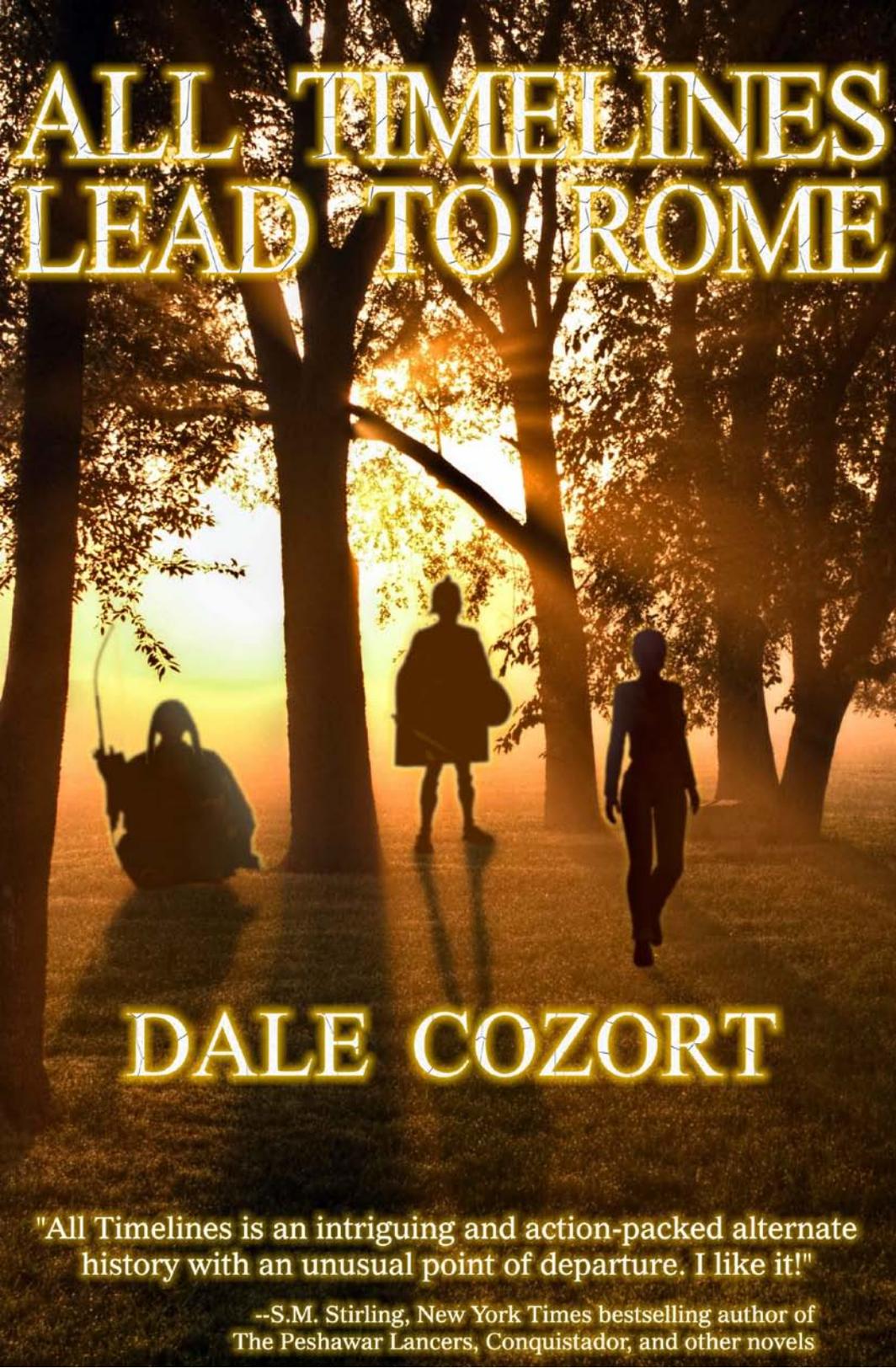


# ALL TIMELINES LEAD TO ROME

A golden-hued forest scene with three silhouetted figures: a kneeling archer on the left, a standing figure in the center, and a walking figure on the right.

DALE COZORT

"All Timelines is an intriguing and action-packed alternate history with an unusual point of departure. I like it!"

--S.M. Stirling, New York Times bestselling author of  
The Peshawar Lancers, Conquistador, and other novels

# **All Timelines Lead to Rome**

Dale R. Cozort

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**Stairway Press**

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To: My Family and My Online and Real-World Writing Groups.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons (living or dead) is entirely coincidental.

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### **Author's Note**

If you enjoy the novel, feel free to drop by my website at [www.DaleCozort.com](http://www.DaleCozort.com) or my blog at <http://dalecoz.livejournal.com>.



## Chapter One

SCOTT WHITE RAN into a wall of Metallica blasting from a jukebox when he entered Dickey's Bar and Grill. The guy behind the bar loomed like a wall too, at least five inches taller than Scott's six feet and bulky in a Harley T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off to reveal bulging biceps. A scar ran from his eyebrow to his chin. Harley Guy rubbed his shaved head and gave Scott a friendly smile.

"Bill Dickey, owner of this fine establishment. You here to pick up the lady?"

Scott nodded. "Yeah, the detective."

"You a boyfriend? Husband?"

"Nope. I'm from the BTI. Just picking her up. She busted an axle on her rental car."

"She checked you out big-time when you walked in," Bill said. "That's a lot of trouble sitting over there. I'll have a go at her if you don't mind."

Scott shrugged and turned away, but Bill said, "Tell the Bureau your public relations suck. You make portals to another dimension boring."

"Not my department," Scott said. "I'm an analyst." He strode over to the twenty-something woman with dark purple hair and East Asian features Bill had pointed out. She snapped a lighter open and shut as Scott held out his hand. "Scott White, Bureau of Timeline Integrity."

Darla Smith looked businesslike in spite of her dark purple hair; tall and slender in blue dress pants and blue and white shirt.

She didn't take his hand, but patted the chair beside her.

"Have a drink."

Bill Dickey joined them uninvited. "I heard you say Boston earlier. What's a Boston detective doing in Illinois?"

Darla flicked her lighter again. "Investigating a murder."

"No smoking here," Bill said. "I'm a law-abiding type."

Darla stared at the flame. "I don't smoke."

"You're hot enough to."

Darla grinned. "Don't you have a bar to run? Better pickup lines?"

He winked and strolled away.

Scott said, "A murder?"

"Yep. And a Roman scroll." Darla pulled up a picture on her cellphone as the jukebox went temporarily silent. "It's a volume in Livy's *A History of Rome*, probably from Timeline X. They tell me this volume didn't survive in our reality. Chad Summers said you're assigned to the case."

"That's the first I've heard of it. Tomorrow I go into quarantine for Timeline X Indian country. Where did you get the picture?"

"From a body. A Jane Doe."

They finished their drinks when the jukebox started again, making further conversation impossible. As they left, Scott spotted a young East Asian woman in dark sunglasses wafting cigarette smoke out the driver's side window of a late model black Mercedes. Her car sat at the fringe of the parking lot, rigidly segregated from the pickup trucks under a faded sign on the side of the bar: "UDE GIRLS EVERY NIGHT."

Darla glared at the Mercedes and her lips tightened. "My personal cloud."

Scott glanced at her, but she didn't say anything else.

The Bureau of Timeline Integrity's Midwest office stood six stories, a pygmy among the office buildings surrounding

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Oakbrook Mall in the middle ring of Chicago suburbs. It discreetly bore the bureau's logo.

Scott barely noticed the handful of demonstrators near BTI's underground garage, a tiny remnant of the thousands that gathered there when the portals opened seven years ago. As he drove his four-year-old green Chevy past them, they chanted, "Close the Portals. Timeline X for the Indians." A tall bearded guy brandished a sign that read, "Jesus Died For TimeLine X Too."

They met Chad Summers in a conference room on the sixth floor. Chad pulled Scott from his Timeline-X gig and assigned him as Darla's liaison. Scott felt a mixture of irritation and relief. Three week quarantine, boring. Working in Timeline X, great. He asked, "Why did BTI route this here instead of New York? And why are you sending it to me instead of having the powers-that-be declare martial law?"

"They want it low-key until we know it's not a scam, but they also want something to happen," Chad said. "New York would slop coffee on the file and toss it in a drawer." He projected the scroll picture onto the conference room wall. "If this was Aztec or Inca, I'd say it was genuine. With Roman stuff, the burden of proof gets higher. Being Roman makes it a scam or a national emergency."

"Why?" Darla asked.

"Disease. Scott can talk details with you."

Darla pulled a package from her briefcase. "So...BTI. Bureau of Timeline Integrity. I hear you hire the best people the FBI doesn't want."

Chad's face went expressionless. "We own turf the FBI wishes they had. If it involves TLX, it's ours. I'll touch base later."

After he left, Darla grinned. "Methinks I hit a nerve. TLX?"

"Timeline X," Scott said. "How much do you know about it?"

"Alternate reality. Roman Empire stuck around, never got to the New World. No Columbus. Lots more Indians."

“Yep. TLX is *the* alternate reality—the only one we know of. And TLX Rome is a lot like Rome in the first century AD, which is one of the mysteries of TLX.”

“Why is a book from Rome less likely than an Aztec one?”

Scott went over the basics: portals located at weak spots in the wall between the realities, with seven in the Western U.S., twelve in Australia, and one each in Siberia and Iceland, but none in mainland Europe because of the huge power requirements—it would take all the power from two nuclear power plants to make a dime-sized hole anywhere in Europe and most places in Asia.

“Too expensive. Portals are only at the weak spots and without portals, you can’t have artifacts.”

“So why would something from Rome be a national emergency?”

“Smallpox. It would kill millions if it got loose here. And who knows what other diseases they have.” Scott turned to the picture on the screen. “Your turn. Where is this from?”

“A removable cellphone camera chip hidden on a headless, handless, naked Jane Doe, murdered and mutilated to prevent identification. Never found the cellphone, just the chip. Chip also contains a thousand-plus pictures of twenty-year-olds having fun. Nothing that identifies her so far.”

“What killed her?”

“Other than having her head cut off?”

“Didn’t that happen after she died?”

“Yeah. Just being a smart-ass. It’ll be a while until I have the autopsy report.”

“On a murder case?”

Darla pulled the chip out of her briefcase. “You obviously haven’t worked with big-city law enforcement.”

Jeni Burgen drove the hundred miles to her portal in eastern Ohio alone. The portal was hidden in a small, windowless building in a

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forty-acre warehouse and data center complex. A seven-foot fence surrounded the complex to keep out casual trespassers. Cameras and motion sensors discreetly backed up the fence, adding unobtrusive but potent layers of security. A long, straight access road led from the nearest county road into the complex, adding a mile-wide flat and treeless buffer zone from that side. From a security standpoint, the back of the complex worried Jeni. One of the landowners there had promised to sell, but got bogged down in a lawsuit, legally encumbering the property. Scrub trees grew in the fields, and security often scrambled when hunters approached the fence.

Jeni presented her badge at the gate. The security guard glanced at it and waved her in with no sign of recognizing her as anyone special. Bernhardt Sloan met her at the front door. He studied her unsmilingly.

“An unexpected pleasure. You should let me know about these trips so I could give you a proper escort.”

“Don’t be so modest. I’m sure the guards at my house phoned you when I left and somebody discreetly followed me with enough firepower to ward off kidnappers or assassins.”

Bernhardt smiled. The expression looked like it made his face hurt. “Perhaps. The constant security undoubtedly gets on your nerves, so I try to maintain the illusion it doesn’t exist.”

“Thank you. I don’t think there’s been a minute in the last three years when you didn’t know where I was.”

“Actually, I lost track of you for three months. I hope we don’t repeat that experience.”

Jeni smiled. “You really didn’t know where I was that summer? Good. As to repeating the experience, I so wish I could. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going across.”

Bernhardt nodded. Before she could walk away, he said, “About the young woman who snuck into your compound...” He hesitated. “Be careful.”

“I will. Something you want to tell me?”

Bernhardt’s face went back to its usual inexpressive mask. “Just to be careful.”

“Yeah. I need time away from everything.”

Bernhardt nodded. “I’m going over this afternoon.”

Jeni went into the portal building. It looked like a power substation, which, along with its covert function, was exactly what it was. Dual overhead doors allowed trucks to enter, though the actual portal was one-way only for truck traffic, to reduce the power needed to keep it open. Jeni watched the doors to the portal tunnel slide up. They were heavy, over a foot thick and made of a shell of high-quality steel around a mix of ceramic materials sandwiched inside. A similar door slid open at the other end. A second pair of identical doors was set on each side of the portal itself, poised to swing shut in an emergency.

Jeni walked along the pedestrian walkway that led to Timeline X. There was no sign marking the transition from one timeline to the other. Some people claimed to feel disoriented when they went across, but Jeni never felt anything unusual.

On the other side, she found herself in a thunderstorm. She dashed from the portal door to the door of her house. Or more properly, her mansion.

Power was out in the house, but backup lights were on. Her housekeeper looked up casually from some kitchen task and then doubled her efforts when she recognized Jeni. Jeni went upstairs to her bedroom and changed out of her wet clothes. The thunderstorm ended a few minutes later. She strolled outside and glared back at the main house, built into the side of a hill, with retractable shutters to camouflage the windows, doors, and solar panels. Yeah. That monstrosity was really going to be invisible from the air. If the pilot was blind. Even with the shutters down, thermal imaging would find it.

She could only spot one other building from the low hill

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where she stood. The top of a white frame house—temporary housing—peeked out of the woods. Her stomach churned at the sight, and not just because it was clearly visible.

*I don't want them here.*

The rest of the buildings sat invisibly underground, including Jeni's "Indian College" half a mile away. No roads connected the buildings, just camouflaged paths for electric carts.

Jeni chased down a plastic grocery bag blowing across the path in front of her. "Great. We're already trashing the timeline."

She marched to the white frame house. A guard sat at the gate of a nine-foot-high chain-link fence topped by barbed wire that surrounded it. He glanced up from his portable videogame, did a double take and hid the game beneath his logbook.

Jeni smiled. "It's a boring job; I get that. All jobs are boring eventually."

"Most of them are grounds-keeping, but there is one here."

"Who authorized the grounds-keeping?"

"Mr. Hollsworth."

"I'll need to chat with him. I don't do slaves."

"He said they're getting paid. I don't know what they would do with money, though."

The guard walked her in. A young female about three feet tall stood up when the door opened, got an eager expression on her face and picked up a notepad. "Draw?"

"They call this kind *Eyes*."

Jeni stood by the door until the "Eye" toddled over with her picture. If the female had a tail, she'd be wagging it. Jeni stared at the picture and didn't have to feign amazement. "Impressive."

The Eye grinned from ear to oversized ear. Jeni impulsively reached down and almost patted her on the head. She stopped herself. "I've got to get out of here."

She rushed out of the house.

Dale R. Cozort



## Chapter Two

SCOTT CRINGED WHEN he noticed Darla eying the chipped conference table and elderly laptop computers.

*Probably thinks we got them at a garage sale.*

He flipped off the lights so he could examine the pictures from the cellphone chip that Darla projected onto the wall.

“You saw the last picture she took,” Darla said. “She shot a video of the same scene.”

Scott studied the picture. Other than the scroll, nothing. The table was oak and new. That meant expensive. “Wait. There’s a mirror. Is there anything in it?”

Darla zoomed in on the mirror. “Nothing.” She ran through the video, checking out the mirror there too. “And nothing.”

“Wait. Go back.” Scott thought he saw a flicker of motion in the mirror. “Slow it down.”

A distorted face appeared in the mirror for a dozen frames, less than half a second in real time. Darla brought up the frame where it showed the clearest. Scott studied the image. Not a mask; the expression changed. And not a gorilla. “I think it’s a man.” But the forehead was wrong. The ears were wrong. “What is four feet tall with a face like a gorilla and hangs around rich people’s houses?”

“I don’t know.”

Scott ran the twelve frames in a loop and studied the slight motions, fascinated. Not much room for a brain in that forehead.

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Finally Darla said, “I’m ravenous. I skipped breakfast to catch the plane and didn’t trust the food at Dickey’s.”

Scott glanced at his watch. “It’s early for lunch, but I’ll make hard copies of the twelve frames, then treat you to BTI cafeteria food. It’s fast and not completely awful. Greasy burgers. Skimpo salad bar.”

As they ate, Darla asked, “What does a BTI agent do when he isn’t looking at mirrors?”

“I’m an analyst, not an agent. There’s a huge difference. Bigger than detective versus beat cop.” Scott glanced around the nearly empty cafeteria. “Agents are too good to eat here. They have big egos, guns and police powers, God help us all. And small manhoods—so I hear.”

Darla grinned. “And let me guess; analysts play with computers. That explains the geeky look.”

“I run marathons. I’m working up to Ironman competitions. And I’ve been to Timeline X a dozen times.”

“Wait, didn’t you just say we couldn’t go there because of the diseases?”

“The diseases are in Europe. Indians don’t have the nasty ones. That’s why Indians died in heaps from European diseases when the Europeans came over but Europeans didn’t die from Indian diseases.”

“Definitely a geek answer. No offense. I poke at people. You’ll get used to it.” Her grin widened. “Besides, I like geeks.” She pulled out her lighter and flicked it. “So the Indians are changing, doing what they would have done if your ancestors hadn’t taken over. The Romans aren’t. And that’s a mystery.”

“My ancestors?” Scott laughed. “I’m a quarter Indian. And you’re part Anglo.”

“Vietnamese-Irish.”

“Yeah.” Scott glanced up at the sprinklers, half expecting them to go off as Darla stared at the flame from her lighter.

“Could you put that away?” He pointed at the sprinkler head above them.

“Sorry. Nervous habit.” Darla flipped the lighter shut, but held it poised in her hand. “Romans. No change. Tell me more.”

“Not much to tell. The Romans stopped changing. A couple of hundred years later so did China and Japan. Looks like something spread from Rome. If anyone knows what spread, they haven’t told me.”

“Indians. Change. Tell me more.”

Scott tried to sum up the five hundred years worth of changes as succinctly as possible: bigger towns, use of bronze, the spread of pigs and chickens from Polynesia. He started to mention butterfly effects before 1492, but caught the glazed look in Darla’s eyes.

*All she’s hearing is “Yada yada, blah blah.”*

He finished with, “And that’s the most intense sexual experience I’ve ever had.”

“Huh? Okay, you got me. I zoned out.”

“I’m used to it. Recovering Anthropology professor.”

They finished eating and headed back to the conference room.

“The walls are thick in Europe and Asia, thin in the western part of North America and Australia. Does very different history in an area make the wall between the universes thicker?”

“That’s a geek question, and a good one.” Scott shot her a searching look. “The data says yes, but theory says it’s a coincidence.”

Darla smiled when they walked into the conference room, a smile with a mix of humor and malice.

“How is Dr. Scott White, history geek, going to help me solve a murder?”

“Scott White, marathoner, may have already spotted your murderer.”

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“Running is a geek hobby. And I would have spotted him.”

“Maybe. What do you know about Jane Doe?”

Darla pulled a set of photos out of her briefcase. “Caucasian, in her twenties, in good shape, natural blond, light skin, wore high heels a lot. We found the body based on an anonymous tip from a disposable cellphone. The guy gave a location and hung up. No other calls from that phone. She was in the water two days before he called, so he didn’t just see the body dumped and call it in. Body was weighted, so he couldn’t have seen it floating. I’ll figure it out. Nobody gets away with murder with me on the case.”

“Ah, a master detective. How many murders have you solved?”

“Technically, none. But hey, perfect track record so far.”

“Or no record at all.”

They spent the next four hours scanning candid shots of what Scott mentally labeled “Ken and Barbie people,” young adults spending mommy and daddy’s money. Not a pimple or inch of cellulite in the bunch.

He did spot two first names on birthday cakes.

*But I’m missing something else.*

Scott closed his eyes. Nothing. They were evidently allergic to taking pictures by landmarks, road signs or the license plates of their Porsches.

Darla leaned back and stretched her legs. “No landmarks until she moved to Boston three months ago. But where did she move from? And where *to* in Boston?”

Chad peeked in. “Anything?”

“Not much,” Darla said. “No labels. She probably downloaded the best pictures to her computer.”

And deleted the blurry ones. Scott blinked. Then he sat up. “No blurry pictures because she deleted them.”

“So?”

“So that’s why you need a geek, not that I am one. If you delete a picture, the camera’s file system makes the space available, but the picture stays until the space is reused.”

“And you have software to get at those pictures?”

“Are bears Catholic? Does the pope sh—um—take walks in the woods? In other words, yeah.” Scott plugged the chip into his computer. After a couple of minutes, he grinned. One hundred deleted files.

He showed the expanded directory to Darla. She groaned. “Four o’clock now. Figure another two hours to get through them.”

Chad waved. “Have fun. I have to pick up the kids.”

Most of the deleted pictures were blurry or partly written over. Finally Scott hit possible pay dirt: a TV van with the call letters visible. He found the call letters on the Internet. New Bristol, forty miles west of Boston. “Okay. Progress.”

As he walked Darla through his discovery, Scott’s feeling of triumph faded. Jane Doe could have been visiting New Bristol. The TV people could have been covering a story out of town. “If we find New Bristol landmarks in the pictures, we have to find Jane Doe in a population of a hundred thousand instead of millions.” Scott sighed. “Maybe a little progress.”

“We’ll find out tomorrow.” Darla brushed Scott’s arm as she retrieved her briefcase. “Want to be my native guide for supper? I don’t have another rental car yet.”

“Sure. And I’ll even drive you to the hotel.”

“Okay, but the evening ends at the door. You’re cute but not that cute. Let’s try Dickey’s.”

“You said you didn’t trust their menu. Lots of good restaurants near here.”

“Yeah, but I want to keep my illusion of superiority. I’m in flyover country, so we eat in a redneck bar.”

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“Chicago isn’t flyover country.”

“Not to you, I’m sure.”

Dickey’s wasn’t much more crowded than it had been in the morning. Bill Dickey waved to them from the bar, then rejoined a cluster of guys around a chubby blonde in a black miniskirt and red stiletto heels.

At the table, Darla smiled. “Tell me everything about yourself.”

“You first.”

“I don’t pour out my life story to strangers.”

“You just asked me to.”

Darla grinned. “Fair enough. Let’s start small. You’re part Native American, right? How much and what tribe?”

“One fourth and I wish I knew. My grandmother claims she’s pure-blood Natchez.”

“And that’s a problem because...”

“No records of Natchez ever living in northern Ohio. And she claims we’re direct descendents of the Great Sun, which means that she’s full of—let’s call it *misinformation*. But I grew up thinking I was a Native American prince, which is why I’m an anthropologist instead of a factory worker like my dad.”

“I have no idea what a Great Sun is, but it sounds cool.”

“It would be if it was true.” Scott glanced up and gave the waiter his drink order. “Your turn.”

“Not much to say. I’m plain Darla Smith. My ancestors came over on the Mayflower—both sides. I went to Harvard, then gravitated to police work.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“What part of it?”

Scott laughed. “All of it.”

“Little known fact: there was a Vietnamese woman on the Mayflower.”

“No there wasn’t.”

“My birth mother was Vietnamese-American. My adoptive parents actually were ancestors-on-the-Mayflower types. I did community college, Marines, then an oops or two before I got my degree.”

“No Harvard? Were your adoptive parents scandalized?”

Darla laughed. “They’ve been continuously scandalized from the time I was twelve until—well, until now, I imagine. I haven’t talked to them in years.”

Bill Dickey brought their drinks. “Did I hear the word scandal?”

“Probably,” Scott said.

“I told you she was trouble. You’ve been here twice, so you’re regulars. Any time you want to get drunk and tell me your darkest secrets, I’m here for you.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Scott said. He gestured to the stage. “No ‘UDE’ girls.”

“You’re not drunk enough to appreciate the girls I get here,” Bill said. “Speaking of deep, dark secrets, when are they going to bring oil through the Portals?”

“Hopefully never.”

Bill grinned. “Ah, tree hugger. Leave the Indians alone? Well your money spends as well as anyone’s, but remember, screwing over Indians made this country great.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

Bill stretched his long arms. His shirt rode up, revealing a pot belly. “We’re a plague of locusts, all of us, Americans and Europeans, Asians. We eat the land bare. Stop moving and we starve to death. Now we have the portals—a whole new world to ravage. We’re a Biblical plague. No use pretending we aren’t.” He strolled away, grinning.

“Cheery thought.” Darla turned to Scott. “Where were we?” She cautiously sipped her drink. “How have you scandalized your parents? Scratch that. What’s the most Native American thing

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you've done?"

"I made an authentic Native American bow."

"A Natchez bow?"

"No. Plains Indians made better bows. They were sinew-backed and—you don't care about that, do you?" Scott scanned the menu. "Your turn. What's the most Vietnamese thing you've done?"

"I ate Vietnamese egg rolls."

"That's the best you can do?"

"It's the best I want to do until I know you better."

"You're such a cheat."

"You never told me what you've done to scandalize your parents."

"You said scratch that."

Darla laughed. "Yeah, but I think you have a good scandalizing or two up your sleeve."

"Not really. Dad wanted me to work in the factory like he did. He still does, even after the factory jobs got outsourced."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"It's better than you did. All I know is your parents were scandalized." Scott grinned. "I may tell you more once I get to know you."

"Touché. So there is more."

They finished eating and drove toward the hotel. Scott glanced in the mirror. "Is someone following us?"

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"Your personal cloud again?"

"Probably."

A fire truck roared down the street behind them, siren blaring. Darla grabbed Scott's arm. "Let's follow it."

"Why?"

"Why not? I'm wired."

Scott followed the truck. Flames rose from a church steeple

blocks away. “Looks like a big one.”

“Park and get closer.”

“Aren’t you exhausted?”

“Not anymore.” Darla grabbed his arm. “Come on.”

The fire burned out of control as they hurried toward it. Half the roof collapsed and the firefighters pulled back. Darla wrapped her arm around Scott’s waist. He glanced at her. “What—”

She kissed him, pressing her body against his. Scott returned the kiss, but she suddenly pulled away and ran to the car. Scott ran after her. “What was that about?”

Darla snapped, “Get me to the hotel parking lot. And don’t walk me in.”