant he'd mistaken a random person for the man he was after.

"Jake Howell," Matthews said again with more force, "hold it right there. This is the police."

He still had half of the frustratingly long hallway to cover before reaching the stairs. But what choice did he have left? He sprang forward, his legs and back aching with the tension and the rush of adrenaline. He sprinted hard down the hall.

Behind him, Matthews took off in pursuit and as he yelled, "Seal off the exits!"

Feet pounding on the tile floor, Jake covered the remainder of the hallway quickly, though to him it didn't feel nearly quick enough. He slammed into the door to the stairwell and it crashed open. With no hesitation, Jake headed down the stairs. But a sudden thought occurred to him. He couldn't beat Matthews to the bottom. Even if he did, he'd heard Matthews call for the

Stop / Wisler

exits to be sealed. That meant there would be officers waiting downstairs for him. As he reached the third floor, he ripped open the door and dove through it.

Matthews crashed through the door to the stairwell which Jake Howell has just dashed through. He stopped, waiting to hear footsteps. But he heard nothing. A moment later, a door clicked shut. It was only one floor down. He took the stairs down to the next level and ripped open the door for the third floor. Stepping out into the hall way, he quickly glanced in all directions.

Three hallways converged where the stairwell door was located. Matthews took in quickly the hall to his left, straight ahead, and to his right. Down the hall to his right was a male nurse who pushed a child in a wheelchair. They had their backs to Matthews as they headed away from him. All the doors were closed. No sign of Jake Howell.

"Pardon me," Matthews called out to the nurse as he took several steps down the hall towards them, "did you see a man come through this door?"

The nurse stopped and looked back then shook his head. Matthews figured they might have been in the hall when Jake came through the door, but if they had had their backs to him, they may not have gotten a look at him. Lucky break for Howell, not so lucky for Matthews.

The detective looked in all directions again. If he had come out on this floor he could not have gone far. The halls were long and wide. So he had to be in one of the rooms nearby. He looked back to the nurse and sighed. As he did so, a door behind him slammed shut!

Stop / Wisler

He whirled around and ran back to the stairwell access. Judging from the sound, it appeared to have been the door leading to the stairs that had swung shut after someone had gone through it. A door to a room just next to the stairs now stood open. Matthews shoved the crash bar on the door to the stairs and headed down. Howell had tried to trick him and now he had a head start on heading down. This time, Matthews didn't wait to listen, he rushed down, taking two steps at a time.

It had been a big risk. Jake's lungs burned as he tried to control his gasps for air. He felt so exposed simply standing in the stairwell, his back pressed against the wall. He was on the landing between floors. He couldn't see the door to the third floor, but looking up to his right, he could see the door to the fourth floor, where Anne lay in a room, unconscious and with possible brain damage.

He had hid in the first room he found when he had run out into the third floor. Having been in too big of a hurry, he didn't think about the fact that the stairwell door on the third floor might make noise as it shut and give away the fact that he'd gotten off on that floor. But when he saw his opportunity, he seized it. Matthews had walked just a little ways down the hall from where Jake hid while talking to the nurse pushing the wheelchair. That meant Matthews had his back to him. So quietly, Jake pulled open the door to the room and snuck over to the stairwell door. As gently as he could, but as quickly as possible, he pushed the crash bar in and swung the door all the way open. As he let go, he'd run up the stairs. Just half a flight. Just enough so he could be around the corner and out of sight. He had

Stop / Wisler

placed a big bet on Detective Matthews assuming he would naturally head down in a desperate attempt to get out of the building. When the door slammed, it drew Matthew's attention. For an agonizing second, Jake had felt sure he'd be found, that his absurd and desperate plan wouldn't work. But then Matthews had dashed down the stairs!

Jake waited for the steps to fade away, then he took stairs back to the third floor. Peeking his head out, he looked in all directions. The nurse pushing the wheelchair was gone now. On the other end of the hall, a doctor looked at a chart and walked towards him. Jake took his chances and stepped into the hallway. He proceeded straight ahead, trying to think of what he might be able to do in an effort to get out of the building. As he walked, he noticed the bright colors on the walls, drawings of rocket ships, planets, rainbows, unicorns... he was in pediatrics!

He kept walking, forcing himself to go slow and to control his breathing. He didn't want to call attention to himself. But he had to find a way out of the building. He wondered how Ethan was fairing. Had he made it to the car? Would the police recognize him?

As he neared the reception desk at the center on the floor, he spotted an open room. In side he saw something that made him stop in his tracks. Could he? He glanced around quickly. Yes!

Wasting no time, he marched up to the desk where a couple of nurses stared at computer screens. He stopped and waited for one of them to look up. Finally one of them did.

"Hi," he said sheepishly, "could I borrow a pen and a sheet of paper?"

"Sure," the nurse said. She grabbed a pen and a legal pad and handed it to him, already looking back at her computer screen.

Stop / Wisler

Jake quickly scrawled out a note, trying to ensure his adrenaline shaken hands could manage to scratch out something legible. Then, pulling the sheet off the pad, he folded it once and cleared his throat.

"Excuse me," he said. "There's a Detective Matthews downstairs. I'm supposed to meet up with him. When he gets up here, could you please give this note to him? I have to get back to my boy right away, but Detective Matthews should be coming this way."

The nurse frowned, looking at the folded note. But at last she took it. "Sure," she said, flatly.

"In fact," Jake continued, "could you call the ER's front desk and let them know that Jake Howell is on the third floor. They're expecting me to call down. I just hadn't have a chance yet, you know."

The nurse frowned again, her annoyance increasing.

"I'm sorry. It would mean a lot," Jake smiled. "I just can't leave my son's side for very long right now, you know it is."

The nurse looked at him for a moment, then softened. "Okay," she said. She picked up the phone. Jake turned on his heels and walked quickly back to the open room he'd spotted. He didn't have more than a minute or two. His heart raced. *I'm crazy*, he kept repeating to himself. *This is crazy. I'm nuts. But I'm committed now!*

Matthews burst through the door to the first floor and ran to the ER entrance. He barked into his radio, "Anyone have eyes on Howell? He came down the stairs!"

No response.

Stop / Wisler

He reached the ER entrance where the Chief still stood.

"Have you seen him?" Matthews panted.

The phone rang and the nurse at the desk answered.

The Chief shook his head. "He's not been through here. We have all the exists covered."

"Damn it," Matthews muttered. "He must've got off on a different floor. But that means he's still in the building!"

"Gentlemen, excuse me," said the nurse who had answered the phone. "Is one of you Detective Matthews?"

"That's me," Matthews said, turning to her.

The Chief and Matthews frowned as they stepped closer to the reception desk. Neither man paid any attention the young boy who came out of the elevator and walked past them and out the front door.

"I've been told that Jake Howell is on the 3rd floor," said the short nurse with an air of confusion.

Matthews eyebrows involuntarily shot up. "Make sure he stays there," he pointed at her even as he turned for the elevator.

The Chief followed him. They stopped at the elevator and Matthews pressed the call button several times. It couldn't have been more than a minute, but Matthews' thundering heart that threatened to break his sternum made it feel much longer.

"Come on," he muttered. Then, grabbing his radio and barked, "Gunther and Miller, head up the stairs to the third floor quick."

Both officers replied simply with "copy," each in their own turn.

Finally, one of the doors opened. Two doctors and a clown stepped out and headed right past them as the Chief and Matthews stepped into the

Stop / Wisler

elevator. Matthews hit the button for the third floor. The doors slid shut, and once again they were relegated to waiting.

"What's he doing in pediatrics?" The Chief mumbled.

"Desperately trying to hide," Matthews shrugged.

The door slid open and they stepped out. Matthews marched up to the pediatrics reception desk.

"Did you call down to say Jake Howell is up here?" he asked the nurses.

"Yes," said one of them. "Are you Detective Matthews?"

"Yes, I am."

"Here," the nurses said, holding out a folded piece of paper.

"What's this?" Mathews said.

The nurse shrugged and made a sound that vaguely resembled a muddled "I don't know."

Matthews snatched the paper out of her hand and opened it. The note simply read, "Go to 77 Dewer Drive. In the garage is a projector and several old films. Look for the man in the black cloak in the footage. He's Fowler's Killer. I'm innocent." It was signed, Jake Howell.

"Son of a bitch," Matthews muttered, as a chill ran down his spine.

He looked up, glancing about, but he knew Jake was gone.

Just then, a slightly heavysset man stepped our of room not far from where they stood. He stomped over to the reception desk in a huff.

"Mary," he whined. "Where the hell is my clown suit?"

"Son of a bitch," Matthews muttered again as he realized exactly what Jake Howell had done—and how close he'd been to him!

Stop / Wisler

Ethan sat in the car looking out the windows for any sign of his father in the parking lot. He craned his neck to look out the passenger window. As he did so, the driver's door opened up. He spun around in time to see something completely unexpected. A clown—big rainbow wig, red nose, multi-color polka dotted suit, and incredibly messy make-up—flopped into the seat behind the wheel.

Ethan yelled. Not that he was scared of clowns, but this was just so utterly bizarre he didn't know how to react. And he was already so worked up as it was.

"Easy, easy!" Jake exclaimed from behind the foam nose and the splotchy make-up. "It's me. It's dad."

"Why are you a clown?" Ethan exclaimed.

Jake paused for a moment, then muttered, "Because it pays better than teaching philosophy."

Ethan broke into a smile, then giggled. Jake joined in.

Between giggles—and if he was honest, he was definitely giggling—Jake managed to say, "Got the keys?"

Ethan held them out to his dad. Jake grabbed them and put them in the ignition. They drove out of the parking lot and turned onto the road. Jake kept checking his mirrors, sure he'd see a police cruiser, but nothing happened. He turned again, and headed out of town. But he felt like his eyes were more often on his mirrors than on the road ahead.

Ethan sat quietly looking out his window. They said nothing to each other for the whole car ride. Exhaustion and nerves destroyed any ability the two might have had for conversation. Jake didn't even bother with the radio. They just listened to the hum of the old engine and the rolling of the tires

Stop / Wisler

on the road. At last, they turned on to the long gravel driveway that lead up to the cabin.

The car lurched to a stop on the gravel and Jake put it in park. He stared at the cabin for a moment. He'd pulled off the nose and wig for the clown costume at some point while driving without giving it much thought. But the make-up and outfit remained. Ethan sat next to him in silence. Finally, the boy spoke.

"Dad. Why did we come back here?"

Jake blinked and looked over at Ethan. "Because we don't have anywhere else to go."

Jake frowned, thinking more. Then he shook his head.

"No. That's not it," he said, almost as if to himself. "We're here because sometimes we have to confront our fears. We have to figure out what's happening here. Who is the man in the black cloak and how can we stop him?"

Jake looked at Ethan now and spoke softly. "I'm going to need your help," he said. "Can you tell me what mommy was doing just before the man in black showed up? Because one thing is very clear, he doesn't just show up for no reason. I bet mommy was on to something, wasn't she?"

Ethan looked out at the cabin, thinking. Finally, he said, "She had her phone out. She's been using her phone a lot when looking at Grandpa's notebooks."

Jake nodded, taking this information in. "Wonder what she was doing," he mused.

"I don't know," Ethan answered. "But you can look."

The boy wrestled the smartphone out of his small pocket and held it out for Jake, who broke into a large grin.

Stop / Wisler

"You have it?" Jake marveled. The thought of grabbing Anne's phone hadn't even occurred to him.

"It fell on the ground when the man in black attacked mom. When you picked her up to bring her to the car, I grabbed it so it wouldn't get lost."

"That's my boy," Jake said, taking the phone.

"I think she was using the map," Ethan said. "I saw her marking things on it."

Jake opened the map application. Sure enough, there were several markers spanning the area of Maine they were currently in. There was also a blue dot indicating their current location.

"You're right," Jake smiled. "Good job, buddy!"

Jake clicked on one of the markers. It popped up with a label that read, "Location #3." Jake zoomed in on that area then moved the map around to better see what landmarks were displayed. Nothing in particular jumped out at him. He moved further out past other locations. Finally, he came across his current location again. There was a large green area to the north of where the blue dot indicated they were currently. At first he wondered at the fact that he'd never noticed it before. Then he recalled that he had not driven to the cabin. Amos had dropped him off here. Jake had used the GPS on his phone to navigate to the hospital. But his mind had been focused only on helping Anne at that point. But sitting there now and looking at the map from overhead, the name was clearly displayed.

Baxter State Park.

Jake's jaw dropped open and he looked up at the cabin... and then the trees beyond it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The door to the cabin swung open. Jake walked in and headed for the bathroom. Ethan closed the door behind him. Jake removed the clown costume which covered his regular clothing. He hadn't bothered with clown shoes. As he considered his shoe predicament He figured few people would look at his feet if he had a rainbow wig, make up, and a red nose.

In a rush, he rinsed off the white make-up he had so hastily applied and dried his face, leaving stains on the towel. White streaks ran down his damp shirt. When he turned around, he found Ethan standing in the bathroom doorway.

"Okay," Jake exhaled. "I'm just going to take a look outside. I'll be right back."

"No," Ethan's eyes went wide.

"It's going to be okay. Just stay in here. I just have to figure out what mommy was doing."

"But the man in black..." Ethan muttered.

Jake sighed and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'll be very careful. I promise. Alright?"

Ethan remained still for a moment, but at last he nodded.

"That's my little man. I'm proud of you," Jake said, giving his boy's shoulders a squeeze.

Jake looked over at the small dresser in the bedroom and then down to his stained and wet shirt. He pulled it off and rummaged through the dresser. Amos was a little rounder than Jake, so most of the shirts would be too big.

Stop / Wisler

But Jake found a grey undershirt and pulled it on. It felt better to be in the dry shirt after all that sweating and the clown make up.

The two walked out into the dining room. Jake headed for the back door and swung it open. But before he stepped outside, he looked back at Ethan.

"I'll be right back," he said. "Maybe you could grab something out of the fridge for us to eat."

Ethan nodded. Jake turned and headed out.

He pulled out Anne's phone and pulled up the map application. He wanted to look again at how close any of the locations Anne had marked were to the cabin. As he did so, however, the phone beeped at him and a message popped up: Battery is critically low. A moment later, the screen went blank.

"Ah crap," he muttered.

He replaced the phone in his pocket and looked around at the trees. The sun was high in the sky and the clouds of the previous day had cleared. It would have been a pleasant day if not for the knot in Jake's stomach. He thought of Anne laying in the hospital, alone. What if she woke without him there? But he couldn't stay. He would have been hauled out of there in handcuffs had he stayed by her side. This way, he at least had a shot at doing something about what was happening.

Ethan had said a man who looked like him had stopped the attacker. Could it be that he'd jumped back to the point of the attack? But, for that to be true, then there would have to be a nexus point nearby. *But of course there's a nexus point here*, Jake thought. *That's how this hooded creep showed up and attacked Anne. But if he can do it, maybe I can too.* The idea that Jake might manage to work out a means to make such a jump and stop the attack filled him with hope. Maybe there was something he could actually do about all of this after all?

Stop / Wisler

As he walked into the woods behind the cabin he wondered if Detective Matthews had gotten his note. Walking past him in the hospital had been the most nerve wracking thing Jake had ever done. He still couldn't believe he'd managed it. He hoped Matthews would do what the note suggested. Would the man who suspected Jake of murdering a former colleague and his own father really bother to check out the footage hidden in the garage of Jake's parents' house? He had no way of knowing. But he hoped Matthews would check out the films. It was the only hope he had at the moment that he might be able to start building a case for himself, or at least instill some doubt into Matthews' mind that he was the killer.

The most pressing question on his mind now, however, was the issue of Baxter State Park, the very place where hikers had found his father's film camera nineteen years ago. And Amos' cabin sat on its southern border.

In the cabin, Ethan finished a tall glass of water and set it aside. He stood in the kitchen. His father had mentioned food, but Ethan had no desire to eat right now. Unable to shake the fear that something might happen to his dad, Ethan headed for the backdoor to at least look out at what his dad was doing. But as he did so, something caught his eye. He stopped and looked at the door that he'd seen before, the one next to the laundry machines.

The door he'd tried to open but found locked.

Light leaked out from under the closed door. There hadn't been light before. Ethan approached it slowly, looking for a light switch near it. But there was nothing. He stopped in front of it and reached out a shaking hand. Grasping the knob, he twisted.

Stop / Wisler

It turned!

The door clicked open and swung in. He let go of the door and let it swing the rest of the way on its own. Ethan stared down in shock at the bare lightbulb that hung over the wooden steps that appeared to lead down into a basement. The cabin had a basement! Why did a cabin have a basement?

Ethan glanced over at the backdoor, wondering if he should wait for his dad. He looked back down at the stairs. But this was Amos' cabin and he felt sure that in here he was safe. Curiosity won out and he stepped down onto the first step with a slight creak.

Jake stepped further into the woods. His eyes searched the trees around him. He stopped and looked about, turning slowly to take in the view. Nothing seemed familiar. He walked a little further in and stopped to examine his surroundings. Again, he turned in a complete circle to take in his surroundings. *You're losing your mind*, a voice in his head told him. *There's a reasonable explanation for this*. But he grinned and shook his head at the folly of his own continued insistence on thinking in familiar terms and in long established patterns. *We are way beyond reasonable here*, he thought as he carried on.

He stopped suddenly and stared. He could barely breathe. Could it be? Several yards ahead of him stood a large tree with a course, thick trunk. From the trunk protruded a large growth, a lump. Two thick branches spread out above the lump forming a V. Was it the same one he'd seen in the last reel of film? Was this the same tree? The very same spot?

Stop / Wisler

Judging the size and characteristics of the tree strictly from his memory of the last reel of the film was a tricky proposition at best. And of course, two decades had transpired since the film was shot. The tree had to have grown and changed. Still, as he looked the tree up and down several times, he felt excitement grow at the possibility that this might be the same tree.

In the recesses of his mind, he heard the more rational part of himself caution against getting his hopes up, and yet, his feet moved him forward slowly. He walked a short distance and then stopped next to a much thinner tree. His eyes remained fixed on the large lump on the tree directly ahead of him. As he stared, he felt certain that this was the same tree. This was the seventh location. That was how the man in black had shown up and attacked Anne and vanished so quickly. That's how Jake must have jumped and saved her. Another horrible thought wash over him like an unwelcome cascade of icy water.

The cabin was not here by accident.

The world around him rippled and distorted. He felt his head spin for a moment and his stomach turned. There was a burst of light and he blinked. The spinning stopped and he took in a sharp breath. He reached out to steady himself against the younger tree he had stopped next to, but his hand found nothing. He nearly fell but found his footing again and steadied himself. His eyes focused first on the large tree still standing several yards away from him. The lump was smaller and lower, but still quite significant. A little moss grew on it.

The air felt hot and humid, but Jake felt a shiver run through him. This was it. It was happening.

Stop / Wisler

A slight, but distinct whirring sound filled the air. Without even looking, Jake recognized the sound and knew it meant the old camera was running somewhere nearby. He looked for it and off to his right his eyes locked onto it. Several yards from him stood the old tripod. On top of it rested his father's film camera. Jake's lips trembled as he took in the sight of it. Movement registered in his eyes, but for a moment he refused to look. He didn't want to look. But he had to see him.

Midway between the camera and the tree with the large lump stood a man. Involuntarily, Jake's eyes focused on the him. There, in the flesh, stood his father, Edward Howell. The man stood with his chalk slate in hand and lifted it up so the camera could see it. He faced away from Jake.

Jake took a shaky step forward, and the sound of it drew Edward's attention. The man looked back in Jake's direction and Jake locked eyes with him. The word forced its way out of Jake's mouth before he could chose otherwise.

"Dad?" he gasped.

Edward's mouth dropped open and the chalk slate slipped from his hands. Bewilderment washed over Edward's features. Jake's heart raced and he felt a tear slip down his right cheek.

Something rustled the leaves behind Jake. He forced himself to look away from his father and turn to see who or what might be behind him. He was not prepared for what he discovered.

At least thirty yards away stood a boy. The boy froze in shock at the sight of Jake standing there unexpectedly. At first, Jake wondered how in the world Ethan had gotten there. But a second later he recognized the old NASA T-shirt his father had bought him when they had visited the Kennedy Space Center on one summer vacation. That wasn't Ethan staring at him. It was

Stop / Wisler

himself as a boy. Thirty yards and twenty years separated the two of them, but Jake recognized his younger self.

He had been there?

Images of this very moment, twisted by two decades of nightmares and a desperate need to forget this horrible day suddenly forced themselves back into Jake's conscious mind. Twenty years of repression, guilt, and fear of upsetting his mother by talking about this day broke open inside of Jake and his legs nearly crumpled.

He had been there!

The boy's eyes moved from Jake to something else far beyond him. In a sudden rush of memory, Jake knew what his younger self was looking at. Even as the adult Jake turned to look, the young Jake turned and fled.

Out among the trees on the other side of Edward, a figure in a black cloak and hood moved quickly. His arm rouse, a revolver in hand. The gun aimed at Edward. Jake sprinted hard for his father. He felt it all happening in slow-motion, unable to make his body move any faster. Edward, eyes wide, took a tentative step back. Just as Jake reached him, he heard the blast from the gun as it ripped through the peaceful woods and echoed off into the distance. The next instant, his shoulders collided with his father's torso. The two men hit the ground.

Jake looked up from the dirt and leaves where he and his father had landed. He saw the black cloak fluttering as his father's real killer fled the scene. Instinctively, Jake rouse to his feet to give chase. But even as he did this, he felt the utter futility of doing so. He stopped after only a couple of steps. Edward gasped where he lay. Jake's eyes returned to the man on the ground next to him.

Blood already stained Edwards shirt from the bullet wound.

Stop / Wisler

Jake fell to his knees next to his father, his hands shaking as he reached out to him. He placed his hands on the wound in an effort to stop the bleeding. The blood oozed up between his fingers. It was no use. The bullet had travelled through Edward. That meant that while Jake applied pressure to the wound on the front of his rib cage, there was an entry wound bleeding just as much or more on Edward's back. Blood ran onto the leaves where Edward lay, staining the knees on Jake's pants.

"Dad," Jake croaked through his tightened throat. "I'm so sorry. I tried to stop him. I tried to save you."

Edward, eyes wide, face pale, stared up at his son as he struggled for breath.

"Jake?" he managed to say at last.

"Yeah, dad. It's me," Jake whispered.

"How are you..." Edward tried to speak, but stopped.

"I wanted to save you," Jake choked out.

Edward reached out and touched Jake's hands still on the exit wound. He lifted a shaking hand and looked at his own blood that now stained it. Then, his eyes looked back into Jake's.

"Son," he murmured, "I'm so sorry."

"What?" Jake frowned.

"I've let you down. I should have been more careful. Your mother was right. This things, this power is too dangerous. And now look at me."

"I just wanted to save you," Jake insisted.

Edward shook his head and spoke in short, halting bursts, "What's done is done. There is a power in these places... too strong to be controlled. Go home. Please. Don't mess with this. Go. Some things are not for us to meddle with. Go be with the people you love."

Stop / Wisler

Edward coughed and a bit of blood now stained this lips.

"I'm sorry, Jake," he said, his eyes filling with tears and regret. "I should have quit. You shouldn't have come here."

Jake shook his head even as tears fell from his own eyes. "I had to. I had to. I had to try. I had to save you." He gasped as a sob escaped his lungs. "I've missed you so much!"

Edward nodded slightly, his eyes communicating an understanding neither could ever have put into words. He closed his eyes and grimaced as fresh pain attacked his body. Edward looked down at the blood on his and his son's hands and whispered, "This is too soon. I..."

He coughed again and a single stream of blood ran from the corner of his mouth toward the leaves he lay on.

"Dad," Jake said softly. "No dad, we can get you help."

"I'm sorry," Edward sighed. " Stay away from this. I... I love you."

Edward's eyes looked past Jake, up to the tree tops and the sunlight and the blue sky far above. It was only a faint sigh, but Jake felt it in his hands as he still held his wounded father. He felt it happen and saw it in his father's eyes. It was such a slight exhale, and yet so much more.

And he was gone.

"Dad!" Jake yelled. "No wait! I love you too! I love you too!"

His head collapsed on his father's chest and he wept with the furry twenty years of pain and regret. His body ached with a need to explode in an onslaught of more emotion and grief than he'd ever thought possible. He gasped for air. The woods around him were perfectly still. He heard only the whir of the film camera still capturing what it could this scene from its limit vantage point.

The camera!

Stop / Wisler

He forced himself up, his back to it. He found the chalk slate. It was all a waste. It was for nothing. His dad had told him not to come here. He grabbed the slate and whipped it with his bloody hand, leaving a red streak across its dark green surface. Blinking through the tears, he grasped the chalk and wrote one word.

The camera's lens stared unblinkingly at Jake as he rouse to his feet and turned to face it. He held out the chalk slate.

Stop.

The slate read simply, "Stop."

As it always had.

As it always would.

He heard the camera roll out of film and the motor stopped automatically. He stood there for a moment, frozen in place by the certainty that there were no choices for him to make. It was all playing out with horrible inevitability. He should have written more. He should have told himself to never come here. Or told himself where the seventh nexus point was located. But could he? All this had already happened long ago.

He turned and walked back to his father's body. Kneeling next to it, he took his father in his arms and held him. He didn't know where to go now, what he should do next. But he knew he couldn't leave his father's side.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, he had the image of his younger self running through the woods, terrified and alone. Jake looked out at the woods around him. That's right. He was out there somewhere. The lies Jake had told himself blended with the reality of this moment and he could not with any certainty recalled what had happened next for him as a boy. He knew deep inside the guilt that would wrack him for years. He had run away. His mother's refusal to ever talk about what happened drove him to silence his

Stop / Wisler

own thoughts. His guilt became his own form of madness. Very slowly, over the course of twenty years, a tortured boy had become a tortured man who had all but forgotten the source of all his pain, twisting it into some other-worldly nightmare. But in this moment, as Jake sat there in the stillness of the woods holding his father's body, he wished he could find that boy who fled, that boy he'd been so long ago, and hold him in his arms and tell him plainly that it was not his fault. There had been nothing he could have done. That seemed clear to Jake now in so many ways. Jake looked back his father's still open eyes. There had been nothing even then as a boy. There was nothing else he could have done now as an adult.

The world around him rippled.

The spinning and nausea barely registered in Jake's state. But as he looked up he saw the camera was gone. Looking through the trees, he could just make out the shape of the cabin in the distance. He was back.

In his arms, he still held his father's body.

Each step creaked loudly as Ethan descended. As he reached the bottom of the steps, he stopped and peered into the mysterious basement in the cabin. His feet stood on a concrete floor. There was a single room with no windows. The room itself was probably no more than ten feet by ten feet. The steps came down along one of the walls. Along two of the walls were tables. Several flat computer monitors were set up along the tables and a computer sat in the middle of the tables where they met at ninety degrees. A single comfortable office chair stood before it.

Stop / Wisler

Stacks of disks and hard drives littered the tables. In the opposite corner stood a large black metal wrack with several glowing lights. It took Ethan a moment to recognize that he'd seen such a thing before on a tour of a Cambridge tech company his school had done. It was a computer server. Buried beneath the cabin was some serious computing power and data storage. What in the world was Amos doing? Next to the server was a coat wrack with several coats.

Ethan stepped into the room, walking out into the middle so he could take a better look at the many computer monitors. As he did so, he realized that all of the monitors appeared to be showing live feeds from security cameras. Only these security cameras appeared to be in the woods in various places. The only monitor that did not show such a view was the one in the middle of the two tables that was clearly hooked up to a computer. It showed a window that had small thumbnails of all the video feeds and another window displayed some sort of computer activity graphs.

Ethan moved closer to the computer monitor and realized that the window with the graphs was labeled: Video Recording Status. There was a list of locations by number, one through seven, and the word "recording" in red letters next to each. Every one of the locations also showed a constantly fluctuating graph which must have been a live feed of the incoming data from the cameras at each of those locations. Another graph indicated battery charge levels, battery back up power, and solar charger generation. Apparently, the cameras were in remote spots where running power to them was not so easy.

Ethan looked from the computer to the bundle of cables that snaked from it to the server. Clearly, Amos had set this place up as a secure recording center for his research. Ethan moved slowly past each monitors, looking at

Stop / Wisler

the live feed from each of the locations. The cameras appeared to be high, likely hidden on tree branches. The monitors had labels above them indicating they belonged to "location number 1" and so forth. As Ethan carefully examined the view from each camera he tried to spot anything that looked familiar. Sure enough, at last he recognized the place in the woods where he and his mother had been the previous day. These were all the places that his grandfather had been researching. He felt sure of that.

He looked at the disks and drives sitting on the table. There was a disk laying at the top of the stack with yesterday's date on it and the words, "Anne's jump" written in black marker. Ethan looked further down the table and his eyes fell on something he recognized. Stacked neatly at the end of the table near the server were the notebooks that his grandpa had used for his research—the notebooks the man in black had stolen from his mother.

Ethan moved to the end of the table and stopped at the last monitor. It was labeled as location number seven. On it he saw a man sitting on the ground, holding another man. The sight of blood shocked Ethan and it took him a moment to recover and realize that he recognized both men. His father sat on the ground holding his grandfather.

In horror, Ethan stepped away from the monitors. He backed away until he stood in closer to the middle of the room. From the corner of his eye, he saw something that made him nearly jump out of his skin. He stood much closer to the coat wrack next to the server now. From the corner of his eye, he'd caught sight of a large black mass of fabric. He jerked his head to his right, taking in the sight of the coat wrack. His mind raced with terrifying images of the man in the black cloak.

Everything on the wrack was black. For a moment, Ethan felt stupid. He was just being jumpy. He moved to the coat wrack and pulled the coats apart

Stop / Wisler

to have a better look. An icy chill ran through him. They were all identical. They were all body length black cloaks. The hood on each hung limp off the back. Fear gripped Ethan as if he were in the very presence of the attacker who wore these black cloaks.

He felt himself moving away from the coat wrack, his hands still out where he had reached up to part the cloaks for a better look. He opened his mouth and screamed.

Jake still held his father. The tears had stopped. Now he just breathed, feeling the overwhelming exhausting settle in over him. He was back. He was back, and his father's body had come back with him. He hadn't saved his father. He hadn't stopped all of this madness. He'd failed.

Suddenly, the shrill, primal sound of his son's scream ripped him out of his spiral of grief. It was a single syllable, high pitched, and loud in spite of being muffled. It came from the cabin. Jake recognized the single, drawn out word and the desperate panic it carried.

"Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaadddd!"

LEVEL FOUR

"The bottom line is that time travel is allowed by the laws of physics."

- Brian Greene

"Science is a great edifice, built one brick at a time. As long as we leave the bricks carefully, we will always be able to build further, and will not need to remove the bricks already placed."

- Jeffrey Bennett

"If I have seen farther than others, it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants."

- Sir Isaac Newton

"Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value."

- Albert Einstein

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fowler took a deep drag from his cigarette and pulled his coat tighter around his neck. The snow crunched under his boots as he walked to his police cruiser. Pulling the door open, he flicked the cigarette off into the street and climbed in behind the wheel. Just then, one of the newer officers came jobbing out of the police station and hollered at him.

"Wait up," Matthews called out. "Just got a call for you."

Fowler left his door open as Matthews trudged through the several inches of snow to reach the cruiser parked on the street side.

"What's going on?" Fowler frowned.

"Just thought I'd catch you before heading home," Matthews explained. "Heard Mrs. Howell called. First time in a while. Guess she was talking to the Chief about whether we were making any progress on her husband's case. I know you have tried to keep her informed in the past. Thought you'd want to know she's poking around."

Fowler shook his head. "Should of known she'd eventually check in again."

"There's not anything new to report, is there?" Matthews said.

"Not exactly," Fowler muttered. "Of course, if I could talk her into letting me ask her kid some questions, we might find out something new."

"Can't we get creative and go around her?"

Fowler chuckled. "I doubt we want to stir up that kind of trouble. We start doing that and we open up whole host of other problems, not the least of which is the trust people have in our department. So, no, I don't think we try to go around her. But, if she's calling the Chief up, that means she's

Stop / Wisler

thinking about things. And if she's thinking about such things, maybe a friendly visit might help move her in that direction. Thanks for the heads up."

Fowler closed the door and started the car. Matthews stepped back on the sidewalk and watched him go. Fowler headed down the street to the intersection, where he took a left instead of his normal right turn to the head home.

#

She heard the crunch on tires on snow and ice on the driveway and knew who would be ringing her doorbell. Laura Howell put aside her magazine and rose from the recliner in the living room. She walked to her front door and opened it even as Fowler got out of his cruiser. She had her hair pulled back in a ponytail and wore slacks and a dress shirt. The cold breeze wrapped her face and neck and cut through the fabric but she stood with straight back and elevated chin, watching the detective approach.

"I take it the Chief told you I called," she said.

Fowler looked up at her and stopped. "I thought I'd stop by on my way home and see if I can answer any questions you have."

She considered shooing him away for a moment. But looking into his dark eyes she relented and stepped out of the door.

"Tea?" She asked.

"No thank you," he said, as he wiped his boots on the rough entry mat. "I shouldn't stay too long. Is Jake home?"

They stepped in and Laura closed the door.

Stop / Wisler

"He's a Mark's," she said. "Apparently the boy's got some new video game. Can't hardly pry Jake away from there. They've been so good to him. It's good he has friends he can be with."

Fowler nodded as he stepped into the dining room. Laura watched him, as he turned to her. She could see how this conversation would play out already. This was their stalemate of months now. Maybe she should just take him right back to the door and end him on his way. And yet...

"Have you given any thought to letting me talk to Jake?" Fowler predictably asked.

When she looked out her without with out a response, he sighed.

"Laura, have you at least talked with him?"

"He didn't see anything," she answered in a soft voice. "He has nightmares. He feels so guilty for running away. Why would I want to drag him through this horrible experience again?"

"I know it's hard," Fowler said.

She looked up at him with a frown. "Do you? We already are the laughing stock of this town with Ed's... eccentric research. I just want my boy to have a normal life now. We're grieving. And in time we can move on. In time, this will all be in the past and Jake and be free to live his life."

"I wouldn't be so sure he'll ever be free of this," Fowler shook his head.

Laura stepped closer to him, feeling her jaw tighten. "Do not presume to come into my house and tell me how to raise my child."

"Laura, I'm not trying to do anything like that," Fowler raised his hands in surrender. "I have a job to do. Don't you want to see this man brought to justice?"

Stop / Wisler

Laura sighed and looked down, "Justice... Justice won't bring Ed back. It won't stop Jake's nightmares."

"About those nightmares," Fowler said, softly, "have you considered what I suggested?"

Laura pursed her lips and let out a long breath through her nose. "A shrink. Hmm."

"I'm not even talked about digging for leads for the case in Jake's head. I just think, it might help him deal with what's happened. In fact, you both might benefit."

She stared at him for a long moment. She wished she knew what to say, knew why she felt so determined to protect this last vestige of the life she had hoped to have but that now was clearly out of reach. Was there any point left in protecting anything? She was now a widow and a mistress, two things she could never have imagined for herself. Oh, how the idealism of youth crumbles under the weight of time and chaos. The life she had built was slipping away before her eyes. The woman she thought she was had melted in a deformed mockery of all her hopes. Only one worthy endeavor remained for her. All she could protect now was Jake.

"I'm sorry, detective," she shook her head. "I think you should go now."

She turned to walk to the door, but Fowler reached out and gently grasped her arm. She felt the warmth of his hand. Maybe it was him, maybe it was the months of isolation, but she felt her heart speed up. She looked back at him and he kept his hand on her arm, not a grasp anymore, but a caress. She felt herself responding and both hated herself and felt no desire to stop what would likely come next.

Stop / Wisler

But when Jim hesitated and his hands began to slide down her arm, a surge of fear shot through her and she realized she didn't want him to walk out that door yet. She stepped in and pressed her body against his, her lips onto his. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her with force now. She could taste the coffee and cigarettes on him and yet found she didn't care. Reaching her arms under his coat, she grasped his back.

When they parted for a moment, Fowler took a deep breath and blinked. "I think I should be—"

"I've missed you" Laura said.

"Laura, I can't do this anymore," he whispered.

She pressed herself against him, feeling him responding. He ran his fingertips through her hair while she moved her hand slowly down his back until she reached his belt. Moving her hands to the front of his pants, she undid the buckle. Fowler reached down and grasped her wrists.

"Not here," he said.

They quickly made their way to the bedroom, Fowler like clay in her hands. She often wondered if he was truly attracted to her or if she was a type for him: the damsel in distress who needed rescuing. She hated the idea of being some damsel. She wanted to be the mysterious woman from a film noir, dangerous, treacherous. It was a life she had never allowed herself. But her old life had died with Edward. So here she, exerting a power she'd only vaguely fantasized. Jim might think of her as a poor lass needing rescuing, but she would teach him that she was indeed quite dangerous.

There was hunger to their movements given their months of unspoken distance. She found herself acknowledging thoughts of how much she'd missed him. But these she kept to herself.

Stop / Wisler

When at last they lay next to each other staring silently at the ceiling, she felt the silence of the house close in on her like rushing water in a sinking ship. An unidentified knot of emotions threatened to claw its way out of her throat. So instead she spoke. And for some reason, she spoke of Edward.

"He took me out once," she said softly.

Fowler stirred and looked over at her. "What now?"

"Ed took me to one of the places he did his research. He wanted to see what I'd experience."

"Did anything happen?"

She shook her head. "No, not a thing. But he kept going on about his various ideas about how it worked. Maybe there was a cadence to when these places let you jump through time. Maybe you had to have some kind of history with the place. It was all so far fetched. And yet, he was gathering data. He and Amos and Noah. How they got their funding is beyond me. Amos has some good connections, I guess."

Fowler reached over and brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes. "Where did he take you?"

"Timber field, a little ways out of town."

"Oh yeah, I've seen it marked on his maps and notes. Maybe I should go take another look at it some time. It's been a while."

"You went out there before?"

"Had to go to every place he'd been studying since we don't know where this location number seven is where he was..." He sighed. "I'm sorry, this is godawful pillow talk."

"Well, I brought it up," she said.

Stop / Wisler

She stood, cupping her hand to prevent his semen from running down her thighs. As she walked out she spoke without even a glance back at him.

"Jake will be home soon. You should probably go."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He opened the door and stepped into the darkness. The musty smell of old boxes and humidity confronted him. Matthews' hand reached out and searched for the light switch. Finding it, he flipped it on. Buzzing fluorescent lights flooded the garage with a harsh, flickering intensity. He found the projector and the boxes filled with film reels. While the rest of the police force was looking for Jake Howell, Matthews figured he might as well see what he would find in this garage that Howell had felt was so important it was worth risking being caught in order to leave him a note. He rummaged through the boxes, looked carefully at the projector, and finally sighed in defeat. He was going to need help with all of this to even determine if there was something to be found here. A cynical voice in his head cautioned him that he was likely being sent off on a wild goose chase. And yet, considering just how out of this world this case had turned out to be so far, he carried on. *Maybe the only way forward is to dive into the wild goose chase*, he shrugged. After he'd snapped several pictures of the garage, the projector, and how everything had been set up, he opened the garage door and backed his Jeep up to it, then proceeded to load the back of his Jeep with all the boxes and the projector.

Matthews headed back to the police station where he recruited the help of their summer technology intern, Samantha. He wasn't sure she would know anything about the projector, but she seemed more than capable of figuring out most things they had thrown at her so far. So why not this as well?

Samantha's eyes lit up when he showed her the projector. "Oh, is this more crazy films from that guy?" She asked.

Stop / Wisler

"Something like that," Matthews mumbled.

He showed her the note and filled her in on what he knew of Jake Howell. No point in holding back, he figured. He needed another set of eyes on as much of this footage as possible, and so he needed Samantha to know what she was looking for. Even though it seemed impossible, her eyes somehow continued to get bigger as he explained... almost everything.

"So I'm looking for this..." she waved a hand in the air, "figure in a black cloak?"

"Yes," Matthews said. "If you can get the projector running. Ever run one of these?"

She looked at the grey hunk of metal with its protruding arms for the reels that sat on Matthews' desk and shook her head. "No. But I'm sure someone on the Internet has. There has to be a Reddit thread on these things."

She pulled out her smart phone and got to work searching for instructions on loading the film reels on to the projector. She inspected the projector to find the make and model of this specific unit and got busy digging for help. Matthews marveled at the simplicity of her approach. She didn't need to know how to use it, just how to look for the right information. He also felt a little like an old dog unable to learn new tricks as he didn't much care for cell phones. But he had to admit in that moment that he was glad Samantha had one and knew what to do with it—whatever a Reddit was.

Within fifteen minutes, Samantha had the projector up and running. They closed the blinds, shut off the lights, and projected the films on to the wall in his office. He cleared a few pictures and a certificate from the wall to make space for the projected image. She loaded reel after reel and they

Stop / Wisler

watched through them. Matthews made notes on a legal pad. It was beginning to feel like an exercise in futility as they saw no sign of the fabled figure in the black cloak they were supposed to be looking for. As the fourteenth reel rolled out, Matthews sighed heavily.

But Samantha was on a mission. She already had another reel of 16mm film in hand and went to work threading it onto the projector. This probably was more interesting than anything else she'd do so far for her internship. Once loaded, she flipped the switch. Matthews watched, his mind distracted by a nagging suspicion that Jake Howell was playing him for a chump and that he'd fallen right into this time wasting trap.

Then he saw it!

"Whoa," Samantha said, sitting forward.

In the grainy footage, moving among the tree, they saw it for just a moment.

"No way," he muttered.

"I'll make note of the film reel," Samantha offered.

"Yeah," Matthews said, eyes glued to the image on his wall. "Do that."

#

"Tonight, I have the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Amos Jeffries, a scientist in charge of a highly secretive and ambitious study," said the reporter. She sat in one of the comfortable plush chairs in Amos' large living room. When she smiled for the cameras, her white teeth contrasted beautifully with her dark skin and hair under the soft lighting the television crew had set up.

Stop / Wisler

There were three camera operators, a sound mixer, and a producer in a grey suit with his arms crossed, standing off to the side. Next to him stood a young woman, a production assistant. Amos wore a soft smile and kept his eyes on the reporter conducting the interview. He wore a navy suit, a lapel mic clipped to his jacket. The boom mic on a stand hovered above him, just out of view from any of the cameras.

"Dr. Jeffries," the reporter continued, "some in the scientific community have scoffed at your work so far, claiming you're chasing ludicrous ideas like the supposed Ley Lines that connect various important historical locations. Things only Druids and science fiction writers believe. I have to admit, this sounds more like science fiction than legitimate research. How do you respond?"

"Well," Amos smiled even bigger and held out his open palms, "these are not like Ley Lines, I'll be the first to tell you. But I agree that at face value, the idea that we can jump through time at these specific locations does sound ludicrous. It flies in the face of our established understanding of how the universe works. But then, so did the idea of a round Earth. Or flying. Or landing on the moon. Relativity theory, quantum mechanics, black holes, all of these things sounded absurd at first, until the the mathematics and repeated experiments all checked out. Almost all of science was science-fiction at one time or another. But this is the beauty of true science. We work hard to disprove our theories and when we get consistent results that a theory is true, it doesn't matter if it overturns old ideas. The truth marches forward."

From the hallways leading into the living room, Jake moved quietly in the darkness. He could hear the interview banter and see the people, the lights, the cameras. Amos was in his element, charming and disarming as he

Stop / Wisler

carefully laid out his case. *So this is why you've done all of this*, Jake thought.

Jake slowly backed down the hallway. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed. He waited as it rang. Finally, the call was answered.

"Detective Matthews," came the gruff voice.

"Hello, Detective," Jake said softly into his phone. "This is Jake Howell. We should probably talk. I think it's time we meet in person."

"Okay," Matthews answered in an even tone. "I've been sitting here looking at the films you told me to watch."

"Good," Jake said. "Because now I've got something far more important I need to show you."

In a hushed tone, Jake explained briefly where he wanted to meet Matthews and hung up the phone. As he headed slowly back down the hallway towards the living room, he listened carefully.

"Right here in Maine," Amos was saying, "I have been tirelessly studying six locations where time does indeed part ways with our conventional understanding of physics."

"How so?" said the reporter.

"I have documented numerous jumps through time," Amos explained. "I am now ready to invite the entire scientific community to come and confirm for themselves what I have experienced and documented for twenty years."

"How do these 'jumps through time' work, exactly?" The reporter cocked her head to the side.

"We are only beginning to unlock the secrets of these places," Amos gave her a big smile. "But it seems clear to me that our research will clearly show a profound metaphysical connection between our minds and our

Stop / Wisler

experience of time and space. These places are simply offering us a means to step through such metaphysical barriers."

"This sounds rather mystical," the reporter frowned.

"The more we understand about the fabric of reality, the more we understand our real connection to and experience of reality. Einstein made us all rethink the very nature of gravity as more than some magical force pulling on us, but the actual bending of space and time. General relativity was once a hard thing for most people to really grasp. Today, it is accepted as the air we breathe. Hollywood even makes movies like *Interstellar* with time dilation, a core aspect general relativity, as the crux of its plot. Your GPS app on your smartphone only works because of the calculation made by general relativity. Einstein predicted gravity waves. And yet, it took us a hundred years from when he first introduced the world to relativity for scientists to finally be able to measure actual gravity waves. Our technology had to catch up to the theoretical. Quantum mechanics and string theory are stretching our understanding of reality—"

"Yes," the reporter interrupted him. "I'm a science correspondent, Dr. Jeffries, I'm quite familiar with relativity, quantum mechanics, and string theory. What I don't understand is how these jumps work. What you're proposing, you have to admit, sound rather absurd, on the face of it."

Amos pursed his lips and nodded. "I sincerely understand the hesitation and skepticism. Healthy skepticism is important. But I must also point out that general relativity clearly allows for the possibility of time travel and many other notable physicists have done excellent work in exploring the possibility of travel through time."

"You mean scientists like University of Connecticut professor Dr. Ronald Mallett, who has dedicated his life to the study of time travel?"

Stop / Wisler

"For one, yes," Amos nodded. "I admire Dr. Mallett and have kept up with all his work, though I've been sad to see that his proposed experiments have never been fully funded. Where our work differs from Dr. Mallett's is that we aren't trying to create frame dragging through the use of circular lasers to allow for the travel back in time to the moment when his theoretical time machine is first turned on. We are observing something that appears to be naturally occurring in nature."

"A natural time machine?" The reporter raised her eyebrows.

"Less of a machine, really, and more of natural nexus points where the fabric of time-space is more easily manipulated," Amos explained. "Physicists like J.R. Gott, from Princeton, have written about the possibility of 'closed time-like curves' caused by cosmic strings."

"Cosmic strings?" The reporter asked.

"The best analogy is that cosmic strings function like faultiness in the substance of the universe. These theorized to be left over fissures in reality from the very birth of our universe in the big bang."

"And you believe you have found evidence of cosmic strings in Maine?" The reporter pressed on.

"What we have gathered so far will be presented in our first publication, which has been peer reviewed, I might point out. I'm not ready to conclusively claim we have discovered cosmic strings. That is something that needs much more study. It is possible that there are more explanations to the phenomena we have documented that are not yet understood theoretically. There are two branches of physics, after all, the theoretical and the experimental. I am an experimental physicist, after all. I will be turning to my theoretical brethren now for further understanding."

Stop / Wisler

"But you have a theoretical partner, don't you?" she pressed. "What has Dr. Noah Derrickson had to say"

Jake, who had been approaching slowly as he listened, reached the end of the hallway. He stopped and waited, wanting to hear what Amos would say. *Go on, you sonofabitch. Tell her.*

"Well," Amos cleared his throat, "Dr. Derrickson and I agree that every jump seems intimately connected to the experiences and memories of the person doing the jumping. Something about the observer works as a catalyst, a trigger, for a given jump. The jumps are for a finite period, which seems to suggest that we indeed are documenting close time-like loops. One theory we would like to further investigate is the possibility of some sort of quantum entanglement with the very moment being accessed by the observer."

"In other words," the reporter jumped in, "the person making the observation determines when they jump to? How can this process be unbiasedly verified and studied?"

"Ah, now you are beginning to understand why our work has taken more than two decades. This is such a complex case of the uncertainty principle at work. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle on steroids, I call it. Our very act to studying these places causes the phenomena we are studying. We cannot divorce ourselves from this reality."

"Then how do you propose other scientists should study these places?"

"Come, experience for yourselves," Amos opened his hands and smiled.

Jake quietly stepped into the room. Amos had his back to the door, so he couldn't see Jake. But the producer and the production assistant instantly saw Jake. The producer's arms dropped to his side and as he quietly, but quickly, made his way over to Jake. The man was obviously surprised to see Jake there.

Stop / Wisler

"Excuse me," the produce leaned in and whispered in Jake's ear, "you're not allowed to be in here during the interview."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Jake played dumb. "Could you please give this to Amos as soon as possible. It's an emergency!"

Jake handed the producer a slip of paper. He snatched it with a frown.

"We're shooting right now," he whispered.

"I know, but this is a matter of life and death," Jake said firmly, holding the producer's annoyed glare. "It can't wait."

The producer sighed and nodded. Jake walked back to the doorway where he leaned against the door frame to watch. The producer continued to glare at him. But suddenly, the producer's eyes glanced down at Jake's blood stained pants, taking them in for the first time, and the man's demeanor changed. His eyes flashed back up to Jake's with alarm and uncertainty now. Jake smiled and backed into the darkness of the hallway.

"In the numerous cases we have documented," Amos was telling the reporter, "myself and my colleague, that is, have documented evidence that short jumps to the past are possible. I have ample film and video footage documenting these jumps that will be made available to the scientific community for study and along with a host of measurements related to suddenly changing weather conditions, fluctuations in background radiation, the magnetic field, and so much more. This discovery will fundamentally change everything we know about time and space."

"Speaking of your colleague, where is Dr. Noah Derrickson?"

Yes, where are all your colleagues? Jake glared from the darkened hallway. *Share that with world, Amos.*

"I'm afraid I don't know," Amos shrugged.

The producer walked over to Amos and cleared his throat.

Stop / Wisler

"Let's hold for one second," the producer announced to the crew and then turned to Amos, "I'm sorry, I was told I need to give this to you right away."

He held out the note for Amos. Amos cocked his head in bewilderment and took the note. Jake watched him unfold the paper, knowing well what it said.

I know what you've done, he had written in the note. Come to the cabin. Or, should I call it by its real name... Location #7?

Even though Amos had his back to him, Jake could see the old man's neck stiffen as he read the note. *That's right, old friend, thought Jake. The game is over.*

Amos held up a hand to shield his eyes from the bright lights. He squinted and looked around.

"Is everything okay?" the reporter asked.

Jake turned to leave. As he headed away, he could hear Amos clear his throat and try to regain his composure.

"I'm sorry. Yes. Everything is fine," Amos said to the reporter.

"Okay. Shall we continue?" said the reporter.

"Yes."

"When did you first discover these jumps through time?"

"It was... a different colleague of mine... more than twenty-two years ago, who first documented..."

Amos paused.

"I'm sorry," he said, "could I have a glass of water?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The cabin stood in darkness. Only a faint glow off in the western sky remained of the day's dying light. Inside the cabin, every light was extinguished. The high beams from Jake's Crosstour swung across the cabin and the old station wagon that had belonged to Jake's mother, which was still parked in the gravel driveway that lead up to the cabin.

Amos parked the Crosstour next to the station wagon and killed the engine. He let his hands fall to his lap and he stared out of the windshield for a long moment, just breathing and taking in the scene. The evening was still. Only the faint sound of crickets could be heard. Above the treetops, stars glowed in the unpolluted Maine sky. Higher still, hung a waxing moon providing a grayish-blue light to the young night.

Amos sighed. He had known this was a likely possibility. He had known that Jake might work this all out. But he'd come too far to turn back now. He let his head sag forward as he took in a deep breath. He held it for a few seconds and then let it out. Why did it all have to go this way? Why didn't he just go home?

He shook his head, blinking back the threat of tears.

Lifting his head, he reached over to the passenger seat where he retrieved his handgun. Swinging open the car door, he stepped out and stuck the gun in the waste band of his dress pants at his back. His suit jacket, the same suit he'd worn for his interview, fell over the gun.

He walked across the gravel, the sound of each crunching step absurdly loud in the unnerving serenity of the evening. He tried to tell himself that

Stop / Wisler

he was simply getting worked up, but some part of him felt sure this was the calm before a horrible storm.

Stepping up to the front door of the cabin, he found a note taped to the center of the door. He peeled it off slowly and squinted at the note in the moonlight.

Meet me around back, was all it said. No name. No need for a name. It was Jake's handwriting. Who else could it have been anyway?

Amos carefully folded the note and slipped it into his back pocket. He would leave nothing behind—except for Jake's Crosstour. As he tucked the note away his hand brushed the handle of the gun. It felt so much heavier tonight. He looked up at the moon and sighed again. *Goddamnit, Jake. You should have just gone home.*

#

Jake had heard the car driveway in, then the footsteps on the gravel. Several minutes passed still before the figure of Dr. Amos Jeffries finally emerged from around the corner of the cabin. Jake stood out in the openness of the back yard in a pool of light coming from the floodlights of the cabin's back porch. At his feet lay the lifeless body of his father.

Amos stopped at a distance and stared.

"You," Jake said as if in a low growl. "You're the killer. You're the man in the black cloak... jumping through time."

"Don't be like your father," Amos shook his head, his voice devoid of its usual warmth. "The cost of greatness can be quite steep. He never understood that."

Stop / Wisler

"The cost of greatness?" Jake's eyebrows shot up. "At the expense of everyone who loved you. Is that the cost you're willing to pay?"

"I don't expect you to understand," Amos shook his head as he took a few more steps toward to Jake.

"Oh, I understand," Jake growled again. "You worked it out quite some time ago. Noah was right. If you have enough of an emotional connection to a moment in time, you can jump there. You knew this for a very long time, and you've been doing just that: jumping to the right moments. Orchestrating things according to your will. Playing God. When Noah realized that his theory was right, it was only a matter of time before he worked out what you'd been doing. So you had to kill him. Then Anne figured out that this is location number seven."

"I never wanted to hurt Anne," Amos raised his hands.

"But that didn't stop you," Jake shot back. He glared at Amos, trying to control his breathing. His heart raced inside his chest. His body ached with rage and tension. He looked down at his father, then back up to Amos.

"Why did you kill my father?"

Amos shook his head, looking off. For a brief moment a slight bemused smirk cut across his features.

"Your father was a coward," Amos said, matter-of-factly. "We'd only started, and he got scared of what learning to control time might do to people. He wanted to quit because of the ethical implications of gaining this kind of power. The *hypothetical* ethical implications, mind you. But progress marches on. Someone would discover this. Science doesn't pause for a discussion on ethics, I'm afraid."

Jake let escape an incredulous laugh. He stepped around his father's body and drew a little closer to Amos.

Stop / Wisler

"So you killed my father and proved him right?" he said. "Not so hypothetical after all."

"He wanted to walk away from the greatest breakthrough in the history of science," Amos shot back. "In the history of our species! I could see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice every day. All those questions, all those nagging little doubts about the supposed dangers. But this discovery, like all great discoveries, was inevitable!"

Amos was shouting now, his voice echoing off into the woods. "It's all inevitable, Jake. If it wasn't Newton who worked out the laws of motion, someone else would have. And Newton would have been forgotten. If Einstein had not written his papers on special and general relativity, someone else would have. Marie Curie, Stephen Hawking, Darwin, Galileo, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Rutherford, all of these great minds that the history of science will forever hail for their monumental contributions to our knowledge would never have advanced the human race if they had sat around wondering about the ethics of pursuing new scientific understanding."

Jake shook his head, "Einstein and Leo Szilard lived to regret ever encouraging Roosevelt to develop the atomic bomb. Szilard quit physics. Einstein called it his one great mistake in life. The advancement of science isn't without its unintended consequences, Amos."

"Save it for your classroom, professor," Amos waved him off. "Meanwhile, it will be my name in the history books."

Jake stared in shock at the man he thought he'd known, now so filled with hubris as to be unrecognizable.

"Yeah," Jake nodded, "you're right. It will be your name in the history books. I just want to make sure they don't leave out any of the sorted

Stop / Wisler

details. The world deserves to know the truth. I deserved to know the truth."

"You are your father's son," Amos shook his head.

"Thank you," Jake said.

"It doesn't have to go like this. You can join me. You don't have to stand in the way of progress, Jake. You can be part of it. You can be part of advancing one of humanity's deepest desires, to control time."

"You killed my father. You beat my wife nearly to death. And now... you want me to join you? Do you really think I'll do that?"

"I don't want to hurt you Jake," Amos insisted. "I never wanted to hurt anyone!"

"Yeah, well, maybe it was inevitable," Jake shot back. "Bringing us here, to the cabin... that was never about keeping us safe."

"It was risky. But it put you conveniently by a nexus point in case I needed to rectify anything. You, of course, figured this out and stopped me from killing Anne. I should have stuck to old methods and done it quickly."

"You mean you should have shot her like you shot my dad?"

"It's a noisy affair, but quick. I hadn't wanted to draw you out here, but I guess I did anyway. But, Jake, I truly never wanted to hurt Anne. If she had just stopped nosing around after I stole Edward's notes, I would have left her alone. I take no pleasure in any of this. But I couldn't let any of you get in the way of all that I've worked out so carefully."

Jake frowned and took a step closer. Amos took a step to his right, putting the cabin behind him and keeping Jake still several yards from him. Amos stared at Jake with narrow eyes, like a cautious but commanding predator.

Stop / Wisler

"You think you have it all worked out," Jake said, softly. "But you can't see everything. It took me a while to figure this one out, but it wasn't me who stopped you from killing Anne."

At this, Amos' eyes winded just a little.

"That's right," Jake grinned. "And as much as you believe you control all of this, your arrogance has blinded you. You completely overlooked someone quite important."

#

Ethan stared at the computer monitor with a video feed of the back yard of the cabin. The image was grainy in the lowlight, but the shapes of the two men could clearly be seen. Ethan sat in the big chair, exactly where Jake had insisted he stay, no matter what happened, no matter what he saw on that screen. Detective Matthews leaned in closer to look at the screen. Four other police officers huddled close as they listened to the exchange outside.

"You're not in control, Amos," said Jake, his voice coming through the computer speakers that sat on the table top. "Not anymore."

On the screen, Jake took a step closer to Amos.

"It's time to give it up," Jake told him.

Amos shook his head calmly. "I'm don't think so."

Amos reached around his back. The next instant, he had something in his hand that glinted in the floodlights.

"He's got a gun!" Yelled Matthews.

The basement exploded in a flurry of police officers rushing up the stairs.

Stop / Wisler

#

Amos pulled out the gun and leveled it on Jake.

"I still have the power," Amos said.

Even from several yards away, Jake could see the muscles in Amos' right hand contracting as his pointer finger squeezed down on the trigger. He didn't wait for the shot. He dove to the side and rolled on the grass. The blast of the gunshot cut through the stillness of the night. He heard wood splinter nearby where the bullet hit a tree. The gun's report echoed off into the dark woods.

Springing back to his feet, Jake sprinted for the woods. He zagged between tree trunks as he heard another blast from the gun. At any second, he was sure he would feel the blinding pain of the bullet ripping into his back, cutting through him like it had his father. But nothing came and he kept running.

He couldn't be sure, but the second gun shot sounded close. He glanced back and found that indeed, Amos was giving chase. Jake changed directions again, trying to make sure Amos didn't have a clear shot through the trees. But as he did so, his left foot struck a large root and he went sailing forward. He landed hard on the ground, the wind being forced out of his lungs. His chest burned, his hands and legs ached.

He forced himself to roll over to his back. He could see Amos coming for him, running between the trees, gun raised. Jake's hands involuntarily reached out in front of him as if they could shield him from the impending bullet.

A fast moving mass hit Amos hard from the side, throwing him to the ground. The man screamed in pain as he landed on his side. The gun fired

Stop / Wisler

wildly into the night. The muzzle flash stung Jake's eyes, but in that instant, Jake could make out the shape of a man standing over Amos. The figure kicked the gun from Amos' hand. It spun off into the darkness of the woods.

"No," said the man standing over Amos. "You're not in control."

The man turned to Jake and in the moonlight Jake could see a face remarkably similar to his own, except for the eyes. He had his mother's eyes.

"You okay, Dad?" the man said.

Jake, still breathing hard, heart still racing, couldn't form words. He just nodded. A tear slipped down his cheek as he fought for air.

Suddenly, flashlights cut through the trees as the police officers from the cabin rushed into the woods.

"Hold it right there!" Matthews yelled.

Jake's savior glanced casually in their direction, then looked back at his father.

"Go take care of mom," the adult Ethan said. "She needs you. I need you. Your daughter needs you."

"Put your hands up!" Matthews commanded as he approached.

Ethan smiled one last time at his father and turned slowly, raising his hands for the officers. But even as Matthews approached him, gun raised, flashlight in hand, Ethan vanished where he stood.

Matthews stopped suddenly. His flashlight beam searched about for any sign of the man who had been there a moment ago. The other officers stopped as well. One approached the still fallen Amos who was struggling to get to his feet. Ethan must have knocked him hard, possibly into a tree. The man seemed quite disoriented and in serious pain.

Stop / Wisler

"Oh hell," Matthews muttered as he turned his flashlight on Amos. "Amos Jeffries, you're under arrest for the murder of Edward Howell, Noah Derrickson, Detective Henry Fowler, and the attempted murders of Anne and Jake Howell."

Amos sat back against a tree and coughed. "Based on what evidence?"

"Oh," Matthews shrugged. "I don't know. What's in your basement, will do for starters. And the conversation we just recorded between and Jake Howell here doesn't really help you much either."

Amos' eyes grew wide. Two officers reached under his armpits and hoisted him to his feet. He cried out in pain, but the officers didn't seem too concerned.

"You have the right to remain silent," one of those two officers said to him as they escorted him out of the woods. "Should you chose to waive that right, anything you say..."

Their voiced trailed off as they moved away. The Chief of Police stepped up to Matthews and the two turned their gaze to Jake, who still lay on the ground. Matthews holstered his gun and approached Jake. He stuck out his hand. Jake took it and Matthews pulled him to his feet.

"Well," Matthews shook his head, "you're one lucky son of a bitch. But I gotta handed it to you... it worked. Barely. But it did."

Jake nodded, swallowing hard. "Thanks for believing me."

Matthews laughed and shook his head again. "'Believe' might be too strong of a word. But I've sure seen some crazy things lately that I can't even begin to explain."

"You and me both," Jake said, rubbing his head where a headache had begun to form.

"Dad!" yelled Ethan as he dashed through the trees.

Stop / Wisler

The boy threw himself at Jake, who cried out in pain from a sore wrist and rib. All the same, Jake scooped up his boy and held him close.

"Hey, little buddy," Jake whispered. "I love you!"

He set Ethan down and smiled at him.

"It worked," Ethan said, his eyes bright.

"Yeah, it worked. You did it!" Jake said. "Thank you!"

Ethan took Jake's hand and they walked back toward the cabin. Matthews and the Chief followed them.

"I'm not going to pretend to even know where to start writing a report on this case," muttered Chief Wilson.

"Fowler was right," Matthews mused. "Sometimes the crazy explanation actually makes the most sense."

"Just be ready," Wilson shook his head. "I'm pretty sure we all just kissed normal goodbye. I mean, are you ready to testify in court that we arrested a time traveling murderer?"

Matthews took in a deep breath and chuckled. "All I'm ready for right about now is a couple of beers. We'll think about that business later."

"Fair enough," grinned the Chief.

As the group emerged from the woods, the flashing lights of police cars and an ambulance just on the other side of the cabin could be seen lighting up the surrounding trees. Already, EMTs had Edward Howell's body on a stretcher.

Jake stopped and watched them as they rolled his father away. The regret of not being able to save him washed over Jake once more like a wave of molten rock and threatened to buckle his knees. He took in a deep breath to steady himself and looked down at Ethan, remembering the words the adult Ethan had spoken to him. Yes, he would mourn his father. But he would not live

Stop / Wisler

forever stuck in that moment, eternally wishing it had happened differently.

Right now, he needed to get back to Anne. And... his daughter?

"Can we go see mom now?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah, we can," Jake nodded.

EPILOGUE

"As for traveling into the past, I believe it will ultimately happen. When time travel does occur, abuses will naturally arise. As with any new powerful technology, time travel will have to be regulated to prevent ill-usage. It will be up to society to ensure that time travel is used for the benefit of the human race."

- R. Ronald L. Mallett, Ph.D.

"A whole new legal specialty will have to be developed and currently no one understands how to try such a case. It's absurd that anyone is even being asked to defend such a case," read the quote of one of Dr. Amos Jeffries' attorneys in several articles that circulated the press. There was no keeping quiet. No one could ignore the story. The infamous journal article by Dr. Jeffries and the late Dr. Derrickson was already published when news broke of the death of Noah Derrickson and the arrest of Amos Jeffries.

At first, the whole ordeal landed like some absurd hoax. But then, local police defended the claims, an eye-witness to two of the murders and another young eye-witness to a non-fatal attack along were brought forward. Police offered a brief glimpse to some of their evidence and invited the world's scientific community to examine the years-worth of data and video Dr. Jeffries had gathered in his secret outpost in the woods near one of the nexus points. Naturally skeptical of these claims, most scientists thought the whole thing a bizarre stunt of some kind. But the coroner confirmed the identity of the body of Edward Howell, who had gone missing more than twenty

Stop / Wisler

years before. That fact in itself didn't draw much attention from anyone. What got physicist to sit up a straight and start booking trips to Maine was that medical experts from Boston and New York City confirmed the coroner's findings that Edward Howell had not aged a day since he'd gone missing and died from a gunshot wound mere hours before his body was turned over to local police. Either this was a different but identical man who had died that day, a perfect hoax, or there was some truth to the time travel claims.

Within two weeks, some of the top names in theoretical and experimental physics converged on Berne, Maine. When the Chief of Police was asked why his department had taken such a drastic and unheard of approach in inviting scientists to examine the evidence, his response was straight forward, "If it's a hoax, we want to know now. If it's not a hoax, then how else will any of this evidence ever be accepted by a jury without scientific consensus backing its validity?"

But how to legally try such a bizarre case? How to find a jury that would be able to listen to the evidence without serious bias already in place or profound awareness of the details of the case given the explosion of media coverage.

A surge of the curious, the eccentric, and the skeptical debunkers converged on Berne. Documentary crews from every major and minor network showed up. New claims emerged and were quickly debunked. Major testing was set up by various scientific initiatives. The government swooped in, which representatives from every branch imaginable wanting to keep an eye on new research. DARPA suddenly found permanent office space nearby.

Meanwhile, the man at the center of this baffling case refused to talk, explaining that he would be ready to testify in court when the time came.

#

The foam clung to the sand as the remains of a wave was pulled back to sea. Ethan crashed into the receding wave, kicking the cold, salty water towards his father. Jake raised his hands and tried to jump out of the way. He stood only ankle deep in the waves. The splash from Ethan caught him and he howled at the shocking bite of the cold then laughed.

"It's not that bad!" Ethan insisted.

"You keep saying that," Jake said, "but I'm still not convinced."

"Mom, come on!" Ethan called out to Anne.

"It's cold, sweetie," she smiled.

"So?" Ethan said. "Just jump in!"

He jumped up as a wave hit his back and went under. A moment later he burst up front he water with arms wide.

Anne laughed, watching him. She approached Jake and stopped next to him. They watched their boy for a moment as he dove in the waves again. Anne looked at Jake, watching his expression. Jake sighed and watched his boy.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

Jake blinked and looked at her as if he'd forgotten where he was.

"Oh. Just... How do I keep it all together?" he sighed. "After everything that happened, how do we live? Just, you know, have a normal life?"

"The trail will pass," Anne said. "And the media will move on to something else, eventually. But you gotta admit, your new notoriety is getting you some nice job offers."

"Yeah. Well, mostly the wrong kinds of job offers. But that's not even the real issue." He grinned and nodded toward Ethan in the water. "He saves

Stop / Wisler

me... eventually," Jake said. "He's going to grow up and save me. He does what I tried but failed to do."

"He does it because he loves you," Anne reached out and took his hand. "Because you're here, you love him. You love us."

"But I have to wonder," Jake sighed, "if everything is already set in stone, if nothing can change. But of course, changing the past would mean creating a paradox, but what if we can't create paradoxes because everything is already predetermined? All those theoretical musings are now my lived reality. And I no longer know what to make of the world we live in—the world we're raising our kids in."

Anne smiled and looked at the ocean. "Ever the philosopher. But you know, I think when it really comes right down to it, no one has ever really known what to make of the world we live in. We create lots of stories and boxes and try to find our experiences into them. But, eventually, something comes along that refuses to fit, and we have to come face to face with the limits of our knowledge and how truly bewildering being alive is."

She brushed a strand of hair away from her face and watched Ethan splashing in the water. After a moment, she continued. "I would never have imagined any of this was possible. And I still don't know how to start making sense of it all or what it will mean for other people. But I do know this, I have a life to live, kids to raise, a husband to love. And you're not the only one who owes your life to our time traveling son over there."

Jake smiled, looking over at Anne. "I guess we better do a good job raising him then, lest he decide we're not worth coming back to save."

"How to raise your time traveling savior," Anne grinned. "We should write that before someone else does."

Stop / Wisler

Laughing, Jake reached out and put his arm around her. With his other hand, he caressed the her round belly where their daughter continued to grow.

"He's right, you know?" Jake said at last.

"About?" Anne frowned.

"We should just jump in," Jake exclaimed as he tugged Anne further into the water.

She screamed, playfully. Ethan splashed toward them. Anne sought to defend herself by splashing water at both Jake and Ethan. Ethan turned his splashing on Jake, who yelled in surprise and returned fire. He chased the boy and they both dove into an on-coming wave as it rushed towards the shore.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funny story. Years ago, while eating some delicious Chinese food with my dear friend, Trevor Duke, we got around to discussing ideas for short films we could make that would be easy to shoot but quite intriguing to watch. It didn't take long to come up with a twisted idea that mixed found footage and time travel. I wrote the script, we produced the film together, Duke starring in it, and the film made a tiny splash on YouTube. That was all I ever meant to do with that particular idea.

But then I was contacted by an independent producer in Los Angeles interested in the idea of developing this short film of mine called "Stop" into a full-blown feature film. I began brainstorming and quickly came up with a viable first act of the script that really took the concept in an exciting new direction I longed to explore. It was now the story of a son finding 20-year-old footage of his missing father in which he attacks his father. At a loss for what to do with the concept past that point I turned to long-time friend and filmmaking collaborator, Jedidiah Burdick. Literally a day later, he came back to me with a proposed plot outline for a feature film script based my first act. I loved it. It was just the structure I needed in order to build a compelling story. With some small tweaks, we were off and running.

Ultimately, we never made the feature film or sold the screenplay. When I began to branch back into novel writing, Burdick encouraged me to develop the idea further into this novel. It was a long road given the other projects I was working on, but at long last, here we are.

Stop / Wisler

I must thank Trevor Duke and Raz Cunningham for helping the short film become a reality, Jed Burdick for helping make the feature script this novel is based on a reality, and some guy in LA who ultimately was more talk than action for getting me to even think about exploring this idea further.

A big thank you too to Penny Crosby, who is one of the few people to have actually read an early draft of this novel. Thank you also to Dominic Kaiser, who was willing to be a total weirdo along with me and experiment with walking round Boston's Faneuil Hall area handing out business cards with the web address for the "Stop" short film when I first released it on YouTube.

In writing this book, I geeked out and read a lot about physics, time travel, and science in general. I learned a lot and it was quite fun. I want to particularly highlight the following sources which were incredibly influential in my development and polishing of this book:

- *What Is Relativity?: An Intuitive Introduction to Einstein's Ideas, and Why They Matter* by Jeffrey Bennett
- *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* by Brian Greene
- *Time Traveler: A Scientist's Personal Mission to Make Time Travel a Reality* by Dr. Ronald L. Mallett (with Bruce Henderson)
- *Time Travel: A History* by James Gleick
- *Now: The Physics of Time* by Richard A. Muller
- *Your Brain is a Time Machine: The Neuroscience and Physics of Time* by Dean Buonomano
- *Einstein's Relativity and the Quantum Revolution: Modern Physics for Non-Scientists* taught by Richard Wolfson
- *Free Radicals: The Secret Anarchy of Science* by Michael Brooks