

# Late Lessons [Story 3 of the Loose Ends Saga]

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Jeff and Laura walked hand in hand past lush Victorian vines, in the Haupt Conservatory of the New York Botanical Gardens in the Bronx.

“There's a timelessness about this place,” Jeff said. Antique gardens always had a special attraction for Laura and him—perhaps it because reminded them of that night long ago, in Wave Hill across from the Palisades, in the 1960s.

Laura just smiled. They entered a room with a skylight dome, slightly cloudy and cracked now with age. A keen blue sky shone through anyway.

Jeff breathed in the honeysuckle and looked at the dome. “Hard to believe it's finally up there again,” he said. “They took their time.”

“They had to be careful,” Laura said. “The Discovery has to fly a successful mission. It was worth the 32-month wait. It'll deploy its communications satellite and come back home with its crew safe and sound. And the space program will slowly recover.”

Jeff shuddered. He recalled the last launch they'd seen—the Challenger. They hadn't the heart to see this one launch in person. And they had tried to stay far away from the space program after the Challenger—let the world take its natural course, the course Laura remembered. That was the best way to get back on track in space.

“There are some nasty things coming up soon that I'd like to stop,” Jeff said. “The Pan Am plane blowing up over Scotland is the worst, I think—that's due to happen right before Christmas—but I guess we have no choice but to leave well enough alone for the sake of the space program. At least 1989 looks to be a pretty good year.”

“Yeah,” Laura said, patting her belly and smiling. “I'd say a *very* good year.” She was six weeks pregnant with Jeff's child.

“It'll be a good year to be born,” Jeff said, and pulled Laura close for a gentle hug. “Berlin Wall comes down, beginning of the end for the Soviet Union. Not the greatest for space—though that should be ok now with the US program in gear again. But a good year for freedom.”

“Don't be so sure about the Soviet Union,” Laura said. “Andropov's a pretty tough customer.”

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“Loser,” Laura shut off the television. “His voice is like—what's that numbing stuff the dentist gave me last year?—novocaine.” Michael Dukakis had just been talking about the economy.

“He's the least of our problems,” Jeff said. He had just returned from a long microfiche session at the NYU Bobst Library.

“Don't worry, honey,” Laura said and kissed him. “They'll have it all up online in the next decade or two.”

“Right,” Jeff said. “But that's not what I'm worried about. I checked the newspapers almost day by day. Brezhnev dies all right on November 10, 1982, and Andropov succeeds him. And that's it! In my timeline, Andropov dropped dead in 1984, some old guy Chernenko took over, he kicked the bucket in 1985, and Gorbachev's in—with glasnost, perestroika, the end of the Cold War. It's in every mirrorim-book in every school.”

Laura shook her head. “None of that at all where I come from. The Soviet Union's still going strong a hundred years from now. They play a major role in the space program in the 21st century—”

“How could I have missed that?” Jeff barely heard her. “I mean, I've just been assuming these past few years that Gorbachev was in power...”

“You weren't here doing that crucial time,” Laura said. “Remember? You took Landry's damned device straight from 1972 to 1986.”

There always was an edge in Laura's voice when she spoke of that, and Jeff couldn't blame her—he had left her alone for 14 years, living through realtime the hard way, while he had made that desperate attempt to get himself on board the Challenger. He had been willing to sacrifice his very life for the space program ... the space program ... was that truly the only thing that mattered in this world?

“And after the Challenger, you were still thinking day and night about the space program,” Laura said, almost reading his thoughts like she always did. “You still think about it day and night.”

“Did the Soviet Union do ... much damage in your 21st century?” Jeff asked.

Laura made a face. “Not so much the Soviet Union. But, yeah, a few of its client states, especially in the North Atlantic dome.”

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George G. Landry walked along the beach, and squinted at the dawning sky.

“So quiet, so clear,” his companion said, a woman with carbon hair and violet eyes, in her early 20s. “Hard to believe a hurricane's roaring up the coast—they say it'll hit us here on the Cape in a couple of hours.”

“There's a storm roaring through the Soviet Union right now,” Landry said. “Much worse than a hurricane. Human backlash ... they say it could wash away everything that we've worked for.”

Karina put a toe in the water. “Warm as a bath,” she said. “There's nothing you can do about Moscow now. It's out of your hands. We'd better get back to the cottage and start boarding up the windows—Hurricane Bob could blast it to pieces.”

“Yep, out of my hands,” Landry said. “Pity you can't board up timelines as easily as windows.”

“Well, you've done more than most,” Karina said. She took his hand and steered him back in the

direction of their little cottage on the bay. “And all of this may yet turn out your way anyway.”

“Hey folks,” a man called down from a cottage near theirs. “Gonna be a nasty one—I'd get out of here to a shelter if I were you. The Brewster Elementary School has one—and I believe Ocean Edge is taking people in.”

“Thanks Gil,” Karina shouted back. “I see you and Chris got most of your rentals boarded up already.”

“Ya,” Gil answered. “This one's gonna be one to remember—the hurricane of August 19, 1991.”

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Sam McKenna had aged remarkably well in the past sixteen years, Jeff thought—though not as well as Jeff had appeared to age, of course, because in fact Jeff had only aged two years, from 1986 to 1988, having travelled instantly from 1972 to 1986 courtesy of Landry and his fast track to the future.

Sam had apparently accepted Jeff and his story when he'd reappeared after the Challenger explosion—the corrected but still tragic explosion, the one that didn't veer off course and take out that schoolhouse in Miami—because professors after all were like that, known for their penchant to suddenly take a special last-minute appointment in some other part of the country, even the world, that started for a year but grew into a decade or more. At least, that's what Jeff assumed Sam believed. For all Jeff knew, Sam really thought he was a madman and was just humoring him. But that was ok too.

Sam certainly always played along with Jeff as he spun out what must have seemed to Sam to be wild what-if scenarios.... What if Nixon had nuked Cambodia, what if the space program had died a total death in 1986...

Now Jeff sat on a bench with Sam in Washington Square Park—not far from where Jeff had first hustled into the past, to November 1963, all those years ago—and spoke of a new what-if, of a Soviet Union headed towards disintegration and freedom, of a dictator named Gorbachev who paradoxically used his totalitarian powers to order his society to be more open, his people to be more democratic. And of a people who once so charged removed that totalitarian system, including its benevolent dictator, altogether...

“And this revolution proceeded without a hitch?” Sam asked. He was a political scientist, so this scenario was catnip for him.

“Well, nothing in this world proceeds without a hitch,” Jeff replied. “You know that. But this one unfolds pretty smoothly—the only serious threat crops up about two and a half years from now, in the summer of 1991, when the hardliners stage a brief coup against the liberating dictator.”

“Against Garbage ... chef?”

“G O R B A C H E V,” Jeff spelled out the name. “Gorbachev—though, if I remember correctly, it was pronounced something like Gahr-bah-chawf.”

“If you *remember correctly*?” Sam asked, and laughed.

Jeff returned the laugh. “Well, I really get caught up in these alternate history scenarios—”

“Right, you're a regular *Man in the High Castle*,” Sam said. “You oughta write some of this stuff up. But ok—what do you see as the result of this hypothetical coup against this hypothetical self-effacing dictator?”

“In the reality I'm sketching, it fails.”

“Hmm ... ok, so there's your access point,” Sam said. “You remember the article I had in the *Atlantic Monthly* last year—“Other Choices”?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, its thesis is that people with clear agendas and some kind of power do best not to stage a revolution themselves, but wait until a time of turmoil—when someone else has incurred the great start-up risks of getting the turmoil underway—and then strike. In fact, that's how the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia in the first place—riding on the coattails of the democratic revolution against the Czar.”

“And the relevance of this to the failed coup against Gorbachev in my alternate history would be?” Jeff pressed.

“Obvious,” Sam said. “If there's some sort of coup against Andropov in 1991 in our current reality, that's the time to get rid of Andropov and install Gorbachev. The Soviet Union turns out just the way you want, except a few years later.”

“Right,” Jeff said. “But how can we know if there'll even be a coup against Andropov?”

“We can't,” Sam replied. “But I know someone who might know—Yelena Grinko. She's used to be Professor of Philosophy in Minsk—she has the Soviet political climate down pat. She'll be in New York next month. Shall I arrange a meeting?”

Jeff nodded, and thought: the last friend of yours that you arranged for me to meet was George G. Landry.

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“Damn it, I can barely hear you.” Landry pulled the phone away from his ear, and shook it. “Damn Soviet Union—I'd have a clearer connection to Mars.”

“Take it easy, honey,” Karina said. “It's the Cape Cod service—full of static in the best of times.” She stroked his shoulder.

Landry turned his attention back to the phone. “Yeah, that's a little better. No, I'm not in the car—we've got bad weather here, and the car phone is useless. I'm in the basement of some school. No, no point in my giving you the number—I don't know how long we'll be here—”

“Excuse me, Sir. Will you be on much longer? One of the campers needs to make a call—”

Landry started to curse—

Karina overrode him. “He'll be off in a minute,” she said, soothingly. “It's a business emergency.”

“Ok,” the woman said. “I'll come back in five minutes. Please have him off by then. Otherwise—”

“Absolutely,” Karina said. “I promise.”

“Ok,” the woman said. She gave Landry a glare, then strode away.

“Nothing like a counselor who takes her campers' needs to heart,” Karina remarked.

Landry was straining to hear what was coming through the phone. “Ok, you got him, good. Right. That's

good. Ok. No, no—you don't do a *thing* to him until you get the word from me.”

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“The Soviet Union is a sick country—we suffer from an illness, an illness of the mind, that was introduced into our country more than 70 years ago. That's what you must remember when you deal with us—you are dealing with a society not in its right mind.” Yelena Grinko ended her talk to a round of sustained, impressed applause.

“She's got a pair on her,” Jeff said over clapping hands to Sam, who had just returned from the bathroom. “To talk like that and not be worried about retribution back home.”

“She's not going back home,” Sam said. “Her dream is to land a job in a philosophy department over here. That's what every Russian academic in America wants.”

They left the auditorium in Tisch Hall, and adjourned to Gavin's. “One thing I can say about NYU,” Sam said, “the food's a lot more exotic than up at City College. Too bad Laura couldn't join us.”

“Well, her taste in food is changing,” Jeff said. “But you used to love the soul food up in Harlem.”

“I did, but it always laid heavy the next morning.”

“You sound like my great-great-grandmother,” Jeff said.

Yelena joined them a few minutes later. Sam made the introductions.

“That was a courageous speech you gave,” Jeff said.

Yelena smiled over her menu. “I deconstruct my country.”

“I'll have the escargots to start,” Sam said.

Yelena frowned. “I had them with Derrida in Paris last May—they gave me, how do you call it, the hives...”

“Try the shrimp,” Jeff said. “They're delicious.”

“Yes,” Yelena said, “they're very fresh. I had them here last time.”

“So do you see any chance for improvement in your country?” Jeff asked, as the waiter scurried away with the orders, not a single one for a main course with a backbone.

“No, I'm pessimistic,” Yelena said. “Andropov is a very ruthless man—far brighter than Brezhnev. He's consolidated his power in the past seven years.”

“And the stirrings in Poland? And Hungary?” Jeff asked.

“Andropov will crush them.” She shattered a breadstick on the table. “Just like he did in East Germany last year.”

Jeff sighed, shook his head.

“You see, Yelena,” Sam said, “my friend has an idea that there's a new regime under the surface in the Soviet Union—that somehow something in your recent history went wrong to suppress it, but that maybe there'll be a chance in a few years to get it on course again.”

Yelena looked puzzled, then laughed. She turned to Jeff. “Ah, you are a science fiction writer then—like Isaac Asimov! He was born in Russia, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jeff said.

Yelena put her hand on his. “I’m only making a joke at your expense, forgive me.” She smiled, then grew very serious. “But, you see, there is nothing bubbling under the surface in my country now, except for more illness. Even if there was a revolution tomorrow, no one would know what to do. My people are all quite happy being children.”

“No talk at all of openness, of a new vision?” Jeff asked.

“A new openness? You mean glasnost? Shevardnadze talked about glasnost during his leadership of free Georgia in March of 1985, but...”

“Andropov ended that and had him killed that September,” Sam said.

“Yes.” Yelena nodded, gravely. “And I left my country then for the last time, never to return. No, the last chance we had for any freedom was maybe 1982 to 1984, before Andropov fully mastered his office. By the time poor Shevardnadze made his stand in Georgia in 1985, it was already too late.”

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“God damn you! I’m almost five months pregnant! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?” Laura turned away in a fury.

“Of course it does,” Jeff replied. “It’s just—”

“Just what?” Laura whirled around. Her eyes were brimming with tears. “It’s always something with you, isn’t it. You think you can change the world, perfect it to your ideals. Don’t you get it yet? Haven’t you learned anything in all of these years? Nothing in this insane loop of a universe we’re in ever turns out the way we plan it. If we were lucky, very lucky, maybe we find we’re in the right place at the right time, and somehow tip the balance in our favor.”

“We tipped the balance in favor of a Challenger explosion that didn’t destroy the space program,” Jeff said. “Actually, I tipped nothing—you tipped the balance—”

“That’s what you wanted! That’s what *we* wanted, remember?”

“Yes,” Jeff said. “That’s what we wanted. A world in which space exploration had some chance in the 21st century. The world you knew. The world I wanted. But what I didn’t know was that that world was somehow tied to the Soviet Union continuing on into the 21st century. I didn’t want *that* world—it may be too much of a price to pay.”

“Maybe the Soviet Union is necessary to keep humanity in space in the 21st century and after,” Laura said. “You can’t know that it isn’t. Maybe it is—after all, Sputnik and Gagarin and the Soviet Union started it all in the first place. And before that, Hitler and the V2s. Those origins are the same in both of our realities. Maybe space needs some kind of totalitarian hand to help push it forward.”

“No.” Jeff shook his head. “I can’t accept that. We’ve got to try for something better—the best of both of our realities. A vibrant space program in the 21st century *and* a world free of sick dictatorships. You should have heard Yelena Grinko—”

“I don’t give a damn about Gringo,” Laura said. “You can’t just splice two different realities together like

they were a piece of tape.”

“I can't just leave the world like this,” Jeff said.

“How do you propose to get back there? Landry's vanished, his Western Coordinating Sciences Institute's been replaced by some sort of online psych center. Even if you went back in time, you don't speak a word of Russian—you'd be arrested as a spy and sent to some frozen gulag hell the minute you set foot in Moscow.”

“I know. I haven't figured it all out yet. Yelena has some ideas—”

Laura stalked out of the room. Then she stalked back in.

“You want the best of both of our realities—here she is.” She pulled Jeff's hand, and put it against her midsection.

Jeff kept his hand there. Then he got down on his knees, and put his ear to the same place. Amnio had told them just last week that their baby was genetically fine—at least, according to the dim lights of 20th-century science—and she was a girl.

“I love you,” Jeff said softly, to Laura and the baby.

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“I don't like conducting business this way. Strangers all around us, I feel like someone's listening to my every word, it's absurd.” Landry looked fitfully around the hall.

Karina followed his gaze, stopping on a nearby couple. “That guy's hand is halfway up her shorts—they couldn't care less about our business.”

“All it takes is one—one person, one act, one word at the wrong time—and what we set in motion will be as out of control as this hurricane. This place is way too public.”

“The hurricane is precisely the reason we're stuck here now,” Karina said.

“It wasn't here the last time,” Landry said.

“Weather patterns are even less predictable than people—you say so yourself in the primer—”

“Ok folks,” a voice boomed down the hall. “I think it's safe to go home now. Watch out for fallen trees and downed wires. It's a real mess out there. Bob took his toll.”

Landry and Karina eventually made it to their car, and on to Route 6A.

“Jeez,” Landry said, as they turned on to Ellis Landing Road. A huge locust tree was on top of the pretty yellow cottage on the corner, crushed now in the center like a piece of rotten cake. The road around it looked like the floor of some insane giant's barbershop, strewn with cuttings and clippings and trees pulled out from the roots.

They made their way through the debris. “Our cottage looks ok.” Karina pointed to the “Sea Piper,” silhouetted at the end of the road against the bay.

“So far, so good,” Landry said.

But on closer inspection, the view was less promising. A thick branch had taken out their overhead

phone wire, and they discovered once they were inside that their electricity was gone.

“I thought I heard someone at the school say that they were shutting off the power for this whole part of the Cape,” Karina said, as they settled in and took stock. “As a safety measure, until the central cables are repaired.” She handed Landry a glass of chablis.

He sipped slowly, said nothing.

“Well, it is romantic in a way,” Karina said, lighting a hurricane lamp. “Food in the fridge will definitely be good this evening. If we don't open the door too often, most of it should still be ok in the morning.”

“I'm more concerned at this point with food for thought,” Landry said, scowling. “I can't command the situation if I have no information.” He sat down on the couch and began fiddling with the small transistor radio he'd taken out of the bathroom. “Nothing but static and more bullshit about the hurricane,” he said.

“Well, keep trying,” Karina said, and pushed over a stool so she could reach the top cabinet. “I'm pretty sure I saw another kerosene lamp up here somewhere...”

“Ah, wait a minute,” Landry said. “Here's something...”

“—no further word as yet on the fate of the Soviet Premier,” a crackling voice on the radio intoned, “though the BBC says—”

Someone rapped sharply on the front door.

“Looks like some kids from the school,” Karina said. “Maybe we left something there...”

She opened the door.

She saw a fist.

But instead of hitting the door it veered towards her face...

Her head throbbed, her stomach ached, her eyes felt like broken glass...

She lifted herself up slowly from the floor. Across the room, a bunch of people were around Landry, slapping him around, talking angrily—in Russian. They all had their backs to her, except Landry. One had a knife...

Landry caught her eye for a second, and gave her a signal, a subtle signal, but as clear as day for her. It said: get the hell out of here.

“You idiots,” Landry said loudly, perhaps to distract their guests. “You can't do anything to influence events over there by beating on me here. Everything's already in motion—”

Karina bolted out of the door. Her only chance for escape was the beach, which stretched for miles in either direction, with houses aplenty, at the bottom of their long flight of stairs.

But a big ugly man was on top of the stairs, blocking her egress, turning slowly around now to face her—

She rushed towards him, shoved him with all of her might, before he had turned fully around. She caught him off balance, and he fell, startled, backwards, down the weathered wooden stairs.

His head hit the big rock that served as the stepping stone at the foot of the stairs, making a sound like the cantaloupe that had slipped off the seat of the car onto the pavement last week ... Karina stepped



over the rock and the head, and ran in the direction of Orleans on the sand.

She ran and ran. The beach felt crusty under her feet, sand half baked in the sun that had prevailed after the hurricane. It was easy to run on...

She looked behind her several times. Not a soul on the beach—unless she counted the terns and sandpipers.

Finally she saw the cottage—set off on a rise, about a quarter mile past the old Linger Longer by the Sea resort. The bleached grey cottage was their fallback place, George had said, in case anything went wrong.

She'd never been here before, but now she'd have to trust her fate to the people within. A nice couple with a little boy, as she recalled. And an old grandmother, named Sarah.

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Three thousand miles away, two and a half years earlier, near another beach, Jeff joined Yelena for lunch at the Valencia Hotel in La Jolla.

“The fish in this restaurant are delicious,” Yelena said. “Very fresh!”

“Yep,” Jeff said. “We go for fresh fish in this country.”

“And the vegetables,” Yelena said, carefully cutting a piece of cauliflower. “So fresh, especially for the winter!”

“Well, it's never really winter in southern California, even in February.”

“Yes,” Yelena said. “I looked out of my window this morning and said to myself, 1989 is on its way to being a beautiful year in California.”

“Your room is comfortable?” Jeff inquired.

“Oh yes,” Yelena said. “The water was hot, and the little bottle of vodka was cold—perfectly chilled! Thank you!”

“I'm glad—you can thank the Salk Institute for that.” Jeff had arranged with Jonas Salk for an invitation to Yelena to come to La Jolla and give a series of lectures at his Institute. Jeff had met the creator of the first polio vaccine years ago at a AAAS Conference—and had found him, in addition to being a brilliant scientist, an equally brilliant, if unrecognized, philosopher of science. Salk's face seemed to shine like a light bulb when he talked about his theories of human survival—and Jeff saw in him, much as he did in Sam McKenna in another way, someone who perhaps was willing, and able, to understand at least a bit of the whirring paradox that was Jeff's life.

They had stayed in sporadic contact over the years. But today, Jeff's interest was another institute in La Jolla—the one that had once been the Western Coordinating Sciences Institute, that had housed George G. Landry and a time-travel machine, much sleeker than Jeff's original Thorne, that had whisked Jeff from 1972 to 1986. That had been the last Jeff had seen of any time-travel machine. And the last Jeff had seen of Landry and WCSI as well.

The building it had been in was now home to some kind of online psychotherapy seminar group. Except—

“And how did your expedition go this morning?” Yelena asked, as if she were peering into his mind.

“Odd,” Jeff said. “Bizarre. Some of the people sitting at their computers were there in 1972—they admit it! They remember Landry, but are vague on just what happened to him. They remember WCSI, but say it merged into some other organization. So what are they doing there now—what are they, specialists who come with the office building?”

Yelena laughed. “I’ve seen stranger things in this world, believe me!”

Not as strange as what I’m about to tell you now, Jeff thought. So far, all he told her was that he had arranged for the Salk Institute to invite her to La Jolla, so she could be here as he tracked down Landry and WCSI, because they had some crucial relevance to the Soviet Union. No Russian could turn down an invitation like that—for that matter, few American academics would either.

“How badly do you want things to change in the Soviet Union?” he asked.

“Very badly. But I told you, it’s hopeless now. Andropov is too strong.”

“Yes, I understand that,” Jeff said. “But you also said Andropov was vulnerable when he first took over—from 1982 to 1984.”

“True,” Yelena said. “But—forgive me—so what?”

“Don’t ask too many questions just yet,” Jeff said. “Just play along, ok?”

“Sure—ok—I like games.”

“Do you think that, if someone had a mind to do it—if someone really wanted to, and had the connections—that someone back in 1982 to 1984 could have forced Andropov from office—could have replaced him with someone perhaps not so dictatorial?”

Yelena considered. “Yes, it’s possible. Of course. But I wouldn’t make a bet on it. Our system is very stable, as you know—usually death is the only sure way to get someone out of office. Of course, Khrushchev was forced to leave, and Kosygin had to move over, but that was back in the 1960s—still lots of instability then, with Stalin dead only a decade. But by the 1980s...” Yelena shrugged. “No, by the 1980s, death is likely the only way.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Jeff said. “So if we really wanted to do this job—still playing along with my game—someone would have to kill Andropov, preferably in his first few years in office, before he’d had the chance to strengthen his central authority beyond even what Brezhnev had.”

“Yes,” Yelena said, clearly relishing even the hypothetical prospect of a murdered Andropov. “I would agree. And who would you select to implement this ... assassination?”

“Someone who really knew her way around back then—and there,” Jeff said. “Someone with the knowledge to appreciate the benefit that Andropov’s death could bring to the Soviet Union—and the world. Someone with the courage to stand up to such a dictator. I was thinking of you.”

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Yelena’s eyes bulged, her lips struggling between laughter and some darker emotion. Whatever she was thinking, Jeff counted it as a good sign that she hadn’t thrown down her fork and walked away.

“This isn’t really a game, is it?” she asked. Now her face was just ashen.

“I’m not going to insult your intelligence and say I know you’ll think this is crazy but I’m a time-traveler. You deserve better than that standard rap, and frankly, I think it’s boring.” Actually, Jeff had said that only once—to Laura, back in 1964—but it indeed bothered him to even contemplate that lame form of admission, the time-traveller’s classic confession.

Yelena just looked at him.

“So here’s what I *will* tell you,” Jeff continued. “Yes, I’m a time-traveller. Yes, the science is possible—that’s how I’m here. But there’s nothing crazy about it—paradoxical, oh yes, paradoxical, more than enough self-defeating loops to *make* you crazy, that’s for sure—but on its own terms it’s quite logical. You can go back in the past and change events. It’s not easy, but it can be done. I know that, because I’ve been there, done that. I spoke once to my great-great-grandmother, and she relayed a message about that to my grandfather—when he was just a little boy on Cape Cod—and he relayed it to me. *After* I’d travelled back in time, and already lived through part of a life in which he hadn’t said anything like that to me the first time. And I’ve also changed a larger event—a much larger event. Or helped to change it. The universe puts up a lot of resistance to these things, and…” Jeff became aware that Yelena had yet to say a word in response. “Is any of this getting through to you? I mean, I know English isn’t your native language, and—”

“I assure you, I’m understanding every word of it,” Yelena said. “I read H. G. Wells, I read Dr. Isaac Asimov, I read Mr. Robert Heinlein. Most of their works aren’t available in the Soviet Union—but I have read every one since I’ve been in the West. So I know about time travel. We Russians know a lot of things—don’t let *your* propaganda fool you. In some things, we know more than you.”

“Ok,” Jeff said.

“So. You want me to go back in time and kill Andropov. For me, the thought of my killing someone—anyone—is far more crazy than going back in time. What would you have me do? Shoot him? Put poison in his tea? I’m not a murderer. But somehow, I don’t think the problem will even arise. Obviously this George Landry and his coordinating group have something to do with your time machine, but you say neither of them are anywhere to be found. So how could anyone even get back to 1982 from here?”

Jeff smiled. “Music is my guide.”

“What?”

“I was a professor of popular culture in the 21st century, cultural history of the late 20th is my specialty,” Jeff said. “I know the music from the current period—when each hit record was released—like the back of my hand.”

“I love rock ‘n’ roll music,” Yelena said.

Jeff nodded. “When I first came here in 1972—to see George G. Landry—there was a guitarist sitting in front of the building Landry was in, singing a song by John Lennon. No big deal about that. Except for one thing: the song was ‘Real Love,’ not released by the Beatles until years after Lennon’s death, in 1995.”

“And your point is?”

“My point is that there obviously was some cultural contamination from 1995 in 1972—which means there had to have been some backwards-in-time contact. Indeed, I’d guess that there have been time machines cutting this way and that way in time, touching just about every year, emanating from that

building the Western Coordinating Sciences Institute was in. Think about it. It was *once* a time travel facility—but there's no such thing as just 'once' where time travel is concerned. If the building housed a device that went, say, from 1972 to 1995, then that same building housed a time travel device, for however short a time, in 1995—regardless of what other purpose the building may have served then. My guess is that if we staked out—kept an eye on—that building long enough, sooner or later a time machine would plop right into our lap. I could probably arrange for a more permanent appointment for you somewhere out here in La Jolla. Perhaps at the University of Southern California—”

“You want us to watch that building for six years, until 1995?”

“My guess is we'll find a time machine there much sooner than that—”

“Forget it,” Yelena said. “It's still impossible that I would go back in time and kill Andropov. Like I told you, I'm not a murderer.”

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Sam McKenna was at Laura's door, humming a Beatles song.

She let him in, then gave him a long hug. The two had grown very close during Jeff's 1972-1986 absence.

“He'll be back soon,” Sam said, taking off his winter coat. “It won't be like last time.”

“I don't know,” Laura said. She took the coat and put it in the closet. She liked the smell of it.

Sam closed his eyes and hummed the Beatles' refrain again.

“You love that line, don't you?” Laura asked.

“Not so much the line, but the word—'awoken'—and the D minor 7th chord swelling restlessly underneath it,” Sam said. “C, D minor 7, G is a very common progression, really. But in John Lennon's mouth it's magic.”

“Jeff loves it too,” Laura said. “All of Lennon's music. It crushed a piece of his heart when Lennon was killed.”

“As it did us all.”

“We heard an advance cut from the Travelling Wilburys album last month,” Laura said, finally showing Sam to a seat and fetching him his customary ginger ale. “It made us cry.”

“Wilburys?”

“Yeah,” Laura said. “A temporary, studio superstar group. Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Roy Orbison, Jeff Lynn, and Tom Petty—extraordinary sound. Spanning the 50s to the present.”

Sam sipped his soda.

“Jeff said the group was unreal,” Laura continued. “It existed, in a manner of sorts, in our world. But it was really a glimmer, a bleed-through, of something else entirely, from an alternate universe.”

Sam smiled. “I think we should have another talk.”

\* \* \* \*

Felice Montag met Jeff and Yelena at the evening door of the pastel grey building on Silverado. She frowned. "I was hoping you wouldn't come."

"That's the thanks I get for helping you unravel that packet-switching problem, huh," Jeff said, with a smile. The primal plan—the very first of so many many plans he had been working through for so many years—had been for Jeff to have arrived a few months before the Challenger explosion in 1986. He had thus been trained in 2084 to be thoroughly adept at personal computer technology in the 1980s—no telling when and how that might come in handy. It of course had been no use to him at all when his Thorne had unexpectedly landed back in 1963. But here in 1989, in an early online scholarly network centered in this building in La Jolla, Jeff's antique computer savvy had been just the thing to ingratiate himself with a harried programmer over her head in too many packets of traffic and too few lines to handle it.

"Well, yeah, you did save my butt yesterday, and I really appreciate it, and that's why I'm here." Felice ushered Jeff and Yelena in, looked out and around the parking lot to make sure no one was watching, and closed the heavy door sharply behind her. "All right. The deal is I take you upstairs, you've got 30 minutes to look around and your photographer takes any pictures she wants, and then we're all three of us out here. And let's hope this is my one and only excursion into industrial espionage."

Jeff had worked with Landry and his colleagues back in 1972 on the first floor of this building—the same floor that Felice and her people now occupied, and which Jeff had visited three times since he'd arrived a few weeks ago in La Jolla, including the propitious occasion yesterday when he'd overheard Felice pulling her hair out over her computer, and he'd offered his helpful suggestions. The second floor, however, was the one he wanted to carefully inspect. This was the one he had seen just twice in 1972: once when he'd first talked here to Landry, one more time when he'd entered the neo-Thorne for the instant elevator to 1986. This was the upstairs to which Felice now took Yelena and Jeff. "So I'll see you downstairs in half an hour," Felice said, and left.

The layout was, unsurprisingly, nothing like what it had once been. Landry's office and the section behind it that had housed the time-travel device were simply gone—dissolved now into rows of primitive 286 computers, each attended by a chair upon which some user could sit and address the computer from the front, and a modem with a phone jack through which the computer could talk to the rest of the world from the back. That world was already in the first stages of the revolution that would let people do all of this from their homes and places of business, soon from their pockets and palms, but it still clung, even at this late date, to the penny-arcade amusement-parlor set-up that harkened back to Edison and his kinoscopes. Old ways of doing things died hard, like the heartbeat of recalcitrant history itself which Jeff always seemed to be trying so desperately to alter.

"You see anything here which looks promising to your needs?" Yelena asked, snapping photograph after photograph.

"No," Jeff said. "But there has to be some place for it here—some place for an artificial wormhole to open up and disgorge its vehicle without smashing all of these gleaming antiques."

"Antiques? Hah! In my country, these pretty toys would be—how do you call it?—the cat's meow!"

"Well, let's see what this monocular cat looks like with a little electricity in its eye." Jeff sat next to a terminal and pressed its power switch. The beast grunted and gargled and eventually put up a C prompt on its blue-green screen. "Right," Jeff said to himself, "this would be just before Windows made its grand entrance."

He pulled a 3 and 1/2 inch disk from his polo shirt and inserted it in the lower drive. The disk was

thoroughly compatible with the 1.44 mb capacity of the drive, but thanks to a special algorithm—with which it had been formatted back in 2084—it could hold a million times that data. The key was that the disk always looked to the 286 write-head as if it was empty, and thus could be written to with more data. Jeff was sure that this mirage feature would be more than enough to capture all the text on any medieval network this knight in shining armor might be connected to. The puterwafer back in his hotel room could easily search the download for any relevant information, then decompress and display it for him.

But that was not the disk's most impressive feature: it was also intelligent enough to read 20th-century encryption systems as if they were block letters on a kindergarten blackboard. If Jeff was right that this building still served as a port for Landry's time machine—and this seemed more than likely, given that Thornes and their descendants, as far as Jeff knew, traversed time not space—then these computers and their networks might well bear some trace, some notation, of the time-travel operation. Jeff doubted that these information machines, creaky as they seemed on the surface, served no part in Landry's schemes. It wasn't like Landry to lavish his time on thoroughly useless window-dressing...

Soon the intelligent agent in Jeff's disk was in every corner of this primordial virtual universe, cracking codes it encountered like eggshells, transforming the data regardless of its size into superslick packets that were downloaded in just minutes on these arthritic 2400 bps modems. Of course, Jeff was assuming that Landry had used 20th-century codes for encryption. But Jeff bet that Landry wouldn't have risked calling attention to himself by use of a code that wasn't of this century. “Camouflage in contemporary color is your best defense,” Landry had advised before Jeff's departure to 1986...

“Okeydokey, all done,” Yelena said.

“Good, same here.” Jeff removed his disk from the computer. If he was lucky enough to find in the data some schematic of this floor that indicated where the neo-Thorne materialized, Yelena's photographs might provide additional essential details.

“Let's go,” Jeff said. They were back on the groundfloor, thanks and goodbyes to Felice, with ten minutes to spare.

They had their answer—or part of it—two hours later.

Yelena was on the couch, half asleep, a glass of wine in her hand and a lock of blond hair over her eye. Jeff was at his puterwafer, soft as a bar of chocolate, a tenth of a kilogram—but, as the advertisements said where he came from, the human brain itself was only a kilogram, and look at all that *that* had done.

“Damn it!” Jeff exclaimed.

“No results from your search?” Yelena asked, groggily.

“No, I have a result. I found part of the schedule. There was an arrival here in December. None in 1989. Goddamnit—I *knew* I should have gotten on this sooner...”

“Ok,” Yelena said. “But that's progress—”

“No, wait. I was searching for arrivals. Let me try this a different way. Let's see ... departures ... they're just as good as arrivals—a departure means a machine will be on hand. OK. Jeez!”

“What?” Yelena asked.

“There's a departure scheduled for mid-March—just two weeks and five days from now—”

“But—”

“One of us—I hope you—is going to take that machine back to November 1982, or sometime right after, at the beginning of Andropov's reign,” Jeff said.

“Listen,” Yelena said, now fully awake. “I haven't agreed to anything. I told you. I'm 38 years old—too old to become some kind of hitman in time. I don't even know yet if I entirely believe you. But let's say I did. If what you're saying is true about time travel, and how it can change yesterdays, how can you even think about just kidnapping a time machine and keeping it from its original mission? For all we know, the only reason that you and I are here talking right now in America is because of something that the original mission made possible in the past. Fooling around with just history is bad enough. Fooling around with the history of *time travel*—the history that *makes* the rest of history, if there is such a thing—is just insane.”

\* \* \* \*

“Communism,” Sarah Harris said. “After what the Czar did—pogroms, *gutenyu*, you shouldn't know from such things!—I don't worry about Communism. Anything is better than the Czar!”

Karina drank a cup of tea, lemon and sugar, with hands that still quivered.

“Would you like a sandwich?” Sarah started to open a package of rye bread. “You look hungry.”

“No, please, Mrs. Harris. You've done enough just letting me into your cottage for a few minutes to rest. You need the food for your family.”

“There's more than enough to go around!” Sarah said. “Yitzhak—my son—and his wife Marilyn and my granddaughter Rachel are stuck in Hyannis because of the hurricane. It's just me and Eli, my grandson, here. How much can a five year old eat? And I'm a 96-year old lady—how much can *I* eat, I ask you? Please! I insist! Have a little something!”

“I eat a lot, grandma,” Eli piped up. “Mommy says I eat a horse!”

Sarah laughed. “Eat *like* a horse, *tatteleh*. Anyhow—in my country, in Russia in the old days—a loaf of bread would last for a week! Even when I first came to this country, to Ah-mer-ica, for a penny I could buy a roll, for another penny a piece of herring, and eat like a queen!” She kissed her fingertips in a gesture that said how good it all was.

“Ok.” Karina relented. She was very hungry, another few minutes couldn't do any harm. She had covered her tracks very carefully from the beach to here. She had seen no sign on anyone in pursuit ... the thought that she might be bringing down Landry's attackers on this unprotected, very old woman, not to mention the little boy, was too awful to even contemplate. She'd just wolf down the food, for strength, and leave—

“Here you go.” Sarah gave her a plate with a sandwich. It was delicious—smoked white fish with some sort of old-fashioned potato salad.

“It's wonderful,” Karina said. “Very fresh!”

Sarah smiled, and placed another cup of tea right next to the plate.

Karina noticed that although Sarah's hands shook, they had an underlying strength—like an aged willow trembling in the wind, with tap roots that reached to the center of the Earth.

“That rain was really something today,” Sarah said, as if she was on the same weather wavelength as Karina.

“Yes, it was. But I guess I'm used to it...”

“You don't come from this part of the country,” Sarah said.

“Well,” Karina began, then thought the better of it and bit again into her sandwich.

“You come from Russia, no?” Sarah asked.

“Is it that obvious?” Karina asked. She thought she had her American accent down cold. “I mean, lots of Americans use the name Karina.”

“To me, anything Russian is obvious,” Sarah said. “I lived there the first ten years of my life.”

“I didn't spend that much longer there,” Karina said. “My mother was Russian—but she also spent lots of time in America—”

“Was she a spy?” Eli asked, scooting out the bedroom on a tricycle.

“Eli!” Sarah exclaimed, with just the right mixture of remonstrance and pleasure.

“Yes, she was,” Karina replied, in a hoarse, mock-conspiratorial whisper. “And she spied on many things.”

“And your father?” Eli asked. “Was he a spy too?”

“Well, I don't know,” Karina said, slowly. “I never knew my father.”

“Ok, Eli, let's play with that puzzle,” Sarah interrupted whatever Eli was about to say. He ran off to get the toy.

“I'm sorry—” Sarah began.

“It's ok,” Karina said, and smiled. “He seems like a very bright little boy—I love bright children.”

Sarah beamed. “Eli is a *mitzvah*—a blessing—I don't have to tell you that. Marilyn is Yitzhak's second wife. His first wife—what's the use of talking—the doctors *killed* her, and it was supposed to be just a simple operation. Then thank God Marilyn came along. Yitzhak started his family late in life. But now they have Eli, and Rachel...”

“He's a beautiful boy,” Karina said. She patted her mouth with a napkin and stood up. “I'm feeling much better now—your tea and sandwich and conversation were the perfect restorative.”

“You're not leaving so soon? Not in this weather,” Sarah protested.

“The hurricane's over—I'll be fine.”

“No, I insist—”

“No, Mrs. Harris, *I* insist this time. You've been very kind. But I have to leave now.” I can't jeopardize your family a moment longer, she thought.

Sarah held up her hands in an exaggerated motion of frustration. “All right,” she finally said. “But let me give you a little something before you leave.”



“Ok.” Karina could see there was no point in arguing about this. “Can I just use the bathroom before I leave?”

“Of course!” Sarah pointed her in the right direction.

The package Sarah gave to Karina as she left contained another white fish sandwich. “Please. I insist. Give this to George.”

Karina nodded, and squeezed Sarah's hand.

There were tears in her eyes as she walked swiftly away on the beach—but in a direction further away from George's house.

He was most likely dead. Just like the vile Soviet Premier whose death had been announced on the radio when she'd first entered the cottage of Sarah Harris. But Karina took no joy in that: his successors would be indescribably worse, with George unavailable to pull the strings. The future of that part of the world would make the hurricane seem, as Sarah might say, like a spritz on the beach...

And for herself?

Her greatest vulnerability lay in the 20-minute walk on the beach ahead to Orleans. Landry's attackers would have no way of knowing she'd been in the house of Sarah Harris, but it would be plain as daylight that she'd gone off in the direction of Orleans...

If she could just make it there now, and the buses were running after the storm, the money in her wallet would get her to Logan Airport in Boston. There she could use a credit card to book the next flight to La Jolla.

There was nothing more she could do here in this August of 1991, except die at the hands of George's executioners. Her only chance was in the past.

\* \* \* \*

“I've been wracking my brains, and I've come up with two possibly pivotal events at the end of March.” Jeff was on the phone with Laura. He yearned to see her face—to catch the nuance in her lips, the glint in her eyes. Having a conversation like this without benefit of visual cues to guide him, to gauge the impact of his words upon her, was maddening. He could never get used to the lack of phone screens in this century. “I want to be as sure as we can be this time that something I do doesn't inadvertently flip my history into yours, or yours into mine, or wipe them both out—so let's check our recollections of history for March and see how they mesh.”

“I'm listening,” Laura said, tiredly. “I'm not sure I remember anything *specifically* happening in March 1989 anyway, but go ahead.”

“Ok. Bear with me. Both events are very well known. I wouldn't dare interfere with a time-travel arrival right before either of them, but I don't see how a time-travel *departure*—away from this time—waylaid by me, could affect these events. One is the Exxon Valdez—spills eleven million gallons of crude oil off the Alaska coast on March 24.”

“Right,” Laura said. “That's in my history too. Serves as a high water—or oil—mark of the danger that fossil fuel can pose to the environment.”

“Good,” Jeff said. “So we're ok on that one. The other event is Fleischmann and Pons—”

“Who?”

“Drs. Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons—they announce the first evidence of cold fusion at the University of Utah on March 23. I remembered that date as soon as I pegged the Exxon Valdez. The two dates are a classic in techno-cultural history—the solution to fossil fuel pollution unveiled but one day before the most publicized incident of pollution in the century. Every school kid knows it. There's a famous *Analog* article about that coincidence by Mallove that everyone reads in the 7th grade—”

“Never heard of it,” Laura said.

“Never heard of what—*Analog*?”

“Of course I've heard of *Analog*,” Laura said. “But Fleischmann and Pons mean nothing to me.”

“How about cold fusion?”

“Nope,” Laura replied.

“So what do people do for energy in your version of the 21st century?” Jeff asked.

“Pretty much the same as in the century we're in right now,” Laura said. “Fossil fuel. Some solar. A little fission and fusion here and there—but fission's frowned upon because it's deemed too dangerous, and fusion barely makes it economically.”

“Jeez,” Jeff said. “So let me get this straight. In my reality, the Challenger takes out a schoolhouse in Miami, and the space program along with it. But the Soviet Union starts collapsing at the end of that same decade, and a universal, low-cost, safe and reliable fuel technique is discovered. In your reality, the Challenger tragedy is more limited, but the Soviet Union continues, and the world is still smarting from all the soot in the air.”

“Sort of makes sense, doesn't it,” Laura said. “In my reality, the Earth is more irritating, more inhospitable—politically as well as physically—so there's more of a goad to get off of this planet and out into space.”

“I'm not sure I like your reality so much anymore,” Jeff said.

“Well, I guess you should have thought of that before you nearly sacrificed your life to alter the Challenger,” Laura said.

Jeff sighed. “There's got to be a way to get the desirable elements of both.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Laura said. “You're trying for an alchemy of time—to create the perfect world, the golden age, out of the two timelines the two of us have. But we don't know if that can be done—we don't even really know what the elements, the building blocks, of these realities are. So, if anything, we're worse off than the alchemists. Maybe we should just leave well enough be now—”

“No! We've been over that already.”

“Just listen to me for a minute,” Laura said. “We've already changed the Challenger part from your reality to mine. So, when you're born in the 21st century, the Challenger will never have reached Miami. You'll be a different person in that century—with no motivation to come back and alter time. And yet you're here right now, talking to me on this phone. That means that you—the person you are now—has survived our tampering with time. And I'm here with you in this time. And we have our baby—you've already felt her inside me. Soon you'll be able to hold her. Can't we just have that? Haven't we earned

the right to enjoy our lives now? Sam says that—”

“I don't give a damn what Sam says—it's none of his business!”

Laura was sobbing.

“Angel, I'm sorry,” Jeff said. “You know I love you. I'm going to try very very hard not to be the one to go back—”

Laura hung up the phone with a slam.

The emptiness rang in his ear.

He thought of nothing for a few minutes.

But his mind edged, of its own accord, towards images of Laura. He could see her sitting in the back of his classroom in City College, on that very first day in 1964, him stranded in the past after the Thorne had pulled him back way too far, and Laura...

He called her back. “Ok,” he said. “I promise you it won't be me—I'll figure out a way, I'll make sure it's Yelena or someone else who goes back. Let's talk about names for the baby...”

\* \* \* \*

Karina slipped into an air-conditioned cab at the San Diego Airport. “I'm going to La Jolla.”

The driver turned around and gave her a big, Mexican-bandito smile. “You'll be right at home there, Senorita.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Ahh, La Jolla's filled with beautiful, narrow-bodied women like yourself.”

“Why thank you.” Karina smiled. She enjoyed the compliment, as well as the great way the cabbie pronounced La Jolla, with the guttural ‘ch’.

She leaned back and closed her eyes. She figured she was safe now—or, at least, as safe as she could be, given the ever-present inherent dangers of travel in the past. Sometimes she wished she could be like other people—lie on a beach somewhere in La Jolla, thong bikini riding up her backside, ogled by decent, uncomplicated men like this cab driver. But that was not her lot in this universe...

The cab pulled into La Jolla. Its streets were quiet in the dusk, much like she remembered them. Muted pinks and ochres, stucco gateways to other worlds. “When you get to California, you're at the end of the world,” she recalled her mother once saying. “The only way further is up.” That was true enough. California represented the end of expansion ever westward—to go any further in a conventional way was only to go back east, back to the Far East, back perhaps to some of the very origins of this humanity.

Space—outer space—was one way out. Some people thought that outer space was what everything was really all about. She had never been in outer space. But she was adept at travelling inner space—the space between years—the liftoff into time.

“Silverado Street, Senorita. Tell me where.”

She pointed to the pastel grey building, and paid for her ride.

She looked for the guy singing John Lennon songs. He had been here the last time. *It really is*, he had sang. Yeah, it was—but what was it? Not John Lennon—he was gone, and no one could save him. His death in prime time—original time—had left too many markers. Just like JFK's. You could only change secondary things, shadows on the Platonic wall. The trick was telling which was the shadow, and which the wall.

She knew just which nondescript place on the door to place her palm upon. A minuscule scanner recognized her print. A bolt slid open. She looked around to make sure no one was watching, and quickly entered.

The inside seemed empty of people too. She hurried up to the second floor. She knew just how to elicit the time machine from its hiding place.

Its destination was already set. She pondered for a few moments. It would take her hours to recalibrate for a different arrival date—those settings were a complicated business. And she might do damage by arriving somewhere—some year—she was not supposed to. On the other hand, if the destination on this machine was already set, she might be stealing someone else's ride. Whose? George's?

Her head throbbed. “Don't get too close to the contemplation of paradox—therein lies the path to complete paralysis,” George himself had always said. She thought again about George in that room, in that chair, in their cottage on the bay. She thought about that knife at his neck. “Everything's already in motion...”

She wiped a tear from her eye, and started the sequence. Her arrival date would be in December, 1988, specific day and time variable, to be decided by the machine and its scan to make sure there were no witnesses to its materialization.

\* \* \* \*

“So what are we going to do if this key created by your computer doesn't work?” Yelena asked.

“No problem,” Jeff replied. “In that case, I'd invite Felice out to dinner. Talk her into coming back to my hotel room for a little drink. Slip her a Mickey Finn—that's the name for that here, isn't it?—and while she was in dreamland, I'd duplicate the key. Easy as a A,B,C.”

“You have lots of confidence.”

“Yep.”

“Who was Michael Finn? A Mark Twain man?”

“Huh? No—Mickey Finn is an it not a who.” Jeff laughed. “It's a drink with, you know, a sleeping pill mixed in—I thought the usage was appropriate to this decade. Or maybe it is, but you don't know it because you're Russian. You're a confusing person to be around in these kind of circumstances.”

Yelena smiled. “You seem like a nice man. Would you really do that—knock a girl out with a drink just to get a copy of her key? It's hard to tell when you're joking.”

Oh, I'd do much more than that, Jeff thought. I was this close—*this* close, he pressed his index finger against his thumb—to killing Nixon. As Laura always reminds me.

They reached the evening door on Silverado. No one was around. Jeff slipped in the key. Among the informational booty his intelligent agent had brought back from Landry's net was a diagrammatic of this building's security system, including this door. That information, fed into his puterwafer and its

key-making module, had produced this little celluline key...

Which worked. The bolt slid open. Too bad, a satyric part of his brain noted. Felice in his bed in his hotel room was by no means the worst scenario in the world.

“Let's get upstairs,” he said.

“Looks the same as last time,” Yelena said, gesturing to the rows of 286 computers as they walked into the room on the second floor.

“Yeah,” Jeff said. It was one week prior to the departure date that Jeff had discovered on the downloaded schedule. “There are only two possibilities here, assuming the schedule is right. One, the time machine is already here, camouflaged in some way. Two, if it's not here now, it has to get here some way in the next seven days, so it can be here one week from now for the departure. Its likely arrival time in that case would be in the evening, or on Sunday, when no one was around.”

But the room indeed looked the same as last time, which meant there was no sign of the time machine that Jeff could see. Yelena's photographs had come up empty in that regard too...

The two stayed the night, but saw nothing. They went through the same routine for the rest of the week—up all night in the computer room, grabbing what sleep they could during the day in their hotel rooms—with the same lack of results.

“Pray it shows up tonight or tomorrow,” Jeff said wearily on the Saturday night before the Sunday departure date. “If not, there's something very wrong in our calculations.”

“Ok,” Yelena said. “But remember, I make no promises—”

“Yep, got that. I understand.” But Jeff thought to himself: She makes no promises, but she's not accompanying me on this night after night because she's not intrigued on some level about the time-travel possibility. Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradox ... more than intrigued. Likely consumed—as Jeff had been, back in the 2080s, when he'd first been drawn into this, into that cool orange continuum of a control room ... the sherbet room, Rena or someone on his team had dubbed it...

“Jeff!” Yelena whispered sharply.

He focused his eyes on the present, on this room with its ancient computers before him, and saw someone walk in on the far side. He hadn't even realized that line in the wall was a door...

It was Landry!

Yelena looked at Landry, her eyes wide open. Those eyes suddenly looked a tiny bit familiar—this was the first time Jeff had seen her with that expression ... he put his index finger up to his lips and caught her attention to indicate silence.

Landry did something with one of the computers that seemed to turn the others on. Of course, they were networked—Jeff knew that already. He had searched and searched for some indication of a time machine.

All of these 286s—there were more than 20 of them—functioning as one integrated unit could be powerful indeed. If Landry had a tiny amplifier in his hand that made their combined computing power exponential, rather than additive or even multiplicative, the resulting capacity would be extraordinary. There were already desktop exponential combiners in Jeff's time. Landry no doubt had access to much more...

But extraordinary capacity for what? Surely not enough to haul a person through time. All the computing power in the world could not in itself create an artificial wormhole...

Landry pulled something out his pocket. It looked vaguely like Jeff's puterwafer, except even thinner, more sharply delineated, smoother. Landry waved it around, like a magic wand. Obviously, it was communicating in some way with the 286 network, operating in tandem with it.

Jeff realized that his intelligent agent and his puterwafer, for all of their sophistication, had done little more than capture what was on this network, hold its shimmering information in their arms. Landry's wand was making love to it. The screens of the 286s pulsed in synch with his swaying hand, their innards seeming almost to hum in accompaniment and contentment.

And out of this procreation something indeed took shape. At first, Jeff wasn't quite sure what he was seeing—he'd never seen a time-travel machine from this end, on the outside looking in, neither his Thorne nor Landry's fancy device, as he'd made his two previous journeys.

It came like something out of the rain. A shiny new car fast approaching in a blinding grey-white storm, a sleek silent helicopter in a hurricane ... except the glimmer had nothing to do with water...

Where had Landry been keeping it? Surely these computers, powerful as they now no doubt were in exponential synergy, had not just created this machine on the spot out of atoms in the air.

No, of course not. The answer was obvious.

Landry must have had this machine—and perhaps others like it—not someplace else, but *sometime* else. In another month, another year, who knows, another century—in this place—to be called back to this time, or whatever time Landry was in, by a remote command generated by this computer network now in amplified high gear. A signal would be intrinsically easier to send through time than an object. Light, electricity, whatever the format of the information, weighed nothing.

Jeff's original Thorne, as far as he knew, had no such automatic feature—it required a human pilot to make it work. But Landry's machine was far more than a Thorne.

Jeff became aware of Yelena squeezing his hand.

Landry was approaching the machine—clearly the same sleek module Jeff had taken from 1972 in 1986, in this very place.

Time to find if Jeff could put a new little rewind into time.

“Hello George.”

Landry wheeled around, startled. “Who the hell are you?”

\* \* \* \*

“Don't tell me you don't know who I am,” Jeff said.

“I don't, but if that's what you want, ok, I won't.” Landry looked at the small stun weapon Jeff was pointing at him. “I certainly know just what *that* is, though, if it makes you happy.”

“Well, that's something.” The truth was that Jeff's little stun-gun, which he'd brought along in his suitcase from the future in his unintended trip back to the 1960s, had never worked back here. Jeff had tried it on a squirrel or two in the park, even on the neighbor's cat once, to no avail. Fortunately, Landry couldn't

know that.

“So, I gather you're not from around here originally,” Landry said, still looking at the weapon.

“You really *don't* know who I am, do you?” Jeff asked. Landry might have looked a little younger than Jeff remembered, and so for Landry this experience might be happening prior to what Jeff thought was their first meeting—in Washington, in 1969—but Jeff wasn't sure. He hadn't seen Landry all that many times, and when he had, the circumstances were so trying—

“Look,” Landry said, “I can't prove to you that I don't know you—I could be feigning ignorance—how can anyone prove that they're not? So let's get to the more important question: You're obviously from the future. You obviously know this is a time machine. You've obviously used it or something just like it to get here. What the hell do you want?”

Jeff raced through his options. He hadn't expected to find Landry here. Perhaps this opened up new possibilities...

“Let's start by your telling me just where you're going in that,” Jeff said.

Landry shook his head no. “Sorry. I make it a point never to reveal destinations. As a time-faring man, you no doubt understand why—our work is complicated and dangerous enough, without expanding the circle of people who know what we're doing.”

Jeff brandished his weapon.

Landry laughed. “Come on. You're not going to use that if you want information from me. Unconscious people are very uncommunicative.”

Jeff tried to stare him down.

Landry made a sarcastic sound, turned around, and took a step towards his machine.

“I *will* render you unconscious if you take another step in that direction,” Jeff said quietly.

Landry turned to face Jeff again. “Ok, that's progress. Part of what you want here is for me not to go into that machine. Why?”

“I want the ride myself.”

“Ah, I see,” Landry said, his eyes lighting up. “And what happened to your machine?”

“Long story,” Jeff said, “assuming you don't already know it.”

Landry smiled. “And you expect me to just turn over my machine to you—not having any idea what you intend to with it? You really think I would do that, given what I've just told you about how serious all of this is?”

“Sorry, I can't tell you what I'm going to do with it either—” Jeff began.

“He wants me to go back in time and change a crucial event or two in our country,” Yelena said, revealing herself for the first time.

Jeff turned around to tell her not to say anything more, then noticed she too had a weapon in her hand. Except it was the old-fashioned kind—a pistol, that fired bullets, the kind that ripped into your heart or brain.

“Yelena, what are you doing?” Jeff demanded.

“I brought this along in case a situation arose,” Yelena said. “I think one has arisen—”

Landry made a dash to the time machine.

Yelena fired a single shot, that went clean through the baggy edge of his trousers.

Well, that at least answered one of the questions Jeff had—unlike his weapon, Yelena's worked.

Landry stopped, shaken but apparently unhurt.

“The next one will hit flesh and blood, I assure you,” Yelena said. “Maybe even your balls.”

“Jeez,” Jeff said. “Who the fuck *are* you?”

“Never mind me,” Yelena said. “This man you call George Landry is KGB.”

“What?” Jeff asked.

“Absurd,” Landry said.

“You deny that I saw you at the University of Moscow in 1987?” Yelena asked.

“I thought you've been here in the United States since 1986,” Jeff asked Yelena.

“Yes, I was in Moscow in 1987, but that doesn't make me KGB,” Landry said.

“I'll soon find out the entire truth, with my own eyes,” Yelena said, and began walking towards the machine.

Jeff looked at her eyes again, and again saw something, some flicker, of deep familiarity there—

“Don't let her do it!” Landry shouted at Jeff. “You've got the damn stun-gun, use it!”

Yelena sneered. “It's a toy.”

Landry erupted, lunged towards Yelena. She stepped back, coolly leveling her gun at Landry's head. “Walk away from me,” she barked. “Last chance.”

Landry backed off, shuddering with fury.

“Yelena, please—” Jeff began.

“Don't worry, don't worry—I'll take care of everything,” she said. “It was good to see you again.” She smiled and entered the gleaming machine.

Its doors closed a split second later. And a split second after, it disappeared in the same glimmering almost-rain that had delivered it into this room.

“She used the pre-set destination,” Landry muttered, still shaking with anger. “No other way she could have gotten out of here so fast.”

“And just when is that?” Jeff asked, throwing his worthless stun-gun on the floor in his own frustration.

“December 1982—a month after Andropov takes over. I was trying to go back to stop that.”



\* \* \* \*

It was February—1989—when Karina finally arrived in New York. She shivered. Much colder than La Jolla.

“Thirty years ago today that Buddy Holly died,” Bob Shannon said on CBS-FM Radio. But who was Buddy Holly?

She settled into her room on Patchin Place, in the Village. “A prime sublet,” the agent had told her. “A science fiction writer usually lives here—lots of interesting books you can read, if you don’t get ketchup on them.”

She’d earned enough money waitressing in La Jolla—in two different restaurants, almost night and day—to keep her going here in New York for at least a few months.

She considered her options, and warmed her hands with a hot cup of tea. Its steam felt good in her face.

She picked up the phone and called Sam.

“Karina! Where are you?”

“Here in New York.”

“Yes—you sound close. Wonderful! Where’s George?”

“I ... I don’t know. I left him in 1991.” She started crying.

“Are you ok? Is George—”

“I don’t know,” Karina sobbed.

“Oh my God, that’s what I was afraid of. What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Karina said again, helpless, for the third time. “He had in motion a plan to kidnap Andropov, threaten to kill him, kill him if he had to. Chernenko’s dead since 1985, so Gorbachev would have taken over...” She was crying again.

“Yes, I know,” Sam said as gently as possible. “What went wrong?”

“Everything, everything! A hurricane on Cape Cod—in the summer, two years from now—cut him off from his contacts. Some people found us at his cottage—I’m sure they were KGB. I think they killed him—”

“George is a resourceful man. Don’t count him out. Remember the way Dick Atwick fooled us all and survived? George is far superior.”

“I know,” Karina said, “but ... you didn’t see him. And ... Andropov’s dead—I’m sure of that. I heard it on the radio before I left 1991. And his successor’s no Gorbachev—it’s Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, that Nazi.”

Sam gasped. “He’s not much older than you. That’s what happens when we let these things get out of our control. I told George: you’ve got to stay on top of these things, beat by beat...”

“It wasn’t George’s fault,” Karina said. “I told you—we had a hurricane.”

“I know, I know, it’s no one’s fault,” Sam said, sincerely. “But this is a grave situation—or will be, in two

and a half years. We've got to figure out, the two of us, what can be done to prevent it.”

“I don't know if I can do this anymore,” Karina said. “That's the main thing I called to tell you. And ... I found some old papers in George's cottage. They say my mother's in New York now. I—I want to see her.”

“I don't think that's wise at this moment,” Sam said.

“I don't care anymore about wise.”

\* \* \* \*

“Look, I know you don't trust me,” Landry said, “but the only way I can see out of this is for both of us to lay our cards out on the table.”

Jeff had consented to a late dinner with Landry at the Valencia. The waiter now brought their poached salmon to the table.

Landry tasted, and made a face. “Not very good,” he said. “I guess the future has spoiled me.”

“Yelena loved it,” Jeff said. “She said it was very fresh.”

“Not surprising,” Landry said. “Compared to what they serve you in Russia, a piece of stinking tripe over here would seem fresh.”

Jeff shoved a piece in his mouth, washed it down with wine. “All right,” he said. “Here's the world I'm trying to create for the 21st century: a vibrant space program, democracy in Eastern Europe, and, oh yeah, Fleischmann and Pons take off with cold fusion.”

“Who?”

“Ok, never mind about them.”

“I'm with you on the other two,” Landry said. “That's the world I'm after too: strong space, no Soviet Union. But as you may have already discovered, that's a hard play. The Soviet Union was, after all, as much responsible for humanity in space as the Nazis and the United States. Maybe even more so—Sputnik, Gagarin, they were crucial in picking up the lead of the Germans, and egging the US on. Von Braun was already here in the US, but without those Soviet accomplishments, JFK would have been much less willing to follow Von Braun's inspiration. And the Soviet Union did lots of good in the 21st century too—Mir2, the red settlements on the Red Planet, the Oort stations in the 2090s...”

“A little ahead of my time,” Jeff said. “In fact, even *in* my time, in the 21st century I come from, we have no space program and no Soviet Union. I assume the reality you're talking about has strong space programs in both the US and Russia—I mean, in the Soviet Union.”

“Right,” Landry said, “Europe and Japan as well. But I agree with you that the world would be better off with a strong space program spearheaded by the US at the end of the 20th century, with ensuing worldwide involvement—and no Soviet Union in the 21st. But it'll be a tricky business bringing that combination about.”

“Well, maybe Yelena—”

“Forget it,” Landry said. “She's on the other side. If anything, she's going back there to strengthen Andropov's hand—to see to it that he lives at least another decade.”

“How can you be sure?”

“She's already back there, right? If she'd succeeded with *your* plan, Gorbachev would be in power right now—not Andropov. It's March 1989, right? Hold on.” Landry turned to a passing waiter. “Who's the Premier of the Soviet Union? Can you tell me?”

The waiter shrugged. “I don't know. Lenin? Nikita?”

Jeff and Landry both waved their hands in disgust.

Another waiter, who had been listening, came over, laughing. “It's Yuri Andropov, right? Hey, there's an article about the Soviet Union right here in the paper. Says Andropov spoke out today about the execution last month of Boris Yelstin. He said there was no place for capitalist sympathizers in the new and improved Soviet Union...”

Jeff looked at the paper and shook his head, sadly.

“Thank you,” Landry said to the waiter.

“Sure,” the waiter said. “Hey, you can keep the paper.”

“Thanks,” Landry said. He turned back to Jeff. “Satisfied now?”

“Hardly satisfied,” Jeff said, “but I take your point.” He pushed his food away, mostly uneaten. “The salmon wasn't that bad,” Jeff said, “but that news story made me lose my appetite.”

“I don't blame you,” Landry said.

“So what do we do now? Yelena took our time machine.”

“Suppose I told you I had another one?”

\* \* \* \*

Lord, the streets of New York were cold in this century. She was afraid to look at anybody too carefully, lest they take offense, or mistake her gaze for an expression of sexual interest that she wasn't in the mood for just now...

But Karina couldn't help but stare at everyone she passed, scrutinizing their faces, assessing their eyes for some sign that they were of her kind.

Her kind ... what kind was that? Someone born out of time, conceived in one century, gestated in another, raised in a third. “You're three centuries old,” George always had teased her, especially when they lay in bed together after making love, he running his fingers down the small of her back, giving her one last chill. God, she missed him. He was old enough to be her father in biological age—but what did that mean to people like George and her? He was the only man she'd ever known who really understood her. The only man she'd ever felt truly at ease with.

She didn't feel at ease with Sam. She didn't really trust him. She'd declined to meet him in the ten days she'd been here. She dyed her hair and cut it so Sam would have trouble recognizing her if he'd decided to press the point.

Her kind ... the theory was that a tumble through time had no adverse affect on the fetus. But as long as she could remember, she had always felt on the brink of paranoia when she contemplated what was going on around her. Except when George was around.

Her mother would understand. She was a child of time herself, in her own way. It had been ten years since Karina had last seen her. She didn't even know her name anymore—names changed too quickly in this business. But Karina had an inkling, based on those papers on the Cape...

She stopped at the NYU Student Union Building. God, the history here! Her eyes looked up, and sought out that student lounge, as they always did when she walked by this corner...

But the path to her mother lay elsewhere today.

“Excuse me,” she said to a security guard, who looked like Charles Manson in a uniform, lounging against a lamppost. “Is that Tisch Hall over there?” She pointed to a likely building.

Manson smiled and nodded, revealing a set of teeth that looked like late Mayan maize.

“Thanks.” She hurried off. Her breath felt sticky in her chest. The talk would begin in about 20 minutes.

\* \* \* \*

“I had three machines in stasis—pre-set for 1982, ready to be called into service here—when we started this escapade a few hours ago,” Landry said. They were back on that second floor of the pastel grey building on Silverado. “Yelena the Great took one. I propose to call forth a second, and take it back to 1982 myself to see if I can accomplish what she either failed to or more likely deliberately prevented.”

“How can I be sure you'll do as you say?” Jeff asked.

“Because I'm going to give you one of these little eels—much more powerful than your wafer—and show you exactly how to call forth the third machine, in case you need it.”

And Landry did just that.

“Allow a minute or two for settlement after I leave,” he continued. “You know the drill. Call up the local radio station—here's their number—”

Jeff frowned.

“—jeez, get the number yourself then, if you still don't trust me.”

“Ok, I trust you,” Jeff said. At least, I trust you at this point more than I don't, he thought. And what other choice do I have?

“Good,” Landry resumed. “And if the radio station tells you Comrade Drop-off is still head of the Soviet Union, you'll know what to do—go back to 1982 and give it a shot yourself. Maybe the two of us will prevail over Yelena—or over the enemies of all three of us back there.”

“You don't seem all that confident,” Jeff said.

“Confidence? No such thing in this line of work—you should know that.”

“Yeah, but I don't speak Russian,” Jeff said. He was also thinking of Laura, and their baby.

“Not to worry, most of the important people over there still speak English. It gets much worse in the next century, of course, if we're unable to change this—they were speaking Russian in northern Canada already the last time I was there in 2060, for crissakes...”

“Ok,” Jeff said. “I get the picture.” Laura would never forgive him, he was sure. What he wasn't sure

about is if he could ever forgive himself if he left her again.

“All right, buddy—I'm off to the races, then.” Landry walked towards his machine. He turned around. “You have a look on your face that we'll see each other again—you obviously recognized me when you laid eyes on me here a few hours ago. Since that was the first time for me, this obviously means that we'll be meeting again later in my life, earlier in yours. I'll try not to upset you unduly then—give too much away that we'll be meeting again in your future. I'll make it hard for you—play the hard-ass to your neophyte—to make it easier for you.” Landry smiled. “But you already know that. Till the next time, then—whenever it may be!” And he walked into the machine.

It disappeared in the silver-grey pseudo-rain.

Jeff didn't have to call the radio station—he could feel the lack of change in his bones, the stasis of standing in an elevator when it should have been moving but wasn't. Or maybe worse—moving down when it should have been moving up...

He called the station anyway. “Yeah, right, thanks.” Yuri Andropov was now not only General Secretary of the Communist Party but President of the Soviet Union, as of March 22, 1989.

Jeff looked at the remaining machine, his mouth dry. There were dozens of good reasons he could think of for not going. Yelena and now Landry had failed to turn the red tide, why should he do any better? And there was Laura, Laura, Laura, Laura...

And there was just one good reason he could think of that he had to go, one goddamn worm that wouldn't let go of his insides: this world with the Soviet Union ascendant, this world that he had perhaps somehow even unwittingly midwived into being with his Challenger tinkering. It was unacceptable—it wasn't meant to be.

He took a step towards the machine, and stopped. He took another unsteady step—

“You're not going to break your promise to me, are you?” Laura's voice asked, in his head.

“I don't want to,” he said aloud.

“Then don't,” Laura's voice said.

Not in his head.

He spun around.

“My God—how long have you been here?”

“Long enough to hear the little chat you and George had,” Laura said.

“I was thinking of you—and the baby,” Jeff said. He looked at her. She looked more pregnant now than the last time he had seen her. “Are you ok? I mean, the both of you...”

“Oh, we're fine,” Laura said, and patted her midsection. “The plane ride was smooth—though I bet they were glad to get me off the plane without a special delivery.”

Jeff smiled, weakly.

“You know, you didn't mention to Landry the most important reason that going back to 1982 to kill Andropov or whatever you expect to do back there is a bad idea,” Laura said.

“I—I didn't feel comfortable talking to him about you and our baby—” Jeff began.

“That's not the most important reason,” Laura said.

Jeff looked puzzled. “What, then? That murder is bad? We've been over that already, with Nixon. You and I don't see things exactly the same on that.”

“No, not murder in general. Murder of *Andropawf!*” Laura said. Her voice had an odd intensity—an odd accent—that Jeff had never quite heard before.

“Ah, I see you're beginning to understand now,” Laura continued.

“You said you loved me,” Jeff was barely able to speak. “That's our baby—”

“I do, and she is,” Laura said. “But you loved me too, and that didn't stop you from doing what you needed to do to save the Challenger, remember?”

“Yes, but—”

“And your loving me, and the baby—would that have been enough to stop you from going back to try change things in the Soviet Union even now? You were about to walk right into that machine and leave us behind, weren't you?”

“I hadn't made up my mind and you—”

“The Soviet Union is a great country,” Laura said. “*My* country—the country of the 21st century. Of the world! Of space beyond the world! We launched the Sputnik! We had the first living organisms in space—and then the first man to circle the globe! We had our losses too—three brave cosmonauts died in Soyuz 11! But we pressed on in space. And we do great things in the next century! If we're allowed to continue—”

“But Andropov's a murderer,” Jeff argued. “You don't believe in that—I know you.”

“I believe in sacrifices, tradeoffs, weighing the choices that sometimes have to be made,” Laura said, her eyes wet with inspiration as well as sorrow. “I stopped you from killing Nixon not because I was so much against murder, but because Nixon alive was helpful to my country—we needed Nixon so Brezhnev would react against him, cooperate with him—Nixon was the perfect American for my country!”

“No! I don't believe it,” Jeff insisted.

“Believe it,” Laura said. “And believe that, yes, I do love you.” And she stepped into the machine—a second before Jeff realized how close she had moved to it, a second too late for Jeff to do anything about it.

He tackled the machine, but all he got in his arms was the rain that wasn't wet.

His body was soaked with perspiration anyway, his face slick with tears.

Laura was gone.

And Jeff knew, not only that he might well never see her again, but that she was going back to 1982 to stop Landry and Yelena—to make possible the very Soviet dominance of the 21st century that he had been trying so hard to prevent.

That, Jeff understood at last, after all of these years, had been her ultimate mission. Her real reason for tracking and meeting Jeff in 1964, maybe even for staying with him all of this time, even after he had left her. Just as his had been to save the Challenger. She had helped with that because a vibrant American space program was a good source of competition, a powerful stimulant, to the Soviet space effort in the 21st century.

\* \* \* \*

“Karina? I hardly recognized you, with that new hair! Good thing the call of nature brought me back here!”

Karina had been concentrating on the talk from the back of the auditorium, eyes dilating with every word. She turned to face the intrusion, and her eyes dilated even more—with a different emotion. “Sam!”

He smiled. “Come.” He put an arm around her. “Let’s go over there.” He gestured to a descending flight of stairs outside of the auditorium. “I think we can find a bit of privacy there.”

She hesitated, not wanting to leave the talk. But with Sam right here ... “Ok,” she said, and reluctantly allowed him to lead her to the staircase.

“You know, I told you this wasn’t a good idea,” he said, when they’d settled in a half flight down, backs against the wall. “Meeting people you’re not supposed to, unexpected intersections in time, they can cause trouble, *big* trouble. You see, we have no *record* of your being here, of your meeting your mother in this time and place. That’s the problem.”

“Stop talking to me like a child,” Karina snapped. “I know about trouble. I saw George—”

“I know, I know, believe me,” Sam said, as soothingly as possible. “But whatever happened to George two years from now—and, again, we can’t be sure, he may still turn up ok after all—there’s surely no point in making things worse by twisting up the threads back here, in 1989. Surely you see that?”

“My mother’s the only thing I can see,” Karina insisted. “I’m sick of this time-travel depravity—I want a normal life, a family, my parents, a husband someday—people weren’t meant to live like this! Jumping around through time, crossing wires, tying their souls up in knots to the point of not knowing who or where or when they are when they take the simple human action of looking in a mirror? It’s enough already! I’m going to meet my mother, tell her the truth of what I’ve been through, what the future has in store for her—”

“Of course you will, my dear.” Sam had removed an embroidered handkerchief from his vest pocket while Karina had been talking—one he always carried for occasions such as this. Now, without the slightest warning, he put it over her face and nose with one hand, and brought the other around the back of her head, pressing her face into the handkerchief, so that she was utterly immobile. The chloroform derivate worked almost instantly. Within 15 seconds she had crumpled into his arms—in 15 more she was utterly unconscious.

He propped her head up as gently as he could against the wall. He lifted her left eyelid, and looked at her pupil—ring of sweet chocolate, dilated, unseeing. Unremembering too, he hoped—though that was not sure a thing with this quick-acting drug. He let the eyelid droop slowly closed, and kissed her on the forehead. “Of course you will, my dear—of course you will.”

He walked quickly up the stairs and out of the building, and summoned the security guard on the corner. “There’s a girl who seems to have passed out on the lower staircase,” he told the guard. “She may need some medical attention.”

The guard bared his stained teeth. “Drugs, goddamn drugs,” he said. “These kids are killing their goddamn mortal souls with those drugs.”

Sam nodded sympathetically, then hurried back into the auditorium. Yelena's talk was just ending. Jeff was already applauding. Good—everyone would be out of the building and long gone before Karina awoke.

\* \* \* \*

Jeff walked up the stairs of his Eastside brownstone. He hadn't felt so utterly alone, so entirely out of place, since he had first set up residence here after his stranding in 1963.

The news on the TV was uniformly depressing: no Chinese students in Tienanmen Square, no sign of Gorbachev anywhere. And May was even worse: Yuri Andropov further consolidates his power by crushing for good the rebels in Afghanistan...

Well, at least the US space program seemed somewhat back on track. A report said six shuttle launches were planned for 1991...

Jeff shut off the TV and tried to call Sam. Same result: his phone machine said he was out of town.

Jeff took the subway down to NYU. Sometimes, when he was half asleep, rocking to and fro with the train car, he felt as if he were a hundred years in the future, back where he belonged ... back where, if he opened his eyes, he was sure he would see the soft holographic ads all around him, the mirrorims of products new and bold, the smooth smiling service that only robotic engineers could render. But when he opened his eyes, the ads and the people were always garish, dirty, two-dimensional—the ubiquitous greeting card of the 20th century.

He walked around Washington Square, and day-dreamed of Rena. He thought of Laura, and yearned for his baby. But all he saw were the faces which seemed to look at him as if they knew him, even though he knew they did not.

He pondered his situation. There had to be some logic, some path he could follow to influence events. He'd tried to call forth more time machines in La Jolla, but Landry had been telling the truth when he'd said there were only three. Worse than that, the schedule he'd downloaded from Landry's network revealed no further arrivals or departures at later dates. It was as if, with Laura's departure—back to 1982 and the Soviet Union if she was telling the truth—Landry's whole time-travel project had concluded, vanished.

But there had to be others.

Something had to have been the source of all the time travellers to 1963 that had caused the JFK vortex that had pulled him back to the 1960s in the first place—assuming, of course, that he and Laura had been right about that.

Laura ... the key was with her. He still couldn't believe that she was a Soviet communist, bent on keeping that system in place through the 21st century. He knew her. She believed in freedom. Maybe she would have a change of heart back there, and help Landry after all.

But if she had, wouldn't Jeff have seen the evidence already? All he saw was Andropov.

Still, he looked through Laura's papers. She had left New York to fly to La Jolla in a hurry. Lots of half-scribbled sheets were still around...



He came upon a sheet with doodles and names. Jeff smiled and grimaced at the same time, crumpled the sheet in his fist and put it under his heart. The names were the ones he and Laura had been discussing during one of their phone calls—possible names for their baby.

Jeff uncrumpled the sheet and looked at the names. Some were the ones they had talked about. Names based on parents and grandparents and ancestors ... names based on no one's names, just names they liked ... and there were some names that Jeff hadn't recalled Laura mentioning...

At the bottom of the sheet, two names were circled, with arrows pointing to penciled explanations.

“Karina”—“because my favorite grandmother was named Karen, and because I think a part of Jeff still loves Rena”...

“Yelena”—“after Jeff’s grandmother, Eleanor, who was Eli Harris’ wife”...

And then, in smaller letters on the righthand side of the sheet: “Karina Yelena Harris”—“because our daughter should always know she is Russian, whatever may happen”.

My God, Jeff hugged himself and cried: I lost my daughter not once but twice to those cursed machines in La Jolla...

\* \* \* \*

He taught classes in the 1989 summer session at NYU—mainly so he could be closer to the streets around Washington Square Park. He felt more at home there these days than at home. It was easy to get a job at NYU, with his forged credentials ratified now by real teaching spanning decades.

One afternoon after his class, a student was waiting for him outside his office.

She looked familiar, but he'd learned not to get too excited about that. He let her in, and bade her to a seat.

“Would you like admission to one of my Summer II classes?” He pulled out a pen and looked for an admission form. “I'm too egotistical to ever refuse a student willing to pay money to hear me talk.”

The student laughed. “Actually, I was hoping you could admit me to your life, now that I've finally found you.”

“Oh?”

“I'm pretty sure I'm your daughter.”

The pen fell to the floor.

“I've located another time machine,” Karina continued, “and I think I know how to get Gorbachev back in power...”