

A painting of a woman with long dark hair, looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. She is holding a large, vibrant green dragon. The dragon's head is positioned near her shoulder, and its body winds around her. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with faint, stylized architectural elements and a circular frame. The overall style is painterly and expressive.

LISE BREakey

*Unraveling
Timelines*

UNRAVELING TIMELINES

LISE BREAKEY



Candlermark & Gleam

First edition published 2017

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Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
In Progress

ISBN: 978-1-936460-75-5
eISBN: 978-1-936460-74-8

Cover design by Eleni Tsami

Book design and composition by Athena Andreadis
Typeface: Calisto MT

Editors: Athena Andreadis and Kate Sullivan

Proofreader: Kelly Jennings

www.candlemarkandgleam.com

*For the beloved dead—
Dad, Gram, George, and Maryanna.*

CHAPTER ONE

One Thursday in September, as if to make up for his entire life to date, Peter Chang experienced two extraordinary events in a single evening. At 8:42 pm, he fell in love with a girl who walked in through the wall in his boss's office. At 9:19, her brother shot him through the chest for no apparent reason. Later he was called upon to save her from the consequences of her father's sins—but at 6:07 pm, he was bending over the printer in his cubicle on the third floor of the Palazzo Building, entirely without a clue.

The printer clicked, hummed, and covered the sheet with—to Peter—barely comprehensible gibberish before putting the page into the tray. It refused to be rushed.

“Client’s waiting,” Elaine said over the cubicle wall.

“I’ll be right there. It’s just this last, uh, fifty pages,” Peter said.

“Well, while you’re waiting, here.” She thrust the financial pages under his nose. The NASDAQ was up, the Dow was down, everything was as it should be as far as he could tell. “Pick a stock.”

“Can’t we give that a rest?” She was always asking. Co-workers egged her on. At first, it was as if she thought he must have some uncanny ability to pick stocks, having been hired at Varian Financial with no other apparent qualification. Then it had become a joke, and now it was probably so that everyone would know what not to invest in.

“Just one, Pete.”

She wouldn't go away until he did. He let his forefinger stab something at random.

“TNR Design.” She shifted the paper out from under his finger and pecked it with her own. “Never heard of it.” She was sharp-nosed, bird-thin, and always dressed in magpie black and white. “Now, it'd be nice if you could get me the Andersen report before you leave tonight.”

“Right, of course,” Peter said as worms of panic wiggled through his insides. “I'll get right on it.” He thumped the printer. “Let's go!”

The clicking and humming stopped. He had turned it off.

“Try not to screw this up.” Her black-and-white nails dug lightly into the fabric of the wall. “Now that the old man's hanging around the office so much, you need to look sharp.”

“I'll, um, I'll do my best.” He turned the printer back on and respooled the document from the last page. “One for the team,” he added. She flared the holes in her elegant beak and disappeared.

Peter Chang wore wire-rimmed glasses, through which he blinked owlishly, and a rumpled just-out-of-bed expression. His suits seemed slightly too big for him even though they weren't. Women thought him cute, but forgot about him the instant they looked in another direction. As a baby, he'd been abandoned (mysteriously, inside the orphanage rather than on its doorstep) and adopted by the Changs.

The Changs consisted of one fourth-generation Chinese American and one sixth-generation Scottish-Irish American. They were to parenthood what Michael Jordan was to baseball: that is, they assumed they'd be good at it based upon their achievements in every other arena of life. “Corey” Chang Kong-li was a Silicon Valley success story, a business-savvy computer engineer who somehow always managed to ride out the extreme up- and downturns the industry was prone to. He said “whatever” a lot, bought Peter computer games, and took him along on business trips to Europe, Hong Kong, and the Philippines,

where Peter passed the time alone in hotel rooms playing with his latest game system or watching television in strange languages. Destiny Moonchild McGee-Chang was an acclaimed writer of children's books (the popular *Penguin and I* series). She told Peter his parents would always love him no matter what he did with his life.

Peter's report cards, filled with Bs and Cs, were hung on the refrigerator. His parents took him for ice cream after every soccer game, even the one where Peter scored the winning goal for the opposing team. He grew from a baffled, polite kid with few friends to a baffled, polite young man who lived at home all through college. Nothing extraordinary had ever happened to him before, except for getting hired at Varian Financial. Shortly after he got his B.A. (in photography) and just as he contemplated flipping burgers or asking Dad for some menial data processing job, a Mr. Theodore Slinky called him up. Mr. Slinky said his resume looked good, and would he come by the firm for an interview for a job as an investment broker.

Only he hadn't sent the firm a resume. He hadn't even posted it on the career placement department website yet. Further, nothing in his background said "broker." He'd taken no business classes and his last job, unpaid, had been on the university newspaper, taking pictures at football games.

Nonetheless, he brought his resume along and Mr. Slinky looked at it for a moment or two. He was the office manager: a short, round, impeccably dressed black guy, as impassive as a boulder. He gave Peter a psychological test consisting of questions like "If you knew that terrorists were going to hijack commercial jets and crash them into the World Trade Center but you had no proof, what would you do with the information?" Peter had no idea how to answer that—he'd been nine years old back then, for one thing. He came away with the impression that the interview had not gone well. But the next day, Mr. Slinky called again and gave him the job.

Peter moved out of his parents' basement and got his own apartment—in San Francisco, no less. He filled it with game systems and cameras, and even some furniture. He went to work every day on Market Street and did what he was told as best he could and wondered why he was being paid for it while hundreds of his peers with better grades and more ambition were hustling for internships. He didn't have any feel for the stock market. He had no gift for foresight generally. He was not reckless, but life continually blindsided him.

6:14 p.m. The printer spat out the last few pages of the report. Peter scooped it up, a package so heavy that the bottom third of it promptly escaped his grip and hit the floor. With a groan, he dropped to his knees, grabbing pages as fast as he could. The firm dealt with an old-school breed of client: wealthy people not comfortable with the increasingly abstract nature of wealth—thus everything was printed out on dead trees rather than displayed on a tablet. He didn't attempt to put the pages in order, but shoved them into his briefcase and ran for the elevator.

The old Palazzo Building suited the firm perfectly, and its elevator was a case in point—a gilded cage, circa 1900, standing exposed from the cracked marble walls of the building in its own fenced-in shaft that pierced the floor below and the ceiling above. *Rattle, creak, bing*, it arrived and Peter jumped in with a nod for Abe Slinky, the head of security and maintenance. Abe resembled the office manager (his son) but was tall and lean and elderly. When Peter had first started the job, Abe had made him uneasy by often seeming about to speak to him, then walking away. But he soon stopped doing that and became just part of the ambiance.

There was also a girl in the elevator, dark-haired and unsmiling, with figure-concealing clothing and a beret pulled over her eyes. Peter felt himself flush because he could still tell she had enough of everything in the right places, and because at that moment he noticed

he had trapped the end of his tie inside his briefcase. No contortions of body or shifting of grip could conceal this fact. Fortunately, she barely glanced at him. *Creak-creak, bing, rattle*, the gilt wire gates parted on the mezzanine level.

Peter jumped out and was just about to dash for the conference room when Abe said, “Here you are, miss,” and she answered, “Thanks, I know my way.” He looked back to see him usher her through the tall old teak doors that separated the rest of the firm from the office suite of its owner, president, and CEO, Mr. Benedict Varian, who—despite hanging around the office more often these days—was not currently in.

Peter went around the corner, waited until he heard the elevator start up, then crept back. He leaned against one door and pushed it open a crack. The outer office was empty as he expected, having just seen Elaine on the third floor. But the shades were up and the inner office, he could see through the glass partition, was also unoccupied except for the girl.

She was inspecting the antique walnut paneling. A paint-smudged smock hung under her open coat. She had exuded a faint scent like varnish. Maybe she was an interior designer and Varian Financial was going to join the 21st century, decor-wise. That didn’t explain why the head of security had escorted her up, operating a manual winch-and-cable elevator like a hundred years of progress in vertical transportation technology and civil rights had passed him by.

She ran her fingers over part of the wall, traced the edges of a panel. Then she pushed it on with both hands and it swung open, swinging out on hinges, revealing an opening just big enough for an adult to pass through sideways. Light glimmered as if from the far end of a tunnel. It looked like daylight. She slipped through, closed the panel flush behind her, and was gone.

Peter let the outer door close and leaned against it.

That panel was set into an interior wall. And he had simultaneously seen darkness and streetlight through the windows.

He remembered the times Mr. Varian had emerged from that office when Peter was certain the boss wasn't in the building. The way he would go in sometimes and neither Peter nor anyone he talked to ever saw him come out. That very morning, Peter had been in the outer office waiting to talk to the boss when a stranger emerged. A bald guy in an old brown suit, whose expression reminded Peter of Mr. Slinky—the same closed-off imperturbable look. He wouldn't have noticed except it was 9:00 am, Peter had seen Elaine unlock the office, and if the guy had been in there first, he must have waited overnight or come out of nowhere.

He screwed up his nerve and reached for the door again. But there was a creak as another door opened on the mezzanine and voices spilled out, making him jump and sneak away. Around the corner, Mr. Slinky waited outside the conference room as Peter hurried over.

“Glad you could make it, Pete.”

“Sorry, the printer was giving me trouble and—”

“Never mind, you're here now. Go along and meet the client so I can get home. And Peter...”

“Yeah?”

“Better take your tie out of your briefcase.”



The new client—Mr. Sanders—proved to be a bloodless-looking man with a tight, clammy handshake. In fact, he was reluctant to let go of Peter's hand once he fastened onto it, and seemed almost to be drawing him into a damp sort of full-body embrace. Peter had to suppress an impulse to beat the man off with his briefcase. But when the client released him from his leech-like grip, he relaxed and the meeting went smoothly.

At least, he thought that the meeting went smoothly. Mr. Sanders didn't mind Peter's tardiness, or the fact that he barely knew what he was talking about. He was an okay guy in spite of his overly smooth, shell-like face, dead-looking eyes, and bespoke tailoring the color of cold volcanic ash. He was a guy you could talk to. He was trustworthy, was the main thing. Peter remembered that distinctly.

The problem was, he remembered it in the elevator, taking Mr. Sanders down to the lobby. Everyone else had gone home and the evening security guard didn't feel that running the clunky old lift was in his job description, so Peter was operating it. That was what he remembered. But he felt as though he had just woken up with his hand on the brass lever. A cold sweat was trickling down under his shirt.

The client was speaking into a gold-cased smartphone. "No, it's early days for him. We can proceed as soon as there's an opportunity." He disconnected, slipped the phone into his breast pocket, saw Peter watching him, and showed his teeth—possibly a smile. "Putting your good advice to work, Mr. Chang."

Peter couldn't remember what his advice had been. Nor could he think of anything he might have said that Mr. Sanders could not have found out faster and more cheaply with an online search. "You must be technologically challenged or a complete moron," he said. The client smiled thinly and Peter felt heat rush to his face. He couldn't believe that had come out of his mouth. "Uh, I mean, um...God, I'm sorry, uh..."

"Are you all right, Mr. Chang?"

"To be perfectly honest—" Peter felt a strange compulsion to be perfectly honest—"I feel like I blanked out somehow. I...don't remember what we talked about." The lift arrived on the ground floor with a grinding and a jolt because he hadn't been paying attention to the controls.

Mr. Sanders gave him an appraising look. “You didn’t have a lot to drink recently, did you? You don’t look like a man with substance abuse problems. You’re a bit young for dementia. I’m not familiar with blackouts associated with coprolalia. Vitamin deficiency, maybe? Brain chemistry is a funny thing. Too much of one enzyme, not enough of a particular protein...if you don’t get enough tocopherols, that can cause memory problems.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“I used to be. Let me recommend you drink a lot of water and take some vitamin B12.” Mr. Sanders patted his shoulder with a damp hand. “Works wonders. Everything comes down to chemistry, in the end. Even love. Infatuation is chemical. It wears off. Remember that.”

Peter walked him through the vaulted foyer to the front door. They shook hands—briskly and briefly this time—and the guard buzzed them out. Peter held the door and watched the client descend the front steps and cross the street. Strange how he was such a great guy, so friendly and easy to talk to, but Peter didn’t like him very much.

It was dark now, definitely quitting time. He went back upstairs to get his coat. Mr. Slinky was long gone, but Elaine swooped down and cornered him in his cubicle. “Hey, knucklehead. Steve could really use that report before you go.”

Peter looked at the clock. “It’s seven-thirty. What would he do with it if he got it?”

“Hey, you know how important that report is—”

“Yeah, I know how important the Jones report is.”

“Jones report?” Elaine said. “You mean the Andersen report, right? She laughed and cocked her head sideways. “I swear, if you’ve been working on the wrong one...”

“All reports are the Jones report,” Peter said. “Haven’t you noticed? They’re all the same report. And they’re all boring as hell.”

There was a glint of amusement in her sharp dark eyes, but she

looked at him as if he had sprouted donkey ears. “What’s with you?”

“I don’t know,” Peter admitted. “I feel a little weird.”

“Hey, if you’re not happy working here, just say the word.”

“I, uh, um...”

“Well, as soon as you can manage to say anything at all,” she said, and flapped away.

He had been on the verge of saying that of course he wasn’t happy, but managed to strangle it into a stammer.

He fired up the spreadsheet program on his computer. The report would never see the light of day by tomorrow, but working on it might restore some sense of normality. First he went to the water cooler and drank off three or four paper cups worth. He found a bottle of mixed vitamins in his briefcase, but it didn’t include any B12s.

An hour went by as he checked row after row of figures and the few people still in the office closed up and went home. The open-plan floor, with an old vaulted marble ceiling over a space like a warehouse, became dark, quiet, and ominous with echoes, until the mere clatter of a dropped pen was enough to spook him. At last he closed the Jones report—or was it the Andersen report?—shut down his computer, grabbed his briefcase, and left the cubicle.

He was not anxious to go home, where nothing awaited him on a weeknight but beer, TV, and online gaming. Car chases and gunplay, or wandering an apocalyptic wasteland killing monsters. Or his mom would call and invite him to a late dinner, and he was no good at putting her off, especially with his foot going into his mouth with alarming frequency. It was like he’d shed all inhibitions against blurting out the truth and he wondered what kind of vitamin deficiency could cause that.

He stopped the lift on the mezzanine and stared at the boss’s office suite door. The whole floor was dark and silent. He tried the outer door and it was still unlocked. So he went past Elaine’s desk and tried the door of the inner sanctum. It also opened.

Humans remember their animal selves in the dark, and Peter was no exception. His senses sharpened and he fancied there was a trace of scent like varnish or oil paint in the air. He closed the door behind him and crossed to the windows to close the blinds. Mr. Varian's antique lamps and bookshelves loomed around him, expensive and fragile, threatening him with their vulnerability. Now that he was in here, he dreaded getting caught. He found his boss intimidating and, thanks to the mysterious door to nowhere, unpredictable.

With a sense of transgression that mere trespass had not evoked, he flipped on the light. Then he went behind the desk to check out the panel the girl had gone through. He was pretty sure which one to examine because it was worn and a little shiny at the natural level for a hand to push on it. He pushed, but nothing happened. He ran his hands over the smooth surface and all around it. No hidden catches or levers around the edges. He tried moving nearby objects—perhaps the door opened when you pulled out the right ledger or twisted a knob on a cabinet or something. But nothing continued to happen. He pushed it in several places, testing. It gave a little in the center, just like the others did, but that was it. He could feel resistance, like a masonry wall behind it.

There must, he thought, be something incredibly obvious that he was overlooking.

He pushed it again, and this time it popped open. He lost his balance, but recovered and found himself nose to nose with a girl.

The girl.



On the morning of the day her father was murdered—"day" in this context meaning a period of personal time during which she was awake—Nikkole Varian concluded that she was not capable of keeping a relationship going longer than three months. Three months

was the record. She'd gotten that far with Lorenzo Bernini. But that was history—so to speak. That morning, after five weeks in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, she broke up with Edvard Munch.

He had spent the night in her studio. A new version of *Madonna*, destined to become his second-most recognizable composition, hung completed in his apartment on the Rue Lafayette. "I am trying to capture a powerful and sacred moment," he had explained during the weeks she modeled for his figure studies. "The woman when she gives herself to become the mother of new life. Her face contains all the earth's beauty. Her lips part as if in pain...a corpse's smile. The chain binding the thousand dead generations to the thousand generations to come is linked together." Well, he'd done it with his rendering of the passionate red-haloed nude, subtly different from the versions he had done with Dagny Juel as his model, but now he was in a slump and Nikki (as she preferred to be called) didn't know what to do with him.

She had a surreal painting of the cathedral to work on, but couldn't do it with him so ostentatiously sulking. Giving up after awhile, she cleaned her brushes and got a baguette, Roquefort cheese, sausage, and a bottle of red wine to assemble lunch from. But she couldn't stand the silence. Finally she made him put the newspaper down and tell her what was wrong.

Munch, who all these weeks had been paying for the cafés, cabarets, galleries, and theaters they attended and had even offered to pay her rent, now told her that he did not know when or if he would receive a scholarship from the Norwegian government that year. Stiffly, he explained he would have to cut his expenses, at least until he knew where his next income would be coming from...

Nikki made the mistake of offering to pay for everything for a while.

She hadn't realized she'd been loading straw on her lover's back all this time, until now, when there was an almost audible snap. Munch paced away, not far because the room was tiny and cluttered

with easels, tools, and canvas. When he turned back, the shy, quiet man—"the monk," his friends called him—was gone.

"Who are you, really?" he demanded. "Where would you get the money?"

The reasonableness of this question was emphasized by the shabbiness of her studio—a garret barely furnished and unadorned except for theater posters nailed to the support beams. They slept on a mattress on the floor. A paint-flecked mansard roof window let in pale sunlight.

"I never said I was poor. I've got some money." She sat on the floor with a board across her lap and started cutting up bread and cheese and sausage.

"All this time," he said, "you have been letting me think I saved you from the gutter, and you have actually been well-off?"

"Is that what you thought?"

"You are forcing me to express myself in a way I despise."

"I never lied to you! You lied to yourself."

She had given him ammunition. "Perhaps you have not lied, but you have not told me anything of importance either. You represent yourself as a woman without a past. Do you expect me to believe it?"

"What you failed to believe was the truth when I told it to you!" This was a low blow. She had told him the truth expecting that he would not believe it.

"Nikki...how could I? How can I?"

This was where she could have offered to prove it. But she'd tried that before with unpleasant results, and she was stung by what he implied. "It's easier for you to assume I'm a prostitute!"

That knocked the wind out of him. "American women!" he said after a stunned pause.

"Victorian men!" she shot back. Then, remembering he didn't know the cultural baggage that would one day be associated with that

epithet, she added, “Scandinavian provincials!”

He occupied his hands with rolling a cigarette. “It would not matter what you once were as long as you were honest about it.” She went on slicing cheese, but everything blurred, the knife, the round of Roquefort, the cutting board. “Dear girl. Can’t you see...”

“What? What can’t I see? Weren’t you the one who hated for ‘a woman to cling to a man and drain his strength away?’”

“What are you talking about? I never said that to you!”

“You don’t have to say it—”

“You read my journal!” he interrupted.

“Well, yes,” she said, “but not until after it was published. So now you lose—” she was about to say *your cool*, but changed it to, “—your temper because I’m not dependent on you?”

She was on her feet now. He was pacing. “You are incomprehensible to me, I admit, but surely two who love each other can tell each other the truth!”

It was the first time he had said the word “love,” and he didn’t even realize how manipulative it was to use it now. “I did tell you the truth. You either accept it, or you don’t.”

“I cannot,” he admitted. “I enjoyed your fantastical stories, but I want to move forward on a firmer foundation!”

This was the moment she could have proved the truth to him, but she felt it arrive with a sensation of fear, of her back up against the wall. To let him see everything about her—no, she couldn’t, and brilliant men tended to get so angry when wrenched out of their comfortable junctures and world views. In a burst of panic, she pushed back hard. “Just tell me one thing. How can so much genius and so much self-pity exist in the same person? Or is it that people in this benighted decade mistake self-pity for genius?”

She regretted that the instant it came out of her mouth. His blue eyes widened and turned to ice and he was free to say everything

he'd only been thinking up to then. "This has all been some sort of diversion for you, hasn't it? You always had some other life you intended to resume when I ceased to amuse you. Don't try to defend yourself!" he snapped as she opened her mouth. "Your eyes betray you. You always look elsewhere, never at what is right in front of you. Your work betrays you too!" He turned to the table where some of her canvases were stacked and swept them onto the floor.

"You jerk!"

"Doors and windows and bridges! Why didn't you seduce an architect?"

"Seduce?"

"If the hat fits, *M'mselle!*" (They were fighting in French, the only language they had in common).

Nikki threw the sausage at him, snatched her coat, and stormed out. He followed as far as the door, calling her name, but did not come after her. The door slammed. She ran, spinning down the narrow spiral. Halfway to the fifth floor, she had a flash of *l'esprit d'escalier*, and realized that throwing him out would've made more sense than leaving herself. But then again, she intended to walk out of the entire juncture, not just one room, so maybe he had more claim to occupy it than she did. Her paintings were still there but she could go back for them any time...

She clattered past her landlady's door and down another half-flight of stairs, then stopped. She put her hair up under her cap, went back, and knocked on the bright enamel paint. The landlady answered at once. "Just dropping off the rent—" and Nikki fumbled in her pockets, smiling through the effort of not crying.

The landlady blinked pouched and watery eyes. "No hurry, *chère*. It is not due for a week."

"Uh, yes, but, I'm going away for a bit."

"Ohhh. Oh, dear." Madame glanced upstairs. The floor between

their apartments was thin and sound traveled well. “Not giving notice, I hope?”

“Oh, no,” Nikki said truthfully. She was not giving notice, she just wasn’t coming back. “Just...might miss the day, you know. In fact,” she added, having a good view of the garret behind Madame’s figure, more bare and cheerless even than her own, “I’d like to advance another three months’ rent, please.”

A certain tension went out of Madame’s face. Nikki had preconceived ideas of a widowed Parisian landlady, but she had lived up to none of them: she was soft and plump, with hair like angora fleece, and constantly worried that Nikki wasn’t eating properly or her coat wasn’t warm enough. “Well...if you wish. If it isn’t too much trouble.” She lowered her voice. “But what of your friend?”

From that question, Nikki realized Madame had thought Munch was paying her expenses—which meant Nikki hadn’t been fooling her at all; she knew she was renting to *une femme*. “...I don’t think you’ll see him again,” she said.

“Ah,” the landlady sighed. “These artistes. So temperamental. I hope it was not so serious as that.”

Nikki remembered meeting Munch, in a Left Bank dive with red velvet wallpaper. The flare of a match lit up his face across the room and she recognized the image—*Self-Portrait with Burning Cigarette*. From the way he stared at her, she realized there was danger of starting a new timeline, so she’d fled. He’d followed, caught up halfway across the Pont de l’Archêveché, actually grabbed her arm.

“You are a woman,” he’d said. He was a Victorian man; naturally he’d made this sound like an accusation.

“I’m afraid so,” she told Madame.

Downstairs, outside, she found a cheerful day in early May on the streets of the Île St.-Louis. Pigeons flocking, urchins running, lovers walking, fishermen with lines off the limestone quay, cyclists and cab

drivers swearing at each other, painters trying to catch the quality of light dancing off water, drunkards adding piss to the smell of the river...

To be fair to Munch, it was illegal for women to dress in men's clothes in La Belle Époque. He must have thought she was on the run from some bullying pimp or former lover. To believe otherwise would put a strain even on his free-love principles. She had known it would in advance; it wasn't her first time in this benighted century.

But now he was accusing her of slumming. She stalked across the bridge connecting the Ile St. Louis to the Ile de la Cité, silently ranting about bohemian anarchist painters who thought themselves so liberated and avant-garde, but who were so repressed you could blow them up like balloons. By the time she reached the other side she was fighting tears. She headed into the park in the vast shadow of Notre-Dame.

The chestnut trees, their masses of blossoms shifting in the wind, nearly hid the river and the limestone quay opposite. The old cathedral rose into a serene sky with a high, thin layer of cloud, broken by the wind so that spots of sunlight hit the old yellowed gray limestone, the voussoirs, buttress towers, and jutting gargoyle mouths. She sat on a bench near the Vigoureux Fountain and got herself past the crying jag.

"Trouble in paradise?"

She jumped, gasped, dragged her coat sleeve across her eyes. Erik lounged at the other end of the bench and she hadn't seen or heard him arrive. "How the hell did you get here?"

"You entered this timeline into the engine records," he reminded her.

"So? I didn't leave coordinates!"

"You gave the year and the city and your famous boyfriend's name," he said. "All I had to do was shadow him until you made contact."

Ice struck down her spine. "You've been following me? Spying on me? For over a month? Dressed like that?" There were few locals near enough to notice his black trench coat, motorcycle boots, mirrored

shades on top of his head. He looked like he had once been the kid nobody expected to bring a thirty-aught-six to middle school.

“Couldn’t contact you before you entered the record. Then you might not have done it.”

“You’re darn right I wouldn’t have!”

“Sounds like you’re afraid of seeing me. I wonder why.”

“Erik. Number one, you’re my brother.”

“Half-brother.”

“And number two, you’re a sociopath.”

He stood up slowly, as if to avoid sudden moves that would give her an excuse to run. “But I am also a Timewalker. So are you. You can’t be happy with one of them.”

“One of who?” she asked, deadpan.

“You know. Ephemerals. Stationaries. Figments. Whatever you like to call them.”

“We’re not a different species!”

“Of course we are.” Drifting closer. “They’re all ghosts. Fragments of probability. They don’t even exist unless we find them.”

“They’re still real. They still bleed, and die, and—and leave relatives squabbling over their stuff.... How did you get access to my records anyway?”

“Dad sent me, actually. Some nauseating reconciliation scene.”

She scowled. “We’ve got nothing to reconcile about. What do I care if he married again?”

Erik shrugged. “I just took advantage of the opportunity to find you.” He took another step and she flinched back. There was an electric heat generated by his proximity that she had to ignore. He took a hand-rolled cigarette out of his pocket, dribbling a few bits of tobacco, and lit it with a flare from a death’s-head Zippo. “Seriously, Nikki, I have missed you.”

“Seriously, forget it. I’m saying goodbye now.”

“I’m going with you. What entrance are you using?” She walked away across the grass. “You think you’re untouchable?” he called. “No one is. Not even us.”

“Goodbye now,” she said.



She found her father in the vineyard. He must be taking a break between capitalist forays into other people’s timelines. The sun was beating down, the earth on the southern slope of the hill was warm and dry and smelled like cinnamon, and he was working on the spring vines with billhook and grafting knife, looking like an illustrated parable or allegory of something in fustian smock and sandals. Benedict Varian had the robust build and features that only sculptors under patronage give to old men—big, gray-bearded, and stern, he could have been a model for Zeus or Jehovah. But he looked around and his expression softened so much that she felt it as a shock.

“Welcome back.” He rested the billhook in the dirt.

They took care of *how are you* and *fine*, and he said nothing about what she was wearing or how she’d avoided him while creeping into the house every now and then to access the engine records. Despite that encouragement, her gut churned and she let him go first. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Nicoletta.” Against her mother’s wishes, he used an Italianized version of Nikkole. “It’s time for you to come home.”

“You mean permanently?”

“It is not safe for you out there. And I miss you. It is time we mended our quarrel. I would forgive and accept you—the best I can—the way you are.”

“You’d forgive me?”

“And I am prepared to listen to your complaints,” with a sigh that

seemed to add *however unreasonable they may be*, and the next thing he did was to turn back to the vines. “What, out of my catalogue of faults, would you like to discuss?”

This was too good an opportunity to miss. “Well, picking one at random, why did you let Erik see my engine records?”

He seemed surprised. “Why should I not have?”

“Thought I made it clear I didn’t want anyone but you and Alex to be able to find me.”

He rolled his head, popping his neck. “I feared you would not listen to me. He seemed certain he could persuade you to return. I have not always been pleased with him; he was an undisciplined, vicious boy—”

“Well, we agree there.”

“—but I felt that time and adventure had matured him.”

“I’m thinking not,” Nikki said. “Did you know I first met him outside?”

“...And?”

“And he didn’t mention we were related.”

She meant to say it straight out, but couldn’t grit her teeth enough. Still, her tone warned him and he raised the grafting knife as if to ward off ill fortune. “And?”

“And we had an affair.” Her feet twitched; she wanted to take a step back. “Until I figured out he was a Timewalker too.” She remembered the tang of second-hand smoke. ‘Let me show you what I am,’ she had said to him once. And how impressed he had pretended to be under a mask of insouciance that turned out to be his real face. A face that once too often had five o’clock shadow at noon or a slightly different haircut or a complete change of mood for no apparent reason.

Her father seemed too nonplussed to be outraged. He put a hand to his head as the storm began to gather around the edges of his face. “You are sure?”

“That I slept with him? Yeah, Dad, I’m pretty sure.”

“And he knew who you were?”

“Definitely. It might have been better if you’d mentioned, you know, that I had a brother named Erik?”

“It would have been better by far if you had remained in Santuario!”

“Dad, you really can’t blame this on me.”

The storm arrived and broke in the same instant. His face went florid, frozen to boiling in three seconds flat. “That incestuous *figlio di puttana* made a *troia* out of you, a Varian? I should have strangled him in his cradle!” He swung the billhook at the base of a grapevine, cultivated for centuries, and chopped it half off its roots.

“And don’t freak out and do that affronted patriarch thing!”

“And you? How could you?” He threw the tools down, almost snorting. “Even though you did not know he was your brother—” Nikki backed away, seeing him react exactly the way she expected him to—but then, “No—no, wait,” he added in different tone. He wiped his brow and made a pacifying gesture. “I forget. This is not the way to raise one’s daughters any longer. I—please, do not go.” To her astonishment, he put one arm around her shoulders and drew her close. “Forgive me. I curse the discretion that brought this shame upon you. If I had foreseen...” Speechless, she almost relaxed against his powerful chest. He smelled of earth, wool, and sugar-cured tobacco. “Never mind now,” he added, releasing her. “The question is what to do about this...outrage.”

“What are you going to do?”

He picked up the tools, shoving the knife into a wide leather belt and shouldering the billhook. “Well, he is no Absalom to me, girl, I assure you. I will call on him to explain, to defend himself, if he can.”

He was leaving the vineyard; she followed, trying to get her breath back. “And if he can’t?”

“Exile.”

“Why would he care?”

“No access to the engine records? No safety from the Hunters? No chance to inherit what I have built here?” He encompassed the whole estate in a gesture. “He will care.” They reached a shed where he put the tools away on their hooks. “You will see.” He gave her a smug smile. *Father knows best.* “You will see.”

He closed up the shed and began climbing the hill, through the steeply terraced gardens and the labyrinthine jasmine hedges toward the villa and again she followed. “Dad... whatever happens, this isn’t a birthday party, not something I’m looking forward too, woo-hoo, big surprise, okay?”

“I understand it is not anything pleasant for you. But you should witness it nonetheless.”

“Oh, no. No. No way. All I want is for him to stay out of my records and away from me.” *It wasn’t rape*, she wanted to say, but the distinction would be lost on him. The issue to him, beyond the fact of incest, wasn’t her consent, it was unauthorized spoilage. “The rest is between you and him. It’s not my problem.”

“Then you do not intend to stay?”

“No. But I’ll say hello to Alex.”

“You should greet your mother as well.”

“Stepmother.”

“Stepmother, yes. Whether you approve or not, I have married again.” Full of his success, he went on: “She is from Milan, the same timeline as the servas, so she is used to them already. And you will have a new brother or sister soon.”

“Oh...congratulations,” Nikki said, and wondered if that event had anything to do with his softened attitude, although neither his previous marriage nor Alex’s birth had worked any such change.

“Thank you.” They went through an archway in a hedge wall and followed the path upward and widdershins, reaching the eastern slope

where the air was cooler and dew sparkled on turf soft as jeweler's cotton, before he urged her again. "Stay. Erik may be lost to me. Alex is a good boy, but no Timewalker; he cares for nothing but engines. My other children are long grown and have never come back. And you are not settling down as you should."

"Not in the sense you'd like."

"Not in any sense," he said dryly. "I do not require you to marry. But your first duty is to your family. I insist. You are too young. This affair proves it. I should never have let you leave in the first place."

Now she could summon outrage to her defense. "How do you know how old I am? I've spent years in other timelines. I could be nineteen going on fifty!"

"Anyone who uses the phrase 'going on' is too young," he said, even more dryly.

From the eastern slope, there was a good view of the aqueduct, three stacks of arches high, spanning the valley from its far wall to the summit of the central hill, imported stone by stone from ancient Hispania. In a trick of temporal physics Dad had never explained, it brought fresh water from Santuario to Santuario—and sometimes she felt her life was a similar Möbius strip. "Dad...I can't live here, knowing how you built the place."

"Not this again."

"You were a colonialist, a robber baron, you looted history, you were involved in the slave trade—"

"That was a long time ago!"

"It's still tainted! You're still probably using—"

"The whole Earth has that taint!" he snapped. "What I do is for you, for my children, for your protection! You do not know what I faced, what I had to deal with!" He was quiet a moment, breathing fast and even, until the thunderous purple receded from his face. "The Hunters will discover you sooner or later."

“I’ve never even seen one.” The Hunters were childhood bogeymen. “You said it’s been a hundred years since they made any trouble for us.”

“Do you confine yourself to the last hundred years?” He shook his head. “They were diminished, they are not gone. And there are other dangers. The Telepaths are too reclusive to worry about, but the Seers...it’s nearly impossible to guard against one, should he become your enemy.”

“I have no plans to become anybody’s enemy,” Nikki said.

“And there are hazards in timewalking itself. Some even I do not understand.”

They began to climb Santuario’s northern slope. Ancient olive trees loomed over the path, each thick and twisted old stump supporting long, thin black fingers of new growth. Their shade was dark and cold by contrast with the glare. Chilled, she picked up the pace. “Dad. I’m sorry. It’s nice to see you. It was easier to talk to you this time. But kids leave, that’s life, it’s normal. What are you going to do, lock me up?”

There was a pause before he said, “No. Never.”

“I’ll pay respects to the latest—to Lady Varian. Then I’m gone.”



Peter stared at the girl, the hair prickling on the back of his neck. “Oh!” she said, as startled as he was. “Sorry, were you going through?”

“I— no,” he said, with more honesty than presence of mind, “because I didn’t really think it would open.”

“Then would you mind letting me out?”

“Of—of course,” Peter said, and staggered back, pushing his glasses more firmly onto his nose.

“Thanks.” She stepped out and closed the panel behind her with a firm click, but not before he caught a whiff of dank underground

scent and glimpsed an absolutely real dark stone tunnel with bright daylight at the far end.

She had limbs and eyes and breasts and so on. Curly dark hair, a dusting of freckles. She wore jeans and a blouse, but the same coat—short for a coat but long for a jacket—and she looked overheated in it, a glow in her cheeks. “Where did you come from?” he blurted.

“My dad’s place,” she said tightly. “Don’t go in. He’s in a mood.”

“Your—your dad?” He gave the panel another push when she wasn’t looking but it didn’t budge. He followed her into the outer office. “Your dad has what, an office in there?”

“Among other things.” She glanced at him sharply. “You *do* know my father?”

There was something familiar in the turn of her head and the shape of her face. “Mr. Varian, you mean? My boss.”

“...But you aren’t supposed to be here, are you?”

“I work here,” he protested. “And I saw you walk through the wall!”

“Oh, Christ.” She stared at him and sighed. “Now this is the part where I either warn you away for your own good, or tell my father that you were poking around.” Peter gulped as stark vistas of unemployment opened up before him. Then she added, “But you know what, I really don’t give a goddamn. And I don’t know what good it would do. It’s like, hello, Dad, do you know anything about human nature?”

She stalked out into the hallway. Blinking, he went after her. “Excuse me. Why are you supposed to warn me away?”

“It’s a secret door, right?” She pushed the call button for the elevator. “Maybe my father would like it to remain a secret?”

“Then I suppose it would be futile to ask you why he has a secret door?”

There was a minute tilt to the corners of her mouth. “Completely.”

There was only one elevator, so he wasn’t following her when

he got on board. She sent them rattling and grinding downward and studied him with a little frown. She still had a trace of that scent. Turpentine maybe. He had to think of something else to say. It had to be amusing, distracting, and non-threatening.

“I’m Peter Chang.” Well, one out of three...

She extended her hand and shook his firmly. “Nikkole Varian. Or just Nikki. Were you the guy with the tie?” The elevator binged at ground level and she added, “Nice meeting you,” before heading through the foyer for the front door.

He had to go out the front door same as everybody else, so he still wasn’t technically following her. She stopped on the front steps, looking around at Market Street, the river of traffic, buildings ghostly, streetlights burning through a light mist. Why did she hesitate—not knowing where to go, or was she waiting for someone? “Do—do you need a ride?”

“Not a ride, no, thank you,” she said, and went down the steps. She had a direction now: away from him.

“Or anything else?”

A direct stare. “You’re following me.”

“Yes I am, now. Er.” He winced. What was wrong with him that he kept blurting out the truth? “Look, I’m sorry I was prying just now. I’ve been trying to figure out if there’s another way into that office for weeks. It’s been driving me crazy because...well, there isn’t any space that someone could just vanish into.”

“How do you know?”

“I spent a couple of nights working late with a tape measure and a set of blueprints.” He was going to have to do something drastic. He didn’t know what. He opened his mouth to see what would come out. “Listen, there’s a coffeehouse across the street. If you would like...I won’t ask you any more about it. I would really like to just buy you a coffee and get to know you better.”

She looked at him severely and he continued wondering what was wrong with him until he noticed that almost invisible curve to her mouth again. “Okay. Why not? I should keep an eye on you anyway.”

Peter’s heart went *thud thud churn churn*. They crossed Market Street—she had a long, loping stride like somebody used to covering distances—to Cosmos Coffeehouse. His favorite piece of graffiti was scrawled on its outer wall: QUESTION EVERYTHING, under which someone had scribbled in smaller letters: *Why?* A crazy homeless man in a gray coat crouched on the sidewalk nearby, muttering to himself in the manner of crazy homeless men. As they passed, a few words came clear. “Go away. Beat it, you moron.”

Peter opened the door for her, making a cheerful bell jangle. The place smelled good and had purple walls. It featured local art, scrawled manifestos, recycled paper napkins, beautiful tattooed waitpersons, conversation, and coffee.

Nikki staked out a table near the front while he stood in line to get two cups of steaming dark liquid, cream, sugar, a raspberry scone, and his change. He managed to get these items, plus his briefcase, back to the table without spilling more than a little liquid from one cup.

“So,” he said, mopping his sleeve with a napkin, hoping to kick the conversation off to an exciting start. He wondered what they could possibly talk about while she sawed the scone in half with a plastic knife. She wasn’t, objectively speaking, extraordinary, but she was a girl, he had just pulled off a Hail Mary pass, and she was actually sitting there prepared to have a conversation with him. They could fall back on the usual subjects, he supposed. “So what do you do? Most of the time?”

“I do some painting,” she said in an off-hand way that he recognized from his photography days as meaning she did not make a living at it. If she considered herself successful, she would say “I am a painter.”

“What’s your subject?”

She gave a little snort. “Architectural features, mostly. Archways, doors, windows, bridges, that sort of thing.”

Her default expression was serious, but excessively serious, as if she were trying not to laugh. “Why is that funny?”

“Is it?” she asked, and it seemed to be a direct question: *Do you think it’s funny?* “Here.” She passed him his half of the scone.

“Thanks.” He tried a bite. “Well...why? What’s the attraction?”

“It suggests possibilities. Further horizons. New worlds.” A pause and she added, “Moving on.”

That sounded like she’d appreciate a change of topic. “So why haven’t I seen you around before? Are you just visiting?”

“No, I live in San Francisco, but I travel a lot. I don’t see Dad very often. So infrequently that I have no idea what he does here.” She chewed her half slowly. “What’s going on in the Palazzo Building these days?”

“It’s, uh, it’s a brokerage firm.” And according to the company literature, it had been a brokerage firm for over a hundred years.

“So you’re a broker.” Again there was a faint upward tilt to the corners of her mouth, as if she found that idea intensely funny but was too polite to laugh at it.

“I’m not, really,” he said. “I mean, I’m learning a bit, but...that’s just my job title. It’s like... kind of like trying to do advanced research in an area you have an honorary degree in.”

“Oh.” She put the scone down. “Did my dad give you the job?”

“...I guess he must have. Do you know why?”

She propped her forehead against her knuckles and sighed. “Patronage.” As he probably looked bewildered, she went on. “He has old-fashioned ideas. Like...a man in his position is supposed to look out for the people under him, you know, people he’s responsible for. Same way he’s supposed to look after his family. Especially the girls.”

“Is that so bad?”

“Not if you grew up in the seventeenth century.”

“It couldn’t be that in my case. Why me? I never met him before I started working here.”

“You could ask him.”

“At the same time I ask what’s behind that door, maybe?”

She licked a bit of raspberry off her upper lip. “I love scones. They’re sweet, but not too sweet, and they’re tough, you know? I like food that requires an effort to eat. Like good, crusty bread, or brownies that have been in the pan too long.”

Peter took a drink of coffee, which he needed after a long, weird day. During this pause in the conversation, she seemed to be really looking at him for the first time. Since he could get self-conscious in the same room with a potted lisianthus, he put the cup down before anything could happen to it. “What?”

“Okay. What do you want to ask?”

“Where did the extra space come from?”

For the first time, she smiled. “Do you really want to know? You could go on thinking of it as a mystery. The explanation might be very dull, you know. Disappointing.”

“I doubt that. Secrets are usually kept for a reason.”

“Or from force of habit,” she said, and the smile blew out like a candle. “On the other hand, it might be very upsetting. It might disturb your idea of the universe so much that if you accept it—which you probably won’t—it’ll leave you wondering out in the cold and the dark whether your life matters even slightly.”

“I don’t think it could be that bad,” he said. “I think you’re stalling.”

She started to answer, then looked through the window over his shoulder and froze like a rabbit. Her face went paler under the freckles, and her eyes, which at this precise moment Peter realized were grayish green, went dark with fear.

He twisted around and saw nothing to get spooked about. The street outside was dark and foggy and full of traffic and pedestrians. “What’s wrong?”

“I have to go.” She stood up. “Don’t follow me.”

“What?” he protested. “But—”

“Don’t follow me!” The bell clattered as she went out.

Peter was not the sort of person who, when told not to follow someone, did the exact opposite. Assuming that a person’s requests were within the bounds of reason, he was usually compliant. But this time, he jumped right up and went to the door. Nikki was cutting slantwise across Market Street, in terrible danger, he thought, of being hit by an oncoming bus on a night like this. “Hey!” He dashed after her, but was forced to stop when one such oncoming bus tore between them, and she didn’t hear him. “Wait!” he called, and followed.

She went up to a man in a long black coat leaning on a streetlight. Peter slowed as he realized that she was talking to the guy, and his heart went *thud thud churn churn* again even though she didn’t look pleased to see the man. *He* was now in terrible danger of being hit by an oncoming bus, but luck was with him and the next one did not go by until he set foot on the sidewalk.

“You must know he wants to see you so he can tell you off!” Nikki was saying.

“So you told him,” the guy answered. “Good. He could use a shock to his complacent marital bliss.” Peter got a better look at the man and instantly loathed him, from the mirrored shades resting on top of his spiky blond hair to the squared-off tips of his motorcycle boots.

Nikki was glowering. “Why would you want to listen to that, unless you’re up to something?”

“Because I thought I might run into you.”

“Well, you were wrong. I won’t be there.”

The man looked over her shoulder at Peter and examined him the

way a hungry lynx sizes up a stray goat. “Is that your new ephemeral?”

“Peter, I told you—” Nikki broke off and glared at the man. “None of your business. And stop using that word!”

Peter broke in with, “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” she said tightly. “Go away.”

“Why shouldn’t I call him that?” the man said. “Especially if you aren’t going to introduce him.”

“Erik Varian, this is Peter. Peter, my brother, Erik.”

“Half-brother,” said Erik.

Peter wasn’t as relieved as he thought he ought to be to learn that the man was Nikki’s brother. He started to tell Erik he was pleased to meet him, then remembered that he was having trouble lying and changed it to, “Hi.”

“So, is he your new ephemeral or not?”

She stamped her foot at him. Peter had never seen anyone do that in real life before. “Dammit, Erik—”

“We jus—we just met,” Peter interrupted, “if it’s any business of yours. Nikki, take it easy. I don’t know what he means, so I can’t be insulted by it. I’m sorry if I intruded.”

“He doesn’t know what it means,” Erik echoed, and very white teeth appeared in his repellently beautiful face.

“No, and I don’t care,” Peter said.

“It means,” Nikki’s brother said, “that if I killed you, she could step back a few minutes and find you again. You could replace him in ten seconds flat, Nikki, and there’s plenty more where he came from.”

“Excuse me?” said Peter.

“Should we show him? It’ll save you some trouble and explanations later on, won’t it?” Erik reached into his coat pocket, produced a semiautomatic pistol, and pulled the slide back.

“...Christ!”

“No!” Nikki lunged for her brother’s arm.

Peter felt a hard blow to his chest and his eardrums imploded. He staggered back under the impact. He wasn't sure what had happened until he tried to take a breath and couldn't. It felt as though his whole ribcage had been crushed and there was no space into which he could draw air.

He knew he should not grab his chest and look down, because that was what people always did on television, and if he did, he would find a great deal of his own blood on his shirt, and then, like a cartoon coyote discovering that he had been standing on thin air for the last ten seconds, he would fall. But he was panicking from being unable to breathe, so he did it anyway. There was a lot of blood on his shirt and on his hand, and more pulsing out every second from a hole that had no business being there. He didn't yet feel as though he was going to collapse, but he thought he should sit down.

He looked up at Nikki's white face, her fingers digging into her brother's arm, and at her brother as he lowered the smoking gun. He said, "Hhughh," which meant, "I can't breathe, please help me."

"You shit!" Nikki said to Erik, and she blurred or perhaps everything blurred as she moved toward Peter—

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He was lying on the grass under a blossoming camellia tree, kissing her passionately. Bright sunlight filtered through the petals, striking him blind in staccato bursts. A busker was playing "Stolen Moments" on alto saxophone on the sidewalk nearby. She had one arm wound tight around his neck and the music seemed to move her against him in lapping waves. He could smell pine scent in her hair. Something awful had just happened. He couldn't remember what it was. He closed his eyes, trying to think—



When he opened his eyes, he was standing on the foggy dark sidewalk on Market Street, looking at Nikki's brother over Nikki's head. Erik had both hands in the pockets of his long black coat. There was no sign of a gun. Nikki was not kissing Peter. She never had. She hugged him briefly and stepped back. "Thanks for the coffee, Pete," she said. "I've got to run now."

"What?"

"I've got to go now," she repeated.

Peter hadn't meant "What did you say," but rather, "What just happened?" He could breathe. His lungs weren't collapsing. He wasn't bleeding to death—there was no blood on his shirt, no pulsing hole in his chest at all.

"I've changed my mind," she said to Erik. "Let's go see Dad. You need to hear what an asshole you're being."

A single realization cut through the mass of conflicting data screaming for Peter's attention: Nikki was leaving. "Wait! How—how do I see you again?" he stammered. That was important. Seeing her again. Not more important than getting shot, certainly. But more important than thinking he had gotten shot, where that belief was flatly contradicted by the simplest observable facts.

"Don't worry. I'll see you around."

"Unless I see you first," her brother said.

They went up the front steps of the Palazzo Building. Erik opened the door, Nikki went in, he followed with a smirk back at Peter, it glided shut. He was left standing on the sidewalk among some dead leaves the wind thought appropriate to blow into his vicinity at that moment for reasons known only to itself.

All his life, Peter had felt that somebody was looking out for him—not because he deserved it, but because it was somebody's job.

Good things had come his way with no effort on his part, although it must be said he never got anything that he would have chosen for himself. But he never had to prove himself, and he lived in a state of perpetual anxiety because he had no idea how or when his entitlement would come to an end. Someday the ground would shift under his feet and he would not be ready to cope.

This, the day he'd finally seen something he wanted, appeared to be that day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lise pronounces her name “Lisa” but will answer to anything other than “lice.” She started out writing fantasy role-playing game articles and books but has also written science fiction intermittently over the last 25 years. In her day job, she is an attorney, handling indigent criminal appeals and writs in the California Courts of Appeal. She also invented the traffic sign which reads “Resume Being Unprepared To Stop.” She lives with her husband Bruce, daughter Autumn and two shaggy dogs in La Mesa, California. Her best writing occurs in various coffeehouses in La Mesa Village.

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