

THE WRONG REFRIGERATOR

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THE WRONG REFRIGERATOR

Rose-tipped azure light haloed the back of the Tuckers' new refrigerator. Allie wished she could blame the effect on a wayward sunbeam. Unfortunately it was raining, and even if it hadn't been, the kitchen windows faced the wrong direction to catch the evening light. Besides, the problem couldn't be the light. The room's other brushed steel appliances sported the same cold gray sheen as always. She shook her head. "Something's seriously wrong with this refrigerator."

"Yeah," her husband Kyle said. He hitched a glass under the ice dispenser. "The damn icemaker's broken."

The fridge is leaking freaky colored light, and he's worried about ice? What's wrong with this picture? A grinding gurgle echoed from the freezer compartment. *If his new Bimmer made that kind of noise, he'd be howling for a mechanic, not randomly jabbing the controls.*

"Piece of shit!" Kyle roared. His fist slammed the control screen.

Allie cringed. His rage came out of nowhere. Not that she was in any danger. Not really. He'd never raised a hand to her. He didn't need to. When the guy with the anger management issues was six-foot-two and solid as a tank, the possibility of violence was enough to keep smaller people in line.

Machines, too, apparently. A flare of green lit the screen. A *whirr* thrummed from the back of the refrigerator.

Kyle flashed a cocky smile. "Works every time."

He replaced his glass under the dispenser. The green light winked out.

"Fuck it," he snarled. "You tell those assholes at Big Buy they'd better fix this thing by Saturday, or they're going to wish they'd never heard of Kyle H. Tucker, Esq."

More and more lately, she wished *she* hadn't.

He stomped down the stairs to the basement and its fully operational fridge. Allie slumped against the dining room pass-through and tried to relax. Hot and cold running rage was just another management strategy he was trying on for size. Dogged as he was when it came to sucking up to the senior partners at Blaylock, Mills, and Chang, he lacked the patience for sustained emotional abuse.

At least, that's what she told herself, ignoring the seed of disquiet that had taken root in her brain. If she truly believed otherwise, she'd need to find herself a divorce lawyer who was a bigger shark than Mills or Chang. *Not likely.*

Across the top of the control screen, a line of colored lights blinked sequentially from left to right, then in groups of two, three, and five. Was the machine having second thoughts? *Smart machine.* She grabbed a glass off the drainboard and held it under the dispenser.

Nothing. She tried resetting it per the instructions, but the refrigerator didn't like her fingers any better than Kyle's. Now she understood why the delivery guy scrawled his phone number on the receipt. He wasn't making a pass. He was trying to prevent a complaint. With all the "special features" attached to this model, it probably happened all the time. Too bad he used a Sharpie. The paper had landed in the only wet spot on the dark granite counter. All that was left of the numbers was a smear.

The kitchen clock read seven forty-five—fifteen minutes before Big Buy's help line closed for the night. She rubbed her temples. After working from home all day while she waited for the delivery guy, she was wiped—and she still had to buy groceries. They couldn't afford Kyle's idea of stocking the larder. Literally. Kyle shopped like he'd already made partner. But it would be worth falling asleep over a shopping cart if she could arrange a service call tonight.

* * *

Nereesha, the Big Buy rep assigned to Allie's call, sighed. "I'm sorry, your address isn't in my system."

"It has to be," Allie said. "Big Buy charged my account."

"Charges are handled by Accounting. They close at five."

Allie pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't need Accounting. I need someone to fix the refrigerator you delivered today."

"Ma'am, that's what I'm trying to tell you. Big Buy didn't deliver anything to your address. There aren't any deliveries scheduled for Radnor, Pennsylvania, all this week."

"And I'm telling you, the refrigerator is here, in my kitchen. I'm looking straight at it." Not the smartest move with the twin jackhammers of hunger and stress pounding the inside of her skull. The refrigerator's aura had dissipated, but glints of two-toned color remained embedded in the minute striations of the brushed steel finish.

Sky-blue pink. The words popped out of nowhere—the imaginary color her high school boyfriend used to describe the inconceivable. Jason Firth. She hadn't thought about Jase in years.

"Ma'am, that's not possible," Nereesha insisted. "The Centauri XLII is on back order."

"I could send you a picture," Allie cooed. If Kyle was polishing his anger-as-management tool, she was becoming expert in passive aggression. "Not just the fridge. I have the paperwork right here."

She rattled the receipt for emphasis. "It says Big Buy at the top, with this number directly underneath. The installer was . . . J. Firth?" Her voice lifted in question. "It can't be."

No, it couldn't. Sure, the guy looked vaguely familiar and was more or less the

right age. That didn't count. She'd spent high school and college surrounded by lanky guys with bottle-bottom glasses and bad haircuts. Based on the ones she'd run into since, some of them never changed. Which was why "J. Firth" couldn't be Jase. He wouldn't be caught dead working a blue-collar job this close to their old high school. He might be recognized by somebody with a lower grade point.

"That's for sure. We won't be getting any more Centauri XLIIIs for at least two weeks."

"Okay, but I still have a broken refrigerator, and my husband's boss and his wife are coming to dinner this weekend."

"Sounds like a job for our Service Squad."

"Okay. Connect me. Please."

"I can schedule them from here."

"Great," Allie said. "When's your next opening?"

"Two weeks from tomorrow."

"You're kidding me."

"No, ma'am. We're not allowed to jest with the customers."

Well, somebody was, and if Allie ever figured out who, she planned to make them really sorry. Until then she shouldn't snark at Nereesha. The woman hadn't done anything wrong, and Allie needed that service appointment. She took a deep breath and found the calm, eminently reasonable tone she used on under-performing staff at the bank where she worked.

"That's not acceptable, Nereesha. That's not what Big Buy advertises, and that's not what it says on my service contract." She crossed her fingers. She hadn't gotten around to reading all the two-point print. "I know about these things; my husband is an attorney."

"We-e-ell," Nereesha wavered. "You could always buy another refrigerator."

"Do a swap, you mean?" Kyle would hate it. He had his little lawyer's heart set on the new Centauri. Appliances had snob rankings—who knew? Still, it was better than nothing.

"The Centauri XXXVI has the same footprint as the XLII," Nereesha said. "The shelves are different, and it doesn't have as many apps. But from the outside you can hardly tell the difference. *And* the XXXVI is in stock. I can have one delivered in fourteen days."

Allie hung up. It was either that or throw the phone at the wall. If it broke, Kyle would insist on replacing it with something that cost almost as much as the fridge. Plus, it would delay the search for a repair person. Regardless of whether the refrigerator was on back order (after years of dealing with off-site fulfillment centers, she had her doubts), she balked at ordering a replacement without a refund in hand. They were already pushing their credit limit. She would need to dip into her PayPal savings—the account *not* in both their names—to pay for repairs.

Could she hold out for Big Buy? Forget the icemaker and the light show. If the fridge worked, she could always buy ice.

The ebonized wood handle felt warm and silky to the touch, a nice contrast to the toothy cold of the freezer bay. The XLII lacked a back-up icemaker, but her old-fashioned plastic trays were already frozen. *Score!*

She opened the door to the refrigerator compartment. In addition to cold air and new plastic smell, the chamber sported a quart of half-and-half on the center shelf. *Where did that come from?* She shrugged. Kyle had probably brought it up from the basement. She was glad he had. She could use a cup of coffee right now, even if it disrupted her sleep patterns. She tossed a pod in the coffee maker.

Her good mood lasted until she unscrewed the cap on the carton. The smell of feta cheese fermenting in paint thinner made her eyes water. Hurriedly she replaced the

cap and checked the carton's expiration date.

What the hell? The red design on the front of the carton was blurred, as if the plastic coating had come too close to something hot. But the use-by date stamped into the top was still legible. Ironically, it was the same day she and Kyle closed on the house. Despite the inflated cost—and her objections—he'd insisted on buying into a gated community close to his firm's Main Line office, tripling her commute. She'd seriously considered separating.

She tossed the cream and the sour memory in the trash.

* * *

The best thing to be said about Wednesday was that she and her fellow commuters survived another SEPTA breakdown without murdering any transit employees or each other. When she finally staggered through her front door, she was funky with sweat, her left arm ached from three hours of strap-hanging, and it was going to take a crowbar to pry her pumps off her swollen feet. But for once it looked like the universe was cutting her a break. Kyle, dressed in the old T-shirt and shorts he wore for grilling, stood in front of the new refrigerator. He appeared to be rummaging in the center shelf where she'd left the ground beef. She gratefully eased her messenger bag to the floor.

"Why didn't you tell me you were dieting again?" He fanned three brand name diet meals in her direction. "I could've postponed the dinner for a couple weeks. After all, the better you look to the boss, the better I'll look as partner."

It was the last filthy straw in a day as rotten as yesterday's cream. He was body-shaming her. As usual!

"You bastard," she snarled. "I'm a perfect size eight."

"Yeah, at Neiman Marcus," he muttered, tossing the boxes on the counter.

"I heard that," Allie hissed. "For your information, it's a Macy's eight. On sale, house brand, because that's all I can afford since we bought this place. Do you have any idea how much we pay in mortgage? In insurance? To say nothing of the taxes! No, of course you don't. You never worry about the numbers. Numbers are *my* job."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Whoa. How'd we get from your dress size to the mortgage? The mortgage isn't a problem. We'll start paying it down as soon as I make partner."

"And my dress size is?"

"You bought the groceries."

"I didn't buy *those*."

She jabbed her finger at the hated boxes, gagging on the remembered taste of snot-textured eggplant lasagna and the choking sense of failure she felt when she couldn't button her fat jeans. Meanwhile, her husband's assistants were getting younger and thinner and prettier with every new job, every promotion . . .

Stop. It's not worth going back to therapy.

He stared at her. "You did the shopping."

"I went shopping last night. Those boxes weren't in the fridge when I left this morning, forty-five minutes *before* you. I haven't been home since. Even lawyers can do that kind of math."

His forehead puckered. She hoped it froze that way. She picked up her bag, wincing at the weight. She had enough gas in the car to grab a salad or something from the Giant, if she didn't break down and head for Macdonald's.

"Babe, I swear, I didn't buy those dinners. I found them in the fridge—a whole week's worth, stacked on the middle shelf, same as before."

Allie sniffed. "Right. Same as before, when you bought me a year's subscription to a fat club for my thirty-fourth birthday."

"I was trying to help," he called down the hall. "I only did it once. Why won't you believe me?"

She unlocked the front door and glanced over her shoulder. Kyle stood in the kitchen doorway, hands on his hips, his face shadowed by annoyance as much as the dimness of the hall.

“What’s wrong with you lately?”

She didn’t know what to say.

* * *

At least the make-up sex was good. Allie let her body have its way, reveling in Kyle’s hot demanding mouth, the grapple and slide of perspiration-slick skin, the coupling that for a few blazing seconds transcended flesh.

But when it was done, she lay rigid beneath the covers, hips skewed to avoid the wet spot. The darkness offered no escape from her thoughts. Turning off her brain hadn’t jump-started her subconscious. She conceived no brilliant plan for rebooting their relationship. Desperate, she fell back on Business Administration 101: *When faced with a management problem, any course of action is better than none.* That was a scary concept for someone as risk-averse as Allie, but she had to do something. The threat of Kyle’s temper was nothing compared to the prospect of thirty, forty, maybe fifty years of casual slights and frustrated hopes.

Her husband sprawled on his back atop the comforter, radiating heat she wished she could share. He smelled like sex and a faint vestige of aftershave. His breath had slowed to a sleepy rhythm, but hadn’t yet slid into a snore.

She turned toward him, trailing her fingers along his arm. “Kyle,” she whispered. “I want kids.”

His muscles tensed beneath her touch.

“I want your kids,” she amended.

“I thought you were worried about our finances.”

“I am. I’m worried about lots of things. But it all comes back to kids. I want your children, Kyle. I understand why you didn’t want kids right after we got married. I wasn’t ready then, either. But I’m almost forty. Pretty soon I’ll be too old. What’s the point of having a house like this if we don’t have children?” She smoothed his taut bicep.

He winced, twitching his arm closer to his side. *Talk about distancing himself.*

He said, “What about your career?”

“I can’t go any higher unless I take a job out of state. I couldn’t do that to us. Long-distance relationships never work. But I can’t stay where I am. The commute is killing me. Every night I come home fried and angry, and there’s no time to recover before I have to get up and do it again. I’ve looked for something closer, but I’d have to take a pay cut, or switch banks, which would mean losing my benefits and a big chunk of my retirement.”

She waited for Kyle to object, to tell her she was getting worked up over nothing, to assure her making partner would fix everything, or promise to work his lawyer mojo on the bank. Instead he lay perfectly still. He barely breathed.

“Kyle?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Help me find a way out. I feel I don’t have a life anymore. I need to know it’s going to get better. I need to know I can have a family.”

“I thought we were a family.”

It was her turn to freeze. She blinked back the tears that welled out of nowhere. “We are. Look, I didn’t mean to spring it on you like this, but these feelings have been trapped inside me so long. Then tonight, when you asked what was wrong . . .”

Pillows and comforter rustled as he hoisted himself on his elbows. The featureless shadow of his head loomed over her, black against the dark.

“Did you stop taking your birth control?” he demanded.

“No! I’d never go off the Pill without telling you. I can’t do this on my own.”

"Glad you noticed," he mumbled. In a louder voice he said, "Can you stay on it until after the partnership meeting? Can you do that for me?"

She told herself agreeing would make things easier. She told herself he would be grateful she played fair. Nevertheless, she wondered if she'd made a terrible mistake—not tonight but eight years ago when she'd thought she'd found her perfect mate. She knew he despised other people's kids. Most guys did. But from the way he stalled, deliberately running down her biological clock—*again*—she was beginning to suspect children weren't part of his game plan. What would he do when she finally went off the Pill—get a vasectomy? Heart sinking, she realized he might.

She'd accomplished nothing. Worse, she'd prolonged the pity party to one A.M. Now Kyle was snoring too loud for her to sleep. She retrieved her discarded pants and camisole, and tiptoed toward the less oppressive gloom of the upstairs hall.

* * *

The air conditioning in the kitchen raised goose bumps on her bare arms. She flipped the light switch for the breakfast nook and curled up on the upholstered banquette with her tablet propped against her thighs. But instead of boring herself to sleep with computer solitaire, she went looking for Jason Firth. In the wake of her non-fight with Kyle it felt a little like cheating on her diet with a double scoop of Cherry Garcia, forbidden and thrilling—only without the downside of extra treadmill time. It wasn't like cheating for real. She didn't plan to get in touch with Jase. It was only natural she'd be curious after seeing the receipt.

His Facebook page was everything she expected: two Ivy League doctorates before he was thirty, "works at University of Chicago," and a blurry profile picture showing a skinny man standing next to a blue Fermilab sign. But he hadn't updated his status in over nine months. Ditto his LinkedIn and other social media accounts. With any other friend, the long hiatus would have set alarms ringing, but Jase was something else. She remembered one high school weekend when he got so caught up in his project for the USA Science and Engineering Festival he forgot to go home. Without parents or a significant other to drag him out of the lab, she could easily see him living his job.

And what a job! About the time she was getting engaged he published a paper on an experimental method to prove the existence of the multiverse. The available abstracts were hard to follow. Even at her nerdiest, quantum mechanics made her head spin. But based on the articles in *Scientific American* and *Science News*, the proof depended on the notion of quantum entanglement—the idea that objects created as elements of an interdependent system would always act as parts of that system, even when separated by great distances. Jase believed he could create an entangled system in the lab, then use it to create and collapse multiple quantum universes.

From the follow-up links, the world's tiny community of super geniuses considered this hot stuff. Everybody up to and including Stephen Hawking was doing the academic equivalent of yelling and beating each other with equations. Things got even wilder four years later when Jase suggested his process could be used to realize the science fictional dreams of instantaneous communication, faster than light transport, and possibly even time travel.

That was Jase all over. When they were dating, she used to joke he'd either end up a start-up zillionaire or crushed to death under his comic book collection. Instead he'd grown up to be a scientist like Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four. So he wasn't super rich. Money—specifically, the security it bought—was her thing. The Jase she'd known would rather be a superhero, or, in the absence of obliging cosmic rays, a super scientist.

A little bud of happiness flowered under her ribs, warming her from the inside out. They'd drifted apart after high school. Different colleges. Different goals. Jase was

the reason she didn't believe in long-distance relationships. But her inner worrywart always wondered if she'd accidentally ruined his life. Based on his resume, it appeared the opposite was true.

Then she made the mistake of pulling up his Wikipedia page. Her happiness shriveled and crumbled to ash. Jason Firth died the day she and Kyle closed on the house.

The article linked to an obituary in the *Chicago Tribune*. She covered her mouth to muffle a sob. Without glasses he looked like a younger, beardless, Abraham Lincoln. The account was vague on the cause of death, but searching the archives, she found an article about an accident at a Fermilab satellite facility that left four people dead, and one missing, presumed dead.

He was only thirty-eight.

Her eyes burned from more than exhaustion. Thirty-effing-eight. Five months younger than she was now. It wasn't fair. Jase was one of the good guys. A little too *out there* sometimes. He took the craziest chances with people and projects. But he didn't deserve to die at thirty-eight.

Was becoming a celebrity scientist worth dying so young? When the experiment or the explosion or whatever caught up with him, did he have a moment to think, like a Roman emperor she'd read about somewhere, he was becoming a god? Or a superhero, which was what he really wanted.

For Jase's sake, Allie hoped so.

* * *

Blaylock, Mills, and Chang held a general staff meeting every Thursday at 4 P.M. that always ran late. Allie considered it a screwy custom. Normal businesses held their meetings in the morning, the better to ruin their employees' day. But in the interests of salvaging her marriage and fading hopes for a family, she didn't examine the practice too closely.

Especially not this Thursday. Being one degree from death tends to adjust a girl's attitude. Allie planned to enjoy her alone time to the fullest. Trading her work clothes for a gauzy top and (Macy's eight) shorts, she turned off the A.C., opened the kitchen windows to the balmy May breezes, and stretched out in the breakfast nook with some supermarket sushi, a dinner salad, and her tablet. By the time Kyle unlocked the door to the garage, she was indulging her inner Julia Child on recipe sites and compiling a shopping list for Saturday's big meal.

Feeling relaxed and sexy with her bare, toned legs stretched over the snow-white canvas cushions, she lifted her face for a kiss. Lost in a rant about some Center City judge, Kyle didn't notice. With a mental shrug, she swung her legs to the floor and made sympathetic noises until he paused for breath.

"Did you eat? Do you want me to make some eggs?"

"We went for Italian." He brandished his silk tie, now splotched with tomato sauce. It wasn't fair that men got to eat all the pasta they wanted, bulk up like wrestlers, and no one complained. *Least of all them.* "What I need is a beer."

She reached for the window above the banquette as he reached for the refrigerator. After his scrap with the judge, Kyle would want the air conditioning set to glacial.

"What are you cooking Saturday?" he asked in a strained voice.

She glanced over her shoulder. His back was rigid under his wilted suit jacket.

"Moroccan chicken with saffron rice, and fresh peas from the farmers' market." She could do most of the cooking ahead of time, filling the house with the glorious aromas of coriander, cumin, saffron, and curry. There would be toasted almonds and tabbouleh, and drinks prepared with fresh mint. Just thinking about it made her mouth water.

"Then what's this doing in the fridge?"

She had time to think "*Not again,*" before a store-wrapped leg of lamb thumped on

the counter.

"Well?" he demanded, nostrils flaring. "You know you can't cook lamb."

That's not what you said the last time I made chops. No, baiting him was counter-productive. In fact, it might be exactly what he wanted. He knew she loathed those diet meals, and the only memory associated with that cut of lamb was her first—and worst—in-law dinner from hell. He'd "found" those particular items in the fridge for a reason. He wanted her upset. Well, Kyle H. Tucker, Esq., was about to learn he couldn't always get what he wanted.

She folded her arms. "I haven't bought leg of lamb in years. I have no idea where it came from."

"Don't give me that. You put it there before you fixed dinner."

Calm. She had to stay calm, despite the pulse fluttering along the veins of her throat. She refused to be gaslighted by her own husband. She pointed at the table. "I was too tired to fix anything."

His eyes narrowed at the take-out dishes and her almost empty Starbucks green tea lemonade. The first hint of uncertainty flickered across his features. He scowled at the lamb.

"It had to be you. I never go to the Shop-Well on Broad Street. You can't trust . . ."

"The sell-by date," she finished for him. "I know."

He pressed his lips together, squinting at the label. "But it says right here . . . No. It can't be."

His eyes widened. Color leached from his face. Tragically easy as it was to believe he'd mess with her mind, he wasn't actor enough to pale on command.

Allie joined him at the counter. Unlike Tuesday's cream, the meat displayed the rich ruby color of fresh lamb. But the sell-by date was eight years old. In fact, it lined up perfectly with the first time she'd entertained his parents. She opened her mouth, closed it.

"Do you see that?" he whispered. He pointed a shaking hand at the narrow end of the lamb leg.

She nodded, incapable of speech. The mantle of fat was just as she remembered it, down to the deep slash through the blue letters of the USDA stamp. That was why she'd gotten a break on the price. Only it didn't work out the way she planned. The lamb vanished from the fridge in their old apartment the night before his parents' dinner.

She'd always blamed Kyle for the meat's disappearance. She assumed he trashed it out of some misguided sense of perfectionism—not that it helped. In a textbook demonstration of Murphy's Law, the apartment stove waited until his parents arrived to go haywire. The replacement lamb (which cost twice as much as it should've, because Kyle insisted on buying it from a specialty butcher) emerged from the oven scorched on one side and raw on the other. There was no way to salvage it—or the rest of the night. Between his father's cracks about "nouveau cooks" and the affronted moue of his mother's lips, Allie got so stressed she nearly called off the wedding.

"Mob," Kyle croaked.

She blinked, not sure she'd heard him correctly.

"That's a Mob sign." He pointed at the stamp. "They're out to get me!"

"No! The butcher's knife slipped."

"Professional meat cutters don't make those kinds of mistakes."

Actually they did. The discount sticker on the label proved it. But explaining that meant explaining . . . what, exactly? What was happening inside their new fridge? First the cream, now this. *What about the diet meals?* Suddenly she wished she'd checked their dates before trashing them. She'd done her best to put the whole "guaranteed weight loss" nightmare out of her mind. But looking back, she recalled a

glitch in her fat club membership. They'd shorted her a week's worth of dinners. What if the problem hadn't been a mix-up at the company? What if Kyle actually found those boxes like he said?

What if their refrigerator was some kind of time machine?

Compared to that, Kyle's Mob theory sounded sane.

She shook her head. "I don't know, putting a leg of lamb in the fridge seems an awfully tame way of sending somebody a message. Okay, we don't have any pets to kill. But if they're going to use raw meat, wouldn't it be more intimidating to throw it on the bed and have it bleed through the sheets? Maybe it's a gift from one of the neighbors. The Johnsons have a key, and they know the security code. Maybe they wanted to thank us for feeding their cat. It's goofy, but it makes more sense than the alternative. You specialize in estates. Why would the Mob target you?"

"This is Pennsylvania! They don't need a reason."

Yes, they did, if only to maintain their profit margin. Which raised a more important question: why was Kyle so spooked?

He paced from the counter to the pass-through and back. "I need to call the office. They need to know about this. Then I'm calling the development board and our so-called security firm." Shaking his finger at the ceiling, he growled, "This is their fault!"

For her own peace of mind, Allie decided to treat the episode like the firm's Thursday meetings and not question his over-reaction too closely.

* * *

Her subconscious either didn't get the memo or chose to ignore it. Nightmares shredded her sleep. She bolted awake around four A.M., heart pounding against ribs constricted with dread. The only way Kyle's hypothetical master crook could circumvent the guards at the development gate, their locks, *and* their security system would be if her husband deliberately shared his gate pass, key, and code.

The prospect sent her running down the hall to the guest bathroom. Rinsing the taste of bile from her mouth, she wondered how she could think such things about the man she'd married, the man she wanted to father her children. But the terror refused to let go.

Data. She needed more data. Knowledge was the only cure for fear. She needed to find out how the food was getting into the fridge. Then she'd figure out what to do about it.

She waited until Kyle was in the shower to call in sick. She rode the bus to the train station as usual, and stopped at the store on the way home to ensure he had left the house before she returned. Stowing the groceries, she inspected Centauri's fridge and freezer. Aside from yesterday's lamb, she found nothing out of the ordinary. The contents of the downstairs refrigerator proved equally innocuous. Whatever was happening with the new fridge wasn't something Kyle arranged on his way to work. Just knowing that much made it easier to breathe.

She hunkered down in the breakfast nook with her office laptop, her phone, and the pepper spray she kept in her purse. She tried working remotely, but she kept glancing at the doors, listening for footsteps on the drive, checking the refrigerator, and counting the seconds until the start of the partners' Friday afternoon golf game. Kyle never left the green until the last hole was played and the country club closed the bar. If he didn't show by tee time, no matter who was putting those weird things in their fridge, at least she wouldn't have to mace her husband.

She knew she was obsessing, but she couldn't help herself. The latest Federal Reserve analysis of mortgage-backed securities wasn't written to keep people awake. A little after noon she abandoned the pretense of work, retrieved her tablet, and typed Jase's name into the search engine. Exploring the hypotheses he hadn't lived to

prove made her heart ache, but it seem to be the only thing she wanted to read.

Tee time tiptoed past while she snickered over indignant editorials on Jase's notions of quantum entanglement. By four her search had run out of legitimate journals. She started seeing links to fringe sites with headlines like "Missing Scientist on Mission to Aliens?" Drily assuring herself "Resistance is futile," she clicked.

According to the linked article's predictably anonymous source, the accident at the Fermilab facility occurred around four-thirty Central Daylight Time, but failed to register on the monitors until after seven. When officials finally declared the affected area safe to enter, there wasn't much left of the experiment's participants. Subsequent autopsies put their time of death between four-thirty and five.

Jase's remains were not among them. The source claimed no trace of Jase's body was ever found, not even a negative shadow on the soot-stained laboratory walls.

Incredible as it sounded, that detail rang true. The blast had been horrific. He was probably vaporized. It was the only sane explanation for the reports listing him as "missing, presumed dead" and the guarded language in his obituaries.

The writer crowed over the missing remains, and the difference between the scientists' reported time of death and the observed time of the accident. He saw them as proof of a government plot to have Jase personally investigate the military applications of a parallel universe.

Allie almost wished that were true. Jase would have loved to imagine himself as the James Bond of the Great Beyond. Unfortunately, given the nature of the accident, the presence of *any* remains was more surprising than their absence. There was likewise nothing mysterious about the apparent discrepancy in the reported time of death. Anybody who ever watched a cop show could tell you time of death was a range under the best of circumstances—and these were some of the worst.

Anybody who ever watched a cop show could also tell you a missing body doesn't necessarily mean said body was deceased.

She massaged her temples, trying to rub away the crazy thought. This was what she got for reading quantum theory on an empty stomach. In the alternate mental universe of quantum physics it was entirely possible for a cat—or a person—to be simultaneously dead and alive.

The two-and-a-half-hour anomaly in the timeline only reinforced the quantum insanity. Once you accounted for the difference in time zones, the date and time of the Fermilab accident lined up perfectly with the closing on their current house. Nine months later, J. Firth, Jase's bespectacled blue-collar twin, appeared during the same four-thirty to seven (five-thirty to eight, EDT) window. The cream wasn't there when J. Firth explained the fridge's interior controls, but it must have appeared inside before she ended her call to Big Buy around eight.

Reviewing the sequence of events, she realized Kyle couldn't have brought the cream up from the basement. He'd arrived home from work, loosened his tie, grabbed a glass, and tried to get ice. When the appliance defied him, he'd left. She was alone with the fridge until after she discovered the cream.

Could Kyle have discovered the diet dinners and the lamb in the fridge like he said?

* * *

After another ninety minutes without food fairies, ninja home invaders, or any change in the contents of the fridge, Allie began to wonder if she was hormonal or just plain nuts. She closed the door to the refrigerator compartment and started to pace.

Somebody put the cream, the diet meals, and the lamb in the Centauri. She prayed it wasn't Kyle. But the alternative offended her belief in a rationally ordered universe. It implied there was more to the synchronicity of her missing lamb and Jase's big paper on the multiverse, her diet and Jase's vision of a quantum-powered world, than simple coincidence.

Sure it looked like a pattern, and even in banking, this former forensic accountant was all about the patterns. But coincidence was not proof. She'd laughed at the sputtering outrage of Jase's detractors, but that didn't mean she disagreed with them. She'd refused to accept Jase's assertion that people—not just super small quantum particles, but *people*—could compose interdependent systems, with lives that influenced each other even when separated by time and space. No. Quantum entanglement at a personal level was nothing more than a trendy way of blaming all your problems and bad decisions on forces beyond your control. She would be better off believing in a refrigerator time machine. At least then she could stop worrying about Kyle.

The blare of her phone's generic ringtone made her jump. She snatched it off the table. "Hello."

"Allie, it's me, Jase."

The bottom dropped out of her stomach and her world. She yanked the phone away from her ear to stare at the screen. The number was blocked; the icon, a featureless egg.

"Don't hang up!" The caller's panicked baritone rose until it matched the timbre and accents of a man supposed to be dead.

It couldn't be. It just couldn't. She wet her lips. "How . . . prove it!"

A breath that could have been a sigh escaped the speaker. "Sky-blue pink, Allie Cat. Sky-blue pink. The last day of senior year we swore we would always be there for each other. You never took your promise back, even when we stopped dating. I'm sorry if you didn't mean it and that's why you didn't call, but I need your help."

"Oh, Jase." She sank bonelessly onto the banquette. "Of course I'll help. What's going on? Everybody thinks you're dead. I read the obituaries."

"It's complicated. Have you noticed anything strange happening in or around your new refrigerator?"

"So that was you. The glasses threw me off. Do random foodstuffs count?"

"Huh?"

"Food nobody bought keeps popping into the fridge," she explained. "Tuesday night after you left it was cream with a sell-by date from nine months ago. Wednesday it was diet dinners. Yesterday it was a leg of lamb I bought right after Kyle and I got engaged."

She clenched her jaw to keep from saying more. All her unspoken fears were there, straining to escape. The fierce need to unload on Jase was almost painful. *Assuming this guy was Jase.* She'd worry about that later.

He muttered something she couldn't catch. She hated when he did that.

"Jaaaaase," she said, drawing out the vowel. The mumble upped the odds in his favor, but only if he remembered she never let him slide.

"Right," he answered smartly. "You read the obituaries, so you know about the accident. We were setting up a new kind of quantum simulation. Something went wrong. The explosion threw me into a weird mixed quantum state that only intersects our spacetime for about two hours a day."

"Four-thirty to seven, CDT, between the time of the incident and the time it was observed."

"You *have* been reading up. The important thing is I figured a way back."

"Through the refrigerator," she snarked.

"Through the refrigerator," he confirmed. "It's the only wifi-enabled appliance big enough to use as a portal."

"Don't shit me, Jase. This is serious. I Googled you after I saw your signature on the receipt. I saw pictures of the lab. Nobody could've survived that blast. My husband's a lawyer. If you're on the run from Fermilab or the government, he can help." She'd make Kyle help. Somehow. "We both can."

"I wish it was that simple. Look, I can prove I'm telling the truth. I'm at the indie coffeehouse on Lancaster. If you get over here before seven forty-one you can watch me phase out. My treat." He didn't sound like he was lying. In high school she could always tell, but high school was twenty years ago. On the other hand, what did she have to lose?

"Give me . . ." She glanced at the refrigerator. Jase still hadn't explained the food. If she left now, she might never learn how it was being delivered. "I can't. Not tonight." Or tomorrow. *Damn dinner party.* "Forget that. Are you in danger?"

"Depends on your definition." Amused, his voice dropped to his grown-up register.

She was glad *somebody* was having a good time. Between freaking out over what was happening *with* Kyle and *to* Jase, she was suffering mental whiplash. Leaning on the table, she cradled her throbbing forehead in her free hand. "Forget it. Tell me about your plan and what it has to do with my refrigerator."

"You believe me!"

"I didn't say that. But I'm willing to be convinced."

"That's fair. The refrigerator is a time machine that uses the principle of interpersonal entanglement to identify synchronous decision points in our mutual timeline, then open a pathway between then and now. When the machine maps a decision point it culls a significant object from the moment. Each object identifies the terminus of its respective channel. Its condition shows whether the path is safe to travel. I've programmed the machine to keep each channel open from one of my phase periods to the next. To use it, all you have to do is reverse the sequence displayed on the control screen before each delivery. There's only one."

She hit the speaker button on her phone and returned it to the table. She needed both hands to keep her head from exploding. The escape plan was pure Jase—audaciously conceived, brilliantly executed, and when applied to the world outside his head, funda-effing-mentally insane.

Food. His time machine delivered food. He expected her to follow the food. She dropped her hands to her mouth long enough to stifle a groan.

"Allie?"

She wasn't sure she could trust herself to speak, but he wouldn't let up until she did. "Sorry. I was processing. I want to be sure I understand. Whenever strange food appears in the Centauri, it's a sign that, for the next twenty hours or so, I can use the fridge to travel in time to where the food came from."

"Right!"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Um, to fix things?"

His response exploded her last hope that this was a gag. She had heard Jase uptalk those three little words in exactly that tone of voice more times than she wanted to remember. They signaled the moment when it finally occurred to him that there *just might* be a flaw in his latest grand design, a point or two he *just might* have overlooked.

"Have you considered where all this food comes from?"

"The past," he said brightly, as if the answer was self-evident even to someone with only one master's degree to her credit.

"Specifically, refrigerators in the past—you know, sealed boxes with slotted shelves, right where my neck, waist and thighs would be if I materialized in one."

He gasped. "It'd be like pushing you though a wood chipper."

Thank you for that image—not! "To say nothing of the other things you find in refrigerators: jars, cartons, random vegetables . . ."

"Shit," he said. "Thanks. I guess some things never change. I'm still crap with the details. That was always where you shined."

Jase was a headache wrapped in a genius inside a wide-eyed little kid, and she still warmed to his praise and his willingness to admit his mistakes. Those were the main reasons she hooked up with him in high school. Too bad they came packaged with a bunch of other, less attractive traits—like the aforementioned disregard of details.

“Back to the white board. Don’t worry, I’ll prove those assholes at M.I.T. wrong yet.”

Or his mule-headed determination to be right at all costs. She instantly regretted the thought. If he *didn’t* prove his critics wrong, he could be stuck in the quantum version of limbo forever.

“I know you will,” she said, because he needed to hear it. “Have you thought about bringing in some of the people you work with? They could probably identify a lot more relevant details than a non-scientist like me.”

“They’d also see me as a test subject. I know I would,” he admitted with another devastating flash of self-awareness. “You see me as a friend or that annoying guy you used to date. Either way, you won’t forget I’m a person.”

She swallowed past the sudden tightness in her throat. “But changing the past, Jase . . . we read stories about that in high school. It never works out. Wouldn’t it be better to get back to the present?”

“In the present four people are dead because of me. It’s on me to make it right. Fixing that isn’t like trying to stop Booth from assassinating Lincoln. We’re not fighting the weight of history here. It’s only been nine months. A little nudge at one of our shared decision points should change everything for the better.”

A little nudge like having someone in his life who reminded him of inconvenient details. Just because they had broken up all those years ago didn’t mean they couldn’t have stayed friends. If the death of his colleagues was his fault, their estrangement was hers. At the same time, there was something she needed to say, something that might cut the cords of friendship completely.

“And then what?” she asked softly. “Suppose I change the past. You haven’t said anything about a return trip. How would I get home? Would I even recognize it if I got here?”

“Would you want to?” he responded just as softly. “I work with super cold states, Allie. You live in one.”

* * *

That’s when things got a little *heated*. Allie forcefully reminded him it would be a *BAD! IDEA!* if two versions of her met in the same spacetime. Jase countered that matter/anti-matter explosions were a figment of science fiction. He challenged her to present a technical problem he couldn’t overcome. She hit him with a volley.

The call ended when Jase’s voice phased into static at seven forty-one. The argument was still going strong. Round two would start as soon as he returned to this spacetime. He’d always been the poster boy for stubborn, and in this case his motivation was off the charts. But she didn’t intend to die for him. Or blow up the world. Or accidentally create a dystopian future nobody could fix.

Sky-blue pink shivered at the corner of her vision. The glow grew stronger, filling the refrigerator niche with light, shocking her out of her pique.

It was really happening. It was one thing to see the light show or discover the food in isolation, without knowing what they meant. But to see it and understand the implications . . . wonder, stupidity, and the death rattle of denial propelled her to the fridge. She tugged on the ebony handles. Mercifully, the doors refused to budge.

A part of her was grateful. She hated taking chances. She didn’t want to disrupt the translocation process. But another part of her was wound tighter than an old-fashioned watch spring, wanting to see Jase’s miracle in action. Self-preservation forced her to step back, but she didn’t get far. She couldn’t relax enough to sit down.

A few minutes' eternity later she heard a noise like stripping gears and a faint clacking, as if the shelves were rattling in their tracks. A green light appeared on the icemaker control panel, followed by a *whirr*, and the same series of lights she'd seen Tuesday evening: sequential flashes from left to right, then groups of two, three, and five. The blue-pink aura pulsed once and receded.

Her own pulse raced. Sweat beaded her forehead and traced a chill down her spine. She took a dozen slow breaths to calm herself, and then a dozen more. After giving her damp palms one last swipe on her shorts, she clasped the refrigerator's handles. The doors sighed open.

The contents of the freezer hadn't changed. But the groceries on the middle shelf of the refrigerator compartment had been pushed aside to make room for four take-out cartons. She set the cartons on the counter with the kind of care usually reserved for unexploded bombs. Trembling with fear and excitement, she popped the flaps to reveal a scoop of shrimp chow foon, some fried rice, a lone steamed dumpling, and a half carton of broccoli beef without the broccoli.

A slightly hysterical giggle bubbled up her throat. The cartons contained the leftovers from the last meal she'd shared with Jase. He'd taken the train from Boston to visit her at the University of Pennsylvania over the Columbus Day weekend of their first year in college. They thought they were so sophisticated braving the rudest restaurant in Philadelphia's Chinatown. But in contrast with his willingness to take chances in other areas of his life, Jase was the least adventurous diner she ever met. He ordered broccoli beef and told them to hold the broccoli. She took the leftovers back to her dorm, but never questioned their disappearance from her tiny student refrigerator any more than she'd questioned the absent leg of lamb. Her roommate's boyfriend had boundary issues and considered anything in their fridge fair game.

Determined to eliminate any possibility of a trick, Allie grabbed a flashlight from the kitchen's everything drawer and pointed it at the back of the fridge. The box and the wall behind it looked solid. She poked and tapped everything with a wooden yardstick to be sure. Nada. She checked the nearby door to the garage. Locked and bolted from the inside. Jase had told the truth. The new refrigerator really was a time machine.

She exhaled a slow breath. The last taut muscles in her chest relaxed. It hurt worse than the squeeze, but it was a good hurt, like a clean wound finally starting to heal. Kyle wasn't gaslighting her. *He wasn't!*

Elation fizzed along her veins, but the rest of her felt empty and limp, as if fear had been the only thing holding her upright. She braced her arms on the counter to either side of the cartons. The food smelled fresh, redolent of garlic, leek, and hot chili oil. It smelled as good as it had in the restaurant—nothing like the spoiled, mephitic cream she'd found Tuesday night.

It was ironic. The leftovers came from the date when she'd decided they would never make it as a couple. They didn't fight or anything. Jase was just being Jase, eating like a twelve-year-old and steaming about a professor who marked him down, not for any errors in his equations but because he held a different opinion about some obscure hypothesis involving imaginary numbers. Nineteen-year-old Allie didn't plan to spend the rest of her life nodding politely at someone else's harangues. (*Yeah, look how well that worked out.*) She wanted someone who liked more of the same things she did. Someone who'd take her to all the hot clubs and wouldn't suck all the life out of a party. Someone fun. Someone like Kyle used to be when they'd first gotten together.

Comparing Jase and Kyle wasn't fair to either of them. They were never in competition. Kyle was years in her future when she pulled back from Jase. She'd let him down as easy as she could. There was no yelling or tears. She simply allowed him to get sucked into his schoolwork. She'd always played the good girlfriend whenever he called or emailed. But she didn't prod him when he forgot. Eventually, he stopped connecting.

Funny how all the delivered food recalled unhappy memories.

No. Tonight's leftovers—and all the decision points represented so far—were only sad in retrospect because Jase had become trapped, and she wondered if she was to blame. In a sense she was. She needed to own her guilt the same way Jase had accepted the responsibility for his coworkers' deaths. But that didn't change the fact she wasn't ready to settle down at nineteen. She wasn't ready to settle down until she was almost thirty, when she met Kyle. Maybe she should have reconsidered their engagement after that awful dinner, but she loved him then. She loved him when she was thirty-four, and still loved him nine months ago when they'd bought the house Jase all too accurately described as an igloo.

And now?

She wasn't as sure as she should be. She definitely had trust issues that needed to be addressed before she tackled her and Jase's past. Even if Jase managed to overcome the technical challenges, how was she supposed to fix things so he didn't screw up his simulation? Assuming the best possible scenario—complete with a round-trip option and no risk of matter/anti-matter disasters—how could she convince the person she used to be to keep tabs on an ex-boyfriend? Why should her past self listen to anything the present version had to say? Should she focus on the younger version of Jase? He would be fascinated by the prospect of time travel, and he'd listen. But that might point him in the direction of bigger and worse mistakes.

She pushed away from the counter. This was getting her nowhere. She needed to stop flailing, do something about her tanking blood sugar, and finish the work she should have done this afternoon.

Her gaze slithered to the cartons. Jase said the condition of the food was the best proof of the time travel process. She could think of the perfect, no-risk way to test that claim.

And she always loved Chinese.

* * *

Ted Mills was sixty-five with dyed black hair and a flamboyantly tanned wife twenty years his junior. In keeping with the theme, he wore a designer golf shirt, khaki shorts, and deck shoes with no socks. Like Kyle, he had played football in school, and his thickened midsection showed the road Kyle's waist would soon travel. In contrast, his wife Tiffany was coifed, sculpted, and cantilevered in defiance of gravity. Allie wondered if she'd have found them more appealing in a setting more congenial than an arctic white dining room populated by the world's most uncomfortable furniture.

Under the cover of the Danish Modern table, Ted's oversized paw landed on her bare knee. He flipped the hem of her sundress with his thumb and wagged his eyebrows.

Beaming a smile as fake as her husband's Alvar Aalto chairs, Allie pried the older man's mitt off her leg. His hand twisted in her grasp and rubbed her knuckles before reaching for the chicken.

No, she decided, he would still be a sleaze.

Tiffany lounged sideways, legs crossed provocatively. Her spike-heeled snakeskin pump (*Who wore spikes to a casual dinner party?*) dangled from the toes of her right foot. She rested her chin on her hand and batted fake eyelashes at Kyle.

"The patio has a built-in hot tub?" Her husky voice throbbed like she'd been taking lessons from Jessica Rabbit. "I wish I'd known. We could've brought our bathing suits and partied under the stars."

Allie shook her head. "Sorry. Between work and the refrigerator crapping out, we haven't had time to prep the tub for summer."

"Actually . . ." Kyle grinned. "I set it up on Wednesday."

Ted's gravelly chuckle set her skin crawling up the back of her neck. "Who needs suits? We're all friends here. *Good friends*, isn't that right, Allie?"

"I need to check on dessert." Her chair squealed against the floor as she jumped away from the table and raced into the kitchen.

"Looks pretty good from here," Ted drawled at her retreating back.

She bent over the sink, squeezing the cold porcelain rim as if she risked tipping into the dirty plates. Her heart stuttered against her breastbone. The thought of sharing anything warm and wet with that man was enough to trigger a panic attack. It took all her willpower to breathe.

"Have you lost it completely?" Kyle hissed in her ear.

She whirled and found herself trapped behind his barrel chest.

"Don't give me those bug eyes. He *likes* you."

"He wants to get naked with me."

He nodded. "You should be flattered. Tiffany's hot for you, too. That woman's a tiger. She swings every way. I cleaned out the tub just in time."

"K-K-Kyle?"

"What? You're the one who wanted me to make partner. You know, pay the bills, pitter-patter of baby feet and all that crap." He snorted. "Man up, babe. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. Plate the baklava and open the Riesling. I'll run the tub."

So this is what shock feels like—your mind whirring like a hundred interlocking gears, none of them connected to the body they're supposed to move. She stared at the garage door as it shut behind him, her mouth frozen in a small, helpless *O*.

In the dining room, Ted leaned back in his chair, fingers laced over his paunch. His thumbs pointed at the thicket of shark gray hair foaming from the open collar of his shirt. His feet bristled with hair, too.

Tiffany waved her fingers at the pass-through and caroled, "Need any help, dear?"

"No!" Allie croaked. "I'm fine!"

Blindly she grabbed a platter from the nearest cupboard. It was white like the walls and all the dishes on the table. *Everything matched in her perfect house in the perfect neighborhood where she was going to raise her two perfect children and their perfect pets with her perfect provider husband.* The silent scream blew out her eardrums. She clenched her fists until the pain of her nails slicing into her palms forced her back into herself.

She shoveled Lebanese pastries from the bakery box onto the platter, writhing internally at the lubricious stickiness of the honey on her fingers. She wished she could scour her hands with steel wool, but even that couldn't wash away the clinging filth of Kyle's betrayal.

He'd gaslighted her, all right, just not the way she'd expected. He knew she couldn't . . . wouldn't swing. Her marriage vows meant something, dammit!

But worse than the betrayal was the knowledge that she'd deferred to Kyle so long her objections—her very existence as a person separate and distinct from himself—had become meaningless to him. By always taking the safe road in their relationship, she'd helped him take her fire. Bit by bit, she'd allowed him to suck the oxygen from her life until she was ashes. She'd let herself become nothing more than a means to his ends. His desires. His goals.

She needed to leave. Now! *And run where?* No one would ever believe Kyle H. Tucker, Esq., would whore his wife for preferment. He was such a swell guy. All the neighbors loved him. Even her parents considered him the perfect spouse. She couldn't go to the police. He'd committed no crime.

Unless his fake rage turned murderous when he lost his chance at partner.

The thought of having to go through with it, having to drop her clothes in front of that hairy leering beast, to be crushed beneath him, his rapacious wife, and her faithless husband, doubled her over the sink. Acid spurted up her throat.

Yes, puke! That's your out. They won't fuck you if they think you're sick.

Perversely, the moment she thought of it, the urge to vomit fled. *No!* Why was the universe doing this to her? She'd always tried to do the right thing, studied hard, worked harder, and finally gotten a job that finished at four so she could be home with the kids she'd hoped to have. All she'd ever wanted was a normal, comfortable life with a husband and a family who loved her like she loved them. Was that so wrong?

A burst of laughter echoed from the dining room. Ted and Tiffany leaned over the table and shared a face-grinding kiss. Allie opened the refrigerator so she could use the door as a shield.

On the center shelf stood a boxed, supermarket sheet cake decorated with multi-colored sugar roses, plastic mortarboards, and the words "Happy Graduation!"

Of course. It was after eight—on the twentieth anniversary of her high school graduation party. How could she have forgotten? She stifled a laugh-turned-sob against the butter shelf.

Allie and her friends were such good little nerds that her parents let them party unsupervised. They didn't realize she was in the middle of a geek throw-down with one of Jase's friends over how long it would take to suffocate in a closed coffin. Determined to prove it took a lot longer than the three minutes specified in the guy's favorite horror movie, she emptied the basement refrigerator right before the party. After her guests succumbed to the siren song of her new Nintendo, she corralled Jase, grabbed a jacket and some tools, and shut herself inside the fridge.

Jase was supposed to check on her at three-minute intervals. Good thing she'd prepared a back-up exit strategy. When she bailed on her own fifteen minutes later, she found her boyfriend/spotter/rescuer was on the other side of the room, arguing air volumes with *the same guy*. Neither of them noticed when she stalked over—much less checked whether she was alive or dead—until she waspishly presented Jase with the old steak knife she'd used to pry open the fridge.

She let Jase grovel his way back into her good graces, but handing him the knife was an omen. You never gave a friend a knife unless you wanted to sever the connection.

She stared at the cake. Another decision point. Another fork (ha ha) in her personal road. Another chance to remake the world. *Maybe her last.*

"Having some trouble?" Tiffany purred. "We'd love to help. We're *good* in the kitchen."

I'll bet. "It's okay. I know what I'm doing."

She hoped. The cake box had been in the fridge right before she'd started clearing the shelves. She remembered scoping out the compartment, then closing the door to answer a question her mom had called down the stairs. The box was gone when she began setting out the refreshments a couple minutes later. At the time she'd convinced herself she'd been mistaken about seeing the box. Now she prayed she hadn't been. After finding the cake gone, she hadn't closed the door again until the fridge was bare.

Her pulse kicked in her throat. She had to hurry. Kyle could return any minute. She emptied the Centauri's refrigerator compartment, piling bins and loaded shelves wherever she found space—the counter, the range, even the sink. If Kyle caught her, he'd have her sedated and committed to the nearest psycho ward, or worse, force her to explain herself to the EMTs. She could lose her job. At best she'd face probation.

Kyle would divorce her in a flash. Win! But what would happen to Jase's refrigerator?

The compartment was much taller and narrower than the one in her parents' fridge. *Didn't matter*, she tittered. She was a Macy's eight.

The shelf angled over the sink crashed into the dishes. Ted called from the dining room. "What's going on in there, Allie?"

"It's a surprise!"

She snatched a thin-bladed, metal spatula from the utensil rack. If she wound up

in another refrigerator, she'd need something to pry open the door. Her hand flew over the icemaker screen, reversing the light sequence that signaled the food's arrival. She had memorized the sequence Tuesday and, as a challenge to herself, rehearsed it yesterday evening. Patterns were her bliss. She was a first-rate forensic accountant when she'd met Kyle, her sure thing, the big wonderful man who'd cherish her and keep her safe all the days of her life. *Everyone makes mistakes.*

Not today. This was their best hope of a way out—for Jase and for her. Even if she was wrong, even if she wound up diced like a gory potato, even if the world exploded, it was better than staying here.

Five. Three. Two. Every light on the bar blinked right to left.

Kyle bumped open the garage door with his hip. "What the fuck?"

The green light flashed. Allie dove into the fridge, yanking the door behind her.

"You shithead!" Kyle wrenched the handle back, but she held onto the shelves. Desperation made her strong. The door jockeyed between them.

The back of the fridge reverberated with a rocket-launch roar. The door slammed shut on its own power, smothering Kyle's bellows, trapping her in absolute black. It was nothing like she remembered. There was no time to feel cold. The box contracted around her, pressing her into a crouch, compacting her knees against her cheeks and binding her arms to her thighs. She tried to scream, but there wasn't any air. She wanted out, even if it meant facing down Kyle with a spatula. But there wasn't any out. The pressure grew, binding her, crushing her, squeezing her until there was nothing left except an endless thread of pain and the stubborn refusal to die.

Then it was gone. Her tailbone smacked something hard. Her feet landed in a narrow well. Her head jerked forward, striking something round and ridged. Cursing, she rubbed her crown. Her fingers brushed a low ceiling. In front of her, a ridged cylinder led into something that felt like . . . a lightbulb? Heart pounding, she explored the darkness mime-style. She was in a box roughly two feet wide and three feet high. Her splayed knees grazed narrow shelves that creaked when she pressed against them. The second shelf from the top contained tab-top cans the right size for soda or beer. But the scent that filled her nose was shortening-and-sugar frosting. *Her graduation party cake?*

She tried to find the spatula, but came up empty. Suddenly afraid to breathe, she reached into the bottom shelf. Her hand closed around the ribbed metal cylinder of her father's old flashlight, the same flashlight she'd used for her party dare. She pressed the switch.

Squinting against the dazzle, she scanned the compartment for the missing spatula. It wasn't there. Neither were the perky peep-toe flats she'd worn to Kyle's dinner party. In their place were bare summer sandals bedizened with plastic turquoise baguettes. Instead of her sundress, wheat-colored shorts accommodated her spread legs. Weighing on her shoulders was the studded denim jacket she'd worn out years ago. It was still stiff from the store. She peeked at her chest. The peacock beads on the neckline of the sky blue knit top she'd worn to dress up her Daisy Dukes for her graduation party winked back at her.

Hairs lifted on the back of her neck and along her arms. She wasn't just sitting in her parents' old fridge; she was sitting in her parents' fridge in her eighteen-year-old body wearing her graduation party clothes. This was not the way she was supposed to go back. She needed to discover what else had gone wrong and, hopefully, find a way to deal. Pronto.

She kicked the door. Seated as she was, the kick lacked force. The door didn't budge. Her spatula was somewhere in the future, but the old, narrow-bladed steak knife she'd used to escape last time was tucked under the flashlight. She slid the curved blade into the narrow gap between the shelf and the door surround. The tip

skidded against the interior enamel before catching on the rubber seal. She jiggled it under the seal, braced one foot against the door and dragged the knife downward.

The refrigerator burst open. Precious air filled her lungs. Jase filled her sight—Jase as she remembered him, with his wild dark hair, hatchet face, madras plaid shirt, and baggy jeans. He hauled her out of the fridge and into his arms in a single motion, a maneuver she'd have sworn he was too awkward to manage. But the pins and needles in her feet made her the clumsy one. She barely avoided stabbing him as he pulled her close.

On the other side of the kitchenette bar, late afternoon sunlight streamed through the glass patio doors, lending a warm orange glow to her parents' oak-paneled family room. More than a dozen classmates clustered around the fat-box TV. Their shouts mingled with the pops and squeals of an old school video game. Jase's horror movie-loving friend worked the controller, bobbing and swaying as if he flew a cockpit instead of a sofa cushion.

That wasn't how it had happened. He and Jase should be arguing air volumes on the other side of the refreshments table. But Jase was with her. He hugged her tighter than the wormhole that had brought her here. His chest was hard and warm beneath his shirt. The familiar scents of starched cotton, deodorant soap, and a faint whiff of coffee made her head swim.

"It worked," he whispered fiercely. "You freed me, Allie. You dragged me back with you. This proves quantum entanglement applies to people as well as particles. Wait 'til I show those idiots at M.I.T!"

"You can't," she gasped. Desperate for air and sense, she shoved against his shoulders. "Look at us. We didn't just travel to the past. We are the past—our past!"

"Details!" he caroled. Grasping her shoulders, he leaned down so their eyes were level. "We're here. We're together. Those are facts, Allie Cat. We are the proof of concept!" "We are eighteen years old. Nobody will listen to us. We haven't even started college."

His brown eyes narrowed, glinting with determination. His voice dropped to the low, forceful register of a man accustomed to leading fractious peers. "I'll make them listen. The next time we have a thunderstorm, I'll go out, get wet, and pretend a lightning strike turned me into a savant."

"That only works in comics."

"It'll work in real life as soon as I show them the equations." He lifted his hand from her shoulder to pinch the air beside her chin. "I'm this close to a Theory of Everything that turns Einstein on his head. The key is . . ."

He trailed off, eyes widening in shock that quickly slid into panic. "I can't remember the proof! I had it all in my head a minute ago. Now I can't even figure out where I started. It's like all my memories are rolling backward."

It wasn't just Jase. Names, faces, where she'd worked, where she'd lived, where she'd played, sheared away from her mind, calving like an iceberg as it melted into the sea. If it weren't for the knife-that-should-have-been-a-spatula, she might not have remembered the wormhole that had brought her here. Of her life preceding the trip, only flashes lingered—a bulldozer body crushing her against a granite counter, a roaring voice, and worse, a bitter, stabbing betrayal that pursued her into the past like Destiny with a capital "D."

It made her so mad. It wasn't fate, but it might as well be. Her former future pressed upon her with a tangible weight, like a resurgent glacier filling the channels it carved before, filling her with rage and fear that had no place in the present. Her fingers tightened around the knife's sticky hilt until they burned. The knife-that-should-have-been-a-spatula was the only thing tying her to her other past. It was the only reason she understood Jase wasn't the true object of her rage. At the same time she had to get rid of the blade before she did something stupid like give it to him.

Whatever happened, she must not sever their friendship. She no longer recalled what lay ahead, but the imperative remained.

She needed to grasp something in place of the knife. She had committed herself to changing their future, but she didn't know what to change. Her gaze darted around the room, searching for a clue, a sign, an omen—anything.

The refreshments table wasn't as crowded as it should have been. A vase of peonies dribbled hot pink petals on the spot usually reserved for the cake. What had happened to the cake? She remembered picking it up and stowing it in the refrigerator. Then it was gone. Its disappearance was a clear, certain, singular memory. But her brain still held two subtly different images of the table. The cake was missing in both.

She glanced at her friends. There weren't enough video games in the world to save a party without something sweet for dessert. She couldn't run out and buy a replacement. Her mom would kill her if she left her guests to go shopping.

But she could cook. That was how she'd survived having Jase as her chemistry partner. Best math brain in the state, and he was a menace in the chem lab. He couldn't get it through his head that details mattered as much as principles and formulae. Temperature, humidity, air pressure, the age of the equipment, even something as stupid as a person stomping down the hall at the wrong time could screw up an experiment as easily as they ruined a recipe. She'd never understood why cooking, especially baking, wasn't a required course for all prospective lab rats. The savings in equipment alone could fund a hundred scholarships a year.

"Allie?" Jase asked uncertainly. His long chin was tucked against his neck, his shoulders slightly hunched. He eyed the knife in her hand as if he expected her to go all *Psycho* on him. *Like it was Jase's fault his friend didn't take his science seriously.*

"Relax, I don't need this anymore." She set the knife on the drainboard beside the kitchenette sink and extended her hand. "Let's go upstairs and break some eggs."

His features screwed in confusion. "You want to make an omelet?"

Smiling for the first time in what felt like forever, she shook her head. "No. A new cake."