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ZONDERVAN

Memory's Gate

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What in the world am I doing here? Elizabeth Forde asked herself as she followed a silver-haired woman down the cold, clinical main hallway of the Fawlt Line Retirement Center.

Of all the things I could have spent the rest of my summer doing, why this? Yes, she had agreed to volunteer at the retirement center. She had even felt enthusiastic about the idea at the time. But walking down the pale green hallway that smelled of pine disinfectant and aging bodies, Elizabeth wondered if she had made a mistake.

She'd been swept along by Reverend Armstrong's passionate call to the young people of the church. He had exuberantly insisted that they get involved in the community. They must be a generation of givers rather than takers, he'd said. His words were powerful and persuasive, and before she knew what she was doing she had joined a line of other young people to sign up for volunteer service. Just a few hours a day, three or four days a week, for a couple of weeks. It hadn't sounded like much.

An old man, bent over like a question mark, stepped out of his room and smiled toothlessly at her.

It's too much, she thought. *Let me out of here.*

"I know what you're thinking," said her guide, Mrs. Kottler, with a smile. "You're thinking that a few hours a day simply won't be enough. You'll want more time. Everyone feels that way. But

if you do the best you can with the hours you have, you'll be just fine. I promise. Maybe later, once you've proven yourself, we'll let you come in longer."

Elizabeth smiled noncommittally.

Mrs. Kottler wore masterfully applied makeup, discreet gold jewelry, and a fashionable dark blue dress. She smelled of expensive perfume. Elizabeth thought she looked more like a real estate agent than the administrator of an old folks' home.

"We don't call it an 'old folks home,' by the way," Mrs. Kottler said, as if she'd read Elizabeth's mind, "or a 'sanitarium' or any of those other outdated names. It's just what the sign says: it's a retirement center. People have productive and active lives here. Being a senior citizen doesn't mean you have one foot in the grave. People who retire at sixty-five often have another twenty or thirty years to enjoy. We're here to help them live those years as fully as they can."

Elizabeth glanced at a couple of *productive* and *active* residents staring blankly at the television sets in their rooms.

"Of course, we do have *older* residents who have gone beyond their mental or physical capacity to jog around the center six times a day, if you know what I mean," Mrs. Kottler added as they rounded a corner and walked briskly down a short corridor toward two large doors. "For everyone else, there's a full schedule of activities throughout the day. Most take place here in the recreation room."

Mrs. Kottler pushed on the two doors, which swung open grandly to reveal a large room filled with game tables, easels, a large-screen television, and bookcases filled with hundreds of books and magazines. Unlike the main halls and cafeteria Elizabeth had just seen, this room was decorated warmly with wooden end tables, lace doilies, and the kinds of chairs and sofas found in showcase living rooms. Tastefully painted scenes of sunlit hills, lush green valleys, and golden rivers adorned the walls.

“Pretty, huh? I decorated this one myself,” Mrs. Kottler said. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that they should have let me decorate the entire center. Well, that wasn’t my decision to make. The residents are responsible for decorating their own rooms any way they like. Most of the other assembly areas were done before I joined the staff.”

“How long have you been working here?” Elizabeth asked politely.

“Five years,” Mrs. Kottler answered. She added wistfully, “Time. It goes by so quickly, don’t you find?”

For Elizabeth, who had been only eleven when Mrs. Kottler started her job, the last five years hadn’t gone by quickly at all. She had traveled from the carefree days of Barbie dolls to the insecurities of middle school and now to young adulthood and wide-eyed wonder over her future. And she had also traveled to a parallel time — not that she’d be inclined to mention such a thing to Mrs. Kottler. *No, it hasn’t gone by very quickly*, she thought. And as she considered the residents of the center and realized that one day *she* might have to live in a place like this, she hoped life would never go by that quickly. She shuddered at the thought.

As Elizabeth was contemplating, a tall, handsome young man entered through a door at the opposite end of the recreation room. “Mrs. K, I was wondering — ”

“Doug Hall, come meet Elizabeth Forde,” Mrs. Kottler said, waving her arms as if she might create enough of a breeze to sail Doug over to them.

Doug strode across the room with a smile that showed off the deep dimples in his cheeks. *He’s got to be a movie star*, Elizabeth thought. His curly brown hair, perfectly formed face, large brown eyes, and painstakingly sculpted physique was only enhanced by the white clinical coat. *He’s a movie star playing a doctor*, she decided.

Doug stretched out his hand and said, "Well, my enjoyment of this place just increased by a hundred percent."

She shook his hand and blushed. "Hi."

"Doug is our maintenance engineer," Mrs. Kottler explained.

Doug smiled again. "She means I'm the main janitor. But I'm more like a bouncer, in case these old merrymakers get out of control with their wild partying and carousing."

"Stop it, Doug," Mrs. Kottler said with a giggle, then turned to Elizabeth. "I know what you're thinking. You're wondering what a good-looking, charming young man like him is doing in a place like this. Right?"

For once, Mrs. Kottler had it right. *He's a movie star playing a janitor?* It didn't seem appropriate somehow. She waited for the answer.

"Well, if you find out, please let me know," Mrs. Kottler said with another giggle. "He won't tell anyone. I assume he has a deep, dark secret. Perhaps he was involved in some sort of intrigue in France and barely escaped from the police on his yacht. Why else would he be doing maintenance in a retirement center in a small town?"

"If you must know the truth, I ran off with the church funds," Doug said. He and Mrs. Kottler chuckled as if this little exchange had been their own private joke for a long time.

Doug rested his gaze on Elizabeth, making her feel self-conscious. How did she look in her freshly issued pink-and-white clinic jacket — frumpy or professional? Had she taken enough time with her makeup? Were her large brown eyes properly accented? Did her smile look natural? Her skin was freshly tanned, and she had no zits today, thank goodness. She'd tied back her long brown hair, but now she wished she had let it fall loose. It looked better that way, Jeff always said.

Jeff.

Thinking of her boyfriend right then made her pause — as if

her self-conscious vanity was, in and of itself, disloyal to him. She glanced away from Doug quickly.

"Well, back to business," Doug said pleasantly, as if he'd picked up on her feelings and wanted to spare her any embarrassment. "I was wondering if now would be a good time to adjust the settings on the Jacuzzi. You don't have any plans to let the big kids in this afternoon, right?"

"No, Doug, the *kids* won't be going in today," Mrs. Kottler replied, smiling. "Do whatever you need to do."

He nodded. "Maybe Elizabeth will want to test it later when I'm finished." He raised his eyebrows and flashed a mischievous grin.

"I think Elizabeth will be too busy getting acclimated to her new duties," Mrs. Kottler replied.

Doug tipped a finger against his brow as a farewell. "If there's anything I can do to help . . ."

Mrs. Kottler watched him go. "He's such a flirt. A charming, good-looking flirt, but a flirt nonetheless." Elizabeth detected a hint of jealousy in her voice.

The tour of the center eventually led Elizabeth and Mrs. Kottler outside to the five acres of manicured grounds, landscaped into gentle green slopes that ultimately rolled down to Richards Lake. The small, manmade lake was enclosed on one side by a natural forest that extended off to the horizon. Elizabeth walked alongside Mrs. Kottler, feeling oppressed by the humidity of the August afternoon. She swatted at the occasional mosquito that tried to make a meal of her arms.

"The heat and mosquitoes tend to keep everyone inside on days like this," Mrs. Kottler said.

"Except those two," Elizabeth said, gesturing to two people in a white Victorian-style gazebo near the lake.

"That's Sheriff Hounslow and his father," Mrs. Kottler said with just enough annoyance to betray her usual professional detachment. "I suppose we should say a quick hello."

As they got closer, Elizabeth saw that the sheriff, a large man in a light gray uniform, was pacing agitatedly. His father, a shadow from this distance, was sitting on one of the benches that lined the gazebo. Sheriff Hounslow saw them coming and waved.

Mrs. Kottler spoke to Elizabeth in a low voice. “The sheriff’s father, Adam Hounslow, joined us just a couple of days ago. Like many new residents, he’s having a hard time adjusting. Hello, Sheriff!”

Mrs. Kottler and Elizabeth mounted the steps to the shade underneath the round white roof covering the gazebo.

“Look who’s here,” Sheriff Hounslow announced. “Mrs. Kottler and — well, well — Elizabeth Forde.”

“Oh, you know my new volunteer? Elizabeth will be with us a few hours a day for the next couple of weeks.”

“That’s nice. You be sure to take special care of my father,” the sheriff said, nodding toward the older man. Elizabeth could see the old man clearly now. His frame was stooped with age and arthritis, and he had a pale, wrinkled face with hazel eyes. Wisps of thin white hair sprayed out from a spotted crown, and he scowled at them, deep frown lines etching his forehead. Elizabeth could clearly see the resemblance between father and son — in their features and their demeanor.

“Wouldn’t you like a pretty girl like Elizabeth to help take care of you, Dad?” the sheriff asked.

“I don’t need to be taken care of,” the old man growled. He tucked his head down against his chest.

Sheriff Hounslow ignored the remark and continued. “I’m surprised to see you here, Elizabeth. Shouldn’t you be getting ready for the grand opening of that historical amusement park, or whatever Malcolm calls it?”

“It’s not an amusement park,” Elizabeth corrected him. “It’s called the Historical Village.”

“I didn’t know you were connected to Malcolm Dubbs.” Mrs. Kottler said, impressed. Malcolm Dubbs was the closest thing

Fawlt Line had to royalty, a member of the family that had been in the area for nearly 300 years. Malcolm came from England to manage the Dubbs estate after the last American adult member of the Dubbs family had been killed.

"She's also dating Malcolm's cousin, Jeff Dubbs," the sheriff informed her.

"Are you? Doug will be very disappointed," Mrs. Kottler teased, then said earnestly, "Jeff's parents died in that terrible plane crash, didn't they? That was so sad. I think Malcolm Dubbs is a remarkable man. Imagine taking in that boy."

"*That boy* is the true heir to the entire Dubbs estate," the sheriff interjected. "If I were him, I'd have a lot of trouble with cousin Malcolm using *my* money to build that park."

"It's not Jeff's money unless Malcolm dies," Elizabeth corrected him. "He's entitled to do whatever he wants with it. And Jeff is very proud of Malcolm."

Mrs. Kottler nodded. "After all, Malcolm is using it to create something educational for everyone. It's not as if he's squandering it." She turned to Elizabeth. "Is it true that he's brought in buildings, displays, and artifacts from all over the world?"

"Whatever he can find. As much as he could find from the past few hundred years, from picture frames and hairbrushes to schoolhouses and church ruins." Elizabeth covered a smile, realizing she had just recited from one of Malcolm's brochures. "Phase One opens on Saturday."

"Phase One?"

"Malcolm says the village is a work in progress. He'll open various sections of it as they're ready."

"Like I said, it's an amusement park of history," the sheriff said dismissively.

Elizabeth frowned at Sheriff Hounslow, knowing better than most the adversarial relationship he had with Malcolm. Elizabeth suspected that the sheriff was jealous of Malcolm's wealth and the respect he commanded from the townspeople. Whatever the

reason, Hounslow never missed an opportunity to poke fun at Malcolm's projects and eccentricities.

"I can't wait to go on the rides!" he added.

"Are there rides?" Mrs. Kottler asked, confused.

Elizabeth shook her head. "No. Just buildings and displays."

Sheriff Hounslow continued. "There's going to be a big celebration. The mayor will be there as well as a special assistant to the governor, and there'll be a telegram from the president and maybe even world peace — all thanks to Malcolm Dubbs. Ha!"

"Don't be such a pompous fool, Richard," Adam Hounslow barked at his son. "I'm looking forward to seeing the village."

"I'm glad you're looking forward to something," the sheriff muttered.

"Now that you've stuck me in a place like this, I'm lucky to look forward to anything," Adam snapped in return.

"Oh, I'm sure you don't mean that," Mrs. Kottler said. "The Fawlt Line Retirement Center will be like home to you in no time at all, I promise."

Adam scowled. "This will never be my home. My home has been sold right out from under me by my thoughtful and compassionate son."

"I'm not getting into this argument with you again, Dad," Hounslow said irritably.

"Yes you are," Adam replied. "As long as you are forcing me to live in a place I don't want to live, we'll have this argument."

The sheriff turned on his father. "Where else are you going to live? You couldn't stay in that big old place alone. You can barely take care of yourself, let alone keep up with a big house."

The old man snorted and turned away.

Sheriff Hounslow kept at it. "Do I have to remind you what led up to this? Do I have to announce to the whole world how you nearly burned the house down — twice — by forgetting to turn the stove burners off? Or the time you flooded the house by wandering off to the store while the bath water was running?"

Mrs. Kottler caught Elizabeth's eyes and jerked her head toward the center, signaling that they should leave. Heading across the grounds, Elizabeth could still hear the voices of the two men arguing behind her.

"I know what you're thinking," Mrs. Kottler said. "You're thinking that Adam must be crazy not to like our center. Well, I agree. Not to worry, though. He'll get used to it. They always do."

They approached the building from the back, where a stone patio filled with flowering plants had been added to the recreation room. A man in a wheelchair was pruning the plants, meticulously spraying the leaves with a water bottle and wiping them. He had long gray hair that poured out from under a large baseball cap. Beneath the brim, he wore sunglasses so dark that Elizabeth couldn't see his eyes at all. A bushy mustache and beard flowed downward. It struck her that, apart from his cheeks, his face was entirely covered. He wore a baggy jogging suit that, to Elizabeth's thinking, must have been terribly hot.

"That's Mr. Betterman, another new resident," Mrs. Kottler said. "Come meet him."

They crossed the patio and Mrs. Kottler introduced them.

Mr. Betterman didn't speak, but grunted and held a carnation out to her.

"Very nice," Elizabeth said.

"Take it," Mrs. Kottler whispered.

Elizabeth reached out to take the flower. For a second he didn't let go, but used the moment to lean closer to her and whisper, "I know who you are." He gave her a slight smile, then turned away to fiddle with the planter.

Disconcerted, Elizabeth looked to Mrs. Kottler, who gently shrugged as they walked inside.

"I wonder what he meant by that?" Mrs. Kottler mused, once they were inside and out of Mr. Betterman's hearing.

"I don't know," Elizabeth replied, but something about the man's half-smile and voice seemed familiar to her somehow.

“Still, it was an honor that he singled you out, you know,” Mrs. Kottler said. “He doesn’t usually talk to anyone. He’s a little eccentric.”

No kidding, Elizabeth thought.

As they drifted through the recreation room, Elizabeth found herself looking for the handsome maintenance man. She wasn’t a flirt — nor was she interested in anyone but Jeff — yet she was drawn to Doug. She wasn’t sure why . . . Elizabeth shook her head to clear it and turned her attention back to Mrs. Kottler, who was finishing the tour.

Mrs. Kottler smiled proudly. “Well, that’s most of it. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking this is more like a beautiful hotel than a retirement center, right? Well, we do our best. Now let me show you where the storage closets are and introduce you to your new responsibilities.”

2



Malcolm Dubbs lived in a cottage on the edge of the family's vast estate, bordering the north edge of the town of Fawlt Line. It had a manor house built in the 17th century, which was now part of the Historical Village. The cottage reminded him of England, and it fit him and Jeff perfectly. Elizabeth thought the two were remarkably happy, considering the tragedy that had brought them together.

Tall and slender, Malcolm was sitting at the large desk in his den when Elizabeth and Jeff arrived. The sun was soon to set, and a dim yellow light washed over the cluttered room. Thanks to the oak tree just beyond the French doors leading out to the patio, drops of cooler, green light filtered into the room. The rays highlighted the old-fashioned furniture and skimmed along the dark wood paneling, the classic paintings, the shelves sagging under too many books. Jeff smiled and turned on the banker's lamp at the head of the desk.

Malcolm looked up and blinked at Jeff. "Oh, hi," he said with a start. "Good evening, Elizabeth." His British accent made him sound intelligent and genteel.

"Good evening, Malcolm," Elizabeth said.

"Are you all right?" Jeff asked, noticing the small worry lines on his cousin's face.

Malcolm sighed. "All the preparations for the grand opening have left me with too much to do and too little time."

Jeff gestured to the papers on the desk. "What are you working on now?"

Malcolm pushed the papers away wearily. "These are daily reports of completed projects within the Village, and this is another report discussing the security system and inherent weaknesses. It appears that some areas remain vulnerable to theft."

"Vulnerable?" Elizabeth asked.

"The security cameras still aren't working." Malcolm leaned back in his chair and shoved his hands into the pockets of his tweed sports coat. He stretched his long legs as far as they would go.

"It's not all doom and gloom, I hope," Elizabeth said.

"No. The eighteenth-century windmill from Holland is working perfectly. And we wrapped up the construction on the miners' row houses from southwest Pennsylvania. I'm particularly proud of that exhibit."

"Why that one?"

Malcolm smiled. "Because it shows the chronology of change better than most of the displays. You start at one end of the row houses, and as you walk through each one you'll see exactly how the miners lived during the last 180 years. Go in the first door, and you'll see how it was in 1820. Move to the next door and you're looking at 1840, then 1860, 1880 and so on until you come to the present day. We spent a lot of time getting every detail just right."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't know how you pulled it all together."

"Sometimes I wonder myself," Malcolm admitted. "It's been a long time in the making."

"Hundreds of years, I figure," Jeff said.

Malcolm waved his hand to change the subject. "Forget

about the Village for now. How was your first day as a volunteer, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth was pleased that he remembered, considering all the other demands on his mind, but that was typical Malcolm. “It was mostly just a chance to look around. I only met a couple of people. The center is nice, I guess, if you have to live in a place like that.”

Malcolm chuckled. “Your faint praise is underwhelming.”

Jeff dropped onto the sofa across from the desk and ran his hands through his wavy dark hair. “She’s sorry she ever volunteered.”

“Jeff . . .” Elizabeth sent him a sharp look.

“What?” Jeff asked innocently. “Did I say something wrong?”

Malcolm stood up and smiled sympathetically. “If it’s any consolation, Elizabeth, I think volunteering to help out at a retirement center is a noble and difficult thing to do. Many retirement homes are downright depressing, and elderly people can be very unpredictable, depending on their states of mind. But if you remember that they’re people, and not just old people, you have the opportunity to do them a world of good.”

Elizabeth thought of how Doug Hall called the residents “kids” and probably charmed the socks off them, if only because he didn’t treat them differently from anyone else.

“As quirky as your parents are, you should feel right at home,” Jeff said with a laugh. Elizabeth kicked at his ankle before sitting next to him on the sofa.

Malcolm tugged at his ear thoughtfully. “I haven’t been out to the center since they renovated it. When I was a kid, it wasn’t a retirement home. It was just a house on a farm. In fact, it was owned by someone you two have heard a lot about.”

Elizabeth and Jeff looked at each other blankly.

“That’s where the Richards property is,” Malcolm said. “It’s where Charles Richards disappeared.”

The two teens' faces lit up with the realization.

"You mean *the* Charles Richards?" Jeff asked.

"The one who disappeared like I did?" Elizabeth added.

Malcolm nodded. The three of them looked at each other silently as the story and the memories came flooding back.



The legend of Charles Richards had been whispered about around Fawlt Line for thirty years, and the mystery surrounding his sudden disappearance had never been solved. At this point, most people considered it just a small-town myth — like haunted houses and the bogeyman. But Malcolm, Elizabeth, and Jeff knew that Charles Richards was more than a myth. They knew what had happened to him was very real, because Malcolm had witnessed the disappearance firsthand.

When Malcolm was a boy, he visited his American relatives in Fawlt Line every summer. Early one morning, he was helping the local veterinarian Hezekiah Beckett run errands. They drove up to the front of the Richards' home, just as Charles Richards stepped out of the front door and kissed his wife Julia good-bye. He patted his two children's heads as he passed them and made his way down the sidewalk toward the front gate. Then, without sound or any change in his surroundings, he suddenly disappeared.

Horrified, Julia, the kids, Dr. Beckett and Malcolm raced to the spot where Charles had just been standing, but saw only the fence and the grass. There were no bushes or trees for him to hide behind, no holes to fall into, nothing to explain how he could simply vanish. Yet no trace of him could be found anywhere.

Julia was bedridden for months afterward, lost in the hope that her husband would return. No funeral or memorial service was ever held, but Charles never came back. Later, the family sold the farm and moved away.

The event changed Malcolm's life, giving him a passion for

history, quantum physics, theories of time travel, and unexplained phenomenon. The theory he had settled on after studying other strange stories in Fawlt Line's history was that the town was actually a *fault line* into other times or dimensions. He was convinced that Charles Richards had fallen through that fault. He had never been seen again — or had he?



Elizabeth felt a chill go up and down her spine as thoughts of Charles Richards reminded her of her own experience, when *she* became a victim of the time fault. She stood up and walked to the window, her arms folded tightly around her.

“Bits?” Jeff asked, worried.

“I’m all right,” she said softly. The day was fading, the shadows stretching, as Elizabeth remembered that strange night.

While taking a bath a year ago, she had slipped through a fracture in time and wound up in a parallel Fawlt Line where everyone thought she was a girl named Sarah. She insisted that she was really Elizabeth and ended up in a hospital being treated as an amnesiac. Because so many people thought she was Sarah, Elizabeth had almost given in to believing she *was* Sarah, even though her memories told her otherwise.

But then on Elizabeth’s side of the fault line, a girl was found unconscious who looked exactly like Elizabeth but clearly *wasn’t* Elizabeth — different dental records, for one thing — which led Malcolm to work out a theory that Elizabeth and Sarah were sort of “time twins” who had switched places.

Elizabeth shivered and rubbed her arms absently. That she had made it back to Fawlt Line — her Fawlt Line — was nothing short of a miracle. She nearly lost her life. But Jeff and Malcolm had put Malcolm’s theory to the test and saved her. Well, they’d had some help from a man at the hospital on the other side of the fault.



Elizabeth sighed deeply from her place at the window. She hardly noticed that Jeff was now at her side.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Crazy George,” she said.

While she was stuck in that other time, Elizabeth had met a maintenance worker at the hospital who insisted that he had also made the switch from one time to the other. At first she didn’t believe him and had called him Crazy George. But he ultimately saved her life from an attempted murder. It was a nightmarish experience, and only in the end did she realize Crazy George wasn’t crazy at all.

“He’s still trapped there,” she said now to Jeff. “Just like Charles Richards and only God knows how many others — Sweet, old Crazy George is trapped in that other time.”

Elizabeth felt the tears form in her eyes. She hardly talked about her time travel experience because of the sadness and anxiety it brought her. Even now, as she sat in the security of Malcolm’s study, it upset her. In the deepest part of her heart, she feared that the nightmare might return just by bringing it up too much. Because even though Malcolm had figured out *what* was happening, he hadn’t figured out what *made* it happen — or if and when it would happen again.

Jeff hugged her close, then turned his attention back to Malcolm. “What happened to the Richards’ house since then?”

“They tore it down and built a gaudy mansion on the site. It was the kind of place kids liked to throw rocks at. Then they tore *that* down and put up the new building a couple of years ago. How does it look inside?”

Elizabeth didn’t answer, her mind still on Crazy George and her own frightening adventure.

“Bits?” Jeff asked, rubbing her arm gently.

Elizabeth shook her head, focusing on Malcolm’s question. “It’s . . . modern. Just one story with a lot of hallways. More like a hospital than a home.”

Jeff and Malcolm glanced warily at each other.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I think you should go home,” Malcolm suggested. “You must be tired from your first day.”

“No, really — I’m all right,” she said.

But Jeff held out his hand. “Come on, Bits. Really, you should get home.”

Elizabeth looked at him curiously, then took his hand and followed him to the door.



Jeff brought his Volkswagen to a squeaky stop in front of Elizabeth’s house and turned off the headlights. They looked up at the front window and saw Alan Forde pacing in the living room, waving his hands and talking animatedly.

“Is he lecturing someone?” Jeff asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Sort of. He’s been recording a series of talks about the legends of King Arthur.”

“Recording them for whom?”

“Anyone who wants them,” she answered. “He’s been obsessed with Arthur ever since . . . well, you know.”

The “you know” was a reference to yet another Fawlt Line adventure — when the legendary King Arthur had slipped through the fault line and ended up in — well, Fawlt Line. Malcolm and Jeff ended up escorting the king back to England, where he and his sword Excalibur slipped back through time.

“I’d like to hear what your dad has to say about the good King Arthur, especially since I got to know him myself,” Jeff said.

Elizabeth glanced at Jeff gratefully. “He’d be happy if you asked.”

“I’ll wait for some other time. Right now, I want you to tell me what’s going on with you.”

Elizabeth hadn’t expected such a direct question, though she should have. Jeff could always tell when something was wrong.

Sometimes it was a comfort to her that her longtime friend, who was now her boyfriend, knew her so well. Other times it made her feel uneasy, particularly when she didn't have an answer — like tonight. “I don't know,” she said after a long pause.

“You must have a clue,” he probed.

She turned in the seat to face him. “I really don't know, Jeff. Maybe it's just volunteering at the center. It was so . . . strange. At first I thought it was because I don't know anything about helping old people. But then . . .”

“But then what?”

She struggled over what to say next. “Sheriff Hounslow's father is a resident there, and the two of them were arguing and it was embarrassing . . . and then I met a guy in a wheelchair who gave me a carnation, and he said he knew me.”

Jeff grimaced. “He knows you? How?”

“He didn't say, and I was too surprised to ask. It was really weird. I had this feeling that I'd seen him before, but I don't know where.”

Jeff took her hand in his and spoke softly. “Look, Malcolm's probably right. Old folks can be unpredictable, and that makes you nervous. Do you remember how Grandpa Dubbs was before he died?”

Elizabeth nodded. “He kept accusing the servants of stealing things.”

“Because he kept forgetting where he put them,” Jeff finished. “It used to scare the wits out of me when he launched into one of his tirades. Maybe the guy in the wheelchair really thought he knew you, but he was thinking of someone else. Probably someone from his past.”

Elizabeth agreed silently.

“I'm just guessing, but it gave you the creeps to find out that the retirement center was built on Charles Richards' place, right?”

“It brought back a lot more than I wanted to remember.”

"That's what I figured." Jeff was quiet for a moment. His expression told Elizabeth that he was forming his words carefully before speaking. "Maybe . . . you should get some counseling about . . . what happened to you — and me. Maybe we all should."

"Oh, right," Elizabeth said, unamused. "I can see me now in the first session with the counselor: 'Well, I'm here because I traveled to a parallel time . . . and my time twin went to my time. I almost got killed, but my boyfriend also traveled in time, and his time twin showed up in Fawlt Line too.' Yeah, that'll work. He'll have me committed just like the doctor there, uh, *then* wanted to do."

"I'm just saying that getting bounced around in time and going through what you went through can't be healthy."

"You're right about that."

"I mean, especially since you don't like to talk about it."

"I'm okay, Jeff," Elizabeth insisted. "I think it's just today, volunteering at the center, bumping into some weird people, and then thinking about Charles Richards and Crazy George. Maybe I am just tired. I'll be all right, really . . ."



But Elizabeth knew she wasn't all right. She had a hard time falling asleep that night, as images of Crazy George spun through her mind and mixed with scenes from the Fawlt Line Retirement Center. Mrs. Kottler kept saying, "I know what you're thinking," and then Doug Hall offered her flowers that had been carefully pruned by the wheelchair-bound Mr. Betterman. The floor of the retirement home then opened up to expose a dark, cavernous time fault that threatened to pull her in. She fell — and never stopped falling.

Elizabeth sat up suddenly in bed, gasping and shaking. She knew that one way or another, she had to take back her offer to volunteer at the center.