

The Story Generator

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Chapter One

PROLOGUE

September

Blue Ridge Mountains, Georgia

Etienne Holmes could hear them scratching at the windows, scabbling at the doors, clawing their way up the sides of his rustic mountain estate home. Looking for a way in.

He did not have long.

The five black candles on the desk before him guttered and he faltered in his incantation. His gaze drifted from the ancient book to the object just beyond it within the circle of candles. A container the size of a large shoebox, intricately constructed of wood, iron, and brass. Light reflected dully off the dials and switches, the crank, and the small glass window.

The damnable story generator.

Fighting a burgeoning panic, he began again, stumbling over the nearly unpronounceable ancient words.

He had made it only halfway through the ritual when two of the creatures crashed through the window behind him in an explosion of shattering glass. One of the grotesque monstrosities landed on his right shoulder, the other tumbled onto the desk. The candles' flickering light flashed off the scaly armor of what looked like a cross between an armadillo and a gargoyle.

The creature on his shoulder slashed through his shirt and flesh. Screaming, he swept his arm across the desk, driving the other one off. He leaped to his feet, knocking the chair to the floor.

The one on the desk flung itself at his face and he batted it away. The abomination on his shoulder reached around for his throat. As its claws tore at him, he tucked his chin to his chest to protect his carotid. Hot blood seeped from the wound, but not the gush he'd feared.

The other beast came at him again. It leaped onto his leg and its razor-sharp teeth and claws penetrated his thigh.

He'd prepared in advance for the eventuality, perhaps the inevitability, that the incantation, his only remaining option, would fail. The gas can sat on the floor behind him, the cap already removed. He held the creature away from his neck but fell to his knees under the things' weight, landing on scattered shards of glass. Claws raked his face, blood flowed from the wounds in his leg and throat, but he managed to grasp the handle of the can and carry it to the desk.

He tipped the can and gasoline drenched the device, seeping into the crevices of its intricate housing, sloshing across the desk, down the sides, and onto the floor.

The acrid fumes seared his nostrils. Why wouldn't the candles ignite them?

The monster on his neck worked a claw under his chin and slashed. Blood spattered from his throat and mixed with the gas on the desk.

As his vision dimmed and became a narrowing tunnel, he stretched a shaking hand toward the nearest candle. Too far away. Its light glinted on the desktop lighter closer to him, but just out of reach. His fingers slipped on the lighter. It wobbled, almost toppled, but its wide base kept it upright. He flicked the wheel, too slowly. The serrated steel wheel ground against flint, not rapidly enough to spark.

With a hideous screech and another rain of broken glass, a third creature pounced onto his back, claws clinging in his shoulders.

It was far too late to redeem himself, to atone for his sin, but he must end this, here and now.

He got a slippery grip on the lighter again. He had only enough strength for a last desperate attempt. He pressed his thumb on the wheel and flicked it.

The gas fumes ignited with a concussive sound and he experienced the most excruciating pain of his life. But he'd stopped it, he hoped, although he'd never know for sure.

Around him, the house burned.

But not everything in it.

Chapter Two

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

October, Friday

morning

Miskatoosa University Library

Townsend, Georgia, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains

When John Dixon found the story generator, he knew it was the solution to the problem that had stalled him out in life at age twenty-three. In fact, the device was custom made for the job.

It arrived in a box of donations to Miskatoosa University's Special Collections Library. John was perusing a yellowed, crumbling science fiction magazine from a stack of 1950s pulps when Ellen Blackwood, his supervisor, entered his gloomy office. On her heels, a

student worker rolled in a cart stacked with boxes. She parked it beside John's desk and scooted out the door before Ellen could conscript her into helping unload them.

Ellen pushed her glasses up on top of her head. "Think you can tear yourself from the visions of future past there? I may have some real treasures for you."

"Great!" John dropped the magazine. Busted reading on the job. Again. Ellen recognized that reading among library staff was inevitable though, and didn't mind as long as he met an imprecise quota of clearing the donations. His work in Special Collections consisted primarily of filing, providing access to materials for researchers, and wading through the ever-growing piles of "donations," most of which should have been carted off to the landfill.

An odd odor emanated from the boxes on the cart, more pungent than the musty smell of cartons and suitcases that had moldered in the late donors' attics for years. The scent had a tangy, bitter edge. Smokey. Like burned wood.

"What have we got?" he asked.

"Familiar with Etienne Holmes?"

"You can't escape American Lit classes here without reading at least one of his books." Holmes was a Miskatoosa alumnus and a lauded "New Southern Writer." His novels were thick and fatalistic, a combination of Faulkner, Joyce Carol Oates, and Joseph Conrad, with incongruous elements of magical realism thrown in.

"He died," Ellen said. "In a fire."

"Oh. The smell."

"Fortunately, this stuff survived."

"Wow," John said. "This is a big deal, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Some of it will probably need some delicate cleaning. I want you to inventory everything, assess the condition, and give me an idea how much of it might warrant inclusion in Special Collections."

"A lot, I'd expect."

"When you're done, Doctor Halliwell and Doctor Franklin will evaluate everything. Go through the boxes and weed out old bills, things like that, and summarize what you find. We'll create a special display and have an opening."

John appraised the cart, the first hint of intuition stirring within him. "You think there might be first drafts and writing notes in there?"

"I'm dying to find out. I'll check back after lunch to see what you've uncovered."

Before she was out the door, John was clearing his desk, practically throwing books on the floor and stacking the boxes of magazines haphazardly on top of existing piles that threatened to topple. He lifted the lid of the top container on the cart, revealing a metal box inside, like a strongbox, but larger. When he picked it up, he was surprised at its weight. The thing was heavy. Seriously heavy. He set it on the desk, grabbed a dust cloth kept for this purpose, and wiped it off.

The hinges were recessed, and when he popped the latch and the lid came free, a soft hiss escaped the box, breaking the seal of a thin gasket rimming it.

He'd assumed the box would hold precious papers, perhaps an early draft of *Under the Weeping Elms* or some other prize-winning novel. Instead, yet another box lay inside, ornate and made from wood and metal.

He lifted the inner box out with some effort and set it gently on the desk pad. The thing was beautiful. It appeared to be quite old but in pristine condition. Rather than solid wood, the lid and sides comprised numerous interlocking pieces, like a wooden puzzle, and the corner pieces looked like iron. A handle perched on top, a brass pipe the thickness of his little finger, a wooden sleeve around it in the center, and joined at the corners with pipe joints. The handle's support posts were screwed into brass fittings fastened to the lid with shiny screws.

John had no idea what this thing was, but it was gorgeous. It deserved its own display case in the Special Collections lobby entrance.

He felt giddy with anticipation and his fingers trembled as they sought for catches or latches. There were none, so he took hold of the handle with one hand and the lid's rim with the other and pulled. At first it did not budge, then it gave, and he held his breath as the lid came free.

Within lay another surprise. The box housed a curious contraption that reminded him of the machines illustrated on the covers of the old science fiction magazines. It looked steampunk.

He set the lid aside and studied the device. Out of habit, he snagged his phone out of his back pocket and took a few pictures.

An inch below the top edges of the box lay a flat metal surface, apparently brass. Inset were dials and gauges, a row of buttons on a wooden faceplate, a trio of switches. A network of thin copper pipes the size of pipe cleaners ran seemingly at random from one point to another. On the left was an intricate set of gears with a small handle on the top wheel. To its right, a one-by-four-inch glass pane was recessed into the surface within

a beveled iron frame. Beneath the glass lay a paper scroll, mostly smooth but with tiny wrinkles. The paper strip was blank.

At the top of the device, engraved writing spelled out:

THE STORY GENERATOR

A thrill of intuition swept over him.

This thing was going to help him finish his book.

John had written the first three chapters of *Whispering Ashes* two years before as his senior project for the university's creative writing program. After getting his degree, he'd written feverishly for a while, but eventually lost his way with the novel, which had shaken his faith in himself. If he couldn't finish the book, he wasn't a writer, and if he wasn't a writer, who and what was he? Somebody who should've majored in something that would've led to a career, that's who. This nagging doubt dissuaded him from applying to grad school.

Miskatoosa University nestled in the foothills of the North Georgia mountains in a miniscule berg called Townsend. John had fallen in love with the charming little town and the nearby Blue Ridge mountains, so when he graduated, he got a job in the Special Collections department of the university library. The mountains spoke to him, whispered of a hidden, mystical realm he might enter by way of his unconscious mind and birth into the outside world through writing. Miskatoosa's remote environment, with its splendid views of misty peaks and valleys, inspired him to write like he'd never written. The words had flowed like taking dictation. Unfortunately, the narrative wandered episodically and amounted to, in Shakespeare's words, "a tale told by an idiot." Gretchen Murphy, one of his critique partners, told him so and he agreed.

John thought of Etienne Holmes's massive output. Could Holmes have used this gimmick to plan his novels? Could he have ... cheated?

Surely not.

Yet this device looked like a mechanized plot wheel on steroids. Plot wheels had been popular among hack writers in the first half of the twentieth century. They were designed to generate ideas and get writers unstuck when they were blocked. Edgar Wallace had patented a plot wheel he invented in the 1920s. If you were at a loss for what was to happen next in your novel, spin the wheel and get a suggestion such as "a fortuitous arrival," "a witness is lying," or "an ally turns out to be a traitor." Erle Stanley Gardner, author of the Perry Mason stories, created his own version. The plot developments were often particular to mysteries and far too specific to be of any use to a literary writer.

Besides, while Holmes's works were sometimes based on bizarre concepts, they were not plot heavy. They relied on depth of characterization, luscious prose, and a keen insight into the nature of life and "what it means to be human."

Although his later books did feature some ingenious twists in the requisite "inevitable yet unexpected" denouements ...

No. Holmes's stories were based on the characters, their particular desires and needs, which he famously (purportedly) discovered as he wrote. They could not be the result of some hack tool with a limited, predetermined set of options to choose from. Or that Fate chose for you when you turned the wheel.

Something had been nagging John about this "story generator," though. The paper scroll. If it showed the thing's output, the next story development, it could hardly be random, could it? With a wheel you spin or a deck of plot cards, you get random ideas. If this was a single loop of paper, every suggestion on it would always be in the same order, predetermined. You'd get the exact same story every time. Or at least extremely similar ones. A Magic 8 Ball produced more random output.

He slouched back in his chair. So this thing probably didn't actually do much. It must have been an inheritance, or an antique curiosity Holmes acquired for research or because he collected weird old shit.

The wind went out of John's metaphorical sails with this conclusion, the vacuum filled by a sinking feeling of disappointment. This pretty piece of junk would not save his Great American Novel wannabe work-in-progress.

He laughed at himself for thinking this box had made Holmes a genius, and that rarer of creatures, a financially successful literary author. And that John could use it to do the same for himself.

His hand drifted toward the handle of the wheel on the left of the machine's surface. He quickly curled his fingers and withdrew his hand. He would not recommend this as a public display item. It would cast doubt on the genius and originality of one of the South's most celebrated modern authors. He ripped off a label from a roll and neatly penned "Archive" on it, then stuck it on the lid of the metal outer box that had contained the story generator.

He was trying to fit the device's ornate lid back on when a voice startled him.

"Whatcha got?" Gretchen Murphy stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame. Her green eyes sparkled conspiratorially like stolen jewels beneath her auburn bangs.

"Ah, nothing?" he said. "Just some old ..." His gaze sank to the lid in his hands.

“Doesn’t look like nothing. It looks like ...” She furrowed her brow.

“It’s part of a donation from Etienne Holmes’s estate.”

“Whoa, seriously?” She came to the desk and studied the curious doodads ornamenting the machine’s surface. “That is so cool. What the hell is it?”

John set the lid down. “See the engraving? It says it’s a story generator.”

“What’s a story generator?” she asked, leaning over the box for a better look. “And why would Etienne Holmes need one?”

“Good question. He must have collected odd antiques or something. Maybe writing-related things.”

“Like typewriters?”

He shrugged. “Dunno. This is the first thing I opened.”

Gretchen ran a finger over the engraved label, prodded the gears, and caressed the tiny pipes. “It’s beautiful. Could be a sculpture. Made from ‘found objects.’”

“Ohmigod, I’m an idiot. Of course it is. It’s art.”

She studied him shrewdly. “You look disappointed.”

“Not at all. I hated to think that Etienne Holmes needed some kind of crutch for writing.”

“Yeah, seems unlikely.”

“Shit. I’m lying. I hoped Holmes *had* needed some kind of crutch. That he’d found a Magic Bullet. That other mere mortals might achieve lofty heights of literature, if only they knew The Secret.”

“Other mere mortals, like you.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it.”

“So how’s the novel coming?”

“And you’d been so pleasant until now.”

“Sorry. I know that’s a sore point.” She touched his arm.

“It’s okay. I’m becoming resigned to my fate as a library grunt with delusional aspirations. I’ve found my niche here in the basement.”

“Well, at least you’re funny. Hey, let me take you to lunch to make up for teasing you about your book.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Okay, you talked me out of it.” She grinned at his expression, which surely confirmed that fact that he was smitten with her. “Just kidding! We’ll go to the Nostalgia Bar and Grill downtown. And I’m not buying. ‘Take you to lunch’ is just an expression.”

“Right, absolutely.” This was a first. Not a first *date*. More like work friends going out for lunch. But who knew. He’d wanted to get to know Gretchen better, but the time had never seemed right. Approaching her at work seemed awkward, and the only time he saw her outside the library was at their critique group meetings, with the other two writers there.

John had always been a loner, an introvert. While his best friend in high school had been out in John’s back yard shooting hoops, John had been inside writing stories. He’d only had a few girlfriends and had never had a serious relationship. But now Gretchen had made the first move, and he forgot about his novel and his envy of Holmes’s talent and prolific output. For now at least.

Gretchen left him to his task and he began rooting through the collection again.

As the morning progressed, John did not find any old Smith-Corona typewriters, or Underwoods, or Royals. Or quills, fountain pens, or inkwells. No Edgar Wallace or Erle Stanley Gardner or other variety of plot wheel. No other pieces of art, if that was what the thing was. The story generator was a unique item in the Holmes collection. Still, it was beautiful and he reassessed his judgement of it. It should go on display after all.

But even after he’d boxed it back up and started a Keepers pile, soon burying it beneath boxes of manuscript drafts and other papers, it lurked in the back of his mind. An idea had come to him as if from outside himself, the thought that the story generator *might* actually work. That he could borrow it. Just for a while. Maybe long enough to write a book.

Chapter Three

GHOST IN THE STACKS

Gretchen shoved the book truck out of the elevator before the doors had completely opened. She'd learned to do this because the elevator never stopped level with the second floor, usually half-an-inch below it. To get out before the doors closed on her, she needed a head start. The front wheels hit the edge of the floor but didn't make the jump. She growled, pulled the cart back, and rammed it forward again. It lurched over the edge, but the doors started to shut and she had to shoulder her way through as they fought to close on her.

She didn't curse as usual when she made it out, the doors snapping at her heels. It would take more than an antagonistic elevator to ruin her mood. She was going out with John. He'd looked pretty excited, which was not a total surprise, but still satisfying.

Despite differing majors and his being a year ahead of her in school, they'd shared a few creative writing classes. Gretchen had always enjoyed writing short stories, and a few months back John invited her to join a small critique group, which included Grant Morris and Ariel Patton. Grant was a senior English major and Ariel was a graduate with a history degree who worked as a waitress downtown. John said he'd loved Gretchen's stories in the class they'd taken together. Sometimes at meetings he held her gaze a moment too long, and she'd caught him staring at her thoughtfully twice. So it wasn't that big a gamble to ask him to lunch once she found an excuse. But she'd still felt that rush of adrenaline, thrill, and fear, like a first kiss.

She rolled the book truck toward the rear of the building and caught glimpses of the beautiful fall day through the tall windows that provided a splendid view of Miskatoosa's

bucolic campus. But she needed to get back to work on her grad school application essay in her head.

She was having trouble with the essay on some deep level. She was a good writer, that wasn't the problem. Or maybe it was—writing appealed to her far more than doing social work, which she'd gotten her degree in. She knew that “creative writing career” was an oxymoron, so the plan was to “re-enlist” and get a masters in social work. Then get a good day job doing something meaningful, make an adequate living, and write for fun. A hobby.

Although Gretchen had enjoyed her undergraduate work and knew helping people would be rewarding, she now found herself resisting that path. The reality of the job daunted her. Dealing with actual people. Their heartaches. Failing social support systems. She suspected she'd chosen social work to define herself as different from her parents. Her mother was a financial advisor, her father an investment banker in Atlanta. They were as dedicated to the idea of bootstrapping oneself and working one's way up the ladder as anyone who'd never had to do so, both having come from privileged families. Still, getting that bachelor's degree had pointed her in a direction, and she didn't see any practical life choice alternatives.

Essay. Get to it.

Maybe she could teach at the college level. Of course, unless she worked in the field first, she'd only have book learning to teach. That would be dishonest and a disservice to her students.

Hello, fucking ESSAY.

She pushed the heavily laden cart into the stacks. Shelving books was her favorite part of the job in the Circulation Department. She could peruse the books as she returned them to the stacks, as well as the ones around them. When she was shelving in a boring section of the stacks, such as ancient Greek history, she jotted down ideas for the application essay on “P Slips.” There was a never-ending supply of the little paper slips, which the circulation staff created by slicing up unneeded printouts and used to jot down call numbers and patrons' names. The making of which gave them something “productive” to do during slack times at the desk. Gretchen had quite a pile of them in her apartment, a small castle of untidy stacks on her desk, and usually a clump of them in her pocket. Still, she'd made little progress on the essay, despite the ample supply of P Slips and time for her mind to wander while shelving. She did more woolgathering than productive idea generation.

She had shelved a quarter of the books on the cart when someone appeared at the end of her aisle. He looked directly at her, his eyes in shadow. The fluorescent fixture above him was burned out and she couldn't make out his features, but he looked familiar.

He slowly shook his head and put his hands out, as if he were pushing against an invisible wall or warding something off. Then he turned and left the aisle.

Etienne Holmes.

Why had she thought that? The guy must have reminded her of the famous author—the famous *dead* author—or maybe Holmes had simply been on her mind after her conversation with John about the donations to Special Collections.

But why did he shake his head at her and make that odd gesture? It was like he was warning her about something. Two books under her arm, she hurried down the aisle to where he'd been. At the cross aisle, she looked in both directions, but saw no one. She moved down the lateral aisle, checking the adjacent rows, but the figure had completely disappeared.

Gretchen frowned and returned to her book truck. It was an odd experience, but it meant nothing. It was just some befuddled student or visiting professor, lost in the stacks. She needed to empty this cart in time to meet John for lunch.

Yet she kept glancing about, searching the stacks as she shelved the books.

Chapter Four

LUNCH DATE

Although today was a Friday, Gretchen's morning dragged due to her anticipation of seeing John outside of work and the critique group. And having seen a ghost.

That's what she thought of it as, even though she'd tried to convince herself it was a rando oddball student wandering the stacks. Or at worst, a loony townie. Non-students did wander onto campus at times, including the library, and some had been known to follow female students and staff around in the stacks. But she found the mysterious figure even creepier than that.

She'd been slow in shelving but still finished up and returned her empty book truck to circulation at eleven forty-five. Which gave her time to load up the cart for whoever would be shelving after lunch (she'd be on desk duty in the afternoon), visit the restroom, and head to the basement a few minutes before noon.

She poked her head in the door to John's office. "Yo, dude."

"Just a sec!" His reply came from a storeroom at the rear of the office. "Almost ready!"

Gretchen smiled and wandered over to his desk. The story generator sat again in the center of it.

"I see you've been working hard, playing with your new toy," she called. She reached to lift the lid, but when she touched it the vision of the ghost in the stacks flashed in her mind and she felt lightheaded and queasy. She drew her hand back and steadied herself.

"Pretty, isn't it?" John's voice nearby startled her.

"Um," she said, reorienting herself in the present.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sure. I just felt dizzy for a second."

"You're probably hungry. Low blood sugar."

She cast a quick glance at the device, then averted her eyes and forced a smile. “Right, yeah. Ready to go?”



Gretchen’s spirits lifted when they emerged into the bright October day and walked across north campus to Townsend’s downtown area. She almost took John’s hand in hers.

The Nostalgia Bar and Grill anchored the far left corner of the streets flanking the town square. Students and townies on their lunch break occupied some of the wrought-iron tables that staked out a narrow lane of sidewalk in front. John led the way inside, through the glass double doors festooned with decals and flyers, local band logos, event notices, and *I Heart Townsend* stickers scattered around the posted hours of operation. Glass windows made up two walls of the diner, the front facing the town square, the side facing a bicycle shop across the street.

The place was busy, the inside tables nearly all taken, and they got their sandwiches and fries on trays to eat outside.

“This furniture has seen better days,” John said, settling into a wobbly chair.

“I think this town’s seen better days,” Gretchen replied.

“Yeah, but that’s part of its rustic charm.” He dipped a fry into a thimble-sized paper cup of ketchup beside his Reuben sandwich. “Which is why we’re still here now that we’re no longer students.”

“We might be again,” she said. “I might, anyway, if I can ever get that damn grad school application essay written.”

“Still not going well?”

“Meh. Still trying to figure out what to do with my life, yadda, yadda.”

“Maybe your unconscious is trying to let you know what you *don’t* want to do,” John said.

Gretchen made a sour face. “Yeah, could be.”

“Well ...” he began. “Never mind. None of my business.”

“No, go ahead. I want to hear.” She leaned forward, not entirely sure she did want to hear. But she could use his perspective, or any help at all. Her fiction practically wrote itself, but the damn essay refused to cooperate.

“Listen to your inner voice,” he said.

“It isn’t saying anything.”

“Exactly. It doesn’t want to write the essay. Maybe it wants to do something else.”

Gretchen felt a stirring of the defensiveness she always guarded against in critique group. It usually meant someone had struck a nerve, so she forced herself to ignore it. “Such as?”

“I don’t know. You could brainstorm options besides social work grad school. Do it like you’re writing a story. Flail until you find what your heart wants.”

“I think my heart is clueless.”

John gazed off toward the distant mountain peaks. “So is mine. Or at least it’s lost. It is clearly *not* in my book. I need to finish *Whispering Ashes*. If I can’t, I don’t belong in grad school. At least as a writer.”

“We might have the same problem,” Gretchen said. “Is it possible you don’t want to go to grad school, either?”

He frowned. “Writing’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, since I secretly read my dad’s Stephen King books and pulp science fiction zine collection when I was ten. Grad school will teach me to write better. Write something I can be proud of.” He laughed. “So I can get a job teaching writing, so I don’t become a starving artist. Or geriatric library staff.”

“Look, we know you’re a good writer, right? At least I do, I’ve read enough of your stories and novel-in-progress to see that.”

John shrugged.

“So maybe ...” She took a deep breath, took the plunge. “Maybe you’re not writing what you want to write.”

“Well, it certainly doesn’t want to be written. But I enjoy the writing itself. Writing *anything*.”

“Exactly. You could make a grocery list entertaining if you put your mind to it. But horror and science fiction are what first inspired you to write. I know you still read that stuff, probably as a break between forcing yourself to read Franzen and Joyce.”

He looked guilty. “But I do love Steinbeck.”

“Everybody loves Steinbeck. At least his fun stuff.” She paused to assess him, to see if he was ready to hear her. “I think you should try writing science fiction. Or even horror.”

His jaw dropped. Fortunately he’d been between bites.

“Seriously,” she went on. “You could write *literary* horror.”

“That has some appeal.”

She started on the second half of her grilled blue cheese. “Anyway, a diversion could free up the logjam in your mind. *Whispering Ashes* might write itself while you’re looking the other way. At any rate, I’m telling you the same thing you told me. Listen to your heart.”

He frowned. “Hoist with my own petard.”

“You know when you’re blocked, that means *something’s not right*. What if it’s not a problem with the book, it’s a problem with *you*?”

She couldn’t tell how he was taking this bit of unsolicited tough love, but at least he looked like he was considering it. “Keep flailing. Go with your strengths. Have *fun*. Art is supposed to be fun.”

John studied the remains of his now soggy sandwich for a moment and then looked across the park in the town square, through a gap in the old buildings to a swatch of horizon, the mountains hazy in the near distance.

She’d lost him. *This lunch* was supposed to be fun. “Or we could just work at the library for a few years while our unconscious minds process it all. Live in the now, enjoy the moment. Carpe the fucking diem.”

He scowled. “We’d get stuck here, never get out.”

“Would that be so bad? We could get an MLS. They have a good program here.”

“A Master of Library Science? And grow old mildewing in Special Collections or Reference at this supposedly prestigious yet resolutely anonymous college pretending to be a university?”

Gretchen laughed. “I like it here. So do you, and you know it. It’s peaceful. Mountains nearby.” She shrugged. “Anyway, just a thought.”

She pushed a fry around in the ketchup puddle beside her sandwich. “Anything else of interest turn up in Holmes’s donations?” she asked.

“Not a lot. Bunch of correspondence with his agent and editors, copyright documents. I’m still hoping for some rough drafts covered with red ink edits.”

He poked the little paper cup holding the remnants of his coleslaw. “This stuff is great. Different. Like the Nostalgia puts a secret ingredient in it.”

“Celery seed,” she said.

He looked quizzically at her.

“Those little black specks? Celery seed.”

“Shit, they do taste like celery! I’ll have to try that!”

She laughed. “You don’t know how to make coleslaw!”

“I do. Simple, really. My trick is a ton of pickles. And now celery seed.”

“Make it for me some time?”

“Absolutely!”

Gretchen gave it a beat, then asked, “How about tonight?”

John looked comically surprised. “Sure! I’ve got some ground beef, I could make burgers to go with coleslaw.”

That had been easy.

“Okay!” she said. “I’ll pick up some wine on the way over. You’ll have to tell me where you live.”

He pulled out his phone, typed a quick text, then her phone beeped. “I sent you my address. How about seven o’clock?”

Gretchen grinned. “It’s a date.”

John pushed his chair away from the little table. “It’s nearly one already. Want to head back?”

She looked at her phone. “Shit! It is late. Yeah, let’s go.”

As she got to her feet, a wave of dizziness swept her, then a vision filled her mind, replacing the sidewalk scene around her.

She was in the library stacks. Before her stood a dark figure, engulfed in flames. Books burned on all sides. She heard a scream.

She opened her eyes to find herself back on the sidewalk.

“Gretchen? *Gretchen!* What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Uh ... yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

Except for having a second terrifying vision in one day.