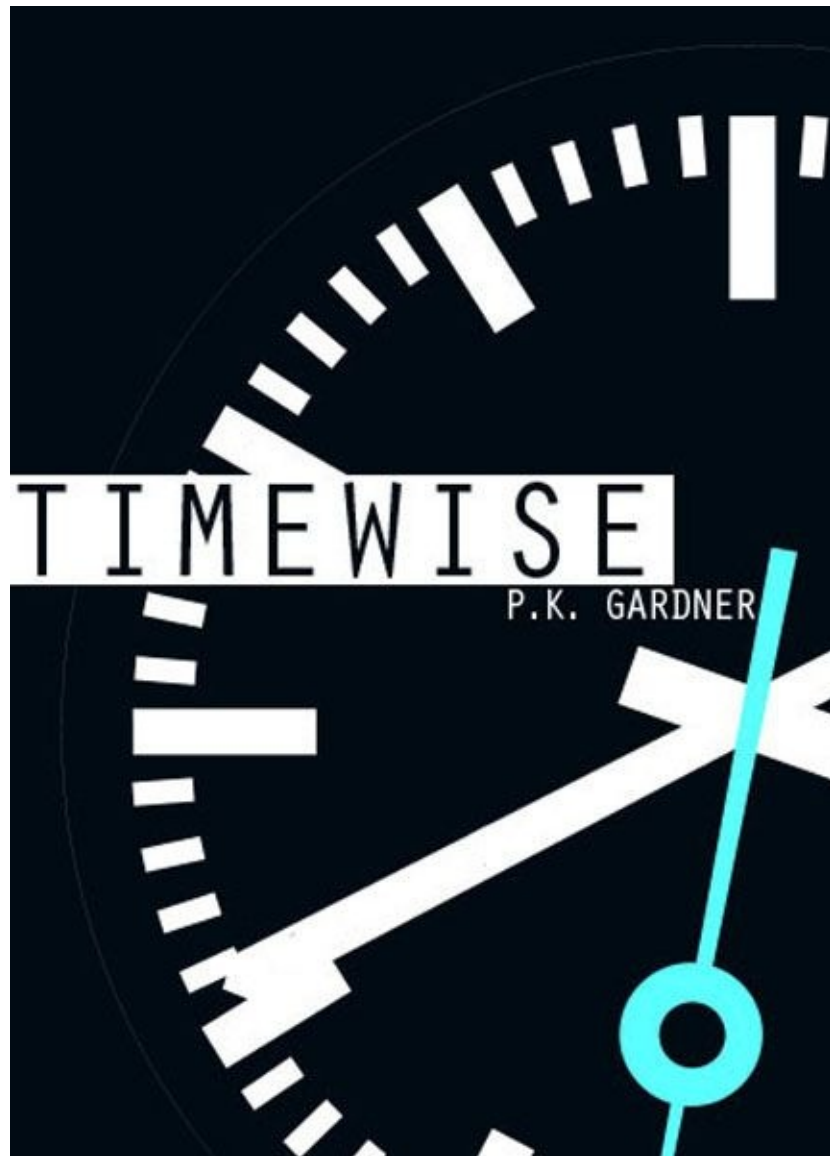




# TIMESWISE

P.K. GARDNER



**TIMEWISE**  
By P.K. Gardner  
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*(Prologue)*

To Tyler Smith, there is no difference between five and ten minutes late.

Eventually, he'll think that has been his problem all along.

Unlike students who break into a sprint the second the tardy bell rings at Lewis Baker Secondary School, Tyler slows down, savoring the swirl of papers left in the empty halls.

He is still Tyler then, but five minutes change that.

Had the incident happened five minutes earlier, he would have been sitting in class. Five minutes later, he would have missed the entire thing. He'd never have become Ty, the Timewise operative who exists everywhere and nowhere all at once.

But this is how it goes:

At four minutes late for his eighth-grade algebra class, he's rounding the corner of the hallway and for the first time feels a cold vise grip curling around his lungs.

Then he sees a creature standing in the hallway. It's pale blue with huge black eyes, long spindly limbs and a single vertical slit where a mouth should be. Tyler blinks – once, twice – but the apparition doesn't fade. It just hovers there in his vision, a child's nightmare made flesh.

Slowly, the thing extends its hand toward him, long, thin fingers unfurling without apparent malice. The cold that has found its way into Tyler's chest intensifies. It builds up in his stomach and seeps into his veins, his lungs and his limbs until he can't move, let alone breathe. He watches, entranced, as the pale blue fingertips start to glow with a vaguely electric light.

(he is now exactly five minutes late to class and knows this is somehow significant)

"Crissakes!" a voice bellows from somewhere behind him. "Get down!"

Tyler spins around, just in time to see someone moving toward him. The blur catches him in the shoulder with a tackle worthy of a linebacker. Tyler hits the floor hard, air whooshing out of his frozen lungs.

Blue lightning crackles above him, charring the brick wall. The heat from the blast does nothing to thaw the ice in his chest.

"Move on!" the guy who knocked him down roars, dragging Tyler to his feet. "Go, go!"

He steers Tyler into an empty classroom, shoves him inside, pulls the door shut and locks it behind them. He peers out the single glass pane in the window while Tyler tries to get his breathing under control.

"What was—" Tyler starts to ask.

"Quiet! Last thing I need is some civilian mucking this up." He turns from the window and slides slowly to the floor, burying his face in his arms. "I'm sunk as it is."

To Tyler's surprise, he recognizes the other guy. He's maybe four years older than Tyler, skinny and gaunt with hollowed-out features and dark brown eyes. Tyler had seen him a few weeks ago, before his life had taken this turn toward the fantastic.

"You're Kevin Jones," Tyler says.

The guy stiffens. "What? No." Then he shrugs, his panic fading into composure. "Well actually, sure, but only sometimes. Never could get used to all the aliases."

Tyler can't place the accent. There's something foreign in the dialect that he can't identify; familiar words twisted with unfamiliar slurs.

"I'm Zane Tucker," the guy says, pulling a black disk from his pocket.

That name strikes a chord with Tyler too, like something resonating from a distant dream.

"Zane Tucker," Tyler repeats.

(it is either the second or third time he has met Zane Tucker, maybe both)

"Sure. Zane Tucker. Practically my whole life." Zane flips the disk over in his hands, raising his gaze to meet Tyler's own. Recognition flashes in his eyes. "Ty? Blast me hellside. Ty Smith?"

"How the hell do you know that?" Tyler asks, stepping backward. There is a tremor in his voice. "I never told you my name."

"Someone on high hates me," Zane moans.

"How do you know—"

"You're not supposed to be here!" Zane bellows, scrambling to his feet. "You can't be here! It'll muck everything up! Tank it straight down under." He cuts himself short and takes a deep, calming breath. "Skorry, skorry. Wait." He laughs. It's a hollow sound with a manic edge. "Wait, no, 21st century. Sorry, sorry. It's been years this week."

"What was that blue thing?" Tyler asks.

Zane appears frazzled. His brown hair is sticking up in clumps, his black shirt is faded and his jeans are torn. He looks like he hasn't slept in six months.

"Can't say," Zane responds. "Still your future."

He spins the disk again, turns to peer out the door's glass pane and gives another hollow laugh. "Look at me," he mutters. He's not talking to Tyler anymore. "Stays straight in line. Follows the rules. See me now. Never thought, never thought..."

"Thought what?" Tyler asks.

Shaking himself from his trance, Zane turns back around. "The thing's keyed onto you," he says. "Which means any tick now, the Timewise Agency will come slipping in."

"Timewise?"

Zane graces him with a crooked smile that looks out of place on his gaunt features. "Haven't heard of it yet? That's good." He taps the black disk, once, twice, a third time. "Still, if Timewise shows, everything gets shot hellside. The thing's keyed you as a target and it's going at you hard."

"What was it trying to do?"

"Laser flash," Zane says, staring out the glass pane. "It was trying to kill you."

"What? Trying to kill me? Why would it want to kill me?"

That draws Zane's full attention. "They're kind of indiscriminate, Ty. But that don't matter. Just shut it and listen. Few ticks here and the hellside breaks lose. I've got a pulse." He shows Tyler the disk in his hand. "It shorts out all things electronic. What I need you to do is pull the fire alarm and get out quick as possible."

"What happens to you?" Tyler asks, voice shaking. The pervasive cold settles back in his stomach. Zane's face twists until all Tyler can see are eyes, big and black.

"Crissakes, Ty." Zane cuffs him in the back of his head. "I need your focus. When I tell you, pull the fire alarm and run. I get out. You get out. Everyone wins. Just don't go telling anyone about this. You can't. Not your friends, not your family and not even me. We can't have you mucking everything up."

"But..." Tyler protests.

"You still talk too much," Zane says, almost fondly. He's wearing a strange, crooked grin. "I'm gonna stay straight with you, always am. Things are going to turn out all right. I'll be seeing you soon." He frowns. "Hopefully not soon for me, but quick enough for you if I'm guessing. Just remember..." He looks strangled for a moment, half choked on his own thought. He forces a swallow. "Just don't tell anybody and don't look back."

Tyler nods. There is a crash out in the hall and in the commotion, Tyler thinks he can hear someone giving orders. But the voice is muffled by the walls, distorted past recognition. The cold eats at the pit of his stomach. His head throbs. The world tilts dangerously on its axis, ready to topple him off. There's something in his head screaming that this is *wrong*. That he shouldn't be here. The classroom spins. He stumbles into a desk.

Zane seizes him by the shoulders, dragging him up straight, high enough to meet his eyes. "You hear me, Ty? Don't tell anyone and don't look back!"

"I hear you," Tyler croaks.

"Good," Zane says. "Let's get to it."

Zane crouches next to the door, one hand poised on the doorknob, the other clutching the disk. "Ready?"

Tyler nods. He's lying.

"Down goes nothing," Zane mutters. He flings the door open and sends the disk skittering into the hallway. "Go!" Zane hisses.

Tyler scrambles out the door, not even glancing down the hall where the unearthly blue creature had stood only minutes before. There's a tinny sound, like a million machines dying all at once.

The lights cut out. Screams of shock echo from the various classrooms. Behind Tyler, the door flies open again. Tyler hears Zane Tucker's footsteps padding away. In the distance comes an indistinct clamor of voices.

Tyler stumbles, trips, almost falls. He catches himself in time, groping along the rough brick walls until his fingers latch onto the fire alarm. He pulls the lever and starts running.

Even as he hears the alarm's pulsing whine, even as he sees the student body pouring into the hall, even as he feels the crashing clamor of a thousand voices, he doesn't stop running. He just keeps going until he reaches the exit, nearly flattening a girl with honey blonde hair,

"Ty?" she calls after him, but he hardly hears her. He's already out of the school, into the bright sun of the crisp, clear fall day.

He doesn't even think to look back.



## PART ONE

*(Future)*

"State your name for the record."

The room is white, almost blindingly so. The solid wooden table in the center is the only real splash of color. On either side of the table stand a pair of chairs. They are metal, straight-backed and too stiff to be comfortable. It is a room generally used for interrogations. Two men sit on opposite sides of the table. More watch, unseen, through one-way glass.

"Come on, Spense," pleads Ty Smith. "Do we really have to do this? You know who I am."

Across from him sits Spense Peabody wearing a navy blue blazer, a white T-shirt, dress slacks and a pair of sneakers. This mix of casual and formal had bothered Ty his first few weeks at Timewise but now he doesn't even notice.

Peabody is clean-cut and clean-shaven. He has neatly parted dark blond hair, pale skin and razor sharp eyes that glitter with intelligence. "Ty," he says haggardly. "It's standard procedure. You know this. You were his partner for two years."

"So we're talking about Zane?" Ty crosses his arms over his chest and tips his chair back onto two legs, balancing precariously. He doesn't fall. He never falls.

"State your name for the record," Spense repeats.

Ty leans forward and the legs of the chair hit the polished tile floor with a satisfying clack. "My name is Tyler Smith. Timewise operative 2007TGS. Scrubbed from my original timeline at thirteen. My mother's name was Joan Bueller, my father was Garrett Smith. Got me a sister called Erica and a pet goldfish named Steve. I used to partner with Zane Tucker. Currently you've stuck me with the mad Anne Gallagher." He glared. "You want me to get my whole life story in order or you going to tell me what happened to Zane Tucker?"

Spense taps his thumb on the folder in front of him. "I'm afraid Zane Tucker's gone AWOL."

"Zane's missing?" Ty repeats, incredulous. Something drops in the pit of his stomach. He thinks he sees a flash of blue behind Spense, lurking just out of reach. "Again? But he just got back. He told me he was getting easy stuff. Routine checks and all that. No way tikkers go grabbing him."

*(Zane's too good to get caught twice)*

Spense coughs. Ty's eyes narrow. It's Peabody's most telling habit. Whenever he needs to say something he doesn't like, he tries to smother it with a coughing fit. "Out with it, Spense. Zane run across tikkers again?"

"It wasn't tikkers," Peabody says. He coughs again. "He's gone rogue."

Ty lets out a harsh laugh. "No way. Guy's an absolute devotee. Loves this place. Not a soul could get Zane to turn like that."

Peabody slides a folder across the table. The fact that now, four hundred years into his future, there are still paper printouts and hard copies amazes Ty. He grabs the folder after a pause, cracking it open.

"He was on an op in 2211 partnering with Val. She said he was acting crooked. Nothing big, just a few nervous ticks. Enough to say he was walking edgebound."

"Due respect," Ty interrupts, "but it was his first real op after being held by tikkers six months. Even folks like you would be edgebound."

"Six months gone," Spense says. "Gets back and first op out, goes AWOL. Next thing he's mucking around in the timelines. What are we supposed to think? He slipped out on Val while she was talking at the new recruit. Since then we've tacked him in 1999, 2388, 2149, dozens of different times. We've got a tack on him, but he's moving fast, staying a step ahead of us."

Flipping through the file, Ty can hardly believe his eyes. "He's changing things?" he asks.

"He could do irreparable damage should this streak go checkless," Spense confirms. "He's got to be stopped." He gives a long sigh and rubs at his eyes. "I want you and Gallagher primary on this. Agency wide, you're the one knows him best."

"Zane once told me the only thing he believes in is Timewise. He's not going to suddenly go breaking every rule."

"But that's just what he's done," Spense says. "You can ask him why once you find him. This is your op, Smith. You're the only one knows him well enough to figure where he'll slip to next. I want Zane Tucker caught."

Ty stares at him. "Due respect, sir, but Zane's my friend."

"It's an order, Smith. You and Gallagher primary, got a few others working it separate. Can get you more in a pinch but we got four hundred years needs covering and not near sufficient manpower. Man's guilty of a level-one timeline infraction. We're not laughing here. I need you to bring him in. We clear, Ty?"

"Yessir, Spense, sir."

"Good," Spense says. "Because Zane Tucker needs to be stopped."

Ty looks down at the folder. Zane Tucker's face stares back out at him, a traitor of the worst kind.

"So what you're saying is you can accept aliens, ghosts and teleportation, but you can't buy time travel?" Ivy Lane's voice contains barely controlled laughter.

Her smile stretches wider than her face.

Across from her, twelve-year-old Tyler Smith scowls, crossing his arms over his chest. They do this sort of thing all the time — sit around and discuss the fantastic. Ivy believes none of it. Tyler, on the other hand, believes every urban legend, every conspiracy theory. That is, everything except time travel. "It just doesn't make any sense."

Ivy snorts. "And aliens do?"

"Look," says Tyler. "There are an infinite amount of stars and planets in this universe. Life could evolve in any one of billions of ways. There's no reason to think ours is the only possibility. But time travel is completely different."

It is Tyler's first day of middle school. The cafeteria is bigger and more chaotic than he expected. His elementary school had been the smallest in the county, but Lewis Baker Secondary School, which houses grades seven to twelve, is the largest in the state.

The size of the school, however, doesn't seem so daunting when he's in the company of a friend.

"How's it different?" Ivy teases, stealing a fry off his plate. "It's all science fiction to me."

"Too many variables," Tyler explains, chewing the thought over a fry of his own. "You've got a person, you've got any one of a billion places he can go, in any one of a billion times. What you don't have is a way to get there. You'd have to break down your entire body and recreate it from scratch. No time machine could cut it. It's the same reason teleportation won't work."

Ivy smirks at him. She's taller than he is, with long, dark red hair, shining green eyes and lily-white skin dotted with brown freckles. Tyler's known her longer than he can remember. The Lane family has lived three houses down from him since he was three years old.

She isn't the girl next door (the woman next door is a ninety-year-old with a fondness for cats) but she is just as good. Better even, because she is his best friend.

"Why can't teleportation work?" Ivy persists. "How do you know scientists haven't already managed to deconstruct the atomic structure of the human body and put it back together?"

Tyler gives her a look. "Since when do you believe this stuff?"

"I don't," Ivy says. "I just like watching you fumble for explanations." She takes a long swig from her milk carton. "Also, I may have watched *The Fly* last night."

Tyler bursts out laughing, not smart while there is food in his mouth. It's a struggle not to spray flecks of half-chewed fries all over the table.

"I'm serious here," Ivy protests, but her eyes are laughing. "I don't see how you can pick and choose the sort of weird stuff you believe in."

"I'm special," Tyler says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Yeah," Ivy agrees. "*Special*. That's what you are."

Tyler throws a fry at her. It hits Ivy in the face, and drops into her lap. She stares at him for a second, shrugs, plucks the fry from her lap, and pops it into her mouth.

"You're disgusting," Tyler says.

She smiles. She has braces. The metal brackets glint in the fluorescent lights. Tyler still thinks she's beautiful. "You love me anyway."

"What's this girl called again?" Ty asks. It's a warm day at Callope University. Most of the students out on the lawn are wearing shorts and tank tops. He even spots a few girls in bikinis, lounging outside their dorms and bemoaning the fact that the nearest beach is three hundred miles away. It's 2172 and Ty's still freezing from the slip through time, but he's starting to get used to it. He's taken to wearing a thick leather jacket during every slip. The extra layer does a lot to retain warmth.

Zane wears the same jeans and T-shirt combination everywhere he goes. *Practical and nearing timeless*, he says. *Blending in is important*.

"Anne Gallagher," Zane says, shoving his hands into his pocket and coming back up with a picture.

Anne is seventeen with dark blonde hair, a disarming smile and sharp green eyes. She's undeniably beautiful, the kind of girl who would turn heads if she ever decided to play up her looks. But at a crowded university, lost in the sea of students, there may be trouble finding her.

"What I don't get," Ty says, passing the photograph back to Zane, "is how a girl thirty years out of her time manages to slip into a major university with no sign of family and funding."

Zane looks at him and smiles. "Catch on fast, Ty. Timewise tacked her down under the alias Erin Miller."

Ty nods as they move toward the student services building. The quickest way to find someone is to follow the paper trail. It always has been. It always will be. "Who's Erin Miller?"

"A genius," Zane replies. "Girl from Gallagher's town. A full ride offered from two different schools. Miss Erin Miller attends both on scholarship."

"A con?" Tyler asks.

"Sure," Zane replies. "If you look at it that way. Figure a girl smart as

Gallagher deserves the ride."

The student services building is pretty standard for a college. It's an old-fashioned redbrick building with big glass windows and a friendly atmosphere.

In fact, from all the different time periods Ty has experienced, colleges seem to be the longest-lasting legacies. Callope University reminds him of schools back in his old time: dormitories, classrooms and thousands of students roaming the grounds. It doesn't really seem to matter if it's 2007 or 2172. Callope has lasted more than two hundred years and may well last two hundred more.

There's a clerk at the desk eyeing them. Zane approaches her with a broad smile. "Ah, pleasure to meet you. Think you could do us a helping?" He doesn't wait for a reply before pressing on. "See me and my brother here, we're hoping to visit our cousin on campus but we neglected to write down the room number. Hoping we could get us a tip."

Ty smiles at the clerk. He's used to this role. Zane and Ty have similar builds, similar coloring and similar smiles. It distracts from the differences in their features. They get taken for brothers almost every time they slip, a good thing. People are automatically more inclined to trust brothers than a pair of mysterious men looking for a girl.

"Acorse," the clerk says, gracing Ty with a smile of her own. "What's her name?"

"Erin," Zane said, "She's called Erin Miller. She's a year one."

The clerk types something into the computer, tapping her long, manicured fingers on the table. "Is this your girl?" She swivels the monitor toward them, and Gallagher's unmistakable face stares back. She's glowering in the picture. Somehow it doesn't surprise Ty in the least.

"That's our girl," Zane whispers. His lopsided smile looks genuine to everyone but Ty, who knows better. "Good old Erin. Where's her place?"

"She's in Lipton," the clerk replies, "opposite side of the quad. You'll have to wait outside if you're looking to surprise her. Skorry, but I can't give you the room number. Can't be letting unauthorized personnel in the residence halls, family or no."

"Thank you, ma'am," Zane says with his charming, disarming smile. "You're a big hand."

He taps a finger on the table and turns back to Ty. The smile drops almost as quickly as it had come. "Let's go."

"That was easy," Ty remarks

Zane lets out a harsh laugh. "Love me this decade."

"The crash isn't for another fifty years," Ty agrees, pushing through the student center's glass doors and into spring air fragrant with blossoms. "People

still trusting people."

In fifty years, everyone will be paranoid. The worst government scandal in more than two hundred years will cause the biggest economic collapse in American history. People will start losing faith in the world, faith in humanity.

Ty doesn't like the 2220s. The 2170s, on the other hand, are different. Idealism soars high, people trust people. And that means Ty Smith and Zane Tucker have a much easier job.

It's Zane who spots Gallagher. He tugs wordlessly on the edge of Ty's jacket, pointing. Gallagher is wearing an old pair of jeans, a raggedy, oversized T-shirt and a dark blue baseball cap. Her dark blonde hair is tied up in a ponytail. Nothing in her appearance suggests she's out of her time.

Ty realizes what she's doing: playing the part of the loner, minimizing her good looks so she doesn't stand out.

(she is going to be so very good at this life)

"Anne!" Zane calls. "Anne Gallagher!"

Her shoulders stiffen, but to her credit she doesn't quicken her pace, doesn't even turn around.

"Erin Miller?" Ty tries.

Her alias in such close succession to her given name gets a rise. She glances over her shoulder, picking Zane and Ty as outsiders from the crowd. She holds Zane's gaze for a fraction of a second and then breaks through the crowd at a full sprint.

Zane curses, setting off after her. Ty gives chase just a split second behind. Anne is surprisingly adept at evasion, weaving through the crowd with an inveterate ease. They're losing her in the mob when she darts into a building.

Ty plows on ahead, following her inside. Zane pours on the speed, darting to the opposite side of the building just in time to cut Anne off before she escapes out the back door.

"Anne Gallagher," Zane says. He is standing in the doorway, blocking it but keeping his body language unthreatening.

Anne, to her credit, doesn't back down even though she must know she is beaten. "Give me one reason," she says, barely even out of breath, "that I shouldn't start screaming right now."

"We're here to help you," Ty replies. "Look, we need half a chance to explain."

"Two guys upturn at a campus, looking to tack down a girl," Anne says. "Help? Should be calling the police. Need me one reason why I shouldn't."

"Because we know you've slipped through time," Zane says, and the look on Anne's face tells Ty they've got her.

"Saying we find him, what are they going to do to him?" Annie asks Ty, kicking a disregarded soda can across the pavement of 2033. She's wearing her usual — a baggy white T-shirt, dark blue jeans and a black baseball cap that shades her face.

They're in the suburbs walking hand in hand because they can't quite pass for siblings like Zane and Ty used to, and they need the cover. There are other couples on the street, young and old alike. The sun hangs high in the sky and the air mixes the crispness of fall with the lingering heat from summer. It's rained recently. Ty can smell the musty scent of leaf mold underneath the crisp air. Zane Tucker was here. Or is here. Or will be here soon. Ty doesn't know which.

Annie's still talking. Her voice is so low, Ty has to dip his head to hear it. An older couple with graying hair smiles at them. "I mean the guy can just slip off again the tick we turn backside."

"Got to catch him first," Ty mutters into her hair.

And that is the thing, isn't it? Zane Tucker is out there mucking with time and space. If Ty and Annie don't stop him, who knows what will happen.

(Ty knows nothing will be the same but he's a little unclear on why that's such a bad thing)

"Figured me that much," Annie snaps. "I just don't know how it all works. It's hard to tack someone down if they don't even tack down in time."

"They told you why some people can slip through time, right?"

"Sure," Annie says. "Genetic mutation."

Ty can feel the heat of her body every time they brush shoulders, but he is shivering uncontrollably. "They'll take it out. The mutation, I mean. It's a procedure. Actually, more like the Procedure. Fixes the gene. Zane Tucker goes back to being Joe Normal."

"Just like that?" Annie says. "Back to where he comes from? Deserves worse."

*Deserves better*, Ty thinks. He's still having a hard time picturing Zane as a villain. After how many times the guy saved his ass when they were partners, Ty still thinks he's a hero.

"Not just the Procedure," he continues. "They'll keep him locked up more than a few ticks. And then they'll put him in the present, not pastside. Can't head where he came from because of future knowledge and you know, because he's been scrubbed..."

Annie nods, turning away from him to survey the scene with her sharp critical eyes. Ty wants to add the rest of it, that Zane Tucker is his friend and the Procedure is only successful on forty percent of the patients. The other sixty

percent stumble through life barely aware of their surroundings, missing a huge piece of themselves. He wants to tell her about all the fatalities. Sometimes he isn't sure he will turn in Zane when he finds him. More than anything, Ty just wants answers.

The sky is blue. The billowy, white clouds are piled high. Ty can hear birds singing and Zane Tucker is nowhere in sight.

(he can't find anything wrong with the scene except for Annie on his arm)

Tugging him down to her level in what must look like an intimate gesture, Annie hisses in his ear, "I don't think Tucker's here."

"No," Ty says, glancing around the serene street with hidden satisfaction. "No, I don't believe he is."

The first time he sets foot in Timewise, Tyler Smith's only thought is how cold it is. A woman named Val Teasley escorts him through the foreign halls of the Timewise Agency. She's the closet thing Timewise has to a PR person. She has a warm smile, a soft voice and a comforting demeanor. She is probably fifteen years older than Tyler with smooth ebony skin, high cheekbones, and almost black eyes. She talks as they walk through the agency and into the academy. Tyler hardly hears a word.

The entire place seems vaguely surreal. The operatives jabber away about temporal theory, paradoxes and tikkers. They pass a white room in time to see a man appear from thin air. Everything is fantastic and wonderful but all Tyler can think is that he's never been this cold in his life.

Val turns to look at him. "Holding fast, Ty?"

Tyler is starting to regret he'd ever agreed to come, ever agreed to leave his family in favor of time travel and the unknown. "What are they going to do when I'm gone?" he croaks. "My family. They'll be looking for me."

Val shakes her head and puts an arm around his shoulders. "Spense talked at you about scrubbing, right?" she said. "Tyler, there's nothing to worry on. They won't even know you're gone. You're being erased. Scrubbed clean from your original place in time. It's precautionary. You can't go back home because you can't afford to change any of it. Got enough problems with tikkers without adding mucked-up agents to the fray."

Tyler shivers and thinks of Ivy. Thinks of his mom, Erica and school and... he's missed everything. He's missed graduation, college and getting a job. He's missed Erica's wedding, mom's funeral...

"Are you cold?" Val asks.

Tyler nods. "Freezing."



"It's like that at the start," Val says. "Happens around temporal disturbances and paradoxes. Anytime you slip, it'll be happening. You'll normalize to it. Promise."

(Tyler doesn't want to get used to it)

She stops walking when they reach a solid gray door, and he does too. The numbers emblazoned on the front read 982.

"Here are we," Val says. "Home for now. You'll be living in the blocs for as long as you're here. You'll be sharing until you enter fieldwork. Let's see, you're with Jones Longwood. 2228. You'll be in the same boat, at least. Both fresh students."

Tyler looks at her.

"Go ahead then," she urges, pushing him toward the door. "Room's set to your handprint. No need for keys. You'll be fine. My heart crosswise."

Tyler places his hand on the doorknob. He feels a click as the lock slides back. With one last glance at Val, he steps inside and let the door swing shut behind him.

The room is sterile. There are two identical twin beds pressed up against opposite walls, two night stands, two desks and two lamps. The bed on the right is occupied by a guy about Tyler's age. When the guy sees he has company, he stands up.

His legs and arms unfurl slowly. Tyler finds himself looking skyward to meet his gaze. Jones Longwood is tall, dark skinned and stick thin. Tyler almost seems to shrink in comparison. Longwood sizes him up.

"Jones Longwood?" Tyler says.

"The hell's asking?"

"Tyler," he stammers. "Tyler Smith."

"Did they snatch you too?" Longwood asks. "Or are you one of *them*?"

They're only two days into classes at the Timewise Academy when someone first asks about time travel's infamous grandfather clause. The professor gets a haggard look on his face like he's heard this question too many times.

"What happens saying you kill your own grandfather?" a skinny dark haired girl from 2021 asks from the first row.

The professor sighs, takes off his glasses and polishes them on his shirt. Ty sits up a little straighter in his seat. Jones Longwood yawns and pulls his head up from his folded arms.

"Why are you looking to kill your own grandfather?" the professor asks.

"Maybe the op's feeling suicidal," says the girl with a scowl. "Professor, it's a hypothetical."

"I understand," the professor replies. "There's no need to get testy. The grandfather clause is one of the classic conundrums of time travel. Say you go back in time and kill your own grandfather. You won't exist. But how could you go back in time to kill your own grandfather?" He circles around his desk to sit on the edge. "Contrary to popular belief, no one at Timewise has ever succeeded in killing his own grandfather. Only one operative has ever attempted as such. But I have personally met that fellow's grandfather and allow me to assure you the man probably would have deserved his untimely death."

Almost all awake now, the class members let out a collective snort of laughter. The professor beams at them. He is a tall, bulky man with the stature of an offensive lineman. His hair is completely gray but he still has all of it. He is wearing jeans that have seen better days and a black sweater with a blue stripe down its middle that does nothing to slim his physique. He has round cheeks, a ruddy complexion and glasses perched on the edge of a hooked nose. His eyes are bluer than any Tyler had ever seen in his home time. From his clothes and dialect, Tyler judges him to be from the 1980s.

"Though we've had no one kill their own grandfather, we have had incidents involving relatives or parents who've died. The result is an inherent paradox. The universe cleanses itself by removing the problem. The grandfather dies because he gets killed. The grandson dies because he was never born. Things stay that way because time can't do a thing to fix it. So the time heals funny, scabs over and makes a scar. Moreover, you'll wind up with tikkers infesting the place. Just —" He coughs and places his glasses delicately back on the bridge of his nose. "—do us all a favor and don't kill your grandfather. The paperwork alone is hell."

The girl in the front of the class pauses for a whole minute to digest this before her hand is in the air again, waving back and forth, bidding for attention despite the fact that there is no competition.

"Yes, Miss Lemond?"

"What happens if you step on a butterfly?" she asks.

The professor rolls his eyes and only barely suppresses a groan of irritation. "Miss Lemond, nothing happens should you step on a butterfly. One butterfly in the scheme of the universe isn't essential. It's not going to change. . ."

"But I read—"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, another Bradbury fan. Trust me. You're not going to go changing the world should you step on a butterfly in 1985. You knowing how many butterflies exist in the world? Well over enough. And if you're that worried

about it, you can save yourself some trouble and don't step on any butterflies." He coughs. "Timewise law states you cannot interfere with the natural course of events. But really, what's a butterfly in the scheme of four hundred years?"

The second time Tyler Smith meets Zane Tucker is six weeks before Timewise picks him up and two days before the first time he knowingly slips into the past. He won't make the connection between this meeting and the first for a long time. It's only his second day of eighth grade and he has no idea where half of his classes are. Ivy is sick, and both Sydney King and Bryce Benson have started trekking their way to the music department in search of their first orchestra class of the year. Tyler is left alone, late for his photography class with no real knowledge of how to get there.

Once the late bell rings, there's really no use in hurrying. Twenty seconds late or ten minutes really doesn't make a difference (he believes that a lot longer than he should). It's only when walking down the deserted hallway among the swirls of paper that he realizes he's not alone. The kid is moving briskly down the hallway, head swiveling from side to side with a crisp awareness that is completely foreign to most high school students.

He is older than Tyler, sixteen or seventeen, if he has to guess, and has ten extra inches to show for it. One of the upperclassmen. A junior probably, or maybe one of the younger seniors. Lewis Baker Secondary School house grades seven through twelve. While it's rare to see high school kids wandering the hall during middle school passing time, it's not unheard of.

As far as looks go, he is entirely forgettable (they have that much at least in common). He has close-cropped brown hair, brown eyes and tan skin — undoubtedly the product of summer spent at the pool. He is wearing jeans that are old and faded but not ripped. His shirt is solid black save the words *The Cadavers* scrawled across the chest. Tyler assumes it's the name of a band. The guy's got his hands shoved in his pockets, but he's not wearing a backpack. He's obviously looking for someone or something.

"You new?" Tyler asks. When he gets an unfriendly stare, he regrets his impulse. "I mean, I know it's a big school, but I figured since I didn't recognize you and you looked kind of lost—"

"You talk too much," the guy says, but at least he's smiling now. "I'm no student. Performing a routine maintenance check."

"Check for what?" Ty asks.

The guy heaves a sigh and glances up and down the hall. No one is watching. He pulls a black leather wallet out of his pocket and flashes a badge. Tyler has

just enough time to read the name *Kevin Jones*. "Look, I know people look at me and think I'm a kid, but I'm here on official business and this thing's well over a civilian clearance. It's jus' a routine check."

"Routine check for *what*?" Tyler repeats, unwilling to let it go.

In the distance, there is a loud crash followed by a shrill scream. Tyler feels something sweep over him. He can see his breath hanging in the air. A prickle of gooseflesh snakes its way up his arms. Jones swears. "Routine check for *that*."

Before Tyler can say another word, Jones is off and running. Tyler stares after him for long moments and then takes off after him. Jones has longer legs than Tyler, stretching his way farther and farther ahead. It occurs to Tyler that he's running toward danger when he should be heading in the opposite direction, but the thought doesn't even slow him down. He has to know what this is about. Has to know what's got Jones spooked, what caused the scream in the distance.

Jones rounds a corner, heading toward the music wing. The discordant sound of the brass section tuning seeps through the walls. Tyler takes the corner without slowing down, but he nearly plows into the security officer.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Mr. Cleaver snags Tyler roughly by the shoulder. "Answer me, son!"

"Late for class," Tyler grunts.

Past Cleaver's right ear, Tyler can see Kevin Jones stop at the front door and look back. He mouths *sorry* and disappears into the light from outside. Something in the pit of Tyler's stomach flips over and freezes like he's just swallowed a vat of liquid nitrogen. The scene swims in front of his eyes. The sunlight seeping in from the edge of the doorframe lingers in his vision. Suddenly, Cleaver's hand on his shoulders is the only thing grounding him to reality. Tyler realizes he's still talking, babbling about being in middle school and finding classes, but the words seem to distort in his mouth, warping so badly that he can hardly hear them, much less comprehend them.

"Get on with it then," Cleaver snaps. "Get to class."

"Yessir," Tyler slurs, only dimly aware he's getting off easy. Cleaver lets go of his arm and he stumbles forward, feet working on their own accord.

"Don't run!" Cleaver yells after him.

Tyler forces himself to slow down and put one foot in front of the other as he moves unsteadily down the hall. Two minutes later, his photography class greets him with the smell of stop bath and developer. The acrid stench hits him hard enough to send spots into his vision.

"Mr. Smith?" the teacher says, consulting the role for his name. There is a note of worry in her voice. "Mr. Smith? Are you feeling all right?"

*Something's wrong*, he tries to say, but his mouth isn't working. He feels like

someone has reached icy cold hands into his stomach and started pulling at him from all sides. *Something's wrong something's wrong something's wrong.*

He thinks of Kevin Jones running toward the crash, he thinks of Zane Tucker sitting in a prison cell, he thinks of the freezing thing inside him that threatens to tear him apart.

Routine check for that.

The fire alarm sounds.

"It can't be that hard to find this guy," Annie Gallagher complains, glancing around the campus. "We're mucking around in time that already happened."

Ty adjusts the folds of his jacket. It's 2172 and they've got a tack on Zane in a place called Callope University. "No, it hasn't. It's all happening right now."

"Right," Annie sneers, "but by Timewise standards, this is past."

"Doesn't work exactly that way," Ty says. "The present and the past run more or less parallel. Zane's grounded in the future so his actions, though synched pastside, are also happening at a set time in the future. Something to do with how a week pastside is the same as a week in the present."

Annie wrinkles her nose and gives him a look. "You're talking from your ass."

"Look," Ty says. "It doesn't matter whyfore. It just matters that we find the guy."

"We should split," Annie says. "Cover more ground. Besides, I know this campus backside front. Tucker picked a bad place this time around. Callope University attendee, I was."

Ty is sure Zane has his reasons for choosing this destination. He's always been sure Zane has reasons for everything he's done. Tyler just doesn't know the endgame.

Annie disappears into the crowd. She has a knack for it; a knack for deception, a knack for lies. She's perfect for a field agent and incredibly adept for a rookie.

Ty glances around the crowd, the endless sea of faces, all of them new, all of them unfamiliar, but still a constant. No matter what time he is in, there are always people, there is always a crowd.

Then, to his immense surprise, he spots Zane Tucker. He's standing just outside of an academic building, arms crossed over his chest, surveying the students.

"Zane!" he calls, jogging over to him. "Zane!"

Zane's chin jerks up, eyes narrowing, and Ty knows something's wrong the second he sees his face. This is Zane, sure, but it's not the same Zane who'd

betrayed Timewise, humanity and Tyler.

"Ty?" Zane asks hesitantly, and Ty can read the same confusion in his eyes. "The hell you doing here?" He fingers the stunner holstered at his side. "You're aged too far to be my Ty."

"I'm looking for you!" Ty cries. There's an odd sort of prickle on the back of his neck. If Zane is here, that means Ty is here too, or at least the Ty of two years ago. The novice out on one of his first slips.

"The hell am I doing crosswise timelines like that?" Zane asks, but then his eyebrows furrow and he adds, "Wait, no. Don't want to hear it."

"Paradoxes," Ty agrees. "Where's the other me?"

"Giving Gallagher the mission statement, I appose."

"Gallagher's here too?" Ty says. Panic seizes his gut and starts to squeeze. There is nothing but adrenaline in his veins. "Right now?"

"Acorse," Zane says. "Just picked her up."

The color drains from Ty's face as he realizes what Zane's (the future Zane Tucker, not this one who is still his friend) plan is.

The same matter cannot exist in the same place at the same time. It's a physical impossibility. They cancel each other out. If past Ty and present Ty bump into each other, both will cease to exist.

There are two Zane Tuckers here. Two Tyler Smiths. Two Anne Gallaghers. "I need to get out of here," Ty says. "I need to grab Annie and slip on out of here."

"Hold," Zane says. "I'm here, you're here, and Gallagher's here? Has all of Timewise gone hellside?"

"Can't say," Ty says. "You know I can't say."

Zane nods, accepting his statement at face value and something inside Ty withers up and dies. This is the Zane Tucker he knows, the Zane Tucker who's devoted to the agency, the one who would never dream of stepping on a butterfly much less going rogue.

(what changed?)

"Get out," Zane says. "I'll make sure you don't go running the way of my Ty. Hope you can go steering your Gallagher and me of the future elsewhere."

"Acorse," Ty says and he's backing away because meeting yourself can be catastrophic even if there is no physical contact. Mention something too specific and entire timelines unravel to weave themselves into new patterns. He might wake up tomorrow a whole new person.

When Anne spots him, she jogs over to meet him in the middle of the quad. It's between classes and the students are starting to flood out of classrooms and into the fresh air.

"Got nada and nothing," Annie says. "You got luck?"

"I saw Zane," Tyler croaks.

"The hell you standing here for?" Annie says. "Let's go get him."

"He's with me," Ty says. "Another me. Another you. Don't you understand Annie? We're all here. We've been here before."

"Still is Tucker," Annie says, rolling up her sleeves. "Say we pick him up."

"We can't do that!" Ty's moving in the opposite direction of Zane. "We're pastside and today already happened! We muck with it and we won't even be here anymore. We'll be somewhere else, sometime else, hell, someone else. You don't understand how bad this is."

"Smith," Annie challenges.

Ty grabs her by the shoulder. "Back to Timewise," he says. "Gotta slip now. Zane's smart; he's not going to linger places with more than one of him. Timewise'll have the tack on him."

Annie sighs, a concession. She fades from view to leave Ty standing alone. He glances back at Zane Tucker and sees himself instead. He closes his eyes and surrenders to the cold.

"Time," the professor drones from the front of the class, "is linear. No matter what anyone tells you, time's progression goes sequentially. There are no loops, no turns, no preordained paradoxes, nothing. Time is and always has been linear. Certain select people, people like us, are not linear. Our lives deviate significantly from time's straight path, slipping back and forth."

Tyler sits slumped in the back of class. Jones Longwood is behind him. Despite the futuristic setting, the Academy is depressingly similar to the schools of his own time. It has the same set of boring professors, the same uncomfortable desks and the same lethargic clocks.

"The ability to slip through time comes from the mutation of a gene on the fourth chromosome. There is no conclusive evidence as to why this mutation occurs or the mechanisms that make it work. Timewise scientists have been investigating the gene long as Timewise has existed. Though some have speculated that the mutation in the gene was spurred by tikker involvement but nothing and nada has been confirmed."

"They did it to us," Jones Longwood hisses behind Ty. "Timewise stole us from our houses and changed us 'gainst our willing."

"It's Tickers that pose the greatest threat to temporal stability and it's Tickers that. . ."

"Shitful" Longwood mutters, "It's all shitful."

(later, much later, Ty will start seeing things Longwood's way)

A hush always surrounds Run Richards. It's no fault of his own. He is a Timewise operative, a good one at that. Originally from the turn of the 22nd century, Run is one of the few people Ty classifies as a genuinely good person. He has dark hair, freckled cheeks and an easy smile.

Ty hates looking at him.

A knot forms in his stomach every time he glances Run's way and it pulls tighter the longer he stares.

He asks Val Teasley about it one day while he's walking through the offices after class. She flashes Run an uneasy glance, and her big, dark eyes turn downward. "Poor guy," she says, struggling to keep her voice light. "No one knows what to do with him anymore."

"What's wrong with him?" Ty asks.

Run doesn't seem to notice the commotion he causes just by existing. He just goes about his business in his usual easy manner.

But there is something very wrong with him.

"Run Richards is one of Timewise's greatest tragedies," Val says, settling down behind her desk. "Turns your stomach, doesn't it? Not just you otherwise. Not many folk can handle being around him."

"What's wrong with him?" Ty asks again. "It feels like it does around tikkers, only worse."

"Few months pastside, Run Richards was on an op that got jumped by tikkers. Some civilians got caught in the crossfire. His partner found out who one of them was." She casts a mournful look in Run's direction. "His mom. By rights, Run Richards shouldn't exist. No possible way for him to be born."

Despite the twisting of his stomach, Ty can't tear his eyes off the man. Run is alone at his desk. The other agents seem to edge away from him, forming around him in a ring. Ty realizes it's not that Run doesn't *notice*, but that he doesn't *care*.

"Then how is he still here? Why doesn't anyone tell him?"

Val shrugs, twirling a lock of dark hair with her index finger. "What are we going to say? 'Sorry, Run, but you never were born? You're a walking paradox that turns my stomach?' Nah, second he fixes it out, he's gone. Won't be the first time it's happened and I don't expect it'll be the last. He's a glitch now, an anomaly in the timeline. The world's rewriting itself, and Run's in its way. That's the thing about people in paradoxes. They're stubborn. They want to stay breathing. The second he fixes it out, that means he's accepted it and the world snaps back to right."

In the distance, Zane Tucker walks up to Run, clapping a hand on his back.



Run grins at him, all too happy to have a human connection. Ty can feel the bile building in his throat just watching the contact.

Val shakes her head. "Never could figure out how Zane does it. Guy must have steel for stomach lining. Run's not the only one either. He adopts them, you know? Zane doesn't talk much, but I think he knows what needs saying."

Zane glances over to Val and Ty, a challenge in his voice when he speaks, "Off for lunch. Join us?"

"That's fine," Val says. "Have fun."

Ty nods his agreement, unable to stomach the thought of eating around the walking paradox that is Run Richards. Run smiles at them as he passes and Ty feels an inexplicable surge of guilt.

"How long?" he croaks when they're gone. "How long does he stay in limbo like that?"

"Don't know," says Val, pulling a pen from the coffee mug on her desk and flipping open a report. "It's happened before, a score. Always different. Seen guys only last ten days. Heard tell of some making it thirty years. Whenever he fixes it out, it's goodbye to Run Richards and hello paperwork."

The world restarts as Run and Zane walk out of the office. There is no mention of paradoxes, but the taboo hangs in the air, so real a presence that Ty can almost reach out and touch it.

Sweat drips down Ty's forehead, dribbling down his cheek toward the ground. He's no good at this, terrible, in fact, not to mention out of shape, but it's been a long time since he felt this normal.

"Ready?" Jones calls. He tosses the basketball to his defender, receiving it back on the bounce. "Let's go then."

The day is dying slowly. There are ten of them: five from Timewise and five from who-cares-when on an unevenly paved basketball court nestled between a factory and some low-rent housing. They've been playing for hours, will be playing for hours more, playing until they can't see the basket anymore.

It's a day off at the Academy, a day off classes and there's nowhere to play basketball at Timewise. But who needs it when you've got four hundred years of pickup games to choose from? According to Jones Longwood, 2219 has got some of the best pickup in the century.

Ty crouches in a defensive stance. The person he's guarding is faster than he is, more experienced. Ty's legs are screaming as he starts his sixth game straight but there's a huge grin on his face and he can't think of anywhere he'd rather be.

They'll be reprimanded for this when they get back. But really what harm can

it do? Five kids from a different time playing pickup with the locals until the sun goes down. What can happen? What can change?

His man crosses over and Ty reflexively makes a swipe for the ball and miraculously makes contact. The ball bounces free. He darts after the ball, fumbling for it with sweaty hands. Jones Longwood has already broken for the opposite hoop, stretching his long legs down the court with astonishing speed. Ty throws the ball up and out. Longwood catches it on the first bounce, leaps up to lay it in.

These people have been dead for two hundred years, Ty thinks with a hint of awe. He's playing basketball with relics of the golden age and the thought doesn't make his skin crawl like it used to.

The locals will be going home tonight, back to normal lives and school and work and Ty will be back at Timewise reading about their lives in lecture. Reading about how they talked, how they dressed. . .

It's good to do this, Ty decides. Good to make them seem human instead of an abstract notion in a textbook. And it's good to play basketball until his body aches, until he gasps for breath and can't think of anything but the ball and the basket and how good it feels to be alive.

It's supposed to be easy. An op in the suburbs of Washington D.C. around 2200. The kid's not even a hard find. He's a senior at the local high school, name of Jackson Knoddings. Jax is a tall, dark-haired orphan who has nothing and no one to stay for. Timewise has tacked onto his accidental slips in four different time periods. Jax has been marked temporally unstable and it's Ty and Zane who draw the assignment to bring him to the Agency.

Zane lets Ty do the talking; Zane always lets Ty do the talking. Zane would rather wander off to check out the scenery, which is what he does. Ty doesn't even realize something's gone wrong until he notices Jax shivering despite the heat.

"What's the matter?" Ty asks.

"Nothing," Jax says. "It shouldn't be this cold in mid-summer."

Now that he mentions it, Ty can feel it too — the cold seeping in out of nowhere like a fog settling in the damp morning air. "I need to be finding Zane," Ty says, the words thick and clumsy on his lips.

"Sure," Jax says, raising an eyebrow.

Ty bolts out the door, suddenly sure something is wrong. But everything is fine. Sure, the sky is cloudy and the sun dim even at high noon, but that's the 23rd century for you. As far as the locals know, the sky has always been clogged

with pollution. There's a slight breeze, but it's nowhere near enough to account for the chill. Everything is fine except for the fact that Zane Tucker is nowhere to be seen.

"Zane!" Ty calls. "C'mon, Tucker, where are you?"

Ty waits an anxious moment. Jax is a step behind him. He doesn't say anything, but Ty can hear him breathing, the only noise in the still air. There are no birds singing, no crickets chirping, nothing.

"Zane!" Ty calls again.

Zane steps out from his perch. He'd been leaning up against a tree, hidden from Ty's view. "Crissakes," Zane grumbles. "What are you on about?"

There's nothing wrong. It's a perfectly ordinary day. Zane's all right.

"Nothing," Ty says.

"Right," Zane says, "We ready to slip back to Timewise?"

"If Jax is good for it," Ty replies, turning back toward the lanky local. He always makes a point to ask if they want to come. Recruits are twice as good if they're willing.

If Jax says no, they'll take him by force. Can't have anyone untrained running around time.

"What do you say Jax?" Ty asks. "Ready for a life of high adventure?"

Jax's eyes widen. He screams something, mouth moving, but Ty can't hear him. The cold's back, flowing through Ty's veins, freezing his blood. Ty fumbles for the stunner at his hips with numb fingers, raising it to fire at the exact moment the tikker seizes Zane by the neck. Zane's eyes go wide in shock as the tikker's blue fingers curl around his jugular and squeeze. Red pools in his cheeks. Terror blooms in his eyes.

Ty's never seen Zane afraid. He's never seen anything but cool professionalism from Zane Tucker. His panic is off-putting in all the worst ways.

Ty's fingers tense on the trigger of the stunner. "Put him down," he orders the tikker. "Put him down right now or I'll start shooting."

It's a bluff, a poor one at that. Even at its highest setting, the stunner isn't going to do much better than knock out a tikker. Ty knows from experience that it hurts like hell, but it's not fatal. Where there's one tikker, there will be another.

One of the tikker's hands curl around Zane's neck. The other is pressed flat to his temple

"Ty," Jax croaks from behind him. "The hell is that?"

"Tyler." Zane forces the words out through partially crushed airways. "Just—"

Ty squeezes the trigger. The tikker disappears in a flash of light, Zane with him. The bolt from the stunner crashes ineffectually into the tree behind them, charring the bark.

"What's he doing?" Annie asks. Spense has walked them through Zane Tucker's last four slips, saying they can catch him on the fifth if they *just move now*. "What's he changing?"

"I don't know," Ty says. He's tired. He hasn't been this tired in a long time. Zane's been running them all across time and Ty still can't figure out *why*. What changed? In the six months he'd been missing, Zane Tucker went from one of the best and most respected Timewise operatives to topping the agency's Most Wanted list.

And that isn't Zane. Ty knows Zane. Zane's loyal, Zane believes in this agency, this place. He loves it because it's the only home he knows.

"What I don't get is the people," Annie says.

There's a whole task force dedicated to finding Zane. They comb newspapers, keep an eye on the past, looking for any sign of Zane Tucker, looking for any changes in the news. Annie and Ty have been interviewing witnesses. Zane has left a trail of them. It's the only way to tell where he's been for sure. The descriptions don't vary.

"Sweet boy," says a curly haired waitress from 1992. *"Came in here right before the fire started. Managed to put it out with his coat. Left before I even got a chance to thank him."*

"Some street kid, I appose," says a market vender in 2312. *"Comes in here, all floppy hair and scruffy jeans and mucks with my stand. Spent me a day fixing it back up. Well enough I appose, considering the market got shot up."*

"Off sort of guy," says a student in 2319. *"Comes in here, tells me stay in tonight. Didn't say whyfore. I listened, acorse. Talk on your omens."*

Zane is saving people. It doesn't take long for Ty to figure that out. Zane's hopping through the timeline and pulling people out of danger. If he hadn't been leaving great big temporal sores in the fabric of the universe, Ty could admire him for it.

"Going to have tikkers in 2319," Annie says. "Another never-ending daylong battle. Thank you, Zane Tucker."

Ty doesn't know what to do. A part of him (it's been there for longer than he cares to remember, whispering sweet betrayal in his ears) just wants to let Zane be. Wants to leave him running, let him change the timeline. A part of him wants to trust Zane, wants to believe he'd never do anything this destructive.

But there's another part of him, screaming about betrayal and revenge, that just wants to make Zane pay.

The first time Tyler Smith meets Zane Tucker, Ty will later realize, is also the last time he meets Zane Tucker.

One minute he's warm in his bed, listening to the pulsing yowl of his alarm clock and the next he's stumbling out of bed expecting warm carpet on his feet but getting the cold surface of a white tile floor. Tyler looks up, blinking. His familiar bedroom with its friendly blue walls has given way to a white sterile room that resembles something out of a mental hospital. It's dark, but the full moon's eerie incandescent light shines through the window, painting a shimmering pattern of shadows on the floor.

Tyler blinks, half sure he's gotten stuck in the distorted reality between dreams and waking, but the illusion holds fast. As his eyes adjust to the relative darkness, he notices the bars on the window and the guy lying on a small white cot, staring at him with hawkish intensity. Tyler takes an involuntary step backwards.

He's not stupid. He knows what sort of places have bars on the window just like he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that he's not in his house anymore, like he knows from his bare feet against the cool white tiles, that this is real. . .

"Where am I?" he manages. "Who are you?"

The guy sits up in bed. There is crispness in his movement, an almost military precision that Tyler finds unnerving and familiar all at the same time.

"Prison cell 67B," he says, gaunt face splitting into a grim smile. "Welcome hellside, kid."

"We're in prison," Tyler stammers. He keeps moving backward until he feels his heel clip up against the wall. He doesn't remember how he got here, doesn't know how he can go from his bedroom to a prison in the blink of an eye.

Yet there's something familiar about this. The guy is shrouded in shadows, sitting in a streak of darkness coming through the window. He has short-cropped dark hair, hollow features and black circles circumventing his brown eyes like bruises. His long, stick-thin limbs fold up awkwardly, bones jutting out at bizarre angles. He looks as much like a skeleton as a person.

"Yessir," the guy says, sounding a little sheepish. "Name's Zane Tucker. You're in my cell. 67B."

"You're a killer, aren't you?" Tyler asks. His breath catches in his throat and sticks there, choking him. His hands are quaking. "That's why they locked you up. Ivy says the criminal mind works in all sorts of twisted ways. The killer tries to gain your trust and the next thing you know, he's shoving a knife in your stomach and slicing out your entrails. I heard—"

"I haven't got a knife," Zane says with quiet, almost detached amusement.

"And I always preferred eyeballs to entrails."

Tyler starts to laugh but the sound has trouble passing through his lips. For all he knows, the statement is not a joke. He forces the laugh out anyway, but it's a strangled, hollow sound.

"Not a killer," Zane says, as if anticipating his question. "Just made enemies of some of the higher-ups. Broke some rules that needed breaking."

"Was it worth it?" Tyler asks before he can stop himself. Sometimes his curiosity gets the better of his common sense.

Zane blinks once, taken aback, but then his face splits into a wide grin and he doesn't look like a prisoner at all. "Most definitely."

"Well then, what did you do?" Tyler asks. The panic's waning but it still hovers like a mist in the room, coating every word, every action. "Don't they let people off if there are extenuating circumstances?"

"Not quite so simplified," Zane says. He pushes himself to a standing position and Tyler can't help but notice how his feet don't make a sound when they hit the floor. "Big on rules, these guys are." There is a sudden maniacal energy to his movements, to his speech, like he's running high on caffeine and low on time. "No matter what they say, you haven't done anything wrong. You'll make the right choices. Don't let them tell you otherwise. You hear me, Ty?" He starts to make a grab for Tyler's shoulder but thinks better of it, hand hovering in the air just out of reach. "It's going to be—"

A loud, insistent knocking sounds on the door. Zane and his prison cell fade from view, giving way to Tyler's bedroom and his mother's voice. "Did you oversleep again, Tyler?"

The clock next to his bed reads 6:50 in glowing red numbers, a full twenty minutes from the time his alarm had gone off.

"Tyler!" his mom yells.

"I'm up!" he hollers back.

"Well, hurry! Your sister needs to drop something off. She's threatening to leave you behind and I'm thinking I might let her."

"I said I'm coming!" Tyler grabs a pair of jeans from the floor and a clean T-shirt from a drawer. "Coming, coming."

He's out the door in two minutes flat. He forgets his English homework, his jacket and his lunch. It's not until he's slumped into his customary math-induced stupor that he wonders how the hell Zane Tucker knew his name.

"Timewise is the present," the professor says, adjusting his sweater as he steps out from behind his podium. "Anything before Timewise is classified past. Right

here, right now is the present. The future does not exist."

Ty feels his eyes glazing over. This is an overarching theme of the Timewise Agency. The past is history. The future doesn't exist. Ty sits in the back of the classroom wondering how much is propaganda and how much is truth.

(about one third of the class had involvements with Timewise before Timewise was involved with them, but no one besides Jones talks about that)

The Timewise Academy class of 2401 had twenty-six students to start, pulled from all over the United States and from across the timeline. Twenty-six people dating from 1972 all the way up to 2399.

Just twenty-five of them now. One is missing, gone without a trace. Jones Longwood picks up on that immediately. The missing student had been a pretty little thing, barely more than a wisp with silky black hair, olive-colored skin and eyes so dark they looked black. Her name is Wendy, or at least it was.

Her name was Wendy and she is gone now.

Jones Longwood whispers theories about what went on that night she disappeared, just starts talking about conspiracies and betrayal until Ty looks over his shoulder wherever he goes.

(no one is ever watching)

*I hear she tried to go futureside, Jones says late one night, his voice invading Ty's ears as Ty tries to drift into sleep. Told Dix she was coming back, told him she jus' wanted to see. She never came back. Nothing and nada futureside. You know what I think it is, Ty? I think in the future's the world's ending. Place where tikkers come from.*

"At first glance," the professor says, "time travel may appear to be limitless, lawless. Like those science-fiction stories some of our students are so very fond of. For starters, writers used to hypothesize that one could spend five, ten, twenty, years pastside and return to the instant they left, able to visit their old house, their old life and find they had aged while the world didn't. However, the interesting anomaly we at Timewise have observed is this: if you are grounded here in Timewise and you spend six weeks pastside, it is physically impossible to return here the day you left. The time spent pastside is always equal to the time lapsed in the present. If it wasn't, nothing and nada would ever get done."

Ty thinks of Ivy Lane growing up; his sister, Erica, graduating and heading to college; his mom with graying hair and creaking bones. He realizes he's missing it all. It's going on right now and four hundred years in the past and he can't go back.

He glances to his side to find Jones Longwood asleep on his desk. Stace Lemond sits in front of the classroom, leaning over her desk, drinking in everything said in lecture. The Professor with his 1980s sweaters and 1990s

glasses is teaching about how to slip through time and why it works.

Ty realizes with a sudden clarity that Timewise is home now. This is where he belongs.

So he leans back, stretching gangly arms, and he nearly hits the girl sitting behind him. She pushes him away, squealing, "Ty."

He turns around and smirks. Then he folds both arms behind his head and leans back in his seat until his head is lying on her desk. He is smiling the whole time.

The first time Tyler slips through time, he doesn't realize what has happened. He is twelve years old and easily panicked — too undersized to have any real chance at defending himself.

And he is freezing.

He opens his eyes to all-consuming darkness. He rolls over, trying to get comfortable, and topples straight out of bed and onto the carpet. Weird considering he usually has enough room to roll over in his own bed.

He lands roughly on the ground, rolling into a glass table. The glass slides off its holder and clatters to the floor, making an uncomfortably loud crash. He remains still until he can verify it didn't shatter. Pushing himself to his feet, he staggers toward the wall and gropes for the light switch.

The light's glow dazzles him, blinds him worse than even the darkness, but slowly, his eye adjust.

The room is not his own. There's a couch with red cushions where his bed should be. If it wasn't so new, it would look just like the couch in the basement. The floor of the room is littered with packing boxes instead of his dirty clothes.

But at the same time, Tyler knows that it is undeniably his room. Same shape, same size, same configuration.

He backs out the door. He doesn't even realize he's moving until he backs into a wall, sending a photograph clattering to the floor. The glass splinters inside the frame, littering the carpet with tiny slivers of broken glass.

Ty looks behind him. The wallpaper is familiar, robin's-egg blue with the faintest hint of white stripes, but it's too new. It's missing the scratches from the stray cat Erica dragged in and the stain from Tyler's ill-timed science project. In a daze, he turns to pick up the picture from the ground.

The couple in the photograph is smiling brightly. The man is handsome, with shaggy brown hair, bronzed skin and blue eyes. The woman is radiant with dark curly hair, thick lashes and a smile so big it threatens to swallow her face. The man has an arm slung around the woman's shoulder. The woman's laughing and



it must have been windy because her hair is flying all over the place.

Tyler traces the man's face, then the woman's. He's never seen this particular picture before, but he knows the people well. They're his parents, before he and Erica were born. Before Dad died. It's a precious slice of the path. He can't look away.

A door creaks open and a voice he hasn't heard since he was three years old says, "What the hell are you doing in my house?"

His father — Garrett Smith — is standing in the doorway with a baseball bat heaved over his shoulder. He's a newlywed by the looks of it, scarcely older than the man in the photograph. His parents must be moving, out of the old apartment into their new house, the house Tyler will grow up in.

"I don't know who you think you are, kid," his father (not Dad yet, still just Garrett Smith) says, "but if this is a joke let me tell you, I'm not laughing."

Tyler feels his eyes widen. "I'm sorry, sir," he says, all too aware of the quaver in his voice. "I have this problem. Sleepwalking, you know. I used to live here."

Garrett's gaze softens. The bat drops down to the ground. Tyler isn't sure what to make of this abrupt change in demeanor especially when the lie is so flimsy. Garrett looks at him strangely. His matter-of-fact voice doesn't match the introspection in his eyes. "Well, it's probably not safe to head back out tonight. Got a phone in the kitchen. One of the few things we actually managed to get in working order. I think the den is mostly unpacked. Tell you what, give your folks a ring, let them know what's happening, then you're welcome to the sofa."

"We're not far," Tyler says. "I can walk. It's no big deal. I'm really sorry."

"Relax," Garrett insists. "It's a mistake. I'm sure stranger things have happened." He yawns. "I can take you home first thing tomorrow. No use in heading out at this hour."

"But," Tyler starts.

"Really," Garrett says, smiling. "It's no problem at all. I'm looking for some sleep tonight and I'm sure you are as well. We'll deal with this in the morning."

Tyler opens his mouth to protest, but thinks better of it. "Thank you very much, sir."

His father yawns. "It's Garrett," he says, "Garrett Smith."

"I'm Zane Tucker," Tyler lies.

"Zane Tucker," Garrett repeats, eyes distant. "That's a good name. I'll see you morningside."

"Yeah," Tyler says, fighting through a fog. "You bet."

Garrett nods and pulls the door to the bedroom closed to leave Tyler standing alone in the hall. He still has the picture clutched in his hands. Tyler tries to think about how long the smiling, trusting Garrett Smith has to live. Four more years?

Five? How long before his daughter comes downstairs to find his broken body sprawled across the living room?

*(shit happens, Zane will tell him someday soon. Shit happens and despite everything, there's nothing we can do to fix it.)*

Tyler's feet lead him downstairs, dodging through empty moving boxes with an ease that surprises him. He's in the kitchen before he realizes he still has the picture. The jagged edge of the broken glass has sliced his palm and now the smiling faces of the newlyweds are distorted by a thin layer of his blood. He sets the photograph down, hands shaking.

He knows he can't stay here. There's a strange icy feeling in the pit of his stomach that tells him nothing good can come from this. He grabs a pad of paper from the refrigerator and a pen from a coffee mug.

He hesitates for a long time and then scrawls, a short note.

*Thanks for everything. I'm sorry.*

He signs it *Zane Tucker* and every letter feels like betrayal. He wants to sign his real name, but something won't let him. His hands are so numb he has trouble holding the pen much less writing down the lie.

He is so very cold. The longer he stays the worse it gets. At the last minute, he grabs the photograph from the table and makes his way toward the foyer.

The door is unlocked. Tyler bites his bottom lip. His father shouldn't be this open, this careless, this trusting. That's how it happens, the door will stay unlocked one night and...

And innocent, naive Garrett Smith will pay with his life.

Tyler takes a deep breath and flees into the fresh air.

Ty and Annie trace Zane Tucker to an abandoned warehouse in 2224. And Ty doesn't realize something is off until it's already too late. Zane should have slipped by now because that's how it goes. Zane sees they're on his tail and he slips back into the living fabric of the past to hide until the next time Timewise tacks him down.

Annie doesn't notice the change in Zane's pattern. She just follows him straight ahead into the warehouse.

The building is old. Ty guesses it was a factory at some point. The lighting is poor, the roof is caving in and it appears abandoned. Ty figures it's one of the few structures too unstable for even the desperate multitudes invading the streets after the governmental collapse of 2223.

Ty trails Annie into the building. He has no choice. Annie's tearing up the rickety stairwell, gaining on Zane with every step. Ty has never been able to stop

her when she's on the warpath like this. Besides, there's not a lot of room to hide once you reach the second deck. Just a rim resembling a balcony that circles the warehouse's open lower level. Zane will have nowhere to go.

(except, of course, the past)

Annie lets out a yelp of frustration that can only mean Zane's slipped again, off to another time that they have to pinpoint before they can follow. But they have more pressing matters. As Ty tops the last stair to the second floor, he notices the ground level is filled with tikkers, about thirty of them hiding in the corners like cockroaches in the shade. He goes mute, stops breathing. Annie follows his gaze and swears softly.

She draws her stunner and fires off four rounds before he can stop her. She connects on two, misses two. But now she's got their attention. Thirty pairs of huge, glossy black eyes swivel up toward the second story. One by one, hands with long spindly fingers unravel and the entire warehouse is filled with the ethereal blue light.

"Down!" Ty screams. Operating on instinct and adrenaline, he reaches for the back of Annie's head, forcing her off to the ground. Blue lightning sizzles above them and crashes into the rotting wood of the roof. The entire place caves in on top of them, showering them with wood shards. The air thickens with dust until it is almost opaque.

"Annie!" Ty hisses.

"Alive," she chokes back through a hacking cough.

As the dust settles, Ty can make out Annie's dirt-caked face. Ty can feel something sticky on his forehead — blood seeping down from a cut on his temple. The single warm streak burns his frigid body.

"The tikkers," Annie says.

Ty crawls to the edge of the platform and peers down. He can see them moving slowly in the dust-laden air, like zombies lurching forward through a fog.

Annie is reaching for her stunner, for her switchblade, ready for a fight. Ty can tell they're outnumbered, overmanned. He knows they don't have a prayer. The flow of blood from the cut on his forehead doesn't show any signs of slowing and there's a bruise forming on Annie's cheek, standing out black against her skin.

"I'll take the ones on the right," Annie says thickly.

She's insane, Ty thinks. Either that or she has one hell of a concussion. "No," he says, panic cutting through the haze of pain. "Timewise."

His limbs are stiff from cold, but he manages to reach out and grasp Annie's wrist, manages to pull them through the icy frost of time until they're both lying,

bleeding, gasping for breath in the blinding white light of Timewise's recovery room.

Ty tries to push himself to his feet. He loses his balance and sits. Propped up against one of the whitewashed walls, he stares at the brown dust outlining the area where his body had just been. Annie rolls onto her back, coughing explosively. Plumes of coarse brown dust billow over her prone form.

Strands of her dusty hair have fallen out of its tie and hang limply on either side of her face. "Zane fucking Tucker," Annie mutters. "That's your old pal Zane Tucker. Good guy, ain't he, Ty?"

"That's not Zane," Ty croaks.

He can get used to the idea of Zane Tucker gone rogue, but he can't believe the same guy he knew would track them through tikkers, trying to get them killed. He can't believe Zane is even capable of that.

"You didn't know Zane before," Ty says. "Now, that's not him. Six months gone and that's just not him anymore. I should have fixed onto it sooner."

"Near died back there," Annie says, pushing herself to her feet. "We've got to get up with this guy. He's gonna cause some damage."

"Yeah," Ty says.

For the first time, he really believes it.

Tyler's at Timewise for seven weeks before he first lays eyes on the contemporary Zane Tucker. The difference between this Zane and the one Tyler had seen that day in the school is shocking.

*Don't tell anyone and don't look back.*

Zane has an almost military-style haircut, a rumpled T-shirt and a pair of jeans that look freshly ironed. He looks younger, skin dotted with the leftovers of adolescent acne. He's talking to a superior officer and Tyler can tell he's uneasy. He's standing too straight, with limbs that are too rigid, and speaking in a voice that is too curt. Tyler ducks into an empty classroom to listen.

"I've heard great things about you," the officer tells Zane. "One of our brightest upcoming field agents. Started solo ops at age fifteen. That's something to be proud of."

"Yessir," Zane says. "Thank you, sir."

The voices drift into the classroom, floating to Tyler's ears. He cups his hand to his ears so he doesn't miss anything.

"Solo op at *fifteen*," the officer repeats.

"Helped alongside by early starts," Zane offers, and Tyler can hear the

embarrassment in his voice.

"Ah, yes," says the officer. "You were scrubbed when? Age eight? Been at Timewise ever since?"

"Yessir."

"You're a fine young man, Tucker," the officer continues. "You would have done pride by your parents."

"Thank you, sir." Zane says tersely. "Means a lot, sir."

"Where you from?" the officers asks. "Everyone's got stories about home."

Tyler peers out from the classroom, he's close enough to read the honest bafflement in Zane's face.

"I'm from Timewise, sir," Zane says.

The professor has an oddly serious look on his face when Ty walks into class one morning late in his first year at Timewise. He is perched on the edge of his desk, running a hand through graying hair. When the class is settled, he takes off his glasses and polishes them on his sweater. He is dressed to match his mood, in black slacks and a dark-gray sweater. Ty can feel the ominous air to the room. Even Jones Longwood is sitting up straighter in his seat. A single word is scrawled across the blackboard in bold white letters: TIKKERS.

The professor waves a hand toward the blackboard. "So, what've you guys heard regarding tikkers?"

A clamor of voices suddenly rises through the classroom's still air. Ty doesn't say anything himself, but he's heard almost all the theories before about what they are and what they want. His roommate, Jones Longwood, collects tikker theories the way some people collect stamps.

One rumor is that tikkers are a product of a splintered timeline, appearing where a Timewise agent had changed something. Another story says they're really a version of humanity, but about a thousand years of evolution and two nuclear wars later. Ty's not sure what he believes.

After a few minutes, the professor raises his hand palm up and the voices trail off one by one. He pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. He's sweating faintly, a tiny drop slipping from his gray hairline and trickling to his cheek. Perspiration is something Ty rarely sees at Timewise. He can't recall the last time he broke a sweat.

"How many of you have seen a tikker?" the professor asks.

One by one, hands start going up. Ty rises his first, then Stace Lemond and Jones Longwood. All in all, fourteen of the twenty-five students (Wendy never does make it back) have a hand in the air.

The professor nods as if he expected the results. "That's about normal for a class. It varies year to year, but it tends to be rounding half. I'll have it known that four more kids like yourselves would have been here with you now if the tikkers hadn't gotten to them before Timewise did."

He pauses for a moment to allow the effect of the statement to take hold. It works. Ty leans forward in his seat, hanging onto every word, every syllable.

"Those of you been around tikkers afore know the symptoms. Same thing ops complain of around scenes of temporal instability, where paradox abounds. Timewise hypothesizes that tikkers are walking paradoxes. They create havoc everywhere they go, spreading temporal destruction behind them and making more work for Timewise.

"Pastside, they were called Temporal Instability Keepers or, on occasion, TIKs, but the lexicon has evolved over time and now they're nearly universally referred to as tikkers. Originally these TIKs were more curiosity than threat, but now, it seems they're The Enemy. Save physical, we don't know anything about these TIKs save they don't much care for human life. Factoring in language incompatibilities they're unreceptive to all forms of human communication.

"Timewise doesn't know what they want or how to deal them. These tikkers were discovered by Harrison Wise a few short years after the agency was established. Chronologically, the first human was lane up in May of 2013, implying the general public has known about tikkers since before Timewise was in being. Contrary to that, our records show definitively that Timewise predated these attacks. Several battles were discovered literally within hours of each other from the perspective of Timewise, and these battles have. . ."

As the professor switches back into lecture mode, Ty starts to phase out. His eyes grow heavy, his head lolls back in his chair and he's pretty sure he's asleep even before Jones Longwood.

It is raining. Ty is freezing. Zane is frantic.

There are tikkers, way too many tikkers, just outside the house. Zane and Ty are holed up along with a family of three that can't just slip away — not that Ty or Zane are in any shape to plunge into the ice.

Ty is barely conscious and slurring his words, thanks to a wooden beam to the head from the collapsing roof. Zane is better off, but only just. He's got a nasty cut on his forehead that's spilling blood all over his face and a broken left wrist bulging awkwardly under his sleeve.

Zane refuses any help the family tries to give him, batting away the lady's hands every time she tries to get a closer look. Ty knows why. The medbay back

at Timewise is top notch. With the depression going strong in 2224, nothing here will provide decent medical care. On the other hand, Ty doubts grinding his teeth through this siege is going to be much fun.

The family they're protecting is typical for the time period, or at least what Ty knows of it. They're all roughly the same shade of brown, with coffee-colored skin and dark hair. Racial identity is all but impossible to discern and Ty thinks he likes it this way. The mother is clinging to her two children like they're all she has left in this world. She keeps reaching for Zane, pointing toward the gash on his forehead, to the bulge of his still swelling wrist and jabbering at high speed in that 2220s slang that Ty never has been able to replicate.

Zane, on the other hand, has the language down pat. The accent that sounds like a mix between Bostonian and Puerto Rican with words going faster than Ty can comprehend, syllables spilling into each other.

"Don't need mending," Zane grumbles, sounding just like a native. "S'good, really, covered square."

"Zane," Ty mumbles. "The tikkers. How many we got?"

"Lots," Zane says.

The lady says something to Zane that Ty doesn't understand. The world spins slowly in his vision. There's an odd sort of buzzing in his ears.

"Can't get out," Zane says to the lady. "Tikkers, hear me talk at you? Rounding ten of them. Not getting out through that."

Ty feels himself slumping down next to the staircase.

"No, no, no, Ty," Zane says, slapping his cheek lightly. "Ty! You don't get to do this. I need you here, Ty, need you to stay with me. No one and nadie getting out if it's just me here."

Zane's face is swimming in front of Ty, skin twisting as if in a kaleidoscope. Ty is intensely aware of the throbbing in his head. It feels like his skull has a heartbeat all its own. There is the coppery taste of blood in his mouth. The pervasive, invasive cold numbs him, making him not care.

"Concussion," he says thickly, stumbling over the ss's, tongue heavy in his mouth. "Zane, I—"

"Get your ass standing," Zane hisses. "If you've got a concussion, leastwise we need your falling asleep on us. You're tikker bait as you are."

Ty tries pushing himself to his feet, but his legs are dead weight; he can't get them to cooperate with his arms. He stumbles on the bottom step, toppling into Zane. Zane catches him with his bad hand, letting out a sharp wail of pain that makes Ty's blood stand still.

The lady is at Zane's side instantly, two tiny children peeking out from between her legs. She's jabbering incessantly in that mind-numbing dialect.

"Get on mending later!" Zane says through clenched teeth. His face is streaked with dirt but Ty can see wet patches where tears mixed in with the grime. He grabs the lady by the shoulder with his good hand. "Listen at me. Take your kids and run quick. Tickers frontside. Rounding back, though, you get chances. No matter what happens don't stop. Read me? Stop and you're lane up for certain."

Tears stream down the woman's face but she nods, stringy black hair swirling wildly around her head. Her arms are wrapped around her children. They're small, reed thin. Ty tries to smile at the smaller one but her eyes go wider and she buries her head in her mother's skirt.

"Listening, you?" Zane growls. "Get out! Buying you as many ticks as possible. Prolly got whole moments if you hurry."

With a single nod, she leans up to kiss Zane on the cheek and then ushers her children toward the back door. Zane turns back to Ty. Slumped against the stairwell, he fights to keep his eyes open.

"Up," Zane growls. He does his best to force Ty into a sitting position, but his best isn't much with his own wrist broken. "Crissakes, Ty. Got to get standing. Sunk if you don't. We need to do them a distraction."

"M'tired, Zane," Ty mumbles. There's a pleasant darkness on the edges of his vision threatening to consume him. "S'cold. Can't move."

"We're always cold, Ty," Zane says, pulling him into a sitting position. "Welcome to Timewise. Now you're lane up if you don't forget the concussion and give me your focus for three ticks."

Ty nods vaguely, head slumping. Zane catches his chin before it hits his chest. "Start talking, Smith. C'mon, what happened afore Timewise? What do you remember from home?"

"Remember," Ty says quietly. "I remember. . . had this girl. you know. Girl next door, except she wasn't. Best friends and all."

"That's good, Ty." Zane says distractedly. "What was she called?"

"Called Ivy," Ty slurs. "Ivy Lane."

"Keep on." Zane says. He roots through Ty's jacket pockets, looking for something. Ty can barely see his face, but he can feel the warmth of his hand, the dampness of his breath, hear the rapid beat of his heart, his irregular breathing.

(it's so cold it burns)

"She was," Ty coughs and tries not to look at the flecks of blood that appear on Zane Tucker's skin, the darker splotches standing out against his ashen skin. "She was pissed with me when I was leaving, but I couldn't, you know? Couldn't tell her because she wouldn't have—"

Zane presses something cold and metal into Ty's hands. Looking Ty in the eyes, he speaks slowly and deliberately. "Hear me now, Smith. Got a stunner in



your hands, got tikkers frontside. Between you and me, we can take them. Real quick. Stun a few to give the family ways out, then back a Timewise where you can enjoy the concussion or just up and die if you want. Just not right here, not right now. I'll not be lane up today."

"Ivy," Ty mumbles.

"She'd want you alive, yeah?" Zane says, wincing as he grabs his own stunner out of his jacket. "She'd want you out of this, scrubbed or not, she'd want you out."

"I'm cold," Ty slurs.

"Stand up," Zane says, hauling him to his feet. "You got your stunner?"

Ty lifts it weakly. The weapon feels like it weighs more than he does. Zane nods approvingly, bringing his own to a firing position. "Take them out," he says. "Don't pause to finish them. We don't have the ticks to spare."

"Zane," Ty slurs. "I'm not sure I'm—"

Zane catches him before his legs give out, hauling Ty back to his feet. "Yes you are, Ty. You're fine. You're going to make it. No one and nadies lane up today. You hear me? We turn the stunners on them. Ten out. Five for each of us. Five shots and a slip and everyone gets out breathing."

Ty nods but he doesn't share Zane's reckless confidence. Zane is smiling now, the shit-eating grin of a kid who's about to do something incredibly stupid and hope to get away with it. "My counting three."

"Sure," Ty slurs. "Counting three."

Zane fingers the doorknob. "Three, two, one." He gives Ty a look. "Down goes nothing, right?"

He flings the door open.

Ty doesn't want to be here. He doesn't want to be back at his old high school (Ivy's here, somewhere close and Ty wants to see her so bad it burns) in the 21st century tailing Zane's haphazard slips. No matter what happens, Zane is always four steps ahead of them, tracking them on a wild goose chase through tikkers, paradoxes and death. It's a good way to disappear.

Zane is still the best in the business.

They get lucky this time. It's only one tikker where it could have been one hundred, but even that rings an alarm in Ty's head. Zane doesn't make mistakes like this.

Something about the entire scene bothers the hell out of Ty. They'd arrived just in time to see Zane knock some hapless local out of the range of a tikker's blast before hightailing it into an empty classroom dragging the kid along beside

him.

But why save the kid? Why step out into danger if there is no need?

"Annie?" he hisses.

She's made quick work of the tikker, but he's come to expect nothing less. That's his Annie Gallagher, efficient and deadly. She'd stunned the creature and whipped out the standard Timewise-issued switchblade to slit the thing's throat. When she looks up, her hands are slick with the visceral yellow fluid that functions as tikker blood. "Yeah, Ty?"

"Did you just see what I did?"

She scowls, wiping the blade on her T-shirt. "I saw that bastard take a hostage. Some idiot local."

"Yeah," Ty says thickly, staring at the blood on her hands. "Acorse." That makes sense. More than the other notion did. "If you circle around outside, we can head him off. Can't walk crosswise. Glass panes in the window; he'll see you if you walk across."

"What if Tucker's slipped already?" Annie asks. "We've got to go in now."

"There's a kid in there," Ty says. "An innocent local who should keep breathing. We go 'round. Head Zane off, catch him clean. Remember, we've got the block." He pats his pocket where the comforting hum informs him of success. "As long as it holds, no one gets in or out of this time."

"The block's experimental!" Annie retorts. "I don't trust it. It's tikker tech. Takes tenfold more energy than we've got to spare. Won't run forever."

"Then we're wasting time," Ty cries in exasperation. A cold has settled in his stomach. Things will go bad soon if they don't act. Annie has to feel it too. "Go!"

With a grudging shake of her head, Annie concedes, moving silently down the hall and out of the school. Ty has about five minutes before she's in position. The entire school is deathly quiet. He shivers, the gooseflesh rising on his skin. He wishes he'd remembered to grab his jacket, even though he knows it's more or less useless in fending off this kind of cold. Still, it gives him the illusion of warmth and anything is better than this, standing here, waiting, freezing with Zane holed up only yards away. He draws his stunner. The gun is heavy in his numb hands. He hasn't been this cold in all the years he's been at Timewise, hasn't been this cold since that day at the school when—

All of a sudden, he knows what day it is.

Knows what's happening at this very second just two rooms over. He should have realized it straight off. The school, the tikker, the boy, Zane, it all *fits* because it's already happened.

*"Someone on high hates me."*

*"You're not supposed to be here!"*

*"Don't tell anyone and don't look back."*

Crissakes, Tyler's *here*. Tyler is the hostage.

And Zane's got an electrical pulse which means that very shortly, any block Timewise manages to put on this place will be shot to hell when the power gets cut.

Even though he's expecting it, it's a shock when the door to the classroom bursts open and a scrawny Tyler Smith, hardly into puberty, tears through the hallway like someone lit a fire under his ass.

Ty freezes, watching the scene. The younger Tyler doesn't look back. The pulse Zane had tossed skids on the linoleum floor before landing at Ty's feet. The device is relatively silent, but the effects are immediate. The overhead lights flicker out. The block in Ty's pocket crackles and sparks, very nearly setting his pants on fire.

And then there's Zane, padding his way down the hallway toward him with his torn jeans, too-long hair and ancient eyes.

Ty keeps hold of his stunner. "Zane Tucker," he calls. "You have been charged with a grade-one timeline infraction. Under authority of the Timewise Agency, I am authorized to take you into custody."

"Step off it, Ty," Zane says. "You're not looking to arrest me."

Where the hell is Annie?

"You broke the law, Zane," Ty says, fighting to keep his teeth from chattering. "You went off grid and started changing time. You know the rules."

"Do you know what day it is?" Zane asks abruptly. His voice is syrupy sweet, almost hypnotic. Something Ty isn't used to hearing from him.

"Course I know what day it is," Ty growls, his finger tensing on the trigger.

"Figured so," Zane says. "Got to remember this one. It's not so long pastside. Judged you age thirteen. September 2007. I knock a kid out of range of tikker fire. Kid would be dead not for me, another unsolved murder mucking up the time stream. Lucky I stepped in and mucked with your precious rules."

"You have no idea what kind of damage you're doing." Even as the words pass Ty's lips, he feels like a hypocrite.

"I stand back and that kid's lane up," Zane says.

The fire alarm blares just as Annie appears in the distance.

Zane raises an eyebrow. "I stand back and you die, Tyler."

Chaos erupts in the hallway. A blackout and a fire alarm within a minute of each other are bound to cause panic in even the best-run schools.

Tyler lowers his stunner. "Disappear," he says to Zane. "Get out fast as you can. Don't look back."

"Ty!" Annie screams over the blare of the fire alarm. "What's on?"

The halls are flooding with students and teachers. Ty sees a flash of red hair. He wants to think it's Ivy.

(it's not)

"You were a sweet kid, Tyler," Zane says and all of a sudden he isn't there anymore.

But Annie is, staring at him through the masses, her pale-blue eyes gleaming in the dim light. He pushes his way toward her.

"C'mon," Ty grunts above the whine of the alarms. "We lost him. Let's get back to Timewise."

The Timewise Academy has no graduation ceremony, no formal end of training, just a summons with his name on it tacked onto the door when Ty gets back from class one day.

He reaches for the piece of paper with shaking hands and pulls it down. The paper is thick and creamy. The ink is black. It is written in a heavy hand.

*You have been declared ready for Field Operations. Your new bunk is 503B. See Zane Tucker for your next assignment. — S. Peabody*

Ty rereads the note twice before reaching for the doorknob. The door unlocks with a click and he pushes his way inside. Jones Longwood is already there. Ty holds up the summons. "You seeing this?"

Jones is carrying an armful of clothes. Ty realizes that he's cleaning out his dresser. "You too, huh?" Jones says. "Put me in scrubbing. You?"

"Field operations," Ty says. There's an odd thickness in his voice and he doesn't know where it comes from. "Report to Zane Tucker for my next assignment."

Dumping his armful of clothes onto his unmade bed, Jones straightens up. Ty's as tall as Jones. He remembers when Jones had towered over him as a father towers over his son. They were even now, eye to eye.

"Zane Tucker, huh?" Jones says. "Hear the guy's off. Damn near mute half the time. Doesn't play well with others."

Ty feels his lips lift into a smile. He knows paranoid ramblings when he hears them. Half of the stuff Jones comes up with is nowhere near truth.

(the other half is fact and that's what worries him)

"And I hear scrubbing is where they send all the conspiracy theorists and the nut jobs," Ty shoots back. "Suits you."

"Nut job, Ty? What's that then? Obsolete 20th century talk?"

"Means you're insane," Ty tells him with a smile. "If the agency threw you in scrubbing, they know you're insane. Probably think it'll make you trust them."

"You know myself, Ty," Jones says, returning the smile. "I still don't trust them. Hellside, I barely trust you and I lived with you for what is it now? Two years?"

"Nearing three," Ty says. "Slipping gets you a bit off the standard. Knew you were a crazy bastard from the start, Longwood. You grew on me."

"Look at you talking," Jones says. "Grew on yourself. About a foot if I've got my sizes right." He punches Ty in the arm. "Take care of yourself, yeah?"

"Sure," Ty says. "And the first conspiracy you turn over, come find me."

Jones grins devilishly and starts shoving clothes into a duffle bag. "You know Timewise, Ty. Bound to be some much here otherwise it wouldn't have lasted this long."

Ty shakes his head. Even when everything changes, nothing does. He starts to pack his meager belongings. Some jeans, white T-shirts, black T-shirts, a black leather jacket. He leaves the bed unmade.

Jones heads off, swinging his duffle bag over his shoulder and giving him a mock salute. "Have fun tromping pastside."

Ty throws a pair of rolled-up socks at him. "Have fun cleaning up my mess."

The door swings shut after Jones heads out. The room looks oddly empty without its second occupant, as if it were Jones Longwood's presence that made the place come alive. Ty has almost no belongings.

It's strange to think of living alone after years of rooming with Jones Longwood. Operatives have their own space and tend to decorate according to their native time period.

Walking into a Timewise operative's room is like walking into a living slice of the past. Ty is looking forward to making a mark of his own, but at the same time doesn't know how to shape a room. He has almost nothing from the past save a single picture of himself and Ivy that shouldn't exist but does. Val Teasley had delivered it his first Christmas at Timewise — the only thing that escaped his scrubbing.

Ty plucks the picture from his desk. It is in plain black frame with the glass cracked in one corner. He stares at it hard. The picture is fading and Ty wonders why Ivy's hair is duller than he remembers, marvels at how blond his own hair looks. He's baffled by the shade of Ivy's skin and the impish smile on his face. He's fascinated by the way his arm loops over Ivy's shoulder and the way Ivy's arm dangles off his. He doesn't recognize his gap-toothed smile because somewhere along the way he's grown up. He's not that kid anymore.

Blowing out a puff of air, Ty wraps the picture in an old T-shirt and places it at the bottom of his duffel bag. He packs clothes on top of it. Everything fits without much problem. It's a sad commentary on his life that he can compress

his belongings into a tiny battered duffel with room to spare. He shakes off the feeling, grabs the bag and walks briskly out the door.

The picture will remain forgotten in the bottom of that duffel bag for nearly two years.

## PART TWO

*(Past)*

Later, Ty will remember laughter. Huge resounding booms of laughter that swelled to a crescendo in the hall. He will remember laughing until his chest ached and he could taste the salty tears running down his face.

Roughly half the Timewise Academy class of 2401 is sitting together in the middle of the hallway playing a card game that is a blend of strip poker, Truth or Dare? and Go Fish. No one but Stace Lemond seems to remember the rules but by this point it doesn't matter.

Jones puffs out his cheeks in a hilarious impression of the professor. Ty's sitting cross-legged on the carpet down to only his boxers. He folds his hands over his chest in a failing effort to hide his scrawny torso. Stace is grinning brightly, her black hair falling out of its tie and into her face. The twins, two dark-skinned girls with dirty-blond hair, giggle over their cards in a sort of bubbling echo.

Ty doesn't know it then, but things are winding down to the end. In three weeks, they won't be academy students; they'll be field operatives and scrubbers and desk jockeys, fated to live in the real world, to work, to protect the fragile timeline from the threat of tikkers.

But right now, they're kids, a group of teenagers from different points in time. Like any normal kids, they're silly and reckless and pumped full of hormones.

Stace Lemond frowns at her draw. To the wolf whistles of the surrounding guys, she starts to peel her T-shirt off. Ty laughs so hard his chest hurts and his eyes start to water. Jones Longwood collapses onto the floor wearing the biggest smile Ty has ever seen on his face. Stace smirks and tosses her shirt into a growing pile of clothes and while one of the twins draws a card.

Looking back on it, Ty will realize it is the last time Timewise feels like home.

Ty Smith's first proper introduction to Zane Tucker is remarkably underwhelming compared to his previous meetings. Zane has a military-style haircut. He wears faded blue jeans and a slightly baggy black T-shirt. His appearance is safe. Jeans and a solid colored T-shirt are universally accepted attire for the timeframes covered by Timewise. Short haircut aside, nothing sets Zane apart from the crowd. He is Ty's size and more or less the same build. He's got the light-brown skin that is all but universal after 2200. His face is entirely unremarkable. He has sunken, dull-brown eyes, hollow cheekbones and a slightly hooked nose. There's a faint white scar on his left cheek but even that is

nearly invisible.

Zane is eating dinner in the mess hall when Ty catches up with him, shoveling down some type of processed protein without enthusiasm. Ty slides into the seat across the table from him. It takes a full minute for Zane to even notice he's been joined. He gulps down half a glass of water.

"You'd be Tyler Smith then? New recruit?" Zane looks him over, up and down. "Early 21st century by looks."

"Yessir," Ty says.

Zane wrinkles his nose in disgust. "Don't yessir at me. I'm your partner, not your boss, Tyler."

"Actually, it's Ty."

Scooping up another spoonful of protein, Zane nods thoughtfully. "Nice. Short. Works well." He resumes eating as if Ty isn't even there, but after long moments lifts his gaze again. "Look, new partner, I know mystery abounds. Let me save your troubling. Whatever you've heard about me – strange, off, antisocial, borderline sociopath — it's probably true."

Not knowing what else to do, Ty picks up a fork and starts on his own plate of food. Twenty silent minutes later, Zane smiles at him. The difference it makes on his face is amazing, lighting it up so he actually looks his age rather than like a ninety-year-old man.

"You stuck around," Zane says. "Can already tell you'll last a few ticks longer than the last guy."

Ty sees the summons as soon as he wakes up. It's flashing on his mirror when he's brushing his teeth. A paper copy is hanging from his front door.

*Case suspended. Report to S. Peabody immediately.*

He closes his eyes, not sure whether to trust them, but the summons is still there when he opens them again.

*Case suspended.*

Wide awake now, he rips down the paper summons, grabs his jacket, shrugs it on and moves into the hallway before he even changes out of his pajamas. He pads across the hall, bare feet sinking into the carpet.

All the operatives live in close quarters, segregated from the current time period. It's like something out of a military barracks, but at times like this Ty doesn't mind in the slightest. Annie's door is one floor up and three doors down. He makes it there in less than a minute.

"Gallagher!" he cries, pounding on her door. "Crissakes, Gallagher, get out here!"



She appears at the door after a long moment, rubbing at the dark circles under her blue eyes. Her hair is a knotted mess of bedhead. She's wearing white men's boxer shorts with blue pinstripes and a huge T-shirt imprinted with the word TIMEWISE, like some sort of declaration of loyalty. "What's on, Ty?" she asks through a yawn.

"They've suspended the Tucker case." Ty hands her the summons and steps past her into her room. It's a wreck. Clothes are scattered on the floor, and yesterday's dinner is on the table next to a half-filled glass of curdling milk.

Annie leans up against the wall like she's ready to fall asleep where she stands. She touches her hair self-consciously and scowls in his direction. "Don't usually expect company afore the sun's up."

"You hear me talking at you? They're shutting us down!" Ty points toward the summons in her hands.

Annie takes her time reading the summons and hands it back to Ty, eyes averted. She wraps her arms over her chest in an almost defensive position.

"Annie," Ty says slowly, for the first time realizing there is no message on her mirror, no paper on her door. "Where's your summons?"

"I don't have one," Annie says quietly.

The silence is so thick, Ty has problems slicing through it. "Annie," he manages finally.

"Case isn't suspended," she says, raising her eyes to look at him. "You are."

She keeps talking after that, but the sound cuts out until all Ty can hear is the sound of his breathing and the drumbeat of his heart. "You sold me out," he says, cutting her monologue short. "You went to Peabody and you got me tossed."

Annie raises her delicate eyebrows. "Ty, I saw you and Tucker. You had him stuck, right there in front of you. And you let him go. What was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to talk at me!" Ty yells. "You were supposed to trust me! I'm your partner."

"Did you trust Zane Tucker?" Annie asks abruptly.

Indignation flares in Ty's stomach, straightening his back and puffing out his chest. "That's not fair, Anne. It's not the same and you know it."

"But you did trust him," she says with an air of authority, of righteousness. "You trusted him and he stabbed you backside."

"I trusted you too," Ty snarls, "and you just betrayed me."

"I saw a security breach and I stitched it," Annie says, raising on her tiptoes to take herself closer to Ty's height. "How can you argue with that?"

"You got me pulled out my case!" Ty leans closer to her so that they're nose to nose. "Because that's what it was. *My* case. You should have talked at me afore

going ahind my back to Spense."

"Sure then, Ty," Annie bites out, sitting down amidst the pile of laundry on her easy chair. "Enlighten me. Just what were you thinking when you let Zane Tucker slip through our fingertips?"

Ty blinks, taken aback. "It's complicated," he says finally.

Annie stands up, laughing harshly. "Complicated? You mucked it up, Ty. At most, you're still partnering with Tucker. And all you've got is *complicated*?"

"Annie," Ty starts.

"Sounds like Spense wants a see you ASAP." Annie says. "Best be off."

Ty doesn't move, just stands rooted to the spot, staring at her.

(she isn't the person he thought she was and the realization stings a lot more than it should)

"Right there, Ty," Annie says, grabbing him by the shoulders and manhandling him toward the door. "That was the polite way a saying go hellside. Take a clue."

Ty stumbles into the hallway, and Annie slams the door in his face. He has the sinking feeling in his gut that this is the end of something. Of a friendship, of faith. He feels like he's falling, like events are no longer in his control.

He doesn't want to contemplate what will happen when he hits the ground.

The first time Zane Tucker goes missing, Ty devotes his entire life to finding him. He starts volunteering for missions, diving head-on into known tikker territory because maybe Zane's there. But Zane never is. Zane's not anywhere. The tikker made off with him while Ty's guard was down, leaving a gaping hole in Ty's chest where there should be closure.

It would have been easier if the tikker had killed Zane outright. Ty thinks he could have handled that. But without a body, Ty can't let himself give up hope. So he takes the hard missions, the solo ops and sweeps through time looking for any sign of him.

Zane has to be dead, of course. No one has ever survived a tikker onslaught. With Zane's reputation, Ty doubts he'll get any mercy at enemy hands.

(it's just a matter of where and when they will find the body)

He's been working alone these past few weeks, exploring any lead about where Zane might be and coming up empty.

Even though he's been expecting to be assigned a new partner since Zane went missing, it still cuts when it happens.

He's shoveling tasteless bits of something resembling food into his mouth when he hears the clatter of a tray hitting the table and a chair screeching across the polished floors. He looks up to see a girl sitting across from him. He

recognizes her after a moment. "Anne Gallagher? How goes your world?"

She looks the same as the last time he'd seen her, back when he and Zane picked her up at Callope University. Her long, straight blonde hair is tied up in a ponytail that peeks through the back of a baseball cap. Her startling blue eyes are as sharp as knives. She has high cheekbones, rosy cheeks and in another life Ty would call her beautiful.

But beauty is not prized in Timewise. Anonymity is key for an operative. The ideal agent leaves no trace, no memories. It helps if the operative is nondescript. Anne Gallagher has managed it, albeit not with the ease of people like Ty and Zane. She wears no makeup and hides her figure under a baggy black sweatshirt and even baggier jeans.

She goes to work on her own plate of food. Ty watches her eat with a vague sort of fascination. She eats with unabashed enthusiasm, like the tasteless meal is the caliber of prime rib. A smudge of potatoes is on the side of her face. Ty lets his own fork clatter to the table.

"Right then, Gallagher, it's good to see you again. Why aren't you with the academy class?"

"Graduated," Anne says between bites. "Got the transfer orders by way of a diploma."

"Congratulations," Ty says. "Not explaining why you're here."

Anne pauses to wipe the smear of potato from her face. Chewing thoughtfully, she shoves a summons toward him. Ty feels surreal when he reads it, like some other Ty calmly skimming the summons and placing it down on the table.

*You have been declared ready for Field Operations. Your new bunk is 607C. See Ty Smith for your next assignment. – S. Peabody*

The real Ty is trapped inside him, screaming like a three-year-old having a temper tantrum because this is it. This is Timewise's official admission that Zane really is gone, that he's dead. This girl sitting in front of him, she's his replacement. She's Ty's new partner.

And she's green. Just like Ty was when he first partnered with Zane. It's not that she's young — in fact, Ty's pretty sure she's older than him — it's that she's new. She's never been in a battle, she's never seen a tikker, she's never had to slit one of the thing's throats. Part of Ty wants to scream about the unfairness of it all.

The other Ty, the one he lets see the world, forces a smile. Or at very least bares his teeth. He says, "Annie Gallagher, huh?"

"Name's Anne," she grumbles.

The public Ty starts laughing. The private one is silently screaming. "Annie will do just fine."

Tyler is thirteen years old when he walks into his house to find a strange man in his living room. It's just past noon on a balmy Wednesday in September. The students at Lewis Baker Secondary School have the afternoon off because of a malfunctioning fire alarm. His mom is at work. His sister is off at college. The front door is locked when he enters.

In the living room, the TV is on, blaring the highlights to some sporting event even Tyler doesn't care about. His mom doesn't watch sports and Tyler knows for a fact that he'd turned the television off before going to school that day. As quietly as he can, he slides the door to the hallway closet open and grabs his old baseball bat. Heart pounding, he creeps into the living room.

The man stands up from his perch on the arm of the couch. Tyler has never seen him before in his life. At his full height, he looks quite imposing. About six three with broad shoulders, blonde hair and a bland face. He's wearing a navy blazer with sweat pants and sneakers. The incongruities make him more threatening rather than less, as though he might not know how to function in society.

"Tyler Smith," the man recites, examining him critically. "Age thirteen, eighth grade, son of Joan Bueller and Garrett Smith (deceased). Temporal status: unstable."

"Unstable?" Tyler croaks. His fingers are white against the neck of the baseball bat. "I'm unstable? Says the freak who broke into my *house*."

"I apologize for any undue surprise," the man says. "I'm called Spenser Peabody. I'm from Timewise."

*Timewise.*

The name gives Tyler pause because he's heard it before. More than once. From Zane Tucker, who'd saved him from the tikkers. And from the girl who'd pushed him out of the past and back into his own time.

*Timewise.* It's important somehow, like the entire space-time continuum is tied up in a single word.

"Never heard of it," Tyler lies. "Get the hell out of my house."

(in 1997 Garrett Smith dies in a robbery gone bad – his mother always tells Tyler he is his father's son)

"You wouldn't have." Peabody draws an identification badge from his jacket pocket. "We prefer to operate anonymously and local we are not."

Tyler peers at the ID. It's official looking, a sturdy plastic card encased in a leather carrier. A badge clipped to the top reads TIMEWISE AGENCY. The card identifies the man as Spenser Peabody, senior agent. The photograph seems

authentic, but something odd catches his eye.

*Date issued: October 4, 2392*

*Date of Birth: September 19, 2370*

"So," Tyler says slowly, "you're twenty-two and not born yet. Not a very convincing forgery when you keep in mind that's physically impossible."

"Age twenty-nine actually. The picture's a bit outdated." Peabody folds his arms over his chest and leans back against the wall.

"You actually expect me to believe you're from the future?"

"Technically, I'm from the present. You're from pastside." Peabody waves a dismissive hand. "All this is history living."

"Right," Tyler says, raising the bat again. He may be short and scrawny but he can get off a good swing if he needs too. The power's all in the hip rotation. "You're insane and you're trespassing."

"I know you've traveled pastside," Peabody says. "So why shouldn't I be able to travel from the future?"

"Because. . .," Tyler struggles to find the words, ". . .because it hasn't happened yet."

"The present is fixed," Peabody explains. Tyler watches his face for some sign of insanity, some glimmer of madness, but he can't find it. "Timewise is the present. Everything elsewise is history."

"Then why come here?" Tyler spits out, grip tightening on the bat, ready to knock the self-important look off future boy's face. "Why barge into my life, my past? Isn't that just going to screw up your future plans? Leave me alone!"

"Wouldn't be here if it weren't necessity." Peabody runs a hand against the wall, moving toward him. "Like I said prior, you're unstable. Libel to slip off through time whenever you get bored. It's not something you can control at start. Pulled me a kid out World War 1 last week. He could have mucked everything up. You're one of the lucky ones, really. We caught you before things got too messy."

"Messy?" Tyler says, knuckles still white on the baseball bat. "What do you mean by that?"

"Ah, you know. All the standards." Peabody is watching him with detached amusement. "Temporal instability always attracts tikkers. Not to mention the fact that amateurs have the tendency to slip themselves to unfortunate times. Knew a fellow who got his mother killed, wiped himself clean out the timeline. And then there was the guy who accidentally became his own grandfather. I'm looking out for you, Tyler. We can't have any of that happening to you."

Tyler thinks of Garrett Smith smiling through the cracked picture frame. "Say I am one of these unstable people who slips through time," he ventures. "How

the hell are you going to fix it?"

Peabody clears his throat. "Timewise dedicates itself to maintaining the integrity of the timeline. You'll be brought upward, put through school and training. In two or three years, Timewise'll recruit you for some work in the field."

"I already go to school," Tyler says.

Peabody shakes his head. "You don't get it. You can't stay here. Timewise will be your home. Staying here would put your family in danger."

A lump rises in Tyler's throat that threatens to choke him. "So you're saying I just disappear?" he asks, voice cracking. "Leave my mom to flip when I never come home? That's not going to happen! Not after Dad."

"You'll be scrubbed aorse," Peabody says, tugging on the sleeves of his jacket. "Standard procedure. All traces of you cleared out from the timeline. It's the only way to maintain the era's temporal stability. Your family won't miss you, Tyler. I can promise that."

Tyler's not sure if that makes the incredible scenario better or worse. "And what if I tell you to shove it?"

Peabody shrugs, folds his arms. "You'll stay pastside, live your life. Figure out a way to explain the missing time between your slips. But it's not going to stop, Tyler, not unless you learn to control it. Even odds you'll get yourself stuck somewhere pastside. Even if you don't, you'll probably end up knee deep in tikkers and trust me when I say you do not want to run crossing tikkers unprepared."

Tyler wants to deny the logic but he can't.

"Big blue things," Tyler says, vaguely. "Shoots lasers. I've seen one before."

Peabody nods. "Messy business, those things are. I've seen the folks caught crosswise. Not pretty. You stay here and you end up dead sooner than later. If tikkers abound, they won't be stopping with just you. The people you care about, they're in danger long as you're pastside."

"And if I do go with you. . ." Tyler's fingers have loosened their hold on the bat. "What happens to my family? My friends?"

"The timeline should stabilize soon as you're gone. They'll be safe."

Tyler drops the bat. It clatters to the floor, the only noise in the silent house. He heaves a sigh. "Doesn't sound like I've got much of a choice."

"You don't," Peabody confirms. "So are you in?"

If he has to leave, Tyler wants to accept with bravado, smirking as he proclaims, *What the hell, I'm in*. But his voice is missing, and he finds himself consenting with a barely perceptible nod.

Spenser gives him a wide toothy smile. Before Tyler can find his voice to ask

if he can say goodbye to his family, Spense has crossed the room and placed a hand on his shoulders. "Good choice, kid."

The cold seeps in as Tyler's house fades into the past.

The last time Ty talks to Zane before the other operative goes rogue, Ty doesn't notice anything amiss.

(but looking back on it, he should have)

Ty creeps into Zane's room. Walking into a Timewise agent's room is usually the equivalent of taking a slip through time. Ty's room, for example, is nearly identical to the messy one he'd left back in his own time. Zane's is neat, impersonal and sterile. There are no posters on the wall, no relics from another time save the quantum alarm clock on his nightstand. But then Zane had been scrubbed when he was six, hardly old enough to remember his own time, especially after spending twelve years at Timewise.

"Heard you got paired with Val," Ty says.

Zane nods. He seems to be more or less back to normal. The bruises on his cheek, once a sickly green color, have faded to nothing. He's given himself a haircut, not quite as extreme as usual but enough to clear the bangs from his eyes. He is starting to look like Zane again.

"Means I'm stuck with Gallagher," Ty continues. "You got off easy. At least Val's sane."

Ty doesn't mention that it's a demotion. Zane is, or at least was, one of Timewise's highest-ranking field operatives. Working under Val Teasley is as good as being assigned a babysitter. Ty can't even bring himself to muster up some indignation for his friend. After all, he'd seen Zane carted off by a tikker and then there was nothing. Nothing for six months. The uncertainty very nearly drove Ty mad.

"Sane," Zane snorts. "Like anyone in this place is still sane. Personality disorders abounding."

"Personality disorders?" Ty raises an eyebrow. In two years of working with Zane, he's never seen this side of him. Never heard him offer up philosophy, never heard him criticize or question an order.

"You know Spense Peabody steals pens," Zane says. "Every time he makes a slip, he comes back with one new. Lifted off desks, nicked out from storefronts. He thinks no one will miss them. Because what's a pen in the span of four hundred years?"

The gravity in his voice demands Ty's whole attention.

"He keeps them in a box in his room," Zane continues. "Weighs more than ten

pounds. It's not just him otherwise. Jones Longwood's been slipping off to the same time every few weeks. Plays pickup ball with the same group of kids. He's friends with them. And normal, *sane* Val keeps lists of everyone she's ever spoke at. She looks them up. Finds out when and where they die. Last I heard she'd filled up two notebooks. Jack McKennon, the guy they had me stay with first two years here, he hears tell of some mission with tikkers and volunteers. No death wish. Just thinks they're fascinating."

The silence is heavy save for the 2210 rock music coming from four rooms down. Ty is looking at Zane like he's never seen him before and thinks maybe that's true. Maybe this is the first time he's ever really seen Zane Tucker for who he is.

"Why are you telling me this?" Ty asks.

Zane shrugs, looks away and he's the worn-down Zane from the hospital. Not the other one, the one Ty misses more than he ever thought possible. More than he misses even Ivy.

"I dunno whyfore. Maybe because you're close as I got friendwise. Maybe. . ."

Zane's voice trails off.

"You know you don't have to get back in the field if you're not ready," Ty says. "You've barely been back a month. No one will think any less of you if you skirt the slipping for a few more ticks."

"I'm ready," Zane says, but he doesn't sound ready. He sounds tired — a bone-deep exhaustion that engulfs everything else. He looks up and meets Ty's eyes. "Skorry, Ty."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Ty says, confused. "We're friends. You don't have to apologize."

Zane stands up abruptly and it's like he's put on a mask. "Shouldn't have said anything." His voice is clipped and businesslike. "You've got plenty to worry on without me adding to your load."

It feels like an interrogation, as though he's on trial and not Zane Tucker. Ty sits on the cold metal chair in the middle of Timewise's blinding-white interrogation room. He can see the back of Spense Peabody's blond head and his own reflection in the one-way glass. He wishes he were anywhere but here. He hates this room. The walls swallow all colors and sounds until Ty doesn't have the energy to say anything but exactly what Peabody wants to hear.

"State your name for the record," Peabody says.

"Tyler Smith. Am I on trial?" Ty asks. His voice sounds thick even to his own ears. He's drifting, exhausted, like a boat cut from its tether floating aimlessly



downstream in the current. There's an inevitability to this place, like everything that happens here is preordained.

(he has been here before and he will be here again)

"You're not on trial," Peabody says. "We're just looking to sort this out."

"I'm not helping Zane." Ty is already tired of explaining this and he's just started. "I don't know why he snapped and went rogue, and I don't have plans to do likewise."

"It's not that easy," Spense says. "We've got Anne Gallagher swearing up and down you were talking at him and then you let him slip."

"Due respect, sir," Ty says. "He had a pulse. He could have thrown it. No way I was going to stop him leaving."

"You didn't think to use a stunner?" Spense says.

"The pulse would have shorted it out," Ty says slowly. "The stunner wasn't really an option."

"What did he talk at you about?" Peabody asks, jotting something down in his notepad.

"Nothing important," Ty says. "He was justifying, I wasn't listening."

"Do you recall anything specific?" Spense taps his pen against the table.

Ty can remember everything. The disheveled Zane Tucker's sweaty face, the slightly acrid stench that pervaded the school, like antiseptic tinged with body odor. He remembers every last word of their conversation and just how much it all stung.

*Step off it, Ty. You're not looking to arrest me.*

"Nothing," Ty says. "Nothing at all."

He's not looking at Spense, but rather at his own reflection in the one-way glass. Who was watching? Some of the higher-ups, no doubt. Peabody's bosses — his, indirectly. He doesn't think he's ever seen any of them before. Until now, that has never struck him as subversive. It had just been a fact of life.

What is Timewise's agenda? He knows the party line: Stop the tikkers. Maintain the timeline. But is it really that simple, that idealistic?

Why has Ty never asked these questions before now? Now, when he's probably facing expulsion from the agency, about to be convicted of conspiracy to tamper with time. Why not at the Academy with Jones Longwood whispering conspiracy theories in his ear? Or when Spense Peabody came to his house, talking about temporal instability and leaving his family for good? Why not the moment Zane, arguably the agency's most competent and loyal operative, turned his back on all this and went rogue?

It all comes back to Zane Tucker, doesn't it?

Zane Tucker panicked in a classroom with a younger Tyler while the older Ty

tracked him down. Zane Tucker following orders without question. Zane Tucker's eyes wide as the tickler's long, thin fingers curled around his neck. Zane Tucker sitting hollow-eyed in the hospital, staring out the window. Zane Tucker, six months gone.

Something changed in those six months Zane was missing. Either he broke or something else did.

*"Why are you telling me this?"*

"I dunno whyfore. Maybe because you're close as I got friendwise. Maybe. . ."

"According to Gallagher," Spense says, flipping through his notes. "You called the situation with Tucker 'complicated.' The explanation you just tossed my ways doesn't seem complicated in the slightest."

"Are you implying that I was just buying time?" Ty says. "Stalling Annie until I came up with a cover?"

"You talk at me," Spense says, folding his arms over his chest. "Why was what happened with you and Zane complicated?"

"How could it not be?" Ty sputters. "He was my partner. I trusted him and he betrayed me. Betrayed all of us. If Gallagher is any indication, that's not all uncommon in Timewise. I thought we were suppose to be better than this." He takes a deep breath and calms himself. "It's complicated because Tucker's mad and raving. He was justifying and it wasn't working. Slipped before I could get too close."

"And that's it?"

"Yessir, Spense, sir," Ty says, but he's not talking at Spense, but rather at his own reflection in the one-way glass, at the higher-ups working behind the scenes. "That's all there is to it."

This is the first thing Tyler Smith remembers:

He is three years old, toddling down a hallway, the cool plastic of a Lego figure clenched in a chubby fist. The house seems limitless since he figured out how to undo the latch on his crib and can roam around as he pleases. He's wobbling past his parent's room and down the hall with the reckless speed only the very young have when he hears the scream.

It's an utterly raw sound, something ancient and primal. It tears at Tyler, who's never heard anything that real before. He totters backwards on unsteady feet and lands on his bottom, tears welling up in his eyes not because of the pain but because of the scream downstairs. The sound is shrill, continuous, without pause for breath.

Tyler's mother appears behind him, wearing a bathrobe, hair falling out of

pink curlers. She scoops him up in her arms. The Lego figure drops to the ground and the bright yellow head with the painted-on smile bounces off and skids down the stairs. Tyler and his mother follow.

In the living room, his seven-year-old sister Erica's mouth is open wide in a scream. Her delicate features are distorted and her face is red. Her hands are balled into fists. A box of cereal has fallen by her side, spilling whole-wheat flakes onto the polished wood floors.

"Erica," his mom says. Her voice is low and rumbling and it resonates through Tyler. "Erica, what's the matter?"

Erica doesn't turn, doesn't even acknowledge Mom's presence, just keeps screaming that high-pitched, unearthly wail. His mom rounds the corner. Clinging to her bathrobe, Tyler gets the barest flash of the scene before her hand clamps over his eyes. It doesn't matter. The scene is etched in his mind for an eternity.

Garrett Smith is on the floor face down. There is a nasty looking red blotch in the back of what's left of his head. His eyes are open. Erica is still screaming.

Later, much later, Ty will wake up with his sister's scream ringing in his ears and a fist shoved in his mouth to stifle a cry of his own. He'll wonder why terrible things happen. Why his house? Why his dad?

In his darkest moments, he'll even contemplate fixing it.

Ty has the summons clenched in his hands. It appeared on his door that morning, a curt note from Spense Peabody demanding Ty and Zane report for their next assignment. Ty spends three full minutes knocking on Zane's door before Val Teasley appears behind him. "You're not going to find him there today."

"What" Ty asks, fist freezing above the door. "We've got an op to run. Spense told me."

"Spense knows better," Val says. "Today's February 15. Zane's never here February 15."

Ty lets his fist drop to the side. "Where is Zane on February 15?"

Val shrugs. "Don't bother asking anymore. He goes sometime it isn't February 15. That's all I ever got out of him. We mostly just let him be."

"What happened on February 15?"

Val's dark eyes widen. "You don't know? Well, after I think on it, I don't suppose it's something he tells people."

"What does he have to tell?"

"I was there when Zane got picked up," Val says. There's a far-off look in her

eyes, like she's swimming in the memories of long ago. "Not a pretty sketch, let me talk at you. There was a big commotion, tikkers everywhere, buildings falling apart. Right in the middle of it, there's Zane, six years old, slipping in and out of different time periods as one of the tikkers starts moving for him. His parents dead in the next room over, lane up, still crackling with the blue stuff. Zane's as temporally unstable as you can get, face purple because he's barely in one place long enough to take a breath. Was partnering with Spense back then; he took out the tikker while I tried to soothe Zane out. He wouldn't let me touch him."

Ty can't imagine the scene. Can't imagine a six-year-old Zane unable to control his ability. The Zane he knows is mature, competent and for the most part, silent.

"We picked him up then. Wasn't much to do otherwise. A kid that instable, doesn't have elsewhere to go. So we took him, brought him into Timewise, let him slide around the classes in the academy. Zane didn't talk for more than a year. Got better aorse. Almost backside normal. He just, you know, likes to be elsewhere on February 15. Don't expect he's had a February 15 to deal with since he's been here. Day comes up and he just gets gone. He'll be back tomorrow. Don't worry. He's got nowhere else. "

"Do not," Ty tells Annie, "under any circumstances drop your guard. Tikkers are attracted to temporal instability and we're only adding at the problem when we slip pastside."

Annie listens as though she doesn't care. She's been assigned as his partner now that Zane's gone and Ty doesn't quite have the hang of command.

"Ty!" A voice calls from behind him.

He ignores his name, leaning in toward Annie. "You hear me talk at you, Gallagher. You've got the stunner, you can't be afraid to use it. Last we need is. . ."

"I've gone past training, Ty," Annie says. "I'm not going to freeze up the first sign of trouble."

"Ty Smith!" the voice calls again.

Something inside Ty snaps, and all the rage and frustration that has been building – at Annie, at tikkers, at the world – comes spilling out all at once. Ty turns, rage blinding him.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" he roars. "Crissakes, I'm getting ready to pull a slip. You might not think it's dangerous, that it's just a milk run, but it's not. There's a risk every time you slip. Always. Tikkers find you. You drop your care down one

tick and that's when it'll happen. The one time you're not looking it's going—"

He suddenly notices he's yelling at a kid who's maybe thirteen years old. The same age Ty was when Spense Peabody dragged him into this madness. He's a little thing with pale blue eyes, sunken cheeks and a nervous demeanor.

"Crissakes," Ty whispers. "Skorry. I shouldn't have. Sorry."

Get out, he wants to tell the kid. You don't want to be here. You want to be back with your family, back with your friends. Not somewhere you can lose someone in the blink of an eye.

"They found Zane Tucker," the hapless messenger says. "Val told me to get word to you."

Something catches in Ty's throat. "They what?" His voice sounds distorted and unfamiliar, as though it's not really him speaking. "How? When?"

"Stumbled into Timewise on his own power," the messenger says. "Straight into class. Looked to be mucked up something awful. Almost attacked Spense Peabody. Spense 'round lost when they got the ident saying who it was."

"But it's Zane," Ty says. "Zane here and alive? They're sure?"

"Acorse," the boy says. "Wouldn't have sent me it they weren't sure."

(tikkers had him and Ty's never heard of anyone who survived that)

"Ty!" Annie says behind him. "Don't we have sometime to be?"

Ty barely hears her. "Zane's back? Tikkers nabbed him! How in hellside did he get back?"

"He's not saying," the boy replies. "Spense wants you in the medbay. Thinking Zane'll talk if he gets a familiar face."

Ty laughs his first genuine laugh in months. "Zane's never been one for talking."

"Am I the only one recalling we have a job to do?" Annie asks. "C'mon Ty, gotta slip."

"It can wait," Ty says, beginning to move down the hall, toward the medbay.

"Ty Smith!" Annie bellows.

"It can wait!" Ty yells back.

A big balloon of emotion is welling up in Ty's chest and he realizes that it's hope.

(because Zane's back and that means everything will turn out all right)

Ty spends two long weeks undergoing a psych evaluation: hours of testing and endless questions about his decisions and state of mind. There are so many tests that Ty starts to feel like Timewise knows him better than he knows himself,

both inside and out.

And then, on the fifteenth day, Spense calls him into his office. "I wanted to apologize, Ty," he says. "These past few weeks weren't exactly fair to you."

Ty says nothing, just sits in the leather chair of Spense's office, hands folded neatly in his lap. He can feel himself shaking and it takes all his effort to control it.

"I know how much meaning the Tucker case held to you," Spense says.

"Held to me, sir?" Ty asks. He's broken into a sweat. He hasn't had a slip since he was pulled off the case. After being frozen solid for so long, the heat is starting to get to him. "I'm still off the case?"

Spense brushes blond bangs from his eyes. "We've got Gallagher working the case primary. Feel that, due to circumstances abounding in recent times, it would be best for you to work on separate assignments."

Ty's on his feet before he registers the act of standing. His chair topples over behind him, clattering to the floor. "Due respect, sir, but this was my case first. I've been working it primary since we started. I need to find him."

He needs to find Zane not only to finish the job he's so hopelessly messed up but because he needs answers, needs to know why and what changed to make Zane go from loyal agent to Timewise's Most Wanted.

"Despite your differences, Gallagher is an intensely competent agent. Higher-ups in the agency feel comfortable with her heading up the investigation." Spense puts a hand in the air, effectively silencing Ty's protest. "Besides, Zane knows you well as you know him. Gallagher will be an unknown quantity for him. We have a separate assignment for you. A solo operation. So please, Ty, sit down and go light on dramatics."

Sheepishly, Ty grabs the upturned chair and rights it, settling back down across from Spense's desk. "Skorry, sir. It's been a stressful week."

"I can picture so," Spense says. "Rather be shot hellside myself than go the route through psych evals. Rest easy. You're not the only one to have braved the eval. They become more routine as you move through rankings." He slides a file toward Ty. "You've been found sound for service. We'd like to investigate a minor temporal disturbance found on May 15, 2013."

"Investigating a temporal disturbance?" Ty asks skeptically. "That's a milk run. A demotion. Going to get me policing busted time machines next?"

Spense sighs, twirling a pen around in his fingers. "It's not a milk run considering the time. There's a tikker battle three days later. Temporal disturbances that close to a conflict are not lightly considered. Worst case, we're looking ways of a failure of containment. A battle spilling into surrounding days. Results would be cataclysmic to the stability of time itself."

"Never knew there was a battle May 18, 2013," Ty says, eyeing the file.

"It was abandoned," Spense says, placing his pen carefully on his desk. "Timewise opted to abort five-eighteen-oh-one-three needing focus on other more pressing conflicts. Tikkers for the most part have followed. But if there are tikkers abounding in that week, maybe we were wrong to drop the battle."

Ty picks up the file and reads the assignment. His throat feels thick when he sees the place. "I was apposed to go to a Lewis Baker Secondary School pastside. Would have graduated 2013."

"The slip would require someone able to pose as a student. Believing me, the disturbance was registered at the time of a graduation rehearsal." Spense folds his hands together, placing them both on the desk. "You, acorse, were the obvious choice. All the information you need – alias, cover, etc. – it's all filed. Ty, I know it's not the Tucker case, but we need someone worth trusting on this job."

Shutting the file with a snap, Ty looks up to meet Spense's milky-blue eyes. "Acorse, sir. I'm one to be counted on."

Spense nods. "I expect a full report the tick you slip back. If tikkers are gathering again, we'll need to mobilize ASAP."

Ty stands up. Spense follows suit, extending a hand. Ty grasps it in his own. Spense's fingers are cool to the touch, almost icy. "You're a good op." Spense says. "Didn't deserve the psych evals."

"Thank you, sir, Spense, sir," Ty says.

He is clutching the edge of the file so hard his knuckles have turned white and the paper is starting to crumble around the edges.

Ty's sitting at his desk one day, picking through a pile of paperwork when Zane walks up to him and plops a stunner on his desk with a clatter. Ty looks up from the gun to Zane's face. "What's this supposed to be for?"

"Tikkers," Zane says. "Remember how to use it?"

"When have we got tikkers?" Ty asks, grabbing the stunner from the table. It feels thick and clumsy in his hands.

"Same time we always have tikkers."

That's the thing about time travel. Any wars between the two factions get lodged in a single time, both sides periodically pouring in reinforcements and bringing out their dead. The battles never change. They just keep going on that single day – on and on forever. It's not like a normal military venture where there can be a retreat. No, they keep going until neither side has anyone left and then come the reinforcements.

Every so often, Timewise will send another hundred agents through. Only about a tenth of them make it into the actual battle. The tikkers have a way of setting up a barricade to keep them from pouring in full force.

"Set?" Zane asks.

Tyler stands up, grabbing the stunner from the table. "As I'll ever be."

Spenser Peabody is giving the instructions. Forty members of the scrubbing team are present, set to eradicate the bodies. Sixty or so agents, in various states of nervousness, each clutch a stunner. "Time is 2099, October 29. Noon. The exact coordinates are following."

Behind him on the view screen, the coordinates flash. Ty memorizes them almost immediately, muttering the numbers under his breath.

"Good luck," says Spense.

"Down goes nothing," Zane mutters beside him.

Ty closes his eyes and lets the cold seep through his veins.

"Ty!" Jones Longwood calls from behind him. "Ty, hold on!"

It's Tyler Smith's second week at Timewise and he's not quite sure what to think about the place. He misses his mom. He misses his sister. He misses Ivy. The halls housing the Timewise bunks are cold, impersonal; eggshell-white walls with a thick brown carpet. The academy is even worse, adding a blinding white tile floor to the mix. Tyler has a headache from the first minute he sets foot on the grounds.

"Ty!" Jones calls again.

Tyler stops cold, fists reflexively opening and closing. He doesn't know Jones Longwood, doesn't particularly want to know him. Jones is hard, cold and paranoid but he seems to have decided that Tyler isn't one of *them*.

"My name is not Ty," Tyler says without turning around. "It's Tyler. Tyler Smith. Not Ty."

Jones claps him on the back. Tyler jumps at the weight of his hand. "You do know you just cemented the nickname, right? Nothing sticks unless you hate it."

As it turns out, Jones is right and Ty catches on, especially in an era when time is everything. No one wants to waste it on names longer than a syllable. Tyler stops fighting the nickname. After all, Tyler Smith is short and skinny with a wide smile and bright eyes. Ty barely even looks like him. He's sprouted up a foot in a little over two years. He's always been painfully thin, but there's a definition to his leanness now, something that tells the world Ty is a force to be reckoned with. His face has matured, losing its baby fat to sharp cheekbones and



a crooked nose. His hair is cropped military short and it's started to darken, no longer the sun-tipped dark blond of his youth, but something duller.

People don't notice Ty.

He has a tendency to look like he's going to slip away, melting from grasping fingers if someone tries to touch him. He walks the lines between worlds, a foot in the present and the other in the past.

Timewise assigns him the alias Timothy Langerhanz. Ty's not crazy about the name, but it's too late to change it by the time he gets the notice. Then again, it's not like he can go into this time, this place, as Tyler Smith. No, it's far too close to his scrubbing for that.

It is not unheard of for Timewise operatives to be sent back to the period of their own scrubbing for a mission. After all, no one is qualified for a particular era like a native. Ty just wishes it wasn't here.

Lewis Baker Secondary School. He would have finished high school there if it hadn't been for Timewise. He could have stayed with Ivy, Sydney and Bryce, living out a normal, linear life with normal, linear problems.

But instead of homework and graduation, he has to worry about his ex-partner running him through temporal paradoxes and tikkers everywhere he turns.

It's surreal to be back in this older, simpler world. He doesn't fit anymore. He's not Tyler Smith.

The disturbance is located in a graduation rehearsal for the class of 2013. All around him, talk of summer and college echo through the large gym. Ty slides slowly through the crowd. He looks out of place in this den of students. They are in tank tops and flip flops, ready for summer. Ty is still freezing from his last slip, wearing his black leather jacket to conceal his stunner. He's here for work. They're here because the work's over.

He wishes he were anywhere else.

He finds the seat labeled Timothy Langerhanz and pulls the label off the chair before sitting down. Apparently he has no outstanding fines, no missing textbooks. Not a hard feat considering he'd never had any to begin with. A girl two rows up and six seats left is freaking out about a stiff library fine. Ty smiles at the absurdity of it all.

"Never seen you before," a voice says somewhere to his right. "Beauty of going to an overcrowded school. Don't even know the guy next to you at graduation."

Ty turns around in his chair. A girl stands over him, hands folded across her chest. She's wearing a baggy pair of blue jeans with a hole in one knee, a black

tank top that only serves to highlight the extreme paleness of her skin. She has red hair, cropped short and feathered. It sticks up in random tufts that look more like bedhead than an artful hairstyle. But it's her eyes, not her hair or the scowl painted on her face, that catch him — green eyes with dark circles under them that look more like bruises than sleep deprivation.

"I'm Tim Langerhanz," Ty lies, standing up to offer his hand.

She stares at it but doesn't shake it.

"Ivy Lane," she says and sits down.

Ty doesn't so much as sit back down as collapse into his seat, hitting the stiff metal chair with enough force to bruise his bottom.

"So, Tim," she says. "Why haven't I ever seen you before?"

"It's a big school," Ty croaks. His voice sounds funny, strangled almost because Ivy Lane is sitting right there, next to him.

She looks different.

(he hadn't recognized her)

Five years does that to a person. Her braces are gone, her body has filled out and the smile has faded from her lips. "Take a picture, Langerhanz," she drawls. "It'll last longer."

"I wasn't around too often," Ty says. "Took a bunch of academy classes. Building that resume, you know?"

Ivy's frowns at him. "Weren't you in my ninth grade bio class? Mr. Smith taught it."

"Can't have been me," Ty answers. "My family moves around a lot. I was here in middle school. Just moved back this year. Never heard of a Mr. Smith teaching bio."

"That's because his name was Mr. Daniels," Ivy replies, scratching her neck. "I don't know where my head is today. Must have mixed you up with someone else."

Ty's eyes go wide. The scrubbing isn't holding. Mr. Smith, a vague sense of familiarity. It is all supposed to be gone. But here is Ivy, sitting next to him, staring at him like she knows him. It's all he can do to grit his teeth and lie instead of falling back into their comforting old repartee. It's been five years and he only just now is realizing how much he's missed her, how much he will always miss her.

How he misses her right now even though she's sitting next to him.

"So, Tim," she says. "Play any sports?"

"No," Ty says. He's trying not to look at her because if he starts, he won't be able to stop.

"Yearbook?" she tries.

"Nah."

"Come on," she says, "I know I've seen you before. You must have done something. Band? Orchestra? Journalism? Art show?"

"Nada and nothing," Ty says. "Acorse, I'm a boring guy."

"Where are you from?" Ivy asks, wrinkling her nose. It's an old habit of hers, one that makes her look like the Ivy he knows rather than this stranger. "You've got an accent."

"Really?" Ty asks, evading the question. "Never thought I picked one up."

"It's funny," Ivy says. "Can't quite place it."

"I'm from bits of everywhere," Ty says. "You know how it is."

"Military family?" she guesses. "You've got the haircut."

Ty reaches up self-consciously to touch his hair. It's long by Timewise's standards, long enough to touch his ears. Ty always thought a real military cut was almost a head shave, but in this time period the style is long and floppy. He doesn't fit the bill. "Been trying to grow it out," he lies. "Sneaking it long as I can. Few days and Dad'll get on me."

The principal gets up on the podium and starts talking about graduation procedure, sparing him further questions. She's a small lady with wild curls and a high-pitched, excitable voice.

Beside him, Ivy is half asleep within ten minutes. In fact, the whole of the student body seems extremely adept at tuning out the principal's bubbly chatter.

Ty, on the other hand, is on high alert. Roughly a week from now, there will be tikkers all over the place. One of the localized single-day battles that have always and will always be fought. But if the disturbances are spreading, pervading the surrounding time as well, that means the tikkers are getting bolder.

Ty is starting to sweat. He's gotten so used to the pervasive cold that comes with the slips he's stopped noticing it, but this clammy, stifling heat is something new. He wishes he could take off his jacket, but he can't without flashing his stunner to the general population. He'd rather not incite a panic if he doesn't need to.

"Now," says the principal, "this system works on key names. When we say the name, the next two rows will stand up and begin filing out in an orderly fashion. Now, guys." The principal claps her hands together. "I know it's a lot of work, but if we just get it right, this is going to be a fantastic ceremony we can all be proud of. But before we get to the names, we're going to try filing into the auditorium. After that, we'll go through the key names and have a trial run of the ceremony. Isn't this exciting?"

The student body lets out a collective groan, but Ty doesn't mind so much. There was nothing like this when he graduated from the Timewise Academy.

Just orders on his bed one day saying he'd been determined field ready and that he should report to Spenser Peabody for his assignment. This is better. There's a lot of muttering as the students file out of the auditorium but the ghost of Ty's smile doesn't leave his face.

"I'd say she was a Nazi if she wasn't so perky," Ivy mutters under her breath. "But hey, graduation is for the parents more than us, right?"

Ty sniggers but before he can answer, he feels it again: cold's icy fingers snaking down his spine, plunging through the extra layer of his jacket. He shivers violently, teeth chattering.

"What's the matter with you?" Ivy asks. "You look like you're about to pass out."

Ty takes a breath to steady himself. It doesn't work.

This must be the temporal disturbance Spense warned him about.

"I'm fine," he says. "It's just. . . I need to get out."

He breaks abruptly from the procession, forcing his stiff limbs into action. He leaves the gym. The cold is intensifying, freezing him slowly. He reaches clumsy fingers into his jacket pocket and withdraws his stunner, finger poised on the trigger.

He just needs to find out where the damn tikker is hiding.

Save for the graduating seniors, the school is empty. Ty is thankful for that much at least. The chatter of the students fades to the background as he weaves his way through the familiar halls, scanning for a flash of blue.

A banner over the senior locker bay reads: *Seniors! 1 Day Left!* Nobody bothered to tear down either poster, and Ty feels a sudden unease. *You're running out of time, Tyler*, the poster seems to say. *Everything's unfinished.*

He hears a clattering behind him and jerks around only to find Ivy standing right in front of him, staring cross-eyed at the gun trained on her forehead.

"Ivy?" Ty says, "The hell are you doing here?"

"Following you," Ivy chokes. Her whole body seems to flinch away from him, from the stunner. She scrunches up her face, as if anticipating the shot.

He should shoot, he realizes. He should pull the trigger and knock her out. Someone will find her soon and no one will be the wiser. It will be better for all of them.

(but it's Ivy so he can't)

Ty drops the stunner. "Get out."

She doesn't relax. "Why've you got a gun, Tim?"

*I'm not Tim*, he wants to scream. *I'm Tyler Smith! You should remember, but you don't! I remember everything. I know what your favorite movie is and what your hair smells like and what makes you laugh and. . .*

"None of your business," Ty snaps. "Best if you get moving along."

"You're not a student," Ivy says, eyes narrowing in suspicion. "I know that much. If you were a student, I would have seen you around before."

"I'm not a student," Ty confirms. To assuage her panic, he reaches his frozen fingers into the inner pocket of his coat and pulls out his badge. "I'm with the Timewise Agency. Official business. Undercover."

"Timewise?" Ivy says. "I've never heard of Timewise."

"Trust me. That's a good thing."

Then Ty sees it. The tikker. Down in the senior locker bay, staring at them with its voluminous black eyes glinting in the dim light.

"Ivy, you need to leave," Ty says. "Get back to graduation and forget me."

"Tim," she says, staring at the tikker behind him with those wide green eyes. "Tim, what's that?"

Ty seizes her face, a hand pressed to either cheek, and steers her gaze back to him. "Ivy," he says. "I need you to get out of here. I need you to run. If you don't —"

He trails off, the unfinished sentence looming in the air like the poster in front of them proclaiming, *Seniors! 1 Day left!*

The tikker is moving toward them.

"Run," he tells Ivy, ice pumping through his veins.

She stands still, staring at him openmouthed, like a statue frozen in time forever.

"Run!" Ty roars.

Ivy stumbles into action, spinning around so fast she trips and has to catch herself before she hits the ground. She's running back to her normal life, away from time travel and tikkers.

She's running away from him.

Ty hoists the stunner, taking careful aim at the tikker. He fires. The tikker shudders violently and collapses to the floor. Ty holsters the stunner, pulls his switchblade from his pocket and moves toward the unconscious tikker.

He doesn't like that the kills in this war have to be up close and personal, doesn't like the feel of the slick yellow fluid that functions as the tikker's blood. But this is his life now. If he weren't here, who knows what would have happened to the students at the graduation rehearsal. Who knows what would have happened to Ivy Lane.

He slices the tikker's throat open with relative ease and the thing's yellow blood oozes everywhere. Ty has to get back to Timewise now and send a scrubber to take care of the corpse. He needs to let Spense know there are tikkers abounding.

(where there's one, there will be more)

Not once does he turn back to look at Ivy. She's not part of his life anymore.

Ty starts counting the days. It's an almost unconscious tick, a running calendar in his head that marks each day relative to when it should be back home. No one at Timewise has birthdays. The students were all pulled out of their personal timelines at different points and thrown into the future where the dates have no meaning.

So Ty counts. Not out loud, not even on paper. He just keeps a running tally in his head, a tick mark for every sunrise.

He turns fourteen on February 14, Valentine's Day, except his birthday is in September. He turns fifteen two weeks after he graduated from the academy and they put him into field operations. He turns sixteen in the hospital after an injury sustained in a fight with the tikkers. He turns seventeen the day before Zane disappears. He turns eighteen the day after Zane goes rogue.

On his sixteenth birthday (which is three hundred and ninety eight years, four months and two weeks after he should be celebrating his sixteenth birthday) he wakes up in the medbay to find Zane asleep across from him. Zane's got his feet propped up against the bed and his arms folded across his chest. His left arm is in a cast, a white plaster sheath that looks like a streamlined version of the 2007 casts Ty knows. Zane's eyes are shut and his clothes are rumpled but he looks alert even when he's sleeping.

"Zane," Ty mutters. His head feels foggy, stuck in the clouds. *Concussion*, he remembers. *I have a concussion and Zane got us out.* "Come on, Zane. Let's go."

Zane responds by letting out a loud snore. Ty has to grin because the perfect soldier persona Zane wears evacuates when he snores. Grinning, Ty reaches to his sleeping friend and pokes him lightly on the leg.

Zane's feet fall from the bed, hitting the ground one after the other with echoing thuds. His hands appear from the depths of his jacket, the right one clenched around the handle of his switchblade. He flips it open with a metallic whoosh.

And that's all before his eyes even open.

"Zane!" Ty hisses. "It's me. It's Ty!"

Finally, Zane wakes up. His eyes look darker than usual. Almost black instead of brown, like the eyes of a tikker shining out from his friend's face.

Ty tries to back away from him but there's nowhere to go. He's in a hospital bed with only thin white sheets and a metal bed frame between him and the knife.

Then the moment is gone. Zane grins sheepishly and flips his switchblade shut. There are faded bruises over his left eye and a cut running down his cheek. "How goes it, Zane?"

His smile is uneven. That's nothing new. Zane's grin has always looked like an imitation of the real thing, but it seems more pronounced today.

(or maybe that's the head wound talking)

"You almost died," Zane says. "Few ticks later and you'd be lane up right and proper."

"I'm still here," Ty says. "Banged up, yeah, but still here."

Zane looks down at his hands. He's twirling his switchblade absently, 'round and 'round in an abstract but fascinating pattern.

"You got us out," Ty says. "That's what you should think on. Us and that family."

Zane's eyes lock with Ty's, and Ty thinks he reads despair in those black depths.

"Sometimes," Zane says slowly, "I think on it all and wonder if we're making a difference. How many people get lane up without us being there? Before we even notice something's amiss?"

Ty is quiet for a long moment because he doesn't remember Zane ever talking like this before. He doesn't remember anything but the straightlaced operative who follows orders and doesn't ask questions. This Zane is someone new, peeking through the shadows of the Zane that was. "You never told me any of that before."

"Never asked," Zane says and gives another dry laugh. "No one and nadie ever asks and I think that's what's wrong with this place. No one ever asking." He leans back in his chair and folds his hands behind his head, the white plaster of his cast pressing against the base of his skull. "Wish we could change it."

"Zane," Ty says delicately. He's starting to feel the headache, the aftereffects of the concussion beating like drums in his head. This kind of talk is dangerous. "You know we can't. No way we could go back and tweak everything to make it perfect."

"Don't need to be perfect," says Zane in that adaptable accent of his. Today the rounded edges of Timewise-style phrasing stand out. "Just want to be able to save a girl in trouble and not have to worry on what happens should the girl live. Saving a life shouldn't be wrong. Just once I want to be a hero without mucking everything over."

Ty doesn't say anything because there is nothing to say. They've all wanted that. While Ty has seen tikkers plowing through people with blue lightning sparking in their hands, he's also seen people fighting people. A girl with her

throat slit after a drug deal. A random shooting on a college campus. A man beaten to death in a bar fight.

To watch tragedy unfold when the past is at your fingertips is infuriating. But rules are in place for a reason.

The past is not something to be changed. It's something to be protected.

Zane snaps out of his reverie, leaning forward. "Near enough died yourself, Ty. Don't much want you to be a statistic."

Ty forces a smile, but he knows it must look as fake and empty as they come. "I'm hard to kill," he jokes. "Not hard to take down, but hard to kill. How long was I out?"

"Three days," Zane says. "Surprised you kept upright. Slipping while concussed was not our best idea."

"Three days," Ty repeats and then his face splits into a real smile. "Age sixteen today."

Zane asks, "You managed keeping count?"

"Sure," Ty says. "Ever since I came here, I've been counting. Not my real birthday but three hundred and sixty five days is real enough. Don't you keep count?"

"It's not like you're getting a party," Zane says. "Elsewise, we'd have ops off drinking all days of the year."

"You're serious," Ty says, wincing as he straightens in his bed. "No one keeps track? You've got to know. C'mon, Zane. How old are you?"

"Age eighteen, thinking on it," Zane says, frowning. "Maybe nineteen by now. Figure me I'm not twenty. . . Don't think I'm twenty."

"You honestly don't know?"

"No use keeping track," Zane says, rubbing the back of his neck with the hand not in a cast. "Just a date. Just days. Just time and what's time when you can slip straight through it?"

Ty thinks of what Val Teasley told him. Zane Tucker hasn't been present on a February 15 since he arrived at Timewise.

Dates are important. No matter what Zane says.

"Glad you got through," Zane says. A beam of light spills in from the window. It hides the hollowness in his eyes and makes him seem younger. Zane has freckles, extremely faint against his skin. They splatter his cheeks and draw attention from his crooked nose and the cut on his cheek. "Don't know what I'd do if you got lane up, Ty. I'd have to break in a whole new partner. Most of them don't last near as long as you. Keep breathing, Smith. I'll get to the paperwork."

"Sure," Ty says. "No complaining from my way."

Zane laughs and ruffles Ty's hair. "Good to have you with us again."



When Tyler Smith is eleven years old, he has his first kiss.

Four friends are in the basement of his house: Tyler, Sydney King, Bryce Benson and Ivy Lane. Sydney, with her long dark hair and wide blue eyes, just moved in down the street and is older than Tyler by six months. Bryce, who's in Tyler's physical education class, makes up for being unathletic by being a smartass. Ivy is in the awkward phase between child and adolescent. She's got pimples spotting her face, braces covering crooked teeth and limbs that have grown too fast, too soon. There's the barest hint of a curve to her hips and chest, but Tyler barely notices because she's Ivy. She's his best friend and has been for as long as he can remember.

Tyler himself is remarkably short for his age, underweight with buzzed-off hair, big ears and a wide smile. He gets taken for younger than he really is.

"Truth or dare," says Sydney.

The four of them giggle. Ivy crosses her hands over her chest and says, "Dare."

Sydney smiles back, first at Ivy and then at Tyler. That makes Tyler nervous because Sydney's the mature one. At the ripe old age of twelve, she knows things they haven't quite discovered.

"I dare you," Sydney starts, jabbing a finger at Ivy for emphasis, "to kiss Tyler."

Bryce makes a gagging sound. Tyler wants to agree because Ivy's his friend. He grew up with her, sharing skinned knees and games of make-believe and endless hours of basketball in his driveway. Ivy is one of the guys. But there's something else in play, something underneath the surface he doesn't quite understand.

Ivy shrugs and flips her long red hair over her shoulders. "What do you say, Tyler?" she asks. "You game?"

Tyler shrugs. Ivy quirks a smile and leans in toward him. Her breath is warm on his face, her lips featherlight against his own. Something warm stirs inside him. The kiss lasts barely a second, but it's imprinted in Tyler's mind forever.

Ivy pulls away, grinning. Bryce makes another gagging noise. Tyler feels a blush creeping down his neck. "There," Ivy says, flopping back on the couch. "Not so bad, was it?"

Tyler doesn't see her mild acne or the braces worn by a gawky eleven-year-old when she smiles at him. He sees bright eyes and a smile that lights up the room.

And that's the precise moment he falls in love with his best friend.

Run Richards disappears on a Tuesday afternoon. Ty walks through the Timewise offices and someone else is at Run's desk like he's always been there. Ty stops in front of the new guy, marveling at the fact that he feels fine. His stomach isn't churning, his head isn't throbbing and it's all because Run is gone.

"Who the hell you apposed to be?" the guy asks.

Ty shrugs, running his fingers across the edge of Run's old desk. They come back slightly dusty. "What happened to Run?"

"The hell kind of name is Run?" the new guy says.

*His name was Run Richards, Ty wants to say. His name was Run Richards and someone messed up on a mission and got his mom caught crosswise. He's gone now and you don't deserve to be sitting where he used to be.*

Instead he keeps his mouth shut and walks away, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

Run Richards is dead, just like he never existed.

And nobody talks about it.

Annie catches up with Ty in the stark white halls of Timewise like nothing in the world is wrong. Like she didn't rat him out to Spense and get him pulled off the Tucker case.

"How's it happening, Smith?" she asks, grinning widely.

Ty glares at her, shaking his hands and splattering the white tile floor with the sticky yellow tikker blood. "Did you find Zane yet?" he snaps.

Annie blinks owlshly. "Yeah, we did. Just brought him in."

"Super," Ty says. "Fantastic, spectacular. You know what? I don't care. We're not working the same job. I don't want to hear about it."

He turns to stalk down the hall. He needs to get to Spense's office. If there were one tikker in that time, there are bound to be more. Tickers spreading out from a battle day is bad news. It means Timewise is losing; humanity is losing.

"Ty! C'mon, Ty. Crissakes, we're all appose to be friends here," Annie yells. He hadn't realized she was following him until she called his name.

Ty spins around. He grabs her roughly by her shoulders and pins her to the wall.

"You caught Zane," he says, "cleaned up my muck and I thank you for it. But us, right here, right now, we aren't friends, not never going to be friends. Annie, you got me pulled off *my case*. You got me shoved into psych eval fixing to see if I was going to go the road of Zane Tucker." His voice breaks. He hates his

weakness. "Crissakes, Annie, Timewise is all I got left."

"Bad slip?" Annie asks.

Ty blinks, only just realizing where he is, only just realizing he's got his hands on Annie. He lets her go abruptly, running his hands through his too-short hair.

"Acorse it was a bad slip," Ty says. "It's always a bad slip close up to your own scrubbing, close up to your old life. If it weren't bad enough to start, I have to run into Ivy Lane—"

"Hold a tick," Annie says, eyebrow arched. "Ivy Lane? You ran crossing *Ivy Lane*?"

"Who's she to you?"

"What are you on about? Everyone knows Ivy Lane. Learned about her in school afore I even made Timewise. First human killed by an alien. May 18, 2013. Coming back from a graduation party. Age eighteen."

Either Ty's head is spinning or the hallway is. He fights to keep standing. May 18. Just three days from his last slip. Three days after he leaves, she's dead. The victim of a tikker attack.

Eighteen years old.

"You're meaning you didn't know?" Annie is looking at him oddly. "Never heard the phrase *lane up*? You know, death by tikker? Where do you think it came from? Ivy Lane. They made a whole mess over her in school." She whistles. "Ivy fucking Lane. You actually went and talked at Ivy fucking Lane."

Something inside Ty breaks, shattering into a thousand little pieces.

(he doesn't know if putting them back together is even possible)

He can picture Ivy if he closes his eyes. He can see red hair, green eyes and a big smile like she's standing in front of him.

She'd be dead by now anyway. It shouldn't matter anymore because it's 2404. All his friends from his native time are dead. They'd all be dead even if they'd lived a century. But it still hurts, still stings, still crashes into him like a physical blow, forcing all the air out of his lungs.

He feels broken, empty, gutted. He doesn't want to think about Zane in a holding cell or Ivy Lane dead and bleeding at graduation or the tikkers gathering in 2013 or the poster above the locker bay screaming *Seniors! 1 day left!*

But when he finally gathers himself enough to speak, his voice is surprisingly steady. "What do you want, Annie?"

"Tucker's not talking. Had him in interrogation for more than half a day. Says he's not going to talk at no one and nadie saving you." Annie shrugs and shoves her hands in her pockets. "The higher-ups want answers. So I'm asking you a favor. Talk at him."

"Got a mess after my last slip," Ty says hollowly. "Got a dead tikker in 2013

that needs scrubbing. Got a report to write. Got tikkers spreading out from the battle day. We got mounting problems bigger than just Zane. Get your own information."

"Ty," she says.

"Go hellside," he growls.

He stalks off down the hallway. Annie doesn't make a move to follow him, just stands there and lets him go. He's still fuming by the time he makes it to Spense's office. He takes a moment to breathe. He unclenches his fists and then he goes inside.

Like most private spaces in Timewise, Spense's office evokes his native time period. He'd been picked up in 2389 so he's practically a contemporary of the agency. The room is starkly decorated. The carpet is gray. The walls are white. The desk is black. Still the room isn't as harsh as it could be. The oddest thing about 24th century design is that things rarely have sharp edges. Smooth curves seem to detract from the stark colors.

Spense's desk is piled with paperwork. He has dark circles under his eyes that lead Ty to believe he hasn't been sleeping well. Ty coughs to get Spense's attention.

Spense jerks his head up. His normally immaculately groomed blond hair is messy and his suit jacket is rumpled. He's got the scraggly beginnings of a pale blond beard. "Ty! What's on?"

"Trouble abounding in 2013," Ty says, leaning up against the doorframe. "Found a tikker. Figured that was your temporal paradox. Expect to see more in coming. Spillover from the May 18 battle. Probably best we get a scrubber down to clear out the mess."

"Perfection," Spense mutters, digging through the mound of paper. "Just what we need. We'll get to it. Problems abound nowadays. Has Annie spoke at you?"

"Yes," Ty replies shortly.

Spense looks up. "She asked you to talk at Zane Tucker?"

"Yessir, Spense, sir." Ty doesn't like the turn of this conversation or the tone in Spense's voice. "Told her to go hellside. I'm not in that muck anymore."

"Ty," Spense says with a regal air, "I would also like to go extending my request that—"

"Due respects, Spense," Ty says, "but you pulled me off this case and I'd like it to stay that way. Just following orders."

*My best friend's dead. My ex-partner's a criminal. My current partner betrayed me. I'm tired. I just want to go home.*

"Don't due respect me, Ty. We're old friends."

Friends. Ty nearly laughs. There's that word again. Annie's his friend, Zane's

his friend, Spense is his friend. The only one who can say that and have Ty believe it is Ivy and Ivy's not here. Ivy's dead. These people are not his friends.

"Friends," Ty says. A slight note of hysteria colors his voice. "Sure, Spense, we're friends. I'll talk at Zane for you. I was his friend too, you know. Funny how it ends."

"Thank you," Spense says, looking haggard despite his obvious relief. "I'll get the muck in 2013 cleared soon as I can."

"Yessir," Ty slurs, "Thank you, sir, Spense, sir."

"Zane's in holding cell 67B. When you get the time?"

"Right away, sir," Ty says and walks out of the office and toward his old friend's cell.

Ivy and Tyler walk into the seventh-grade dance holding hands. It's not actually a date. They're just a couple of friends going to one of the lame school dances together. The gym lights are covered in blue cellophane to create an air of mystery. Tyler figures the theme has something to do with underwater because of the cutouts of sea creatures all around. Ivy surveys the scene with a wrinkled nose. "Are those fish?"

"Looks like," Tyler says.

She frowns and then shrugs dismissively. "All right then. Hey, we should try to find Bryce and Syd."

The music is some sort of loud pulsing rap, the lyrics barely audible under the grinding background rhythm. Tyler can scarcely hear Ivy in the din.

"They here together?" he asks, surprised. Sydney and Bryce are more antagonistic toward each other than anyone he's ever met. Despite hanging out together all the time, the two of them have never seemed like friends. Ninety percent of their time together is spent trading insults that don't sound quite friendly.

"Together?" Ivy says, laughing. "Not yet."

With that, she starts picking her way through the crowd, dragging Tyler along for the ride. His hand, slightly damp with sweat, is still clamped in hers. He feels like the blue-checkered tie around his neck is more a noose than an accessory.

Ivy's red hair swirls behind her. She's wearing a green dress that is just tight enough to highlight her developing hips. Even in the gymnasium's dim light, Tyler can't help but smiling at how good she looks.

A commotion breaks out. A group of ten or so people, all varying in size, gathers. Most of the girls are taller than the boys. Tyler can't quite see what's going on until he and Ivy push their way through the crowd.

"Are you kidding me?" Sydney shouts.

"It was a joke!" Bryce yells back.

It's not a fistfight, just Bryce and Sydney verbally sparring in a very public venue. Sydney is wearing a red dress with her dark hair swept into a bun. Not even an hour into the night, wisps fall into her face. Bryce is wearing a white long-sleeved dress shirt with a crimson bow tie. His face, naturally rosy, is bright red and his blond hair seems oddly luminous in the faint blue light.

"Break it up!" Ivy says, stepping between them. It's sweltering inside the gym. Ivy's makeup, applied too thickly, is running down her cheeks. Streaks of black eyeliner stain her face.

The guys in the group of spectators groan in disappointment. One by one, they wander off to watch a pair of kids in dress slacks attempt to break dance.

Bryce adjusts his bow tie and takes a deep breath, the color in his face beginning to return to normal. Sydney hugs Ivy, grinning as if the argument had never happened "Ivy! You look amazing."

Tyler claps a hand onto Bryce's back. "How you doing, man?"

"I called Syd fat," he says. "Bad idea. Girls, huh?"

Tyler casts a subtle look in Ivy's direction. She is laughing. It lights up her face. He looks past the smudged makeup and the braces on the teeth and just sees Ivy.

"I dunno," he mutters to Bryce. "They're not all bad."

The Zane who has stumbled into Timewise after being missing for six months is not the intelligent, intensely focused Timewise operative Zane that Ty knows.

A dull look mars his normally sharp features. His eyes are open, but oddly empty. His hair – usually clipped in neat, military fashion – is long and messy, falling into his face in thick, dirty clumps and obscuring his line of sight. A technicolor bruise spans the left side of his face, standing out against his ashen skin, sucking in all surrounding color.

This is not Ty's partner sitting in that hospital bed in medbay. But then, how could he be after spending six months at the hands of tikkers? No one has ever crawled back alive before. When tikkers get you, it's over. The end.

(it is the first rule Zane has ever broken but it won't be the last)

"Zane," Ty says. He sits down on the edge of the bed. The sunlight streaming through the window and the crisp, clean white sheets illuminate everything, not in a good way. There is a tiny cut against Zane's temple, still too fresh to fade. "You look shitlike, you know?"

Zane stares out the window, not replying. So Ty clears his throat and starts

talking. "You went and left and I get stuck with Annie Gallagher. Remember her? Identity fraud extraordinaire? Conned her way into Callope University? You used to say *I* talked too much. Everything out of that girl's mouth is smart. It's. . ." He takes a deep breath. "Crissakes, you probably don't even hear me."

And then a miracle happens. Zane turns his head to stare at Ty and a flicker of the old Zane is in his eyes. "Ty?" Zane's voice is sandpaper rough, like he's talking through a mouthful of gravel. "Ty Smith?"

"That's right, Zane," Ty says. "It's me. Think I'd ever quit bothering you?"

Zane's eyebrows bunch and he has to work to form the words. "Did I make it back?"

"Acorse you did," Ty says. "Anyone could do it, it's you. You're the best there is."

"How long?" he croaks.

Ty sobers. For the first time he realizes that getting Zane back and having him back are two different things. "Six months."

Zane turns away, eyes settling back on the barren landscape outside the medbay window. "Felt longer."

Zane is sitting in a white room. Ty stands outside for a long time, staring at him through the one-way glass. Zane doesn't move, doesn't flinch, barely even blinks. He's wearing an orange prison jumpsuit with the badge number 2115ZPT stitched into the breast. Ty can hardly believe Timewise caught him. The fact that Anne Gallagher, of all people, managed to bring him in doesn't seem fair.

The agency has given him a haircut, a severe one that leaves him nearly bald. He's dropped weight since the last time Ty's seen him and at least part of that is from lost muscle. There's a bruised, sunken look to his cheeks that has never been this pronounced.

Ty recognizes the wire band around Zane's wrist as a new-age handcuff. It's equipped with a pulse that will immobilize the body in instances of escape attempts.

Zane has not tried to escape.

Ty takes a deep breath and presses his hand against the door. It slides open. He walks into the white light of the interrogation room and pulls the chair across from Zane back from the table. It screeches as he drags it across the floor, the sound impossibly loud in the still air. Ty sits down, crossing his arms over his chest, determined not to be the one to speak first.

Zane stares at him with the hollow, dead eyes of a tikker. Ty's still got the alien's visceral yellow blood coating his shirt, splattered all over his pants. He

can smell it now, a sour, acidic scent that burns the inside of his nose.

"Ty," Zane says finally.

"You asked for me," Ty says. "Now I'm here."

Zane nods, looking down to fiddle with his cuff. "You know pastside, these things were metal."

"I remember," Ty says. "I predate you."

A smile spans Zane's face, stretching the skin until he looks like a smirking skull. "Guessing you do."

"The higher-ups want to know why," Ty says. "Me, I'd rather just lock you up and forget about you."

"You know what Timewise does to the ones who get out of line?" Zane asks. "They take it out. The time travel, I mean. It's a genetic mutation. They slice it right out of the genome. Most people survive it. Well, at least some do."

"Oh, boo hoo," Ty spits out. "You knew what you were getting into when you started. Everyone knows the consequences." He sighs. "Just tell me why you did it, Zane. Tell me whyfore and let me get out."

"What happened to you, Ty?" Zane asks.

The words put Ty on the brink of collapse. The other ones who'd called themselves his friends hadn't noticed Ty's misery, hadn't seen his pain. Zane, whom he'd chased for months, recognizes it on sight.

"What happened to *you*?" Ty says thickly, "That's the real question. What got you turning?"

Zane pushes his chair back, balancing on two legs, a thoughtful expression on his gaunt face. "Remember that pickup?" he finally asks. "The one where the tikker grabbed me?"

"Acorse," Ty says. "You were six months gone afore anyone sighted you again."

"I was futureside," Zane says. "And I was there a lot longer than six months."

"The future," Ty repeats. "You expect me a believe that. Timewise—"

"—is the present," Zane finishes. "The past is history and the future's yet to be written. Tell me how that's making sense?"

Zane leans forward in his chair, bruised face alive for the first time in recent memory. "Think on it. I ran 'cross you before current Timewise did. That's meaning I existed sometime in the future and you knew exactly where and when I was going to be."

"But if the future's already in existence," Ty says. "Then—"

"What happens by way of free will?" Zane interrupts. "What happens to everything? Can I watch the ending of the earth knowing I can do nothing and nada by ways of stopping it? Time isn't that rigid, Ty. If it were, the universe



would have splintered same tick Harrison Wise found out 'bout slipping. Time changes every time we slip into someplace we haven't been before. Little stuff changing, never the huge things, but enough to make some difference somewhere. Who knows what it'll be by the end. And what's more, who wants to know?"

Ty's never seen Zane this animated before, never seen him this passionate, never heard his voice croak with emotion. In that moment, he forgives Zane for the months of hell and the betrayal. Forgives him because whatever happened to Zane woke him up and made him alive in a way he wasn't before.

(Ty envies him that)

"We lose, Ty," Zane says, and the hollow look's back in his eyes. "That's what I saw. The tikkers win and we lose. After I got away from the tikkers, I was on this slip with Val and I see this girl in an alley, tears falling because she's got a gun on her. I figure, world can't be worse off if she lives. So I stun the guy. Girl gets away, lives. And I get on thinking again and I realize you can't change the big picture, but the little one you can. And if you can keep tweaking at the little picture, it'll add up, you know? Tacking on and on until maybe the big stuff starts to twist too."

It's not insanity Ty sees in Zane Tucker's eyes, but it's something close. Like a fire burning inside him that can't be put out. Seeing it makes Ty feel tired, empty somehow. He doesn't have anything left inside him. "Why are you telling me this, Zane?"

Zane shrugs. "Because you're my friend, maybe?" He shakes his head. "Nah, that's about the final thing you want to hear. Try this one — acause I knew your dad."

"You *what*?"

"Never told you that one, did I?" Zane asks. "Before my time, but I crossed lines with him once or twice. Nice guy, John Smith was."

"My dad's name was Garrett Smith," Ty croaks.

"Nah, that was a cover," Zane says. "See, guy was arrested suspecting identity fraud at least four times I know of. Name like John Smith sounds like an alias. Started going by Garrett then. Stuck somehow. Only folks who knew he was John were back at Timewise. Got left pastside after a pickup. Figured me he was gone. Lane up." He shrugs. "Guess it turned out right by him."

"He died," Ty says. The tightness in his throat makes it hard to speak. Tucker had to be lying. Looking for a weakness that would make him trusted. (or worse, he might be telling the truth) "Robbery. I was three. I barely remember him."

"Skorry," Zane says. "Skorry about everything. But Ty, you've got to know, I'm not the bad guy. I'm not the enemy."

Ty swallows. Glances back to the one-way glass only to see his reflection and Zane in his orange prison jumper. There are higher-ups watching no doubt. Ty doesn't care. He can't do this anymore.

"I don't care what your reasons are," Ty says. "You're still going down for this. If you're looking my ways for helping, that's something I won't give."

"Never expected any," Zane says, nodding slowly. His eyes don't leave Ty.

Ty has to turn away from his gaze. "Goodbye, Zane," he says, stands up and leaves his former partner alone in the white room.

Outside the door, Annie Gallagher greets him. "Ty," she says. "I just wanted a —"

"He's a madman," Ty says, lie springing to his lips with surprising ease. "Don't trust a word out of his mouth. Futureside? How shitful is that getting?"

"And what by ways of your dad?" Annie says, raising an eyebrow.

"None of your business," Ty snaps. "None of his either, but definitely none of yours."

"Ty," she says again.

"I don't want to talk on it," Ty says. "I just want to go to my room and sleep."

Ty wakes up in a daze. The lights are out and he has no idea where he is. He tries to move his arm only to find it encased in a thick white cast. As his eyes start to adjust to the darkness, he starts to figure it out. The memories filter back to him slowly, flashes at first and then the whole picture coming together like a jigsaw puzzle. He's seconds away from screaming.

Then he sees where he is. He's not in the battle anymore. He's in the medbay, nestled into the scratchy hospital sheets. That means he's made it. He dove into one of the never-ending one-day battles and kept breathing.

He doesn't know many people in Timewise who can say that.

Hesitantly, he pulls off the white sheet and eases from the bed. Save his arm, everything appears to be in working order. The room is in shadows. All four dozen hospital beds are occupied. Suddenly Ty just wants to get the hell out of there, back to his own room where he can curl up next to memories of home and forget.

In his haste to leave, he trips over the end of his bed, stumbling across the median into another patient's space. To Ty's horror, the guy sits straight up in his bed. In the darkness, all Ty can see are the whites of his eyes, gleaming with an ethereal light of their own.

"Where is it?" the guy mutters. "I can't find it. I've lost it."

"I'm sorry," Ty says. "You lost what?"

"It's gone now," the guy rambles. "I had it and now it's gone. Don't know what happened. Can you fix it? Can you fix me?"

He reaches for Ty's arm, and Ty staggers backward to avoid the contact. "Skorry," he mutters. "Skorry. Just... ssorry. I don't know what you're missing."

Behind him, someone grabs both Ty's shoulders. He yelps in surprise as he turns around, automatically reaching for the switchblade in his jacket that is not there. Jones Longwood catches his arm before he can take a swing at him. "Easy Ty, easy. Jus' me."

"Jones," Ty says, breathing heavily. "Crissakes, don't sneak in on me like that. Hellside you doing creeping around the medbay?"

"Came to see you," Jones explains. "Such a suspicion, me seeing a friend?"

"Couldn't have done it in the light?" Ty mumbles.

Jones shrugs. "Looking to surprise you."

"You're a sick sadistic son of a bitch, you know that, Longwood?"

Jones grins at him and for a moment all Ty can see is white teeth standing out in the darkness like the Cheshire cat's smile. From the bed, the patient mutters. "Something missing. Something gone. I've lost it, got to find it."

Looking over his shoulder, Jones examines the patient with distaste. "Guessing he's one with the Procedure. Missing something. Something loose in his head. Lucky if you look at it that ways. Only about half make it out living. Maybe one in ten make it out the same as they came in."

"What he do a deserve that?" Ty asks.

(what's wrong with him?)

"Level one timeline infraction," Jones says. "Not the kind of guy a be trusted with time travel elsemore so they cut it out. Lop it straight outta the genome. The Procedure."

"Can you help me find it?" the guy rambles. "Can you fix me?"

A chill runs down Ty's spine and he turns to grab Jones's shoulder. "Let's go. Hate me a hospital."

They leave the medbay together, padding through the sleeping patients and taking care not to make noise. The man's mumblings still float over to them on the soft, still air. "I can't find it. I can't find it."

Garrett Smith likes to pull up a chair to his son's crib and tell him stories when Tyler is a baby. Fantastic tales about aliens and time travel and places in the future with things that are almost unimaginable.

On some of his darker nights, Garrett strokes the feather-soft hair from Tyler's forehead and tells him secrets, one after the other in a hushed voice while his

wife softly snores the night away in the next room.

"Not really called Garrett, you know," he says in quiet tones as the moon splashes a thin, milky light through the blinds and onto the carpet. "Used to be John. Yeah, John Smith."

Tyler gives him a toothless smile, reaches out and tries to pat his cheek. Garrett lets out a dry laugh, barely audible even in the still night air.

"Practically sounds like an alias, don't it?" Garrett says. "Took me in three different times for ident fraud because of it. Garrett was easier. Stuck, that did. Always seemed to when you didn't like it. Afore long everyone knew me as Garrett and never saw fit to change it back. Your mom still thinks that's the real me. Doesn't know about the forged birth certificate or the old Timewise ident I've got in the back of our dresser. Our little secret, yeah, Ty?"

He tells the story more and more the older Ty gets because he knows his time is starting to run thin.

"Didn't mean for it to happen," he slurs one night, voice thick with sleep even as his son slumbers on – unaware of anything, much less his father's anguish. "I mean you go on an op and you don't expect to get left behind. You expect to do your job and get out, but I was late getting back and they thought I was dead. Didn't check the hospitals afore they left. Didn't have much reason. Tikkers don't usually leave survivors. Just got lucky."

He leans in closer, arms folded at the edge of the crib as he surveys his young son.

"You know those first six months I spent here, I used to think all the time how I just wanted to get back," Garrett says. "Didn't get the chance for nearing five years. When Spense showed up, I didn't want it anymore. I just wanted my normal life with your mom and Erica. People change, you know. People change and you don't always have the chance to keep up with the present. Thing about it is, Timewise always catches up. No matter how long you're gone, Timewise is always going to catch up. After all, they've got practically eternity."

Something is different one night when Garrett comes into Tyler's room. His son is a toddler now, and he's squirming in the grips of a nightmare. Garrett is barefoot, wearing pajama pants adorned with a Bugs Bunny print and a dark gray T-shirt with a pink bleach stain on the left sleeve. He is shivering, goose bumps raised on his arms. He runs a hand down Tyler's cheek only to find it cool to the touch despite the night's relative warmth. Garrett gets a blanket from the dresser and covers his sleeping son. Tyler squirms, rolls over and slips his thumb into his mouth. His breathing, light and soft, is the only sound in the still air.

"You're like me," Garrett says quietly. An air of certainty colors his voice along with a smidge of disappointment. "You can feel it too. Things are

changing."

Garrett lets out a heavy breath, and he thinks he can see it hanging there in the dark, like a puff of smoke from a cigarette. "I'm sorry, Tyler. If you're really like me, I'm sorry. I never wanted this for you."

Those are the last words Garrett ever says to his son, the last words he ever says to anyone.

He leaves Tyler's room earlier than he does most nights and goes downstairs to grab a midnight snack. Someone is waiting for him in the kitchen and somehow Garrett is not surprised. He's been expecting this, after all. He still believes time wants to be linear, something he learned at the Academy.

Before the bullet slices through his head, he can't help but think maybe this is just the universe righting itself, maybe this is his punishment for leaving Timewise, for abandoning the war and his duties. Even though his decision is about to cost him his life, he thinks it was worth it. That this little life he's made for himself, tucked away in a discreet corner of the past, was worth the risk of paradoxes, tikkers and anything else the universe could throw his way.

And then he doesn't think anything any more.

When Ty hears about Spense electing to reopen the battle of May 18, 2013, he does something he never expected to do: he volunteers.

"I already have a cover," he tells Spense. "I've been there before. Crissakes, I was at their graduation rehearsal. Let me go a day early. Two. I can keep an eye out for more tikker activity. I can keep the days afore clean at least."

Spense concedes, even compliments Ty on his work ethic. And that's how Ty finds himself sitting at another graduation rehearsal in the Lewis Baker Secondary School gym waiting for Ivy to appear.

Ivy Lane, his best friend, who will die in two days.

*And I get on thinking again, Zane's words whisper in his head, and I realize you can't change the big picture, but the little one you can.*

A spark struck when Ty was in that interrogation room, a tiny flicker in the hollow din that is Ty's soul. Ivy is going to die in two days.

The more Ty thinks about it, the less he thinks he can stand to watch.

"If it isn't Timothy Langerhanz," a voice says, as someone collapses into the seat next to him.

He turns around, a smile, big and real and genuine, involuntarily sweeping over his features. "Ivy Lane," he says.

Ivy is wearing a red T-shirt and pair of black jeans. Her hair is standing on edge. Through glasses with a thick black frame, she stares at him in accusation.

"I'm waiting."

"For what?" Ty asks, genuinely baffled.

"For what," Ivy spits, eyes wide. "Let's count it out, shall we? One, we've got the mysterious Tim Langerhantz — if that's even your name — who shows up at rehearsal pretending he's always been at Lewis Baker. See, he says he's working undercover, but he looks my age so I figure he's lying. Except I can't find him in a single yearbook as far back as I have. Two, said mysterious Mr. Langerhantz claims to be part a shadowy group called Timewise which, according to Google, is a brand of watch and not a government agency. He's got a gun that, to the best of my knowledge, has never been invented. To top it all off, he's hunting some alien blue thing which shouldn't exist." She pauses, catches her breath and says, "I miss anything, Timothy?"

"Nope," Ty says. "Not a thing."

"You going to tell me why you're undercover?"

"Nah." He leans back in his chair, positively beaming at her.

She shakes her head in annoyance. "You're really not going to explain?"

"Nope," Ty repeats, his grin stretching. "Nada and nothing."

She laughs despite herself, and Ty follows suit. It's strange, he thinks. It's been so long since he laughed, so long since he kicked back and just enjoyed being Tyler Smith. He'd almost forgotten what it was like.

(almost forgotten what he is like)

"So give me the scoop," he says finally. "People still say scoop at this school, right? Who was prom queen? Which superlative went where? How's the football team?"

Ivy's laughing again, so hard her face is turning red and her chest is heaving. One lock of her hair falls into her face instead of standing on edge like the rest of it. Ty itches to brush it into place. Ivy's eyes shine out from behind her glasses. Ty's smile is so wide it hurts.

She finally composes herself. Her cheeks are still wet from tears. "You looking for help with your cover story?" she asks.

"Something like that," Ty says.

Ivy wrinkles her nose and gives him a funny look. "Football team is terrible, I mean really, really terrible. First game of the season, some players got caught at a party with underage drinking and the coach booted the lot of them. The junior-varsity kids started the rest of the season. A girl named Katelyn Radford got voted prom queen as a joke more than anything: sweet kid, but definitely not a looker. Two of my best friends, Bryce Benson and Sydney King, got voted cutest couple which is funny considering they weren't a couple at the time and did nothing but insult each other. Strange thing was Bryce asked her to prom a day

later and they've been going steady ever since. The principal got pulled over for a DUI a few weeks ago which is just a scream considering she's heading this huge alcohol-abuse seminar in about a week and. . ."

She keeps talking straight through the morning's inspirational speaker, the student body president's stammering practice speech and the instructions they'd already heard before. Ty sits back and listens, pretending this is what he does every day. That he sits in the comfortable presence of Ivy and gossips about anything and everything. Pretends he'd never been taken to Timewise, never met Zane, never heard of a tikker.

Pretends he doesn't know Ivy Lane will die in two days and become world famous as first human slain by a tikker, the first one lane up.

(graduation ticks closer)

Ty makes it through the tikker block and into battle even though Zane doesn't. He's slipped a little off target. Getting the time right is the easy part; the place is more of a challenge. He's always been shit with coordinates.

Still it's not hard to find the battle. It's 2099. Ninety-odd years from his native time and people still act the same way in a crisis. Slang changes, clothes change, hair changes but human nature stays the same. He clutches the stunner to his chest, trying to shake the numbness from his fingers and failing.

Screams sound in the distance. Civilians flee the scene, eyes wild with panic. Ty pauses. He doesn't have to jump into the meat grinder of a battle that has been going on for one hundred years and one day all at once.

He can run, Ty thinks suddenly. Steal a bicycle, find a basketball court and play pickup until his body aches. He can slip back to his time, the right time, and curl up in his own bed or scare the hell out of Ivy. He doesn't have to stay here and be one of the hundreds who will die today.

(he is only sixteen years old and that is far too young to die)

He moves toward the battle all the same. The chaos is coming from a stadium. The battle is at a high school. It's the day of a homecoming football game, if Ty remembers right. Hundreds of students, natives of the time, try to push their way out of the stadium, seeking safety.

They students have always been here and will always be here – stuck in this spot, this day, this battle forever.

He starts shoving his way through the panicked masses, heartbeat pulsing in his throat. Though the day is warm, his fingertips are numb, freezing.

"What are you doing?" Someone screams at him. "Are you off? You knowing what's in there?"

"It's all right," he says, flashing his badge. "I'm called Ty Smith. I'm from Timewise. Needing you to stay calm!"

That doesn't work, not even close. The entrance to the stadium is too small for everyone to get through at once. Too many people jammed at the gate in not enough space and the fences too high for most to climb. Ty squeezes his way through the throng of people, for once thankful for his slight stature. If he thought it was chaos outside, inside is even worse. He glances around. Twenty tickers on his first count, blue lightning flickering from spindly fingertips.

He counts four bodies, but there's no saying how many the scrubbers have wiped from this day. He draws his stunner. It's impossible to shoot to kill. He needs to fire the stunner and then slit blue alien throats.

It's low-tech warfare at its absolute worst, and Ty tries not to choke on the scent of sizzling flesh as he moves into the battle.

It's surreal, Ty thinks as he stands outside what would have been his high school gymnasium dressed in what would have been his graduation robes holding what would have been the cover to his high school diploma. Despite everything, he still feels that same sense of closure, of accomplishment. It is coming to an end.

*Seniors! 1 day left!*

Ivy looks terrible. The girls are dressed alike in white robes that balloon out and make them resemble hundreds of marshmallows. She's teetering precariously on heels when she spots him and stumbles toward him, tripping over the bottom of her robe. Ty sweeps in and catches her before she hits the ground.

"Hey there, Tim," she says, grinning brightly. "Pick up your pretend diploma?"

"No point, is there?" Ty asks, propping her back onto her feet. "Never did go to this school."

"Aw," Ivy says, clutching her degree to her chest. "Don't you want a memento from the school you're pretending to graduate from? It's only right. You went through the rehearsals from hell."

"Ivy!" a voice calls. "Ivy Lane, you're a high school graduate!"

A pair of students race over. One is a tall dark-haired girl with blue eyes and the other is a heavysset blond guy in blue robes. In one hand, the girl is carrying her heels and a diploma. The fingers of her other hand are laced together with the boy's.

"Syd! Bryce!" Ivy cries, hugging them both in turn. "We actually made it."



Sydney's eyes lock on Ty, giving him the once-over. "Never seen you before."

"Right," Ivy says, glancing first at Ty and then back at Sydney. "Sydney, Bryce, this is Timothy Langerhans. He's an undercover agent from a secret government organization that has infiltrated our graduation. Isn't that right, Tim?"

"One hundred percent," Ty says, without batting an eyelash. "Seems Miss Lane wasn't the best confidante."

"Oh, I like him," Sydney says, studying Ty critically. "Little on the plain side, sure, but you can work with that. Where you been hiding him, girl?"

Ivy shakes her head at the absurdity of it all. "Graduation rehearsal." She raises her diploma in a toast. "Here's to Lewis Baker. Biggest school in the state. Funny how I'd never even met the guy sitting next to me."

"That's a shame," Sydney says, looking at Ty. Unbidden, Ty feels a hot blush sweep his cheeks. Sydney smiles. "He's cute when he's embarrassed."

"Should I be worried here?" Bryce asks, looping his arm around her waist. "You looking to make a move on him?"

"Always worry, Bryce," Sydney teases. "I'm still on the lookout for something better."

Ty shakes his head and pushes back his robes far enough to shove his hands into his pockets.

"I'm having a graduation party starting around four," Sydney continues. "It would be excellent to have some people outside of relatives and neighbors attending. You're both welcome to come by."

"Sure thing," Ivy says. "I'll have to put in some family time of my own, but I'll make it. How about you, Tim?"

Ty shrugs, trying to play it nonchalant. "Got nothing better worth doing."

"Fantastic," Sydney says, "See you guys there."

Ivy flashes her a smile. Ty feels a stone drop in the pit of his stomach. A tikker attack at a graduation party. This is how it will happen.

Ivy Lane is beside him now, smiling and happy and alive, her whole future paved out in front of her.

And today is the day she is going to die.

"You know what I think?" says Jones Longwood one night when Ty is in the hazy place between wakefulness and dreams. "I think time's a hell of a lot more flexible than we give it credit for."

It's past four o'clock in the morning. Ty rolls over in his bed, forcing his eyes open. "What are you on about?"

"Think at it." Jones is lying in his bed, hands folded behind his head. His face is bathed in the faint green light that lines the edges of the room. "Look at scrubbing. They tell us scrubbers remove us from the timeline. Never was a Jones Longwood out a 2228. But that's a paradox acause I'm right here, existing."

"What's your point?" Ty asks.

Jones sits up. The whites of his eyes stand out starkly against his dark skin, the only feature Ty can make out through the gloom. "You know why they call it Timewise?"

"Jones," Ty groans. "It's late. Or early. It's—"

"You know why they call it Timewise?" Jones repeats.

"No," mumbles Ty. "Prolly some sort of acronym or something."

"Nah," Jones says. "They call it Timewise acause a guy called Harrison Wise founded the place."

"Never heard of Harrison Wise," Ty says.

"That's acause they don't teach on him elsemore. Had to dig on it to find anything." Jones says, eyes shining in the dim green light. "Harrison Wise founded the place in 2289 and disappeared ten years after. Not a sign of him until some bottom-level research tech finds him in a newspaper obit dating 2034." Jones flops back down on his bed. "Been living pastside for thirty odd years. So much for protect and maintain the timeline."

"What's your point?" Ty asks.

"Figure me that maybe there isn't any dire need to protect the timeline like they say. Maybe the tikkers aren't any danger. Maybe this entire operation is just a way to get a few people up top rich. Because, by my counting, time's a lot more flexible than they preach. Way they say it, you step on a butterfly, you wipe out everything."

"So don't step on butterflies," Ty says.

"That's not my point," Jones says. "My point is we do shitful more than step on butterflies. What do you think on that?"

Ty rolls over in his bed to stare at Jones across the room. "I think you need to get out of the two-twenties and get back to sleep."

Jones is quiet for a long moment. Ty turns back over in bed, facing the wall rather than his roommate. He can hear Jones' breathing, heavy in the still air. Finally Jones says, "Forget it. Night, Smith."

Jones drifts off fairly quickly, but Ty can't, not quite. His roommate's words echo in the depths of his mind until that's all he can hear.

After fleeing the house where his dead father lives and the room that isn't yet his, Tyler Smith spends a day and a half in 1989. For two nights he sleeps in the field outside the newly minted Lewis Baker Secondary school and wakes up with the sun, clothes damp with the morning dew.

He's got a gnawing hunger in his gut. It's been more than a day since he's eaten and he's a little lightheaded. He wants to go home, but he can't yet because home won't even exist for another five years, at least not the home he knows.

He pushes himself up from the damp ground, trying not to notice the musty smell of earth saturating his clothes. Time travel. He still can't quite believe it, but here he is, trapped in the past with no hope of seeing his present.

The girl finds him three blocks outside the school. "Ty Smith!" she calls hesitantly.

When Tyler turns around, there's disappointment etched across her lovely face.

She is older than he is, about twenty if he has to guess, with long honey-blond hair peeking out from the back of a baseball cap. She's got pleasant features, stunning even, with high, sharp cheekbones, cupid's bow lips and eyes bluer than the sky itself.

"I'm Tyler Smith," he says.

"Anne Gallagher." Looking him up and down, she rolls her eyes and says, "Fucking time loops."

"You know who I am?" Tyler asks, because at this point, nothing will surprise him. "Have I even met you before?"

"Yes and no," the girl says, pressing her hands to her temples as if combating a headache. "Listen, Ty, you heard of Timewise?"

"Timewise?" he repeats dumbly. "No. What's a Timewise?"

"If you don't know, I can't tell you," she says. "Listen, I've met you before. Looking for you right now. Just not—" She gestures vaguely with one hand. "Just not this you. Picked up on the wrong Ty Smith, I appose. Both of you out of time."

"My name is Tyler," he says.

"See, what I mean? I'm looking for a Ty Smith. Not Tyler. Wrong guy." She smiles at him, or at very least bares her teeth. "I don't appose you've seen a great tall fellow 'round. Dark hair, dark eyes. Looks like you actually."

"Only one of me," Tyler says.

"Right," Anne says slowly. "Sure. You probably don't understand this a bit. Skorry to bother you."

She starts moving away from him at a remarkably quick clip. Tyler has to jog by her side to keep up. Not for the first time, he curses his diminutive stature.

"Wait!" he cries. "I'm stuck! I just woke up here and I don't know how to go back. And I have to go back. I haven't even been born yet. I can't stay here."

"Don't see what you're wanting me to do," Anne says, shoving her hands in her pockets.

"You can do it too," he guesses and the look in her eyes confirms it. "You can go back and forth in time. You have to help me get back home."

"I've got places to be," she says briskly. "I've got you — another you, that is — to find. Don't have a tick to spare."

"Please," Tyler says, pleading now. He doesn't think he can stomach another day here. He can't watch these people moving around with the knowledge that this life is nothing but a rerun. "I can't stay here."

Anne heaves a sigh. "Fine. Let's do this. You've got to close your eyes."

Tyler obeys immediately, shutting out the world in favor of the oblivion that is the darkness. Anne's voice drifts slowly to his ears, riding the breeze, syrupy sweet.

"Now, think on your right time," she says. "Should be grounded there. Find it and imagine it's right here. You're going to feel something like slipping and you have to let it start happening. Go down with it. Track it."

"I don't feel anything," Tyler whispers. "Never did. I just woke up here and it was cold."

"Don't appose so," Anne replies and Tyler can hear the frown in her voice. "Had the same trouble getting back pastside. Guessing I could try."

She presses her hand against his back and Tyler can feel it through the dampness of his shirt. Her hands are cold, freezing despite the heat outside. "Down goes nothing," she mutters.

She pushes him with all her might.

And then he's falling, slipping through time, back to the present and the knowledge that he's been missing for two days.

Ivy Lane lives on Harrison Street, a quaint street in the suburbs nestled in the bowels of a neighborhood called the Oaks. Ty used to live here too, in a little house two doors down from Ivy.

He is standing in front of his old house now, staring at the manicured lawn, the oak trees, the redbrick front, the well-worn siding. He used to be part of this little picture of suburban bliss.

Do the Smiths still live in the same house? Can Ty go knock at the door and say hello to his mom and his sister? Can he go back and pretend he had never left? Erica would be graduating college by his count and he's missed it, missed

everything.

"Don't know why I'm surprised to see you here," Ivy says. She's changed out of her graduation robes into a pair of jean shorts and a navy tank top. Ty feels out of place still wearing his leather jacket and jeans. He's icy cold. The battle, the attack, it's going to happen soon, and Ty's got to be ready if he intends to make a difference.

He points toward his old house. "Who lives there?"

Ivy shrugs. "Family called the Danners. Moved in three or so years ago after the Smiths left." Her eyes narrow in suspicion. "Why are you asking?"

Ty fights to speak around the lump in his throat. "No reason."

"I don't get you," Ivy says. "Super-secret government agent hanging around a highschool graduation. You're barely older than I am."

"Age eighteen," Ty says.

"No way you got recruited that young," Ivy says. "I'm going to want your story, you know."

"It's a long one," Ty says, "Besides, don't we have to get to your friend's party?"

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he curses them. But then Ivy grabs his hand, fingers linking with his own and everything else flies out of his mind.

Her hands are warm and he likes to think that some of the ice that haunts him thaws at her touch. She's grinning brightly at him, and he can't do anything but smile back and let her lead him down the street.

Sydney King's house is a half-mile walk from Harrison Street. Balloons decorate the mailbox and a sign over the door reads, *Congratulations Graduate!* Ivy leads him around back and into the Kings' spacious yard. A big wooden picnic table is on the patio, filled to the brim with food. There are watermelons, hot dogs, burgers, deviled eggs, cookies, cake, chips, salsa, apples, strawberries, pineapples, potato salad. . .

"See," Sydney says, coming up behind them. She's wearing a white dress with her long hair half up and half down. "I told you, the more the merrier. There's no way we can eat all this on our own. Ivy, your folks coming?"

Ivy nods, grabbing a slice of watermelon from the table. "Yeah, they'll be here in an hour or so. I think they needed a few minutes to collect themselves. Bigger day for them than it was for me."

Sydney rolls her eyes. "If our folks remembered what kind of hell high school was, they wouldn't be so sad to see us leave."

Ivy laughs her agreement. Sticky trails of watermelon juice run down either side of her mouth. For a moment, Ty can't see anything else.

"Where are your parents, Tim?" Sydney asks, "They're welcome to stop by as

well. We have more than enough food to go around."

"They're around," Ty lies. "Not really partygoers. We'll have a quiet thing later acorse."

"Acorse," Sydney repeats. "Listen to this guy, Ivy. I love it. Where've you been hiding him?"

Ivy shrugs. "We just met, Syd. Really."

"Whatever you say, Lane," Sydney says. She grins as she waves at someone over their shoulders. "Love to stay and chat, but I've got to mingle."

Ivy glances to Ty at her side. "You know she thinks we're going out, right?"

Ty feels a hot blush creeping up his neck. "That so?" he chokes.

"She's bat-shit insane," Ivy says. "I'm letting you tag along because I want the story behind this mysterious organization thing. You'll tell me everything eventually."

"Maybe," Ty chokes. "Someday."

Ivy Lane is going to die today. Until now, the situation had been an abstract notion but it is settling quickly into hard fact. Ty watches as Ivy moves away from him and into the crowd of people and the world that should have been his too. He's enthralled with her, the way she smiles, the way she moves.

"How's it on, Ty?" someone asks.

He's jerked back into reality with uncomfortable speed. Annie Gallagher is standing next to him, wearing a baggy white T-shirt big enough to conceal a weapon and an old pair of jeans. Her hair is tied up in a ponytail that sways in the light breeze.

"What are you doing here, Gallagher?" Ty asks.

"What?" She grabs a strawberry off the table and bites into it with a moan of delight. "Think you'd be the only one Spense sent to keep a look at this time? Too big a job for one." She follows his gaze, eyes landing on Ivy. "Is that her? Ivy Lane? Thought she'd be taller if I'm honest. Introduce us?"

"Go hellside, Gallagher," Ty spits.

"C'mon, Ty," she says, mock pleading. "We'll call me your sister. You and Tucker used to pull this con over easy."

"We're on a job, Gallagher," Ty says. "In case you've forgotten, all hell's going to cut loose in a few moments and you want your taste of history."

"Fine," Annie snaps. "It's going to start here. Hell cut loose, like you said. Us two are the first line. Numbers will be up soon. Elsemore, they'll be tikkers as well. I'll get in position and get ready for a fight. You best drop the tryst with dear Ivy Lane and do likewise."

He can feel it now, the cold gathering like a thunderstorm on a warm summer day. He places his hand on the stunner in his pocket, on the switchblade. Annie

disappears into the crowd almost as quickly as she'd come. Ty's head is throbbing. He pushes his way through excited graduates and proud parents until he reaches Ivy. He grabs her arm and turns her away from her friends.

"Tim," she tries to shake him off, but Ty won't let go. The physical contact is the only thing keeping him grounded. (if he lets go, she'll be gone) "What's wrong, Tim?"

"Ivy," Ty says with much more composure than he feels. "I've got to talk at you. Now."

"I'm busy," Ivy says.

"Please," Ty pleads. "Ivy, it's important."

She turns back to her friends, politely excuses herself from the conversation and lets him lead her to a secluded section of the yard. Only then does she shake his arm off. "I don't have time for this, Tim. So unless you're going to be straight with me, I don't want to hear it."

"You're going to die," Ty says. "Not long now."

"Not exactly inspiring me with confidence right now, Tim," she spits out. "Starting to think I may need to call the cops on you."

"You have to trust me," Ty says. "In a few minutes, things are going to get bad, and you can't be here when it happens."

"Trust you?" Ivy repeats. "What reason have you given me to do that? You haven't told me anything about who you are or what you're doing here, and now you say I'm in danger. Tell me why, Tim. If you want me to trust you, you have to give me a reason."

"Ivy, please," Ty pleads. What can he tell her? That he's a Timewise agent from the future come back to stop her death – that he's risking the fabric of reality, his entire career for her? "Even if I could tell you, you wouldn't believe me."

"So try, Tim," she says, green eyes shining in earnest. "Try."

A crash rings out behind them. Someone screams. Ty looks at her and says, "Ivy, please, you can't go back there."

"Why the hell not?"

"Please," Ty pleads. "Please, Ivy."

"You still haven't given me one reason to trust—"

Ty dips his head, cups her cheek and kisses her. It's nothing like the first time where they were both young and innocent and too afraid to feel anything. Ty closes his eyes and pours everything he can into the kiss: his hopes, dreams, desperations, desires and regrets. He tries to memorize the taste of her lips, the smell of her hair, the feel of his hands on her cheeks. He wants this moment to last forever – no, longer. He wishes he could freeze this moment so it could

exist forever like the battle that is starting right now not even twenty feet from them.

He pulls away from her all too soon. She's swaying as if in an unseen breeze, lips still slightly parted, eyes closed. Her hair's askew; her face is flushed.

"Get out of here, Ivy," he mutters. "Just trust me."

And that's how Ty leaves her.

(he hasn't felt this cold in a long time)

"I don't buy it," Ivy says, sitting across from him in the school cafeteria one day. "You say you were in town with Bryce, visiting his stepdad, and I don't buy it."

"There's nothing to buy." Tyler picks at the unidentifiable meat on his plate. "Me and Bryce went into town. I forgot to tell my mom. She got worried."

"We've known each other for a long time. Right, Tyler?" Ivy says.

"Forever," Tyler says. "Maybe longer."

"Yeah," Ivy agrees, leaning toward him over the cafeteria table. Tyler can smell her floral shampoo and feel the heat of her breath on his face. Almost instinctively, he leans closer to her, so that their noses almost touch over the table.

"Tyler," she whispers.

"Yeah, Ivy?"

She flicks his forehead. "That means I know when you're lying."

He shrinks back from her as if burned. He can't tell her the truth. That he can travel in time and got stuck in 1989 where his dad was still alive and neither Ivy nor Tyler existed yet. No, the lie is more believable.

He's given the same story to the cops and his mom. He'd called in all the favors Bryce owes him, feeling lucky that Bryce's stepfather had been too drunk to refute the claim. He didn't tell Bryce what really happened and Bryce didn't ask. Tyler's covered for him before. They're even now.

It's only Ivy who refuses to believe him and spots his story for the bullshit it really is.

"It's the truth," Tyler lies. "We went downtown. Listened to street musicians, bummed around town. Nothing exciting."

"You're lying," Ivy says.

Tyler has to wonder how she can tell. His mom can't, his sister can't, none of his teachers can. Just Ivy, who can pick up his invisible ticks and read him like a book.



(maybe it's because he's never lied to her before)

"Ivy, I—"

"You what, Smith?" she snaps. "You can't tell me? It's not all that hard. Certainly not rocket science. Just a few little words and we're back to normal. You can't have possibly done something so bad, you can't even tell me about it. What happened to trusting each other, Tyler? What happened to no secrets?"

"Ivy," he pleads.

"I don't like liars, Tyler," she says. "Never have and never will."

"I can't tell—"

"Two days," Ivy says, interrupting him. "Tyler, you were missing for two whole days. Your mom was going mad. Cops were at my house asking what happened to you. We all thought you were dead and now you show up again and you're lying and you won't even tell me why." Tears pool in her eyes and the thickness to her voice tugs at Tyler's heart and doesn't let go. "And you know what? If you won't say a thing, I'm not sure I can ever trust you. So, please Tyler. Tell me. Where the hell were you?"

"Ivy," he starts. The truth about time travel and paradoxes is hanging on his lips. He opens his mouth to speak. "I was with Bryce Benson for the weekend at his dad's house. We went into town, stopped for ice cream and that's all there was to it."

She shakes her head. A loose strand of hair falls into her face, covering one of her eyes. She pushes herself away from the table and stands up.

"Goodbye, Tyler," she says. "If you ever feel like telling me the truth, I'll be around. Until then, don't bother talking to me."

She stalks away. Tyler stares after her, cementing her every movement and every step in his memory. He fears he might never see her again.

Two days later, he runs into Zane and the tikker in the school hallway. A week after that, Ty is gone from his own time for good.

The memories of his life before Timewise will become shrouded in mist until they're almost unreal.

But this moment will remain etched in his memory: Ivy walking away from him over and over again until it's happening every second of every day.

Forever.

"It's not a gun," says the professor as the academy students eye the weapon with suspicion. "Keep that in mind. This is not a gun. Carrying a gun pastside would be illegal. Not to mention ill-advised."

They are in the courtyard outside Timewise's main building. The walls from

the building surround them on all four sides, tall and gray and stretching up toward the heavens. Ty feels claustrophobic. He can see the sky but it's the same color as the buildings, pollution from four hundred years obscuring the blue. It makes him think the horizon is an illusion, that the only thing that is real is Timewise. He'd been outside in 2401 only once. The streets were cluttered with people, not quite as many as his own time, but a good number all the same. Ty hadn't been bothered so much by what was different, but more by how much was the same.

Four hundred years and there are no significant improvements. Sure, the subtleties of the language are different but the conversation – all about the mundane – is the same. It's what he's been listening to his whole life.

There have been no important inventions since Ty's time. No one lives off planet. Cars can't fly. Transportation is still way short of the speed of light. And Ty's pretty sure food has less flavor because of years of genetic manipulation.

According to Timewise, it's all because of the war. The conflict with the tikkers that started in 2013 caused the human race to divert all funding into an international effort to fight an unknown enemy. Later, after Timewise assumed the burden of the war, the money that should have gone toward humanity's progress went to Timewise.

"It's called a stunner," the professor says.

The gun is sleek and silver with a simple trigger mechanism and some sort of a dial toward the top.

"When you're on an op, the stunner's the only weapon you'll be bringing pastside," the professor says. "Not even the high setting has a lasting effect on humans, just knocks them cold for a spell. They wake up, assume they hit their head and no one is the wiser. It has more or less the same effect on tikkers. Stunner knocks them cold and there's your chance to finish them."

"What are you talking on?" Stace asks, picking up on the vagueness of the statement even before Jones manages it. "Finish them?"

The Professor takes a deep breath and adjusts the collar of his jacket. It is a cold day outside. They're all cold days. Ty can barely make out the sun through the haze. "The only other standard for an op is this."

He pulls something out of his coat. From the distance, all it looks like to Ty is a black hunk of plastic, about as long as a comb. Then he flips it open and it's a knife with a six-inch blade, gleaming in the dim light of the courtyard. Ty can tell it's razor sharp without even asking. The professor delicately folds the blade back into the handle and returns it to his jacket.

"Since the stunner is incapable of finishing a tikker, use of a switchblade enables permanent disposal," he says. "The prescribed means is an incision to

the jugular."

"We slit their throats?" Stace asks, disgust evident in her voice.

Ty has to agree. Four hundred years pass and the only surefire way to dispose of an enemy is up close and personal? He would have thought the future would be less barbarian, more impersonal.

The professor coughs, embarrassed. "Ops can't go changing events. The stunner makes for the means of immobilizing tikkers. The blade ensures no killings not planned and sanctioned by Timewise. Can't have people wiping out ones apposed to live. Stunning natives isn't best way to go about things, either." He claps his hands briskly. "So here we stand for training with novice agents. The best way to get efficient is target practice. Trigger's simple to figure. You'll find some quirks to the weapon that take some getting used to."

He gestures to the stone table in the courtyard complete with twenty-five stunners all laid out in a row. "Can every student grab a stunner?"

Hesitantly, Ty follows the rest of the students to the table. He doesn't like guns. They make him think of his father, dead on the kitchen floor, leaking blood from a bullet hole in his head. No matter how much the professor insists the stunner isn't a gun, it still looks like a gun, still feels like a gun.

"Each stunner is set to weak," the professor says. "Hitting a human should give five, maybe ten minutes of unconsciousness, but nothing lasting."

Ty exchanges a look with Jones.

The professor smiles. "Best ways to do this is a challenge. You may test the stunners on each other. Last one standing gets victory."

The silence in the courtyard is so profound that Ty has to wonder if he's dreaming. Then beside him, Jones Longwood crumbles to the ground, unconscious. Acting solely on reflex, Ty whirls around and pulls the trigger.

The professor is right. There is a delay from trigger pull to stunner fire. His aim is terrible. He misses the guy he was aiming for and hits Stace Lemond square on. She collapses, too.

The battle is on then. Students all around Ty drop to the ground, but the joy in the air is unmistakable, like they're twelve-year-olds playing the world's most intense game of laser tag. And they are kids, Ty realizes with a start. They're kids playing at war but no one except Ty can see it.

Leaning against the side of Timewise's building, the professor surveys the scene with detached amusement.

Ty thinks that's the worst part.

It's started.

The war has started.

Ty sees Annie out of the corner of his eyes, stunner out and at the ready. Her hair's come half out of her ponytail, the knotted remnants of it hanging on either side of her face. Her clothes are streaked with tikker blood and her own blood. She looks fierce, terrible, but beautiful in her own way. A tikker's body is face down on top of Mrs. King's immaculate buffet table, leaking yellow fluid into the potato salad. Chaos abounds. Sydney is screaming, her pristine white dress caked in dirt and blood. Her face is red. Her perfect teeth glint in the sun.

He thinks he spots Jones Longwood, Val Teasley and Zane Tucker, but it can't be Zane because his ex-partner is locked up back at Timewise if the Procedure hasn't killed him already.

"Everybody out!" Ty bellows. "Everyone not from Timewise get out right now."

"Help," someone croaks at his side, hands clutching at his jeans. "You've got to help me."

Ty brushes the hands off without looking to see their owner. He counts tikkers: four, seven, thirteen. "You've got to get out!"

He fires off a round from his stunner. He sees Annie pulling out her switchblade. The civilians are starting to roust themselves into action. Bryce picks up a folding chair and swings it full force into the back of a tikker's head. He's moving toward Sydney when a stray shot from a Timewise stunner catches him in the back of the head. Bryce collapses, unconscious, to the grass.

Ty forces his numb limbs into action, moving on autopilot now. He spots a tikker with its hand extended, blue lightning gathering on its palms. The lightning crackles through the air before Ty can squeeze off another round of his stunner.

"Tim!" someone screams. "Tim!"

It's Ivy. Ivy, stumbling through the chaos. Ivy, who is due to die any minute now. Ivy, who is only out here because of him.

She doesn't even see the tikker behind her.

Ty takes off at a run. His vision tunnels, his muscles scream. She's going to get lane up right here, right now, right in front of him. If that happens, he has nothing left.

He crashes into her at full speed, toppling them both to the ground. The blue streak of lightning whizzes over their head, singing the ends of Ty's hair.

"Are you insane?" he hisses at Ivy.

"I was looking for you," Ivy says.

Ty doesn't respond to that. He can't, because Ivy is here and she's alive. As long as she's beside him, he can do anything. He scrambles to his feet, pulling

her up with him.

"Run!" he tells her. "Run! Let's go!"

He links his hand with hers and they're both take off, racing through the carnage, through tikkers and Timewise and stunners and lightning, through terrified graduates and disregarded burgers.

"Ty!" Annie Gallagher screams at him, but she doesn't follow, can't follow. She's locked in battle and Annie doesn't turn her back on duty.

(not like him)

Ty doesn't let go of Ivy's hand until they're three blocks away. They're both breathing heavily. Sweat drips down Ivy's brow, but Ty is still shivering from the temporal instability. The screams are fading into the distance.

Ty looks up at the sky. The sun is shining, birds are singing and flowers are in bloom. The grass is that rich green color that happens before the blistering heat of summer. And Ivy Lane is alive.

(Ty is good as dead)

He runs his hands through his hair as the seriousness of his predicament hits him full force. He has broken the law, the single most sacred law in the whole of Timewise.

*Don't interfere with the natural course of events.*

However, there's no apocalypse. Time has not split itself on its seams because Ivy is still breathing.

Ty thinks of Jones Longwood lying in the bed across from him. *I think time is a hell of a lot more flexible than we give it credit for.*

"They'll get here soon," Ty says.

"Who will get here soon?" Ivy asks.

"Timewise," Ty says, pacing frantically. "Oh, I'm sunk now. That's it. That's the end of me."

"You saved my life," Ivy says.

And that is what would damn him, Ty thinks, condemn him to a life on the run, moving through the timelines like Zane until Timewise finally catches up with him.

And Timewise will catch him.

How long does he have before Annie turns him in? More importantly, how long before Timewise reacts? They know exactly where he is, exactly when. If the tikkers have a block on this day, it might buy him a little time, but not enough, not nearly enough. He has to move – has to move now and has to move fast. He needs to build up a buffer between him and them.

"You saved my life," Ivy says again.

"And I'd do it again," says Ty. "Crissakes, I wouldn't even have to think before

I did it again."

"What happened back there?" Ivy asks. "What the hell was that?"

How can he explain the neverending battle that only lasts a day? What can he say about time travel and tikkers and Timewise that would make sense? How could Ivy understand Tyler plucked from 2007 as a scrawny, naive kid only to return a hardened operative of the Timewise Agency in 2013?

"I need to get out. They'll find me otherwise. Skorry, Ivy." He touches her hair, then her cheek. "I wish I could—I'm sorry."

He turns abruptly, shoving his hands into his pockets and stalking down the deserted street.

"Tyler!" she calls.

He freezes. She shouldn't be able to pull his name out of the air, like she actually remembers him from before. He's been scrubbed, erased from this era. He should be nothing but a phantom, a ghost who doesn't truly exist.

"Tyler!" she yells again. "That's your name, isn't it?" She sounds like she's on the verge of tears. "You're Tyler Smith." She chokes out a sound that's half-laugh, half-sob. "You got tall."

He doesn't turn around. He can't look at her because if he does, he's sunk. This is the last thing he needs after the business with Zane.

"Tyler?" Ivy says again and he can hear the tears in her voice

If he looks at her now, he'll never be able to leave. He's not sure he can function outside of Timewise, not sure he can live a normal, linear life.

"Ty," he says without turning around. "It's just Ty now."

## PART THREE

*(Present)*

Ty slips before he consciously makes the decision to run. One minute he's in 2013 walking away from a sobbing Ivy Lane and then he blinks and it's nighttime. A different time than he just left but the same place. He blinks again, disoriented.

A commotion is coming from one of the houses, his old house with its redbrick front and its manicured lawn. The lights are on. Two men barge out the front door. To Ty's surprise, he recognizes both of them.

The first is his father, standing in blue pajama pants a size too big and a white T-shirt that's a little too small. The second is Spenser Peabody. Quite a few years younger than the Spense Ty knows, but still unmistakably Ty's boss. Ty ducks behind a tree before they can spot him.

"You have no right coming here," his father hisses. "This is my family, my house, my home. You don't get to come back after five years and expect me to leave with you."

"It hasn't been that long for us, John," Spense says, running a hand through his blond hair. "Crissakes, we thought you were dead."

"As it turns out, not so much," his father answers. "And the name's Garrett now."

"Been going by your cover?" Spense asks. "John, this isn't you."

"It didn't used to be," his father says. "But you left me here five years and I grew up. Got a wife I love and a little girl I adore. Going to have a son in a few weeks. That's not something you can ever have at Timewise."

Ty peeks out from his hiding spot. Spense is dressed the same as always in sneakers, dress slacks, a T-shirt and a blazer. But he looks softer in the face, somehow more innocent. This Spense hasn't been beaten down by the weight of command, hasn't yet sent people to their deaths.

"John, you can't stay," Spense says. "You're not supposed to be here."

"Why not?" Garrett retorts. "Five years gone and nothing's happened: no tikkers, no temporal disturbance, nothing and nada. The world won't end if I don't go back."

"John," Spense says, but he catches himself. "Garrett, look—"

"I don't care what you say, Spense. I've got a life here," his father says. "I'm not going back. That won't change. No matter how many people they send for me, that won't change!"

Spense starts to say something, thinks better of it and scuffs the ground with his foot. "Hell, John," he says finally. "They won't be hearing from me. Easier to

leave you dead. Less paperwork."

His father laughs and pulls Spense into a hug. "Gonna miss you, man," he says, his voice thick with relief. "Thanks."

"Yeah, well, take care of yourself." Spense gently pushes his father away. "Don't want to be hearing about you getting lane up." And then he tilts his head sideways and he's gone.

Garrett Smith smiles, shakes his head and turns to move inside. He pauses, fingers on the doorknob.

"I know you're out there," he calls. "And you can tell Timewise the answer is still no."

Ty holds his breath.

"You hear me?" his father shouts from the doorstep, thumping his chest. "I'm called Garret Smith and I moved here in 1986 and this is home now!"

Ty reaches into the cold and slips.

"Ty Smith," says Jones Longwood, crossing his arms over his chest. "Never thought I'd look at you elsemore. You do know they're looking on tacking you down. Timewise enemy number one."

Ty is in Jones' quarters inside Timewise, because he needs information and Jones is only person he thinks won't rat him out on sight. "I need your help," Ty says.

(he has nowhere left to go)

"And how do you know I won't be handing you in?" Jones says, folding his arms over his chest. He's been at Timewise as long as Ty, but he hasn't lost that paranoia that haunts the new agents, the sneaking feeling that everyone's out to get them.

(everyone is out to get them)

"There's not many people I trust," Ty says. "You're one of them."

Jones stares at him for a long moment and then shrugs. "How long you got before they find you?"

Ty shakes his head. "I'm hoping the last place they'll check is right under their nose."

"So between two minutes and two years, yeah?" Jones asks.

Ty rubs at the scraggly beginnings of the beard on his chin. "I just want to keep moving."

"What you need?"

"Scrubbing. I need to know how it works."

Jones flops back onto his unmade bed. "You know I can't tell you that."



"Come off it," Ty snaps. "You got assigned to be a scrubber acause you're a suspicious son of a bitch. Now I am, too. A girl I used to know before Timewise, she remembers. Looks straight at me and calls me Tyler Smith. You've got to tell me why."

That gives Jones pause. "You sure you want to know? Lots of folks don't much like it."

"I need to know," Ty insists.

Jones leans forward on the bed, one hand on each side, clutching the edge. "This here, Ty, this is Timewise's biggest secret."

"Had it with theatrics, Jones," Ty says. "Let's hear it. Nothing can surprise me anymore."

Jones raises an eyebrow. "How 'bout this? There's no such thing as scrubbing. Never was and never going to be. People can go writing themselves out of history if they misstep, can become their own grandfathers, can go changing who they are, but blank themselves entirely? Impossible. Can't be done if you want to keep the person breathing. Elsewise, they turn out like Run Richards."

The news doesn't hit Ty as hard as it would have a year ago. "But then what do you do?"

"Every day, I go back and make it so no one goes looking for us," he says. "I fake deaths. I plant bodies."

"So my family thinks I'm dead?" He can't deal with this right now. He's got to push it out of his head before the idea breaks him.

"Easier for all that way," Jones says. "Ops don't get sent out until ages after. Even if they get seen, no one and nadie gets an ident."

"Is that what the battle scrubbers do, too?"

"Something worse," Jones says. "They won't talk at me to say what, but they scream while sleeping. How the hell do you think the battle days are always scrubbed clean? No sign of the ones before. I think they go out making folks like Run Richards."

"How can you do that?" Ty asks. "Every day, how can you go out ending lives?"

"You don't get to judge me," Jones says, standing up to grab him by the shoulders. "Don't look at me and think I don't hate it. Got to get done, though. Long as tikkies abound, someone's got to keep us fighting. Tick after this is over, something's going to be done."

"But it will never be over," Ty says.

Jones shakes his head. "Timewise won't get to do this forever long as Jones Longwood has a thing to say about it."

"You don't trust them," Ty says.

"Anyone who puts this much effort into hiding their steps don't deserve trusting," Jones says. "Elsewise, I don't trust anyone. I'm just needing proof."

Somewhere outside, alarm bells blare, a low whining siren that signifies the Timewise facility has been infiltrated.

Ty shoots Jones a wry smile. "That's my cue."

"They'll hear nothing and nada from me," Jones says, an uncharacteristic softness in his eyes. "Promise."

Ty runs into trouble in 2313 when he stumbles out of an elevator car and straight into a tikker. He's dropped his stunner sometime in 1999 and his switchblade in 2167. Everything Timewise could use to trace him is gone and that leaves him alone and defenseless.

It's just one tikker. One stupid, lone tikker in the middle of an empty hallway. The tikker raises its hand, fingers crackling with blue fire. Ty closes his eyes and thinks, *This is how it ends. This is how I die.*

He's cold, tired and almost three hundred years past his own time. All he can think to do is stand there and wait for the death blow.

He closes his eyes, waiting for the tikker to finish him. At least he'll die upright like a man rather than rotting in jail cell like—

"Ty!" a voice cries.

He opens his eyes. Zane is standing in front of him, the tikker dead at his feet.

"Ty Smith!" Zane quirks a smile. "Not the one looking to arrest me, I appose."

"No," Ty chokes. "Not that one."

Zane takes in his disheveled appearance. "What did you do then? Guessing it was big."

"I changed something." Ty runs a hand through his hair. "I fixed it."

"Dangerous business, that is," Zane says. "Being a hero."

"World's fucked over," Ty says. "Fell to pieces. Someone's got to put it back together."

"Elsewise we'll all go hellside with it," Zane agrees. "Skorry you had to find out."

Ty nods. He's sorry, too. He was happier before he realized just how miserable he was. "Better get out," he slurs, hands shaking. "Elsemore they'll find their pair of outlaws together."

"Can't be having that," Zane says.

Ty's left staring at the empty space where he used to be.

And then it's 2376 and Ty's outside Timewise. A little boy at the gates is staring up at the building as his mother tries to drag him away. He's about six years old with lily-white skin and a shock of blond hair. The brightness of the boy seems foreign, out of place. The sky is dark with the haze of 24th century pollution, and Ty has a hard time picturing the entrance to Timewise as anything other than the gates of Hell.

"Gonna be a Timewise agent when I get growed," the boy tells his mother. "Fighting the tikkers, saving the world."

"That's nice, Spense." The mother finally succeeds in pulling him away. "But you know we can't all work at Timewise. Only a very special kind of person can work there."

"Gonna save the world," says six-year-old Spense Peabody, blue eyes shining out from under blond bangs.

And it's 2172. Ty trips as his feet hit the ground, landing him on the grounds of a familiar college. Annie's college. Callope University where she conned her way into admission under the name Erin Miller.

He shivers. This is what he gets when he slips without aiming. Familiar places and familiar people. Because there's Annie Gallagher not twenty yards from him, sitting on a bench holding a newspaper and shivering despite the summer heat.

This isn't the cold, hardened agent he knows. This Annie, eighteen years old and thirty years out of her own time with no way to get back. She has red-rimmed eyes, like she's been crying. Ty's used to seeing her in a T-shirt, jeans and a baseball cap, but this Annie doesn't have to play down her beauty. She's wearing a tight jean skirt that shows off perfectly toned legs and a v-neck blouse that displays just the right amount of cleavage. Not for the first time, Ty realizes she's beautiful; absolutely, stunningly beautiful.

Standing amid the masses of students walking to their classes, watching her sob, he also realizes that she's human after all.

Someone bumps into his back. He's so unstable, he slips again.

And then it's 2001 and he's back in suburbia, freezing through the blazing heat of summer.

It's a sunny, cloudless day, so hot that steam seems to rise from the asphalt. Ty shoves his hands in his pockets and starts walking. Kids are everywhere, laughing, screaming, sweating, chasing down the ice-cream man on bikes as others fight to finish cones of soft serve before the sun does it for them. The

sticky liquid drips, drips, drips down their chins.

Two kids catch his eyes in particular. A little girl with red hair and sunburned cheeks chasing a tiny slip of a boy with light-brown hair. They're both clutching squirt guns and squealing with laughter. Ty can't take his eyes off them.

"Bang!" Ivy shouts, hitting the younger Tyler with a blast of water straight in the face. "Bang! You're dead now! You're dead!"

Her words ring in his ears over and over until it's all he can hear. *Bang! Bang! You're dead now!*

It's an omen if he's ever heard one.

*You're dead!*

Ty slips.

And he saves a girl from a mugger in 2210, then breaks up a gang fight in 2229 only to be knifed in the process. He stops a guy from committing suicide in 2340 and yanks a kid back to the curb by his collar before a bus flattens him in 2019.

Ty sees Annie, the current Annie, six times in a span of seven slips and starts keeping the jumps closer together. He is always freezing and he's starting to wonder how Zane made it all those months, how anyone could possibly survive this.

He comes across tikkies in 2311 and loses Annie in the fray, slipping back to 2222 where a younger Jones Longwood greets him with a disarming smile and too much trust.

"Some men will come at you a few years forward," Ty warns the young Jones, his words slurred. He is tired and not thinking clearly but at the same time he is making perfect sense. "You can't trust them acause they're going to take you away and make it look like you're dead."

The young Jones nods, face showing not apprehension but trust. Ty thinks back on history. This is before the government scandals and the economic collapse. Before the world descends into chaos and Jones Longwood's mom gets caught in the crossfire. This is before Jones realizes just how cruel the world can be.

*And if you can keep tweaking at the little picture, it'll add up, you know? Tacking on and on until maybe the big stuff starts to twist too.*

Ty wishes he could fix what will happen to Jones. He wishes he could fix it all. "You're a good kid," Ty says, ruffling Jones's hair. "You don't deserve any of this."

He smiles sadly at Jones, tilts his head sideways, slips to 2333, and runs straight into Annie Gallagher.

"Ty! Did you get him?" she yells. But when she gets a good look at him, she frowns. "What the hell happened to your face?"

He rubs at his grungy beard self-consciously and watches as the realization hits Annie. Before he even realizes what's happened, she has her stunner trained on him. "You've run your timelines crosswise. What breed of idiot are you?"

Ty raises his hands defensively. "Annie, calm down, calm down. You've got to let me tell it."

"Fine," Annie says, but she doesn't lower her stunner. "Talk at me."

"Well." Ty rubs at the back of his neck. "It's a little like this—"

He slips mid-sentence before she has time to fire.

And he gets tired. The kind of bone-deep tired that comes from months of being constantly on the move, of eating practically nothing and freezing even in the summer heat. Ty can count his ribs and hardly recognizes the sunken eyes staring back at him when he looks in the mirror. One day he realizes he can't do this anymore, realizes another tick of this and there will be nothing left of him.

So he goes back to Ivy.

(after all this time where she is still feels like home)

Ivy Lane's a college sophomore when Ty finally finds her again, attending Callope University only about two hours from where he used to live. Ty takes a page out of Annie's book and cons his way into the school by stealing someone's unused scholarship. It's two weeks of classes before he finally runs across her on campus.

Ivy is coming out of the chemistry building, talking animatedly with a gangly, bespectacled guy who has a pair of lab goggles dangling from his neck. Her hair's grown out a little, framing her face in a layered bob. She looks good – better than good – but Ty isn't exactly unbiased. He smiles at her, so wide his face hurts from the strain of it. "How's it happening, Ivy?"

At first, she walks past him. Ty's disappointed but not surprised. He's not the most noticeable guy around. While that's a blessing when it comes to Timewise, it's not when it concerns Ivy. But then, three steps later, she stops in her tracks and turns around.

"Tyler!" she shouts and launches herself at him, looping her arms around his

neck.

He spins her around, loving every second of her delighted laughter, reveling in the closeness.

"Tyler Smith!" she says, finally pulling away from him. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"Actually, it's Marcus Bennington now," Ty says. "So says the paperwork at least."

Ivy shakes her head. "You're still Tyler Smith to me. Always will be." The smile melts from her face, abruptly giving way to suspicion. "Hold on, we're not getting more of those blue things to worry about, are we?"

"Nothing to worry on," Ty says. He motions to his backpack, grinning sheepishly. "Not unless you count a physics test. How do they expect me to do well on this test when their stuff is so obviously wrong? Hopelessly outdated."

"You're going to school here?" Ivy says with surprise. A second later, an expression of absolute delight crosses her features. "What happened to the super secret alien-fighting organization?"

Ty shrugs. "I got bored."

"You do realize you're giving me the whole story," Ivy says. "No more lies."

"My heart crosswise," Ty says. "Everything. Promise."

"Then we're meeting up for lunch. Noon at the Grill?"

"Sure thing," Ty says.

Ivy's face splits into a wide smile. The light catches her eyes, making them appear to dance. Her freckles are dark against her cheek and Ty can't imagine a world where she's dead.

Sitting in a secluded corner of the dining hall known as the Grill at a college called Callope University in the year 2014, Ty tells Ivy everything. About Timewise and tikkers, scrubbing and battles. About Annie Gallagher and Spense Peabody and Jones Longwood. About Zane Tucker gone rogue and the four months Ty has spent on the run.

Ivy, to her credit, listens to the fantastic tale with a straight face and an open mind. She munches on fries smothered in ketchup and picks at the remnants of an overcooked cheeseburger.

When Ty finally trails off, his voice is hoarse. The lunch rush has long since passed and the two of them are the only people left in the dining hall.

"So," Ivy says after a long pause. "Aliens and time travel, huh?"

Ty nods. His throat has clammed up and stopped working as he waits for her response.

Ivy grabs another fry from her plate and pops it into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. "I thought you said time travel was bullshit. Now, aliens I can buy. After all, there's what? Thousands of different ways life could evolve, but time travel, Ty? Honestly." A mischievous twinkle is in her eyes. "Impossible. Too many variables."

Ty laughs so hard he almost chokes. "That's what I kept thinking. Six years gone and I'd never believe it if it hadn't happened to me."

"Now genetic mutation's a nice touch," Ivy continues. "Haven't heard that before about time travelers. It's crazy. Madness if it works."

Ty can't stop laughing. Ivy keeps talking, smirking and Ty laughs until the tears stream down his cheeks.

It takes two years for Timewise to catch up with him. Ty's a junior at Callope, working through a double major of physics and history. He decides to skip out on clubbing with Ivy in favor of pulling an all-nighter to finish a term paper due the next day.

It's five a.m. and still dark outside when he walks into the apartment he shares with Ivy and flips on the light switch to find Annie Gallagher sprawled on his couch. Her feet are propped up on the coffee table and her hand is poised on the stunner at her side.

"Come on, Ty," she says, smirking like she owns the place. "Did you really think we wouldn't find you?"

Whether he realized it or not, Ty has been expecting this day for two years. Now that it's finally here, he doesn't know how to deal with it.

"Annie," he says cordially, hanging his jacket on a hook next to the door. "It's been a while. You want anything to drink? I think we've got beer in the fridge."

"Are you even legal yet?" Annie asks.

"You know I lost track a while back. Figure me close enough." Ty moves to the kitchen and grabs a couple of beers from the refrigerator. He returns to Annie and tosses her one of the bottles. She catches it easily.

"You haven't stunned me yet," Ty says, "so I'm guessing you got over the phobia of tikker tech and you're carrying a block."

Annie pops the cap off her beer. "Acorse," she says. "What? Think I'd have a sit-down with Timewise enemy number two knowing he could slip away?"

"Number two?" Ty asks.

"Disappointed?" Annie shoots back, taking a long swig from her beer.

"Surprised," Ty confesses. "What happened to number one."

"You were until a month pastside."

"What happened then?"

Annie shifts uncomfortably on the couch. "Took Zane Tucker in for the Procedure. He gave me the slip before they had him sedated."

Ty feels a smile sweep across his face.

"Won't be making that same mistake twice." Annie says, looking at him strangely. She's exhausted, Ty realizes. She's got deep, dark circles under her eyes and a dreadful thinness to her face. "Why'd you do it, Ty? Why'd you go and change the past?"

Ty sits down on the edge of the coffee table. "That's the thing, isn't it? Annie, it's not the past. Not for me, at least. Was born in 1993, not 2406. This may be your past, but it's not mine. Far as I'm concerned, none of it's happened yet."

"Cute, Ty," Annie snarls. "Incredibly naive, but cute. Tucker teach you that? What happens when the tikkers abound?"

"Tikkers haven't showed up," Ty says, sipping on his beer. "And if they haven't yet, I doubt they ever will. I just want to have a normal, linear life. I'm not hurting anyone."

"No," Annie says, setting her bottle down on the coffee table. "No, you're not hurting anyone, but I'm taking you in that way or no. Stand up. Turn 'round."

Ty obeys, standing up slowly and turning to face the wall.

"Tyler Smith," Annie says and Ty can hear her pulling out the handcuffs. "You have been charged with a grade one timeline infraction. Under authority of the Timewise Agency, I am authorized to take you into custody."

He can feel her moving toward him. She grabs him roughly by the wrist and a wild panic seizes him. He jerks his elbow back and up and catches her in the face. Her head snaps backward, giving him enough time to wheel around and snatch the stunner from her hands. She stumbles back, tripping over his coffee table and landing on the beat-up couch, a look of complete bewilderment on her stunning features.

"Did you really think I'd come quietly?" Ty asks, fingering the trigger.

Annie smirks through the mess of rapidly swelling flesh. She's wiping the sticky red blood from her face when she says, "Did you really think I'd come solo?"

Something bashes into the back of Ty's head and his entire world plunges into darkness. He loses his grip on the stunner and it clatters to the floor about a second before he does. He lands roughly, a sharp pain shooting through both knees. It's a miracle he maintains consciousness.

He spots the stunner under the coffee table only a few feet away and tries to make a grab for it. Annie bends down and picks it up before he can even force his arms into action. She glances up, giving her new partner a nod. "That was



perfection, Jax."

It's Jackson Noddings, the orphan Ty and Zane brought in when the tikker took Zane.

Annie crouches down on her haunches, regarding Ty with barely contained disdain. He feels a sort of perverse satisfaction at the rapidly bruising mark on Annie's chin. "You went changing the past, Ty," she says. "You near mucked everything up."

She really believes it, Ty realizes. She's bought into all the Timewise doctrine and all the rules. She believes it with a sort of fevered frenzy that Ty never had.

"I think time's a hell of a lot more flexible than we give it credit for," Ty says, reciting the words as if from a distant dream.

"I think," Annie replies, pausing for full effect, "you're shitful. Jax, cuff him."

"You can't change what I did," Ty snarls. "You know that. It's happened now and that's just as good as saying it always happens and always will be happening."

"Don't matter."

Ty sighs as Jax hauls him to his feet. "Can I at least write Ivy a note? Tell her what happened."

"That's her name, huh?" Annie says. "Ivy Lane. Records say she was apposed to be the first human ever killed by a tikker. Sweet on her, huh, Ty?"

"Very much."

"Suppose you think that'll get to me? Touch me deep inside. Make me think it was about love so what you did wasn't criminal." Annie's blue eyes cut through him. "It's not all good. Love's not an excuse. I'm still taking you in. What've you got to say to that?"

"She's not dead," Ty growls. "And you know what, Annie? That means no matter what you do to me, I've won."

Annie grabs him roughly by the arm. With her free hand, she reaches into her pocket and turns off the block. They plunge into the ice, slipping forward through time. Ty had forgotten how the ice seeps through his veins and into his heart, had forgotten what it's like to exist with his fingers stiff and his joints numb. Despite it all, he's smiling as they tumble through time and through the cold.

Because Ivy's alive and there's nothing they can do.

"You hear me!" he crows, laughing now. "I won!"

The cell in Timewise is freezing. Ty has to keep flexing his fingers to make sure they don't stiffen irreparably. They've shaved his head, dressed him in an

orange prison jumper and shoved him into a holding cell to wait.

They assign him an attorney and, finally, put him on trial. His attorney won't let him testify. He has to sit there and listen while Timewise presents overwhelming evidence against him. Annie Gallagher, Spense Peabody and Val Teasley testify. Jones Longwood is the only one to say anything in Ty's favor but he can't say much without being branded a traitor himself.

He's convicted of three counts of grade one timeline infractions, aiding the fugitive Zane Tucker and a couple other misdemeanors that Ty can't bring himself to care about.

The sentence is the Procedure, twelve months in a cell and then release from Timewise. Release into the current time, 2407, hundreds of years after his life is supposed to be over.

Ty listens to the ruling, staring down at his hands folded neatly in his lap. He forces himself to think of Ivy, smiling and alive back in his own time. She'll be upset for a while, but he's warned her this might happen — would happen. He just wishes they'd had more time together.

Back in the cell again, Ty thinks the layout could be a duplicate of the prison cells he used to see while watching old movies on the couch with Ivy.

A single cot with scratchy sheets and bedsprings that creak is pushed over to the side of the room. A small toilet is in another corner. Shining chrome bars keep him inside the cell, a crackling force field that taunts him with the impossibility of escape. The walls so white that it seems like daylight even in the darkness.

Soon Ty loses track of the days. A prison guard stops by at breakfast and dinner and leaves him protein bars that taste like sawdust in his mouth. He eats anyway. He scratches at the cuff on his wrist, trying to find some loophole, some way to get it off, but only succeeds in rubbing his skin raw. The blood slicks his hand and stings painfully, but no one is willing to take off the cuff to dress the wound properly his hand stays red and puffy for weeks on end.

He takes to sleeping as long as he can. His dreams are distressing more often than a comfort. He dreams of Zane, finally caught after years of running, going in for the Procedure. He dreams of his father with a bullet in his brain, sprawled across the living room for his seven-year-old daughter to find. He dreams of Ivy, body convulsing after the blue lightning from a tikker strike. He wakes up and has to shove his fist in his mouth to keep from screaming. He won't let them have the satisfaction of hearing him suffer.

Nothing changes for weeks — or maybe it's months or even years. And then one night, everything changes. There's a small disturbance in his cell, a change in the atmosphere, a shift. It's almost imperceptible, but it wakes him up. He

groggily turns over in his cot and forces his eyes open.

A little boy is inside his cell, hardly more than ten years old. He has a wild mess of dark brown hair and wide, frightened eyes. He's wearing pajamas, his feet bare against the floor.

"Where am I?" the boy manages to ask. "Who are you?"

His voice is soft, as light as the air. It's been a long time since Ty heard something that sounded so innocent.

"Prison cell 67B," Ty answers, sitting up in bed. "Welcome hellside, kid."

The poor boy's eyes go even wider and he wraps his hands across his chest for warmth. Ty recognizes the pose instantly. This kid's out of time. All the telltale symptoms of an unplanned slip are there, from the too-short pajama pants to the fear dripping from him.

"We're in prison," the kid stammers, shrinking back against the wall.

And that's when the haze clears and Ty realizes he knows this kid. It's him. It's Tyler Smith before this mess started.

"Yessir," Ty tells his younger self. "Name's Zane Tucker. You're in my cell. 67B."

"You're a killer, aren't you?" Tyler stammers, his entire body quaking. "That's why they locked you up. Ivy says the criminal mind works in all sorts of twisted ways. They try and gain your trust an' the next thing you know, they're shoving a knife in your stomach and slicing out your entrails. I heard—"

"I haven't got a knife," Ty says. "And I always preferred eyeballs to entrails."

He feels distressingly calm. The distant voice from a lecture long forgotten rings in his ears. *The same matter cannot exist in the same place at the same time.* But even though he's inches away from his younger self, he's not the least bit worried.

Tyler makes a sound like he's choking back a laugh. Ty gives the kid a small smile. "Not a killer. Just made enemies of some of the higher-ups. Broke some rules needed breaking."

When his ten-year-old self finally speaks, his words are unusually serious for someone so young. "Was it worth it?"

The question catches Ty off guard. It hangs in the still air and gains weight with each second that passes. He opens his mouth, about to tell himself what's coming. To explain about the tikkers and the chaos and the destruction in his future. About to warn himself not to follow Spense Peabody into Timewise that fateful afternoon.

And then he thinks of Ivy. She'd be dead if Ty hadn't come to Timewise, gone rogue and broken all the rules. He realizes if he had a chance to do it all over, he'd do it exactly the same way.

A smile spreads across his face. It's the first time he's smiled since 2015, when he last saw Ivy. Every stolen second was paradise.

*Was it worth it?*

"Most definitely," Ty says.

And he means it.

### *(Epilogue)*

After four months of waiting, the day Ty is scheduled for the Procedure arrives. Spense is in his cell when he wakes up, blinking against the bright whiteness of the room. Spense looks paler somehow, his skin so white it nearly blends in with the walls.

Ty pushes himself into a sitting position. "Is it time?" he asks. Even to his own ears, his voice sounds wrong: rusty, grating, unused.

Spense nods. Ty meets blue eyes filled with something that looks like pain, but Spense doesn't maintain eye contact for more than a second.

The lock on the cell opens and Spense starts walking toward the end of the hallway, obviously expecting Ty to follow. For a split second, Ty contemplates sitting in his cell, refusing to move. What would happen then?

He can imagine Timewise bringing in people to coax him out of the cell, down the hall and into the lab. He'd lash out at Annie Gallagher, try to explain his reasoning for not budging to Val Teasley and say goodbye to Jones Longwood. In the end, he'd go to the lab, either willingly or by force. No matter what, Timewise will always win this battle.

So he leaves the cell of his own volition, standing up on leaden legs and forcing himself to put one foot in front of the other. Spense is ahead of him, moving down the whitewashed hallway with a brisk sense of purpose. Ty follows.

He is not the only prisoner. Others peer out through the chrome bars on their cells, eager for one last look at Ty Smith before he heads in for the Procedure.

Ty forces himself to smile, but the grin feels all wrong on his face, like it's so lopsided it will slide off at any minute. He sees his shadow on one of the white walls. He's always been slim, but he's skin and bones now, swimming in a shirt that used to fit him well. He feels old, hunched over like a man forty years his elder. It takes a conscious effort to straighten his back.

If Ty has to go down, it won't be while he's looking like a beaten man.

"In here," Spense says at the end of the hallway, pulling the door open.

Ty walks past him and into a room that resembles a morgue more than an operating room. Everything's gray: the ceiling, the walls, the floor. Instead of being shiny and metallic, even the operating table is dull.

Ty can imagine tickers being dissected here, sliced up on the table with visceral yellow fluid seeping from every incision.

"Skorry it has to go along this way," Spense says quietly. "But Ty, you—"

"I know," Ty interrupts. Absolution. That's what Spense wants, so Ty gives it to him. "I broke the law. I get it. The Procedure is just procedure. It's not your

fault."

Spense is tasked with sentencing people to their deaths and sending agents to hunt down their own. Ty gets that it's a hard job that someone has to do. It's not Spense's fault that he's good at it.

"They'll be preparing for the Procedure in the next room," Spense says, staring down at the floor. "I've got some paperwork." His eyes flicker up to Ty. His hand is on the door handle. "Goodbye, Ty," he says in a voice coated with thickness.

Spense is out the door before Ty finds his voice and whispers, "So long, Spense."

Ty tests the handle when the door is shut. The room is locked. He claws at the cuff on his wrist. If he shorts it out, he might be able to get away, to slip back home to Ivy. But the skin surrounding the cuff is already rubbed raw. It chafes at the new skin and sends racks of pain shooting through Ty's frail body.

The cuff won't come off. He knows this already, but the realization still sends a new wave of panic through him.

It's actually going to happen.

They're about to give him the Procedure. Once they cut the gene for time travel out of his body, what's left of him will be free to wander the barren streets of 2407 alone and without purpose.

He sits down on the operating table and buries his face in his hands. He thinks of Ivy, who would be long dead by now. He wonders how she coped when he was taken, hopes she had a good life.

And then he uncovers his face and raises his head because he realizes he's wrong. Ivy isn't dead. There's a point somewhere back in time where Ivy Lane is just fine, smiling and laughing and living her life completely unaware of Ty's struggle.

A smile works its way to Ty's face. Because it's okay. Right here, right now, Ty is close to the end, but somewhere back in time, there's another Tyler Smith, holding hands with Ivy at the seventh grade dance.

Somewhere in time, Garrett Smith cradles his infant son while he whispers soft secrets in the wee hours of the night. Jones Longwood clings to his mother in the wake of destruction. Tyler Smith survives a tikker attack thanks to the rogue Zane Tucker. Annie Gallagher cons her way into university, making the best of what life hands her. Spense Peabody, still bright-eyed and excited, dreams of saving the world.

And somewhere in time, a girl is walking around who would have been dead if it weren't for him. Somewhere he is kissing Ivy, pouring everything he has into that one act of desperation. Somewhere else, Zane is still running, slipping through the hands of Timewise again and again and making a difference.

And it's all happening right now. In the past, sure, but it's all happening and will always be happening and that's what matters.

The door creaks open and a doctor enters. He's wearing a lab coat, a green sterile mask and a cap covering his hair. Nothing about him is identifiable if Ty were able to make it out of here whole. That's Timewise, anonymous and impersonal until the very end.

"Are you prepared, Mr. Smith?" the doctor asks.

The needle in his left hand is filled with an amber liquid that Ty knows is a sedative. Ty shrugs and rolls up his sleeve. He flashes a smile at the doctor who looks unnerved by his cheer.

"Down goes nothing, right?"