

CH1 – OPTION:1
YOUR PERCEPTION OF MATTHEW
JUST FRIENDS
OR
ROMANTIC INTEREST

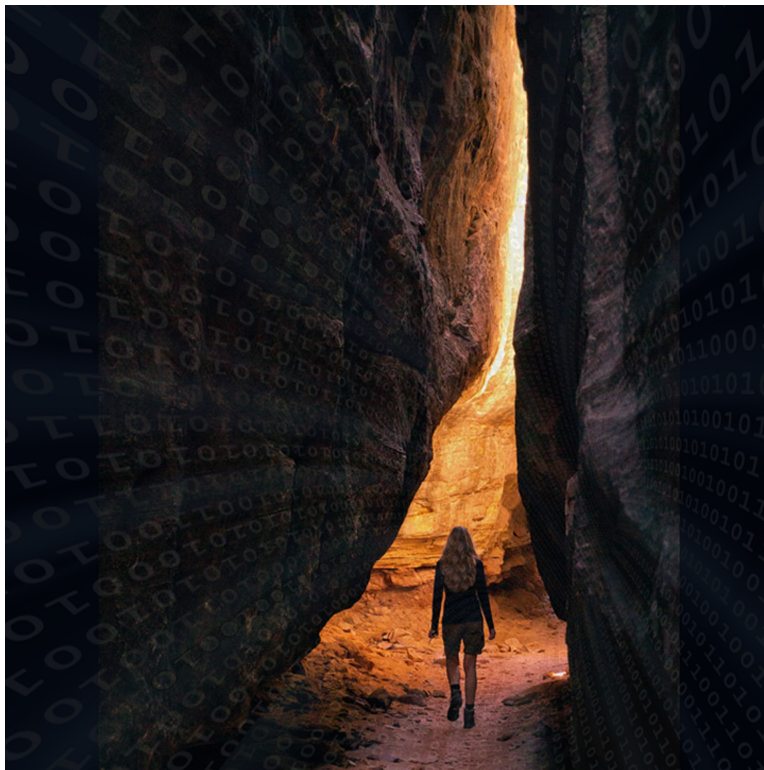


(PLAYER'S CHOICE WILL LAST THROUGHOUT THE GAME).

Chapter 1

How strange it was to be seventeen and facing death. The tranquility of the desert night with its vast array of glittering stars and the merest crescent moon belied the imminent danger of hypothermia. There was little comfort in the fact Amelia wouldn't be dying alone. She barely knew the boy sitting by her side. Matthew had been chosen as her hiking partner by their geology teacher, but they'd never really spoken until that day.

By mid-day it was seventy degrees, the sky was clear, deep blue and so incredibly immense. They hiked through fields of coarse grass, sage, and prickly pear, and along dried stream beds gathering rock samples for their class. They'd scrambled up and down over rugged outcrops that looked like megalithic statues; frozen waves, rising and subsiding in the vastness of the high desert – an indelible reminder that this had once been an ocean floor.



The trail wove through the desert disappearing into a jumble of cliffs and ravines then reappeared in the massive presence of red sandstone walls laddered with cool crevices and fissures. As they emerged from the dark interior of the canyon labyrinth and sat down

just a few feet apart, Matthew took off his sunglasses as he slumped down onto the warm red rock surface to rest. It was the first time Amelia had seen him up close.

Though it made no sense at all (and she wouldn't admit it in a million years) when he looked at her she felt as if she had known him forever. Matthew smiled and not only did Amelia suddenly realize she'd been staring, she was instantly mesmerized by the fact that he had dimples and, as if she had no will of her own, she stared a bit longer.

Blinking, she returned his smile a bit awkwardly, drew in a deep breath and looked up at the sky, "It's so beautiful," she said, hoping Matthew would follow her skyward gaze rather than watch her cheeks turn blazing red.

"Yeah I love it here," he said warmly.

Amelia pulled her knees close to her chest. Ironically, her backpack had the initials YOLO (You Only Live Once) displayed across the front but something about the last few minutes was bringing that concept into question. What if people actually live more than once? And if she was somehow remembering the *feeling* of Matthew - could he remember her as well?

FROM THIS POINT ON NARRATION IS FOR BOTH JF AND RI.



After a few moments of reflecting on the fact that her day just kept getting better and better, Amelia opened her eyes and turned her head to see Matthew smiling at her as he handed her a bottle of water.

“We need to get going,” he said and though she nodded in agreement, and admittedly was an inexperienced hiker, it seemed unnecessary to rush. Matthew pointed to a trail in the canyon below and said, “That’s a much nicer trail than the one we’re supposed to be on. Do you want to take that one instead?”

“Sure,” said Amelia, enjoying the fact that he had asked her opinion since she wouldn’t have known the difference between one trail and another.

As they descended into a deep canyon labyrinth, time seemed to stand still. Surrounded by earthen walls, Amelia could only see the vibrant sapphire sky overhead with no indication of the sun’s proximity to the horizon.

Emerging from the enclosed space, a profound and hypnotic beauty appeared before them, the sun falling slowly toward the horizon, washing deep oranges and fiery reds over the land.

They stood staring for a moment and then as if awakening from a trance Amelia said in a slight panic, “Matthew will we make it back on time?”

“Don’t worry I know this trail really well. We’ll make it!” Matthew sounded confident but Amelia noticed a certain urgency in his walk.

Wherever the land was fairly flat they ran instead of walking. They scrambled over boulder fields in their gradual ascent to the top of a high mesa where red rock canyons rose majestically above the desert floor. Slanted rays drenched blazing red rock walls with golden light and shadows lengthened across the canyon skating along the desert floor. The air was slightly cooler now, but didn’t breathe what was yet to come.

As it grew darker Matthew stopped and said, “Hold on a sec,” as he dug through his pack. “Shit! I forgot my glasses!”

“I can lead, do you have a flashlight?” said Amelia nervously.

A guilty look passed over Matthew’s face. “I don’t. I was thinking this would just be a day hike, I didn’t think to pack one.”

“It’s ok,” said Amelia, “let’s just keep going.”

Until this point Amelia felt confident that Matthew would take care of everything, and if there was an emergency he was a really fast runner and could have made it to the camp for help. But now it was up to her to get them safely back. Anxiety blooming in her chest and flowing into every cell of her body, she took the lead, running from one rock cairn to the next. With iron legs she climbed steep cliffs, the muscles in her thighs shaking with the effort. She tried jogging through the fields but could manage no more than a fast walk.

The sky was now dark purple, the evening clouds were brushed over with shimmering gold, but there was just enough light to see the cairns up ahead. Despite exhaustion

Amelia tried to run as fast as she could from one cairn to the next. Then suddenly the horizon turned a soft sable bringing to light three glittering stars and a new moon dangling by an invisible thread at the edge of the horizon. In moments the sky and land had become one. It was too dark to safely go any further.

Amelia's heart was frantically rushing in her chest and roaring in her ears as a roiling, swirling feeling made her too dizzy to walk. Sitting side by side, she and Matthew silently watched more and more stars float out of the velvety darkness. As the temperature quickly dropped, Amelia pulled on her sweater. It was oversized, warm and cozy, and though she knew the warmth wouldn't last for long she immediately felt better.

Digging through her pack, she handed Matthew half of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Thanks. I'm starving," he whispered gratefully.

Within minutes the soft evening breeze was edged with a hard chill.

"How cold do you think it's going to get tonight?" said Amelia, as she emptied out her backpack then fumbled with different ways to fold it.

"It'll probably drop below freezing." Matthew paused then added slowly, "Do you know what that means?"

Amelia knew the answer but she was desperately hoping Matthew might have something in mind a little less drastic than *death-by-stupidity* – the leading cause of death between the ages of 14 and 24, a statistic regularly quoted to her by her father. Of course she had ignored him as he was just being her dad. But now she was beginning to realize how easy it was to become a statistic.

"We could die from hypothermia," said Matthew his voice low and apologetic.

Amelia involuntarily gasped a stuttering breath as tears silently streamed down her cheeks. "Don't you think they'll look for us?"

Matthew moved closer and put his arm around her.

"I'm sure they will," Matthew said. "They'll drive into town or wherever they can get a cell connection and call my dad. He'll fly down in his helicopter and use the search light, but they'll be looking at Canyon Rim which is nowhere near here."

"Wow, your dad flies his own helicopter?" asked Amelia lightly, hoping to change the topic.

"Yep," said Matthew in an exhausted tone making it clear he didn't particularly like his father. "He learned to fly in Africa. I call him *the great white hunter* because he goes on safaris every year and now we have the heads of dead animals hanging all over the walls of his study."

"Oh," said Amelia, not really sure what else to say.

"Yeah," said Matthew with a slight laugh. Then he drew Amelia closer and said, "I'm sorry. It's my fault," his voice guilt-ridden. "I never should have taken you off the trail."

Amelia knew he must be as frightened as she was; feeling worse even, because he felt responsible for her.

“It's okay,” she said squeezing his hand, “it was my choice too.”

As the night grew colder the stars appeared razor sharp. Amelia's body, tingling and numb, began shaking uncontrollably as the freezing air penetrated her bones, a fierce, constant pain drawing out the little warmth left in her body. And though Matthew moved to sit behind her, wrapping his arms tightly around her, she felt herself sinking into the blackness of the night sky, drowning in stars as numerous and cold as falling snow, her body encased in ice, eyes wide open staring. Nothing seemed to exist but infinite galaxies of light and color blooming in her mind, pulling her forward with greater and greater intensity into an empty void of nothingness.

CH1 – OPTION:2

FORCE YOURSELF TO STAY AWAKE

(SKIP to beginning of CH 2)

ALLOW YOUR ESSENCE TO LEAVE YOUR BODY



Suddenly, enveloped in darkness and with all the air squeezed out of her lungs, Amelia traveled at lightning speed down a long tube composed of dense grey light. With a whipping jolt she found herself sitting in a dimly lit room on a cold linoleum floor, gasping for breath.

As her vision cleared various shapes gradually began to emerge - a thin, flimsy mattress coupled with a faded, grey wool blanket, and a well-used pillow, all of which were lying in a neat pile on a cheap plastic bed frame screwed tightly into the floor. A piece of reflective metal was embedded in the wall above a small, rust-stained sink and next to it sat a toilet with no lid. A gloomy light was cast by a single bulb in the ceiling encased in a metal cage. High in a corner a solitary security camera swiveled slowly back and forth systematically scanning the room. That was it... there was nothing else. No pictures, no windows, just white-washed cement walls.

After frantically pulling on the handle and beating on the door, it was obvious no one was coming to help her. She tried yelling and waving her arms at the camera, and though she was certain she was being watched no one responded as she anxiously paced back and forth like a caged animal. Finally, Amelia gave up, sat down on the decrepit little bed, crossed her legs and slowly leaned back against the cold wall.

CH1 – OPTION:3

KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN – FORCE YOURSELF TO STAY ALERT (SKIP AHEAD TO CHAPTER 2)

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Taking a deep breath she closed her eyes and began to vividly imagine herself outside of this strange room. Instantly she felt her *essence* completely pull away from her body until she was floating close to the ceiling. From this vantage point she could see herself below sitting motionless on the bed wearing green scrubs.

Amelia floated along the ceiling, then through the wall and further on into a brightly lit hallway lined with doors that looked just like hers. She continued on and soon found herself in a large community room.

*** ADD ATTUNEMENT TO THE INNER WORLD

The television seemed fairly new, but the couches, tables and chairs appeared to be at least twenty or thirty years old. As she drifted through the open doors leading to the Intensive Care Unit she immediately saw Matthew lying in a hospital bed, unconscious and on life-support. She gently floated in to see him, but quickly realized he was in a coma and unaware of her presence.

Unconcerned, she floated back out of the ICU and returned to the community room. This time she noticed a middle-aged woman with deep brown eyes and black, curly hair streaked with grey, dressed in green scrubs and fluffy, pink slippers. There was a deck of cards sitting on the table in front of her and as Amelia floated closer the woman looked directly at her.

“Sit down my dear, I’m Itzel. I’ve been expecting you,” she said hooking a chair with her foot and pushing it away from the table.

Amelia sat down. Without a word Itzel shuffled the deck and spread the cards out face down in a perfect arc on the table.

“Do you know you’re playing a game? Do you remember asking me to do this for you a long, long time ago before you were even born?”

Shaking her head Amelia said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s alright,” said Itzel, “Just remember it’s all a game. Now go ahead and pick three cards, one at a time.”

CH1 – OPTION:4

PICK A CARD

REFUSE TO PICK A CARD

(Skip to the beginning of CH 2)



Amelia obediently pointed to a card and Itzel flipped over the Death card. The picture showed Death himself portrayed as a skeleton wearing armor and holding a black flag with the Roman numerals XIII in white. His horse was carefully stepping over a dead man, woman and child, all lying on the ground in that order. Standing in front of the horse and rider was a bishop dressed in yellow paying homage to Death.

With an inexplicable, penetrating look Itzel said, “You cannot resist Death nor conquer it. The white horse is a symbol that Death is the ultimate purifier like the sun that dies at night and is reborn every morning. It means you can die and be reborn fresh and new.

“But notice this card is upside down so the meaning is also reversed. Sudden, unexpected change is coming and you must know that everything within you will resist that change. Death always includes transformation, but if you refuse to change you will be trapped, stuck in limbo. Do you understand?”

Amelia looked at her blankly. Some hazy, distant part of her did understand, but she said nothing.

“Pick another card, darling.”

Amelia pointed to The Hermit which was also turned upside down. The card depicted an old man with a flowing white beard and shoulder-length white hair dressed in a long, grey cloak standing alone on a snowy mountaintop with a dark, bluish-grey sky in the background. He carried a staff in his left hand and held aloft a lantern with a glowing six-pointed star in the center.

“As you can see this card is reversed, but in the upright position it is a symbol of wisdom and the sharing of knowledge with others. More than anything it represents a deep awareness of yourself – an awareness that can only be gained through isolation.

“But the meaning is reversed, which means you will not choose to be alone or go within, your isolation will be unwelcome, forced upon you. There will be a separation from someone you care for deeply and it will bring you overwhelming emptiness and pain if you resist. But notice The Hermit wears the grey cloak of invisibility and in this very moment you are invisible to everyone but me, so there is potential here IF you don’t resist what is now happening.”

Without being asked Amelia pointed to a third card and was immediately relieved to see that finally one of the cards was upright, until she saw it was The Devil. The card portrayed a Satyr, an unappealing creature part man, part goat with large horns sprouting out from his head and gigantic vampire bat wings emerging from his back. From his feet protruded bat claws rather than the typical toes or hooves and he was perched high above a man and woman – both naked with tiny goat horns sprouting from their heads and goat-

like tails as well. They were chained to the podium where the Devil sat and also chained to each other.

“This doesn’t look good,” said Amelia shaking her head.

With a sigh Itzel said, “Yes, this one is challenging, no doubt.”

“This IS just a game, right?” said Amelia uncertainly.

“Yes, my dear, you are playing a game,” said Itzel reassuringly.

“Okay – go ahead and tell me what it means,” Amelia sighed.

“This card represents an actual person who, like a bat, sucks the life out of his prey. But in this case it’s not blood, but energy. He takes the life-force of others, believing that the end somehow justifies the means. There is something about him that is irresistible, almost hypnotic. He may actually use hypnosis to get what he wants and those that come near him are easily held within his power. The inverted pentagram above his head signifies dark intent and black magic.”

“Is there anything good about any of this?” asked Amelia doubtfully.

Itzel raised an eyebrow and said, “Well, look here at the man and woman. It appears they’re being held captive against their will, but if you look more closely you can see the chains around their necks are loose and could easily be removed. This means they’re voluntarily in bondage.”

“This is the good news?” said Amelia impatiently.

“It means you have a choice. This is actually the most important card for you to understand. On the one hand you’ll meet a man who embodies these things, but unlike the repulsive picture on this card you may feel strangely drawn to him, he may be ultra-charismatic, he may have certain characteristics that are much like your own. In other words he won’t look like a devil. But he will mirror to you all your hopes and fears.

“It will be easy to feel like his victim, easy to blame him for what happens to you. But if you believe that to be true, you *will* fall completely under his control. You’ll transfer your energy over to him and he will become more powerful while your energy becomes more and more depleted.”

“But I thought you said we’re playing a game,” said Amelia, feeling frightened and confused. “This doesn’t sound like any fun at all.”

“The trick to this game is to remember it’s all YOUR game. And you have a choice; you can play it according to someone else’s rules or play by your own rules. You can get caught up in their *version of reality* or you can choose to remain in your own.”

“Have we done this before?” said Amelia blinking. “I’ve dreamt of you before haven’t I?”

Amelia’s body began shaking uncontrollably then suddenly, both Itzel and the room dissolved into complete darkness.