

• NEVIS •

*Florida, The Present*

Nevis, driving north out of Florida on the I75, wasn't thinking about terrorists taking down the power grid. He was having trouble with coherent thought. What on God's green earth had he just witnessed?

Three hours ago, he had watched as two people appeared between equipment that had been spitting blue fire in Arthur Littlewood's clandestine laboratory. Two people who had not been there a moment earlier. He saw them appear out of nowhere and slump to the ground. What had he seen? One thing was for sure, he was glad no one in that room knew he'd seen it.

Gripping the wheel of his rental car, Nevis made a mental shortlist of possibilities.

Secret deep-cover government agency technology.

Terrorist activity.

Alien technology.

Honestly? He had no idea what he'd just stumbled across. But he was pretty sure that whatever it was, Jules Khan's death was mixed up in it. A shiver ran down Nevis's spine. Littlewood hadn't seemed like a killer. Neither had the young woman from Santa Barbara. The young man who'd opened the door—was he some high-level assassin sent to eliminate Khan when Khan had demanded hush money? But Everett could barely defend himself in a fist fight.

Nevis blinked as a new possibility presented itself.

What if his assailant had *pretended* to be unable to defend himself? Everyone at that lab had been intent on preventing Nevis from seeing anything, that was for sure. He

shuddered, remembering the flashes of light. The two people who had appeared out of nowhere.

Nevis had FBI clearance for another two days. Maybe less than that. He'd blocked calls from his SAC after passing the county sheriff back at the complex where Littlewood's secret lab had been located. He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. He wanted answers. What had he witnessed? Something big, that much was clear. Littlewood had said his work was government funded. Okay. That was a place to start. Find out more about Littlewood's funding. What branch was it from? How long had he been getting it? These were things that would be a lot trickier two days from now.

That decided it.

Exiting the freeway, Nevis pulled into the parking lot of the Valdosta Walmart Supercenter. He needed to figure out his next move. If Littlewood's funding was governmental, then maybe the reason Nevis had been ordered to back off was because the FBI had been told to back off. The forces behind a secret of this magnitude must be powerful. And deadly.

Nevis swallowed and then reached up to loosen his tie. He shifted his seat, tipping it back to a more comfortable angle. As he did so, his keys shifted in his pants pocket, jabbing his thigh. Except . . . his keys were in the ignition. He reached into his pocket.

Oh.

It was the thumb drive he'd picked up in front of Littlewood's clandestine operation. Could it belong to the professor?

Nevis's heart began to beat double-time. Handing the thumb drive over to his SAC wasn't even a remote temptation. He fired up his laptop, inserted the drive, and

examined the contents, encountering equations, theories, diagrams, and equipment lists that were meaningless to him. But what was *not* meaningless were the names.

Five hours later, Nevis had an address in Missouri. He'd used his FBI access to locate the possible whereabouts of someone calling himself Ken Julius, a name he'd found on the thumb drive in a list of aliases once under consideration by none other than *Jules Khan*. Whoever this Ken Julius living above a coffee shop in Kansas City was, he knew something.

Nevis swallowed. He should maybe consider adopting an alias himself.

Nevis would never know the complicated path by which the thumb drive had landed in his possession. But he did know one thing: he'd seen two people appear out of thin air and this thumb drive contained scientific papers and schematics and blueprints that referenced time travel as though it were an actual *thing*. Benjamin Nevis had questions. Lots of questions.

If time travel were possible, what would that mean for humanity? Or, closer to home, what might it mean for Nevis? For eight years, Nevis had replayed the horrible day when his former boss Lewiston had double-crossed him and gotten away with millions. The day that had nearly ruined Nevis's career and led to his sister's death. *If only he could turn back time*, had been his constant refrain. Now by some crazy chance, he'd found someone who might, with the right persuasion, be able to do just that.

And so, thirty-one hours later, on a hot, sticky morning outside a hot, sticky coffee shop in Kansas City, Nevis waited until a compact man in need of a haircut stepped out with a cup of coffee and a day-old doughnut.

"Hello, Jules Khan," said Nevis.

The man dropped his doughnut, but not, fortunately, his coffee, and glared at Nevis.

“Who the hell are you?”

Nevis flashed his badge without a verbal response, allowing the question to hang unanswered for a moment before offering his most genial smile. “I’m the man you’re going to have an extended conversation with, regarding the contents of this thumb drive.”

Khan’s face turned pale. “That’s mine.”

“It *was* yours. It’s mine now. But if you tell me everything about the time machine you invented, it could be yours again.”

Khan swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “What do you want to know?”

· *HALLEY* ·

*December*

Halley was ready for a change. She stood in the darkened living area of the latest hotel efficiency suite she shared with Edmund, watching colorful Christmas lights as they blinked on a twelve-inch artificial tree. It was a portable and therefore a very practical tree. Since the first of December, Halley and Edmund had lived in three similar hotel units, following the filming of a movie that had barely wrapped on Christmas Eve. They'd paid out of pocket to stay here tonight, the 25th. Exhausted from staying up late the night before to finish Halley's present, Edmund had already gone to bed.

It had been a good Christmas. Cozy. Peaceful. They'd slept in, dined on leftovers foisted on them by craft services, and exchanged gifts. Halley's eyes fell on Edmund's gift to her, a hand-made wooden baby cradle. The timing was . . . serendipitous. For the past month—since they'd had to spend Thanksgiving alone, in fact—Halley had been reconsidering the lifestyle that meant she was always on the road, always at someone else's beck and call, at all hours, and without any permanent home.

A little over two years ago—the moment pregnancy had become a possibility—she'd made the decision to go on the pill. There was no *way* she could run wardrobe for major motion pictures while enduring morning sickness and exhaustion, not to mention a belly that would seriously impede her ability to dash from the costume trailer to the set for the twenty to thirty wardrobe “emergencies” typical on any given day.

No, the pill had been an awesome solution.

Somehow, though, she hadn't managed to tell Edmund of her choice that first month of sharing a bed. Or the second month. By the time a year had passed, it would have been awkward to bring it up, what with Edmund thinking she wanted a baby and trying to cheer her up each month when her period arrived. Edmund had always wanted to be a dad. Until recently though, Halley hadn't wanted to be a mom.

She crossed to the plastic tree, reaching for the light switch. Now the room was dark except for the glow put out by a few LEDs. A bright blue TV button light lit the cradle's smoothly polished surface. Although he didn't believe it, Edmund was a true craftsman. Halley smiled and ran her hand along the top rail.

What would it be like to settle down and live in the same place for more than six weeks at a time? To have a backyard where they could invite friends over for Fourth of July? She'd accepted her next job, a shoot of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* reimaged in the Florida Everglades, because it would put her closer to the people she loved—to the ones who were family even if they weren't blood-related. But what would it be like to own a condo in Wellesley, Florida? Or buy a house there? She'd saved enough for a modest down payment. What would it be like to have a *home*, or even . . . to have Edmund's child?

Halley nudged the cradle, setting it gently rocking.

It was time for a change. It had been a long time coming but she finally felt ready, and so for the first time in over eight hundred nights of sliding under sheets to join Edmund's enticing body, Halley didn't take her pill.

· KHAN ·

*December*

Jules Khan hurled the whiteboard eraser across his laboratory.

What was wrong with Space-time?

For the past week, this had been his question. It was all he could think about. In actuality, it had started three weeks ago, although he hadn't known anything was "starting" at the time. He'd been sitting at his desk, awaiting results of a trial of his newly completed time machine. To pass the time he'd been online, reading news about some seemingly unrelated thefts of valuable historical artifacts, which had vanished as if by magic. Khan had become more interested when he read that each of the items in question had been purchased from an estate in Montecito, California. Further investigation showed the estate in question had been that of the late Jules Khan. Curious. But then an alarm on the machine had started blaring, and he'd thought no more of the vanishing valuables.

Until last week.

Last week Khan had been standing by the singularity device, trying to figure out why it seemed to be drawing twice the power it ought to draw on each of seventeen trials he'd run. Why would his machine draw extra power?

As he puzzled the problem, Khan had absentmindedly reached in his pocket for a stone he kept with him. The stone—a small piece of Rome's *Via Sacra*, had been his one memento from a visit to 53 BC using his former advisor's time machine. Well, the stone had been his only memento aside from a hulking Roman soldier, whom Khan had *not* kept.

As Khan stood there, listening to the machine's roar and worrying the stone in his hand, his memento had vanished.

*Vanished.*

Not fallen, dropped, slipped, or slid out of his grasp.

Vanished.

Khan had immediately halted all operation of the machine. Something uncanny was going on. Either something was wrong with space-time, or with his machine. But space-time couldn't be the culprit. Space-time operated only in predictable ways, in accordance with Khan's first and second temporal laws. If something was wrong, it had to be the result of human interference. Of someone, in short, operating a malfunctioning time machine. So what could possibly be wrong with his machine?

"*Nothing,*" he said out loud. His voice echoed in the cavernous space he'd rented eight months ago, before Nevis had turned up. At first, Khan had been thrilled to meet Special Agent Benjamin Nevis. Nevis had possessed—and shared—the one thing Khan needed most: a thumb drive containing schematics for building a singularity device. Khan had rebuilt the device to spec, correcting earlier errors introduced *before* he'd gotten his thumb drive back. With his newly acquired instructions, he'd done everything precisely. Triple-checked his work. There was simply no logical explanation for the problems with space-time *or* with his machine.

Nevis, for all that he claimed to know a little physics, was no help at all. Lately, Khan had even begun to doubt he was an FBI agent—or a *current* one, at any rate. Not that it mattered. Either way, Nevis had him under his thumb.

Khan examined his work on the whiteboard, daring an error to reveal itself. He must have missed something. He should recalculate. Grabbing a sweater Nevis had left unattended, Khan used the sleeve to erase the diagram on the whiteboard. What was he missing?

On observing the dry-erase ink had transferred itself from the whiteboard to Nevis's sweater, Khan smiled grimly. Teach Nevis to leave his things lying around. How was Khan supposed to work in these conditions?

That was the *real* problem. Khan knew damn well he was capable of building a functional singularity device from the information on the thumb drive. He knew it because *he'd already done it*. Or at least, a version of himself had done it. When Dr. Arthur Littlewood had accidentally transported Jules Khan from 2001 to 2018, Khan had learned of the existence (and death) of a separate version of himself who had remained behind in 2001. Space-time apparently abhorred the void that would've been left if a person or object wasn't duplicated, to exist in both times. The alternative Khan left in 2001 had abandoned academia, built a time machine, and amassed wealth in Montecito. This was how Khan knew he had it in him to build a machine from the instructions on the thumb drive. The other Khan had already done it! He'd used the thumb drive instructions to build a machine and operate it very profitably for almost seventeen years.

If his other self had done it, then so could he.

This was all Nevis's fault, Khan thought, glaring at Nevis's sweater. How was anyone supposed to work with an armed FBI agent watching his every move? Khan heard the distant industrial flush of the lab's only toilet. Nevis's bathroom visits were

practically the only breaks Khan got from the man's onerous presence. He waited for Nevis's second flush. His disgusting, why-did-he-need-it, second flush.

Khan set Nevis's sweater back down, hiding the marker ink inside a fold.

He knew why he was having so much trouble figuring out the problem with space-time. Or rather, with his machine. Who could be expected to do their best work under constant threat of exposure and imprisonment? While Nevis pretended they were colleagues (*as if!*), Khan understood the nature of their relationship. Nevis was blackmailing him. If Khan didn't build the machine and do whatever the hell else Nevis demanded, Nevis would give the FBI or CIA or Homeland Security a tip. One of the other of those organizations would follow up with a careful look at Khan's falsified ID. Nevis had been clear Khan's ID wouldn't pass for the real thing. Khan might fantasize about running away and starting afresh, but he knew better than to think he could outwit the various arms of law Nevis would bring to bear on him if he *did* run in his current penurious state.

No, he needed to get the machine operational and steal obscene amounts of valuables from the past and convert these to cash, which would allow him to flee to some country without extradition where he could . . . start all over again.

Some prospect.

The toilet flushed a second time.

It might not be a great prospect, but it beat life with Benjamin Nevis.

Lately, Khan had begun to wish he could consult with Arthur Littlewood about this. Had Littlewood, perhaps, encountered these troubling "disappearances"? And never bothered to mention it? During Khan's tenure as postdoc, Littlewood had never so much

as hinted at “object impermanence.” Of course, Littlewood had only made a handful of trips to the past, and only one retrieval—his fountain pen—so far as Khan knew.

Littlewood was probably as ignorant as he was.

But Khan did wish they could discuss the matter, physicist to physicist. The problem with working alone was that he was . . . *alone*. If there were physics conundrums—as clearly there were—Benjamin Nevis was not the sort of person Khan could turn to for a little brainstorming. The toilet flushed a third time.

“Really?” Khan muttered to the empty lab.

Then he turned back to the empty whiteboard. If he was ever getting out of here, he had problems to solve.

Why was the machine drawing twice the power it should?

Why were *some* (but not all) duplicated objects retrieved from the past disappearing?

Where did these items disappear *to*?

And, worst of all: would he, a duplicate himself, be next?