

## Reunion

by Robert Reed

Last month, Mr. Reed regaled us with Joe Carroway's epic story in "Five Thrillers." This month, the new tale from Nebraska's foremost science fiction writer is smaller in scope, but we think you'll like meeting the Twelve and the Ten just as much as you enjoyed "Five Thrillers."

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Eleven years past her last major role, yet Martha L. still looked ready for somebody to feed her her next line. Tiny, tiny sunglasses hovered above that perfect nose and the elegant, upturned chin. To my tastes, her face was the living definition of classical beauty, despite layers of makeup working in tandem with subcutaneous microchines, carefully obscuring the erosions of time. I'd always heard what a lucky actress she was: Martha L.'s projects typically made money, her divorces had been spectacular and timely, and her supporting casts were blessed with talent, but not so much they could ever steal the show. She was shorter than she looked in movies; as they say, high heels and a tall woman's frame helped the illusion of stately elegance. But when I saw her for myself, I finally appreciated just how small the woman was. She looked like a child climbing out of the razor-wagon—a willowy, middle-aged child still able to wear black short-shorts and a simple white shirt that accented her breasts and narrow waist. Despite a pair of thick-soled sandals, she leaped gracefully to the pavement. Then she happened to glance in my direction. The two lenses of her sunglasses were riding on magnetic curtains, hiding those lovely green eyes. I couldn't tell if she saw me or not, but a robust smile emerged. With a single expression, the actress managed to convey a wealth of possible emotions: indifference and passion, as well as an emotional chill and a natural, yet hard-to-define brilliance. She looked poised. She looked ready for anything. But then I noticed her tiny fingers dancing, and I realized that the woman was nervous, even vulnerable. Which made her utterly fetching to me.

"Easy, tiger," my date rumbled. "You don't want that."

"How do you know what I want?" I countered.

"I don't," he agreed. "But remember our story: I'm here with the love of my life. Which happens to be you, if I remember it right."

Kale was a tall gentleman, pleasant of nature and handsome despite those extra thirty pounds around his waist. We'd known each other for a

couple years. I'd met him after first becoming interested in his school and old classmates. Subterfuge isn't my talent; right off, I had warned him that I was unabashedly gay and not interested, but thanks for flirting. Then flat out, I asked, "Speaking as one of the famous graduates, what do you think the explanation is?"

"Dumb-ass raw chance," he replied.

"Well, that's been said," I allowed.

"What else could it be?" Shrugging those round shoulders, he pointed out, "Besides, I'm not one of *them*. Some of us didn't get lucky. In fact, more than half of us are just ordinary fools."

"Out of twenty-three—"

"There's eleven," he interrupted. With an ease that hinted at a borderline obsession, he named each success story. Martha Lindergruber was last on his list: "Martha L.," according to the Actor's Guild. Then with a hard stare, Kale added, "What? You don't like my count?"

"You're missing somebody," I warned.

"Who?"

"Sarah Younts."

"Her?" He squinted and shook his head, retrieving everything in his brain about the woman. "Last I heard, she was some kind of clerk or secretary."

"Where's that?"

"In Washington DC."

"She works for the government, Kale."

"I know that."

"In Langley, Virginia. Do you know whose offices are in Virginia?"

"Maybe."

"The Reformed CIA."

He refused to be impressed. "So she's a secretary for the spooks. They've got a hundred thousand people in their workforce."

"Except that's not her job," I told him.

He took a moment to accept that possibility. "So what then? Sarah's a spy?"

"All I know is that your classmate has State Department credentials, and she's been stationed at half-a-dozen different embassies. Always in hot zones, and in every case, big events have happened during her tenure." I produced an envelope and pulled out the first photograph. "This was taken by a tourist in Indonesia. Ignore the woman in the sundress. In the crowd ... do you see her? This might be Sarah. Or she isn't. But the man on her right was definitely an arms merchant accused of selling bomb-grade plutonium, and this is two minutes before the son-of-a-bitch was shot through the heart and head."

I let him study the image before handing him an enlarged, heavily enhanced version.

"I haven't seen Sarah for years," he confessed, handing back the sketchy evidence. Then as he must have done many times in the past, he asked me, "So what do you think the explanation is?"

"I don't have one. Yet."

"That's interesting," he allowed. "From what I've seen, most people like you, 'the enthusiasts,' they begin with some half-logical answer that appeals to them. The fascination comes later. It's like a love affair, really. A meeting. A courtship. And then lust. And by lust, I mean that they'll collect any evidence, just so long that it seems to back up their own extraordinary, half-brained claims."

"Maybe that's true for others," I warned him. "But I've got different reasons."

"Such as?"

For the time being, I brushed the question aside. "A small-town high school in Missouri has a graduating class of twenty-three. And at least twelve of you have made a major impact in the world."

Kale said nothing.

“Think of the odds,” I said.

He was well aware of how unlikely this was, but he had learned to keep his distance. Denying the obvious was important. Just like the other ordinary graduates who couldn't match their famous classmates' achievements, Kale maintained that dumb chance was responsible. And besides, he was thinking: What rational person would wish for the kind of celebrity that the Golden Eleven had to endure?

Kale sighed and shook his head.

Then with the faint trace of a smile—a suspicious smile, but with curious eyes—he asked once more, “What about you?”

“Can you keep a secret?” I asked.

“That depends.”

“Patrick Goslick.”

“Dead,” Kale said instantly.

“I know that.”

“Three years after graduation,” he said. “The poor kid clipped a curb while riding his Harley, and slammed his head into a tree....”

I showed him a tight little smile.

“What?”

I handed over a second envelope and sat silently while he opened it and studied the officious contents. Twice he looked at me—at my face and eyes—before he replaced the birth records and DNA tests and handed the envelope back again.

“So what's next, miss?”

“My name's April,” I reminded him.

“What's next, April?”

“Assume there is an explanation, and I don’t mean dumb-ass raw chance,” I proposed. “Think hard and give me a direction here. Someplace new to look, or some fresh way to think.”

“To make things sensible?”

“Or even just one good thread that connects the lucky ones.”

“Don’t think I haven’t tried,” he said.

“Was there a special day or a specific incident, maybe?”

“Maybe.” Then Kale shook his head while rolling his skeptical eyes. “But here’s the trouble, miss. I mean April. Get as old as I am, and you’ll find out. You might feel that you can remember all of your life. Because it’s your most precious possession, and why shouldn’t you recall it? Maybe you’ll even tell yourself that you know exactly what you’ve done and when you did it. But the sad truth is, none of us remembers more than a little fraction of what has happened to us ... even our best, most blessed days, April ... they are mostly and forever forgotten.”

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In the ensuing months and years, what had been a comfortably strange mystery grew, the Internet as well as the old-fashion rumor mills feeding interest in what were now called the Golden Twelve. Sarah Younts’s role in national security was soon exposed, forcing her into an abrupt retirement and a seven-figure advance for her life story. Suddenly the world seemed full of people with the time and insane focus to study the lives of a dozen strangers, trying to piece together any workable explanation for what stubbornly refused to be explained. (I was never the only nut-job, and I can’t say that fact made me sleep any easier.) Then came word of the thirty-year class reunion, and with that, the story managed to grow even bigger. Against a new set of long odds, each of the twenty-two surviving graduates returned his or her questionnaire, completed in full and including promises to make an appearance at the festivities. One of the Little Ten had bravely offered her home to host the event—a modest ranch-style within sight of the old high school. Access had to be tightly controlled: Three of her classmates were multibillionaires, while two more were major politicians with their eyes on the same White House. There would be roadblocks and prepositioned security systems, and the known crazies would be stopped at the county line, while the official press were stationed in the school cafeteria. Being Kale’s date was my ticket in—a bit of luck after a couple years of comfortable friendship. But to make him

happy, I had to pay a high cost: I changed my hair and slipped into a nice dress that was without question the most heterosexual thing I'd worn since my own high school experience.

“Hello, Kale.”

“Hey, Martha.”

Martha L. was standing between the razor-wagon and her date—a big silent gentleman with muscles and a plastic smile, and apparently, no name. She shook Kale's hand and then mine, telling both of us, “It's a lovely evening.”

It was a hundred and three degrees in the shade, with humidity and a fleet of soot-gray helicopters circling just above tree height.

“It's certainly nice of Carla to invite us,” said the movie actress who had lost two Oscars. “Really, I think this is just the way to do this reunion ... you know ... back in our old haunt. Just us and our families and friends.”

On that optimistic note, the four of us walked to the front door.

Carla, our hostess, was a large woman in the final throes of a long, celebrity-induced mania. She was thrilled to have us in her house, and in the next breath, she wanted us to leave her house, ushering us into a backyard that had been severely modified for this single occasion. A transparent tent was hung overhead, supported by the best spiderweb modern factories could weave. Portable air conditioners pumped out cool air. Antinoise generators masked the clatter of helicopters, while a round fountain pushed a stream of punch from a wide nipple, the cold red juice recirculating through a basin large enough to serve as a bathtub.

I couldn't help but notice that the punch resembled blood.

A tiny table was reserved for the official guest book. Carla insisted that each of us sign in, although her intensity dropped noticeably once Martha Lindergruber had handed the official pen over to Kale.

I used my time at the book to read names, counting those who hadn't shown quite yet.

The billionaires were present—three tightly wound, endlessly focused captains of industry standing close together, happily trading whatever kind of stories it was that made their kind grin and laugh in unison. The

ex-quarterback, now the first-string color man for the NFL Network, was sitting in a big lawn chair, resting his new knees while sharing football stories with several awestruck teenage boys. But an even bigger crowd of admirers had gathered near the two little bald men—partners from childhood and the designers of three of the top virtual reality games of all time. That made six of the Golden, plus Martha L. It took some doing, but eventually I spotted a mousy lady hiding near the lilacs—the top-selling writer of historical romances in the English-speaking world. A few moments later, the ninth came walking out of the house, wiping his hands on his pants after a trip to the bathroom. The present rumor—a credible rumor, as it happened—was that the gentleman would soon win a Nobel in medicine for his work with life-extension in rhesus monkeys. And if his elixirs succeeded in human trials, he would spend his next century or two enjoying his own well-earned billions.

Still missing were two politicians, and Sarah Younts.

But that made perfect sense. In a bit of obvious theater, the junior Senator from Missouri and the five-time Congresswoman from Nevada soon arrived together, arm in arm. No doubt there had been high-level negotiations between their respective camps. It must have been decided that their best strategy was to pretend an amiable friendship for cameras stationed in the outside world, as well as any audience lurking inside here. And then a few minutes after their arrival, when the applause had fallen away and the evening was settling into a rhythm of idle chatter and determined one-upsmanship, the lifelong spy slipped in quietly through a side gate.

My plans—as much as I had any—involved approaching the ex-quarterback. But when I stood close to the man, listening to his heroic recounting of his Super Bowl loss, the fellow sounded sloppy and a little too drunk, and in ways you don't usually see in talented athletes, stupid.

No, I decided, my back-up target was the right one.

If anything, Sarah was even more forgettable than the mousy little writer. She was average in height and utterly plain, her eyes watery brown and her hair turning to snow without any fight. We made eye contact, and I offered a darling little smile. Sarah assumed that I was nobody. She allowed me to approach, offering a bland, "Nice evening," before I managed to settle on her right.

I didn't speak.

So she introduced herself and asked for my name.

“April Vermeer,” I said. “Kale brought me.”

Sarah’s reaction was an honest, slightly surprised smile. Then she glanced at the pudgy, almost fifty-year-old man, her expression saying something like, “Good for old Kale.”

Old Kale was trying to have a normal conversation with poor worn-out Carla. He was assuring her that the yard was lovely and she was the best hostess ever, and yes, everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time. But he felt my eyes, and he gave me a quick glance just then, and a wink.

The poor fellow. In a fit of rare duplicity, I had neglected to tell Kale my plans for this evening.

“Actually, Kale brought me as a favor,” I mentioned.

Sarah tipped her head. “A favor? For you?”

“More for my father,” I said.

She looked at me, studying my features, the first trace of recognition showing around her wise brown eyes.

“Pat Goslick,” I said.

“Your father...?”

“My mother lived in St. Joe. She was a senior in high school and gave up her baby to a very sweet couple, and I had no idea who my biological parents were, at least until a few years ago.”

What emotion that news brought, I couldn’t tell. The face beside me was older than most, worn down by years of tropical sun and heroic worries. Sarah looked tired suddenly. But she appeared to be under control of her emotions. When a smile seemed necessary, she smiled. Then with a cautious tone, she said, “Huh. How about that.”

“So I guess I really belong here,” I said, making my voice loud enough to carry.

Was it my imagination, or did the air beneath the tent grow quieter now?



“Poor Pat,” said Sarah. “That was so sad, that crash.”

“And it was inevitable,” I snapped.

She didn’t make any sound.

“I know a good deal about it,” I said. Then I took a step back, speaking even louder. “At least, I have a pretty clear idea what must have happened. Thirty years ago, give or take.”

The professional spy showed me a blank, watchful face.

“Except I don’t know exactly who’s responsible for my father’s death,” I called out. “Really, after all this time, that’s the only question that wants me to find an answer.”

A glass of blood-colored punch was warming in my hand. The high heels that had been squeezing my poor feet seemed to have vanished, leaving me with the sensation of floating above the clipped green grass. My voice was nervous and a little too practiced, but that was forgivable since I’d been contemplating this moment for the last several months. With a calculated pace, I offered my life story to Sarah—nothing in the tale particularly important, but taking my time, allowing everyone with a vested interest the chance to learn about my little bombshell. Sure enough, some of the Golden Twelve drifted closer, pretending their own conversations but mostly eavesdropping on my recollections about being a difficult child for my poor adoptive parents. Others sent aides or girlfriends or various tagalongs—loyal subordinates who actually stood beside us, sometimes throwing out uninformed little questions, fishing for answers to check against whatever biographical material was being presently excavated on the Web. Was I genuine? And more important, was I dangerous? Probably and probably not, the Twelve finally decided. My story had progressed well into my adult years when the game-designers joined Sarah, followed by the others, each person finding some tiny piece of ground from where they could comfortably hear what I was saying and offer whatever they might to the conversation.

I described tracking down my birth mother, and through her, my dead father. Then I paused, taking a deep useless breath before concluding, “And that’s pretty much the story of my life. I hope you’re not too bored, Ms. Younts.”

“Call me Sarah.”

“Sarah.” I took another breath, this time looking at each of the Twelve. Martha L. was standing farthest away, her sunglasses removed, those exceptionally large eyes staring at nothing but me.

“The story of a life,” I said, offering an unexplained bow of thanks in Kale’s direction. “A good friend once explained this to me: There’s no such creature as a life story. As much as we’d like to think so ... as much as we need to believe in our own epic ... it is something that cannot exist.”

The ex-quarterback growled dismissively. Otherwise, nobody made a sound.

“This is what I believe,” I warned. “What we call ‘life’ is just a mass of disconnected events, each more random than the last. It isn’t even a string of incidents and accidents, because that implies sequential ordering, and the true ingredients of any life overlap, competing desperately with each other. Existence is not as organized as beads riding on a necklace. But the human brain, like or not, is built to find order in any chaos, even where it doesn’t exist. That’s why we can recognize Jesus on an egg yolk. That’s why we can take any mishmash and build a good fat story out of it. Plot lines are a refuge, something hard-wired into our soggy little brains—a talent that probably gave our ancestors insights that genuinely mattered. And as a species, we love nothing better than that good final chapter where the loose ends are tied up, and some overarching moral is earned, and learned, and those characters left behind can add a measure of happiness to their illusionary life stories.”

Portions of my audience were losing their focus. Children and various assistants began hunting for fresh distractions. But none of the Twelve looked away, or blinked. Or in some cases, some of them seemed to quit breathing.

“A high school graduating class that is wildly successful,” I said. “Twelve life stories, each generating the kind of fame that deserves envy and long-winded biographies ... and how can that be?”

“Chance,” Kale called out from beside the punch bowl.

“Always a possibility,” I conceded with a wink.

“Or it’s the end of a lot of hard work,” Carla offered. Probably alarmed by the sudden change of mood, our hostess had pushed her way to the front row, that fat face grinning wildly at her honored guests before giving

me a warning stare. “Hard work and an excellent education coupled with Midwestern values ... that’s what helped everybody here—”

“Bullshit,” I said.

She flinched.

I said, “I’ve seen all of your test scores, Carla. Your IQ, and your college entrance exams ... maybe you don’t realize this, but you consistently tested out as being smarter than eight of these success stories. You had the second best grade point average. You enjoyed the same background that you praise, and all your life, you have worked like a demon, Carla. Yet after three failed businesses and two useless degrees, you came back to this little town, and if that isn’t enough irony, you work in your old high school as a guidance counselor.”

The woman shrank down.

“I know every half-assed hypothesis that’s ever been proposed,” I promised. “Have you heard the gene-for-fame notion? It assumes there’s some rare mutation common to many if not all famous souls—a gene with subtle neurological enhancements that we can’t yet test for; a gene that gives its recipient smarts as well as a burning ambition. But even if such a gene existed, nobody here is all that closely related to anybody else. I’ve checked. And if there were such a powerful gene, you’d expect that it would show up in quite a few other Missourians. Wouldn’t you?”

Nobody answered.

“Of course there’s the viral version of that same idea. A weird bug infects half of your class and leaves you brain damaged/mind-enhanced. How the physiology of such a plague would work is a mystery. But maybe there is something to it, and if the virus can mutate into a more communicable form, then our world might soon be home to millions of hypersuccessful individuals. And God have mercy on our souls.”

I laughed quietly.

“Or maybe over the years, they have helped each other,” Carla mentioned. “Maybe? A synergy of talents, maybe?”

This wasn’t her favorite explanation. Carla grimaced as she spoke, realizing that if it was true, then her friends had long ago left her behind.

I looked at Sarah. “Did any old classmates give you a helping hand? And did you even once do a favor for even one of them?”

She said, “No,” to both questions.

“Plenty of observers have checked the records,” I explained. “Except for our game-builders and a partnership that began in their freshman year, none of the Twelve have been substantially helped any of the others. Each of you has his or her own industry, niche market, or political party. In fact, from what I can see, some of you don’t seem to particularly like each other.”

I said, “It’s a stumper, this puzzle is. I mean, how could one little group navigate their way through so many random events and still end up at the summit? The pinnacle? For a long time, I’ve thought about this. I researched all of you, and I sought help from people more imaginative than I, and when I slept, I dreamed these fantastic, useless dreams about you. And after all of that, there’s only one explanation that fits what I know.”

“You don’t know anything,” our hostess declared.

Carla was furious. Like me, she had an enormous investment in this gathering, and not only had I taken control of her party, I had ruined her carefully enforced mood of banal pleasantness. This wasn’t the evening that she had spent months dreaming about, and the tears cutting into the blush on her cheeks made me feel empathy for the poor woman.

I looked at Sarah then. I glanced at the game designers. And then in quick succession, I measured every other important face.

“You had help,” I said. “Didn’t you?”

“Get out,” Carla demanded. “I want you out of my house—”

“Thirty years ago, something happened,” I said. “I think I have a reasonable guess about when it happened, and maybe where ... although I’ve still got several competing hypotheses to explain what it was exactly and who actually gave you the help—”

“April,” said Kale.

My friend had slipped around from behind.

“You’re not welcome here anymore,” Carla assured me.

“This really is getting weird,” said Kale, one big palm dropping on my bare shoulder. “How about you and I step out front for a little while—?”

“If I leave,” I threatened, “then I’ll tell the world what I know, or at least what I think I know. But if the Twelve sit down and listen to me, then I promise—I mean this—their secret will die with me.”

Carla grabbed me by the arm, yanking hard enough to bruise.

But then Sarah pushed Kale’s hand away and threw a comforting arm around Carla’s shoulders. And after a long glance at the other Eleven, she said, “Darling,” to the sobbing, distraught woman. “Why don’t you show us to your basement, darling? Right now, please. Please?”

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Fourteen people spilled into a cramped family room. The furnishings and paneled walls were badly in need of updating. In the adjacent laundry room, a rattling dehumidifier was waging a losing war against moisture and mold. I noticed the little table where plastic trophies and pot-metal plaques were put on display—honors achieved in softball tournaments and debate club and the like. The grand achievements of one obscure family; I noticed that nobody had taken the trouble to dust the golden batter standing on its narrow pedestal. Yet really, for all their wild successes, the Twelve had achieved little more that would actually last. Fifty years after their deaths, how many of these names would remain in the public mind? And if anybody remembered even one of them five hundred years from now, it would be more a testament to improvements in memory and minds—a civilization built on superintelligence, where the generations might entertain themselves by unveiling the most obscure trivia.

Carla lingered at the bottom of the stairs, wringing her hands when she wasn’t wiping her wet face.

Finally Kale appeared, and after a concerned look in my direction, he led his old classmate back up the stairs, closing the door in his wake.

“Pat Goslick,” I began.

“We know,” the quarterback snapped. “He was your dad.”

With a beer in one hand, he was easing his frame into the best chair available. The others shared two beat-up sofas and three folding chairs

found in a corner, while the rest settled on sofa arms and sofa backs or just stood flush against the ugly, water-stained walls. Two people were standing: Martha L. in the back of the room, and me in front, my back to the trophy table and my arms trying to relax at my sides.

“Pat was the very best in your class,” I said.

Maybe I feared disagreement; definitely I hoped to see heads nodding in agreement. But the reaction was as close to nothing as could be. A couple people used the pause to clear their throats. Others shifted their butts, trying for comfort in their new seats. Otherwise, I received looks of watchful indifference.

“My biological mother told me,” I continued. “She claims that my father was the smartest person she’d ever known, and he was physically beautiful, and he was decent and kind, and by any standard, he was an exceptional athlete. Better than ‘that silly old quarterback,’ she claims.”

The old quarterback sipped his beer and said nothing.

I said, “For a long time, my working hypothesis was that the rest of you had sacrificed my father. You robbed him of his talents and maybe his life too.”

“How could we have done that?” Sarah asked.

“Black magic.” I shrugged, laughing at myself. “I really didn’t understand the methods that you might have used. But in my endless research, I learned that during her junior year, the Congresswoman from Nevada went through a phase. She dressed Goth-style and played with satanic symbols and all that.” I looked at the woman, adding, “It was just a phase, I know. But what if you’d hit upon some ancient spell that could transform souls, and meanwhile leave my father sacrificed and dead?”

The Twelve stared at me, offering nothing.

“Except I don’t believe in magic, black or white or any gray between.” With my hands, I swept that possibility aside. “And even if my father could have lived a full life, why does talent make success inevitable?”

“More than anything, chance is what builds success and fame.

“And how do you manipulate chance? How can you guarantee that the die will come up your favor? Well, you clearly have to cheat somehow. And

when it comes to the mechanics of cheating ... I'll warn you, these fields are not my usual strength. Like physics, for instance. And in particular, quantum physics."

There.

Most definitely, my audience stirred.

"I know there was a pretty big UFO sighted during your senior year. And I've read about that series of cattle mutilations in that decade. Maybe one or both of these vague events have a role to play. But people are always seeing odd lights in the sky, and livestock always end up dead in odd ways. No, after a lot of hard consideration, I decided just to focus on the twelve of you, and my father too. Was there any point in time where all of *you* were together? A class, a club? Any event that joined each of you?"

Again, most of the faces seemed distinctly uncomfortable.

"Physics," I repeated.

Then I smiled, waiting until finally, from the back, the genuine scientist in the group asked, "What do you mean?"

"In your senior year," I pointed out, "everybody here took general physics from Dr. Westbrook."

People glanced at one another.

But not Sarah. She was as close to me as anyone and far too shrewd to give away clues during this clumsy interrogation. "What are you thinking, April? Just tell us, please."

"Dr. Westbrook taught all of the sciences for one year," I said, "and then he left just as suddenly as he arrived. Supposedly there was an affair with one of his students—"

In reflex, half a dozen people glanced at Martha L.

"And he left town that next summer, before the scandal turned public and ugly. But really, that isn't what interests me." I smiled grimly, saying, "I've looked for the man's history, and I can't find much. There was a Dr. Westbrook working for MIT and then the Sandia laboratories, but all of his files, including every photograph of him, are either lost or drenched in secrecy. All I know for certain is that he vanished from the Sandia rosters,

and soon after that, a man with his basic name arrived here, showing certification and looking for work.”

Martha L. was leaning hard against the wall, her head tilted back and the eyes halfway closed.

I said, “And after living and working here ... after a few more years of wandering ... the mysterious Dr. Westbrook dropped off the face of the Earth. Which might just well be the literal truth.”

“What are you thinking?” Sarah prompted.

“The man was a magician, but with theoretical physics. Or maybe he was never a true human male, but instead he was some agent or power or explorer or criminal from another time or dimension. Really, I don’t have any clear explanation to offer. And maybe none of you do, either.” Then I shook a finger at them, adding, “But all of you took his physics class. And I think there was a day, probably late in the spring semester, when he decided to run an experiment with you.” I had to pause, breathing hard for a few moments. Then with my best pleading tone, I asked, “Am I a little bit close?”

Sarah glanced at the others, and then she turned to me, saying, “Maybe we should go back to the party—”

“Many-worlds,” I blurted.

There. I watched eyes grow big and faces light up.

“The oddest part of quantum mechanics, I think, is the many-worlds idea.” I felt thrilled and terrified. “Reality is built on an infinite number of discrete moments, each moment encompassing every possible configuration of matter and energy, and every Present splits into countless Nexts. And every Next splits and splits again. And maybe if you possessed sufficient power, it would be possible to take any life and then guide it through that endless tangle of possibilities....”

No one moved. Whatever else I had accomplished that night, I could claim that I had genuinely stunned the Twelve.

“What did Dr. Westbrook do?” I pressed. “Did he say, ‘Tell me where you want to be in thirty years, and I can make it happen.’?”

I could hear people breathing. Even the old spy was excited enough



to gulp at the damp, moldy air.

Martha L. had turned sideways against her wall, eyes closed, showing me her lovely profile.

“And so each of you did it,” I continued. “Not that any of you actually believed in whatever trick he was trying to perform. But it would have been fun—for kids, for anyone—playing that game where you paint some images of the big house where you’re going to live someday, and the books you’ll write, and the discoveries you’ll make ... and how you’ll defend our country in adventurous ways ... not to mention ending up rich and happy and exceptionally famous....”

The quarterback pulled his bulk forward, dropping his half-drunk beer onto a battered little coffee table. Otherwise, the room was filled with people too weak to move or speak.

“So that’s what happened,” I said. And then, with a pride that I believed was earned, I added, “I guessed right! Didn’t I?”

Sarah looked up.

In a measured tone, she told me, “No, April. No.”

What did she say?

“In a lot of ways, no. Your story isn’t at all what happened.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe you.”

“Who cares?” the quarterback barked. “You’re wrong, and get over it, girl.”

But no obsession surrenders easily. I leaned against the table, feeling the softball trophy tilt and then fall onto its side. Looking at my own feet, I maintained, “Something did happen with this group. You can’t tell me otherwise.”

They began to mutter among themselves.

“My father!” I blurted. “Tell me: Was he part of it? Whatever happened, was he there?”

Nearly a dozen faces shook their heads, but not to say, “No.” They

were voting for silence only, and thankfully Sarah didn't bother to ask for their permission. She caught my gaze and said, "You deserve to know. He was part of it, yes. Pat was."

Others complained about this breach.

Then the old spy jumped to her feet, snapping at them, "If she doesn't deserve to hear this, who does?"

I was crying now.

Sobbing.

"Honey," Sarah said, touching my elbow and using a warm, natural voice. "I won't tell you the specifics, April. And don't ask again. But one thing you're right about ... when it happened, none of us truly believed that we were mapping out our next thirty years. How could we accept it, really? So maybe our plans weren't thought out quite as well as they should have been...."

"My father?" I muttered.

"The accident, yes." She shook her head. "You know, that's when we started to believe that it might just be possible. That what we had done was something real, and there were going to be some very large consequences for what had always seemed preposterous."

"Do you know what my father wanted?"

"Yes, I do," replied Sarah. With a sweep of an arm, she promised, "We all know. Everybody here got to hear what each of us was asking from Life."

"Dad wanted to die?"

"No, April. He wanted to be a hero, to save some important lives. At least, that was one piece of his wish list."

"Just tell her," the quarterback snapped.

And then from the back of the room, the clear strong voice of the actress said, "That motorcycle accident destroyed his mind, April. But not his heart and kidneys, the liver and such."

I was trembling. “So who got them?”

“Before we tell you that,” said Sarah, her warm hand returning to my elbow. “I want you to know ... really, your father might have been the best person in our group. Because when he made his wish list, he wasn’t just thinking about himself. In fact, his first desire was to someday have a child ... a decent, lovely, smart, and creative child, he wanted ... and regardless what happened to him, Pat wanted her to grow up and become a spectacular success in her own right....”

\* \* \* \*

A few more minutes of measured enlightenment, and then our meeting broke up and we filed out of the basement and into the back yard. The Ordinary Ten were sitting in a wide circle, exchanging stories about local gossip and raising teenagers and the strange adventure that came with growing old. After that, the evening turned into an endless blur of overlapping conversations and quiet little crying jags. Now and again Kale would settle beside me, holding my hand. How I was doing? “Fine,” I would lie. And was I finding the answers I wanted? “More than enough,” I promised, and left matters there.

People from both the Ten and the Twelve were eager to share remembrances of their dead friend. I can’t remember half of what I was told, and the order of these conversations is totally lost to me. Somebody swore, “I see Pat in your eyes and face, and even in the way you hold your beer.” Several voices offered little snatches of the valedictorian address that my father delivered—obtuse words about promise and hope caging in the blackness and cold that is everywhere. I was working on my second or third beer, or maybe my fourth, when the quarterback took me to the back of the yard. He was drunker than ever, and happy. I thought I was going to be fending off an unwelcome advance, and making ready, I decided which knee I would kick. But no, he wanted nothing but to warn me. “For me, it was like this,” he said, keeping his voice low and secretive. “I was a sixth round draft pick with a weak arm and no leg speed. But I had this one fat talent. Whenever the game was on the line, I’d heave the ball where I shouldn’t have, and more often than not, something would go right. In double coverage, my receiver would make the catch. Or the safety would trip up. Or maybe there’d be an interference call.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ve studied your old games.”

“Eighty, maybe ninety passes made my career,” he said with a practiced, confessional tone. “But here’s the thing you should think about,

young lady. Whatever talents you've got ... I don't know you, and maybe you don't know your gifts for yourself yet ... but whatever you've got, unless you're willing to throw blind off your back foot, you'll never get all of this good luck to work for you.

"Understand what I'm saying?"

"You want me to throw into triple-coverage," I replied.

"Which I stopped doing in both Super Bowls," he muttered, an ancient pain showing through the booze. "I got practical and careful, and we got beat. And that was that."

"Thank you for the advice," I said.

"Don't mention it."

There were more conversations that I can't recall, and another one and a half beers. Then it was after one in the morning, and one billionaire was leaving with his entourage. I stood in the middle of the yard, turning a slow circle while counting faces. Most of the Twelve had slipped away. Carla and Kale were the last of the Ten holding out. I spotted my date sitting beside Martha L. They were talking, smiling. The actress had one tiny hand on Kale's thigh, and I couldn't help but notice that her man-friend had vanished completely. A flicker of jealousy made me alert. Made me thoughtful. And a couple insights struck me at the same moment.

I started to walk, but Carla caught me.

"I'm sorry," she had to tell me. "I was rude before. I want to apologize."

"And I was a bitch," I offered.

We shared a little laugh and then some idle chatter. Then I thanked her for the party, and hearing some part of that, Kale rose and came over to ask, "Is it time to leave?"

"Nearly," I said. "Would you give me a minute first?"

He followed my gaze, smiled and said, "I'll be out front."

Martha Lindergruber remained in her chair. I settled where Kale had been, feeling his residual heat. "Two things puzzle me," I said.

Those big green eyes glanced at me.

“Sarah explained that when my father died, when his heart and the other parts went to all those good people ... she implied that’s when your group started to believe that maybe this was all for real....”

“And?” Martha prodded.

“Your first big break came a year earlier. You played the plucky teenage daughter of the President....”

The actress looked at me again.

“But now why wouldn’t your success constitute good hard evidence? That’s what I want to know.”

She sat back in her chair. “Make a guess.”

“You’re part of the group, sure,” I said. “But for whatever reason, you refused to actually fill out your wish list.”

Martha closed her eyes, and smiled, and after a contemplative silence, she said, “Maybe I just wanted to make it with my own talent.”

I said, “By that measure, you’re the biggest star in this group.”

Delight filled that youthful, lovely face.

Then Martha opened her eyes again, and she reminded me, “You said that two things puzzled you.”

“A string of men, and three failed marriages,” I said quietly. Then I risked placing my hand on her bare little knee. “Ever wonder if you’re meant for a different kind of dating?”

She looked at my hand, then my face.

And because there is no such creature as a story—just a series of events with arbitrary starts and finishes—I will select this moment to say, “And the princess lived happily ever after.”

