

## THE ERDMANN NEXUS

by Nancy Kress

“Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow,

He who would reach for pearls must dive below.”

—John Dryden

\* \* \* \*

The ship, which would have looked nothing like a ship to Henry Erdmann, moved between the stars, traveling in an orderly pattern of occurrences in the vacuum flux. Over several cubic light-years of space, subatomic particles appeared, existed, and winked out of existence in nanoseconds. Flop transitions tore space and then reconfigured it as the ship moved on. Henry, had he somehow been nearby in the cold of deep space, would have died from the complicated, regular, intense bursts of radiation long before he could have had time to appreciate their shimmering beauty.

All at once the ship stopped moving.

The radiation bursts increased, grew even more complex. Then the ship abruptly changed direction. It accelerated, altering both space and time as it sped on, healing the alterations in its wake. Urgency shot through it.

Something, far away, was struggling to be born.

\* \* \* \*

### ONE

Henry Erdmann stood in front of the mirror in his tiny bedroom, trying to knot his tie with one hand. The other hand gripped his walker. It was an unsteady business, and the tie ended up crooked. He yanked it out and began again. Carrie would be here soon.

He always wore a tie to the college. Let the students—and graduate students, at that!—come to class in ripped jeans and obscene T-shirts and hair tangled as if colonized by rats. Even the girls. Students were students, and Henry didn’t consider their sloppiness disrespectful, the way so many did at St. Sebastian’s. Sometimes he was even amused by it, in a sad sort of way. Didn’t these intelligent, sometimes driven, would-be physicists know how ephemeral their beauty was? Why did they go to such lengths to look unappealing, when soon enough that would be their only choice?

This time he got the tie knotted. Not perfectly—a difficult operation, one-handed—but close enough for government work. He smiled. When he and his colleagues had been doing government work, only perfection was good enough. Atomic bombs were like that. Henry could still hear Oppie’s voice saying the plans for Ivy Mike were “technically sweet.” Of course, that was before all the—

A knock on the door and Carrie’s fresh young voice. “Dr. Erdmann? Are you ready?”

She always called him by his title, always treated him with respect. Not like some of the nurses and assistants. “How are we today, Hank?” that overweight blonde asked yesterday. When he answered stiffly, “I don’t know about you, madame, but I’m fine, thank you,” she’d only laughed. Old people are so formal—it’s so cute! Henry could just hear her saying it to one of her horrible colleagues. He had never been “Hank” in his entire life.

“Coming, Carrie.” He put both hands on the walker and inched forward—clunk, clunk, clunk—the walker sounding loud even on the carpeted floor. His class’s corrected problem sets lay on the table by the door. He’d given them some really hard problems this week, and only Haldane had succeeded in solving all of them. Haldane had promise. An inventive mind, yet rigorous, too. They could have used him in ‘52 on Project Ivy, developing the Teller-Ulam staged fusion H-bomb.

Halfway across the living room of his tiny apartment in the Assisted Living Facility, something happened in Henry’s mind.

He stopped, astonished. It had felt like a tentative touch, a ghostly finger inside his brain. Astonishment was immediately replaced by fear. Was he having a stroke? At ninety, anything was possible. But he felt fine, better in fact than for several days. Not a stroke. So what—

“Dr. Erdmann?”

“I’m here.” He clunked to the door and opened it. Carrie wore a cherry red sweater, a fallen orange leaf caught on her hat, and sunglasses. Such a pretty girl, all bronze hair and bright skin and vibrant color. Outside it was drizzling. Henry reached out and gently removed the sunglasses. Carrie’s left eye was swollen and discolored, the iris and pupil invisible under the outraged flesh.

“The bastard,” Henry said.

\* \* \* \*

That was Henry and Carrie going down the hall toward the elevator, thought Evelyn Krenchnoted. She waved from her armchair, her door wide open as always, but they were talking and didn’t notice. She strained to hear, but just then another plane went overhead from the airport. Those pesky flight paths were too near St. Sebastian’s! On the other hand, if they weren’t, Evelyn couldn’t afford to live here. Always look on the bright side!

Since this was Tuesday afternoon, Carrie and Henry were undoubtedly going to the college. So wonderful the way Henry kept busy—you’d never guess his real age, that was for sure. He even had all his hair! Although that jacket was too light for September, and not waterproof. Henry might catch cold. She would speak to Carrie about it. And why was Carrie wearing sunglasses when it was raining?

But if Evelyn didn’t start her phone calls, she would be late! People were depending on her! She keyed in the first number, listened to it ring one floor below. “Bob? It’s Evelyn. Now, dear, tell me—how’s your blood pressure today?”

“Fine,” Bob Donovan said.

“Are you sure? You sound a bit grumpy, dear.”

“I’m fine, Evelyn. I’m just busy.”

“Oh, that’s good! With what?”

“Just busy.”

“Always good to keep busy! Are you coming to Current Affairs tonight?”

“Dunno.”

“You should. You really should. Intellectual stimulation is so important for people our age!”

“Gotta go,” Bob grunted.

“Certainly, but first, how did your granddaughter do with—”

He’d hung up. Really, very grumpy. Maybe he was having problems with irregularity. Evelyn would recommend a high colonic.

Her next call was more responsive. Gina Martinelli was, as always, thrilled with Evelyn’s attention. She informed Gina minutely about the state of her arthritis, her gout, her diabetes, her son’s weight problem, her other son’s wife’s step-daughter’s miscarriage, all interspersed with quotations from the Bible (““Take a little wine for thy stomach’—First Timothy.”) She answered all Evelyn’s questions and wrote down all her recommendations and—

“Evelyn?” Gina said. “Are you still there?”

“Yes, I—” Evelyn fell silent, an occurrence so shocking that Gina gasped, “Hit your panic button!”

“No, no, I’m fine, I ... I just remembered something for a moment.”

“Remembered something? What?”

But Evelyn didn’t know. It hadn’t been a memory, exactly, it had been a ... what? A feeling, a vague but somehow strong sensation of ... something.

“Evelyn?”

“I’m here!”

“The Lord decides when to call us home, and I guess it’s not your time yet. Did you hear about Anna Chernov? That famous ballet dancer on Four? She fell last night and broke her leg and they had to move her to the Infirmary.”

“No!”

“Yes, poor thing. They say it’s only temporary, until they get her stabilized, but you know what that means.”

She did. They all did. First the Infirmary, then up to Seven, where you didn’t even have your own little apartment any more, and eventually to Nursing on Eight and Nine. Better to go quick and clean, like Jed Fuller last month. But Evelyn wasn’t going to let herself think like that! A positive attitude was so important!

Gina said, “Anna is doing pretty well, I hear. The Lord never sends more than a person can bear.”

Evelyn wasn’t so sure about that, but it never paid to argue with Gina, who was convinced that she had God on redial. Evelyn said, “I’ll visit her before the Stitch ‘n Bitch meeting. I’m sure she’ll want company. Poor girl—you know, those dancers, they just abuse their health for years and years, so what can you expect?”

“I know!” Gina said, not without satisfaction. “They pay a terrible price for beauty. It’s a little vain, actually.”

“Did you hear about that necklace she has in the St. Sebastian’s safe?”

“No! What necklace?”

“A fabulous one! Doris Dziwalski told me. It was given to Anna by some famous Russian dancer who was given it by the czar!”

“What czar?”

“The czar! You know, of Russia. Doris said it’s worth a fortune and that’s why it’s in the safe. Anna never wears it.”

“Vanity,” Gina said. “She probably doesn’t like the way it looks now against her wrinkly neck.”

“Doris said Anna’s depressed.”

“No, it’s vanity. ‘Lo, I looked and saw that all was—”

“I’ll recommend acupuncture to her,” Evelyn interrupted. “Acupuncture is good for depression.” But first she’d call Erin, to tell her the news.

\* \* \* \*

Erin Bass let the phone ring. It was probably that tiresome bore Evelyn Krenchnoted, eager to check on Erin’s blood pressure or her cholesterol or her Islets of Langerhans. Oh, Erin should answer the phone, there was no harm in the woman, Erin should be more charitable. But why? Why should one have to be more charitable just because one was old?

She let the phone ring and returned to her book, Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter*. Greene’s world-weary despair was a silly affectation but he was a wonderful writer, and too much underrated nowadays.

The liner came in on a Saturday evening: from the bedroom window they could see its long grey form steal past the boom, beyond the—

Something was happening.

—steal past the boom, beyond the—

Erin was no longer in St. Sebastian’s, she was nowhere, she was lifted away from everything, she was beyond the—

Then it was over and she sat again in her tiny apartment, the book sliding unheeded off her lap.

\* \* \* \*

Anna Chernov was dancing. She and Paul stood with two other couples on the stage, under the bright lights. Balanchine himself stood in the second wing, and even though Anna knew he was there to wait for Suzanne’s solo, his presence inspired her. The music began. Promenade en couronne, attitude, arabesque efface and into the lift, Paul’s arms raising her. She was lifted out of herself and then she was soaring above the stage, over the heads of the corps de ballet, above Suzanne Farrell herself, soaring through the roof of the New York State Theater and into the night sky, spreading her arms in a porte de bras wide enough to take in the glittering night sky, soaring in the most perfect jete in the universe, until...

\* \* \* \*

“She’s smiling,” Bob Donovan said, before he knew he was going to speak at all. He looked down at the sleeping Anna, so beautiful she didn’t even look real, except for the leg in its big ugly cast. In one hand, feeling like a fool but what the fuck, he held three yellow roses.

“The painkillers do that sometimes,” the Infirmary nurse said. “I’m afraid you can’t stay, Mr. Donovan.”

Bob scowled at her. But it wasn’t like he meant it or anything. This nurse wasn’t so bad. Not like some. Maybe because she wasn’t any spring chicken herself. A few more years, sister, and you’ll be here right with us.

“Give her these, okay?” He thrust the roses at the nurse.

“I will, yes,” she said, and he walked out of the medicine-smelling Infirmary—he hated that smell—back to the elevator. Christ, what a sorry old fart he was. Anna Chernov, that nosy old broad Evelyn Krenchnoted once told him, used to dance at some famous place in New York, Abraham Center or something. Anna had been famous. But Evelyn could be wrong, and anyway it didn’t matter. From the first moment Bob Donovan laid eyes on Anna Chernov, he’d wanted to give her things. Flowers. Jewelry. Anything she wanted. Anything he had. And how stupid and fucked-up was that, at his age? Give me a break!

He took the elevator to the first floor, stalked savagely through the lobby, and went out the side door to the “remembrance garden.” Stupid name, New Age-y stupid. He wanted to kick something, wanted to bellow for—

Energy punched through him, from the base of his spine up his back and into his brain, mild but definite, like a shock from a busted toaster or something. Then it was gone.

What the fuck was that? Was he okay? If he fell, like Anna—

He was okay. He didn’t have Anna’s thin delicate bones. Whatever it was, was gone now. Just one of those things.

\* \* \* \*

On a Nursing floor of St. Sebastian’s, a woman with just a few days to live muttered in her long, last half-sleep. An IV dripped morphine into her arm, easing the passage. No one listened to the mutterings; it had been years since they’d made sense. For a moment she stopped and her eyes, again bright in the ravaged face that had once been so lovely, grew wide. But for only a moment. Her eyes closed and the mindless muttering resumed.

\* \* \* \*

In Tijuana, a vigorous old man sitting behind his son’s market stall, where he sold cheap serapes to jabbering turistas, suddenly lifted his face to the sun. His mouth, which still had all its white flashing teeth, made a big O.

\* \* \* \*

In Bombay, a widow dressed in white looked out her window at the teeming streets, her face gone blank as her sari.

\* \* \* \*

In Chengdu, a monk sitting on his cushion on the polished floor of the meditation room in the ancient Wenshu Monastery, shattered the holy silence with a shocking, startled laugh.

\* \* \* \*

## TWO

Carrie Vesey sat in the back of Dr. Erdmann's classroom and thought about murder.

Not that she would ever do it, of course. Murder was wrong. Taking a life filled her with horror that was only—

Ground-up castor beans were a deadly poison.

—made worse by her daily witnessing of old people's aching desire to hold onto life. Also, she—

Her step-brother had once shown her how to disable the brakes on a car.

—knew she wasn't the kind of person who solved problems that boldly. And anyway her—

The battered-woman defense almost always earned acquittal from juries.

—lawyer said that a paper trail of restraining orders and ER documentation was by far the best way to—

If a man was passed out from a dozen beers, he'd never feel a bullet from his own service revolver.

—put Jim behind bars legally. That, the lawyer said, "would solve the problem"—as if a black eye and a broken arm and constant threats that left her scared even when Jim wasn't in the same city were all just a theoretical "problem," like the ones Dr. Erdmann gave his physics students.

He sat on top of a desk in the front of the room, talking about something called the "Bose-Einstein condensate." Carrie had no idea what that was, and she didn't care. She just liked being here, sitting unheeded in the back of the room. The physics students, nine boys and two girls, were none of them interested in her presence, her black eye, or her beauty. When Dr. Erdmann was around, he commanded all their geeky attention, and that was indescribably restful. Carrie tried—unsuccessfully, she knew—to hide her beauty. Her looks had brought her nothing but trouble: Gary, Eric, Jim. So now she wore baggy sweats and no make-up, and crammed her twenty-four-carat-gold hair under a shapeless hat. Maybe if she was as smart as these students she would have learned to pick a different kind of man, but she wasn't, and she hadn't, and Dr. Erdmann's classroom was a place she felt safe. Safer, even, than St. Sebastian's, which was where Jim had blackened her eye.

He'd slipped in through the loading dock, she guessed, and caught her alone in the linens supply closet. He was gone after one punch, and when she called her exasperated lawyer and he found out she had no witnesses and St. Sebastian's had "security," he'd said there was nothing he could do. It would be her word against Jim's. She had to be able to prove that the restraining order had been violated.

Dr. Erdmann was talking about "proof," too: some sort of mathematical proof. Carrie had been good at math, in high school. Only Dr. Erdmann had said once that what she'd done in high school wasn't "mathematics," only "arithmetic." "Why didn't you go to college, Carrie?" he'd asked.

"No money," she said in a tone that meant: Please don't ask anything else. She just hadn't felt up to explaining about Daddy and the alcoholism and the debts and her abusive step-brothers, and Dr. Erdmann hadn't asked. He was sensitive that way.

Looking at his tall, stooped figure sitting on the desk, his walker close to hand, Carrie sometimes let herself dream that Dr. Erdmann—Henry—was fifty years younger. Forty to her twenty-eight—that would work. She'd Googled a picture of him at that age, when he'd been working at someplace called the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory. He'd been handsome, dark-haired, smiling into the camera next to his wife, Ida. She hadn't been as pretty as Carrie, but she'd gone to college, so even if Carrie had been

born back then, she wouldn't have had a chance with him. Story of her life.

“—have any questions?” Dr. Erdmann finished.

The students did—they always did—clamoring to be heard, not raising their hands, interrupting each other. But when Dr. Erdmann spoke, immediately they all shut up. Someone leapt up to write equations on the board. Dr. Erdmann slowly turned his frail body to look at them. The discussion went on a long time, almost as long as the class. Carrie fell asleep.

When she woke, it was to Dr. Erdmann, leaning on his walker, gently jiggling her shoulder. “Carrie?”

“Oh! Oh, I'm sorry!”

“Don't be. We bored you to death, poor child.”

“No! I loved it!”

He raised his eyebrows and she felt shamed. He thought she was telling a polite lie, and he had very little tolerance for lies. But the truth is, she always loved being here.

Outside, it was full dark. The autumn rain had stopped and the unseen ground had that mysterious, fertile smell of wet leaves. Carrie helped Dr. Erdmann into her battered Toyota and slid behind the wheel. As they started back toward St. Sebastian's, she could tell that he was exhausted. Those students asked too much of him! It was enough that he taught one advanced class a week, sharing all that physics, without them also demanding he—

“Dr. Erdmann?”

For a long terrible moment she thought he was dead. His head lolled against the seat but he wasn't asleep: His open eyes rolled back into his head. Carrie jerked the wheel to the right and slammed the Toyota alongside the curb. He was still breathing.

“Dr. Erdmann? Henry?”

Nothing. Carrie dove into her purse, fumbling for her cell phone. Then it occurred to her that his panic button would be faster. She tore open the buttons on his jacket; he wasn't wearing the button. She scrambled again for the purse, starting to sob.

“Carrie?”

He was sitting up now, a shadowy figure. She hit the overhead light. His face, a fissured landscape, looked dazed and pale. His pupils were huge.

“What happened? Tell me.” She tried to keep her voice even, to observe everything, because it was important to be able to make as full a report as possible to Dr. Jamison. But her hand clutched at his sleeve.

He covered her fingers with his. His voice sounded dazed. “I ... don't know. I was ... somewhere else?”

“A stroke?” That was what they were all afraid of. Not death, but to be incapacitated, reduced to partiality. And for Dr. Erdmann, with his fine mind...

“No.” He sounded definite. “Something else. I don't know. Did you call 911 yet?”

The cell phone lay inert in her hand. “No, not yet, there wasn't time for—”

“Then don’t. Take me home.”

“All right, but you’re going to see the doctor as soon as we get there.” She was pleased, despite everything, with her firm tone.

“It’s seven-thirty. They’ll all have gone home.”

But they hadn’t. As soon as Carrie and Dr. Erdmann walked into the lobby, she saw a man in a white coat standing by the elevators. “Wait!” she called, loud enough that several people turned to look, evening visitors and ambulatories and a nurse Carrie didn’t know. She didn’t know the doctor, either, but she rushed over to him, leaving Dr. Erdmann leaning on his walker by the main entrance.

“Are you a doctor? I’m Carrie Vesey and I was bringing Dr. Erdmann—a patient, Henry Erdmann, not a medical doctor—home when he had some kind of attack, he seems all right now but someone needs to look at him, he says—”

“I’m not an M.D.,” the man said, and Carrie looked at him in dismay. “I’m a neurological researcher.”

She rallied. “Well, you’re the best we’re going to get at this hour so please look at him!” She was amazed at her own audacity.

“All right.” He followed her to Dr. Erdmann, who scowled because, Carrie knew, he hated this sort of fuss. The non-M.D. seemed to pick up on that right away. He said pleasantly, “Dr. Erdmann? I’m Jake DiBella. Will you come this way, sir?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned and led the way down a side corridor. Carrie and Dr. Erdmann followed, everybody’s walk normal, but still people watched. Move along, nothing to see here ... why were they still staring? Why were people such ghouls?

But they weren’t, really. That was just her own fear talking.

You trust too much, Carrie, Dr. Erdmann had said just last week.

In a small room on the second floor, he sat heavily on one of the three metal folding chairs. The room held the chairs, a gray filing cabinet, an ugly metal desk, and nothing else. Carrie, a natural nester, pursed her lips, and this Dr. DiBella caught that, too.

“I’ve only been here a few days,” he said apologetically. “Haven’t had time yet to properly move in. Dr. Erdmann, can you tell me what happened?”

“Nothing.” He wore his lofty look. “I just fell asleep for a moment and Carrie became alarmed. Really, there’s no need for this fuss.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Has that happened before?”

Did Dr. Erdmann hesitate, ever so briefly? “Yes, occasionally. I am ninety, doctor.”

DiBella nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned to Carrie. “And what happened to you? Did it occur at the same time that Dr. Erdmann fell asleep?”

Her eye. That’s why people had stared in the lobby. In her concern for Dr. Erdmann, she’d forgotten about her black eye, but now it immediately began to throb again. Carrie felt herself go scarlet.



Dr. Erdmann answered. “No, it didn’t happen at the same time. There was no car accident, if that’s what you’re implying. Carrie’s eye is unrelated.”

“I fell,” Carrie said, knew that no one believed her, and lifted her chin.

“Okay,” DiBella said amiably. “But as long as you’re here, Dr. Erdmann, I’d like to enlist your help. Yours, and as many other volunteers as I can enlist at St. Sebastian’s. I’m here on a Gates Foundation grant in conjunction with Johns Hopkins, to map shifts in brain electrochemistry during cerebral arousal. I’m asking volunteers to donate a few hours of their time to undergo completely painless brain scans while they look at various pictures and videos. Your participation will be an aid to science.”

Carrie saw that Dr. Erdmann was going to refuse, despite the magic word “science,” but then he hesitated. “What kind of brain scans?”

“Asher-Peyton and functional MRI.”

“All right. I’ll participate.”

Carrie blinked. That didn’t sound like Dr. Erdmann, who considered physics and astronomy the only “true” sciences and the rest merely poor step-children. But this Dr. DiBella wasn’t about to let his research subject get away. He said quickly, “Excellent! Tomorrow morning at eleven, Lab 6B, at the hospital. Ms. Vesey, can you bring him over? Are you a relative?”

“No, I’m an aide here. Call me Carrie. I can bring him.” Wednesday wasn’t one of her usual days for Dr. Erdmann, but she’d get Marie to swap schedules.

“Wonderful. Please call me Jake.” He smiled at her, and something turned over in Carrie’s chest. It wasn’t just that he was so handsome, with his black hair and gray eyes and nice shoulders, but also that he had masculine confidence and an easy way with him and no ring on his left hand ... idiot. There was no particular warmth in his smile; it was completely professional. Was she always going to assess every man she met as a possible boyfriend? Was she really that needy?

Yes. But this one wasn’t interested. And anyway, he was an educated scientist and she worked a minimum-wage job. She was an idiot.

She got Dr. Erdmann up to his apartment and said goodnight. He seemed distant, preoccupied. Going down in the elevator, a mood of desolation came over her. What she really wanted was to stay and watch Henry Erdmann’s TV, sleep on his sofa, wake up to fix his coffee and have someone to talk to while she did it. Not go back to her shabby apartment, bolted securely against Jim but never secure enough that she felt really safe. She’d rather stay here, in a home for failing old people, and how perverted and sad was that?

And what had happened to Dr. Erdmann on the way home from the college?

\* \* \* \*

### THREE

Twice now. Henry lay awake, wondering what the hell was going on in his brain. He was accustomed to relying on that organ. His knees had succumbed to arthritis, his hearing aid required constant adjustment, and his prostate housed a slow-growing cancer that, the doctor said, wouldn’t kill him until long after something else did—the medical profession’s idea of cheerful news. But his brain remained clear, and using it well had always been his greatest pleasure. Greater even than sex, greater than food, greater than marriage to Ida, much as he had loved her.

God, the things that age let you admit.

Which were the best years? No question there: Los Alamos, working on Operation Ivy with Ulam and Teller and Carson Mark and the rest. The excitement and frustration and awe of developing the “Sausage,” the first test of staged radiation implosion. The day it was detonated at Eniwetok. Henry, a junior member of the team, hadn’t of course been present at the atoll, but he’d waited breathlessly for the results from Bogon. He’d cheered when Teller, picking up the shock waves on a seismometer in California, had sent his three-word telegram to Los Alamos: “It’s a boy.” Harry Truman himself had requested that bomb—to see to it that our country is able to defend itself against any possible aggressor—and Henry was proud of his work on it.

Shock waves. Yes, that was what today’s two incidents had felt like: shock waves to the brain. A small wave in his apartment, a larger one in Carrie’s car. But from what? It could only be some failure of his nervous system, the thing he dreaded most of all, far more than he dreaded death. Granted, teaching physics to graduate students was a long way from Los Alamos or Livermore, and most of the students were dolts—although not Haldane—but Henry enjoyed it. Teaching, plus reading the journals and following the on-line listserves, were his connection with physics. If some neurological “shock wave” disturbed his brain...

It was a long time before he could sleep.

“Oh my Lord, dear, what happened to youreye?”

Evelyn Krenchnoted sat with her friend Gina Somebody in the tiny waiting room outside Dr. O’Kane’s office. Henry scowled at her. Just like Evelyn to blurt out like that, embarrassing poor Carrie. The Krenchnoted woman was the most tactless busybody Henry had ever met, and he’d known a lot of physicists, a group not noted for tact. But at least the physicists hadn’t been busybodies.

“I’m fine,” Carrie said, trying to smile. “I walked into a door.”

\* \* \* \*

“Oh, dear, how did that happen? You should tell the doctor. I’m sure he could make a few minutes to see you, even though he must be running behind, I didn’t actually have an appointment today but he said he’d squeeze me in because something strange happened yesterday that I want to ask him about, but the time he gave me was supposed to start five minutes ago and you must be scheduled after that, he saw Gina already but she—”

Henry sat down and stopped listening. Evelyn’s noise, however, went on and on, a grating whine like a dentist drill. He imagined her on Eniwetok, rising into the air on a mushroom cloud, still talking. It was a relief when the doctor’s door opened and a woman came out, holding a book.

Henry had seen her before, although he didn’t know her name. Unlike most of the old bats at St. Sebastian’s, she was worth looking at. Not with Carrie’s radiant youthful beauty, of course; this woman must be in her seventies, at least. But she stood straight and graceful; her white hair fell in simple waves to her shoulders; her cheekbones and blue eyes were still good. However, Henry didn’t care for the way she was dressed. It reminded him of all those stupid childish protestors outside Los Alamos in the fifties and sixties. The woman wore a white T-shirt, a long cotton peasant skirt, a necklace of beads and shells, and several elaborate rings.

“Erin!” Evelyn cried. “How was your appointment? Everything okay?”

“Fine. Just a check-up.” Erin smiled vaguely and moved away. Henry strained to see the cover of her

book: Tao Te Ching. Disappointment lanced through him. One of those.

“But you weren’t scheduled for a check-up, no more than I was. So what happened that —” Erin walked quickly away, her smile fixed. Evelyn said indignantly, “Well, I call that just plain rude! Did you see that, Gina? You try to be friendly to some people and they just—”

“Mrs. Krenchnoted?” the nurse said, sticking her head out the office door. “The doctor will see you now.”

Evelyn lumbered up and through the door, still talking. In the blessed silence that followed, Henry said to Carrie, “How do you suppose Mr. Krenchnoted stood it?”

Carrie giggled and waved her hand toward the Krenchnoted’s friend, Gina. But Gina was asleep in her chair, which at least explained how she stood it.

Carrie said, “I’m glad you have this appointment today, Dr. Erdmann. You will tell him about what happened in the car yesterday, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You promise?”

“Yes.” Why were all women, even mild little Carrie, so insistent on regular doctor visits? Yes, doctors were useful for providing pills to keep the machine going, but Henry’s view was that you only needed to see a physician if something felt wrong. In fact, he’d forgotten about this regularly scheduled check-up until this morning, when Carrie called to say how convenient it was that his appointment here was just an hour before the one with Dr. DiBella at the hospital lab. Ordinarily Henry would have refused to go at all, except that he did intend to ask Dr. Jamison about the incident in the car.

Also, it was possible that fool Evelyn Krenchnoted was actually right about something for once. “Carrie, maybe you should ask the doctor to look at that eye.”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Has Jim called or come around again since—”

“No.”

Clearly she didn’t want to talk about it. Embarrassment, most likely. Henry could respect her reticence. Silently he organized his questions for Jamison.

But after Henry had gone into the office, leaving Carrie in the waiting room, and after he’d endured the tediums of the nurse’s measuring his blood pressure, of peeing into a cup, of putting on a ridiculous paper gown, it wasn’t Jamison who entered the room but a brusque, impossibly young boy in a white lab coat and officious manner.

“I’m Dr. Felton, Henry. How are we today?” He studied Henry’s chart, not looking at him.

Henry gritted his teeth. “You would know better than I, I imagine.”

“Feeling a bit cranky? Are your bowels moving all right?”

“My bowels are fine. They thank you for your concern.”

Felton looked up then, his eyes cold. “I’m going to listen to your lungs now. Cough when I tell you to.”

And Henry knew he couldn't do it. If the kid had reprimanded him—"I don't think sarcasm is appropriate here"—it would have at least been a response. But this utter dismissal, this treatment as if Henry were a child, or a moron.... He couldn't tell this insensitive young boor about the incident in the car, about the fear for his brain. It would degrade him to cooperate with Felton. Maybe DiBella would be better, even if he wasn't an M.D.

One doctor down, one to go.

\* \* \* \*

DiBella was better. What he was not, was organized.

At Redborn Memorial Hospital he said, "Ah, Dr. Erdmann, Carrie. Welcome. I'm afraid there's been a mix-up with Diagnostic Imaging. I thought I had the fMRI booked for you but they seem to have scheduled me out, or something. So we can do the Asher-Peyton scan but not the deep imaging. I'm sorry, I—" He shrugged helplessly and ran his hand through his hair.

Carrie tightened her mouth to a thin line. "Dr. Erdmann came all the way over here for your MRI, Dr. DiBella."

"'Jake,' please. I know. And we do the Asher-Peyton scan back at St. Sebastian's. I really am sorry."

Carrie's lips didn't soften. It always surprised Henry how fierce she could be in defense of her "resident-assignees." Why was usually gentle Carrie being so hard on this young man?

"I'll meet you back at St. Sebastian's," DiBella said humbly.

Once there, he affixed electrodes on Henry's skull and neck, eased a helmet over his head, and sat at a computer whose screen faced away from Henry. After the room was darkened, a series of pictures projected onto one white wall: a chocolate cake, a broom, a chair, a car, a desk, a glass: four or five dozen images. Henry had to do nothing except sit there, and he grew bored. Eventually the pictures grew more interesting, interspersing a house fire, a war scene, a father hugging a child, Rita Hayworth. Henry chuckled. "I didn't think your generation even knew who Rita Hayworth was."

"Please don't talk, Dr. Erdmann."

The session went on for twenty minutes. When it was over, DiBella removed the helmet and said, "Thank you so much. I really appreciate this." He began removing electrodes from Henry's head. Carrie stood, looking straight at Henry.

Now or never.

"Dr. DiBella," Henry said, "I'd like to ask you something. Tell you something, actually. An incident that happened yesterday. Twice." Henry liked the word "incident"; it sounded objective and explainable, like a police report.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"The first time I was standing in my apartment, the second time riding in a car with Carrie. The first incident was mild, the second more pronounced. Both times I felt something move through my mind, like a shockwave of sorts, leaving no after-effects except perhaps a slight fatigue. No abilities seem to be impaired. I'm hoping you can tell me what happened."

DiBella paused, an electrode dangling from his hand. Henry could smell the gooey gel on its end. "I'm not

an M.D., as I told you yesterday. This sounds like something you should discuss with your doctor at St. Sebastian's."

Carrie, who had been upset that Henry had not done just that, said, "In the car he sort of lost consciousness and his eyes rolled back in his head."

Henry said, "My doctor wasn't available this morning, and you are. Can you just tell me if that experience sounds like a stroke?"

"Tell me about it again."

Henry did, and DiBella said, "If it had been a TIA—a mini-stroke—you wouldn't have had such a strong reaction, and if it had been a more serious stroke, either ischemic or hemorrhagic, you'd have been left with at least temporary impairment. But you could have experienced a cardiac event of some sort, Dr. Erdmann. I think you should have an EKG at once."

Heart, not brain. Well, that was better. Still, fear slid coldly down Henry's spine, and he realized how much he wanted to go on leading his current life, limited though it was. Still, he smiled and said, "All right."

He'd known for at least twenty-five years that growing old wasn't for sissies.

\* \* \* \*

Carrie canceled her other resident-assignees, checking in with each on her cell, and shepherded Henry through the endless hospital rituals that followed, administrative and diagnostic and that most ubiquitous medical procedure, waiting. By the end of the day, Henry knew that his heart was fine, his brain showed no clots or hemorrhages, there was no reason for him to have fainted. That's what they were calling it now: a faint, possibly due to low blood sugar. He was scheduled for glucose-tolerance tests next week. Fools. It hadn't been any kind of faint. What had happened to him had been something else entirely, *sui generis*.

Then it happened again, the same and yet completely different.

At nearly midnight Henry lay in bed, exhausted. For once, he'd thought, sleep would come easily. It hadn't. Then, all at once, he was lifted out of his weary mind. This time there was no violent wrenching, no eyes rolling back in his head. He just suddenly wasn't in his darkened bedroom any more, not in his body, not in his mind.

He was dancing, soaring with pointed toes high above a polished stage, feeling the muscles in his back and thighs stretch as he sat cross-legged on a deep cushion he had embroidered with ball bearings rolling down a factory assembly line across from soldiers shooting at him as he ducked—

It was gone.

Henry jerked upright, sweating in the dark. He fumbled for the bed lamp, missed, sent the lamp crashing off the nightstand and onto the floor. He had never danced on a stage, embroidered a cushion, worked in a factory, or gone to war. And he'd been awake. Those were memories, not dreams—no, not even memories, they were too vivid for that. They'd been experiences, as vivid and real as if they were all happening now, and all happening simultaneously. Experiences. But not his.

The lamp was still glowing. Laboriously he leaned over the side of the bed and plucked it off the floor. As he set it back on the nightstand, it went out. Not, however, before he saw that the plug had been pulled from the wall socket during the fall, well before he bent over to pick it up.

\* \* \* \*

The ship grew more agitated, the rents in space-time and resulting flop transitions larger. Every aspect of the entity strained forward, jumping through the vacuum flux in bursts of radiation that appeared now near one star system, now another, now in the deep black cold where no stars exerted gravity. The ship could move no quicker without destroying either nearby star systems or its own coherence. It raced as rapidly as it could, sent ahead of itself even faster tendrils of quantum-entangled information. Faster, faster ...

It was not fast enough.

\* \* \* \*

## FOUR

Thursday morning, Henry's mind seemed to him as clear as ever. After an early breakfast he sat at his tiny kitchen table, correcting physics papers. The apartments at St. Sebastian's each had a small eat-in kitchen, a marginally larger living room, a bedroom and bath. Grab rails, non-skid flooring, overly cheerful colors, and intercoms reminded the residents that they were old—as if, Henry thought scornfully, any of them were likely to forget it. However, Henry didn't really mind the apartment's size or surveillance. After all, he'd flourished at Los Alamos, crowded and ramshackle and paranoid as the place had been. Most of his life went on inside his head.

For each problem set with incomplete answers—which would probably be all of them except Haldane's, although Julia Hernandez had at least come up with a novel and mathematically interesting approach—he tried to follow the student's thinking, to see where it had gone wrong. After an hour of this, he had gone over two papers. A plane screamed overhead, taking off from the airport. Henry gave it up. He couldn't concentrate.

Outside St. Sebastian's infirmary yesterday, the horrible Evelyn Krenchnoted had said that she didn't have a check-up appointment, but that the doctor was "squeezing her in" because "something strange happened yesterday." She'd also mentioned that the aging-hippie beauty, Erin Whatever-Her-Name-Was, hadn't had a scheduled appointment either.

Once, at a mandatory ambulatory-residents' meeting, Henry had seen Evelyn embroidering.

Anna Chernov, St. Sebastian's most famous resident, was a ballet dancer. Everyone knew that.

He felt stupid even thinking along these lines. What was he hypothesizing here, some sort of telepathy? No respectable scientific study had ever validated such a hypothesis. Also, during Henry's three years at St. Sebastian's—years during which Evelyn and Miss Chernov had also been in residence—he had never felt the slightest connection with, or interest in, either of them.

He tried to go back to correcting problem sets.

The difficulty was, he had two data points, his own "incidents" and the sudden rash of unscheduled doctors' appointments, and no way to either connect or eliminate either one. If he could at least satisfy himself that Evelyn and Erin's doctor visits concerned something other than mental episodes, he would be down to one data point. One was an anomaly. Two were an indicator of ... something.

This wasn't one of Henry's days to have Carrie's assistance. He pulled himself up on his walker, inched to the desk, and found the Resident Directory. Evelyn had no listings for either cell phone or email. That surprised him; you'd think such a yenta would want as many ways to bother people as possible. But some St. Sebastian's residents were still, after all these decades, wary of any technology they hadn't

grown up with. Fools, thought Henry, who had once driven four hundred miles to buy one of the first, primitive, put-it-together-yourself kits for a personal computer. He noted Evelyn's apartment number and hobbled toward the elevators.

"Why, Henry Erdmann! Come in, come in!" Evelyn cried. She looked astonished, as well she might. And—oh, God—behind her sat a circle of women, their chairs jammed in like molecules under hydraulic compression, all sewing on bright pieces of cloth.

"I don't want to intrude on your—"

"Oh, it's just the Christmas Elves!" Evelyn cried. "We're getting an early start on the holiday wall hanging for the lobby. The old one is getting so shabby."

Henry didn't remember a holiday wall hanging in the lobby, unless she was referring to that garish lumpy blanket with Santa Claus handing out babies to guardian angels. The angels had had tight, cotton-wool hair that made them look like Q-Tips. He said, "Never mind, it's not important."

"Oh, come on in! We were just talking about—and maybe you have more information on it!—this fabulous necklace that Anna Chernov has in the office safe, the one the czar gave—"

"No, no, I have no information. I'll—"

"But if you just—"

Henry said desperately, "I'll call you later."

To his horror, Evelyn lowered her eyes and murmured demurely, "All right, Henry," while the women behind her tittered. He backed away down the hall.

He was pondering how to discover Erin's last name when she emerged from an elevator. "Excuse me!" he called the length of the corridor. "May I speak to you a moment?"

She came toward him, another book in her hand, her face curious but reserved. "Yes?"

"My name is Henry Erdmann. I'd like to ask what will, I know, sound like a very strange question. Please forgive my intrusiveness, and believe that I have a good reason for asking. You had an unscheduled appointment with Dr. Felton yesterday?"

Something moved behind her eyes. "Yes."

"Did your reason for seeing him have to do with any sort of ... of mental experience? A small seizure, or an episode of memory aberration, perhaps?"

Erin's ringed hand tightened on her book. He noted, numbly, that today it seemed to be a novel. She said, "Let's talk."

\* \* \* \*

"I don't believe it," he said. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bass, but it sounds like rubbish to me."

She shrugged, a slow movement of thin shoulders under her peasant blouse. Her long printed skirt, yellow flowers on black, swirled on the floor. Her apartment looked like her: bits of cloth hanging on the walls, a curtain of beads instead of a door to the bedroom, Hindu statues and crystal pyramids and Navaho blankets. Henry disliked the clutter, the childishness of the decor, even as he felt flooded by gratitude toward Erin Bass. She had released him. Her ideas about the "incidents" were so dumb that he

could easily dismiss them, along with anything he might have been thinking which resembled them.

“There’s an energy in the universe as a whole,” she’d said. “When you stop resisting the flow of life and give up the grasping of trishna, you awaken to that energy. In popular terms, you have an ‘out-of-body experience,’ activating stored karma from past lives and fusing it into one moment of transcendent insight.”

Henry had had no transcendental insight. He knew about energy in the universe—it was called electromagnetic radiation, gravity, the strong and weak nuclear forces— and none of it had karma. He didn’t believe in reincarnation, and he hadn’t been out of his body. Throughout all three “incidents,” he’d felt his body firmly encasing him. He hadn’t left; other minds had somehow seemed to come in. But it was all nonsense, an aberration of a brain whose synapses and axons, dendrites and vesicles, were simply growing old.

He grasped his walker and rose. “Thanks anyway, Mrs. Bass. Good-bye.”

“Again, call me ‘Erin.’ Are you sure you wouldn’t like some green tea before you go?”

“Quite sure. Take care.”

He was at the door when she said, almost casually, “Oh, Henry? When I had my own out-of-body Tuesday evening, there were others with me in the awakened state.... Were you ever closely connected with—I know this sounds odd—a light that somehow shone more brightly than many suns?”

He turned and stared at her.

\* \* \* \*

“This will take about twenty minutes,” DiBella said as Henry slid into the MRI machine. He’d had the procedure before and disliked it just as much then, the feeling of being enclosed in a tube not much larger than a coffin. Some people, he knew, couldn’t tolerate it at all. But Henry’d be damned if he let a piece of machinery defeat him, and anyway the tube didn’t enclose him completely; it was open at the bottom. So he pressed his lips together and closed his eyes and let the machine swallow his strapped-down body.

“You okay in there, Dr. Erdmann?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good. Excellent. Just relax.”

To his own surprise, he did. In the tube, everything seemed very remote. He actually dozed, waking twenty minutes later when the tube slid him out again.

“Everything look normal?” he asked DiBella, and held his breath.

“Completely,” DiBella said. “Thank you, that’s a good baseline for my study. Your next one, you know, will come immediately after you view a ten-minute video. I’ve scheduled that for a week from today.”

“Fine.” Normal. Then his brain was okay, and this weirdness was over. Relief turned him jaunty. “I’m glad to assist your project, doctor. What is its focus, again?”

“Cerebral activation patterns in senior citizens. Did you realize, Dr. Erdmann, that the over-sixty-five demographic is the fastest-growing one in the world? And that globally there are now 140 million people over the age of eighty?”



Henry hadn't realized, nor did he care. The St. Sebastian's aide came forward to help Henry to his feet. He was a dour young man whose name Henry hadn't caught. DiBella said, "Where's Carrie today?"

"It's not her day with me."

"Ah." DiBella didn't sound very interested; he was already prepping his screens for the next volunteer. Time on the MRI, he'd told Henry, was tight, having to be scheduled between hospital use.

The dour young man—Darryl? Darrin? Dustin?—drove Henry back to St. Sebastian's and left him to make his own way upstairs. In his apartment, Henry lowered himself laboriously to the sofa. Just a few minutes' nap, that's all he needed, even a short excursion tired him so much now—although it would be better if Carrie had been along, she always took such good care of him, such a kind and dear young woman. If he and Ida had ever had children, he'd have wanted them to be like Carrie. If that bastard Jim Peltier ever again tried to—

It shot through him like a bolt of lightning.

Henry screamed. This time the experience hurt, searing the inside of his skull and his spinal cord down to his tailbone. No dancing, no embroidering, no meditating—and yet others were there, not as individuals but as a collective sensation, a shared pain, making the pain worse by pooling it. He couldn't stand it, he was going to die, this was the end of—

The pain was gone. It vanished as quickly as it came, leaving him bruised inside, throbbing as if his entire brain had undergone a root canal. His gorge rose, and just in time he twisted his aching body to the side and vomited over the side of the sofa onto the carpet.

His fingers fumbled in the pocket of his trousers for the St. Sebastian's panic button that Carrie insisted he wear. He found it, pressed the center, and lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

## FIVE

Carrie went home early. Thursday afternoons were assigned to Mrs. Lopez, and her granddaughter had showed up unexpectedly. Carrie suspected that Vicky Lopez wanted money again, since that seemed to be the only time she did turn up at St. Sebastian's, but that was not Carrie's business. Mrs. Lopez said happily that Vicky could just as easily take her shopping instead of Carrie, and Vicky agreed, looking greedy. So Carrie went home.

If she'd been fortunate enough to have a grandmother—to have any relatives besides her no-good step-brothers in California—she would treat that hypothetical grandmother better than did Vicky, she of the designer jeans and cashmere crew necks and massive credit-card debt. Although Carrie wouldn't want her grandmother to be like Mrs. Lopez, either, who treated Carrie like not-very-clean hired help.

Well, she was hired help, of course. The job as a St. Sebastian's aide was the first thing she'd seen in the Classifieds the day she finally walked out on Jim. She grabbed the job blindly, like a person going over a cliff who sees a fragile branch growing from crumbly rock. The weird thing was that after the first day, she knew she was going to stay. She liked old people (most of them, anyway). They were interesting and grateful (most of them, anyway)—and safe. During that first terrified week at the YMCA, while she searched for a one-room apartment she could actually afford, St. Sebastian's was the one place she felt safe.

Jim had changed that, of course. He'd found out the locations of her job and apartment. Cops could find

anything.

She unlocked her door after making sure the dingy corridor was empty, slipped inside, shot the deadbolt, and turned on the light. The only window faced an air shaft, and the room was dark even on the brightest day. Carrie had done what she could with bright cushions and Salvation Army lamps and dried flowers, but dark was dark.

“Hello, Carrie,” Jim said.

She whirled around, stifling a scream. But the sickening thing was the rest of her reaction. Unbidden and hated—God, how hated!—but still there was the sudden thrill, the flash of excitement that energized every part of her body. “That’s not unusual,” her counselor at the Battered Women’s Help Center had said, “because frequently an abuser and his victim are both fully engaged in the struggle to dominate each other. How triumphant do you feel when he’s in the apology-and-wooing phase of the abuse cycle? Why do you think you haven’t left before now?”

It had taken Carrie so long to accept that. And here it was again. Here Jim was again.

“How did you get in?”

“Does it matter?”

“You got Kelsey to let you in, didn’t you?” The building super could be bribed to almost anything with a bottle of Scotch. Although maybe Jim hadn’t needed that; he had a badge. Not even the charges she’d brought against him, all of which had been dropped, had affected his job. Nobody on the outside ever realized how common domestic violence was in cops’ homes.

Jim wasn’t in uniform now. He wore jeans, boots, a sports coat she’d always liked. He held a bouquet of flowers. Not supermarket carnations, either: red roses in shining gold paper. “Carrie, I’m sorry I startled you, but I wanted so bad for us to talk. Please, just let me have ten minutes. That’s all. Ten minutes isn’t much to give me against three years of marriage.”

“We’re not married. We’re legally separated.”

“I know. I know. And I deserve that you left me. I know that now. But just ten minutes. Please.”

“You’re not supposed to be here at all! There’s a restraining order against you—and you’re a cop!”

“I know. I’m risking my career to talk to you for ten minutes. Doesn’t that say how much I care? Here, these are for you.”

Humbly, eyes beseeching, he held out the roses. Carrie didn’t take them.

“You blackened my eye the last time we ‘talked,’ you bastard!”

“I know. If you knew how much I’ve regretted that... If you had any idea how many nights I laid awake hating myself for that. I was out of my mind, Carrie. I really was. But it taught me something. I’ve changed. I’m going to A.A. now, I’ve got a sponsor and everything. I’m working my program.”

“I’ve heard this all before!”

“I know. I know you have. But this time is different.” He lowered his eyes, and Carrie put her hands on her hips. Then it hit her: She had said all this before, too. She had stood in this scolding, one-up stance. He had stood in his humble stance, as well. This was the apology-and-wooing stage that the counselor

had talked about, just one more scene in their endless script. And she was eating it up as if it had never happened before, was reveling in the glow of righteous indignation fed by his groveling. Just like the counselor had said.

She was so sickened at herself that her knees nearly buckled.

“Get out, Jim.”

“I will. I will. Just tell me that you heard me, that there’s some chance for us still, even if it’s a chance I don’t deserve. Oh, Carrie—”

“Get out!” Her nauseated fury was at herself.

“If you’d just—”

“Out! Out now!”

His face changed. Humility was replaced by astonishment—this wasn’t how their script went—and then by rage. He threw the flowers at her. “You won’t even listen to me? I come here goddamn apologizing and you won’t even listen? What makes you so much better than me, you fucking bitch you’re nothing but a—”

Carrie whirled around and grabbed for the deadbolt. He was faster. Faster, stronger, and that was the old script, too, how could she forget for even a half second he—

Jim threw her to the floor. Did he have his gun? Would he—she caught a glimpse of his face, so twisted with rage that he looked like somebody else, even as she was throwing up her arms to protect her head. He kicked her in the belly. The pain was astonishing. It burned along her body she was burning she couldn’t breathe she was going to die.... His boot drew back to kick her again and Carrie tried to scream. No breath came. This was it then no no no—

Jim crumpled to the floor.

Between her sheltering arms, she caught sight of his face as he went down. Astonishment gaped open the mouth, widened the eyes. The image clapped onto her brain. His body fell heavily on top of hers, and didn’t move.

When she could breathe again, she crawled out from under him, whimpering with short guttural sounds: uh uh uh. Yet a part of her brain worked clearly, coldly. She felt for a pulse, held her fingers over his mouth to find a breath, put her ear to his chest. He was dead.

She staggered to the phone and called 911.

\* \* \* \*

Cops. Carrie didn’t know them; this wasn’t Jim’s precinct. First uniforms and then detectives. An ambulance. A forensic team. Photographs, fingerprints, a search of the one-room apartment, with her consent. You have the right to remain silent. She didn’t remain silent, didn’t need a lawyer, told what she knew as Jim’s body was replaced by a chalked outline and neighbors gathered in the hall. And when it was finally, finally over and she was told that her apartment was a crime scene until the autopsy was performed and where could she go, she said, “St. Sebastian’s. I work there.”

“Maybe you should call in sick for this night’s shift, ma’am, it’s—”

“I’m going to St. Sebastian’s!”

She did, her hands shaky on the steering wheel. She went straight to Dr. Erdmann’s door and knocked hard. His walker inched across the floor, inside. Inside, where it was safe.

“Carrie! What on Earth—”

“Can I come in? Please? The police—”

“Police?” he said sharply. “What police?” Peering around her as if he expected to see blue uniforms filling the hall. “Where’s your coat? It’s fifty degrees out!”

She had forgotten a coat. Nobody had mentioned a coat. Pack a bag, they said, but nobody had mentioned a coat. Dr. Erdmann always knew the temperature and barometer reading, he kept track of such things. Belatedly, and for the first time, she burst into tears.

He drew her in, made her sit on the sofa. Carrie noticed, with the cold clear part of her mind that still seemed to be functioning, that there was a very wet spot on the carpet and a strong odor, as if someone had scrubbed with disinfectant. “Could I ... could I have a drink?” She hadn’t known she was going to say that until the words were out. She seldom drank. Too much like Jim.

Jim...

The sherry steadied her. Sherry seemed so civilized, and so did the miniature glass he offered it in. She breathed easier, and told him her story. He listened without saying a word.

“I think I’m a suspect,” Carrie said. “Well, of course I am. He just dropped dead when we were fighting ... but I never so much as laid a hand on him. I was just trying to protect my head and ... Dr. Erdmann, what is it? You’re white as snow! I shouldn’t have come, I’m sorry, I—”

“Of course you should have come!” he snapped, so harshly that she was startled. A moment later he tried to smile. “Of course you should have come. What are friends for?”

Friends. But she had other friends, younger friends. Joanne and Connie and Jennifer ... not that she had seen any of them much in the last three months. It had been Dr. Erdmann she’d thought of, first and immediately. And now he looked so...

“You’re not well,” she said. “What is it?”

“Nothing. I ate something bad at lunch, in the dining room. Half the building started vomiting a few hours later. Evelyn Krenchnoted and Gina Martinelli and Erin Bass and Bob Donovan and Al Cosmano and Anna Chernov. More.”

He watched her carefully as he recited the names, as if she should somehow react. Carrie knew some of those people, but mostly just to say hello. Only Mr. Cosmano was on her resident-assignee list. Dr. Erdmann looked stranger than she had ever seen him.

He said, “Carrie, what time did Jim ... did he drop dead? Can you fix the exact time?”

“Well, let me see ... I left here at two and I stopped at the bank and the gas station and the convenience store, so maybe 3:00 or 3:30? Why?”

Dr. Erdmann didn’t answer. He was silent for so long that Carrie grew uneasy. She shouldn’t have come, it was a terrible imposition, and anyway there was probably a rule against aides staying in residents’

apartments, what was she thinking—

“Let me get blankets and pillow for the sofa,” Dr. Erdmann finally said, in a voice that still sounded odd to Carrie. “It’s fairly comfortable. For a sofa.”

\* \* \* \*

## SIX

Not possible. The most ridiculous coincidence. That was all—coincidence. Simultaneity was not cause-and-effect. Even the dimmest physics undergraduate knew that.

In his mind, Henry heard Richard Feynman say about string theory, “I don’t like that they’re not calculating anything. I don’t like that they don’t check their ideas. I don’t like that for anything that disagrees with an experiment, they cook up an explanation.... The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool.” Henry hadn’t liked Feynman, whom he’d met at conferences at Cal Tech. A buffoon, with his bongo drums and his practical jokes and his lock-picking. Undignified. But the brilliant buffoon had been right. Henry didn’t like string theory, either, and he didn’t like ideas that weren’t calculated, checked, and verified by experimental data. Besides, the idea that Henry had somehow killed Jim Peltier with his thoughts ... preposterous.

Mere thoughts could not send a bolt of energy through a distant man’s body. But the bolt itself wasn’t a “cooked-up” idea. It had happened. Henry had felt it.

DiBella had said that Henry’s MRI looked completely normal.

Henry lay awake much of Thursday night, which made the second night in a row, while Carrie slept the oblivious deep slumber of the young. In the morning, before she was awake, he dressed quietly, left the apartment with his walker, and made his way to the St. Sebastian’s Infirmary. He expected to find the Infirmary still crammed with people who’d vomited when he had yesterday afternoon. He was wrong.

“Can I help you?” said a stout, middle-aged nurse carrying a breakfast tray. “Are you feeling ill?”

“No, no,” Henry said hastily. “I’m here to visit someone. Evelyn Krenchnoted. She was here yesterday.”

“Oh, Evelyn’s gone back. They’ve all gone back, the food poisoning was so mild. Our only patients here now are Bill Terry and Anna Chernov.” She said the latter name the way many of the staff did, as if she’d just been waiting for an excuse to speak it aloud. Usually this irritated Henry—what was ballet dancing compared to, say, physics?—but now he seized on it.

“May I see Miss Chernov, then? Is she awake?”

“This is her tray. Follow me.”

The nurse led the way to the end of a short corridor. Yellow curtains, bedside table, monitors and IV poles; the room looked like every other hospital room Henry had ever seen, except for the flowers. Masses and masses of flowers, bouquets and live plants and one huge floor pot of brass holding what looked like an entire small tree. A man, almost lost amid all the flowers, sat in the room’s one chair.

“Here’s breakfast, Miss Chernov,” said the nurse reverently. She fussed with setting the tray on the table, positioning it across the bed, removing the dish covers.

“Thank you.” Anna Chernov gave her a gracious, practiced smile, and looked inquiringly at Henry. The other man, who had not risen at Henry’s entrance, glared at him.

They made an odd pair. The dancer, who looked younger than whatever her actual age happened to be, was more beautiful than Henry had realized, with huge green eyes over perfect cheekbones. She wasn't hooked to any of the machinery on the wall, but a cast on her left leg bulged beneath the yellow bedcover. The man had a head shaped like a garden trowel, an aggressively bristly gray crew cut, and small suspicious eyes. He wore an ill-fitting sports coat over a red T-shirt and jeans. There seemed to be grease under his fingernails—grease, in St. Sebastian's? Henry would have taken him for part of the maintenance staff except that he looked too old, although vigorous and walker-free. Henry wished him at the devil. This was going to be difficult enough without an audience.

“Miss Chernov, please forgive the intrusion, especially so early, but I think this is important. My name is Henry Erdmann, and I'm a resident on Three.”

“Good morning,” she said, with the same practiced, detached graciousness she'd shown the nurse. “This is Bob Donovan.”

“Hi,” Donovan said, not smiling.

“Are you connected in any way with the press, Mr. Erdmann? Because I do not give interviews.”

“No, I'm not. I'll get right to the point, if I may. Yesterday I had an attack of nausea, just as you did, and you also, Mr. Donovan. Evelyn Krenchnoted told me.”

Donovan rolled his eyes. Henry would have smiled at that if he hadn't felt so tense.

He continued, “I'm not sure the nausea was food poisoning. In my case, it followed a ... a sort of attack of a quite different sort. I felt what I can only describe as a bolt of energy burning along my nerves, very powerfully and painfully. I'm here to ask if you felt anything similar.”

Donovan said, “You a doctor?”

“Not an M.D. I'm a physicist.”

Donovan scowled savagely, as if physics were somehow offensive. Anna Chernov said, “Yes, I did, Dr. Erdmann, although I wouldn't describe it as ‘painful.’ It didn't hurt. But a ‘bolt of energy along the nerves’—yes. It felt like—” She stopped abruptly.

“Yes?” Henry said. His heart had started a slow, irregular thump in his chest. Someone else had also felt that energy.

But Anna declined to say what it had felt like. Instead she turned her head to the side. “Bob? Did you feel anything like that?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“I don't know what,” Henry said. All at once, leaning on the walker, his knees felt wobbly. Anna noticed at once. “Bob, bring Dr. Erdmann the chair, please.”

Donovan got up from the chair, dragged it effortlessly over to Henry, and stood sulkily beside a huge bouquet of autumn-colored chrysanthemums, roses, and dahlias. Henry sank onto the chair. He was at eye level with the card to the flowers, which said FROM THE ABT COMPANY. GET WELL SOON!

Anna said, “I don't understand what you're driving at, Dr. Erdmann. Are you saying we all had the same disease and it wasn't food poisoning? It was something with a ... a surge of energy followed by nausea?”

“Yes, I guess I am.” He couldn’t tell her about Jim Peltier. Here, in this flower-and-antiseptic atmosphere, under Donovan’s pathetic jealousy and Anna’s cool courtesy, the whole idea seemed unbelievably wild. Henry Erdmann did not like wild ideas. He was, after all, a scientist.

But that same trait made him persist a little longer. “Had you felt anything like that ever before, Miss Chernov?”

“Anna,” she said automatically. “Yes, I did. Three times before, in fact. But much more minor, and with no nausea. I think they were just passing moments of dozing off, in fact. I’ve been laid up with this leg for a few days now, and it’s been boring enough that I sleep a lot.”

It was said without self-pity, but Henry had a sudden glimpse of what being “laid up” must mean to a woman for whom the body, not the mind, had been the lifelong source of achievement, of pleasure, of occupation, of self. What, in fact, growing old must mean to such a woman. Henry had been more fortunate; his mind was his life source, not his ageing body, and his mind still worked fine.

Or did it, if it could hatch that crackpot hypothesis? What would Feynman, Teller, Gell-Mann have said? Embarrassment swamped him. He struggled to rise.

“Thank you, Miss Chernov, I won’t take up any more of your—”

“I felt it, too,” Donovan said suddenly. “But only two times, like you said. Tuesday and yesterday afternoon. What are you after here, doc? You saying there’s something going around? Is it dangerous?”

Henry, holding onto the walker, turned to stare at him. “You felt it, too?”

“I just told you I did! Now you tell me—is this some new catching, dangerous-like disease?”

The man was frightened, and covering fear with belligerence. Did he even understand what a “physicist” was? He seemed to have taken Henry for some sort of specialized physician. What on Earth was Bob Donovan doing with Anna Chernov?

He had his answer in the way she dismissed them both. “No, Bob, there’s no dangerous disease. Dr. Erdmann isn’t in medicine. Now if you don’t mind, I’m very tired and I must eat or the nurse will scold me. Perhaps you’d better leave now, and maybe I’ll see you both around the building when I’m discharged.” She smiled wearily.

Henry saw the look on Donovan’s face, a look he associated with undergraduates: hopeless, helpless lovesickness. Amid those wrinkles and sags, the look was ridiculous. And yet completely sincere, poor bastard.

“Thank you again,” Henry said, and left as quickly as his walker would allow. How dare she treat him like a princess dismissing a lackey? And yet ... he’d been the intruder on her world, that feminine arena of flowers and ballet and artificial courtesy. A foreign, somehow repulsive world. Not like the rigorous masculine brawl of physics.

But he’d learned that she’d felt the “energy,” too. And so had Donovan, and at the exact same times as Henry. Several more data points for ... what?

He paused on his slow way to the elevator and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

When Henry reached his apartment, Carrie was awake. She sat with two strangers, who both rose as

Henry entered, at the table where Henry and Ida had eaten dinner for fifty years. The smell of coffee filled the air.

“I made coffee,” Carrie said. “I hope you don’t mind ... This is Detective Geraci and Detective Washington. Dr. Erdmann, this is his apartment...” She trailed off, looking miserable. Her hair hung in uncombed tangles and some sort of black make-up smudged under her eyes. Or maybe just tiredness.

“Hello, Dr. Erdmann,” the male detective said. He was big, heavily muscled, with beard shadow even at this hour—just the sort of thuggish looks that Henry most mistrusted. The black woman was much younger, small and neat and unsmiling. “We had a few follow-up questions for Ms. Vesey about last night.”

Henry said, “Does she need a lawyer?”

“That’s up to your granddaughter, of course,” at the same moment that Carrie said, “I told them I don’t want a lawyer,” and Henry was adding, “I’ll pay for it.” In the confusion of sentences, the mistake about “granddaughter” went uncorrected.

Geraci said, “Were you here when Ms. Vesey arrived last night?”

“Yes,” Henry said.

“And can you tell us your whereabouts yesterday afternoon, sir?”

Was the man a fool? “Certainly I can, but surely you don’t suspect me, sir, of killing Officer Peltier?”

“We don’t suspect anyone at this point. We’re asking routine questions, Dr. Erdmann.”

“I was in Redborn Memorial from mid-afternoon until just before Carrie arrived here. The Emergency Room, being checked for a suspected heart attack. Which,” he added hastily, seeing Carrie’s face, “I did not have. It was merely severe indigestion brought on by the attack of food poisoning St. Sebastian’s suffered yesterday afternoon.”

Hah! Take that, Detective Thug!

“Thank you,” Geraci said. “Are you a physician, Dr. Erdmann?”

“No. A doctor of physics.”

He half-expected Geraci to be as ignorant about that as Bob Donovan had been, but Geraci surprised him. “Experimental or theoretical?”

“Theoretical. Not, however, for a long time. Now I teach.”

“Good for you.” Geraci rose, Detective Washington just a beat behind him. In Henry’s hearing the woman had said nothing whatsoever. “Thank you both. We’ll be in touch about the autopsy results.”

\* \* \* \*

In the elevator, Tara Washington said, “These old-people places give me the creeps.”

“One day you and—”

“Spare me the lecture, Vince. I know I have to get old. I don’t have to like it.”



“You have a lot of time yet,” he said, but his mind clearly wasn’t on the rote reassurance. “Erdmann knows something.”

“Yeah?” She looked at him with interest; Vince Geraci had a reputation in the department for having a “nose.” He was inevitably right about things that smelled hinky. Truth was, she was a little in awe of him. She’d only made detective last month and was fucking lucky to be partnered with Geraci. Still, her natural skepticism led her to say, “That old guy? He sure the hell didn’t do the job himself. He couldn’t squash a cockroach. You talking about a hit for hire?”

“Don’t know.” Geraci considered. “No. Something else. Something more esoteric.”

Tara didn’t know what “esoteric” meant, so she kept quiet. Geraci was smart. Too smart for his own good, some uniforms said, but that was just jealousy talking, or the kind of cops that would rather smash down doors than solve crimes. Tara Washington knew she was no door-smasher. She intended to learn everything she could from Vince Geraci, even if she didn’t have his vocabulary. Everything, and then some. She intended to someday be just as good as he was.

Geraci said, “Let’s talk to the staff about this epidemic of food poisoning.”

But the food poisoning checked out. And halfway through the morning, the autopsy report was called in. Geraci shut his cell and said, “Peltier died of ‘a cardiac event.’ Massive and instantaneous heart failure.”

“Young cop like that? Fit and all?”

“That’s what the M.E. says.”

“So no foul play. Investigation closed.” In a way, she was disappointed. The murder of a cop by a battered wife would have been pretty high-profile. That’s why Geraci had been assigned to it.

“Investigation closed,” Geraci said. “But just the same, Erdmann knows something. We’re just never gonna find out what it is.”

\* \* \* \*

## SEVEN

Just before noon on Friday, Evelyn lowered her plump body onto a cot ready to slide into the strange-looking medical tube. She had dressed up for the occasion in her best suit, the polyester blue one with all the blue lace, and her good cream pumps. Dr. DiBella—such a good-looking young man, too bad she wasn’t fifty years younger aha ha ha—said, “Are you comfortable, Mrs. Krenchnoted?”

“Call me Evelyn. Yes, I’m fine, I never had one of these—what did you call it?”

“A functional MRI. I’m just going to strap you in, since it’s very important you lie completely still for the procedure.”

“Oh, yes, I see, you don’t want my brain wobbling all over the place while you take a picture of—Gina, you still there? I can’t see—”

“I’m here,” Gina called. “Don’t be scared, Evelyn. “Though I walk in the valley of—””

“There’s no shadows here and I’m not scared!” Really, sometimes Gina could be Too Much. Still, the MRI tube was a bit unsettling. “You just tell me when you’re ready to slide me into that thing, doctor, and I’ll brace myself. It’s tight as a coffin, isn’t it? Well, I’m going to be underground a long time but I

don't plan on starting now, aha ha ha! But if I can keep talking to you while I go in—”

“Certainly. Just keep talking.” He sounded resigned, poor man. Well, no wonder, he must get bored with doing things like this all the live-long day. She cast around for something to cheer him up.

“You're over at St. Sebastian's a lot now, aren't you, when you're not here that is, did you hear yet about Anna Chernov's necklace?”

“No, what about it? That's it, just hold your head right here.”

“It's fabulous!” Evelyn said, a little desperately. He was putting some sort of vise on her head, she couldn't move it at all. Her heart sped up. “Diamonds and rubies and I don't know what all. The Russian czar gave it to some famous ballerina who—”

“Really? Which czar?”

“The czar! Of Russia!” Really, what did the young learn in school these days? “He gave it to some famous ballerina who was Anna Chernov's teacher and she gave it to Anna, who naturally keeps it in the St. Sebastian's safe because just think if it were stolen, it wouldn't do the Home's reputation any good at all and anyway it's absolutely priceless so— oh!”

“You'll just slide in nice and slow, Evelyn. It'll be fine. Close your eyes if that helps. Now, have you seen this necklace?”

“Oh, no!” Evelyn gasped. Her heart raced as she felt the bed slide beneath her. “I'd love to, of course, but Anna isn't exactly friendly, she's pretty stuck-up, well I suppose that comes with being so famous and all but still—Doctor!”

“Do you want to come out?” he said, and she could tell that he was disappointed, she was sensitive that way, and she did want to come out but she didn't want to disappoint him, so ... “No! I'm fine! The necklace is something I'd really like to see, though, all those diamonds and rubies and maybe even sapphires too, those are my favorite stones with that blue fire in them, I'd really really like to see it—”

She was babbling, but all at once it seemed she could see the necklace in her mind, just the way she'd pictured it. A string of huge glowing diamonds and hanging from them a pendant of rubies and sapphires shining like I-don't-know-what but more beautiful than anything she'd ever seen oh she'd love to touch it just once! If Anna Chernov weren't so stuck-up and selfish then maybe she'd get the necklace from the safe and show it to Evelyn let her touch it get the necklace from the safe it would surely be the most wonderful thing Evelyn had ever seen or imagined get the necklace from the safe —

Evelyn screamed. Pain spattered through her like hot oil off a stove, burning her nerves and turning her mind to a red cloud ... So much pain! She was going to die, this was it and she hadn't even bought her cemetery plot yet oh God the pain—

Then the pain was gone and she lay sobbing as the bed slid out of the tube. Dr. DiBella was saying something but his voice was far away and growing farther ... farther ... farther....

Gone.

\* \* \* \*

Henry sat alone, eating a tuna fish sandwich at his kitchen table. Carrie had gone to work elsewhere in the building. It had been pleasant having her here, even though of course she—

Energy poured through him, like a sudden surge in household current, and all his nerves glowed. That was the only word. No pain this time, but something bright grew in his mind, white and red and blue but certainly not a flag, hard as stones ... yes, stones ... jewels...

It was gone. An immense lassitude took Henry. He could barely hold his head up, keep his eyes open. It took all his energy to push off from the table, stagger into the bedroom, and fall onto the bed, his mind empty as deep space.

\* \* \* \*

Carrie was filling in at a pre-lunch card game in the dining room, making a fourth at euchre with Ed Rosewood, Ralph Galetta, and Al Cosmano. Mr. Cosmano was her Friday morning resident-assignee. She'd taken him to buy a birthday gift for his daughter in California, to the Post Office to wrap and mail it, and then to the physical therapist. Mr. Cosmano was a complainer. St. Sebastian's was too cold, the doctors didn't know nothing, they wouldn't let you smoke, the food was terrible, he missed the old neighborhood, his daughter insisted on living in California instead of making a home for her old dad, kids these days.... Carrie went on smiling. Even Mr. Cosmano was better than being home in the apartment where Jim had died. When her lease was up, she was going to find something else, but in the meantime she had signed up for extra hours at St. Sebastian's, just to not be home.

"Carrie, hearts led," Ed Rosewood said. He was her partner, a sweet man whose hobby was watching C-Span. He would watch anything at all on C-Span, even hearings of the House Appropriations Committee, for hours and hours. This was good for St. Sebastian's because Mr. Rosewood didn't want an aide. He had to be pried off the TV even to play cards once a week. Mike O'Kane, their usual fourth, didn't feel well enough to play today, which was why Carrie sat holding five cards as the kitchen staff clattered in the next room, preparing lunch. Outside a plane passed overhead, droned away.

"Oh, yes," Carrie said, "hearts." She had a heart, thank heavens, since she couldn't remember what was trump. She was no good at cards.

"There's the king."

"Garbage from me."

"Your lead, Ed."

"Ace of clubs."

"Clubs going around.... Carrie?"

"Oh, yes, I..." Who led? Clubs were the only things on the table. She had no clubs, so she threw a spade. Mr. Galetta laughed.

Al Cosmano said, with satisfaction, "Carrie, you really shouldn't trump your partner's ace."

"Did I do that? Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Rosewood, I—"

Ed Rosewood slumped in his chair, eyes closed. So did Al Cosmano. Ralph Galetta stared dazedly at Carrie, then carefully laid his head on the table, eyes fixed.

"Mr. Cosmano! Help, somebody!"

The kitchen staff came running. But now all three men had their eyes open again, looking confused and sleepy.

“What happened?” demanded a cook.

“I don’t know,” Carrie said, “they all just got ... tired.”

The cook stared at Carrie as if she’d gone demented. “Tired?”

“Yeah ... tired,” Ed Rosewood said. “I just ... bye, guys. I’m going to take a nap. Don’t want lunch.” He rose, unsteady but walking on his own power, and headed out of the dining room. The other two men followed.

“Tired,” the cook said, glaring at Carrie.

“All at once! Really, really tired, like a spell of some kind!”

“A simultaneous ‘spell,’” the cook said. “Right. You’re new here? Well, old people get tired.” She walked away.

Carrie wasn’t new. The three men hadn’t just had normal tiredness. But there was no way to tell this bitch that, no way to even tell herself in any terms that made sense. Nothing was right.

Carrie had no appetite for lunch. She fled to the ladies’ room, where at least she could be alone.

Vince Geraci’s cell rang as he and Tara Washington exited a convenience store on East Elm. They’d been talking to the owner, who may or may not have been involved in an insurance scam. Vince had let Tara do most of the questioning, and she’d felt herself swell like a happy balloon when he said, “Nice job, rookie.”

“Geraci,” he said into the cell, then listened as they walked. Just before they reached the car, he said, “Okay,” and clicked off.

“What do we have?” Tara asked.

“We have a coincidence.”

“A coincidence?”

“Yes.” The skin on his forehead took on a strange topography. “St. Sebastian’s again. Somebody cracked the safe in the office.”

“Anything gone?”

“Let’s go find out.”

\* \* \* \*

Erin Bass woke on her yoga mat, the TV screen a blue blank except for CHANNEL 3 in the upper corner. She sat up, dazed but coherent. Something had happened.

She sat up carefully, her ringed hands lifting her body slowly off the mat. No broken bones, no pain anywhere. Apparently she had just collapsed onto the mat and then stayed out as the yoga tape played itself to an end. She’d been up to the fish posture, so there had been about twenty minutes left on the tape. And how long since then? The wall clock said 1:20. So about an hour.

Nothing hurt. Erin took a deep breath, rolled her head, stood up. Still no pain. And there hadn’t been pain when it happened, but there had been something ... not the calm place that yoga or meditation

sometimes took her, either. That place was pale blue, like a restful vista of valleys seen at dusk from a high, still mountain. This was brightly hued, rushing, more like a river ... a river of colors, blue and red and white.

She walked into the apartment's tiny kitchen, a slim figure in black leotard and tights. She'd missed lunch but wasn't hungry. From the cabinet she chose a chamomile tea, heated filtered water, and set the tea to steep.

That rushing river of energy was similar to what she'd felt before. Henry Erdmann had asked her about it, so perhaps he had felt it this time, as well. Although Henry hadn't seemed accepting of her explanation of trishna, grasping after the material moment, versus awakening. He was a typical scientist, convinced that science was the only route to knowledge, that what he could not test or measure or replicate was therefore not true even if he'd experienced it himself. Erin knew better. But there were a lot of people like Henry in this world, people who couldn't see that while rejecting "religion," they'd made a religion of science.

Sipping her tea, Erin considered what she should do next. She wasn't afraid of what had happened. Very little frightened Erin Bass. This astonished some people and confused the rest. But, really, what was there to be afraid of? Misfortune was just one turn of the wheel, illness another, death merely a transition from one state to another. What was due to come, would come, and beneath it all the great flow of cosmic energy would go on, creating the illusion that people thought was the world. She knew that the other residents of St. Sebastian's considered her nuts, pathetic, or so insulated from reality as to be both. ("Trust-fund baby, you know. Never worked a day in her life.") It didn't matter. She'd made herself a life here of books and meditation and volunteering on the Nursing floors, and if her past was far different than the other residents imagined, that was their illusion. She herself never thought about the past. It would come again, or not, as maya chose.

Still, something should be done about these recent episodes. They had affected not just her but also Henry Erdmann and, surprisingly, Evelyn Krenchnoted. Although on second thought, Erin shouldn't be surprised. Everyone possessed karma, even Evelyn, and Erin had no business assuming she knew anything about what went on under Evelyn's loud, intrusive surface. There were many paths up the mountain. So Erin should talk to Evelyn as well as to Henry. Perhaps there were others, too. Maybe she should—

Her doorbell rang. Leaving her tea on the table, Erin fastened a wrap skirt over her leotard and went to the door. Henry Erdmann stood there, leaning on his walker, his face a rigid mask of repressed emotion. "Mrs. Bass, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. May I come in?"

A strange feeling came over Erin. Not the surge of energy from the yoga mat, nor the high blue restfulness of meditation. Something else. She'd had these moments before, in which she recognized that something significant was about to happen. They weren't mystical or deep, these occasions; probably they came from nothing more profound than a subliminal reading of body language. But, always, they presaged something life-changing.

"Of course, Dr. Erdmann. Come in."

She held the door open wider, stepping aside to make room for his walker, but he didn't budge. Had he exhausted all his strength? He was ninety, she'd heard, ten years older than Erin, who was in superb shape from a lifetime of yoga and bodily moderation. She had never smoked, drank, over-eaten. All her indulgences had been emotional, and not for a very long time now.

"Do you need help? Can I—"

“No. No.” He seemed to gather himself and then inched the walker forward, moving toward her table. Over his shoulder, with a forced afterthought that only emphasized his tension, he said, “Thieves broke into St. Sebastian’s an hour and a half ago. They opened the safe in the office, the one with Anna Chernov’s necklace.”

Erin had never heard of Anna Chernov’s necklace. But the image of the rushing river of bright colors came back to her with overwhelming force, and she knew that she had been right: Something had happened, and nothing was ever going to be the same again.

\* \* \* \*

## EIGHT

For perhaps the tenth time, Jake DiBella picked up the fMRI scans, studied them yet again, and put them down. He rubbed his eyes hard with both sets of knuckles. When he took his hands away from his face, his bare little study at St. Sebastian’s looked blurry but the fMRI scans hadn’t changed. This is your brain on self-destruction, he thought, except that it wasn’t his brain. It was Evelyn Krenchnoted’s brain, and after she recovered consciousness, that tiresome and garrulous lady’s brain had worked as well as it ever had.

But the scan was extraordinary. As Evelyn lay in the magnetic imaging tube, everything had changed between one moment and the next. First image: a normal pattern of blood flow and oxygenation, and the next—

“Hello?”

Startled, Jake dropped the printouts. He hadn’t even heard the door open, or anyone knock. He really was losing it. “Come in, Carrie, I’m sorry, I didn’t.... You don’t have to do that.”

She had bent to pick up the papers that had skidded across his desk and onto the floor. With her other hand she balanced a cardboard box on one hip. As she straightened, he saw that her face was pink under the loose golden hair, so that she looked like an overdone Victorian figurine. The box held a plant, a picture frame, and various other bits and pieces.

Uh oh. Jake had been down this road before.

She said, “I brought you some things for your office. Because it looks so, well, empty. Cold.”

“Thanks. I actually like it this way.” Ostentatiously he busied himself with the printouts, which was also pretty cold of him, but better to cut her off now rather than after she embarrassed herself. As she set the box on a folding chair, he still ignored her, expecting her to leave.

Instead she said, “Are those MRI scans of Dr. Erdmann? What do they say?”

Jake looked up. She was eyeing the printouts, not him, and her tone was neutral, with perhaps just a touch of concern for Dr. Erdmann. He remembered how fond of each other she and Henry Erdmann were. Well, didn’t that make Jake just the total narcissist? Assuming every woman was interested in him. This would teach him some humility.

Out of his own amused embarrassment, he answered her as he would a colleague. “No, these are Evelyn Krenchnoted’s. Dr. Erdmann’s were unremarkable but these are quite the opposite.”

“They’re remarkable? How?”

All at once he found himself eager to talk, to perhaps explain away his own bafflement. He came around the desk and put the scan in her hand. “See those yellow areas of the brain? They’re BOLD signals, blood-oxygen-level dependent contrasts. What that means is that at the moment the MRI image was taken, those parts of the subject’s brain were active—in this case, highly active. And they shouldn’t have been!”

“Why not?”

Carrie was background now, an excuse to put into concrete words what should never have existed concretely at all. “Because it’s all wrong. Evelyn was lying still, talking to me, inside the MRI tube. Her eyes were open. She was nervous about being strapped down. The scan should show activity in the optical input area of the brain, in the motor areas connected to moving the mouth and tongue, and in the posterior parietal lobes, indicating a heightened awareness of her bodily boundaries. But instead, there’s just the opposite. A hugely decreased blood flow in those lobes, and an almost total shutdown of input to the thalamus, which relays information coming into the brain from sight and hearing and touch. Also, an enormous—really enormous—increase of activity in the hypothalamus and amygdalae and temporal lobes.”

“What does all that increased activity mean?”

“Many possibilities. They’re areas concerned with emotion and some kinds of imaginative imagery, and this much activation is characteristic of some psychotic seizures. For another possibility, parts of that profile are characteristic of monks in deep meditation, but it takes experienced meditators hours to build to that level, and even so there are differences in pain areas and—anyway, Evelyn Krenchnoted?”

Carrie laughed. “Not a likely monk, no. Do Dr. Erdmann’s scans show any of that?”

“No. And neither did Evelyn’s just before her seizure or just after. I’d say temporal lobe epilepsy except—”

“Epilepsy?” Her voice turned sharp. “Does that ‘seizure’ mean epilepsy?”

Jake looked at her then, really looked at her. He could recognize fear. He said as gently as he could, “Henry Erdmann experienced something like this, didn’t he?”

They stared at each other. Even before she spoke, he knew she was going to lie to him. A golden lioness protecting her cub, except here the lioness was young and the cub a withered old man who was the smartest person Jake DiBella had ever met.

“No,” she said, “Dr. Erdmann never mentioned a seizure to me.”

“Carrie—”

“And you said his MRI looked completely normal.”

“It did.” Defeated.

“I should be going. I just wanted to bring you these things to brighten up your office.”

Carrie left. The box contained a framed landscape he would never hang (a flower-covered cottage, with unicorn), a coffee cup he would never use (JAVA IS JOY IN THE MORNING), a patchwork quilted cushion, a pink African violet, and a pencil cup covered in wallpaper with yellow daisies. Despite himself, Jake smiled. The sheer wrongness of her offerings was almost funny.

Except that nothing was really funny in light of Evelyn Krenchnoted's inexplicable MRI. He needed more information from her, and another MRI. Better yet would be having her hooked to an EEG in a hospital ward for several days, to see if he could catch a definitive diagnosis of temporal-lobe epilepsy. But when he'd phoned Evelyn, she'd refused all further "doctor procedures." Ten minutes of his best persuasion hadn't budged her.

He was left with an anomaly in his study data, a cutesy coffee cup, and no idea what to do next.

\* \* \* \*

"What do we do next?" asked Rodney Caldwell, the chief administrator of St. Sebastian's. Tara Washington looked at Geraci, who looked at the floor.

It was covered with papers and small, uniform, taped white boxes with names written neatly on them in block printing: M. MATTISON. H. GERHARDT. C. GARCIA. One box, however, was open, its lid placed neatly beside it, the tissue paper peeled back. On the tissue lay a necklace, a gold Coptic cross set with a single small diamond, on a thin gold chain. The lid said A. CHERNOV.

"I didn't touch anything," Caldwell said, with a touch of pride. In his fifties, he was a tall man with a long, highly colored face like an animated carrot. "That's what they say on TV, isn't it? Don't touch anything. But isn't it strange that the thief went to all the trouble to 'blow the safe'—" He looked proud of this phrase, too "—and then didn't take anything?"

"Very strange," Geraci said. Finally he looked up from the floor. The safe hadn't been "blown"; the lock was intact. Tara felt intense interest in what Geraci would do next. She was disappointed.

"Let's go over it once more," he said easily. "You were away from your office..."

"Yes. I went up to Nursing at 11:30. Beth Malone was on desk. Behind the front desk is the only door to the room that holds both residents' files and the safe, and Beth says she never left her post. She's very reliable. Been with us eighteen years."

Mrs. Malone, who was therefore the prime suspect and smart enough to know it, was weeping in another room. A resigned female uniform handed her tissues as she waited to be interrogated. But Tara knew that, after one look, Geraci had dismissed Malone as the perp. One of those conscientious, middle-aged, always-anxious-to-help do-gooders, she would no more have attempted robbery than alchemy. Most likely she had left her post to do something she was as yet too embarrassed to admit, which was when the thief had entered the windowless back room behind the reception desk. Tara entertained herself with the thought that Mrs. Malone had crept off to meet a lover in the linen closet. She smiled.

"A thought, Detective Washington?" Geraci said.

Damn, he missed nothing. Now she would have to come up with something. The best she could manage was a question. "Does that little necklace belong to the ballerina Anna Chernov?"

"Yes," Caldwell said. "Isn't it lovely?"

To Tara it didn't look like much. But Geraci had raised his head to look at her, and she realized he didn't know that a world-famous dancer had retired to St. Sebastian's. Ballet wasn't his style. It was the first time Tara could recall that she'd known something Geraci did not. Emboldened by this, and as a result of being dragged several times a year to Lincoln Center by an eccentric grandmother, Tara continued. "Is there any resident here that might have a special interest in Anna Chernov? A balletomane—" She hoped



she was pronouncing the word correctly, she'd only read it in programs "—or a special friend?"

But Caldwell had stopped listening at "resident." He said stiffly, "None of our residents would have committed this crime, detective. St. Sebastian's is a private community and we screen very carefully for any—"

"May I talk to Ms. Chernov now?" Geraci asked.

Caldwell seemed flustered. "To Anna? But Beth Malone is waiting for ... oh, all right, if that's the procedure. Anna Chernov is in the Infirmary right now, with a broken leg. I'll show you up."

Tara hoped that Geraci wasn't going to send her to do the useless questioning of Mrs. Malone. He didn't. At the Infirmary door, he said, "Tara, talk to her." Tara would have taken this as a tribute to her knowledge of ballet, except that she had seen Geraci do the same thing before. He liked to observe: the silent listener, the unknown quantity to whoever was being questioned.

As Caldwell explained the situation and made the introductions, Tara tried not to stare at Anna Chernov. She was beautiful. Old, yes, seventies maybe, but Tara had never seen anyone old look like that. High cheekbones, huge green eyes, white hair pinned carelessly on top of her head so that curving strands fell over the pale skin that looked not so much wrinkled (though it was) as softened by time. Her hands, long-fingered and slim-wristed, lay quiet on the bedspread, and her shoulders held straight under the white bed jacket. Only the bulging cast on one leg marred the impression of delicacy, of remoteness, and of the deepest sadness that Tara had ever seen. It was sadness for everything, Tara thought confusedly, and couldn't have said what she meant by "everything." Except that the cast was only a small part.

"Please sit down," Anna said.

"Thank you. As Mr. Caldwell said, there's been a break-in downstairs, with the office safe. The only box opened had your name on it, with a gold-and-diamond necklace inside. That is yours, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Is it the one that Tamara Karsavina gave you? That Nicholas II gave her?"

"Yes." Anna looked at Tara more closely, but not less remotely.

"Ms. Chernov, is there anyone you can think of who might have a strong interest in that necklace? A member of the press who's been persistent in asking about it, or someone emailing you about it, or a resident?"

"I don't do email, Miss Washington."

It was "Detective Washington," but Tara let it go. "Still—anyone?"

"No."

Had the dancer hesitated slightly? Tara couldn't be sure. She went on asking questions, but she could see that she wasn't getting anywhere. Anna Chernov grew politely impatient. Why wasn't Geraci stopping Tara? She had to continue until he did—"softening them up," he called it. The pointless questioning went on. Finally, just as Tara was running completely out of things to ask, Geraci said almost casually, "Do you know Dr. Erdmann, the physicist?"

"We've met once," Anna said.

“Is it your impression that he has a romantic interest in you?”

For the first time, Anna looked amused. “I think Dr. Erdmann’s only romantic interest is in physics.”

“I see. Thank you for your time, Ms. Chernov.”

In the hall, Geraci said to Tara, “Ballet. Police work sure isn’t what it used to be. You did good, Washington.”

“Thank you. What now?”

“Now we find out what resident has a romantic interest in Anna Chernov. It’s not Erdmann, but it’s somebody.”

So Anna had hesitated slightly when Tara asked if any resident had a special interest in her! Tara glowed inwardly as she followed Geraci down the hall. Without looking at her, he said, “Just don’t let it go to your head.”

She said dryly, “Not a chance.”

“Good. A cop interested in ballet ... Jesus H. Christ.”

\* \* \* \*

The ship grew agitated. Across many cubic light years between the stars, spacetime itself warped in dangerous ways. The new entity was growing in strength—and it was so far away yet!

It was not supposed to occur this way.

If the ship had become aware earlier of this new entity, this could have happened correctly, in accord with the laws of evolution. All things evolved—stars, galaxies, consciousness. If the ship had realized earlier that anywhere in this galactic backwater had existed the potential for a new entity, the ship would have been there to guide, to shape, to ease the transition. But it hadn’t realized. There had been none of the usual signs.

They were happening now, however. Images, as yet dim and one-way, were reaching the ship. More critically, power was being drawn from it, power that the birthing entity had no idea how to channel. Faster, the ship must go faster ...

It could not, not without damaging spacetime irretrievably. Spacetime could only reconfigure so much, so often. And meanwhile—

The half-formed thing so far away stirred, struggled, howled in fear.

\* \* \* \*

## NINE

Henry Erdmann was scared.

He could barely admit his fright to himself, let alone show it to the circle of people jammed into his small apartment on Saturday morning. They sat in a solemn circle, occupying his sofa and armchair and kitchen chairs and other chairs dragged from other apartments. Evelyn Krenchnoted’s chair crowded uncomfortably close to Henry’s right side, her perfume sickly sweet. She had curled her hair into tiny gray sausages. Stan Dzarkis and Erin Bass, who could still manage it, sat on the floor. The folds of Erin’s

yellow print skirt seemed to Henry the only color amid the ashen faces. Twenty people, and maybe there were more in the building who were afflicted. Henry had called the ones he knew of, who had called the ones they knew of. Missing were Anna Chernov, still in the Infirmary, and Al Cosmano, who had refused to attend.

They all looked at him, waiting to begin.

“I think we all know why we’re here,” Henry said, and immediately a sense of unreality took him. He didn’t understand at all why he was here. The words of Michael Faraday, inscribed on the physics building at UCLA, leapt into his mind: “Nothing is too wonderful to be true.” The words seemed a mockery. What had been happening to Henry, to all of them, did not feel wonderful and was “true” in no sense he understood, although he was going to do his damndest to relate it to physics in the only way that hours of pondering had suggested to him. Anything else—anything less—was unthinkable.

He continued, “Things have occurred to all of us, and a good first step is to see if we have indeed had the same experiences.” Collect data. “So I’ll go first. On five separate occasions I have felt some force seize my mind and body, as if a surge of energy was going through me, some sort of neurological shock. On one occasion it was painful, on the others not painful but very tiring. Has anyone else felt that?”

Immediately a clamor, which Henry stilled by raising his arm. “Can we start with a show of hands? Anybody else had that experience? Everybody. Okay, let’s go around the circle, introducing yourself as we go, starting on my left. Please be as explicit as possible, but only descriptions at this point. No interpretations.”

“Damned teacher,” someone muttered, but Henry didn’t see who and didn’t care. His heart had speeded up, and he felt that his ears had somehow expanded around his hearing aid, so as not to miss even a syllable. He had deliberately not mentioned the times of his “seizures,” or outside events concurrent with them, so as not to contaminate whatever information would be offered by the others.

“I’m John Kluge, from 4J.” He was a heavy, round-faced man with a completely bald head and a pleasant voice used to making itself heard. High-school teacher, Henry guessed. History or math, plus coaching some sort of sports team. “It’s pretty much like Henry here said, except I only felt the ‘energy’ four times. The first was around 7:30 on Tuesday night. The second time woke me Wednesday night at 11:42. I noted the time on my bedside clock. The third time I didn’t note the time because I was vomiting after that food poisoning we all got on Thursday, but it was just before the vomiting started, sometime in mid-afternoon. That time the energy surge started near my heart, and I thought it was a heart attack. The last time was yesterday at 11:45 AM, and in addition to the energy, I had a ... well, a sort of—” He looked embarrassed.

“Please go on, it’s important,” Henry said. He could hardly breathe.

“I don’t want to say a vision, but colors swirling through my mind, red and blue and white and somehow hard.”

“Anna Chernov’s necklace!” Evelyn shrieked, and the meeting fell apart.

Henry couldn’t stop the frantic babble. He would have risen but his walker was in the kitchen; there was no room in the crowded living room. He was grateful when Bob Donovan put two fingers in his mouth and gave a whistle that could have deafened war dogs. “Hey! Shut up or nobody’s gonna learn nothing!”

Everyone fell silent and glared resentfully at the stocky man in baggy chinos and cheap acrylic sweater. Donovan scowled and sat back down. Henry leapt into the quiet.

“Mr. Donovan is right, we won’t learn anything useful this way. Let’s resume going around the circle, with no interruptions, please. Mrs. Bass?”

Erin Bass described essentially the same events as John Kluge, without the Wednesday night incident but with the addition of the earlier, slight jar Henry had felt as he let Carrie into his apartment Tuesday before class. She described this as a “whisper in my mind.” The next sixteen people all repeated the same experiences on Thursday and Friday, although some seemed to not have felt the “energy” on Tuesday, and some not on Tuesday or Wednesday. Henry was the only one to feel all five instances. Throughout these recitations, Evelyn Krenchnoted several times rose slightly in her chair, like a geyser about to burst. Henry did not want her to interrupt. He put a restraining hand on her arm, which was a mistake as she immediately covered his hand with her own and squeezed affectionately.

When it was finally Evelyn’s turn, she said, “None of you had pain this last time like Henry did on Thursday—except me! I was having a medical MIT at the hospital and I was inside the machine and the pain was horrible! Horrible! And then—” she paused dramatically “—and then I saw Anna Chernov’s necklace right at the time it was being stolen! And so did all of you—that was the ‘hard colors,’ John! Sapphires and rubies and diamonds!”

Pandemonium again. Henry, despite his growing fear, groaned inwardly. Why Evelyn Krenchnoted? Of all the unreliable witnesses...

“I saw it! I saw it!” Evelyn shrieked. Gina Martinelli had begun to pray in a loud voice. People jabbered to each other or sat silent, their faces gone white. A woman that Henry didn’t know reached with shaking hand into her pocket and pulled out a pill bottle. Bob Donovan raised his fingers to his lips.

Before Donovan’s whistle could shatter their eardrums again, Erin Bass rose gracefully, clapped her hands, and cried surprisingly loudly, “Stop! We will get nowhere this way! Evelyn has the floor!”

Slowly the din subsided. Evelyn, who now seemed more excited than frightened by the implication of what she’d just said, launched into a long and incoherent description of her “MIT,” until Henry stopped her the only way he could think of, which was to take her hand. She squeezed it again, blushed, and said, “Yes, dear.”

Henry managed to get out, “Please. Everyone. There must be an explanation for all this.” But before he could begin it, Erin Bass turned from aide to saboteur.

“Yes, and I think we should go around the circle in the same order and offer those explanations. But briefly, before too many people get too tired. John?”

Kluge said, “It could be some sort of virus affecting the brain. Contagious. Or some pollutant in the building.”

Which causes every person to have the exact same hallucinations and a locked safe to open? Henry thought scornfully. The scorn steadied him. He needed steadying; every person in the room had mentioned feeling the Thursday-afternoon “energy” start in his or her heart, but no one except Henry knew that at that moment Jim Peltier was having an inexplicable heart attack as he battered Carrie.

Erin said, “What we see in this world is just maya, the illusion of permanence when in fact, all reality is in constant flux and change. What’s happening here is beyond the world of intellectual concepts and distinctions. We’re getting glimpses of the mutable nature of reality, the genuine undifferentiated ‘suchness’ that usually only comes with nirvana. The glimpses are imperfect, but for some reason our collective karma has afforded them to us.”

Bob Donovan, next in the circle, said irritably, "That's just crap. We all got some brain virus, like Kluge here said, and some junkie cracked the office safe. The cops are investigating it. We should all see a doctor, except they can't never do anything to cure people anyway. And the people who had pain, Henry and Evelyn, they just got the disease worse."

Most people around the circle echoed the brain-disease theory, some with helpless skepticism, some with evident relief at finding any sort of explanation. A woman said slowly, "It could be the start of Alzheimer's." A man shrugged and said, "As God wills." Another just shook his head, his eyes averted.

Gina Martinelli said, "It is the will of God! These are the End Times, and we're being given signs, if only we would listen! 'Ye shall have tribulations ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.' Also—"

"It might be the will of God, Gina," interrupted Evelyn, unable to restrain herself any longer, "but it's mighty strange anyway! Why, I saw that necklace in my mind plain as day, and at just that moment it was being stolen from the safe! To my mind, that's not God, and not the devil neither or the robbery would have been successful, you see what I mean? The devil knows what he's doing. No, this was a message, all right, but from those who have gone before us. My Uncle Ned could see spirits all the time, they trusted him, I remember one time we all came down to breakfast and the cups had all been turned upside down when nobody was in the room and Uncle Ned, he said—"

Henry stopped listening. Ghosts. God. Eastern mysticism. Viruses. Alzheimer's. Nothing that fit the facts, that adhered even vaguely to the laws of the universe. These people had the reasoning power of termites.

Evelyn went on for a while, but eventually even she noticed that her audience was inattentive, dispirited, or actually asleep. Irene Bromley snored softly in Henry's leather armchair. Erin Bass said, "Henry?"

He looked at them hopelessly. He'd been going to describe the two-slit experiments on photons, to explain that once you added detectors to measure the paths of proton beams, the path became pre-determined, even if you switched on the detector after the particle had been fired. He'd planned on detailing how that astonishing series of experiments changed physics forever, putting the observer into basic measurements of reality. Consciousness was woven into the very fabric of the universe itself, and consciousness seemed to him the only way to link these incredibly disparate people and the incredible events that had happened to them.

Even to himself, this "explanation" sounded lame. How Teller or Feynman would have sneered at it! Still, although it was better than anything he'd heard here this morning, he hated to set it out in front of these irrational people, half ignoramuses and the other half nutcases. They would all just reject it, and what would be gained?

But he had called this meeting. And he had nothing else to offer.

Henry stumbled through his explanation, trying to make the physics as clear as possible. Most of the faces showed perfect incomprehension. He finished with, "I'm not saying there's some sort of affecting of reality going on, through group consciousness." But wasn't that exactly what he was saying? "I don't believe in telekinesis or any of that garbage. The truth is, I don't know what's happening. But something is."

He felt a complete fool.

Bob Donovan snapped, "None of you know nothing. I been listening to all of you, and you haven't even got the facts right. I seen Anna Chernov's necklace. The cops showed it to me yesterday when they was asking me some questions. It don't got no sapphires or rubies, and just one tiny diamond. You're full of

it, Evelyn, to think your seizure had anything to do with anything—and how do we know you even felt any pain at the ‘very second’ the safe was being cracked? All we got’s your word.”

“Are you saying I’m a liar?” Evelyn cried. “Henry, tell him!”

Tell him what? Startled, Henry just stared at her. John Kluge said harshly, “I don’t believe Henry Erdmann is lying about his pain,” and Evelyn turned from Donovan to Kluge.

“You mean you think I am? Who the hell do you think you are?”

Kluge started to tell her who he was: among other things, a former notary public. Other people began to argue. Evelyn started to cry, and Gina Martinelli prayed loudly. Erin Bass rose and slipped out the front door. Others followed. Those that remained disputed fiercely, the arguments growing more intense as they were unable to convince their neighbors of their own theories. Somewhere among the anger and contempt, Carrie Vesey appeared by Henry’s side, her pretty face creased with bewildered concern, her voice high and strained.

“Henry? What on Earth is going on in here? I could hear the noise all the way down the hall.... What is this all about?”

“Nothing,” he said, which was the stupidest answer possible. Usually the young regarded the old as a separate species, as distant from their own concerns as trilobites. But Carrie had been different. She had always treated Henry as inhabiting the same world as herself, with the same passions and quirks and aims and defeats. This was the first time he had ever seen Carrie look at him as both alien and unsound, and it set the final seal on this disastrous meeting.

“But, Henry—”

“I said it’s nothing!” he shouted at her. “Nothing at all! Now just leave me the hell alone!”

\* \* \* \*

TEN

Carrie stood in the ladies’ room off the lobby, pulling herself together. She was not going to cry. Even if Dr. Erdmann had never spoken to her like that before, even if ever since Jim’s death she had felt as if she might shatter, even if ... everything, she was not going to cry. It would be ridiculous. She was a professional—well, a professional aide anyway—and Henry Erdmann was an old man. Old people were irritable sometimes. This whole incident meant nothing.

Except that she knew it did. She had stood outside Dr. Erdmann’s door for a long time as people slipped out, smiling at her vaguely, and Evelyn Krenchnoted babbled on inside. The unprecedented meeting had first piqued her curiosity—Henry Erdmann, hosting a party at ten o’clock on a Saturday morning? Then, as she realized what Evelyn was saying, disbelief took Carrie. Evelyn meant ... Evelyn thought ... and even Dr. Erdmann believed that “something” had been happening, something weird and unexplainable and supernatural, at the moment that Evelyn was under the MRI ... Henry!

But Jake DiBella had been upset by Evelyn’s scans.

The door of the ladies’ opened and the first of the Saturday visitors entered, a middle-aged woman and a sulky teenage girl. “Honestly, Hannah,” the woman said, “it’s only an hour out of your precious day and it won’t kill you to sit with your grandmother and concentrate on someone else besides yourself for a change. If you’d just—”

Carrie went to DiBella's office. He was there, working at his desk. No sign of her picture, cushion, coffee cup; she couldn't help her inevitable, stupid pang. He didn't want them. Or her. Another failure.

"Dr. DiBella—"

" 'Jake.' Remember?" And then, "Carrie, what is it?"

"I just came from Dr. Erdmann's apartment. They were having a meeting, about twenty people, all of them who've felt these 'seizures' or whatever they are, all at the same time. Like the one you captured on Evelyn's MRI scan."

He stared at her. "What do you mean, 'at the same time'?"

"Just what I said." She marveled at her own tone—none of her shakiness showed. "They said that at the exact same time that Evelyn was showing all that weird activity under the MRI, each of them was feeling it, too, only not so strong. And it was the exact same time that Anna Chernov's necklace was being stolen. And they all saw the necklace in their minds." Only—hadn't Mr. Donovan said that the necklace looked different from what Evelyn said? Confusion took Carrie.

Jake looked down at whatever he was writing, back at Carrie, down again at his notes. He came around the desk and closed his office door. Taking her arm, he sat her gently in the visitor's chair, unadorned by her cushion. Despite herself, she felt a tingle where his hand touched her.

"Dr. Erdmann was involved in this? Tell me again. Slowly, Carrie. Don't leave anything out."

\* \* \* \*

Evelyn Krenchnoted made her way to Gina Martinelli's apartment on Five. Really, Henry had been unbearably rude—to that poor young girl, to everybody at the meeting, and especially to Evelyn herself. He hadn't comforted her when that awful Donovan man called her a liar, he hadn't put his hand on hers again, he'd just yelled and yelled—and just when things between them had been going so well!

Evelyn needed to talk to Gina. Not that Gina had been any help at the meeting, not with all that praying. Gina was really a lot smarter than she looked, she'd been a part-time tax preparer once, but hardly anybody knew it because Gina never opened her mouth except to pray. Not that there was anything wrong with praying, of course! Evelyn certainly believed in God. But you had to help Him along a little if you really wanted something. You couldn't expect the Lord to do everything.

Evelyn had even curled her hair for Henry.

"Gina? Sweetie? Can I come in?"

"You're already in," Gina said. She had to speak loudly because she had Frank Sinatra on the record player. Gina loved Frank Sinatra. For once she wasn't reading her Bible, which Evelyn thought was a good sign. She lowered her bulk onto Gina's sofa.

"So what did you think of that meeting?" Evelyn said. She was looking forward to a good two-three hours of rehashing, sympathy, and gossip. It would make her feel a lot better. Less creepy. Less afraid.

But instead, Gina said, "There was a message on the machine when I got back here. Ray is coming next week."

Oh, God, Gina's son. Who was only after her money. Ray hadn't visited in over a year, and now that Gina had told him she was leaving everything to the daughter ... and there was a lot of everything to

leave. Gina's late husband had made major money in construction.

"Oh, sweetie," Evelyn said, a little perfunctorily. Ordinarily she would have adored discussing Gina's anguish; for one thing, it made Evelyn glad she had never had kids. But now, with so much else going on—Henry and the attempted robbery and Evelyn's seizure and the strange comments at the meeting—

Frank Sinatra sang about ants and rubber tree plants. Gina burst into tears.

"Oh, sweetie," Evelyn repeated, got up to put her arms around Gina, and resigned herself to hearing about Ray Martinelli's selfishness.

\* \* \* \*

Bob Donovan sat beside Anna Chernov's bed in the Infirmary. The man simply could not take a hint. She would either have to snub him outright or tell him in so many words to stop visiting her. Even the sight of him, squat and toad-faced and clumsy, made her shudder. Unfair, but there it was.

She had danced with so many beautiful men.

Which had been the best? Frederico, partnering her in *La Valse*—never had she been lifted so effortlessly. Jean, in *Scotch Symphony*, had been equally breathtaking. But the one she always returned to was Bennet. After she'd left the New York City Ballet for American Ballet Theater and her career had really taken off, they'd always danced together. Bennet, so dazzling as Albrecht in *Giselle*.... Guesting at a gala at the Paris Opera, they'd had seventeen curtain calls and—

Her attention was reclaimed by something Bob Donovan said.

"Could you repeat that, please, Bob?"

"What? Old Henry's crackpot theory? Science gibberish!"

"Nonetheless, would you repeat it?" She managed a smile.

He responded to the smile with pathetic eagerness. "Okay, yeah, if you want. Erdmann said, lemme think..." He screwed up his already crevassed face in an effort to remember. Although she was being unkind again. He probably wasn't all that bad looking, among his own class. And was she any better? These days she couldn't bear to look in a mirror. And the sight of the ugly cast on her leg filled her with despair.

"Erdmann said there was some experiments in physics, something with two slips, where people's consciences changed the path of some little ... particles ... by just thinking about them. Or maybe it was watching them. And that was the link between everybody who had so-called 'energy' at the same time. Group conscience. A new thing."

Consciousness, Anna translated. Group consciousness. Well, was that so strange? She had felt it more than once on stage, when a group of dancers had transcended what they were individually, had become a unity moving to the music in the creation of beauty. Such moments had, for her, taken the place of religion.

Bob was going on now about what other people at the meeting had said, offering up ungrammatical accounts in a desperate bid to please her, but even as she recognized this, Anna had stopped listening. She thought instead about Bennet, with whom she'd had such fantastic chemistry on and off stage, Bennet lifting her in the grand pas de deux of Act II, rosin from the raked stage rising around her like an angelic cloud, herself soaring and almost flying...



\* \* \* \*

“Tell me again,” Jake said.

“Again?” This was the third time! Not that Carrie really minded. She hadn’t had his total attention—anybody’s total attention—like this since Jim died. Not that she wanted Jim back.... She shuddered even as she went through it all again. By the end, she was belligerent.

“Why? Are you saying you believe all this stuff about a group consciousness?”

“No. Of course not. Not without confirmation ... but Erdmann is a scientist. What other data does he have that he isn’t telling you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” And she didn’t; this conversation was beyond her. Photon detectors, double-slit experiments, observational pre-determination ... Her memory was good, but she knew she lacked the background to interpret the terms. Her own ignorance made her angry.

“Henry had two other experiences of ‘energy’ when he was with you, you said. Were there others when he was away from you?”

“How should I know? You better ask him!”

“I will. I’ll ask them all.”

“It sounds stupid to me.” Immediately she was frightened by her own tone. But Jake just looked at her thoughtfully.

“Well, it sounds stupid to me, too. But Henry is right about one thing—something is happening. There’s hard data in the form of Evelyn’s MRI, in the fact that the safe was opened without the lock being either tampered with or moved to the right combination—”

“It did?”

“The detective told me, when he was asking questions yesterday. Also, I got the physician here to let me look at the lab results for everybody admitted to the infirmary Thursday afternoon. Professional courtesy. There was no food poisoning.”

“There wasn’t?” All at once Carrie felt scared.

“No.” DiBella sat thinking for a long while. She scarcely dared breathe. Finally he said slowly, as if against his own will or better judgment—and that much she understood, anyway— “Carrie, have you ever heard of the principle of emergent complexity?”

\* \* \* \*

“I did everything for that boy,” Gina sobbed. “Just everything!”

“Yes, you did,” said Evelyn, who thought Gina had done too much for Ray. Always lending him money after he lost each job, always letting him move back home and trash the place. What that kid had needed—and bad—was a good hiding, that’s what.

“Angela didn’t turn out this way!”

“No.” Gina’s daughter was a sweetie. Go figure.

“And now I just get it settled in my mind that he’s out of my life, I come to grips with it, and he says he’s flying back here to see ‘his old ma’ and he loves me! He’ll just stir everything up again like he did when he got home from the Army, and when he divorced Judy, and when I had to find that lawyer for him in New York.... Evelyn, nobody, but nobody, can rip you up inside like your child!”

“I know,” said Evelyn, who didn’t. She went on making little clucking noises while Gina sobbed. A plane roared overhead, and Frank Sinatra sang about it having been a very good year when he was twenty-one.

\* \* \* \*

Bob Donovan took Anna’s hand. Gently she pulled it away. The gentleness was for her, not him—she didn’t want a scene. His touch repelled her. But oh, Bennet’s touch ... or Frederico’s.... Still, it was the dancing she missed. And now she would never dance again. She might, the doctors said, not even walk without a limp.

Never dance. Never feel her legs spring into a ballote or soar in the exuberance of a flick jete, back arched and arms thrown back, an arrow in ecstatic flight.

\* \* \* \*

“Carrie, have you ever heard of the principle of “emergent complexity?”

“No.” Jake DiBella was going to make her feel dumb again. But he didn’t mean to do that, and as long as she could sit here in his office with him, she would listen. Maybe he needed someone to listen. Maybe he needed her. And maybe he would say something that would help her make it all right with Dr. Erdmann.

Jake licked his lips. His face was still paper white. “‘Emergent complexity’ means that as an evolving organism grows more complex, it develops processes that wouldn’t seem implied by the processes it had in simpler form. In other words, the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Somewhere along the line, our primitive human ancestors developed self-awareness. Higher consciousness. That was a new thing in evolution.”

Old knowledge stirred in Carrie’s mind. “There was a pope—I was raised Catholic—some pope, one of the John-Pauls maybe, said there was a point where God infused a soul into an animal heritage. So evolution wasn’t really anti-Catholic.”

Jake seemed to be looking through her, at something only he could see. “Exactly. God or evolution or some guy named Fred—however it happened, consciousness did emerge. And if, now, the next step in complexity is emerging ... if that...”

Carrie was angered, either by his line of thought or by his ignoring her; she wasn’t sure which. She said sharply, “But why now? Why here?”

Her question brought his gaze back to her. He took a long time to answer, while a plane droned overhead on the flight path out of the airport. Carrie held her breath.

But all he said was, “I don’t know.”

\* \* \* \*

Gina had worked herself up to such a pitch that she wasn’t even praying. Ray, Ray, Ray—this wasn’t what Evelyn wanted to talk about. But she had never seen Gina like this. All at once Gina cried passionately, drowning out Sinatra singing “Fly Me to the Moon,” “I wish he weren’t coming! I wish his

plane would just go on to another city or something, just not land here! I don't want him here!"

Never dance again. And the only love available from men like Bob Donovan.... No. No. Anna would rather be dead.

\* \* \* \*

"Well, I don't believe it!" Carrie said. "Emerging complexity—I just don't believe it's happening at St. Sebastian's!"

"Neither do I," said Jake. For the first time since she'd entered his office, he smiled at her.

Outside the building, a boom sounded.

Carrie and Jake both looked toward the door. Carrie thought first of terrorism, a car bomb or something, because everybody thought first of terrorism these days. But terrorism at an assisted living facility was ridiculous. It was a gas main exploding, or a bus crash just outside, or...

Henry Erdmann appeared in the open doorway to the office. He didn't have his walker with him. He sagged against the doorjamb, his sunken eyes huge and his mouth open. Before Carrie could leap up to help him and just before he slumped to the floor, he croaked, "Call the police. We just brought down a plane."

\* \* \* \*

Anguish ripped through the ship. Not its own agony, but the Other's. No guidance, no leading, it was raging wild and undisciplined. If this went on, it might weaken the ship too much for the ship to ever help it.

If this went on, the Other could damage spacetime itself.

The ship could not let that happen.

\* \* \* \*

## ELEVEN

When Henry Erdmann collapsed, DiBella moved swiftly to the old man. Carrie stood frozen—stupid! Stupid! "Get the doctor," Jake cried. And then, "Go, Carrie. He's alive."

She ran out of Jake's office, nearly tripping over the walker Henry had left in the hallway. He must have been coming to see Jake when it happened—when what happened? She raced to the lobby and the call phone, her mind so disordered that only as she shoved open the double doors did she realize that of course it would have been faster to hit Henry's panic button—Jake would do that—but Henry seldom wore his panic button, he—

She stopped cold, staring.

The lobby was full of screaming people, mostly visitors. Among them, old people lay fallen to the floor or slumped in wheelchairs. It was Saturday morning and on Saturday morning relatives arrived to take their mothers and grandfathers and great-grandmothers for brunch, for a drive, for a visit home ... Bundled in sweaters and jackets and shawls, the seniors had all collapsed like so many bundles of dropped laundry. St. Sebastian's nurses, aides, and even desk volunteers bent ineffectually over the victims.

Fear roiled Carrie's stomach, but it also preternaturally heightened her perceptions.

Mr. Aberstein, a St. Sebastian's resident even though he was only sixty-seven, stood unaffected by the elevators. Mrs. Kelly sat alert in her wheelchair, her mouth a wide pink O. She was seventy-one. Mr. Schur...

"Nurse! Come quick, please, it's Dr. Erdmann!" Carrie caught at the sleeve of a passing nurse in purple scrubs, but he shook her off and raced to an old woman lying on the floor. Everyone here was too busy to help Carrie. She ran back to Jake's office.

Henry lay quietly on the floor. Jake had turned him face up and put a cushion—her cushion, Carrie thought numbly, the patchwork one she'd brought Jake—under Henry's feet. Henry wasn't wearing his panic button. She gasped, "No one can come, it's happened to all of them—"

"All who?" Jake said sharply.

She answered without thinking. "All of them over eighty. Is Henry—"

"He's breathing normally. His color's good, and he's not clammy. I don't think he's in shock. He's just ... out. All of them over eighty?"

"Yes. No. I don't know, I mean, about the age, but all the older ones in the lobby just collapsed and the younger residents seem fine.... Jake, what is it?"

"I don't know. Carrie, do this now: Go to one of the common rooms and turn the TV to the local news channel. See if there's been a ... a plane crash—"

He stopped. Both of them heard the sirens.

\* \* \* \*

Henry did not wake. All of Redborn Memorial Hospital's ambulances had gone to the crash site. The St. Sebastian's staff moved afflicted residents to the dining room, which looked like a very peaceful war hospital. The residents didn't wake, moan, or need emergency treatment with the exception of one woman who had broken a hip falling to the floor. She was sent over to Memorial. Monitors couldn't be spared from the Nursing floor, where nearly everyone had fallen into the coma, but a few spare monitors were carried down from the infirmary. They showed no anomalies in heart rate or blood pressure.

Relatives summoned family doctors, sat by cots, screamed at St. Sebastian's staff, who kept repeating, "Redborn Memorial is aware of the situation and they'll get the St. Sebastian's residents over there as soon as they can. Please, sir, if you'd just—"

Just be patient. Just believe that we're doing our best. Just be reassured by your mother's peaceful face. Just accept that we don't know any more than you do. Just leave me alone!

Carrie checked on her resident-assignees, one by one. They were all affected, most collapsed in their apartments. They were all moved into the infirmary. They were all over eighty.

She was hurrying from Al Cosmano's apartment—empty, he must have been elsewhere when it happened—back to the infirmary when a man caught at her arm. "Hey! Ms. Vesey!"

One of the detectives who'd investigated Jim's death. Carrie's belly clenched. "Yes?"

"Where do I find the hospital administrator? Caldwell?"

"He's not here, he went out of town for the weekend, they sent for him—why?"

“I need to see him. Who’s in charge? And what the hell happened here?”

So not about Jim’s death. Still—a cop. Some part of her mind shuddered—Jim had been a cop—but at the same time, she seized on this. Official authority. Someone who investigated and found answers. Security. There was a reason she’d married Jim in the first place.

She said as calmly as she could manage, “We’ve had an ... an epidemic of collapses among the very old. All at the same time. About a half hour ago.”

“Disease?”

“No.” She heard how positive she sounded. Well, she was positive. “When the plane went down.”

He looked baffled, as well he might. She said, “I’ll take you to Dr. Jamison. He’s the St. Sebastian’s physician.”

Jamison wasn’t in the dining room. Carrie, leading Detective Geraci, found the doctor in the kitchen, in a shouting match with Jake DiBella. “No, damn it! You’re not going to further upset the relatives for some stupid, half-baked theory—No!” Jamison stalked off.

Carrie said, “Dr. Jamison, this is—” He pushed past her, heading back to his patients. She expected the detective to follow him, but instead Geraci said to Jake, “Who are you?”

“Who wants to know?”

She had never seen Jake so rude. But he was angry and frustrated and scared—they were all scared.

“Detective Geraci, RPD. You work here?”

Carrie said quickly, before the two men could get really nasty, “This is Dr. DiBella. He’s doing a medical research project at St. Sebastian’s, on ... on brain waves.”

Geraci said, “I received an anonymous call. Me, not the Department, on my cell, from the St. Sebastian’s front desk. The caller said there was information here about the plane crash. You know anything about that, doctor?”

Carrie saw that Vince Geraci believed Jake did have information. How did she know that? How did he know that? But it was there in every line of the detective’s alert body: He knew that Jake knew something.

Jake didn’t answer, just stared at Geraci. Finally Geraci said, “The plane went down half a mile from here. A U.S. Air commuter plane carrying forty-nine passengers, including thirty-one members of the Aces High Senior Citizen Club. They were on a three-day trip to the casinos at Atlantic City. Everyone on board is dead.”

Jake said, “I can’t talk to you now. I have to take some brain scans while these people are unconscious. After that idiot Jamison realizes what I’m doing and throws me out, we can talk. Carrie, I’ll need your help. Go to my office and put all the equipment in the corner onto the dolly, throw a blanket over it, and bring it the back way into the kitchen. Quickly!”

She nodded and hurried off, so fast that she didn’t realize Geraci was behind her until they reached Jake’s office.

“Let me get that, it’s heavy,” he said.

“No, it’s not.” She lugged the console onto its dolly. “Shouldn’t you be asking people questions?”

“I am. Does DiBella always order you around like that?”

Did he? She hadn’t noticed. “No.” She added the helmet and box of peripherals on top of the console, then looked around for a blanket. There wasn’t one.

“Do you work for DiBella or for St. Sebastian’s?”

“St. Sebastian’s. I have to go to the linen closet.”

When she returned with a blanket, Geraci was reading the papers on Jake’s desk. Wasn’t that illegal? Carrie threw the blanket over the equipment. Geraci grabbed the handle of the dolly before she could.

“You need me,” he said. “Anybody stops you, I’ll just flash my badge.”

“Okay,” she said ungraciously. She could have done this, for Jake, by herself.

They brought the equipment into the kitchen. Jake set it up on the counter, ignoring the cook who said helplessly, “So nobody’s having lunch, then?” All at once she ripped off her apron, flung it onto the floor, and walked out.

Jake said to Carrie, “Hold the door.” He slipped through to the dining room and, a moment later, wheeled in a gurney with an elderly woman lying peacefully on it. “Who is she, Carrie?”

“Ellen Parminter.” After a moment she added, “Eighty-three.” Jake grunted and began attaching electrodes to Mrs. Parminter’s unconscious head.

Geraci said, “Come with me, Carrie.”

“No.” Where did she get the nerve? But, somehow, he brought that out in her.

He only smiled. “Yes. This is an official police investigation, as of this minute.”

She went, then, following him back to Jake’s office. Carrie was shaking, but she didn’t want him to see that. He did, though; he seemed to see everything. “Sit down,” he said gently. “There, behind the desk—you didn’t like me reading DiBella’s papers before, did you? It’s legal if they’re in plain sight. You seem like a really good observer, Carrie. Now, please tell me everything that’s been happening here. From the very beginning, and without leaving anything out. Start with why you told DiBella that woman’s age. Does her age matter to what he’s doing?”

Did it? She didn’t know. How could it ... people aged at such different rates! Absolute years meant very little, except that —

“Carrie?”

All at once it seemed a relief to be able to pour it all out. Yes, he was trained to get people to talk, she knew that, and she didn’t really trust his sudden gentleness. It was merely a professional trick. But if she told it all, that might help order her chaotic thoughts. And maybe, somehow, it might help the larger situation, too. All those people dead on the plane—

She said slowly, “You won’t believe it.”

“Try me anyway.”

“I don’t believe it.”

This time he just waited, looking expectant. And it all poured out of her, starting with Henry’s “seizure” on the way home from the university. The vomiting epidemic among seven or so patients, that wasn’t the food poisoning that St. Sebastian’s said it was. Evelyn Krenchnoted’s functional MRI. Anna Chernov’s necklace, what Evelyn thought the necklace looked like and what Bob Donovan said it really was. The secret meeting this morning in Henry’s apartment. What Carrie had overheard: Henry’s words about photons and how human observation affected the paths of fundamental particles. Jake’s lecture on “emergent complexity.” Henry’s appearance at Jake’s office, saying just before he collapsed, “Call the police. We just brought down a plane.” The mass collapse of everyone over eighty and of no one younger than that. The brain scans Jake was taking now, undoubtedly to see if they looked normal or like Evelyn’s. The more Carrie talked, the more improbable everything sounded.

When she finished, Geraci’s face was unreadable.

“That’s it,” she said miserably. “I have to go see how Henry is.”

“Thank you, Carrie.” His tone was unreadable. “I’m going to find Dr. Jamison now.”

He left, but she stayed. It suddenly took too much energy to move. Carrie put her head in her hands. When she straightened again, her gaze fell on Jake’s desk.

He’d been writing when she’d burst in with the news of the meeting in Henry’s apartment. Writing on paper, not on a computer: thick pale green paper with a faint watermark. The ink was dark blue. “My dearest James, I can’t tell you how much I regret the things I said to you on the phone last night, but, love, please remember—”

Carrie gave a short, helpless bark of laughter. My dearest James. ... God, she was such a fool!

She shook her head like a dog spraying off water, and went to look for Henry.

\* \* \* \*

The new being was quiet now. That made this a good time to try to reach it. That was always best done through its own culture’s symbols. But the ship had had so little time to prepare ... This should have been done slowly, over a long time, a gradual interaction as the new entity was guided, shaped, made ready. And the ship was still so far away.

But it tried, extending itself as much as possible, searching for the collective symbols and images that would have eased a normal transition—

— and roiled in horror.

\* \* \* \*

## TWELVE

Evelyn Krenchnoted lay on a cot jammed against the dining room window. She lay dreaming, unaware of the cool air seeping through the glass, or the leaves falling gold and orange in the tiny courtyard beyond. In her dream she walked on a path of light. Her feet made no sound. She moved toward more light, and somewhere in that light was a figure. She couldn’t see it or hear it, but she knew it was there. And she knew who it was.

It was someone who really, truly, finally would listen to her.

\* \* \* \*

Al Cosmano squirmed in his sleep. “He’s waking,” a nurse said.

“No, he’s not.” Dr. Jamison, passing yet again among the rows of cots and gurneys and pallets on the floor, his face weary. “Some of them have been doing that for hours. As soon as the ambulances return, move this row to the hospital.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Al heard them and didn’t hear them. He was a child again, running along twilight streets toward home. His mother was there, waiting. Home...

\* \* \* \*

The stage was so bright! The stage manager must have turned up the lights, turned them up yet again—the whole stage was light. Anna Chernov couldn’t see, couldn’t find her partner. She had to stop dancing.

Had to stop dancing.

She stood lost on the stage, lost in the light. The audience was out there somewhere in all that brightness, but she couldn’t see them any more than she could see Bennet or the corps de ballet. She felt the audience, though. They were there, as bright as the stage, and they were old. Very, very old, as old as she was, and like her, beyond dancing.

She put her hands over her face and sobbed.

\* \* \* \*

Erin Bass saw the path, and it led exactly where she knew it would: deeper into herself. That was where the buddha was, had always been, would always be. Along this path of light, curving and spiraling deeper into her own being, which was all being. All around her were the joyful others, who were her just as she was them—

A jolt, and she woke in an ambulance, her arms and legs and chest strapped down, a young man leaning over her saying, “Ma’am?” The path was gone, the others gone, the heavy world of maya back again around her, and a stale taste in her dehydrated mouth.

\* \* \* \*

Lights and tunnels—where the hell was he? An A-test bunker, maybe, except no bunker was ever this brightly lit, and where was Teller or Mark or Oppie? But, no, Oppie hadn’t ever worked on this project, Henry was confused, that was it, he was just confused—

And then he wasn’t.

He woke all at once, a wrenching transition from sleep-that-wasn’t-really-sleep to full alertness. In fact, his senses seemed preternaturally sharp. He felt the hard cot underneath his back, the slime of drool on his cheek, the flatness of the dining-room fluorescent lights. He heard the roll of rubber gurney wheels on the low-pile carpet and the clatter of cutlery in the kitchen dishwashers. He smelled Carrie’s scent, wool and vanilla and young skin, and he could have described every ligament of her body as she sat on the chair next to his cot in the dining room of St. Sebastian’s, Detective Geraci beside her.



“Henry?” Carrie whispered.

He said, “It’s coming. It’s almost here.”

\* \* \* \*

The Ship withdrew all contact. It had never encountered anything like this before. The pre-being did not coalesce .

Its components were not uniform, but scattered among undisciplined and varied matter-specks who were wildly heterozygotic. Unlike the components of every other pre-being that ship had detected, had guided, had become. All the other pre-ships had existed as one on the matter plane, because they were alike in all ways. These, too, were alike, built of the same physical particles and performing the same physical processes, but somewhere something had gone very wrong, and from that uniform matter they had not evolved uniform consciousness. They had no harmony. They used violence against each other.

Possibly they could, if taken in, use that violence against the ship.

Yet the ship couldn’t go away and leave them. Already they were changing spacetime in their local vicinity. When their melding had advanced father, the new being could be a dangerous and powerful entity. What might it do?

The ship pondered, and feared, and recoiled from what might be necessary: the destruction of what should have been an integral part of itself.

\* \* \* \*

### THIRTEEN

Jake DiBella clutched the printouts so hard that the stiff paper crumpled in his hand. Lying on the sofa, Henry Erdmann frowned at the tiny destruction. Carrie had pulled her chair close enough to hold Henry’s hand, while that RPD detective, Geraci, stood at the foot of the couch. What was he doing here, anyway? DiBella didn’t know, but he was too agitated to care for more than a fleeting second.

Carrie said to Henry, “I still think you should go to the hospital!”

“I’m not going, so forget it.” The old man struggled to sit up. She would have stopped him, but Geraci put a hand on her shoulder and gently restrained her. Throwing around his authority, DiBella thought.

Henry said, “Why at St. Sebastian’s?”

The same question that Carrie had asked. DiBella said, “I have a theory.” His voice sounded strange to himself. “It’s based on Carrie’s observation that nobody under eighty has been ... affected by this. If it is some sort of uber-consciousness that’s ... that’s approaching Earth...” He couldn’t go on. It was too silly.

It was too real.

Henry Erdmann was apparently not afraid of either silliness or reality—which seemed to have become the same thing. Henry said, “You mean it’s coming here because ‘uber-consciousness’ emerges only among the old, and nowadays there’s more old than ever before.”

“For the first time in history, you over-eighties exceed one percent of the population. A hundred forty million people worldwide.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why here. Or why us.”

“For God’s sake, Henry, everything has to start somewhere!”

Geraci said, surprising DiBella, “All bifurcation is local. One lungfish starts to breathe more air than water. One caveman invents an axe. There’s always a nexus. Maybe that nexus is you, Dr. Erdmann.”

Carrie tilted her head to look up at Geraci.

Henry said heavily, “Maybe so. But I’m not the only one. I wasn’t the main switch for the energy that brought down that airplane. I was just one of the batteries linked in parallel.”

The science analogies comfort Erdmann, DiBella thought. He wished something would comfort him.

Carrie said, “I think Evelyn was the switch to open the safe for Anna Chernov’s necklace.”

Geraci’s face sharpened. But he said, “That doesn’t really make sense. I can’t go that far.”

Henry’s sunken eyes grew hard. “You haven’t had to travel as far as I have in order to get to this point, young man. Believe me about that. But I experienced the ... the consciousness. That data is anecdotal but real. And those brain scans that Dr. DiBella is mangling there aren’t even anecdotal. They’re hard data.”

True enough. The brain scans DiBella had taken of the unconscious oldsters, before that irate idiot Jamison had discovered him at work and thrown him out, were cruder versions of Evelyn Krenchnoted’s under the fMRI. An almost total shutdown of the thalamus, the relay station for sensory information flowing into the brain. Ditto for the body-defining posterior parietal lobes. Massive activity in the back of the brain, especially in the tempoparietal regions, amygdalae, and hippocampus. The brain scan of an epileptic mystical state on speed. And as unlike the usual scan for the coma-state as a turtle was to a rocketship to the stars.

DiBella put his hands to his face and pulled at his skin, as if that might rearrange his thoughts. When he’d dropped his hands, he said slowly, “A single neuron isn’t smart, isn’t even a very impressive entity. All it really does is convert one type of electrical or chemical signal into another. That’s it. But neurons connected together in the brain can generate incredibly complex states. You just need enough of them to make consciousness possible.”

“Or enough old people for this ‘group consciousness’?” Carrie said. “But why only old people?”

“How the hell should I know?” DiBella said. “Maybe the brain needs to have stored enough experience, enough sheer time.”

Geraci said, “Do you read Dostoevsky?”

“No,” DiBella said. He didn’t like Geraci. “Do you?”

“Yes. He said there were moments when he felt a ‘frightful’ clarity and rapture, and that he would give his whole life for five seconds of that and not feel he was paying too much. Dostoevsky was an epileptic.”

“I know he was an epileptic!” DiBella snapped.

Carrie said, “Henry, can you sense it now? That thing that’s coming?”

“No. Not at all. Obviously it’s not quantum-entangled in any classical sense.”

“Then maybe it’s gone away.”

Henry tried to smile at her. “Maybe. But I don’t think so. I think it’s coming for us.”

“What do you mean, ‘coming for you’?” Geraci said skeptically. “It’s not a button man.”

“I don’t know what I mean,” Henry said irritably. “But it’s coming, and soon. It can’t afford to wait long. Look what we did ... that plane...”

Carrie’s hand tightened on Henry’s fingers. “What will it do when it gets here?”

“I don’t know. How could I know?”

“Henry—” Jake began.

“I’m more worried about what we may do before it arrives.”

Geraci said, “Turn on CNN.”

DiBella said pointedly, “Don’t you have someplace you should be, Detective?”

“No. Not if this really is happening.”

To which there was no answer.

\* \* \* \*

At 9:43 PM, the power grid went down in a city two hundred miles away. “No evident reason,” said the talking head on CNN, “given the calm weather and no sign of any—”

“Henry?” Carrie said.

“I ... I’m all right. But I felt it.”

Jake said, “It’s happening farther away now. That is, if it was ... if that was...”

“It was,” Henry said simply. Still stretched full-length on the sofa, he closed his eyes. Geraci stared at the TV. None of them had wanted any food.

At 9:51, Henry’s body jerked violently and he cried out. Carrie whimpered, but in a moment Henry said, “I’m ... conscious.” No one dared comment on his choice of word. Seven minutes later, the CNN anchor announced breaking news: a bridge over the Hudson River had collapsed, plunging an Amtrak train into the dark water.

Over the next few minutes, Henry’s face showed a rapid change of expression: fear, rapture, anger, surprise. The expressions were so pronounced, so distorted, that at times Henry Erdmann almost looked like someone else. Jake wondered wildly if he should record this on his cell camera, but he didn’t move. Carrie knelt beside the sofa and put both arms around the old man, as if to hold him here with her.

“We ... can’t help it,” Henry got out. “If one person thinks strongly enough about—ah, God!”

The lights and TV went off. Alarms sounded, followed by sirens. Then a thin beam of light shone on Henry’s face; Geraci had a pocket flashlight. Henry’s entire body convulsed in seizure, but he opened his eyes. DiBella could barely hear his whispered words.

“It’s a choice.”

\* \* \* \*

The only way was a choice. The ship didn’t understand the necessity—how could any single unit choose

other than to become part of its whole? That had never happened before. Birthing entities came happily to join themselves. The direction of evolution was toward greater complexity, always. But choice must be the last possible action here, for this misbegotten and unguided being. If it did not choose to merge—

Destruction. To preserve the essence of consciousness itself, which meant the essence of all.

\* \* \* \*

## FOURTEEN

Evelyn, who feared hospitals, had refused to go to Redborn Memorial to be “checked over” after the afternoon’s fainting spell. That’s all it was, just fainting, nothing to get your blood in a boil about, just a—

She stopped halfway between her microwave and kitchen table. The casserole in her hand fell to the floor and shattered.

The light was back, the one she’d dreamed about in her faint. Only it wasn’t a light and this wasn’t a dream. It was there in her mind, and it was her mind, and she was it ... had always been it. How could that be? But the presence filled her and Evelyn knew, beyond any doubt, that if she joined it, she would never, ever be alone again. Why, she didn’t need words, had never needed words, all she had to do was choose to go where she belonged anyway...

Who knew?

Happily, the former Evelyn Krenchnoted became part of those waiting for her, even as her body dropped to the linguini-spattered floor.

\* \* \* \*

In a shack in the slums of Karachi, a man lay on a pile of clean rags. His toothless gums worked up and down, but he made no sound. All night he had been waiting alone to die, but now it seemed his wait had truly been for something else, something larger than even death, and very old.

Old. It sought the old, and only the old, and the toothless man knew why. Only the old had earned this, had paid for this in the only coin that really mattered: the accumulation of sufficient sorrow.

With relief he slipped away from his pain-wracked body and into the ancient largeness.

\* \* \* \*

No. He wasn’t moving, Bob thought. The presence in his mind terrified him, and terror turned him furious. Let them—whoever—try all their cheap tricks, they were as bad as union negotiators. Offering concessions that would never materialize. Trying to fool him. He wasn’t going anywhere, wasn’t becoming anything, not until he knew exactly what the deal was, what the bastards wanted.

They weren’t going to get him.

But then he felt something else happen. He knew what it was. Sitting in the Redborn Memorial ER, Bob Donovan cried out, “No! Anna—you can’t!” even as his mind tightened and resisted until, abruptly, the presence withdrew and he was alone.

\* \* \* \*

In a luxurious townhouse in San Jose, a man sat up abruptly in bed. For a long moment he sat completely still in the dark, not even noticing that the clock and digital-cable-box lights were out. He was too filled

with wonder.

Of course—why hadn't he seen this before? He, who had spent long joyful nights debugging computers when they still used vacuum tubes—how could he have missed this? He wasn't the whole program, but rather just one line of code! And it was when you put all the code together, not before, that the program could actually run. He'd been only a fragment, and now the whole was here....

He joined it.

\* \* \* \*

Erin Bass experienced satori.

Tears filled her eyes. All her adult life she had wanted this, longed for it, practiced meditation for hours each day, and had not even come close to the mystical intoxication she felt now. She hadn't known, hadn't dreamed it could be this oneness with all reality. All her previous striving had been wrong. There was no striving, there was no Erin. She had never been created; she was the creation and the cosmos; no individual existed. Her existence was not her own, and when that last illusion vanished so did she, into the all.

\* \* \* \*

Gina Martinelli felt it, the grace that was the glory of God. Only ... only where was Jesus Christ, the savior and Lord? She couldn't feel him, couldn't find Him in the oneness...

If Christ was not there, then this wasn't Heaven. It was a trick of the Cunning One, of Satan who knows a million disguises and sends his demons to mislead the faithful. She wasn't going to be tricked!

She folded her arms and began to pray aloud. Gina Martinelli was a faithful Christian. She wasn't going anywhere; she was staying right here, waiting for the one true God.

\* \* \* \*

A tiny woman in Shanghai sat at her window, watching her great-grandchildren children play in the courtyard. How fast they were! Ai, once she had been so fast.

She felt it come over her all at once, the gods entering her soul. So it was her time! Almost she felt young again, felt strong ... that was good. But even if had not been good, when the gods came for you, you went.

One last look at the children, and she was taken to the gods.

\* \* \* \*

Anna Chernov, wide awake in the St. Sebastian's infirmary that had become her prison, gave a small gasp. She felt power flow through her, and for a wild moment she thought it was the same force that had powered a lifetime of arabesques and jetes, a lifetime ago.

It was not.

This was something outside of herself, separate ... but it didn't have to be. She could take it in herself, become it, even as it became her. But she held back.

Will there be dancing?

No. Not as she knew it, not the glorious stretch of muscle and thrust of limb and arch of back. Not the creation of beauty through the physical body. No. No dancing.

But there was power here, and she could use that power for another kind of escape, from her useless body and this infirmary and a life without dance. From somewhere distant she heard someone cry, “Anna—you can’t!” But she could. Anna seized the power, both refusing to join it or to leave it, and bent it onto herself. She was dead before her next breath.

\* \* \* \*

Henry’s whole body shuddered. It was here. It was him.

Or not. “It’s a choice,” he whispered.

On the one hand, everything. All consciousness, woven into the very fabric of space-time itself, just as Wheeler and the rest had glimpsed nearly a hundred years ago. Consciousness at the quantum level, the probability-wave level, the co-evolvee with the universe itself.

On the other hand, the individual Henry Martin Erdmann. If he merged with the uber-consciousness, he would cease to exist as himself, his separate mind. And his mind was everything to Henry.

He hung suspended for nanoseconds, years, eons. Time itself took on a different character. Half here, half not, Henry knew the power, and what it was, and what humanity was not. He saw the outcome. He had his answer.

“No,” he said.

Then he lay again on his sofa with Carrie’s arms around him, the other two men illuminated dimly by a thin beam of yellow light, and he was once more mortal and alone.

And himself.

\* \* \* \*

Enough merged. The danger is past. The being is born, and is the ship, and is enough.

\* \* \* \*

## FIFTEEN

Months to identify all the dead. Years to fully repair all the damage to the world’s infrastructure: bridges, buildings, information systems. Decades yet to come, DiBella knew, of speculation about what had actually happened. Not that there weren’t theories already. Massive EMP, solar radiation, extrasolar radiation, extrastellar radiation, extraterrestrial attack, global terrorism, Armageddon, tectonic plate activity, genetically engineered viruses. Stupid ideas, all easily disproved, but of course that stopped no one from believing them. The few old people left said almost nothing. Those that did, were scarcely believed.

Jake scarcely believed it himself.

He did nothing with the brain scans of Evelyn Krenchnoted and the three others, because there was nothing plausible he could do. They were all dead, anyway. “Only their bodies,” Carrie always added. She believed everything Henry Erdmann told her.

Did DiBella believe Henry’s ideas? On Tuesdays he did, on Wednesdays not, on Thursdays belief again.

There was no replicable proof. It wasn't science. It was ... something else.

DiBella lived his life. He broke up with James. He visited Henry, long after the study of senior attention patterns was over. He went to dinner with Carrie and Vince Geraci. He was best man at their wedding.

He attended his mother's sixty-fifth birthday party, a lavish shindig organized by his sister in the ballroom of a glitzy downtown hotel. The birthday girl laughed, and kissed the relatives who'd flown in from Chicago, and opened her gifts. As she gyrated on the dance floor with his Uncle Sam, DiBella wondered if she would live long enough to reach eighty.

Wondered how many others in the world would reach eighty.

"It was only because enough of them chose to go that the rest of us lost the emerging power," Henry had said, and DiBella noted that them instead of us. "If you have only a few atoms of uranium left, you can't reach critical mass."

DiBella would have put it differently: If you have only a few neurons, you don't have a conscious brain. But it came to the same thing in the end.

"If so many hadn't merged, then the consciousness would have had to..." Henry didn't finish his sentence, then or ever. But DiBella could guess.

"Come on, boy," Uncle Sam called, "get yourself a partner and dance!"

DiBella shook his head and smiled. He didn't have a partner just now and he didn't want to dance. All the same, old Sam was right. Dancing had a limited shelf life. The sell-by date was already stamped on most human activity. Someday his mother's generation, the largest demographic bulge in history, would turn eighty. And Henry's choice would have to be made yet again.

How would it go next time?