

ThaDarkitect



CHAOS THEORY

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An unfinished HBCU love affair sprouts new roots but is threatened by a malicious force that imperils the world as we know it.

Nothing is safe, including historical truths and even the concept of time itself.

All the while, the bloodied hands of an astronomer's long-lost clock may hold the key to their salvation.

Darkitect No. 1,947,389

This is a work of fiction; therefore, the story and characters are fictitious. Any public agencies, institutions or historical figures mentioned in the story serve as a backdrop to the characters and their actions, which are wholly imaginary.

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Text in purple is offered to set a scene and evoke imagery.

Text in blue is offered to represent an interlude or a dream sequence.

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Save me, save me, save me. . .

*Minnie Riperton,
"Memory Lane"*

dayOne

[The drumline from Amerie's '1 Thing' pierces the darkness as a convertible Audi weaves through traffic on 16th Street's 'Gold Coast' in Washington, DC. Brushing brown curls from her black Ray Bans, Tessa Clark lowers the volume to a 'respectable' level, as she turns onto a leafy street and parks curbside to an English Tudor.] Tess grabs a bottle of spring water and walks into her home office, tossing her keys into a woven basket. Logging in to bypass a Purple Rain screen saver, she scrolls through a cache of unread emails. A ringing cell phone breaks her concentration and she answers on the 4th ring, slightly annoyed, "This is Tess..." Perking up at what seems like prospective business, she says, "Well, we study *historical architecture* on archaeological sites - not for restoration or rebuilding, but to *imagine* what early builders were thinking, and to study the quality of life evident in those structures. Using architectural logic, we study remains using artifacts, animation, and 3-D reconstructions. So far, we've found that the interaction between architecture, archaeology and anthropology provides a *far* greater take on how structures were built, their purpose and possible motives for their creation. *[She pauses to listen, eyes alight with interest.]* Um, yes - Thursday morning works great. I'll look out for your invite." Tess's dog ambles in and she gives Lewis an enthusiastic belly rub and scratches behind his ears. Their 'Lewis and Clark' connection has always been good for a laugh with her friends. Her phone rings again, but this time she answers quickly with a smile, which slowly dissipates before she instructs, "Don't...touch...*anything*."

[screen fades to black]

[A darkened lecture hall is stirred by the piano intro of 'Manifest' by Gang Starr. The camera slowly pans rows of sleepy faces tinted gold from laptop glare, pausing at Josh Damon whose hooded head rests on his keyboard. A woman's hand enters the view and plucks the nape of his neck. Josh sits back and pulls the hoodie from his face, now bronzed in screen glow. Giving Dana Pearson a side eye, Josh removes his Airpods (stopping the music) and asks, "What??"] Beside the lectern, in Air Force Ones and a plaid untucked polo, Professor Thaddeus Craig continues, "According to a report by the American Institute of Architects, less than 2.5% of its membership identifies as Black or African-American. Another survey claims that Black women are just .5% of the registered architects in the US! As your inaugural ("*and adjunct*," jests Josh) professor of African Ancestry in American Architecture, I have to ask: *[stepping into the projector beam,]* Would our numbers be greater if our influence was *properly* recognized and celebrated?" (Silence. . .) "Ok. . .let's try this: *[Resuming his powerpoint]* How many of you have heard of the *oldest* of the Seven Wonders of the World - the Great Pyramid of Giza?" *[as students raise their hands, outstretched arms and fingers form a silhouette of sand swept palm trees, flanked by three pyramids.]* "For over 4,000 years, Imhotep's architecture stood as the tallest in the world, rivaled in height *only* by the construction of the *Eiffel Tower* centuries later. Both the Great Pyramid and the Great Sphinx were built during the reign of King Khafre to commemorate his father, Khufu. Legend has it, that Napoleon's troops shot a *cannonball* at the Sphinx's nose to diminish Cheops' influence. . . But whether or not you believe that, not having a nose *kind of* dulled any resemblance between the Sphinx and the king – *or the Sphinx and you* for that matter." (*class laughter*) "Let's bring it closer to home: Has anyone heard of Jean Batiste Point Du Sable? He was a Haitian explorer and entrepreneur, and the first non-native American to settle at 'Eschikagou'. (*Josh parodies the pronunciation*) He established a trading post that expanded *ex-po*-entially into what we now know as - *Chicago*. Even our Washington Monument is, in essence, an obelisk – a four-sided, tapered stone with an Egyptian pyramidion at the peak! Look, (*Thad raises the lights*) honoring our early influence might not have prevented laws that barred us from universities or from taking licensing exams. Nor will an accurate accounting of that history ensure access to African American studies, quality internships or jobs. Conveying our history provides an opportunity to get to know the *Darkitects* - before you *attempt* to join their ranks... (*Thad smiles coyly*) And to assist you on *your* journey, 15 well researched pages on African American influence on today's built environment are due in one week." (*the audience groans collectively*)

[*Two blocks from campus*] Josh moves in to kiss Dana on the neck, hoping to be invited up and beyond her apartment door. Dana smiles wryly but wraps a scarf around her neck saying, “Nope. You were *hella* disruptive today. (*Holding up her hand*) *Y’know*, out of 24,325 applicants, we had a freshman class of 2,209 students. Full-ride scholarships were awarded to less than 1% of students, so in our class - you’re one of *a few* unicorns walking this historic campus and *you’re really* doing a lot – to *not* come off as *brilliant*.” Josh listens to Dana through squinted eyes, holding back on a mischievous response. Throwing his gym bag over his shoulder he says, “Yeah, well this architectural history class is about to wreak havoc on my scholarship, with a major paper due in one week on top of training and all my other assignments.” Dana gives him a peck on the cheek and says, “You’ve got this, baby, but don’t expect to get there without some *real* effort this time. None of your usual last-minute crap, even if most of that crap is *still brilliant*. I hate you for that.” Considering her not-so-subtle advice, Josh grins big, blows her a kiss, and jogs back to the yard towards the library.

[*Tess pulls up to a treed construction site in Anacostia and walks over to a clearing. Dr. Steve Collier approaches with an ominous expression – diminished only by his whimsical purple Baltimore Raven’s bowtie.*] He starts, “The police are giving us limited first access. A contractor was clearing the site when the excavator unearthed what seems to be an 18th century structure on the property’s southwest corner.” Tess whispers, “Steve, cops don’t typically chaperone our archeology finds. What am I miss-”. Dr. Collier interrupts, “Tess, this is a crime scene. There’s a *corpse* in the debris field and it’s burned – *badly*. Whoever did this did it a long time ago and most likely committed the murder somewhere else.” As they walk over the clearing, Tess asks, “I get that you’re the anthropologist - but how can you assess ‘murder’ with certainty with remains *that old*?” Steve points down to the half-ton sandstone block resting angrily on the cadaver’s chest. Tess strains to make out the stone’s inscriptions through the caked mud which read ‘Jurisdiction of the United States’ on the left face, and ‘Virginia’ on the right side. On the face oriented skyward, a series of incomprehensible characters had been carved, further piquing her interest. Hearing additional sirens in the distance, Tess dons plastic gloves and brushes soil and debris from the stone. As Dr. Collier speaks to one of the officers, she kneels and steadies herself to take photos of the mysterious engraving. At the mechanized camera noise, the officer grumbles, “Ma’am, this is a crime scene. Courtesy was extended to Dr. Collier out of respect for the Smithsonian, but not for civilians to play ‘*Special Victims Unit*’.” Without looking up Tess replies, “Steve, please inform the officer just how large historic objects fall directly into my purview, and why you’ll need this civilian’s help to figure *any* of this out. And for the record. . .I’m more of a ‘*CSI*’ gal.” Dr. Collier grins nervously as he watches Tess rise, turn, and walk to her car.

[*On Campus*] Thad steps out of his cramped campus office and exits the building to a crisp, spring day. He pulls out his buzzing phone to a text that reads, ‘*Make anything of this?*’ Seeing the sender’s name, he hesitates before tapping the embedded photo. He stares at the picture and then enlarges it between his thumb and index finger to enhance the detail. Thad puts his phone away and takes a few steps, stopping beneath an old oak tree damaged by lightning. He sits on a bench and pulls out his telephone again, intensely contemplating the now darkened screen as students pass in each direction. Finally, Thad unlocks his phone, presses the home button and says, “Call Tessa Clark.”

[*A bar on U Street NW*] Thad takes a second sip of water, nervously fidgets with the bar menu and says, “I’m surprised you were open to meeting me.” As if on cue, Tess replies, “It’s just *work* Thad, no more, no less. You thought you might have an idea about the stone?” Thad’s expression drops for a moment before he recovers, sensing that pushing Tess any further would be a mistake. He takes another sip, then floats his hypothesis, “If I’m right, your stone has a storied past. . .I think. . .I think it could be one of Banneker’s

boundary markers.” Tess interjects, “Um, you’re talking about *Benjamin* Banneker - the mathematician... and almanac writer?” Thad replies, “Yeah, sure – *and surveyor of DC.*” Tess replies sarcastically, “I almost forgot – one of your *Darkitects*, right? ...but how does he figure in all of this?” Thad continues, “In 1789, George Washington gave an order to erect forty boundary stones to mark the border of the District of Columbia. Pierre L’Enfant was designing a new city to house the seat of the new US government and Major Andrew Ellicott was appointed to conduct the survey. In 1791, Ellicott hired our man Benjamin Banneker, an astronomer and surveyor from Maryland to locate the first, *Southernmost* cornerstone in a seawall opening at the Jones Point Lighthouse in Alexandria, Virginia.” *[as Thad speaks, the bar counter liquefies into sapphire river waves, rolling against a moonlit breaker. A beacon above a white clapboard house flashes brilliantly on counts of five, vying for attention from the aurora above.]* “According to legend, Banneker fixed the position of the first stone by lying on his back to find the exact starting point for the survey. Maintaining a clock that could relate points on the ground to his astronomical calculations, he plotted six stars as they crossed his location at specific times of night. Historians claim that due to illness, Banneker left the team after the placement of the first stone. But while the Maryland and Virginia boundary stones survived 200 years, despite vandalism, vehicle damage and theft – the original Jones Point marker was replaced with a second stone only *three years* after its initial placement. The crazy thing is that the original marker was never seen again after its removal - until today, that is.” Tess takes it all in and then stares at the photo of the marker on her phone. She murmurs, almost to herself, “But why in the heck would they *do* that?” Thad replies, “What, swap one stone for another?” Tess answers dryly, “No . . . kill to cover it up.” Grabbing her purse, Tess says, “Yeah, it’s time to drop this turd – whatever it’s about - back into the capable hands of the metropolitan police.” Tess turns to the waitress and motions, “Check, please.” Thad reaches for his wallet, but Tess places cash on the bar as she exits, curtly noting, “I’ve got the bill, Thad – this isn’t a date.”

As Thad watches Tess drive away, he shakes his head with regret. “What the hell is *wrong* with me?,” he says in a fog, securing his seat belt. Starting his engine, he puts the car into gear for the drive back home. At a stop sign and out of sorts, he turns the steering wheel impulsively and accelerates, spinning the tail of his car in the opposite direction, determined not to lose his first chance with Tess in years. His car drives to her house as if on instinct. As he pulls onto her street, he spots her parked car but stares in shock at the once familiar house. There is an unmistakable orange-red glow of a raging fire streaming from windows on each level. Without thinking, Thad sprints from his car through the smoke-filled air to open the front door - but is blown violently into the hedges and grazed by a spinning oven door that collapses the side of Tess’s car. He scrambles to his feet, supporting himself on the splintered door frame and gasps from the hot air burning his lungs. Crouching, he covers his stinging eyes and shouts wildly for Tess. Despite the hiss of flames and the ominous groan of steel beams losing integrity, he hears barking and recognizes Lewis’ frantic yelp. Thad feels his way upstairs and discovers Tess unconscious on the floor, her left forearm wedged beneath a charred rafter and Lewis pacing nervously by her side. Thad shifts the smoldering beam - ignoring both the tremendous weight and the pain of burnt flesh on his forearms. He lifts Tess cautiously and calls to Lewis, uncertain where to go. With her Bulldog a half step behind, Thad staggers downstairs and through the front doorway, just moments before the roof planes collapse like a bellows, sending a giant plume of red flames and hot ash into the air. As firetrucks arrive, the two stumble onto the front lawn where EMT’s encircle Tess and commence CPR.

[Washington Hospital Center] A nurse adjusts Tess’s oxygen and secures the IV on her bandaged arm, waking Thad from an awkward position in the chair next to her bed. Tess looks peaceful, and Thad wishes she was just sleeping. As the nurse leaves the room, he slowly sits upright and clasps his bandaged hands. “Lord, I know you haven’t heard from me in a minute. I don’t deserve anything from you. But please, I’m begging you, don’t let her die. I’ll do anything to make this right. Please, God!” Thad’s eyes fill with tears as his appeal for divine intercession morphs into confession. “Tess... I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you . . . I

was so focused on myself and I . . . You can't die because I need to make this up to you. Taking credit for your designs on the Potomac Center was the worst thing I've ever done. I *knew* how difficult it had been for you to advance - but I sold you out – all because making partner was more important than anything or anybody. You could have easily *ruined* my career by proving the work was yours, but you didn't, even after what I did to you. You *have to* live, Tess, please, please...let me make this right!! Thad lifts his eyes, becoming aware of Tess crying faintly. “No, no, no, Thad...you don't get to do this . . . Not now. It's too late – you took too much from me. I trusted you more than anybody. I loved . . .” In the silence, Thad's shame overwhelms him and he sees that Tess has turned away from him. He leans back, unsure what to do when an unfamiliar cell phone rings. Thad reaches for a plastic bag containing Tess' belongings and hands her the cellphone, which must have still been in her pocket during the fire. Sniffing, Tess answers hoarsely, “Hello?” After a moment, she freezes, dropping the phone to the floor. Tess, eyes wild and hyperventilating says, “Steve Collier...” Confused, Thad asks, “What?” “My colleague...from the Smiths...,” Tess sobs. “He was murdered!!” Embracing Thad in despair, Tess trembles as he wraps his arms tightly around her back. A warm sense of dread begins to spread through Thad's chest, neck, and face. He understands in that instant that the stone, the fire and this murder are interwoven. Horrified, he closes his eyes, knowing that the only woman he has ever loved is in great peril.

Tucking her IV tubes and possessions beneath his shirt, Thad attempts to wheel Tess down the hall in a 'borrowed' wheelchair from the nurses' station. Through eyes still cloudy with pain medication, Tess watches him call the elevator with his heavily bandaged hand, suddenly realizing that he must have been the one to pull her from the fire. Peeking out from the nurse's station, a staffer asks, “Sir - where are you-” But Thad quickly pushes the close button, and the elevator doors shut before the nurse can summon security. Once in the hospital lobby, Thad's pace hastens to match his pulse as they pass through automatic doors into the evening air and toward his car. As he secures Tess' seatbelt, the mere sight of her in the passenger seat triggers a sea of memories. Just then, a black Sprinter van with tinted windows comes to an abrupt stop beneath the emergency drop off. A man with an athletic build wearing a black jacket and pants exits the passenger side and walks briskly into the lobby, ham-handedly holding a large stuffed panda by its ear. As the hospital elevator doors close behind him, Thad's rear turn signal blinks in the distance, leaving the wheelchair rolling slowly towards the curb.

[*Thad's rowhouse in Shaw*] Thad places a note on his nightstand in case Tess wakes before he returns. He bolts the front door and heads to the campus library, vacillating in the lobby between searching the stacks or heading to the cellar where the microfilm equipment is housed. Unbeknownst to Thad, his disheveled appearance and erratic behavior doesn't go unnoticed. Down in the 'doldrums', as the cellar is creepily referenced, Thad sits in the dark, combing through rolls of archived images on microfiche but is unable to make sense of the stone's engraving. He fires up his laptop and combs through internet records and his own prior research, still failing to discover an intelligible meaning to the inscription, which remains inscrutable. “No wonder they buried that *fucking* stone,” Thad mutters frustratedly. Emerging from the shadows and the silence, Josh inquires, “*Talking to yourself, Prof. C?*” Thad swiftly spins and grabs Josh's collar, his free fist ready to strike in defense. “*Maan...put that down before you hurt yourself,*” quips Josh, momentarily startled but standing half a foot over Thad. Incredulous, Thad shouts, “Josh, what the hell are you doing down here??” Peeling Thad's fingers from his collar, Josh replies, “Me?? I'm five pages into your random assignment. What are *you* doing down here in the 'drums' – looking all kinds of crazy?” Embarrassed, Thad tries to smooth out Josh's collar, now mindful of the optics – his notes spread chaotically on the floor, bandaged hands, grass-stained clothes, and a photo of what must resemble gibberish on the screen. As Thad moves to close his laptop, Josh takes a look at the screen and says, “*Niiice... a Polyalphabetic cipher.*” Thad slowly reopens the laptop lid as Josh continues, “This is the evolution of the original Caesar cipher that

encrypted messages by shifting letters of the alphabet. A Polyalphabetic cipher uses a secret shift word that converts each letter into numbers, *complicating sh - sorry stuff*, with multiple shifts.” Grinning, Thad whispers, “Well, damn...”, and plops into a chair that saw its best days 50 years ago. Amused, Josh says, “‘Stars’, Prof. C . . . the shift word is ‘Stars’.” Gravely, Thad slowly begins, “Josh...this is a photo of the *first* boundary stone placed to mark our Nation’s Capital more than 200 years ago. Tell me **exactly** what it says...” Josh hesitates, looks at Thad intently, then deadpans, “This *has to be* good for extra credit – *right?*”, before starting to laugh. Lacking the energy and headspace to join in Josh’s playful banter, Thad says, “Yeah, *plenty*. Let’s see what you got.” *[As Thad and Josh switch places, ‘Soldier’ by Erykah Badu softly blends into the background.]* Josh reaches behind Thad’s ear to retrieve his pencil. He stares at the photo then begins to transfer the engraving to a sheet of paper:

*“Oaee loh tvf lae cafz aie lbcbk
Ety kzw yolj-lb-tlyw hf nal
Lamw sel dwf yrfe laieyk hbjuwge
Cwkm tyw dhckll stjwtn jwn’mevf”*

Writing the shift word ‘stars’ in the upper left-hand corner, Josh counts under his breath and scribbles an assortment of numbers below each letter. He calculates the letter frequencies beneath several characters looking for any repeating words. Scribbling notes in the margins, Josh gazes from the paper to the photo, then back to his notes and says, “...This *can’t* be right. . .It’s weird – *even for you*.” Then he slowly reads,

*“When two ten the long arm ticks
May the four-ti-tude of wit
Save all men from things obscene
Lest the locusts scream sev’ten”*

Thad rhythmically taps his fingers and repeats over and over “*When two ten the long arm ticks...*” As an idea begins to grow, he leans over to Josh as if to convey a secret and asks, “Hey. . .you open for a field trip?” Pulling his hoodie back over his head, Josh grins big, then responds, “Ok, Prof. C . . . you *finally* have my attention.”

[Two miles away in a leafy suburban neighborhood.] Jacques Toombs adjusts his stride, probing his pockets for house keys. He hangs up his coat and walks into the kitchen, drawn in by the aroma of simmering bourguignon. His wife Kat smiles, spinning to be enveloped in his embrace, as their daughter teasingly makes faces of disgust behind their backs. Jacques turns to plant a kiss on each cheek of 10-year-old Inna, asking, “So how was practice?” Back to looking at her iPad, she complains about a lack of playing time and shares other details about her soccer practice. Jacques loosens his tie and suggests that they use the weekend to work on her ball handling together. “Really?”, Inna replies looking up immediately from her iPad, knowing how her father’s important job limits his time with the family. “That would be perfect!” Inna says excitedly, hopping from her stool to set the table. The doorbell rings and Jacques taps his phone to access the video feed, saying, “It’s just a delivery. I’ll get it.” He kneels in the doorway to retrieve a rectangular package adorned with purple ribbon and returns to the kitchen. Peeling off a small envelope and placing it in his shirt pocket, he opens the box as Kat pours steaming pappardelle into a colander. “Ooh, a 2007 Bordeaux!”, gushes Kat, looking back at him sweetly, “That will pair *nicely* with dinner!”

Jacques and Kat raise their glasses to meet Inna’s cup of juice for a toast before dinner. Inna begins to ask about hosting a sleepover, but Jacques raises his hand to his mouth, gesturing for her not to talk while

chewing. Ignoring his admonishment, Inna shrieks, “Papa, your finger!!” Jacques follows Inna’s alarmed gaze to his left hand where the entire index fingernail dangles gruesomely from the cuticle. He drops his fork and leaves the table, as Kat glances at him with a look of almost knowing concern while she comforts Inna. He rushes to the bathroom and shuts the door, as his look of feigned alarm gives way to a sneer, conceding quietly to himself, “Touché Dr. Collier.” Pulling a 9-inch tactical knife from his calf sheath, Jacques wipes sticky blood from the blade with a crumpled Baltimore Raven’s bow tie that he retrieves from his pants pocket. Using the tip of the blade, he proficiently flicks the nail into a flushing toilet where it eddies into a crimson swirl. Before sheathing the knife, he slits open the envelope that accompanied the wine bottle, retrieving a message penned in cursive: “Disappointment breeds distrust.” He groans, knowing that he’d failed to fully silence the duo that discovered the artifact. Until this morning, no one even knew that it still existed. He had never seen the Vaughns this anxious and didn’t get why this ‘assignment’ took priority over all others - but he also knew from experience with the Vaughns, that he didn’t need to understand. What he did get was what this message was meant to convey – and why it was sent in front the only audience that would ever matter to Jacques. Wrapping his finger tightly in toilet paper, Jacques reenters the dining room, announcing, “I need to take a rain check on this weekend’s soccer drills, honey – something’s come up at work.” Already upset about her father’s injury, Inna begins to cry, feeling let down. Caught off guard by his daughter’s reaction and the lingering concern on Kat’s face, Jacques holds up his bandaged finger to symbolize a swift return, as he jolts from the room. In an instant, Jacques appears holding a giant stuffed panda in the doorway, cheerfully rocking from side to side, singing dopily in a cartoonish voice, “Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques, Dormez vous? Dormez vous? Sonnez les matines, Sonnez les matines, Ding ding dong!” Despite herself, Inna smiles and hugs her new bear, wiping her cheeks as she giggles, “Thank you, Papa!!” Forgetting to mask his nature in the moment, the edges of Jacques mouth curl into an aberrant grin. As he wipes away sweat with the back of his hand, he smears his forehead with his bloody finger dressing, while Kat looks on with dread.

[Thad’s rowhouse] Tess wakes groggily late in the night, uncertain of her surroundings until discovering Thad’s note. She places a bare foot on the floor, desperate to stretch her legs. Doing a double take in a floor mirror, she sees a reflection of herself in an oversized De La Soul t-shirt, which smells and feels familiar, her signature brown curls gathered loosely in a well-used Nike headband. Smiling subtly at Thad’s obvious effort, she opens the refrigerator, taking inventory of the scant possibilities to satisfy her just-beginning-to-grumble stomach: “Let’s see here. Three eggs, lettuce, leftover chicken wings of unknown origin, slightly fuzzy blackberries - and. . .insulin?” She grabs a bottle of water then quickly closes the door, regretting the intrusion. With crossed arms, she walks past a living room wall holding his diplomas, an architectural license, certificates of membership with the American Institute of Architects and the National Organization of Minority Architects, as well as pennants from Hampton *and* Howard University. She remarks, “Hmm...”, not recalling his affiliation with *both* HBCUs. Feeling a bit lightheaded, she walks to the brown leather sofa and covers herself with a dark blue throw blanket, struck again by the familiarity of its smell. Framed photos on the coffee table chronicle various aspects of Thad’s life: portraits of Thad’s parents and sisters, old mutual friends, and, most surprisingly, a selfie taken by Tess riding on Thad’s back during a long-ago hike in the Andes, both of their faces aglow with sweat and happiness. Drowsily, she looks away after a long moment, her memories of that time becoming more than a little uncomfortable. More curious to Tess are the seemingly recent pictures of Thad with various groups of young adults, maybe - college students?

Tess startles awake on the couch at the sound of keys jangling at the door. She self-consciously covers her bare legs with the throw blanket as Thad enters wearing a backpack and holding a bag of Chinese takeout. “Hi there,” he says, smiling somewhat awkwardly, as he walks towards the coffee table. “I took a chance that you still like Kung Pao Chicken...” Tess interrupts, “I do. But more importantly, *what is up with all the photos of college-aged kids? Are you like a military recruiter or something? Are you dating college girls now?*”

Nearly choking on his spring roll, Thad chuckles, “Noo, I’m a college professor – well, an adjunct, but...*whatever...*” Tess replies, “Not like it’s any of my business, anyway. But how do you have *time* to teach as a partner at Kinsley? The Kinsley mentality, as I recall it, was work, eat, sleep, repeat.” Thad pauses. “Kinsley doesn’t get a say in it,” he replies soberly, “I left the firm more than three years ago.” Skeptically, Tess stares at Thad, saying, “But I quit **four years ago**. I’m confused - didn’t you make partner?? After everything . . .” Tess trails off and looks away, realizing that her voice was beginning to reveal her still raw emotions. Thad takes a breath and calmly says, “I did make partner, Tess, but I couldn’t stay there, not after what I’d done. To you. To us. I was a shell of myself, and I checked out - professionally, emotionally. . . physically. Couldn’t sleep, ate crap and, if I’m being really honest, acted like Patron Silver was some kind of daily therapy. And hey - it doesn’t take too much of that lifestyle to get to Type 2 diabetes, especially if you ignore the symptoms because you stopped caring. I needed a *hard* reset, and there was no way to stay at Kinsley and stomach my reflection in the mirror. I have a lot to atone for Tess - but this opportunity to give back and teach is the best thing that’s happened to me – at least until you texted today.”

Tess looks at him in silence, mulling a myriad of painful follow-up questions. But exhaustion from the calamitous day allows her to ask only the easiest one: “. . .So. . .where have you been all evening?” Taking a seat next to Tess on the sofa, Thad hands her the container of Kung Pao chicken and exhales, “We cracked the inscription tonight...” Tess exclaims, “What??!!”, covering her mouth in astonishment and playfully punches Thad’s shoulder. Smiling in disbelief, she hesitates then tilts her head to the side to ask, “Wait, who's we??”

Two strangers, not strangers - only lacking the knowing

*Minnie Riperton
"Inside my love"*

[The drumline of Sumthin' Sumthin' by Maxwell precedes a kaleidoscope of images of Thad and Tess reasoning, quarreling, laughing, then falling asleep on the sofa, each juxtaposed to the other. They wake the next morning, fixated on a clue that sends them driving north, just outside of Baltimore.] “I wanted to thank you...y’know - for arranging care for Lewis. . .and for taking care of *me*. This was obviously not what I had in mind when I texted you that picture yesterday but here we are, I guess. . . Have you ever been to the Patapsco Valley?” asks Tess, rolling Thad’s faded blue sweatshirt sleeves down to cover her bandaged arm. Thad says, “Nah – I always intended to but never made it happen. I just have this feeling that there is something at Banneker’s home that can help us - he was raised on a farm along the river – Man, I can’t get his ‘*riddle*’ out of my head, ‘When two ten the long arm ticks.’ What’s crazy is that when Banneker was 22, he actually *built* a functioning clock after borrowing a pocket watch from a friend. He replicated every small piece, calculated the relationship between the gears, and constructed a *whole* clock made *entirely* from pieces of *carved wood*. It was the first clock built in America, and it gave perfect time for *40 years*. For the boundary inscription to reference a specific time seems like too much of coincidence given Banneker’s history with clockmaking. I don’t know. . .maybe the Benjamin Banneker Park can provide some context that we haven’t found online.” Tess considers Thad’s theory. “Yeah – makes sense. . .*but, I still don’t understand, why involve the kid?*” Tess asks with concern. Pausing to consider her question, Thad replies, “I don’t know. . .he kind of entangled himself – It wasn’t planned. I mean, no offense Tess – I’ve always known that *you* were smart – but this kid is on a different level, and he’s been hiding in plain sight behind a linebacker’s physique and a jacked-up attitude!” Tess laughs, but then gives Thad a serious look, saying, “I get that he’s a brilliant. But you *can’t* include him Thaddeus – he’s a college *student*! If the last 24 hours has taught us anything, it’s that we don’t have a *clue* what we’re facing!” Thad cranes his neck to the side, and concedes, “Ok, ok. Yeah. . .you’re right.” He dials Josh over his car’s Bluetooth, but gets his voicemail. “Josh, this is Professor C. Change of plans. I’m not headed to Patapsco today after all so no need for you to drive up. Sorry for the confusion – I’ll see you in class next week. And we’ll work something else out for extra credit – *cool?* Cool.” As the music resumes, Tess rolls down her window and reclines, relieved.

Tess returns her seat to an upright position as they pull into the parking area. Exiting the car, Thad rubs his lower back, massaging a dull ache that he’s felt since the fire. Families, hikers, and school groups all make their way towards a small log cabin surrounded by an old wooden split rail fence. Thad and Tess join a short line queuing beside a cast iron plaque that reads, ‘*You are standing on what was once part of Benjamin Banneker’s farmstead. Mary and Robert, Benjamin’s parents, purchased a 100 acre parcel in 1737 for 7,000 pounds of tobacco. Benjamin was a small child when he moved from the Elkridge area to this farm with his 4 sisters and parents. Soon after moving, his family built a small cabin to live in. Archaeologists think this cabin was built on stone foundation piers, had a small cellar and probably a mud and stick chimney. Later, a larger cabin was built with a full stone foundation, larger cellar and stone chimney. His cabin was 16 by 14 feet, the same size as the cabin you see here.*’ Thad steps inside the cabin, noting the careful placement of furniture and everyday artifacts arranged to resemble Banneker’s daily routine. Admiring the cabin’s efficient use of attic storage and a root cellar for cooling produce, Thad motions for Tess to come see - but she’s nowhere to be found. Unnerved, he steps outside and spots her forty yards away, slipping through a tree line dense with spring foliage. While discretion keeps him from yelling her name, he jogs to her location, a bit annoyed at her decision to walk into strange woods on her own. Catching up, he taps Tess’s shoulder, startling her. She quickly instructs him *not to move* as she treks forward, undeterred by the thorny brush. After an anxious minute with Tess out of sight, she whistles, prompting Thad to follow her path through the forest. He arrives out of breath but halts mid-expletive when he sees Tess resting a gloved hand on the charred and blackened

remains of a chimney. Motioning for him to tread gently, she begins to remove the overgrowth camouflaging a rubble foundation. Confused, Thad asks, "Is this the cabin? *How did you know??*" As Tess gently tugs on random bricks, she answers, "Well, if the fresh mortar on that replica didn't give it away - or the plaque's reference to a smaller cabin didn't clue you in - then history's mentions of Banneker's cabin *burning to the ground* the **day** of his funeral might indicate -" Thad interjects, "That *shit ain't always what it seems...*" Tess smiles, saying, "Also, knowing that archeologists found this site back in the 80's *didn't hurt.*" Thad chuckles and asks, "O-kay...well if this *isn't* a *new* find, what are we doing here, Ms. Clark?" Brushing aside his question, Tess continues to look behind and under stones, through openings and behind facades. Before Thad can ask again what she is doing, she asks Thad to take off his shoes – giving him a look when he begins to protest – and then places them in the center of the fireplace. Placing sunshades on her face and her curls in a bun, she lays her head back onto the tongue of his sneakers. Pursing her lips tightly and extending her right arm up the chimney remnant, she lifts her shoulder to penetrate deeper up the flue – then tenses her bicep and gives a good pull - sending centuries old ash onto her face (and Thad's kicks). [*The guitar riff from 'Prototype' by Outkast drifts over the scene*] "Ahrgrgh..." Tess shrieks, (hacking) "*I'ma catch black lung!!*" as she feverishly wipes her lips with her sleeve. Tess removes her Ray Bans, revealing clean skin underneath, and triumphantly clutches a 15-inch-long crumpled lead cylinder in her right hand. Standing beneath the shaded forest canopy, they can't help but laugh as Thad uses his sleeve to wipe soot from her face, cheeks and forehead, and then gently with his fingertips on her lips. Beams of daylight form darts through the tree cover, illuminating them both in a warm glow as their breaths begin to increase in unison. Before Tess can 'rationalize' the moment away – she tilts her head to kiss him deeply on his lips. Thad encircles her in his arms, reciprocating with the desire from four years without her. **And in that instant, the ruins and rubble fade** - and a love that had withered takes root again - in the River Valley soil.

With lips barely parted, they slowly exhale, both willing the moment to stay. As Thad searches in vain for the right words – an elderly park docent bursts through the brush, startling Tess, who raises the heavy cylinder in defense. Out of breath, he stares at the ruttled tube and asks, "Who *are* you? How??" Thad steps between Tess and the docent, and replies, "We were arguing, and just needed privacy to work things out, you know how it is – we're leaving now", pulling her along by her wrist. The old man touches her sleeve as she passes, asking, "Are you one of the *Seventeen?*" Tess stops short. "I'm sorry, *the what?*", she replies, pivoting. "*The calibre,*" asks the docent, insistently, "how did you find it?" *He continues,* "They burned *him* alive for that. Now they'll be coming for you." Thad interjects, "Hey - not sure who you *think we are*, but I assure y-" The old man raises his hand, palm down, motioning for silence. "Shhh," he whispers. "They're here now," as a bullet rips a quarter inch hole just below the docent's left clavicle. The blow forcefully spins the old man, but Tess just catches him, lowering his frail body to the ground as blood flows freely from his upper chest. Wheezing and wincing in anguish, he cries to Tess, "Don't let. . .the clock. . .toll." Hearing the clock reference, Thad, already on his knees crawling toward Tess, makes eye contact with the docent. Despite his grave wound and the close sound of footsteps and radio chatter, the docent struggles to speak. Thad immediately recognizes the language from the marker engraving: "*When two ten the long arm ticks ...May the four-ti-tude of wit ...Save all men from things obscene.*" The docent coughs violently and spits up blood from the effort. As Thad lays him on his side to clear his airway, the old man rasps, "*locusts. . scream. . .sev'teeeen*" in a tortured final breath. Tess shakes the docent gently in a what Thad knows is a futile attempt to revive him. Thad quickly closes the old man's eyelids as Tess shuts hers in shock, wishing away the horror. "Tess, he's gone - we have to get out of here now!" Thad shouts. As she reopens her eyes, Jacques Toombs emerges behind Thad like a wraith, silently slipping a wire garrote under his neck. Screaming, "Thaddeus!!" in horror, Tess helplessly watches him claw at his now-bleeding throat, thrashing his legs and stretching futilely for solid ground. She scrambles to her feet and swings the lead canister, savagely fracturing Jacques left orbital bone, sending him reeling backwards. Released from the wire, Thad

lays gagging and splayed on the ground. As she scrambles to Thad's side, a three-man squadron flanks Tess, brandishing silenced Staccato pistols.

[*'Pause'* by J-Dilla pulses as a warning] Tess digs her heels into the soil, her back against the rubble foundation as glowing red dots migrate first to her chest, then her cheekbone, then over her right eye. In supplication, she closes her eyes, praying death arrives quickly. She hears more footsteps, growing louder, coming quicker, concluding that more men are coming to kill them. But instead of death there's just silence – as Josh lunges upward and airborne – glancing Tess's curls as he crushes two of the attackers with 235 lbs. of pure pass rush. Tess whirls around to see one assailant motionless – his neck bent haphazardly. A second attacker is doubled over – stunned and wildly aiming his gun - before Josh slams the man's head into his own knee with ferocity. As bullets plough the ground behind him, Josh roll tackles the third assailant's legs, collapsing him onto his side, where his nose fiercely meets Josh's right elbow. He turns towards Tess and asks, "You and Prof. C ok???" Tess exclaims, "Josh!!!?? You came? I've never been happier to be *so wrong!*" Josh replies, "Who doesn't like a day at the park?" Tess almost laughs, despite what just happened. "*Of course*, you came, Josh," Tess repeats, "Thank God kids don't listen to their teachers. Can you help me up? We need to check on Thad." As Josh lifts her to her feet, he tenses suddenly, feeling the barrel of a gun wedged against his kidney, "*Quite the gentleman, eh?*", Jacques probes from behind, "*Why so eager* to die? Apologies, please pardon the pistolet (*holstering the gun*); I fancy myself a purist and American guns are. . . si simple, oui? I préfèr more feudal weaponry (*drawing a Danish hand axe from behind his back*). Ms. Clark, being somewhat of an archeologist, I *think you'd love* my collection...it's from a simpler time." Tess stares unflinchingly at Jacques, wishing once again that she and Thad hadn't placed Josh in danger. Jacques continues, seeming to revel in the sound of his own musings, "Indeed, it's your modern technologie that betrays you every time -like those hospital cameras capturing Mr. Craig's license plates. *Treasonous!* You practically *paged me* when you drove through the toll." With a hand over his bleeding eye, he continues, "*C'est la vie*. . .in another life, *we* could have been friendly - but you've caused such a fuss that the Vaughns require proof of death. However, give up the tube *rapidement*, and perhaps I'll collect your head, *after* a more civilized death." Tess steps in front of Josh, then grudgingly extends the tube, but quickly pulls it back, demanding, "Why me, why Steve – what's all this *about?* Who the hell are you people??" Chuckling at Tess's pluck in the face of imminent death, Jacques retorts, "What does it matter, fille? *Your time* has come to an end. But *for my employers*, time is exponential, as is power. And you stand – or rather stood – in the way of exponential *progress*. There's nothing else I could say that would make sense to you - so now, I must bid you adieu." With his right hand gripping the helve, and his left hand on the butt, Jacques lifts the axe across his body and behind his head. Just as he brings the axe towards her neck like a guillotine, Thad cracks the back of Jacques' skull with a slab of old hearth slate, growling, "*Au revoir, freak!*" The axe narrowly misses Tess's left shoulder, as Jacques tumbles beside her, face first. Tess checks herself for injuries, then quickly spins to face Josh, who mumbles, "Damnn...", before collapsing into Thad's arms.

Dana Pearson's hands tremble lightly as her professor tries to explain. "I don't understand, Prof. Craig – why do you have Josh's phone? What was he doing way out in the Patapsco Valley?? And how hurt is he?", she asks again, nearly hyperventilating. Tess utters, "*Drive faster*," then takes the phone from Thad and says, "Dana – I'm an old friend of Tha – Prof. Craig's. I know that none of this makes sense, but Josh really needs you, and - *we do too*. Can we bring Josh to your apartment? Please. We will explain everything once we get there." After 5 labored seconds, Dana rattles off her address to Tess, who scribbles it on a napkin. Grimacing in agony after each highway bump, Josh grips the axe wedged in his chest to keep it from jostling. As Tess leans over the backseat to apply pressure to the site of the wound, Josh groans, "I really hope that tube. . .is worth trashing my baby.... Remind me, . . **cough** . . *why* are we in **my car** instead of Prof. Craig's?" Tess smiles, glad that Josh feels well enough to joke, and replies, "Well, since I photographed the boundary

marker yesterday, some unknown group of very shitty people have killed my colleague, they've destroyed my home and tried to burn me alive – then they tracked Thad's car from the E.R. and sent armed *goons* to murder us in the middle of a state park in broad daylight. As far as we know, they have no idea who you are and they are not tracking your license plates and, from the age of it, your car clearly doesn't have GPS. You heard that French psycho - driving Thad's car after today would be suicide." She immediately regrets her last sentence and is a tiny bit relieved to see that Josh has passed out. She confirms he's still breathing normally, then loosens her shoulders and sighs deeply. She leans towards the driver's seat and whispers, "*Thad, what the hell??*" Thad sighs and replies tensely, "I know, I know. It's all messed up – **I know**. I never would have involved Josh if I knew this would happen. This is madness – but, now for all our sakes', we *have* to see this through." Tess snaps, "*See it through?* An inch to the left and we'd be taking Josh to the morgue! We've got to call the police - I should've called them yesterday at the diner!!" Barking back, Thad retorts, "Tess, the police are the *only ones* that have seen the stone and are still **alive** to talk about it – have you considered *who might have given our friends back there your name - your address??*" They ride in silence for the next few miles until Thad breaks the quiet, "We're going to be ok. We'll get Josh to Dana's so he can rest and heal." He reaches out for Tess's hand and she quickly grabs it. She taps on the lead cylinder with her free hand and looks back at Josh's wound, fearing that the cost of 'see this through' is already too high.

[The kettle drums of 'Quiet Dog' by Mos Def convey the urgency] Dana stands in the doorway of her apartment, fidgeting nervously. While she can't recall Josh *ever* being on time, she's never been *this* anxious waiting for his 2010 cobalt blue Camaro to arrive. Before any sight of his car, she hears the rumble of his V8, then the squeal of tires as the car stops half-way down the block. She steps onto the stair landing visibly distressed by the additional delay. Inside the car, Josh sits up slowly, grumbling emphatically, "Stop the car, Prof. Craig. No way she can see me like this. I won't freak her out like that." Thad applies the brake gently, planning to talk some sense into Josh, and turns around in time to yell, "What the hell are you doing??!!!" as a spittle-soaked growl escapes from Josh's gritted teeth. With bloody fingers and a will of steel, Josh swiftly extricates three inches of axe blade from his left pectoral muscle. By the time the axe rattles to the floorboard, Josh has lost consciousness again. Tess vaults into the back seat to firmly press her sweatshirt on the wound in an attempt to staunch the increased bleeding. Thad steers towards Dana who waves her arms at the base of the stairs. She runs to the passenger door and almost faints at the sight of Josh and the amount of his blood in the backseat. She hands Thad the dark colored blanket he requested, and he drapes it over Josh's torso before straining to lift him.

Tess embraces Dana, who is clearly shaken, then assists Thad with stabilizing Josh while they navigate the apartment building's stairs. As they attempt to lay Josh on the sofa, he comes to and tries to resist, pushing himself into a seated position. "Open the tube Prof. Craig..." Dana and the others sigh with relief to hear Josh awake and speaking lucidly. Dana asks, "What are you talking about? Do you know you have a hole in your chest?" Josh half laughs and then instantly regrets it due to the piercing pain. Thad interrupts to ask if Dana has any gauze and a can opener. Dana replies, "Yes, I'll find them. And I get the gauze but why a can opener? And what tube is Josh talking abo-?" She stops her rapid-fire questioning as Tess gently lays the lead cylinder on the couch next to Josh. Josh speaks, "We're not just here because I'm hurt, baby... I'm sorry to bring this to your doorstep...but shit has gotten real." He looks over at Thad and says, "Open it..." But Tess objects, "There's time for that, Josh. Let us look after you first," attempting to secure his dressing. Josh shakes his head, looking back at Tess and repeats, "No, I'll be alright - you're wasting time. Get it open – and if it contains anything like that cipher I saw in the library, you'll want Dana to take a look at it. Trust me."

Thad glances over at Tess, then they both look at Dana – whose eyes remain locked with Josh. Thad makes several attempts to latch the can opener to the end of the cylinder, then stands and opens a kitchen drawer, searching through the contents. Intuitively, Dana tells him that the screwdriver and bottle opener are in the top, right drawer. “Thanks” Thad replies without looking up. He sets the sharp end of the bottle opener at the end of the lead tube when Tess jumps up, shouting, “Oh crap, Thaddeus – follow me!” She asks Dana if she’s ok finishing Josh’s dressing, then leads Thad into the bathroom and turns the shower valve to warm. Thad looks confused, as Tess shuts the door behind him. “What is it?” he asks. “You might destroy whatever is in there if you don’t handle it just right,” she answers, “We *have* to be *more* careful. Based on what I think the docent was trying to tell us, the cylinder’s contents have *never* been in a conditioned climate and haven’t been exposed to direct light for over *200 years*. If the tube contains delicate fabrics, a brittle grade of paper or even certain kinds of metal, exposing them to dry air could make the contents *deteriorate* almost instantly.”

Tess turns off the bathroom lights, choosing to illuminate the room with her smartphone’s LED light. Thad pierces the tube’s end with the bottle opener, marveling, “Did the cylinder just - *gasp?*” He slides the can opener into the newly created slot and turns the knob slowly, feeling the opener’s teeth gain traction. After perforating the full circumference, he wedges the screwdriver under the lid’s edge and lightly applies pressure. As the lid flips open, shadows dance on the walls from Tess’s movements, as she retrieves a towel from the closet and places it on the bathroom floor. Thad hands her the tube and she tilts to 30 degrees, then 35, until she feels several objects inside begin to shift. After several seconds, the only item to fall out is an antique skeleton key tied to a ragged string of twine. Even when Tess tilts the cylinder to 60 degrees, the rest of the contents remain lodged until Thad gently tugs the ‘key’ twine disappearing up the tube. As he lifts his hand to tap the raised end of the cylinder, a roll of linen finally falls to the floor, startling them both.

Thad reaches quickly for the roll but Tess grabs his wrist. Suddenly overcome with the gravity of their situation, she sits on the edge of the tub, entreating, “Wait. Thad, *please* stop...I don’t know if I can take anymore. People are being killed all around us! (*placing her hands on her head*) If we continue down this road – none of us will survive the weekend! For goodness sake, we’re *architects* - not FBI agents or Navy *Seals*, and we aren’t *trained* for this. We *can* stop right here, *right now* – and I get that you don’t trust the authorities, but I’m thinking...perhaps I should turn these artifacts over to the Smithsonian, *you know* - for preservation, protection, research and” Thad looks into Tess’s eyes, then sits beside her on the tub edge and exhales deeply. “Tess – there are two constants I know to be true, irrefutable, and extraordinary. The first, is *you*. I loved you long before we were even introduced. It might sound creepy, but I watched you during those early days at Hampton. You were beautiful and brilliant. But more than that, I saw how you treated people, how you spoke with them, *made them feel*. *You were the flame and I was definitely the moth*. I still am, always will be. The second constant is *history* – *our people’s*, specifically – which has been hard fought, and brutally suppressed – mostly, because it holds many of your same qualities; it’s irrefutable, and in many ways, extraordinary. Whoever’s hunting us wants to quiet *you* and whatever *truth* this tube holds. And whatever this is goes all the way back to Banneker, someone who paved the way for both us some 200 years ago. *They* won’t allow *whatever this is* to come to light – *ever* – in *any* forum. They tried to kill us in broad daylight today and made it abundantly clear that they value the contents of this cylinder *far more* than our lives. And this might sound crazy, but – *I think they’re right*. If this tube holds a truth that powerful, isn’t that worth risking our lives should it come to it? This is part of our legacy, too. We’re standing in the gap between Banneker and future pioneers – including the architects to come, *especially* the ones on the *other side* of this door. But you’re right - this *is* dangerous and more people might get hurt. We could lose *everything* we’ve ever worked for. With those kind of risks, I can only speak for myself regarding the right next steps. . .Tess, what do *you* want to do?” Tess stares at Thad, then brushes the tears from his

cheek that had fallen without reserve during his impassioned plea. She reaches into her back pocket and retrieves a pair of plastic gloves. She maneuvers her left hand inside the glove, snapping the plastic on her wrist and replies simply, “The *Darkitects*.” Thad looks at her with a puzzled expression. “*What?*”, he asks. Tess responds, “*You meant to say; ‘the Darkitects’ to come,*” as she carefully unbinds the roll and spreads two linen sheets onto the waiting towel.

Dana enlarges Tess’s emailed photo on one of her 27” LED monitors. With Thad and Tess to her left, and Josh observing from the couch, she downloads and carefully scales a second image downloaded from the Library of Congress to an adjacent screen. “This comparison confirms that what was in that cylinder was indeed a document no one’s seen in over 200 years,” Tess proclaims. “We’re looking at hidden history here – *unbelievable.*” Thad adds, “From the date on the image, I believe the first linen scroll is an early iteration of Pierre L’Enfant’s original plan for the Nation’s Capital. . .Most sources give Andrew Ellicott credit for the 1792 plan of DC but L’Enfant’s initial plan predates that.” From his perch on the couch and much improved after 2 “special” Tylenols left over from Dana’s wisdom teeth surgery, Josh asks, “Why wasn’t L’Enfant’s original version utilized?” Thad replies, “In a word - Beef.” When they all look at him quizzically, he continues, “L’Enfant made enemies. His design for D.C. envisioned a *grand capital with broad European-style avenues, large public squares and dramatic sightlines to convey the grandeur of our federal government, which was only three years old at the time. Despite his motto for the American Capital being “MAKE NO LITTLE PLANS”, his own plan was largely derailed due to an avoidable beef that grew beyond his control. Ever heard of Harlan Vaughn? Well, he was the largest landowner in what is now known as Capitol Hill and had just started construction on a new residence when George Washington announced the planned location for the new Capitol city. Vaughn’s new home sat right where L’Enfant planned New Jersey Avenue SE as a main public square adorned with fountains. L’Enfant demanded that the house be relocated to make way for the city. Let’s just say that Vaughn wholly disagreed with that plan and wasn’t afraid to appeal to his powerful friends to stop L’Enfant, including then-Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and even President Washington himself. Nonetheless, L’Enfant had the house demolished in the dead of night and gained a powerful enemy as a result. Long story short, the fallout was severe, prompting L’Enfant to resign and Banneker to step up to complete the map in his absence.” Dana murmurs, “Man...*thaat shh is cray.*” Then (closing the Library of Congress image from the second monitor), she says, “Whoa – this plan shows a *tunnel* from the White House to the Octagon House? And check out the Capitol Hill fountains from the original design – and the asterisks on New Jersey Ave, pinpointing a ‘*home to be demolished*’.” Josh responds, “Yeah..*that’s* beef alright.”*

Dana enlarges Tess’s second photograph and begins, “Looks like an axonometric projection of some kind of mechanism...” Taking one look at the image, Thad immediately surmises, “Banneker’s *clock!*” Dana continues, “Well, these do look like clock components, but no dimensions are provided, no itemized parts or instructions for assembly.” Tess, suggests, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think he didn’t want it reproduced.” Josh weighs in, “Except for this this section on the upper right side labeled ‘the calibre’- there are detailed dimensions and specifications for that piece.” Dana states, “You’re right. Man, you could practically ‘*plug and print*’ that calibre plan in 3D even though it was designed in the 1700s. Crazy.” Tess stares at the screen, “Thad, the park docent...he said something about a calibre, remember? He asked how we found it or something like that.” Thad concurs, “Yeah. That was right before he told us not to let the clock toll. *I decided it wasn’t the right time* to tell him I didn’t know what a *calibre* was.” Grunting, Josh positions his weight on his elbow and forearm to explain, “A calibre governs a clock’s mechanical movement...so removing it would stop a clock. Consider it *the heart* - It powers *everything*, from the movement of the hands to the chronograph, its chime and anything else.” Thad stares at Josh for a moment. “I’m not even going to ask how you know all that, Josh,” Thad teases, then adds, “Banneker’s clock was made entirely out of wood, which was unheard of for that era. No one knows how, but it kept its time until his death, and there’s no

records, photos or known pieces of the device.” Josh states, “*Well*, there are only two ways to power a clock - mechanically, or with an external power source. I don’t imagine batteries existed in 17...” Thad volunteers, “1753, I think, and no, batteries weren’t created until 1800.” Tess continues, “And, I know your generation is all-in for renewables but that’s probably a *hard no* on *solar*,” Tess jokes, to laughter. As the chuckles subside, Dana casually asks “But what about *lunar* power?”

“I ran a sequence through an intelligence database to find any links between Banneker’s clock, *which he called a chronometer*, and the cosmic events he studied.” Dana continues, “What came back supports a theory that the clock could have a celestial element of sorts. *In a New Federalist article on “Benjamin Banneker, American Astronomer”, a woman named Janet West wrote that Banneker had used a new surveying instrument, which he had himself invented for “the determination of the latitude of stars near the zenith” and had given it a new application for establishing boundary stones according to celestial calculation*”. Recalling an earlier discussion with Thad, Tess mentions, “Didn’t you say that Banneker used his clock to coordinate points on the ground with astronomical calculations?” Thad remembers, “*Yeah*, and legend has it, that many nights, he’d wrap himself in a *cloak* and lie under a tree to meditate on revolutions of the heavenly bodies.” (Josh, fully feeling the impact of the pain meds, giggles at the term “*heavenly bodies*,” snorting like a kid, then coughs and groans from the effort). Thad smiles and continues, “These habits were *odd* to the non-scientist, but he was renowned for his astronomical observations.” Tess concurs, “The Smithsonian has copies of Banneker’s Almanac and Ephemeris, which were top sellers all over - from Pennsylvania, to Virginia to Kentucky. They called him the “Sable Astronomer” and his almanac was as highly regarded as Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanac for a time.” Dana asserts, “It looks like Banneker accurately predicted a total solar eclipse would occur on April 14, 1789.” Thad exclaims, “Exactly, Ms. Pearson! But his prediction was disputed by the top astronomers and mathematicians of the era.” Smiling, Dana admits, “I wish I could take credit for actually knowing that, Professor Craig, but I’m just reading the notes here on the image - lots of dates and events and even stuff he called omens. It almost reads like a journal or diary.” Dana zooms in on the notes, pauses, then opens a spreadsheet in a separate tab. Within a minute, she exports the information from two columns onto her sheet:

Omens

Incidents

1753 – *Chronometer nears completion. Only the calibre remains, albeit ionized wood from a thunderstruck tree is essential.*

4 May 1755 – *Insomnia. 10 min. aft the 2nd hour, the chronometer began to tremble. I dreamt vividly of Muscovite structures and people infected with sores and disease*

15 Sept 1771 – *An outbreak of bubonic plague in Moscow which kills 57,000. Plague Riots begin.*

4 May 1772 – *Chronometer clatters during aurora borealis. I woke from a dreadful premonition of war, followed by a visions of black bodies undersea*

10 June 1772 – *Start of American Revolution. Sons of Liberty attacked a British Royal Navy schooner In Narragansett Bay, R.I.*

17 May 1787 – *English slave ship Sisters capsizes killing*

*hundreds, en route from Africa to Cuba.
An irregularity from chronometer use?*

*6 April 1789 – During a coronal storm the clock
face presented an eclipse to come
followed by an image of fire.*

14 April 1789 – A total solar eclipse as foreseen!

*4 May 1791 – Utilized chronometer to locate South
boundary marker. I beheld my own
death in the borealis. The clock made
sounds not unlike those of locusts*

*1 April 1791 – A wealthy suitor seeks to purchase
the chronometer.*

*– I engraved a caveat onto the face of the
boundary marker. The clock is unfit for use.
The tree used for the calibre was infested
with locust spawn and must be recreated.*

*30 May 1792 – Again petitioned by Harlan Vaughn
For chronometer. My rejection was met
with harsh response.*

*1794 – Southern boundary marker has
Been replaced. Quarters ransacked
for chronometer. I am unsettled.*

*1803 – Fires sweep through Portsmouth, New
Hampshire. The Chaos Ephemeris holds
true. Disaster follows 17th year clock use
however gestation period is shrinking.*

22 March 1806 – I am watched and vulnerable.

As they read, the group sits quietly, awash in their own thoughts. Their silence is almost palpable until Tess faintly whispers, "Wow." Agreeing with the sentiment, Dana soberly adds, "He was *so* isolated." Thad adds, "What makes that even more painful to read is that just *six months* after that journal entry -" Josh interjects, "They *killed* him! *Bastards* burned him alive with his research!" Staring ahead blankly, Tess reflects, "I can't argue with your theory, Josh, since they tried to murder me the *same* way. . .but is *this all* because of that *asinine* boundary marker??" Josh contemplates for a moment. "I think the marker was a *warning* -" he opines "What'd Banneker call them in his journal?" Dana replies grimly, "*Omens*." Thad asks, "Okay - an omen, but of *what*?" Josh replies, "*Think about it* – his *first* vision of some kind of disease outbreak occurred in *May of 1755 at 2:10, in the middle of the night*. That *same* time was engraved on the boundary stone. It *can't* be a coincidence - and Banneker's Jedi ass was like, "*May the fortitude of wit*"?? He's talking about *May the Fourth!* I mean, *three* of his premonitions occur on the same day! This is about the *clock*, man – *not sure how*, but *Ben here* is warning us that it's bout' to be a freak show *every 17 years* on May 4th – *and my money's on 2:10* in the morning!"

Dana raises an eyebrow at Josh and asks, "*So it's 'Ben', now, huh?*" She then frenetically begins typing - logging on to a litany of websites, databases and excel files. In the backlight of flickering webpages and screen images, Tess places a hand on Dana's shoulder to ask, "*You, okay hon?*", but only receives a quick, "*Yep*" as Dana remains fixated on her screens. Raising the corner of her lip in a sneer, Dana taunts the coded

ghosts trying to thwart her queries, “You call that a *firewall*?” Seconds later she grunts, “You can’t ‘*cookie me*, *fool*...” then she leans forward, closing with, “Who *you* calling *unauthorized*?” After a few final keystrokes, she flops back in her chair, lifting her front wheels off the floor. She looks up, startled to see all eyes on her, with Josh shaking his head, and replies, “*What??*”

“Don’t kill the messenger,” says Dana, “But Harlan Vaughn was a *busy boy* after Banneker’s death in 1806. Using Banneker’s 1755, 1772 and 1789 journal entries, I ran a program to comb through known records in 17-year increments, searching major financial transactions, tax filings and transfer deeds of the Vaughn family’s *many* shell companies. And *forget* generational wealth - I unearthed 225 years of multi-generational theft! Talk about ‘*celestial*’ privilege!!” Attempting to slow her rapid-fire monologue, Tess pleads, “Dana, wait – slow down! What do you mean? *What* theft?” With restraint, Dana eases her excited cadence. “*What I mean*, is that Josh is *right* about the clock! Look at this list of major transactions on the right. Vaughn family transactions were among the most significant during these ‘*cicada*’ years, and always - and I mean *always* occur right before, or soon after one of these 17-year events. It’s statistically *impossible* for that to be a coincidence for two centuries!”

1806 - Construction is authorized on the Great National Pike, the 1st U.S. federal hwy. *Vaughn Holdings Ltd. acquires 412 acres + 13 years: 1819, The Panic of 1819 was the first widespread financial crisis in the United States*

1823 - Stephen F. Austin receives a grant of land in Texas from the government of Mexico. *HAV Investment Corp buys 1200 acres + 12 years: 1835, Fire consumes over 600 buildings in New York City*

1840 - Captain Charles Wilkes circumnavigated Antarctica, claiming it for the United States. *HV Global purchases Falkland Isle. ports + 11 years: 1851, Major fire in San Francisco destroys 1500-2000 buildings*

1857 - Panic of 1857 begins, setting off one of the most severe economic crises in U.S. history. *HV Global LLC sells stock holdings + 10 years: 1867, 49 victims of "Angola Horror" train wreck burn to death in Angola, New York*

1874 - Hawaii signs a treaty with the United States granting exclusive trade rights. *Vaughn Starboard acquires Atlas Shipping Corp + 9 years: 1883, Volcanic shocks (Isle of Ischia, Italy) kills 2,000 and destroys 1,200 houses*

1891 - Shoshone National Forest is established in Wyoming, the first U.S. National Forest. *V Family Trust builds 4,600 adj. homes + 8 years: 1899, 8th deadliest tornado in U.S. history strikes New Richmond, kills 117, injures 200*

1908 - The Collinwood school fire, Collinwood near Cleveland, Ohio, kills 174 people. *Legacy Holdings Inc acquires school grounds + 7 years: 1915, Earthquake in Avezzano, Italy kills 29,800*

1925 - The former Dreyfus Hotel collapses in Boston, MA, killing 44 patrons dancing in second floor club. *SRV Intl acquires property + 6 years: 1931, Earthquake devastates Managua, Nicaragua, killing 2000*

1942 - President Roosevelt signs executive order relocating Japanese Americans to internment camps. *V5 Co buys foreclosed homes + 5 years: 1947, Chemical explosion levels 42 blocks in Los Angeles, California*

1959 - US steel strike leads to significant importation of foreign steel for 1st time *Vaughn Starboard maintains 70% of shipping lines + 4 years: 1963, Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*

1976 - Argo Merchant oil tanker runs aground off Nantucket, MA, causing worst marine spill in history. *ScionV contracted for cleanup + 3 years: 1979, Meltdown at 3-Mile Island Nuclear Plant in US*

1993 - Hundreds of levees fail along Mississippi & Missouri Rivers causing \$15B in damage. *DV6 Inc buys 83% of foreclosed homes + 2 years: 1995, Oklahoma City, federal building bombing*

2010 - The Deepwater Horizon rig explodes in the Gulf of Mexico, beginning a six-month oil spill. *ScionTech V contracted for cleanup + 1 year: 2011, Earthquake strikes Washington, DC - 5.8 in magnitude*

“They *had to be* manipulating the clock to acquire these properties, amassing swaths of land under consideration by, or in *direct* proximity to, *the most profitable* economic engine in America – the *federal government*. Even worse, *after* an economic *collapse*, a *disaster* or an environmental *emergency*, they’ve come across as saviors, swooping in to procure contracts for clean-up efforts, or offering distraught property owners *pennies* on the dollar in their *worst* hour. It’s damning enough that Vaughn’s empire was erected on greed, but to think that a crusade that began with murder, wittingly unleashed the death of millions – *it’s unfathomable*. I’m not sure you *saw*, but these years of deferred disaster seem to have run their course. Banneker’s notes referenced a *Chaos Ephemeris showing* these catastrophes occurring earlier each year, like some kind of doomsday clock. He said it - that clock is *unfit* for use! The calibre needs to be replaced!”

“*Thaddeus*.” Tess calls out, turning from the monitors to face him. “*I know -*”, Thad answers, making eye contact with her. She continues, “This is *so much worse* than we thought.” Thad takes a deep breath and says, “I figured we were fighting for our history, but we’ll be lucky if there’s a *future* to *protect*! There won’t be any ‘*chaos delay*’ when they use that clock again.” Josh interrupts, “Guys, check out the date. We’re out of time - that clock’s gonna toll sooner than any of us thought – May 3rd is *today* - and it’s already 11:48 PM!” Glaring at the monitor, Tess shakes her head in realization and utters, “*Save all men from things obscene* - so much *needless* loss. I get it now. . .this must be the work of the *Seventeen*.” She pauses, thinking for a moment, then says, “Pull out that plan of the calibre... it’s time to *stop the clock*.”

Baby, grab your hat now, 'cause here we go...

*Minnie Riperton
"Here we go"*

[The sleepy trombone of 'Paris is Burning' by St Vincent embodies the early hour. In a dimly lit room, a man awakens on a soiled two-inch mattress and rubs his poorly shorn head. An examination lamp intermittently shines on a cart of used surgical instruments, as he sets his feet on an unsealed concrete floor.]

Standing unsteadily, he turns to walk, revealing a titanium plate sutured into the crown of his head. He grabs a medicine bottle and leans into the mirror, slowly peeling stained gauze from his collapsed eye socket, exposing a gaping laceration. Jacques swallows a handful of pills and then covers his good eye with his free hand. He snarls, infuriated by his waning vision and smashes the orange bottle into a blood-stained sink, bursting a grenade of opioids onto the floor. Gripping the sides of the vanity with both hands, he regains a modicum of composure and strides from the room barefoot, snatching a black leather eye patch off the medical cart.

He continues down the hall, as water drips from the stained concrete ceiling. After entering six digits into a backlit keypad, he rests his shoulder against a rusty steel door and adjusts the eye patch above his cheekbone. Unlubricated internal gears grate loudly against iron cylinders, until the 'chuk' of a retracting deadbolt reverberates through the space. As the door squeals open, track lighting brightens the room considerably – illuminating a metal peg wall holding dozens of tactical firearms. Twenty armed men mull about, engaged in spirited conversation. All discussion ceases when Jacques enters the room – the younger men staring as if they've seen a ghost and the grizzled old-timers merely nodding in grudging respect. Jacques ignores the impressive arsenal of automatic weaponry and stops at a second security point, slapping his hand on the wall above his head. He positions his face in front of a digital glass display, impatiently waiting for the authorization of his biometric signature. Three sections of a thick steel door divide and recess into the doorframe, as a digital voice announces, "Greetings, Mr. Toombs." After a backward glance confirming that he has not been followed, Jacques enters the room and immediately takes solace in his surroundings. Unlike the prior spaces, this room is lavishly appointed but with a stunning array of tawdry and unusual kink, comprised of hoods, rope, gags, handcuffs, and an assortment of whips. Stepping deeper inside, the collection becomes yet more disturbing, and includes cattle prods, a pillory, spears, a scold's bridal, spiked batons, and a rack, finally building to a covered crescendo hidden behind a red velvet curtain. In anticipation, Jacques trails his fingers along the curtain, creating a small ripple throughout the sumptuous fabric.

Inside, he slips into a black vest and selects six throwing knives, sliding them into sheaths beneath the vest lapels. Jacques conjures a smile as he clenches a German war hammer, gently whispering into the handle as if it were a lover. But before he can fully immerse himself, a hollow, thin voice calls out from the darkened left side of the room, "Bonsoir Jacques. I see there have been some interesting adjustments to your appearance. No more *clandestine* assignments for our man Jacques, since you stand out like a *sore thumb* now. Such a pity, really." The muscles in Jacques's neck visually constrict, reviving a sharp pain where his newly installed head plate meets his skin. Without making eye contact or revealing a trace of emotion, he responds, "Bonjour Monsieur Vaughn." The hollow voice continues, "I love what you've done with the place – are you planning to head out for the evening?" "Oui", Jacques replies, "pour revenge." Dolion Vaughn nods his head, jostling the considerable folds of skin under his neck, and responds, "Ah yes, third times a charm – *right?* I *warned* you about disappointing me, Jacques. Forgive me for not having much *confidence* in your display of resolve. Perhaps the *threat of termination, shall we say*, will help you find your *grit*." Jacques drops his head, countering, "I've led your teams depuis 2001. You would relieve me of my employment pour une fille??" Dolion smiles warmly, "*Of course not*, Jacques, you're almost like family to me. Plus, you're invaluable to our organization, and it's a *nightmare* to find people with your, um, skills. No, I was talking

about your daughter. I would terminate the lovely *Inna*. But only if necessary, of course. Up to you, my boy.”

Jacques tenses, and in one furious fluent movement, swings the war hammer 270 degrees, stopping half an inch from Dolion’s forehead, who roars, “**That’s** the *spirit*, boy!! That’s the Jacques my father told me about! Once you *washed out* of France’s *Commandos* because of your unorthodox methods and tastes, my father bought you stateside and gave you a vocation that finally matched your proclivities. He was always enthralled by your *prowess*, but me - I’ve always *admired* your restraint! Even with your collection of weaponry or your relentless training – I know you have the discernment to realize that a regiment has *already* been dispatched to your house. And I know you understand that if they don’t receive *word from me* - they’ll be no further *words* from little *Inna* or your wife – Kat, is it?” Jacques swallows hard, then coolly retorts, “I won’t fail- *fait accompli!*”, and promptly turns to leave. But Mr. Vaughn says drolly, “Don’t bother leaving, old friend. Tonight, our annoying new friends will be coming to *us*.” Incredulous, Jacques asks, “Quoi?? Dolion grins. “Oh, yes,” he continues. “These *irritants* have shown a shrewdness beyond just *dumb luck*. They’ve become a *cancer* that threatens our values – quite possibly our *way of life*. And with the cylinder in their possession, they’ve likely become aware of who and what we are, which simply cannot be tolerated. They mustn’t be allowed to disrupt tonight’s long-awaited ceremony. Do you understand?? Come now, cheer up . . .the last of the Seventeen arrives soon - and many hands make light work...”

[Dana’s apartment, off campus] Dana drops her key ring, fumbling to find the ignition button in the dark. Her Honda Civic finally shudders to life as she shifts into ‘Drive’ and throttles the gas, throwing Tess and Thad back into their seats. Tess yells, “*Whoa, girl!*” Dana sheepishly replies, “My bad! I’m just so nervous...” “*We all are,*” Thad says, “just try to relax a bit so we can pull this off.” Pulling onto campus, Dana slows behind a blue motorcycle. She observes the rider in front arguing with the campus security after being turned away, and panics, declaring, “This won’t work! Let’s turn around.” Over her car’s Bluetooth, a tired, deep voice incongruously sings the chorus to Janet Jackson’s ‘Control’. Pausing, Josh says, “Ya’ll left me back here, talking into a headset like I’m *Control* for MI-6. *So, I’ll be that. Come on Dana, remember when we hit your dad’s Macallan over Thanksgiving freshman year? No chaser, no ice or nothing, we got ridiculously buzzed. Then your dad came in and started chatting me up about football strategy? I had to turn it on even though I could barely think straight. I went so deep into linebacker zone coverage and triangle reads that his eyes glassed over. Your pops ain’t asked me about sports since. I need you to turn it on like that now, baby.*”

Smiling slightly, Dana says, “Ok, I can do this,” regaining her composure. She rolls down her window and extends her ID as she comes to a stop at the guard station. “Good eve – no, good morning - where are you folks headed at this late time of night?”, the security officer asks. Dana smiles her best smile and says casually, “Hi - just going to the architectural lab.” The officer scans the car’s interior quickly. “All of you?”, asks the officer. “Umm, yes,” Dana responds. “*You sure? Are your friends enrolled here?*”, the officer asks skeptically. Thad begins to shift nervously, but Tess chimes in, “Hello - I’m her cousin, and this is my friend. We’re both architects and before we fly out tomorrow morning, Dana wanted our feedback on her senior thesis. *(Tess turns to face Dana)* But, if it’s a problem, you can just email *some photos* and we can get on one of those zoom things to talk about it before you turn it in. It only counts for half of your final grade, but, we’ll do our best – I’m sure it will be just as good as seeing it in person.” *(Silence...)* With a hint of a frown, the officer states, “Enjoy your evening, folks” and lifts the security arm allowing them to pass. “*Maan,*” Thad says under his breath. “Good thing he didn’t recognize me. We were *well past* the point for me to mention that I’m *employed* here...” Tess snickers, “I *know* – but don’t worry. You probably *won’t be, come Monday.*” Thad shoots Tess a look, then begins laughing loudly in relief, followed by Dana.

Thad taps Dana on the shoulder and points, saying, “Park there and turn off the lights.” He steps out of the car and strolls alone across the Quad towards an iron bench under a large tree that would have been unremarkable, except for its blackened and dark gray branches. Approaching, he remembers that it was only two days ago that he sat in this very spot to call Tess back after she first sent him the image. So much has changed since that fateful call. Looking around to confirm he is alone, Thad stands on the bench seat and retrieves a Swiss army pocketknife from his jeans. He flips open the saw-toothed blade and places a foot on the back of the bench, managing to keep his balance while stretching to reach a low-hanging branch. He saws repeatedly at the blackened limb, as thick as his wrist. After several minutes of sustained effort, the branch’s connection to the tree is weakened enough for him to break it completely off. He jumps to the ground and breaks the branch over his knee, creating two sections small enough to be concealed under his shirt. He walks quickly back to the car and slides into the back seat. Tess asks, “Exactly why did we risk incarceration for *this* old tree?” Josh’s booming voice pipes in via the Bluetooth speaker, startling them all. “We need *ionized* wood from a lightning strike - just like Banneker used on the original calibre. Didn’t ya’ll read the journal?” Tess rolls her eyes and glances at Dana (*who laughs*), then groans, “Thanks, bruh...” After parking near the Sklarek Architectural Sciences Hall, the three hurriedly walk to the entrance. Thad uses his key card to gain entry, then hands the wood pieces to Tess, whispering, “You keep going, I have to take care of something – I’ll meet you back at the car.” Tess hesitates, then pulls him by the collar, kissing him softly, saying, “Stay alive, ok?”

Tess turns to Dana and asks, “Are you ready?” [*As the guitar strum of ‘Klink’ by Smino begins,*] Dana locks eyes with Tess and replies, “Let’s do it.” Hugging the right side of the room, they walk in tandem, casually facing away from the cameras. They take the stairs, skipping risers in order to avoid the elevator’s surveillance. As they reach the 3rd floor, they hear the lobby doors below open resoundingly and, through the glass atrium, they see two security officers enter the building. Taking off their shoes, Dana and Tess run across the third floor tiles in bare feet, dipping into an alcove near the restrooms. A shorter officer remarks that the panel signaled entry five minutes ago but didn’t flag it as a break in since it was a keycard access. His taller, more heavy-set cohort shrugs off the entire errand, griping, “They gotta stop sending us out every time something goes bump late in the night. Can’t have us running cross the yard chasing every blinkin’ light. Call me when some glass breaks.” Ignoring his partner’s routine nonchalance, the first officer sighs and starts climbing the stairs, while his partner summons the elevator and yells out, “I’ll start at the top, Brunson – meet you midway.” Dana seizes the opportunity of their loud conversation to mask the sound of opening the creaky wood shop door and immediately slips behind a computer station with Tess on her right. She hands Tess one of her earbuds and calls Josh, whispering, “Have you finished the drawing?” Josh frustratedly responds, “That’s a *no*. Why do folks think it only takes a few clicks to draw things in CAD – let alone drafting in *three dimensions*? Lord knows what might happen if our inputs aren’t exact.” Dana replies, “Gotta move faster, bae. Campus cops know someone is here and are searching the building.”

Tess searches the workshop to find a tabletop vise to secure their freshly cut branch. She strokes the larger branch piece several times with a handheld planer, rotates the limb 90 degrees and repeats the process, creating smooth sides. She looks up to ask Dana, “So where’s that Nomad CNC you talked about?” Josh quips, “Let the record reflect, - the school *just got* that machine, and it was hella expensive...” Dana interrupts with an insistent whisper, “It’s across the aisle on the right.” Tess chides, “Chill, guys - this is what I *do*. I won’t break your precious machine. You finished with that CAD file, Josh?” “Yes ma’am,” Josh sighs, “I just emailed it to DP.” Dana logs in using her studio credentials and motions to Tess, who clamps the new plank into the 3-D cutter, then joins her beside the monitor. She carefully reviews Josh’s adapted calibre CAD file to ensure alignment along its X, Y, and Z axes and dials up the RPM to enhance the router’s precision.

Holding tight to Dana's hand, Tess mouths a quick prayer, then proclaims, "Here goes - *absolutely everything*" and hits the 'enter' button.

On the other side of the Quad, Thad walks with purpose, constantly looking furtively to see if he is being observed. It's not uncommon for professors to burn the midnight oil, but he knows it would be an anomaly on a Saturday night in the Spring. He reaches his office but stops cold when he finds the door ajar. He listens intently for activity but hearing none, slowly enters the room. His papers and files have been ransacked and his CPU yanked from its cabinet, leaving HDMI and ethernet cables on the floor. He immediately thinks of Tess, Dana and Josh, and the ridiculous jeopardy they are all in. He walks over to the mini refrigerator under his desk and retrieves an insulin pen, thankful it's still in place. Opening a drawer on a mobile file, he reaches into a box of sterile needle tips and pockets half a dozen. He unwraps the seventh, screwing it onto the tip of the pen and injects the back of his arm. He takes a breath, and caps the pen - just as an incoming call arrives from Josh.

[The Sklarek Architectural Sciences Hall] Flashlight beams shine across the wood shop windows as guards loudly enter, yelling a mishmash of, "Who's in here!" and "Show yourselves!" Officer Brunson uses his free hand to tap along the wall to bank of ganged light switches, flipping most to the on position. With the whirr of the Nomad and the slow illumination of the fluorescent tubes masking their footsteps, Tess and Dana duck below the partitions, away from the security team. But the calibre has not finished milling, and the guards stand around touching the protective polycarbonate enclosure. The larger officer starts pushing buttons to shut off the unit, then bends down to pull the plug. Reacting to prevent the calibre's ruin, Tess shouts out, "Sorry for the drama, officers!" and then flips off all the lights as she darts from the room, plunging the officers into darkness. "Shit!", yells Brunson, "Cut her off!" He sprints after Tess as the second guard pauses, asking, "What about the machine?" Brunson snaps, "Leave it. We'll double back and shut the power to the wing! Come on, Simms!!" Dana, still in her hiding place below the partitions, listens in shock to Tess's footsteps on the stairs followed by the officers in pursuit. Panicked, she asks, "You hear that, Josh?" He answers, "Yeah - I heard. How long before the calibre is done?" "Maybe - four minutes," whispers Dana. Josh asks, "Listen Dane - you know Tess can take care of herself. Just stick to the plan and get - that - calibre. You got this."

[Thad's campus office] Josh calls Thad to report, "it's *all* falling apart Prof. C - where *are* you?" Thad responds, "I see what you mean - security is everywhere. I tried to get back to the car but there's no way. Campus guards have blocked both ends of the street! Contact Dana and Tess - tell 'em the only way off the yard is through the Quad!" Josh says, "I'm on it."

[The Quad, campus] Thad stands under the lightening tree, away from the glow of streetlights. The heightened patrols and flashing lights fuel his growing concern. As he checks his phone compulsively for calls messages from Tess and Dana, Tess runs up from behind him, out of breath. She warns, "We should...stay off our phones...the light...draws attention. I just lost two guards...by the practice fields." Thad hugs her tightly, then asks, "What happened - *where's Dana?*" Tess says, "We had to split up - there was no other way. She was in the wood shop waiting for the calibre to finish." Thad remarks, "Damn - I just hope she can get out of the building." Tess adds, "And that we can get *off this campus...* Walking, at this hour, in the middle of a security event - we'll definitely become *black folks of interest.*" At that moment, a shadowy figure races towards them - waving an arm overhead, yelling, "RUN!!!" Six officers trail Dana by only 10 yards. As if it were a relay, Thad and Tess begin running, trying to match Dana's pace, but slowly enough for her to catch

up. Upon arrival, she places the calibre into Tess's outstretched hand. The trio continue running with Thad at the rear. With security closing the distance, Dana cries, "I can't keep this up...just go without me!" Thad's stomach drops. The thought of repercussions for Dana – the consequences for himself – or *for the world*, nearly makes him vomit. "Keep going," he shouts at them as he stops and turns, raising his fists, readying himself for an aggressive (and painful) diversion. But before the officers reach him, he hears the distinctive rumble of a throaty V8 and sees a cobalt blue Camaro drift 180 degrees in front of the security team, sending thick smoke and burnt rubber into the night air. The passenger door flings open and Josh coolly says, "*Get in where you fit in - Now.*" With utter relief, Dana, Tess, and Thad tumble into the car as the rear wheels spin up more smoke, before speeding down Georgia Avenue.

[At a stoplight in Petworth] They marvel in awe at the ornate object Tess twists in her fingers. Thad rubs his eyes as the calibre appears to glow from within, but he's unsure if his low blood sugar has blurred his vision. A car to their rear honks twice, prompting Josh to continue through the intersection, stating, "It's 1:16 in the morning - and we have fifty-four minutes to do this – I'm just not *exactly* sure what we're doing..." Tess remarks, "There are only *a few* buildings from Banneker's day that *remain* standing. And that old skeleton key from the cylinder belongs to *one of them.*" Thad adds, "The White House, the Capitol, and the Octagon House come to mind – but the first two nearly burned to the ground when the British invaded Washington in 1814. They've both had *significant* repairs and extensive security improvements since." Tess opines, "We're looking for a place relatively untouched since Banneker's last journal entry in 1806. That's where the clock is bound to be."

Thad suggests, "That leaves the Octagon House, which is where President and Dolly Madison lived while the White House was being rebuilt. *Until today*, I thought the tunnels in and out of the Octagon House were *legend...*" Dana then adds, "Not according to L'Enfant's *hidden* map – he shows them - clear as day. Once I'm back on my server, I can pinpoint the entry points – but you need to start heading that way. We'll use the AirPods as comms." Josh asks, "What makes you sure the clock is there now?" Dana states, "The tax records. *Every* shell corp the Vaughns established were founded using that address." Josh quips, "Damn - that's *screaming, evil lair.*" Dana adds, "It's basically, *bad guy 101.*" Josh begins to feel lightheaded and brings the car to an abrupt stop, occupying two parking spaces across from Dana's apartment. He lays his head back and closes his eyes in exhaustion. Dana caresses the back of his head and says, "Let's get you inside, baby." He gingerly exits the car and tosses his keys to Thad through the open window. He murmurs, "Check the glove box." Thad opens the compartment and looks back at Josh without speaking. Josh says, "In case of emergency, *those* will break the glass."

[Dana's apartment] Thad and Tess wait to make sure Josh and Dana get inside safely. Thad starts the engine and adjusts the rear-view mirror. As he puts the car in reverse, Tess asks, "So, what's in the glove box?" He presses the pedal producing a squeal from the tires, then motions for her to take a look. She slips her fingers under the handle and squeezes, popping the glove compartment open. *[The menacing intro to 'Kick in the Door' by the Notorious B.I.G. begins]* As Georgia Avenue NW becomes 7th Street, she retrieves a particularly malevolent looking set of brass knuckles, and grins in approval. She stares out of the window, sliding them deep into her pocket. They continue the drive in silence – relieved to be alone, but emboldened because they're together.

Tess answers on the fourth ring, having briefly mistaken the heavy brass in her pocket for her cell phone. Relieved, Dana says, "You guys OK? – for a second I -" Tess replies quickly and attempts to regain focus,

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.” Dana inquires, “It’s all good, Ms. Clar... Wait, can I call you Tess now, considering the world might end in forty-five minutes?” Tess laughs, “We’re definitely on a *first name* basis at this point.” Comforted, Dana says, “You guys should head to the Lockkeeper’s House at 17th and Constitution. There’s a structure there where the canal lock keeper maintained waterway traffic in the 1830s - but it’s been abandoned since 1855. After 1814, it was a refuge point for an emergency tunnel from the White House, by way of – *you guessed it - the Octagon House.*”

[*Constitution Avenue, Downtown DC*] Thad pops the Camaro’s trunk and lifts the spare tire, separating the tire iron from the jack assembly. The tire iron’s weight is welcomed, as Thad knows it could serve beyond its original purpose. He slides the iron through one of his belt loops and paces two blocks towards an ashlar clad cabin with Tess matching his pace. The intersection is busy – even at this witching hour, making discretion almost impossible. Tess sits on the front doorstep and pretends to tie her shoelace. As she stands, Thad kneels behind her and slips the tire iron between the door and it’s frame like a crowbar. He places his full weight on the iron’s long end, cracking opening a 2-inch gap at the base of the door. He stands next to Tess and takes the obligatory tourist selfie to conclude their performance before walking back towards the corner. When the traffic finally subsides, Thad bolts up the sidewalk and corners, shoulder first into the doorway. The wooden jamb splinters as the door swings violently into the room, causing Thad to tumble head first into a pile of dusty orange cones. “Nice going, He-Man,” Tess says as she quickly closes the door behind them, jamming it shut with a wedged scrap of wood.

They peer around the dim room, which is comprised of old hewn wood studs without insulation or drywall. The floor is a knotted, wide plank hardwood with gaps of varying sizes. In the middle of the room, a lumpy grey pillow rests on the floor along with a myriad of plastic containers holding liquids in various states of decomposition and several hypodermic needles - confirming a squatter’s presence in the not-so-recent past. The window panes are largely covered with various street closure, construction, and directional signs, paying homage to long-ago parades, festivals, and protests. Tess wonders aloud, “Just think of the history that has been witnessed firsthand from this vantage point – Lincoln’s funeral procession, the March on Washington, inaugurations ...” Thad says, “Tess - look,” motioning to a corner of the room where a gap disrupts the hardwood flooring. Tess pushes the stack of faded orange cones to reveal a 3’-0” x 3’-0” floor hatch, secured shut by a rusting padlock, bolting a black iron ring to the floor. Thad slides the tire iron through the loop of the padlock and pulls back, using his weight yet again. When the padlock refuses to budge, Tess slips next to him and stands on the tire iron, using Thad’s shoulders and back for balance. On the count of three, Thad pushes with all his strength while Tess bounces on the tire iron, her sneakers on each side of Thad’s fists. Suddenly the padlock gives way, cracking like the discharge of a musket. A chunk of padlock breaks off and grazes Thad’s cheek before ricocheting off the rough-hewn lumber ceiling. He wipes away blood from a 2” gash near his cheekbone, and slips the tire iron back through his belt loop.

Thad pulls the floor hatch open to about 110 degrees, where the ring knocks against the inside wall of the cabin. Tess shines her phone light down the black shaft, revealing over two dozen dusty metal rungs on the wall. Thad checks his watch. Realizing that there is no time to waste, he glances at Tess quickly before disappearing down the chute. “Great – a dark deep shaft with a rusty older ladder,” Tess says, attempting to overcome pretty much all her childhood fears. She tentatively places one leg down to the second rung and wills herself to continue. Upon reaching the bottom, the air becomes wet – beyond humid, as their footsteps splash and resonate throughout the narrow corridor. Tess dials Dana, pleasantly surprised that they still have some cellular reception, and asks, “It’s 1:51 - how far away are we?” Catching every other word, Dana replies, “About 4 blocks – just - the tunnel - half a mile.”

The corridor is jet black except for their cell phone lights. Thad trudges ahead by a few steps, attempting to clear the path of stalactites and abandoned cobwebs with his tire iron. Drops of cloudy liquid occasionally drop on them, each one causing Tess to silently reassess her decision to climb down the shaft. Tess attempts to reach Dana again – but the spotty signal is now completely dead, as is Thad’s phone battery. Despite overwhelming trepidation, Tess takes pole position as her phone light illuminates their path with just 5% of power remaining. She stops abruptly as Thad nearly bumps into her, asking “What is it? What do you see?” Tess answers, “Nothing – *that’s the problem*. Our data must have been wrong – we’ve been on a *fool’s* errand.” In the darkness of the tunnel, Thad holds up two fingers, “Wait, listen...” [The muffled sound of a lone voice can be heard through the tunnel wall.] Tess peers through the blackness, stretching her phone light forward to reveal the contour of an arched iron door in the distance. They advance slowly and quietly, desperate not to reveal their presence. Thad produces the cylinder’s rusty skeleton key and gently inserts it through the keyhole, sending a small echo through the tunnel. They freeze, wondering how they can gain entry while avoiding detection. They listen as the voice on the other end of the wall seems to be conducting some sort of presentation or ceremony. When their applause is followed by what seems to be the stomping of feet, Thad seizes the opportunity to turn the key until the lock’s cylinder loudly drops into place. Thad and Tess put their full weight into the wrought iron slab as the heavy door groans to an open position, allowing them, and ankle-deep murky water, access into an adjacent, dimly lit room.

[*The Octagon House - The catacombs*] Thad and Tess walk gingerly across a concrete floor, their wet shoes squishing softly with each step. As they pass a red velvet curtain, Tess stops to peer through an opening. A 14’-0” high guillotine with a gleaming, angled blade suspended at its apex greets her menacingly. She recoils instinctively, nearly knocking Thad off balance. Shaken, she releases the curtain, not sharing what she’s witnessed and they continue their path toward the voices. Finally, they approach an opening leading to the source of the voices. Thad peers around a pilaster to observe an eight-sided two-tiered room with over a dozen white-robed men seated on the upper level, opposite a very thin man on the lower floor wearing what looks to be a finely tailored business suit. The thin man continues, “It has come to my attention that one among us has begun to question their calling, openly speaking about our *‘tactics’*. While this individual benefits from the enormous influence, wealth, and trappings that we all unselfishly distribute among our corps, they place this institution at risk. Indeed, our strength is dependent upon the world’s belief in our spotless reputation and altruistic motives. If we lose that, wielding our power will become quite a bit more, shall we say, messy, and no one wants that. To maintain our way of life, we only stand *as strong* as our weakest, *most feeble*, pathetic link. That is our code and every man here knows it, as our fathers and grandfathers did before us.”

“Mr. St. James, please rise to atone,” commands the thin man. Slowly, a bespectacled bearded man in his late 50s rises to his feet. His short and stout frame trembles noticeably, causing his white robe to billow like an ocean wave. Two large armed men stand just behind him as he continues to shake before the assembled group. Before he can say a word of contrition or denial, they grab him beneath his robed arms and violently throw him over the railing down to the lower level. Crimson splotches appear below the knee and elbow of Linwood St. James’s otherwise white robe, as he writhes in pain on the floor. Two men on the lower-level stride over to drag him by his flailing arms towards the velvet curtain, where they strap him to a bench, face up. The curtain opens to reveal a figure with a crew cut and an oversized eyepatch standing beneath the guillotine. The man, familiar in his mannerisms, seems unbothered by the glistening blade above his head; rather, he seems to relish the fear on St. James’s face. As the man with the crew cut circles the contraption,

Thad catches a glimpse of the metal plate at the crown of his head and a sickening feeling washes over him. His fears are fully realized as Jacques speaks, "Bonsoir, Monsieur St. James."

Tess taps Thad on the shoulder, motioning to the pedestal in front of the thin man. Sobbing, Linwood St. James fretfully cries, "Dolion!! There's been a horrible mistake!! I've been true to our cause! I would never betray the Vaughns! My family's served the *Seventeen* for more than 100 years!! Dolion...Please!" Receiving a smack in the temple with the butt of a rifle, St. James goes limp. As the thin man raises his arm and flicks his index finger toward the guillotine, Thad and Tess finally gain what they had been waiting for -- an unobstructed view of Banneker's clock. At long last, the chronometer is a sight to behold. Its stained finish is well worn - almost neglected, revealing two deep gauges and multiple scrapes. But where the rear of the clock sits open, it exposes a symphony of wooden pinions and wheels, each arbor spinning at varying speeds, performing complementary functions. Below this magnificent intricacy rests the calibre, the beating heart of the clock nearly masked by the complexity of its surroundings.

Jacques asks a groggy St. James, "Do you have any finale words?" Just as Linwood parts his bloodied lips to speak, Jacques raises a lever, releasing the guillotine's weighted blade down through St. James' open mouth. Tess screams at the macabre sight, causing the entire gathering to turn in her direction. Thad sees the guards moving towards them and is nearly grazed by gunfire as he runs into the octagon and grabs Dolion Vaughn by his neck. He raises the tire iron with his other hand, threatening to smash the clock. Vaughn yells, "Stop shooting, *you feckless* idiots! You'll damage the chronometer!!" Thad yells, "So *this* is the *source* of so much chaos?? This is what you are willing to kill for?!!" Vaughn laughs gleefully, seemingly unbothered by Thad's grip on his thin neck. "You *simple* boy, this apparatus has facilitated more economic activity than the GDPs of South America combined. We wield the power to influence any election around the globe, the decisions of any central bank and the trend in any economic market! If you possessed this power, Mr. Craig, you would kill for it too and much more. As it is now, *you and everyone else in this country* would be lost without the *Seventeen* and our *able hand* at the rudder! A few deaths – a few hundred thousand deaths – is a small price to pay, I am sure you would agree. In ten minutes, you'll *witness god's own hands* at work. And with St. James' timely *departure*, there is an opening for a *seventeenth* discipleship – to usher in a *new chapter* of governance over these – *cattle*. *In an instant*, all the wealth and influence that belonged to that traitor could be yours. In fact, recent events prove that you and Ms. Clark are far more resourceful than *that dotard* ever was. *Goodness*, I must be *evolving* - we've never *remotely considered* someone of your... background. *Perhaps Jefferson was wrong on that front as one of you could prove to be useful... So*, will it be you or the lovely Ms. Clark? *You decide among yourselves. Only one of you has to die today.*"

As Dolion speaks, Jacques tosses two *throwing knives* onto the floor, anticipating a cock fight and revenge upon Tess and Thad that had motivated him for days. Tess rises slowly at this provocation. She does not have a plan but knows that time is short given the fire in Jacques' eyes as he stares at Thad. Dolion chides, "Tick-tock – only 9 minutes remain until the *chronometer tolls* for the *seventeenth time*. After which, we have but *three minutes* to extricate what we're here for - an accounting of the future – otherwise the gateway metastasizes – which would be *quite* unpleasant." After kneeling quietly and surreptitiously picking up a throwing knife, Tess joins the conversation. "Vaughn, your choice of words is *interesting*. You, your family, and this God forsaken *Seventeen* have *long* been a cancer that threatens civilization's very existence. Do you even have a clue of the magnitude of destruction that ensues each time you use the clock?? Do you care?" Vaughn laughs with genuine amusement, "You think like a *child*, Tess. Does a moth *care* that it's *chewed* through your Christmas sweater? Does a rooster *agonize* when it wakes you from your *slumber*? No, they just do what they are called to do. Just as I am called to lead by wielding that *beautiful* clock. It's time for

you to... *Oh, how would your generation say it – ‘Wake the hell up.’ Time is truly money,*” he cackles.

Enraged, Tess hurls a throwing knife at Dolion Vaughn’s face but strikes his arm instead. He roars in pain, screaming, *“Kill this bitch!”* The guards raise arms at Tess who stands with her hands at her sides, facing death for the third time in as many days. Thad immediately brings the tire iron up to Dolion’s throat and pulls with both hands, knuckles up, shouting, *“If anyone touches her - I’ll wring his turkey neck!!”* As the rest of the Seventeen frantically scramble, overturning chairs amid this standoff, Jacques makes his way over to Tess. He removes his eye patch revealing his grisly visage and faces her, standing only one foot away. *[The ominous pulse of ‘Formation’ by Beyonce breaks the 4th wall]* Tess holds her ground, not moving an inch and staring back at his collapsed eye socket. Jacques runs the back of his hand across her neck to her cheek, then touches her lips with a bandaged finger. As Thad tenses, Jacques holds his gaze and says, *“I will not enjoy this mon amour...alas, but neither will you.”* He reaches down to his calf sheath, producing his tactical knife, wiping it clean with the purple Raven’s bow tie. He places the tip of the blade beneath her right earlobe. Tess’s hand moves ever so slightly, from her sides to her pockets as she coyly asks, *“What...no ‘last words’ for me? Even the traitor St. James was afforded that courtesy.”* Jacques’ right eye flitters, if only for a moment and he replies, *“Je m’excuse mademoiselle. S’il vous plait, continuez...”* From across the room, Dolion Vaughn spits onto the floor, and cries, *“Come on, you French freak - just slit her throat!!”* Jacques’ fleeting distraction from Dolion’s insult gives Tess enough time to slip her small fingers into the designated holes of Josh’s brass knuckles. Claspng both hands together, she swings them upward in a rapid arc - from right to left – and connects with Jacques’ mouth, sending blood, teeth and jaw bone fragments onto the wall. Tess shouts, *“That was for Josh and Steve Collier- and for my house, you sick monster!”*

As Tess stands over Jacques’ slumped frame, Dolion screams, *“Murder them all! The tolling commences in three minutes!!”* Thad watches in horror as guards pursue Tess, who has slipped behind the velvet curtain. Thad pushes Vaughn forward, then forcefully swings the tire iron into his spine. As Vaughn yells and falls to the floor, Thad changes his grasp on the iron, holding it now at the bend, and pierces the abdomen of an approaching guard with the straight end. Thad rips his assailant’s M16 rifle from his bloody hands, as a bullet tears through his upper thigh. Thad falls to one knee, but is still able to lay down rounds of suppressive fire. When the clip empties, the room becomes still – with five guards and eight of the Seventeen either dead or unconscious. Through the walls, Thad hears an occasional burst of fire, and he searches the floor for unspent cartridges, finding just one.

Thad pushes past the extreme pain in his leg and stands to peer behind the red curtain in search of Tess. He’s partially through the proscenium but feels a vibration, followed by a clattering coming from the octagon. He quickly returns, in time to witness the clock arms softly aglow, reading 2:10 to the minute. Dolion Vaughn, his back shattered, pulls himself along the floor by his shaking arms. With his eyes still fixed on the clock, he strains to push a guard’s dead body from his path. Thad looks from the clock to Dolion and asks, *“Are you still obsessed with the clock? Blinded by undeserved power after everything that just happened? Is there no shame in you?”* Dolion coughs and curses under his breath, then says, *“You’re so unworthy. [Then spits] You have no idea what you’ve squandered. I offered you eternal life, of sorts. Wealth for you and generations of your descendants.”* Over a din that resounds like hundreds of cicadas, Dolion cries, *“You’re missing your window into immortality, boy! This is your very last chance – help me get to my feet.”* Angrily, Thad yells, *“You and your family have helped yourselves for far too long! It’s time to go to hell!”* As Thad loads the clip into his rifle, a lone gunshot echoes from a handgun Dolion removed from a dead guard, sending fresh smoke wafting through the octagon.

Thad collapses to the ground and struggles for breath. Bringing his hand to his chest, he exhales, panic-stricken seeing a tiny, ragged hole pumping blood through his fingers. Dolion Vaughn cries, “*Ha!!* You’re as *arrogant* as *Icarus*, Thaddeus. Is *this* how you saw *your* day playing out??” Dolion continues to slink towards the clock by crawling over Thad, his long nails clawing his clothing for leverage. As Thad’s consciousness wanes, he reflects on his family, his class, and especially Tess. His heart fills with grief when he thinks of them now, finding no peace. He envisions Tess alone, facing this madman without him, and he feels for a weapon - finding only the insulin pen in his pocket. He produces a needle tip from the few he took earlier, and unwraps it with his teeth. He painstakingly screws the tip to the pen and adjusts the dosage to its highest setting. Completely spent, his head falls back to the concrete, as he struggles to move. Girding for a final outlay of energy, he whispers, “Hey...*dickhead*...” Halfway across Thad’s blood-stained torso, Dolion furiously turns to say, “Oh just *die*-” But at that moment, Thad jams the insulin pen into Dolion’s right cornea, injecting a dosage more than 10 times the normal. Dolion’s remaining eye widens in shock and he lets out a blood curdling scream before his body begins seizing.

Disheveled, Tess sprints into the octagon and places her hands on her knees. Unnerved by the clatter, she first spots Vaughn in a fetal position, involuntarily shuddering from extreme hypoglycemia. She then runs over to Thad’s lifeless body and sobs uncontrollably as she rests his head in her lap. She calls to him softly, then kisses him on his lips, wiping her tears from his cheeks with her palms. In an instant, the clamor of locusts ceases, and Vaughn maddeningly repeats, “Dear God – oh no, no, **no, nooo**”, as the ground begins violently shaking. Tess looks around wildly, seeing cracks emanate in every direction from the clock and its base. Guards run into the octagon, real fear in their eyes as some yell, “Make it stop!” A column near a passageway begins to shear from the lateral movement, sending stress cracks through the vaulted ceiling, which collapses in a cloud of dust.

[*Dana’s Apartment, Petworth, Washington, DC*] Dana jumps up from her desk to check on Josh, believing he’d fallen. Seeing him sleeping, she turns in the doorway, but the entire apartment building heaves, then shudders, dropping the plaster ceiling. As Josh awakes in a stupor, Dana screams and covers his body with her own.

[*The Toombs residence, Spring Valley, Washington, DC*] Kat hurriedly carries Inna down the stairs to the basement, as cracks form in the concrete foundation walls. The incoming water line separates at the coupling, as cold water floods the basement and rises. Kat prays the Lord’s Prayer with her eyes tightly shut as Inna repeatedly cries, “*Where’s Papa?*”

[*The Lockkeeper’s house, Washington, DC*] Traffic is gridlocked at Constitution Avenue and 17th St NW as the signals that still work, flash red in both directions. A 30-foot crevasse opens along multiple blocks on top of the tunnel network, swallowing pedestrians, cars, and the Lockkeeper’s house whole.

[*The National Mall, Washington, DC*] F-22 Raptor’s scramble on Quick Reaction Alert in advance of Marine One’s departure. The ground along the Mall shakes violently as tectonic plates shift, liquefying the soil beneath the southwest foundation of the Washington Monument, allowing it to lean 6 degrees. At the Capitol, the cupola supporting the Statue of Freedom, falls to the floor of the rotunda before the dome breaks into 3-ton chunks, that rain down on the marble flooring below.

[*Patapsco Valley, Maryland*] The riverbed is dry, as trout and spot crowdedly swim in remnant pools, most flapping desperately for air. Benjamin Banneker’s replicated cabin lies in rubble. [*The camera view widens, capturing the Benjamin Banneker Museum intact*]

[The Vessel, Hudson Yards, New York] The surrounding plaza and the Highline are evacuated, as the steel structure of the Vessel emits high pitched groans and gently sways.

[The Catacombs, The Octagon House] The temblors have collapsed three floors of the Octagon House, with night sky visible in areas, but Tess has miraculously survived, having dragged Thad beneath a structural archway. Chunks of the vaulted ceiling have rained down onto Dolion Vaughn's legs and torso, leaving only his shoulder, head and open mouth exposed. Later news reports will record the earthquake's magnitude as 9.2, inflicting billions of dollars of damage from the Carolinas to Vermont. But as of now, the intensity continues to grow, as Tess huddles, praying. With trembling hands, she lifts her sweatshirt, revealing the freshly milled calibre that had been wrapped in plastic and taped to her stomach. Wincing, she rips off the duct tape and unwraps the calibre. As the clock hands rotate clockwise, nearly 40 times normal speed, Tess shifts to the rear of the device. Avoiding the spinning clockwork, she pinches the rotten calibre, using her thumb and index finger. She twists her hand counterclockwise and pulls, snapping the piece – *which burns her fingertips* – out of its cradle. Tess holds the new calibre and inserts it at the same orientation as its predecessor. She turns the calibre clockwise, until the snap becomes audible. The clock wheels are static, and the face has now darkened, but the concrete floor continues to heave and fracture under her feet. She falls onto her side, and crawls to her knees, distraught at the prospect of abject failure. She yells in frustration, and gives the side of the 225-year-old relic a good whack. In amazement, the chronometer face glows, then dims, beckoning, like the Jones Point lighthouse. As if it had been imagined, the cacophony of chaos stops abruptly, the glow from the clock illuminating the destruction in all directions. Staring at Thad's lifeless body, Tess begins to cry as she rests on her knees. She places her hand on the clock, closes her eyes and wishes with her very soul that he was still with her. The clock hums and sweetly tolls, like a tuned chime, as Tess looks up into the star filled night – from 32 feet below the sidewalk.

[4th floor, Washington Hospital Center. The camera pans from Dana to Josh - with his arm in a sling, then zooms to wider view of a hospital room with Tess on the opposite side of the bed.] The group laughs, as Thad lays slightly inclined in a hospital bed, holding out his arms, reliving his recent adventures. Tess holds his hand and strokes it lovingly. Over her shoulder, she knowingly pushes away a hospital tray holding his water, sugar-free Jello and a copy of today's Washington Post. The camera then pans to the front page of the newspaper where the headline 'EAST COAST DEVASTATION' looms prominently. The focus then tightens to the kicker headline beneath, reporting the collapse of the Tower Bridge in London. A tense and worried look passes across Tess's face for a moment before she recovers her smile. *[The piano intro of 'Clock with No Hands' by The Roots plays softly.]* *The camera view widens to the four of them, talking and laughing as Josh gives the nurse his phone, for a group photo]*

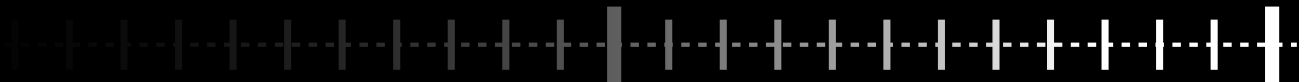
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ThaDarkitect

(NOUN) 'DÄR-KƏ -,TEKT

a genius of color, (e.g., architect, engineer, farmer, lawyer, physician, student, etc.) who, despite overcoming obstacles to opportunity, has become an endangered species.



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