

Chapter 6

Jim was awakened by crunching gravel and the whine of powerful electric motors. It was just after sunrise and the transport was on the move, heading north past the Jeep. Unsure if anyone on the transport would notice, he rolled down the window and waved. Jim was on the road again soon after.

It was late morning and the sky was clear and blue when Jim drove out of solar field on a road that went over US-23, north of Columbus, Ohio. He drove east for another hour and crossed over the I-71 corridor before turning southeast and then south around Columbus. Columbus was one of relatively few major cities in the United States that wasn't bounded on any side by a lake or river, or some other geographic feature, so the city had sprawled enormously after the ag collapse, when people concentrated in urban areas. Columbus hadn't grown up like some cities had, it had grown out in all directions.

It was early afternoon when Jim drove the Jeep over the I-70 corridor east of what used to be Zanesville, Ohio. Zanesville was a town in its own right, before Columbus engulfed it like an amoeba engulfs a speck of food.

All that remained of the trip to Point Pleasant was about one hundred miles of driving on roads that wound through the Wayne National Forest.

At a stop for a late lunch, Jim looked at an old roadmap of Ohio to find a route to Point Pleasant. The map no longer accurately depicted the network of roadways in the majority of the State, but not much had changed over the years in Southeastern Ohio. This region was not rich in any kind of resource; the land here was too hilly to be suitable for large-scale farming way back when or for a solar array now, the wind was not reliable enough to drive wind turbines, and no rivers flowed here with enough volume to generate hydroelectric energy on a scale that would matter. Southeastern Ohio was impoverished in the twentieth century

and it was empty now, a wasteland, some said. But to Jim, a forest without shopping centers, warehouses, factories, and antennas was most certainly not a wasteland.

Jim enjoyed driving the roads through the hills of Southeastern Ohio. They had a flow: climbs and descents mixed with left and right turns, some steep and sharp, some more gradual. Sometimes the road followed a small creek bed, other times it carved around a hillside and over a ridge line into a new valley. At some places he could see far ahead and at others he could only see to the next curve or rise. Along some stretches the road was smooth and he could clip along and along others, roughness and obstacles demanded he slow down. All an apt metaphor for life, Jim thought.

As he got closer to Point Pleasant, vibrant memories of the time he had with Rachel came more rapidly. In the beginning of their relationship, when firsts accumulated and lasts were uncommon, Jim knew that it was Rachel who gave and he who took. Near the end, however, when the firsts were done and the most painful lasts accumulated, it was Jim who gave and she who took. But somewhere in the middle, when giving and taking felt only like sharing, it was perfect. Jim longed to relive the perfect times with Rachel, but as the road leveled out onto the floodplain of the Ohio River, he felt mostly the stings of many regrets.

Jim reached the Ohio River near the towns of Pomeroy and Middleport, Ohio, about fifteen miles north of Point Pleasant, where he took the Bridge of Honor over the river into West Virginia. As he drove the final dozen miles of the trip he was surprised at how little the area had changed: it wasn't built up, modern, and crowded, as all urban areas were, yet it wasn't emptied out like most of rural America. People still lived here because there was enough commerce nearby to support them. The commerce here was what it had always been since the industrial revolution: the transport of people and goods. No longer by the pioneering steamboats of the 19th century nor by the lumbering towboats and barges of the 20th, but by swift and efficient ground-effect vehicles.

Along a section of West Virginia Route 62 that closely follows the Ohio River, Jim watched a cargo skimmer fly downriver. Skimmers are as much a boat as they are an airplane; this one had a large hull and long, slender, downward canted wings, each supporting three powerful electric motors spinning three-bladed propellers. When at rest or moving slowly, a skimmer floated on the water, like a boat; but when it got moving fast enough, it flew like an airplane. Skimmers did not fly high—their engines and airfoils were designed to maximize the efficiencies of very low-altitude flight—but they flew fast by riverboat standards. The cargo skimmer would get to Point Pleasant much before Jim would.

The town of Point Pleasant is situated on the Ohio River where its waters mix with the waters of the Kanawha River, which flows northward from Charleston, West Virginia. When Jim first visited Point Pleasant four decades earlier, it was a historic town, its modest downtown streets lined with hundred-year-old brick buildings, all protected from river flooding by a system of gated floodwalls. As Jim reached the town limits and then drove slowly down Main Street, he noted that here much had changed: nearly all the original buildings had been torn down and replaced by modern structures, probably a result of the flooding of 2055, when the old floodwalls failed. Jim found the new downtown a tasteful modernization, though, and was relieved and happy to see that Tu-Endie-Wei Park, right where Main Street literally slopes down into the Kanawha River, was much as it had been back then.

It was late afternoon and Tu-Endie-Wei park was empty when Jim stopped the Jeep. He and Smudge climbed out, took a stretch, and walked together across the grass to a bench that faced the Ohio River. He and Rachel met at Tu-Endie-Wei park, on a warm, late-spring day, and they had sat here together many times. Today, Jim sat alone on the bench and watched skimmers of all sizes go by. Some were small, stylish pleasure-craft, others were larger commercial and passenger vessels. Another large cargo skimmer went by as well, its long wings and powerful motors claiming a wide swath mid-river river.

[There could be a couple here, like he and Rachel from so long ago.]

Shadows were getting long by the time Jim decided to get on with one of the reasons he had come to Point Pleasant. He walked back to the Jeep to grab a small package and then he and Smudge walked a few blocks to the corner of 4th and Main. Back when he and Rachel met there was a coffee shop there called the Paddlewheel Cafe, in a space on the first floor of one of the original downtown buildings. When downtown was rebuilt after the floods, the shop had reclaimed its original location but its name was changed to Rivertown Treats. According to what Jim found online before he left home, a variety of synthetic items, including synthcafe, tea, and snacks, somewhat like before, were available at the shop. But to the menu the owner had added various nicotine- and THC-containing "treats".

Jim was encouraged to see when he walked up to the shop door that Rivertown Treats was still a gathering place. What interested him most, however, was that it was still run by Emily Klein, Rachel's sister.

A sign on the door said "Good Dogs Welcome" so Jim walked in to the cafe with Smudge at his heels and found a seat at a booth in the front window. Smudge sniffed around and then curled up on the floor under the table. Jim looked around the shop. It was stylish, a fusion of old-school and new-wave. The walls were adorned with pictures of old and new river craft and various river-lore paraphernalia; a large, wooden ship's wheel hung on the shop's far wall. The seating areas, however, were more varied and modern, some nothing more than large beanbags arranged around low tables made of a transparent composite. The lighting was neither too yellow and dark nor too white and bright. Rivertown Treats was a comfortable and inviting place.

Jim saw only one server working, a young man, checking on and conversing familiarly with the few groups of customers who were in the cafe. No one was behind the counter, which made Jim wonder if he would be able to talk with Emily as he had hoped. The young man eventually walked over to greet Jim and ask him what he'd like. Jim ordered a synthcafe and a type of sandwich that resembled a grilled cheese. When the young man walked away, a door behind the counter opened and through it walked a woman who under different

circumstances Jim might have mistook for Rachel. She appeared to be in her mid sixties, slender, with long dark hair that showed some grey. She wore a loose-fitting long-sleeved white blouse and a long, colorful, flowing skirt. Jim's heart skipped a beat, and he wondered if he could go through with it.

Emily brought Jim's order to the table. "Here you go, coffee and a sandwich," Emily said cheerfully. Even her voice even reminded Jim of Rachel. "Let me know if you need anything else. No rush, but we're closing up in a bit."

"Thank you," Jim said looking up at her, pausing briefly, "...Emily?"

Emily took a step back from the table and put her hands on her hips. She looked quizzically at Jim and said "Do I know you?"

"Not really," Jim replied. He took a deep breath and added "I knew your sister...", his voice trailing off.

"You knew Rachel?" Emily said, her expression turning from surprised happiness to what looked more like worry. "When?" she added, in a tone that was less a question and more a demand for credibility.

Jim took a sip of his coffee and said "Can you sit down for a while? Believe it or not, I came here to see you."

"Not right now," Emily replied, her hands falling to her sides. She took another step away from the table. "But stay for a while. I'll close up and we can talk."

"Okay," Jim said. Emily walked away and for the next twenty minutes Jim ate his sandwich, drank his coffee, and watched people walking about on the sidewalk outside the cafe. The streetlights flicked on.

Emily followed the last group of customers out, flipped the open sign to closed, and locked the door. "Hey Aaron," she called out, "I'm all set here tonight. I'll tidy up a bit; you can take off. Make sure the door in the back latches locked when you leave."

"Okay, Ms. Klein," the server replied from the back of the shop. "See you tomorrow."

"Aaron," Emily called out again, "can you open in the morning?" Aaron replied that he could, and after back door clicked closed, Emily said more softly to Jim "So how did you know Rachel?"

Jim invited Emily to sit down on the other side of the table. Still looking a little uneasy she sat down and asked again "So how did you know Rachel?"

"That's kind of a long story..." Jim began. "I met her about ten years before..., well... I met her at the park, showed her students the windmill I setup there."

"You installed the windmill?"

"Yes. I worked for General Electric."

"You know what happened, right?"

"Yes," Jim said softly. Neither spoke for a while. Then Jim added "She told me a lot about you."

"How well did you know her?" Emily asked.

"Pretty well. We talked and visited often over the years. She was a good friend to me; and I think I was a good friend to her too. A little unusual, I know... It's really terrible what happened," Jim said, not able to lift his gaze from the table.

"Yeah it is... Why did you come here?" Emily asked, her voice softened with emotion.

"Well, I have something for you. Something of Rachel's that I think you should have, and that I need your help with." As Jim spoke, he reached to the bench beside him and lifted a small box to the table.

"What is it?"

"Go ahead and open it."

"I don't know if I want to," Emily said defiantly. "This is pretty damn strange, you showing up here talking about Rachel. I'm thinking maybe you should just leave."

Jim looked up from the table. "Emily, I can understand why you would feel that way. Just wait a minute before you send me out. I don't want to relive any of this any more than you do, but I have something that might tell what happened. Let me show you."

Emily sat upright, obviously distressed. She slid out of the booth. "Emily," Jim said, "It's okay. Just wait a minute. I can't do anything more with this but maybe you can." And before Emily could walk away Jim pulled the top off the box so she could see what was inside. She looked at it... then at Jim... and Jim said "It's a cell phone. It's Rachel's cell phone."

"How the fuck do you have Rachel's cell phone? I don't fucking believe you," Emily said, reaching into the pocket and pulling out her comdev. "I'm calling the police."

"Emily. Wait. Don't. Please don't. Just listen for a minute... my name is Jim. James. James Stilton," he said, looking up at her. "If you saw any of the investigation reports you would have read about me. They investigated me, Emily. Do you remember? They held me and questioned me for several days. Did you read any of the reports?"

“Yes, I read them. You’re James Stilton?” Emily said, still holding her comdev. “Prove it,” she challenged. “And tell me how the fuck do you have Rachel’s cell phone?”

“Okay, look... I can show you my ID if you want. Don’t call the police, Emily, not yet at least. You can later if you want, just wait and hear me out.”

Emily looked skeptically at Jim but then she reached to the box and picked up the cell phone. Jim said to her “Turn it on. It’s charged. It won’t register with the network because the phone is so old, but it’ll turn on. You’ll see.”

Emily pressed the button on the side of the phone and they both waited for it to boot. Several error messages filled the screen from top to bottom, then the phone went black for a moment, and then with a flash it displayed the wallpaper image. It was a picture, a selfie of Rachel and Emily, both young, wearing stylish sunglasses, and smiling broadly on a sunny day. The old phone itself was reflected in Rachel’s sunglasses, her outstretched arm holding the phone and Emily’s reaching to push the shutter button with her index finger.

The words “Enter Passcode” were displayed above a keypad of numbers on the phone’s face.

Emily put the phone on the table and looked down at Jim. “What the fuck,” she said slowly. “How do you have Rachel’s phone?”

Jim didn’t answer right away, but eventually, after Emily let the silence hang heavily in the air, he said “I found her on the day she was murdered, Emily. I was there. But I didn’t do anything to her. I found her. And I panicked, I guess. I left her in her apartment but I took her phone with me when I left.”

Jim waited for Emily to reply, but she remained silent, so he went on, looking down at the cell phone instead of up at her. “On my way home I fell asleep at the wheel and crashed my car. That’s when the police

caught up to me up and questioned me, and went through all the DNA testing. After a couple days they released me because my DNA wasn't a match to the samples they collected in her apartment. I told them what happened, but I never told them about the phone. I'm not sure what I planned to do with it, but at the time I guess I thought I could open it and read her messages to find out who else she was with."

Emily spoke up abruptly. "That makes no sense. Why didn't you just give the phone to the Police?"

"Because I wanted to know myself. And I didn't trust the police, and who else knows what they would have found on it. But I haven't been able to unlock it. I tried guessing the passcode a few times," Jim said, as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. He held the paper up so Emily could see it. "These are the ones I've tried." Seven eight-digit numbers were written on the worn scrap. "But none are correct and I can't keep on guessing. After ten guesses the phone will erase itself. That's how they were back then. So I put it away and tried not to think about it. But now I really want to know, Emily."

"Why do you bring it to me? Just take the damn thing to the police," Emily repeated.

"It's still the same. I don't trust the police. Especially not now, so many years after. I bet they would't even do anything about it anyways, except probably arrest me again. If I turned up with Rachel's phone, so many years later, a bright spotlight would be on me, and they'd probably just take the easy way out."

"How do I know you didn't kill her? Huh? How do I even know? What if I call the police right now, and give them the phone myself?" Emily demanded, her voice raised with agitation.

"I guess you can, if you want. I won't stop you. I didn't really think this through, but I came here to ask you to help me, but now I can understand if you don't want to."

"I'm not sure what I want to do," Emily said, picking up the phone again and looking at the picture on its face.

"Okay, I understand," Jim said. He slid out of the booth and stood to face her. "How about this... I'll leave the phone with you and you can decide what you want to do. I'll stop by tomorrow and you can either help me, or, if you want, you can just give the phone to the police and have them meet me here."

"What if you just run off again?"

"I'm not going anywhere. My Jeep is at the park and we're just going to spend the night there. In fact, if you want, you can call the police now and they can come get me there, right away. It's your choice. You know what, Emily, I'm tired. I've been tired for a long time, so I'm just going to leave it up to you." And with that, Jim walked to the door saying "Come on Smudge, let's go for a walk."

Without saying anything more, Emily unlocked the shop's door and let Jim and the dog out. Jim did not look back when he heard the door click locked as he started back down Main St. to the river and Tu-Endie-Wei park.