

# **CHAPTER 00**

## **YEAR 00, MONTH 00**

### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

I remember when life was beautiful and boring. Boring is underrated. If you're lucky enough to be bored then thank your god. And tell your god I said fuck you.

People call me Firebird. I was born in New Jersey USA but I grew up real fast in New South Wales Australia.

Mom was an economist. She spent some time in Chile helping them get their economy off the ground. She was known as the "Chicago Gal" cuz she studied at the University of Chicago. Her mentor was a Nobel Prize winning economist named Milton Friedman. He was on the daytime talk show Donahue twice. I know this cuz Mom made us watch it both times.

Dad was a radiologist. He was into cars. He taught me to drive as soon as I could reach the pedals. He loved movies. Sometimes he let me come with him to see R rated flicks. In his spare time he made electronic gizmos. He built the goddamn television we watched every night.

The seventies were crazy. For a while there in New York City a bomb was going off every other

day. One terrorist group alone set off a hundred bombs in New York and Chicago. A hundred bombs. A bloke in an office building found one of their bombs with twelve seconds left on the clock. He shouted "It's a bomb!" and all fifty people in the room evacuated. Fifty people in twelve seconds. I guess everyone was just ready and expecting bombs to go off at any moment. Hijackings were so common that they seriously considered building a Fake Cuba in Florida so planes could fly there when they got hijacked. And it wasn't like hitting New Year's Day in 1980 made all that shit go away. There was still an oil crisis and a hostage crisis and the Cold War.

Australia's economy was going downhill the way Chile's had been so they invited Mom to give a presentation at a political conference in Sydney. Dad had just lost his job so we all tagged along.

It was at this point that my life stopped being beautiful and boring and started getting ugly and interesting.

The news was all over the TVs at the Sydney airport when we arrived. Bombs going off. People being shot. Not just there but all over the goddamn world.

It took four hours to get through customs and immigration. Then they stopped everyone again

and told us we couldn't leave the airport. Everyone was stressed the fuck out.

I got out my favorite Hot Wheels car so I could have something to fuck around with. It was a 1977 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am just like the one Burt Reynolds drove in Smokey And The Bandit.

Dad had this cool self winding dive watch. I asked if I could try it on and he let me.

My sister was screaming that she was hungry. I got sick of listening to her scream so I told her to shut the fuck up.

Mom got mad and grabbed the Hot Wheels out of my hand. She made me tell my sister I was sorry. Then she gave me some shrapnel and told me to go buy my sister some bikkies. Well she probably said cookies but whatever.

"Then can I have my Hot Wheels back?" I asked.

I didn't realize it at the time but I realize it now. What my mother said next was real fucking important. So I'm gonna put it in big fucking letters:

## ATTACHMENT LEADS TO SUFFERING

I went to the newsstand and grabbed some Tim Tams. They had the new issue of Byte

magazine with the IBM PC on the cover so I grabbed that too. The bloke pushed some buttons on his cash register.

We call it the Big Bang but it wasn't big for everyone. It wasn't one single thing that happened. There were big bangs. There were little bangs. Hell froze over and heaven got too hot. Depends who you ask. For me it was just a little bang but it was big enough.

The cash register bell rang and the drawer opened. Then there was a KABOOM.

I saw my Hot Wheels Firebird go racing across the floor. The cashier had a piece of a chair stuck in his face. I wasn't sure what was going on. I grabbed the magazine and the Tim Tams and I ran after my Hot Wheels.

There was smoke and fire and confusion everywhere. No one knew how to get out of there but I managed to follow that Hot Wheels car right out the exit door to the sidewalk where the cars and taxis were waiting. I bent over and picked it up.

An asshole with a mohawk slammed into me and we both fell to the ground. He had a big fucking gun which he proceeded to point at my brain.

"Are you going to kill me?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Either that or make you stronger."

Then a heap of coppers jumped on him and took away his gun.

I turned around and looked out into the street. Everything was chaos except for one thing. It was like the universe was apologizing for being such an asshole to me that day cuz sitting right there before my eyes was a Stellar Blue 1975 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. The driver's door was open. Its engine was running. The radio was playing AC/DC's Back In Black.

Ok I made that last part up. Really it was Close To You by The Carpenters. But whatever. The car was sitting there calling to me.

Luck is preparation plus opportunity. I got in and pulled the door closed. I rolled down the window.

I took a look back at Mohawk Asshole. Cops were beating on him. He was fucked up in handcuffs.

He shouted "That's my car you little shit!"

I shouted "Attachment leads to suffering."

I peeled out of there and drove off in my newww car! Hell yeah The Price Is Right. Johnny Olson. Bob Barker motherfucker!

Once I'd gotten the hell away from that exploding airport I found a spot in the hills to pull

off and watch the world burn. I ripped open them Tim Tams and munched them all down. I looked in the glovebox of my new badass car and found a pistol. Then I checked the boot.

Rifles. Shotguns. Revolvers. Semiautomatics. Machine guns. Heaps of ammo. Fuck yeah.

Having all them badass terrorist guns helped a lot cuz I was just a kid and I had to raise myself in the apocalypse from then on.

Since we'd pushed the reset button on the whole world some of us called it Year Zero. In Year Zero I was an American kid stuck in Australia.

Things were bad for a while. Assholes bumped off motherfuckers for fun or cuz they wanted to eat them. I didn't bump off too many people and I didn't eat anybody but I would have if I'd had to. As Maslow said "Grub first then ethics."

Mostly I read a lot of books. Economics and electronics. I was gonna be one of them clever cunts who creates wealth by inventing shit. Not one of them assholes who grabs money out of other people's pockets. I've grabbed plenty of shit in my time but it's never been my preferred way of life.

I'm probably not telling this story right cuz I'm supposed to be making you like me. I

probably sound like I don't care that my family got blown to bits. If I could tell this story in the voice of that little boy then I might tell it differently. I probably cried or whatever. But we see who we were through the eyes of who we've become. Nowadays I don't give a fuck about anything. I had lots of good memories back then but that's all gone now.

Everything changed that day. I became a different person. Well one of me did anyway. There's another version of me who might be that nice guy you were hoping to meet. But really he ain't so nice neither. He's gonna tell you his story too but let me get through mine first.

# **CHAPTER 01**

## **YEAR 25, MONTH 01**

### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

Some of you ain't lived through anarchy so let me tell you what it's like.

Anarchy isn't the absence of order. It's the absence of government. Throughout most of human history there was no government so anarchy is our natural state. With anarchy you have some disorder but you also have something called spontaneous order.

Spontaneous order happens cuz people don't wanna fight if they can avoid it. Von Mises said if the tailor kills the baker now the tailor's gotta learn how to bake bread. The gunfight at the OK Corral was big news in its day cuz most of the time all them cunts with guns on their hips got along just fine. Peace without government.

You gotta try not to piss people off. I'll fight when cornered but my superpower has always been running away. Run away so you can live to run away another day. Conflict resolution keeps you alive and not kicking. Not causing offense is the best defense.

It don't matter if you're king or president. No matter how tough you are there's always



somebody tougher. No matter how big you are there's always somebody bigger. If you bring a knife they'll bring a gun. If you bring a gun they'll bring a bomb. If you bring a bomb they'll lay in wait and pick you off with a rifle. If you lay in wait for them you'll puke and die cuz they poisoned your brekkie. If your servants died tasting your brekkie for you you'll open the door and find an angry mob outside. If you've disarmed the angry mob they'll keep coming for you until you run out of bullets. Like I said. You gotta try not to piss people off.

Anarchy and government aren't as different as you might think. Government is whatever gang has the biggest pile of guns. When people take the big pile of guns away from one gang and give it to another gang they call that an election. When the gang in charge grabs your money they call that taxes. A border is nothing but a line in the sand you're capable of defending. As for laws? Good people don't need them and bad people don't follow them. Ammon Hennacy said that. Or maybe it was Playdoh. They're both dead so who gives a fuck. Firebird said it.

You probably think we eat dog food out of fifty year old cans and bugs off the ground. Sometimes. But ask yourself where does your water come from? Where does your electricity

come from? Where does your petrol come from? You don't know. You don't know cuz you don't need to know. It don't come from communism. It don't come from socialism. It don't come from capitalism. That shit comes from anarchy. Someone wants your money so they get the shit you need and they deliver it to you. We still got that here. That ain't never going away. We got food and petrol and electricity and all that shit. Everything is just expensive as fuck.

The world will never run out of anything. I can guarantee it.

Take oil. If we ever start to run out of oil the cunts that sell it will raise the price until people stop paying it. People will put electric motors in their cars and charge them up with windmills. No one will wanna pay for that oil anymore and we'll leave it in the ground. There will be local shortages but shortages have nothing to do with the world running out of something. A shortage just means that thing you want is real far away and real hard to get. Pay somecunt enough and they'll get it for you.

High prices won't stay high forever. High prices are like someone shouting into a megaphone that selling that thing is a good business to get into. Clever cunts hear the

message and get into that business. Competition increases and prices come down.

Paul Ehrlich predicted that overpopulation would drain the world of its resources so Julian Simon bet him a thousand bucks that any five resources he chose would be cheaper ten years later. Simon would have won that bet if it hadn't been for the Big Bang. I'm certain of it. Throughout human history if you were to bet on a long enough timescale that things would get better you'd be right every time. Even now. Even after the Big Bang. You'd still be right. We're rebuilding the world. We just need a slightly longer timescale.

We have radios but you're lucky if you can find a station. We have TVs but there ain't nothing on. We don't have movies. I miss movies. We got walkie talkies and generators but we don't have phone lines or power lines cuz them wires don't stay up for long. We got guns but not much ammo. Motherfuckers carry around broken guns or fake guns. They mount them on their cars.

We don't go to school but if you think that means we don't learn nothing then let me learn you something. We learn what we need to learn and we learn what we want to learn. I started learning the moment I stopped going to school.

No we don't barter all the time. Sometimes. Money still works. People use money cuz it's convenient. Not cuz a government says it's worth anything. But with no more currency being produced and everyone being poor we got deflation instead of inflation. Bills crumpled to dust and coins went up in value. It takes all day to earn a twenty cent piece but a twenty cent piece buys you a hot meal. People sometimes use foreign coins or coins out of their antique coin collections or ball bearings or bottlecaps. Anything small and valuable. But just cuz you think something is valuable that don't mean someone else will. So shit like bottlecaps don't always work. Money stored on plastic cards is all gone but I bet somecunt out there is working on reinventing that shit right now. And if they don't maybe I will.

Another question you might have is why don't everyone just steal shit from each other. You can do that but it's rude and it's dangerous. You own whatever you can defend. Clever cunts like me don't need to grab shit. We think of ways to give you what you need for a price. I'm a maker not a taker. I might be an asshole sometimes too but I am making the world spin.

There is one rule you have to live by whether you got anarchy or communism or capitalism or

whatever. This rule probably even works in other galaxies. Fuck that Star Trek Prime Directive shit. This is better than that.

This rule will make you happy. This rule will make you a good person. This rule will make you money. This rule will make you friends. This rule will keep you alive.

This rule ain't the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule says do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. But other people might need something different from what you need.

This rule ain't the Platinum Rule. The Platinum Rule is an improvement upon the Golden Rule where you try to do unto others as they would have you to do unto them. Treat others how they want to be treated. That's a good rule too but I can do you one better.

I call my rule the Goddamn Tippitytop Best Rule:

## CREATE VALUE

Create value for yourself. That's happiness.

Create value for people who don't pay you.  
That's kindness.

Create value for people who do pay you.  
That's work.

Create value for people you like. That's friendship.

Create value for people you don't like. That's self preservation.

I'm not saying this rule is easy to live by.

It's impossible to create value for everyone all the time. And you wouldn't want to. You gotta figure out when to create value and who to create it for. You gotta figure out when to charge for it and when not to. Some people won't appreciate it. Some people don't deserve it. Some people are just worth pissing off.

And it's hard to figure out what people will value. All value judgements are subjective. Most people don't know what they need so they won't be able to tell you. Henry Ford said people thought they needed faster horses when what they really needed was Ford Mustangs. People threw money at the guy. Ain't nothing wrong with that.

The value I created for people usually involved helping them build things or fix things or transport things. Sometimes that meant I was delivering something or standing guard or wrenching underneath a car but that was only if the money was good enough. Usually I was more of a manager. I managed large projects for clients with deep pockets. You probably think that means

gangsters or something. Yeah I'd work for them sometimes but I preferred to work for cunts like me who were rebuilding the world and making money doing it. I'd make or fix or move whatever they needed as long as the rewards were worth the risk.

In my spare time I worked on developing a prototype computer. I knew computers were gonna be big money someday. Tandy sold a year's supply of TRS80s in the first two goddamn weeks. Some of the old computers still worked but it was getting expensive to buy and fix and maintain them. I knew I'd make heaps of money if I offered people brand new shit that was cheaper and would last longer. We all knew what needed to be rebuilt. The prewars remembered. The postwars had heard the stories. We had it all once. We could have it all again. All we needed was for the assholes to fuck off and let us clever cunts do our thing.

My computer was about the size of a refrigerator. It shared the garage with the Firebird. It was already working great but I needed to make it smaller. I still had my old copy of Byte magazine with the IBM PC on the cover. I figured once my computers were smaller than that I'd start selling them.

It's not like I was trying to turn sand into silicon. You could still buy resistors and capacitors and shit. You could even have circuit boards and integrated circuits made. It just took time and money and knowing the right people.

One day when I was soldering a board for my computer I took a break and flipped on the radio. They were playing Crawl Out Through The Fallout by Sheldon Allman. Yeah that's a real song. It came out in 1960. In What's Left O'Sydney we only had one radio station but the music was fucking great.

An ad came on for a company called Exotic Travels. I'd referred clients to them before. They had a great reputation for getting you where you wanted to go. Anywhere in the world. Once you're there you're on your own. But they'd get you there.

You might be wondering how do we cross oceans. Boats motherfucker. It's dangerous and expensive and it takes forever but we do it. Some propeller planes are still working but they're not in good enough shape to be crossing any oceans. Maybe someday somecunt will get one of them big jet planes flying again.

Anyway the ad said the USA was a green place where everything was better so everyone should go. I'd been wanting to get back to my



childhood home ever since the Big Bang. Not cuz I was sentimental. I wanted to get back there cuz there was a heap of silver bars locked in my parents' safe and I was the only person left on earth who knew the combination. With a pile of silver that big I'd have enough money to set up a factory and go into business selling my computers.

I counted up all my money. It was just enough for a ticket to the USA. I dumped it all into a big fucking box. I put the box in the passenger seat of my badass car and headed to Exotic Travels.

Exotic Travels was six hours west of O'Sydney and it's scary driving around with such a big heap of shrapnel on you but it's usually ok as long as nobody knows what you got. Problem is people know that if you're gonna buy a ticket across an ocean you must have something of value to buy it with. So there's a "police" roadblock out by Exotic Travels. They ain't real police. But your police ain't real police neither. Police are just assholes with guns.

Anyway you can pull up and pay their toll but the toll is so much that if I paid it I wouldn't be able to afford my ticket.

You're probably hoping that this is where the action begins. But action ain't my goal. Shouldn't be your goal neither. If I'd been an out of

controller rock 'n' roller who craved action my story would have been over a long time ago. I just wanted to be left alone. And to make it back to the USA. And fix up my car. And find a girlfriend or two. Ok maybe I did want a few things and maybe it was gonna take some action to get them but I sure as hell wasn't looking forward to it.

I paid some motherfucker to go through the roadblock and distract the assholes while I drove around. They caught him and sliced him up. Good thing I only paid half in advance.

I made it to Exotic Travels. This place had a wall around it with snipers and shit. These cunts had money. If you have something of value you have to hide it or defend it. Especially if you settle down in one place. They made me show them my box of shrapnel and then they let me in. I dragged my big heavy box into the building.

There was a big sign that said no refunds. I dumped my life savings onto the counter. I made it clear to the cunt in charge that this ticket was for me and my car. I was gonna leave my computer behind but I was not gonna leave my Firebird. I could make another computer but they were never gonna make another Trans Am.

The cunt gave me my ticket.

"No refunds" he said.

"Yeah I got that."

"Boat leaves on time with or without you."

"Fine."

"If it's up to us we'll keep your money and leave without you."

"Got it asshole."

He pointed out the window to a weird looking young guy. He told me the kid was a messenger who'd come find me in a few weeks and he'd let me know when and where the boat would show up.

On the way out I asked a bogan if he knew a way through the roadblock.

"Pay the toll" he said.

"I don't have any money" I explained.

"You're gonna die."

Messenger Kid was getting into an old Volkswagen Beetle. I tried to stop him and ask him how he got through the roadblock but he ignored me. He started up the bug and took off. I figured he must have some trick so I followed him.

On the way out to the roadblock he came upon a mystery girl on the side of the road hitchhiking. He stopped to let her in. Rather than sitting up in the seat she curled up and hid.

The roadblock was two blokes and two cars. There was an old geezer with a mohawk sitting in a buggy and a fake cop standing beside a fake cop

car. They looked sweaty and bored from having to stand around being assholes all day.

Fake Cop was trying to act like a real cop. Old Geezer was reading a book. How the fuck should I know what book he was reading? I can only assume it was *How To Win Friends And Influence People*.

When Messenger Kid got there they just waved him by. Some trick. Exotic Travels and the roadblockers were in cahoots. Or the roadblockers just knew better than to mess with the cunts who were bringing in the money.

Exotic Travels wasn't gonna let me back in without any money and I was almost out of petrol so I said fuck it. I take pride in using my brain to solve shit like this but I didn't have time to come up with some big plan.

So yeah it's time for some action. I hope you motherfuckers enjoy it. You think I survived to tell this fucking story but for all you know I'm paralyzed from the neck down or maybe I'm some kind of ghost. Let's find out.

You can drive around their roadblock and yeah I was gonna have to do that. But it slows you down and it's real risky. If you get a flat it's all over.

I drove at them real fucking fast and veered around them into the dirt. The shocks were

topping out and everything was shaking like crazy but the Firebird held together.

Old Geezer couldn't get his shitty buggy started. As I drove by I got a real good look at him and he got a real good look at me.

"Little Shit! That's my car!" he shouted.

Old Geezer was Mohawk Asshole.

I reminded him at the top of my lungs that "Attachment leads to suffering!"

Decades later and he's still hung up on that car. I had that car longer than he ever did. The universe clearly wanted it to be mine.

I got back on the road and kicked it in the guts. Fake Cop got his fake cop car started but he was slow getting that thing turned around so that bought me some time. He turned on his fake sirens and came after me.

Then cuz life can never be simple I started catching up to Messenger Kid and Mystery Girl in the Beetle.

I tried to pass them but Mystery Girl was freaking out assuming that even though we'd never met my one purpose in life was to fuck with her. She leaned out the window and pointed a shotgun at me so I hit the brakes. She yelled something like "Lick my prickly flaps!"

I tried to get around them on the driver's side so she couldn't shoot me. Messenger Kid cut me

off but then he went off the road and got the Beetle stuck.

I laughed as I blew by them. "Suck my star spangled ding dong" I yelled.

Just then the tank ran dry. I coasted to a stop and got out.

Messenger Kid and Mystery Girl were out of their car too. Messenger Kid had a Bugs Bunny doll in his hand. He pulled a string on the doll and it said "Now take it easy!" Then he and Bugs bugged out back in the direction of Exotic Travels.

Mystery Girl was strutting up the road toward me. I couldn't help but notice she was real good looking especially walking that way and carrying that big gun.

Or was it a gun? No it was not. I foolishly pointed that out to her. "That's not a gun" I said.

"Nah mate it's a steel pipe." She hit me in the face with the not gun.

I fell over and she jumped on me and started punching me. I'd never been punched by such a pretty girl before. She was real dirty but she smelled great.

I tried to tell her there was an asshole chasing us and we needed to stop fighting and start hiding but it was hard to talk when she was punching me so hard.

"Your nads are gonna be my coin purse" she said. I would have laughed but she said it so coldly and methodically.

Then we heard the fake sirens as the fake cop car came over the horizon.

She ran and hid and left me there on the ground with blood shooting out of my eyeballs.

I heard the cop car come to a stop right by my feet. The engine shut off. The door opened. Footsteps. Fuck.

I felt Fake Cop's boot press against my throat.

Then I heard Mystery Girl yell "Kiss my dirt button!"

There was a scuffle. Then a cracking sound as Mystery Girl's steel pipe crunched Fake Cop's dumb old skull.

She's pretty great when she's not punching you.

She helped me up and gave me a hankie to wipe the blood off my face. She introduced herself. "I'm Mad Skelli."

"Firebird."

"Sorry I thought you were a friend of my ex."

"Who's your ex?"

"The dead guy."

"When did you break up?"

"Just now."

"Where you headed to?"

"Not headed to" she said. "Headed away."

I noticed that her ex boyfriend now ex person had on a badass cowboy hat. I grabbed it and put it on.



## **CHAPTER 02**

### **YEAR 25, MONTH 02**

#### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

Me and Mad Skelli spent the next few weeks together at my place in O'Sydney.

I showed her my homemade computer. She asked a lot of questions. I taught her how to write programs for it. Pretty soon it was more like she was teaching me. I think she even came up with some algorithms no one had figured out before.

She stayed up late every night working on that thing and a week later she'd created a game called Alien Guzzaline Wars where you can shoot at monsters. Compared to Atari's shit them graphics was like you were there in the trenches watching the blood splatter as you bumped off Nazi aliens. Damn she was sexy.

I asked her if we were dating.

She said "I dunno. You're the first to survive the audition."

It was pretty great but I'd spent my life's savings on that ticket to the USA and Messenger Kid was bound to show up any day now to tell me when I'd have to say goodbye.

Since there's not much smooth concrete or bitumen around I'd converted my old skateboard into a dirtboard with tires instead of urethane wheels. It's hard as hell to push around on but it's fun to ride down hills.

I was out rolling around on it when I noticed Messenger Kid watching timidly from behind a wall.

I said "Hey Messenger Kid. Got a message for me?"

He came out. He had that bunny on him. He pulled its string. "What's up doc?"

He handed me a note with the time and place I was supposed to meet the boat. Tomorrow at 9am by the Opera Ruins. Pack tonight. Head out early. No problem.

I pointed at the skateboard and said to him "Wanna give it a try?"

He got on the board. He didn't know how to ride it and he was afraid to go downhill. So I tied a rope around the front truck and pulled him around. He managed to fall off anyway.

Then he grabbed the rope and pointed at the board. I got on and let him pull me around.

We came upon a scary fucking pickup truck idling beside a little store and he got an idea. He pointed at the trailer hitch. I figured out what he was trying to tell me. I went up and ran the rope

through the hitch and all the way back to the board. Then I wrapped it behind the front truck and hung on to the end of the rope.

We sat on the curb behind the truck and acted innocent.

The motherfucker who owned the scary truck bolted out of that place. The store owner was yelling at him like maybe he'd just grabbed something. He climbed into the truck. I stood up on the board and pulled the rope taut. He spun out and took off with me in tow.

For the first few seconds this idea of ours went great. Messenger Kid jumped up and down and raised his hands in the air. I must have been going like fifty kays when I hit a bump and then I was like that Charger in *The Dukes Of Hazzard*.

Yeah I know all my pop culture references are from the seventies. Fuck you. It's cuz my world blew up. I haven't seen a movie in decades. If I don't retell these stories they'll fade away forever. The seventies sucked but the cars and movies and TV shows were great. *For Your Eyes Only* and *The Cannonball Run* came out in the same goddamn week. What a week that was. Did you see *The Cannonball Run*? Did you know most of the shit in that movie really happened? Nobody in that movie gave a fuck. Nowadays nobody gives a fuck cuz there's nothing to give a fuck about.

But back in those days everyone was supposed to give a fuck and the coolest thing you could do was not give a fuck.

Anyway me and my skateboard flew into the air like that Charger in *The Dukes Of Hazzard*. Only the board went one way and I went the other. I hit the ground and tumbled out of it but at that speed you're gonna take some damage. I had on a tshirt and jeans and by the time I stopped rolling there wasn't much left of that tshirt.

We limped back to my place. Skelli was out shopping for food. Messenger Kid stitched me up.

I noticed he was wearing a nice leather jacket and I figured I could use something like that. I asked if he got it around here. He nodded and pulled on my arm so I followed him.

He led me to an abandoned police station from back in the days when people still said the word "justice" with a straight face. We crawled through a broken window.

You have to understand that in my world you rarely come upon the perfect anything. Mostly you have to make do and make it work. But the jacket I found in that cop shop fit perfectly and made me look like the love child of Steve McQueen and Peter Fonda.

I asked "How do I look?"

Messenger Kid pulled the string. "I like you" the bunny said.

"I like you too Messenger Kid."

The sun was setting when we got back. Skelli had made dinner.

Messenger Kid's bunny asked "Eh what's cookin doc?"

Skelli yelled "Messenger Kid!" and gave him a huge kiss. "Thanks for smuggling my tits past those gutdroppers" she said.

After we had dinner I said "It's my last night in Straya. We should go out. I know some cunts who make ice cream."

The three of us went to the garage. I opened the door.

My badass Firebird was gone.

No one knew where I lived. No one knew there was a working car in that garage.

"Fuck!" I turned to Messenger Kid. "Did someone follow you here?"

There was no way anyone could have gotten that car started in less than an hour. I'd installed six different kill switches. I looked around. I looked down.

Tire tracks. Big deep tire tracks. Their tires and the Firebird's. "Someone towed it."

Skelli sighed. "Mohawk Asshole has a tow truck."

"How well do you know that fucker?" I asked.

"He was my ex's best mate. His name is Bruce Barbagallo. I know where he lives."

"I know where he lives too. Or at least I know where he likes to hang out and harass innocent travelers. Six hours away at speed." I looked at my watch. "It's 9pm. I have to be back here to catch a boat in twelve hours."

I looked at Messenger Kid. "We're taking your car. I'm driving. I owe you both an ice cream."

We all squeezed into the Beetle and headed west. I put my foot to the floor and we proceeded at... checking the speedo... fuck... a hundred kays. It was dark but I kept the lights off in case we caught up to that fucker. I drove by the light of the moon and by feel.

Six hours later we did catch up to him. My precious Firebird was facing backwards chained helplessly to his tow truck. His truck was a loud and slow F350. His lights were on but they were dim as fuck. He hadn't spotted us even though we were right on top of him.

So here's some more of that action you crave. I'm glad you find it so entertaining when my life is in danger. This book had better make me big money. Maybe a movie deal when somecunt gets movies working again.

"Messenger Kid take the wheel" I said. "I'm climbing into the Firebird. Skelli you hop on the truck and let the chain down real slow."

I climbed out the window of the bug. I slipped and almost went under the wheels. Suddenly this did not seem like such a good plan. But I made it into the window of the Firebird. I put on my seat belt. I put my keys in the ignition and unlocked the wheel. I was now sitting in my car which was pointed downward at a forty five degree angle with the rear wheels off the ground and the front wheels rolling backward at something like eighty kays.

Skelli climbed onto the truck. She slowly turned the crank. The Firebird's back wheels moved closer to the roadway.

At this point it's worth reminding you fuckers that it was three in the morning.

Mohawk Asshole was falling asleep at the wheel. I know this cuz we all started casually drifting off the road. Skelli started cranking furiously and a moment later all four of the Firebird's wheels were on the ground.

The Firebird was now a four wheeled trailer and a four wheeled trailer does not track. Yes I knew this would happen but I figured that future me would figure this shit out. But what had once

been future me was now present me and present me had no idea what to do either.

Tires were screeching and vehicles were fishtailing and we were still chained together. I pressed as hard as I could on the brake. Skelli jumped off the truck and rolled. The truck bumped into a tree and crunched its radiator. The Firebird's ass came to a stop a couple of centimeters from the back of the tow truck.

I started up my badass car and tried to get loose but the tires were just spinning. Skelli ran to the back. I put it in reverse and gave her some slack so she could unhook it.

Mohawk Asshole got out of his truck. His face was bloody and the steering wheel had somehow come off and wrapped itself around his neck. It was gross and kinda scary.

Messenger Kid stopped and smiled and held the bunny out the window. He pulled the string. I was expecting "Now take it easy" but what we got was "Hey take me with you."

Mohawk Asshole grabbed the bunny and threw it on the ground. Messenger Kid quickly rolled up the window. Mohawk Asshole tugged on the Beetle's door handle. The handle came off in his hand and the door stayed put. Messenger kid pattered off toward Exotic Travels. It wasn't much of a goodbye but it was the best we could



do while defending ourselves from a raging lunatic.

Skelli did not have to do what she did next and it was brave as fuck. She walked right up to Mohawk Asshole and grabbed the steering wheel that was around his neck. She used it to keep him at arm's length. She reached down and picked up Messenger Kid's bunny.

She bit the string and pulled it like she was gonna throw a grenade. She held the bunny right in his face. It said "I like carrots."

She tossed the bunny to me and jumped into the window of the Firebird.

Mohawk Asshole grabbed Skelli's leg and held on. We dragged him a bit before he dropped off. All he got was her shoe. He yelled something about killing me and everyone I loved and I'm pretty sure I saw him take a bite out of her shoe.

We cruised back to O'Sydney dodging roos at two hundred kays.

"Eastbound and down" I said.

"What's that?" she asked.

"American trucker talk. You've never seen Smokey And The Bandit?"

"I've never seen any movie" she said. Turned out she was a postwar.

"What was the Big Bang like?" she asked.

"Best thing that's ever happened to me." I dunno if I was being sarcastic or not. It's not like I can compare my life to another version of my life where the Big Bang never happened.... Right?

"Did you lose anyone?" she asked.

"I lost everyone."

A moment passed in silence. Then she said the following.

"My identical twin died of food poisoning when I was four. I didn't understand that she was gone. I kept asking my parents where she was."

I know some of you are choosing to consider this a work of fiction but I assure you that right there is some of the realest shit you've ever read.

The sun started to rise over O'Sydney. I looked down at my dad's watch. I discovered it had been smashed during the previous night's shenanigans. I took it off and tossed it out the window.

When we got to the Opera Ruins the boat was still there but it had already begun to move away from the dock.

There was less than a meter between the dock and the boat but the gap was growing fast.

I knew what to do. I'd seen it in the movies. I kept on it. I gave it the bejeezus.

We flew over the gap. We almost ran over a kid but he managed get the fuck out of our way. I hit the brakes and screeched to a stop. Maintain your brakes and you'll live long enough to appreciate your engine.

We stepped out of my badass car. Skelli smoking hot as always and me in my cowboy hat and Stever McFondaqueen sex jacket.

The little tacker I'd almost just killed said "That was awesome."

I tossed the kid a five cent piece. "There ain't no movie stars anymore kid. There's just us."

"We're giving them back their heroes" Skelli said.

We kissed.

She jumped off the boat and swam back to the dock. She climbed out of the water. She looked adorable with her one bare foot. She yelled to me.

"I love you."

"Attachment leads to suffering" I yelled back.

"Hope you get scurvy" she shouted cheerfully.

# **CHAPTER 03**

## **YEAR 30, MONTH 11**

### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

After a few years in Las Diablas California I had a smaller prototype of my computer that fit in the back seat of my car and I'd saved up enough shrapnel to head east and grab them silver bars from my parents' safe. I was gonna use them silver bars to buy a factory so I could start mass producing my computers. I was gonna put the fucking world back together.

The archetypical American road trip was always to head west towards the wide open spaces and laid back attitudes. I hoped my reverse road trip would turn out better for me than it did for them blokes in Easy Rider.

The cities were smashed but cunts heard me coming and emerged from the rubble. They flagged me down and offered me petrol at exorbitant prices which I happily paid. If petrol were cheap then everybody would be taking road trips. As it was I had the country to myself.

Route 66.... Joshua Tree.... Saguaros.... Grand Canyon.... I'd never seen any of this shit except in pictures. Looked just as good after the Big Bang

as it had before. Better now cuz no one else was here. Hell is other tourists.

Monument Valley.... Arches.... Natural bridges.... Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner.... Jonathan Richman on the radio. Plymouth paid Warner Brothers a heap of money to put Road Runner decals on them cars. The horn even made the Road Runner sound. Meep meep motherfucker.

I don't know how it was possible but there was someone on the radio on every goddamn kilometer of Route 66. I felt like Kowalski in Vanishing Point with that DJ leading him home. Or them kids in The Warriors. Civilization was gone but weirdos in remote outposts still spent all day and night shouting into the void and playing records for nobody. I heard ads occasionally but there was no way those ads were paying for all of this. These people loved what they did. And I loved what they did. The radio kept me going when I had no petrol. It kept me going when I had no food. It kept me going when I had no water. If I'd had no air I would have breathed the music.

When I was a kid I recorded songs off the radio cuz I couldn't afford the records. I'd be pissed when the DJ walked all over my music. Then one time I got a record for my birthday. Heart Of Glass. I listened to that record a lot. But

sometimes I'd still go back and play my tape recording of the song cuz I missed hearing the DJ's voice over it.

I was cannonballing through Arizona about to hit New Mexico when a DJ saved my life.

"You're listening to Uranium Springs Radio" he said. "Get your fix on Route 66. Follow us all the way home. Coast to coast proof you're never alone. Shut up and listen. I've got what you've been missing. I am The Swede and I've got what you need. Here is the news. Stay away from the crossroads in Gallup. It's a birthday bash you do not wanna crash. Go dark. Go quiet. And go at night. This has been the news. Now back to the music. Rush. Spirit Of Radio."

When I got close to Gallup I stopped and waited for night to fall. I turned off the headlights and took the side streets. It was immediately obvious what intersection he was referring to. An overpass came into view. Chockablock with assholes frolicking about. Playing Twister. Burning cars and shit. They were doing bad things to people who I hoped deserved it but who I suspected did not. Thanks for the tip Swede.

Texas.... Every creature that's capable of locomotion needs to be able to remember its way around. How to find the way back to that spot where there was water. How to avoid that spot

where there was a bear. It's what we share with the mice and the fish and the cockroaches and the dinosaurs.

Oklahoma.... Driving distills the experience of navigating through space into its purest form.

Missouri.... Driving is therefore a primal act.

Illinois.... When you need to remember a list there's a trick you can use where you envision each item sitting in a different room of your childhood home. Later when you need to recall that list you imagine walking through the house and seeing each item in each room. The reason this works is cuz our memory of places is our most fundamental type of memory.

Indiana.... I made up a list of items to remember as a game to keep myself awake. I imagined a glass of water on the floor in the foyer of our house in New Jersey. A bear sitting in a chair in the library. A mouse running across the TV in the family room. A fish swimming through the air in the kitchen. A cockroach on a plate in the dining room. A dinosaur on the couch in the living room. A heap of silver bars in the safe in my parents' bedroom.

Ohio.... I tested myself. The trick worked. Foyer: Water. Library: Bear. Family room: Mouse. Kitchen: Fish. Dining room: Cockroach.

Living room: Dinosaur. Parents' bedroom: Silver bars.

Pennsylvania.... Water. Bear. Mouse. Fish. Cockroach. Dinosaur. Silver bars.

New Jersey. It had been thirty years but I still knew how to find the place. Maybe Mom and Dad and Sis would be there waiting and we could start all over again.

When I arrived it was a dark night with no moon. I camped out in a wooded area by our house where we used to try to take our bikes over some jumps we'd made out of piles of dirt.

The sun woke me up. I opened my eyes and crawled out of the car.

The trees were blackened trunks with no branches. The entire neighborhood was gone. Houses and mailboxes and flowerbeds and bicycles and above ground pools. Gone. The charred remnants were overgrown with weeds.

I stepped into my house. What used to be my house. What used to be my home. I kicked over the blackened boards that were once the walls of my room.

I found Dad's safe sitting half obscured in the brush. The door was hanging off its hinges. The silver was gone.

All that was left in the safe was a reel of movie film. The fire hadn't gotten to it but the



elements had. I held a piece up to the sky. It crumbled in my hands.

I liked the weather better out west anyway. I had enough money to get back but my dream of setting up a computer factory was gonna have to wait.

I wanted to make one last stop before heading back to Las Diablas. When I was a kid I visited New York City. I remembered seeing the Monet exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum Of Art. The impressionism really made an impression on me. I decided to drive into the city and see what was left of the museum.

Nowadays they call it Rotten Apple. The buildings were bombed out even worse than O'Sydney. Few were even standing. Anything that could help with survival had been looted. People crawled in and out of doorways like rats. Rats crawled in and out of doorways like people.

There was a chance that some of them great works of art might still be around. When you're hungry and everyone else is hungry what's the point of stealing art? Grub first then ethics then art. I headed for The Met. I had to stop every now and then to hook a tow strap onto an abandoned vehicle so I could tug it out of the way.

There was no life within sight of the museum. I took that as a good sign. I parked my car and locked it and cut all the kill switches.

As soon as I stepped into the museum a gang of cunts with guns and knives appeared.

"You have to pay admission to visit the museum" a woman said.

"You own the place?" I asked.

"We protect it" she replied.

"Is the art still here?"

"Most of it."

"What about the Monets?"

"All of them are here."

She pointed to a pin on her jacket. It read "Monet Preservation Society."

"So you don't own the place but you protect it and I have to pay you if I wanna look at the art?"

"That's right."

"Fair dinkum."

I paid their admission fee and one of them cunts followed me around. An old geezer. I could still make out the museum's logo on his jacket.

"How long you been working here?" I asked.

"Forty years" he said. Since before the war.

The geezer led me to the Monets. When the woman at the door had said "all of them are here" I thought she meant all the ones that used to be here were still here. But no. She meant like

everything by Monet was here. Not literally everything Monet ever painted but they'd collected heaps of his works from all over the world. They were thumbtacked all over the walls.

Monet used reality as an excuse to paint. When I visit a place I've been before it's the same damn place every time. When Monet visited a place he'd been before he saw it again for the first time. The light had changed. The weather had changed. The season had changed. The water shimmered in a new way. Monet was like a puppy. He was surprised and overjoyed to wake up every goddamn day. Every one of Monet's paintings contains a hidden joke. Every stroke contains frivolity. He used to say "I like to paint as a bird sings." Viewing a Monet is an active process. You can't properly appreciate a Monet while seated. You gotta approach the painting then step back then look away then look back. You gotta laugh and cry and experience moments of revelation. A work by Monet is a three dimensional object. More sculpture than painting. The colors Monet created had not existed anywhere on earth until Monet dreamt them up. Van Gogh was a better artist but Monet had more fun.

It was nice to see that this little bit of the old world was still around and doing ok. On the way

out they made me walk by their gift shop which consisted of a couple of folding tables. They had shirts that said "Monet Preservation Society" on them so of course I bought one.

I was getting into my car when I heard the glorious roar of V8s in the distance. Maybe even some V12s. It might have been a gang of skags out for blood but I didn't care. I had to go find out what was going on.

Dozens of cars were pulling out of a parking building and gunning it headed west. Every kind of car. Ferrari Dino. Aston Martin Vantage. Lamborghini Countach. Chevy Vega.

Pretty much every car had a motherfucker hanging out the passenger window with a big scary gun of some sort. The faded sign on the building read "Red Ball Garage."

I couldn't get my car into the garage while everyone was coming out so I parked outside and walked in. There were cunts in there signing time cards and handing one to each driver. I asked them what the fuck was going on.

"It's the Cannonball Baker Sea To Shining Sea Memorial Trophy Dash" they told me.

The real life Cannonball Run. The famous race from New York to LA. Rotten Apple to Las Diablas. They were still doing it after all these years.

Fuck yes I entered the race. The entrance fee was half of my gas money home but I'd figure something out. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Did the fact that there weren't any laws to break take away from the fun? Fuck no it didn't. We drove as fast as we could as long as we could and we felt the wind in our hair. No anxiety. No worries. Except for the gangs of highway robbers. Ok maybe there were some worries.

I was somewhere in Ohio when I saw them fuckers in the Lamborghini broken down on the side of the road. They had the decklid up and they were staring at the engine with big question marks over their heads.

At this point it became clear how I'd be paying my way back to Las Diablas. I turned around and went back. I charged those rich fucks big bucks to get their V12 purring again.

I fixed four or five more cars along the way. I came home with shrapnel to spare.

Who won? Who gives a shit.

This little story of all the crazy shit that's happened in my life has now caught up to me in the present tense and from now on I'm writing it all down as it happens. Who knows how it's gonna end? No one knows!

In The Cannonball Run movie Dom DeLuise's character could suddenly turn into a whole different version of himself he called Captain Chaos. He'd always sing a little musical motif before he changed. Right now I'm gonna hand the story over to my own personal Captain Chaos. Maybe I should come up with my own theme music for this. Doot doo doobee doowha. Nah fuck that's not gonna work. Just fucking read it.

# **CHAPTER 04**

## **YEAR 35, MONTH 08**

### **NARRATOR: JOHN**

My name is John. I grew up in New Jersey. I spent most of my adult life in Texas before moving to Phoenix. I'm a software engineer.

I just wanted to show up at my job, get paid, go home, and take lots of vacations. I was on my way to a comfortable retirement and I didn't want to do anything to mess that up. My life was boring, but boring is underrated. I'd much rather live with boredom than anxiety. I'd spent enough time living with anxiety.

Mom was a prominent economist. She spent some time in Chile helping them get their economy off the ground. She was known as the "Chicago Gal" because she'd studied at the University of Chicago.

Dad's a retired radiologist. He's into cars and movies. He's a maker. I'd be more specific, but really, he can make anything. He built the television set that was in our family room.

On my sixteenth birthday I got my driver's license. A week later I had my first job. I was videotaping weddings and church services for a video production company. My friends and I shot

and edited six skateboarding videos. In college I majored in Computer Science, and minored in Film.

Some people are into Star Wars. Some people are into Indiana Jones. Some people are into Back to the Future. For me, it was always Mad Max.

Wasteland Weekend is an annual festival in California that looks and feels like a Mad Max movie. Everyone crafts intimidating costumes. A lot of people come up with characters to play. The goal is "immersion." When you're there, you feel like you've entered a different world. As soon as I heard about it, I knew I had to go.

It was at this point that my life stopped being comfortable and boring and started becoming weird and interesting.

My favorite Mad Max character had always been Scrooloose. He was a member of the Lost Tribe, also known as the Waiting Ones. He's the weird, mute, goth-like kid in Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome who spends most of his time alone, doing his own thing. As an introvert who had never fit in anywhere, I'd always identified with Scrooloose the most.

I decided to make Scrooloose a part of my character's backstory. I imagined that Scrooloose and I had been friends long ago, but we'd become separated. My character would be wandering



around Wasteland Weekend, looking for his long lost friend. In Beyond Thunderdome, Scrooloose carries around an old talking Bugs Bunny doll. I went online and bought an antique Bugs Bunny doll just like it. My plan was to find a stranger dressed as Scrooloose, and return their lost bunny to them. Maybe I'd turn an imaginary friend into a real one.

I spent weeks customizing a leather motorcycle jacket that had started out looking like the one Peter Fonda wore in Easy Rider. I distressed the racing stripes. I added period auto racing patches, punk rock spikes, and hidden ventilation grommets. I figured no one would remember anybody's name so I included a nametag patch. I put Bugs in the chest pocket and zipped it up so only his head was showing.

Our world isn't non-apocalyptic. It's pre-apocalyptic. Some kind of apocalypse is inevitable. Wasteland Weekend is a celebration of that. But why would anyone celebrate death and destruction? I was going to find out.

I drove my 1975 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am from Phoenix, Arizona to California City, California, where Wasteland Weekend is held. The Trans Am didn't have any fake guns mounted on it or anything, but I figured since the Mad Max

apocalypse had happened in the eighties, any pre-1980 car would be a cool car to bring. Really you can bring any car you want. You just won't be able to bring your car into the themed areas unless your car is themed, too.

I loved that car more than anything. Stellar Blue, with a light blue bird on the hood. Two-tone red and white interior. Mine was the only one that had been made in that color combination. One of a kind. The story I'd heard when I bought the car was that it had been special ordered in red, white, and blue because the Bicentennial was coming up and the guy wanted to drive it in parades. The car had such a cool history. The car's documentation indicated that it had even spent some time in Australia.

When I arrived at the event, I found a place to park and camp. I'd be sleeping in the car. It's a lot easier than putting up a tent.

I got into character and introduced myself to my neighbor, Christine. It was her first time at Wasteland Weekend too. I asked her if she knew Scrooloose, or if she'd seen anyone matching his description. No luck.

I headed into Wasteland City, at the center of the event. Along the way I checked out the cars. There were newer cars, older cars, and military vehicles. All of them were covered in dirt and lots

of them had bull bars, spikes, and fake weapons mounted on them.

Toecutter rode by in the back seat of an old convertible. Aunty Entity watched over the city gates. Lord Humungus was DJing on a stage. No one was dressed as Scrooloose.

I asked everyone I met if they'd seen Scrooloose. The answer was always no, but everyone promised to ask around and try to help find him for me.

I danced. I delivered a letter for the Wasteland post office. I ate a brownie someone handed to me. I got a haircut at the Body Shop.

The babe who cut my hair told me about a big celebration coming up in Australia for the fortieth anniversary of Mad Max. It was a year and a half away. I'd always wanted to visit Australia, but the thought of traveling internationally made me anxious. I'd never been out of the country.

When I returned to camp, Christine was sitting by the fire. We shared our stories. Christine asked if I'd been to the memorial yet. She explained that it was a small structure at the top of the hill, built to pay tribute to wastelanders that were no longer with us.

"You should go," she said.

There was still some light left, so I went back out and headed up the hill.

I couldn't believe what I saw. His name was painted in large letters on rusty sheet metal, glowing in the light of the setting sun:

SCROOLOOSE  
LANCE A. MOORE II

I'd spent the past month getting myself into the mindset of a character who was looking for an old friend. I'd expected I would either find him, or I would not find him. Discovering his name on the memorial was a highly unexpected sort of closure.

Standing there at the memorial, I was no longer playing a character.

I perpetually, desperately need the catharsis I feel when I'm crying, but I always have trouble letting it out. Instead, I always focus on what I can do, or how I can fix things. It's so hard for me to just let go, and give in to the pain. Mom had died of cancer that year, but I hadn't cried. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried.

But now, tears were streaming down my face. I was crying over the death of someone I'd never met. I was crying for my mother, too. I was crying over death itself. I was crying over decay, rust, fire, oxidization, entropy, ephemerality, destruction and the fact that, one day, the sun

would grow so large that it would swallow the earth, and with it, all the works of Monet.

I unzipped my chest pocket, took out the Bugs Bunny doll, and placed it on the memorial. I had turned my imaginary friend into a real one.

I was no longer merely a Wasteland Weekend attendee. I was a wastelander. This is my story. But it's not just my story.

It's not a costume; it's an outfit. It's not a character; it's a persona. It's not immersion; it's just life.

I knew at that moment that I'd return to Wasteland Weekend next year, and every year. I'd attend all the local events I could. And it was time to start planning my pilgrimage to Australia for the fortieth anniversary.

A closure can be a new beginning.

I came down from the memorial a changed person. But some other things had changed, too.

The world around me was a little different. Several people looked more like beggars than Mad Max extras. One woman was covered in what looked like real blood. There was no amplified music. There was music, but it was coming from people singing, banging on things, and playing acoustic instruments.

I met a very tall War Boy on his way up to the memorial. I gave him the wasteland salute, which is two middle fingers, crossed.

"Wasteland!" I said.

"What's Wasteland?" he asked, in an accent I didn't recognize.

"What do you call this place?" I asked him.

"The Gathering."

"What's The Gathering?"

"It's where we come to find them we're looking for and them we've lost."

"Lost?"

"Lost. In the Big Bang."

On the way back to my camp, I noticed the cars were older and rustier. Many were still weaponized and intimidating. The weapons were less wild, more realistic. Maybe real. Now, every car I saw was a pre-1980 model.

There was more dirt on my clothing. I looked down at my wrist. My Wasteland Weekend wristband was gone.

Maybe I'd traveled back in time and ended up in some war-torn country. Maybe I was having a stroke. Maybe it was that brownie I'd eaten. Dagnabbit. I should have asked what was in it.

I've always been a teetotaler. I've always hated the idea of drugs. Humans don't have claws or sharp teeth. Our minds are our tools of

survival. Whatever drug this was, it was not giving me a pleasant experience. I didn't know who I was, or where I was. I felt like I was losing control. It was the worst feeling I'd ever felt.

I found my car keys, or someone's car keys, in my right pocket. There was a heavy bag of coins in my left. I no longer had my wallet or my phone. I found my car, right where I'd parked it, but it was dented, rusted, and scratched. It couldn't have been vandalized. The damage had clearly happened over decades.

I'd heard people on LSD might look in a mirror and see their face melting or something like that. Maybe this was all in my head.

Christine was gone. I had a new neighbor, or at least, she was new to me. I wasn't new to her. She gave me a look of pleasant recognition and waved me over. She radiated peace and acceptance. These things were just what I needed at that moment. She was cooking meat for tacos. I was hungry. Maybe I was dehydrated, or my blood sugar was low. Maybe it was my electrolytes. If you drink water, but don't eat enough food, you can get water intoxication.

She handed me a taco.

"Have we met?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I'm Lioness."

"Who am I?"

She gave me a funny look. "A few hours ago you were Firebird. Who are you now?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out."

"Are you ok?"

"I might have hit my head or something."

She checked my head for injuries. "Did it happen in The Cage?"

"What's The Cage?"

"Where people fight. There's no fighting at The Gathering, except for in The Cage."

"I might have accidentally taken some kind of drug. I'm sure I'll be fine, once it wears off. Have you seen my wallet and phone?"

"I haven't seen a working phone in decades. You should probably get some rest."

She walked me to my car. I put the keys in the door and they worked. I got in. This must be my car. They only made one in this color combination. I had the keys in my pocket.

But who am I?

I looked down at my nametag. It was covered in dirt and barely legible, but I could just make it out. It no longer read "John." It read "Firebird."

I recognized my face in the rearview mirror. I pulled up my sleeve, and found the freckle on my right arm that I used to stare at in elementary school when I was bored.



This is my body. Sort of. Some things are different, but I'm still me.

I jumped at the sound of someone trying to open the locked passenger door. I looked over, and oh my wow.

She was just my type. And the way she looked at me. Her pupils were wide. Her eyes were bright. She didn't just know me. She loved me. I had no idea who she was, but I could see in her eyes that she loved me. I don't think anyone has ever looked at me that way, before or since. After about five dumb seconds of staring, I was pretty sure that I loved her, too. I unlocked the door, and a flood of joy and beauty poured into the car. Her arms were around me. She was kissing me. I was reunited with a lover I'd never met.

"I've missed you," she said. She had an amazing Australian accent.

"I've missed you too," I said. Somehow it felt right to say that.

I'm not going to turn this into pornography but I have to mention one thing. I've always liked women who are smart, but also primal. I've never been a germaphobe. I'm more of a germophile. The fact that humans mated successfully for a hundred thousand years before soap, shaving, and deodorant were invented is proof that some

forgotten part of us loves dirty, hairy, smelly sex. And I did love it. We loved it.

I have a body here, I have a history here, I have possessions here. I even have someone who loves me. Lost as I felt, at least I had a partner.

"I stole a pair of shoes from your old place. Hope you don't mind," she said.

"Huh?"

"I lost my shoe, remember?"

I had to explain to her what was happening as best I could. I didn't even know her name.

"I'm sorry, but I'm kind of out of my head today."

"You sound like you're from Texas! You really are an American now, aren't you?"

"How did I sound before?"

"I don't knaeiouw." To every word, she added several mellifluous vowels they only have in Australia. "It's been ten years. Last time I saw you, you talked like me. Now you sound like Johnny Cash. I like it."

"I think I have amnesia."

She started gently feeling my head for injuries. "Noggin's all right."

"I think I'll be ok, but right now I have some stupid questions."

"Like what?"

"What's my name?"

"It's written on your jacket, dumba\*\*."

"What's your name?"

She hadn't realized how serious this was. She sighed. "I'm Mad Skelli... and I love you."

"Mad Skelli.... I think I love you, too."

Her face fell. I didn't expect that.

"Who the f\*\*\* are you?" she said.

She grabbed my head and smacked it into the steering wheel. I really did not expect that.

She got out of the car. "Go suck a cactus." She slammed the door.

I passed out, or fell asleep. At that point, I couldn't tell the difference.

When morning came, I woke up, and everything was normal again. It had been a wild dream, or drug trip, or whatever. I was glad it was over.

Or at least I thought it was over, until the world started bouncing back and forth again, this time more quickly. Looking out the windshield, I could watch things change before my eyes. My surroundings alternated between Wasteland Weekend and some other place that was just like it, only more real. Sometimes it would last a few seconds. Sometimes it would last a few minutes.

A note appeared on the dashboard. It literally appeared, out of nowhere. It was written in handwriting similar to mine. It read, "Hi."

I replied by adding to the note. "Hi."

Things kept bouncing. Every time I returned to my world, the note got a little longer, and I'd add something to it as well.

I seemed to be communicating with a counterpart who was experiencing something similar to what I was experiencing. My counterpart and I pieced together what was happening through our notes.

It wasn't the world that was changing. My consciousness seemed to be trading places with another version of me in another timeline.

"Firebird" was just a nickname. We were both named John Binns. We used to be the same person. Our lives diverged when we were young.

For some reason, now, our lives were converging again. We were both being handed unprecedented opportunities to see the worlds that could have been.

I couldn't meet Firebird face-to-face, but I could become him. When I became him, he became me. Hopping between timelines wasn't time travel. Firebird's world was an alternate version of right now.

I explained Wasteland Weekend, where we dress up like we're in the movies. He explained The Gathering, where we come to find them we're looking for and them we've lost.

I wrote down an explanation of how to use my phone. He left instructions for how to use a computer he'd built that took up the whole back seat of the car. We used my phone to make videos for each other. He tried out Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, and Facebook. We pieced together the similarities and differences between our timelines.

He was excited to find out that Julian Simon had won some bet. He was dismayed to discover that Naomi Klein had written a six-hundred-page bestseller about what a monster Milton Friedman was.

When I was a kid, my family canceled a trip to Australia so Dad could accept a job offer. Firebird's dad turned that job down, and his family took the trip. When I left home, I moved to Texas. Firebird got stranded in Australia. I acquired a Texas accent. He acquired an Australian one. It's been said if a butterfly flaps its wings in a certain way, it can cause a tornado. A butterfly flew right in my world, wrong in Firebird's world, and nothing's been the same since. My world went on to experience the

greatest successes humanity has ever seen. His world burned.

At this point we started composing this manuscript, keeping copies in both timelines. Firebird wrote a summary of his life, which you've read. Now I've contributed a summary of my life. From here on out we're writing it as it happens. We're going to be just as surprised by all of it as you are.

We call Firebird's timeline Epoxyclipse. We call mine Tomorrowland.

You don't have to believe me. I'm not sure I believe me. I can tell you what I'm experiencing. You can call it autobiography, fiction, or delusion.

Firebird and I were hitting it off until I got to the part about Mad Skelli. From that point on, this document became the world's first unauthorized autobiography. Or, more precisely, it became an adversarially collaborative autobiography.

So let's have a moment of adversariality.

Firebird is kind of a jerk. He's about to go into one of his little tirades, and before he begins, I want to make it clear that I disagree with him on a couple of points.

First, mental illnesses are real. They aren't always caused by one's problems, or one's outlook on life. Mental illnesses can happen for no reason at all. You shuffle some genes, mix up

some chemicals, fire up some neurons, and something goes wrong. I'd never presume to judge someone suffering from mental illness, especially when it's quite possible that I myself have some undiagnosed condition that makes me think my mind is capable of moving between timelines.

Second, I'm a Texas liberal. Texas liberals, like most Texans, want a smaller government. But we only want to cut wasteful things like the American war machine. We want to use those savings to expand social programs. We believe the government should educate people and provide for everyone's health and welfare.

All right Firebird, now it's your turn.

# **CHAPTER 05**

## **YEAR 36, MONTH 04**

### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

Wasteland Weekend? Spoiled motherfuckers. My life is not your theme park.

Someone once said if you don't like people then you're not gonna sell any books. I guess we're gonna have to give these things away then. You fuckers with your anxiety and your depression. The impala overcomes its chronic fatigue syndrome as the cheetah approaches. I'm a goddamn impala every goddamn day.

You don't know how good you have it. Airplanes. Skyscrapers. Clean water. Antibiotics. Poor people are fat instead of thin. No infant mortality. Cell phones. The motherfucking internet. Safety. Comfort. Convenience. You have it all and you think the world owes you more.

Eat the rich? You mean let everyone else on earth eat the Americans? Inequality isn't the problem. Every place in the world has some people who are dirt poor. "Inequality" just means "in this place it's also possible to get rich." The question is how did they get rich? Honestly or dishonestly?



I'm not saying all my money's honest. But most of it is. Honest money comes from someone spending their time and effort and creativity and ingenuity and persistence satisfying the needs of others and getting paid to do it. If someone gives you their money they are giving you a piece of their life. If you take money from someone you are taking a piece of their life.

Where I come from we help poor people and sick people and old people but we do it cuz we want to not cuz we have to. There ain't no such thing as a free lunch. I didn't get a free education. I don't get free health care. We have teachers and doctors but you gotta pay them. Someone has to pay your teachers and doctors too. If someone else chooses to pay for your teachers and doctors that's very kind of them. If you make someone else pay for your teachers and doctors that's not very kind of you.

I loved Tomorrowland. I just wished the people in it loved it as much as I did.

I was pissed at John for fucking things up with Skelli. He's lucky she didn't hit him with a steel pipe. It had been a few months since Skelli had last seen me but a decade since I'd last seen her! I was worried I'd never see her again.

Sure I'd been with other girls but you never forget the first girl who tries to murder you. Any

girl can call you a sociopath but no one else put it quite as eloquently as Skelli did.

One good thing that came from trading places with John was getting a chance to see them little pocket computers you all have in Tomorrowland. When I was there I got heaps of ideas for ways to improve my homemade computer. Mine still wasn't anywhere near as small as them pocket computers but it was way smaller than the one I'd built back in Straya. You could hook it up to a TV set and a typewriter and a walkie talkie and then not only would you have your own computer but you'd be on a network that didn't need any wires or central hubs or monthly subscriptions. Your computer would talk directly to the other computers around it.

Every May there's a race out in Uranium Springs called The Cannibal Run. This one is a little different from The Cannonball Run. Everyone who participates gets a prize except the one who comes in last. Unless you consider being killed and eaten getting a prize in which case the person who comes in last gets a prize too. Yeah they cook and eat the loser.

I'd never spent any time in Uranium Springs but aside from what happens if you lose The Cannibal Run it's supposed to be a real friendly

town. Ever since The Swede had saved me with a radio announcement that lonely night I'd wanted to visit the place. Maybe I'd get a chance to thank him in person.

The race itself was on the last day of the event. I know you're hoping I'm gonna be in that race. Yes the prizes were large amounts of cash. Yes I needed money to start building my computers. But no I was not gonna enter. I don't take stupid risks unless it's worth the reward. Sounded like a hell of a show though. I'll describe the loser's death in vivid detail if that's what you're into.

I got to Uranium Springs and set up camp. Then I headed for the big radio tower and found the source of that voice I remembered so well.

"You're The Swede and you've got what I need! Years ago I heard you on the radio and you helped me find my way across this godforsaken country. You saved me from some serious shit that night."

"Glad to hear you say it" Swede said.

"Someday I'll repay it" I promised. "You ever make it to The Gathering?"

"I never miss it. I run the radio station there too."

Then he vanished. Before my eyes he vanished. I was in the same place but it was

different. It had happened again. John and I had traded places. I was now at another stupid party in the desert called Detonation.

Well good. Maybe John would enter The Cannibal Run and die. Wait I don't know which one of us dies in that case so maybe not.

Ok pay attention cuz I'm only gonna explain this once. The Gathering and Wasteland Weekend happen at the same place in California's Mojave Desert. In Epoxyclipse we call that place Damnation Valley. In Tomorrowland they call it California City. The Cannibal Run and Detonation happen at the same place in Arizona's Painted Desert. In Epoxyclipse we call that place Uranium Springs. In Tomorrowland they call it Holbrook.

When me and John both attended these similar events in similar places we ended up hopping between timelines.

We figured out that it wasn't the events or the places that were magic. The magic happened any time we crossed paths and momentarily occupied the same physical space in two different timelines. Also strictly speaking we don't believe in magic so really we prefer to think of it as some kind of science thing.

Anyway now we'd made some sense of it. And being a pair of clever cunts we immediately

started using this newfound superpower to our advantage.

This time around we spent a few days in each others' worlds. I partied a while at Detonation and when I finally returned to Epoxyclypse I was delighted to discover that John had spent all of his time writing programs for my computer.

John wasn't thinking up these programs himself. He was duplicating the work of companies that had been successful in his timeline. We were gonna invent the internet and on day one we were gonna be bigger than Microsoft and Apple and Facebook combined. Those are some real successful computer companies in Tomorrowland for those those of you who don't know.

There would be some competition. The whole network would be free and you could build whatever you wanted on it. But we would be the only ones with a foolproof way of picking winners. Everyone else would have to use trial and error. We'd be Google and you'd be Ask Jeeves. Yeah you guessed it. The first one was successful and the second one wasn't.

John built a social network called You Are Awaited that would let you stay in touch with old friends and make new ones too. But the social

network was nothing compared to the other thing he did.

He implemented a cryptocurrency and a mining program. The mining program let your computer print its own money. The computer created money out of nothing but electricity and maths. Everyone who bought one of my computers would have an instant revenue stream. The thing would pay for itself.

I decided to call our new currency Firebucks. Firebucks are all just numbers stored on computers. But all the computers in the world have to agree on what those numbers are so no one can fuck the system up. John knew people would still wanna be able to carry their money around on them so he set it up so you could engrave some codes onto these special cards and you could use them as money too just like a goddamn Master Charge.

I chose the motto we'd engrave on the cards:

## HARMONIA ABSQUE IMPERIO

The best part was that my own personal computer had a massive head start on generating Firebucks. I was gonna have all the money in the world and you'd be super excited about pedaling your bike for an hour to power your generator

long enough for your computer to make you twenty cents. Hell twenty cents is better than no fucking cents so fuck you. Yes I am making the world a better place no matter what you say.

This would only work if I could get everyone to accept our new money. The only way I'd get everyone to accept it would be if everyone had some of it to spend. The only way everyone would have some of it to spend would be if everyone had one of my computers.

My supplier had figured out a way to cram more transistors onto an integrated circuit so it was quite possible that the next version of my computer would be shrunk down smaller than an IBM PC. But them fancy integrated circuits were not gonna be cheap.

I would need to build a heap of computers all at once or else no one would get any value out of them. There'd be no way to connect to the network if there was no network around to connect to. No one to trade Firebucks with. No one to fall in love with.

I needed materials and tools and fuel. And heaps of money. And yeah I knew of a way to make some quick shrapnel. Having a chance to become the richest person on earth made the stupid risk worthwhile. All I had to do was make sure I didn't come in last.

It's race day! Your hero is in jeopardy! Are you excited race fans? Are you excited to find out who wins and who dies? Good cuz I'm gonna tell you.

One other person entered. One other person. So it was me or him. One of us would be rich and the other would be dead.

I was up against a tall musclebound motherfucker in a blown Mustang. He'd won every race he'd ever entered. He was gorgeous and cocky. Everyone cheered when they introduced him. Then they introduced me and nobody cheered. Some people laughed. I was the underdog. The race began. He let me get ahead. He toyed with me. We had some kind of tortoise and hare dynamic. His cockiness got the better of him. I used my superior intellect to take advantage of his one weakness. Then I won and I got the money I needed to make my computers. We ate him for dinner and that motherfucker got what he deserved.

Is that the story you wanted to hear? Cuz I could have told you that's what happened.

There's not much point in telling you what really happened. There's no drama in competition or battle. At least not in the battle itself. Someone's gonna be more skilled. Or someone's



gonna pull some kind of trick. Or someone's gonna get lucky. That's it. The drama lies in what's at stake. The drama lies in how much you care about the participants.

Do you care about me? I don't give a shit about you. I've never met you. Writing is an asymmetrical relationship. I'm trying to make you like me without even bothering to get to know you. Sorry about that.

I could just tell you I pulled the lever of a slot machine. If I told you I'd won we'd celebrate together. If I told you I'd lost it would build up tension and make it more intense when I eventually did win. We're gambling addicts every one. Sure if I lost this race I'd die. Or maybe I'd escape. That's still a very limited number of outcomes. The universe pulls the lever of some cosmic slot machine and someone comes out victorious. Boring as fuck.

What makes for real drama is the boundless possibility of the human condition. Do people learn from their experiences? Do they make the world a better place? Do they improve the lives of others or leave a trail of suffering behind them? That kind of drama is still just the universe pulling the levers of slot machines but it's pulling a lot more of them at once. Free will is an illusion but life is a hell of a ride anyway.

We like to see good people struggle and eventually succeed. We like to see bad people win a few battles but ultimately fail. So what do you think of me so far? Am I a good guy or a bad guy? Maybe don't answer that just yet cuz I'm gonna tell you what really happened.

The other bloke who entered the race couldn't have been older than twenty. He was dressed in rags and his car was a piece of shit. I won the race. A woman carrying a baby ran out to try to stop them from killing him and eating him. She was wailing and flailing but the crowd held her back. She watched the proceedings helplessly. Still want me to describe his death in vivid detail?

I'm not a good guy. I'm not a bad guy. I'm whatever the situation requires.

I tried to ignore the sound of her wailing. Eventually she quieted down as the smell of roasting flesh hit the air. I packed up my stuff.

I tossed my big sack of prize money into the boot. I was about to close it when I saw the woman who'd lost her husband standing there pointing a revolver at me. She still had her baby in her arms.

I closed the boot.

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

She pulled the trigger again and again and again. Click click click click click click. No bullets. She threw the gun and screamed and came at me. I pushed her away and got the hell out of that place.

Later it occurred to me that I should have named my computer after the bloke who got eaten. But I couldn't remember his name. When I'm gone I hereby give all of you permission to be unable to remember my name too. Forget me when you look at the night sky.

# **CHAPTER 06**

## **YEAR 36, MONTH 08**

### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

The Gathering is the place we come to find them we're looking for and them we've lost. It don't matter if you're looking for love or a friend you haven't met yet or an enemy you haven't battled yet or someone you knew once long ago. Without phones or a reliable mail service we need a designated meeting place. That's The Gathering.

Pretty much everyone in the world knew about The Gathering. There were lots of local gatherings too. But if the person you were looking for could have ended up anywhere in the world then your best hope was to look for them at the biggest gathering in the world. The Gathering in Damnation Valley California.

They'd held a Gathering every year since Year Zero. Since I'd arrived in the USA I'd been going every year.

John knew I'd be at this year's Gathering and I knew John would be at this year's Wasteland Weekend. We were fully expecting that we'd trade places at some point. In fact we were looking forward to it. Well at least I was. I think trading places stressed John out.

Since The Cannibal Run I'd invested all of my money and time into hand building ten of my new smaller computers to sell at The Gathering. Yup they were even smaller than that IBM PC now. I wouldn't call them portable yet but I'd get there.

I'd decided to call my computer the Firebuddy. It should've been easy to sell a box that makes money and friends. But the Firebuddy would only be truly useful to someone if lots of other people had them too. I was going to have to advertise.

I decided to go see the cunt that ran The Gathering's newspaper. I pulled up in front of his office in my rumbling V8. The building had a big sign on it:

## WASTELAND COMMUNICATION CORPORATION

The Gathering's radio station was in the same building as the newspaper office. I peeked in to look for The Swede but the door was locked and the equipment wasn't set up yet.

The newsie cunt popped his head out of his office. "Nice jalopy!" he said.

"Nice hat" I said. He had on a fedora that made him look like he'd just stepped off the set of Citizen Kane.

I introduced myself. "Firebird."

"Yes it is" he said. He was still ogling my car.

"So am I. Who are you?"

"Deadline."

"How many eyeballs does your paper reach?"

I asked.

"Eight thousand" he said.

I did the math. "That's over four thousand people."

I tried to pitch the idea of him doing an article on the Firebuddy. I ended up making my first sale instead! Nine to go.

He wasn't gonna write an article about it until he saw what the thing could do. He wasn't gonna see what the thing could do until I'd sold a heap of them and he'd be able to use it to communicate and connect with people.

He said he'd be happy to sell me an ad. But I'd gone all in on building these fancy high tech machines and I couldn't afford an ad. I had nothing left to offer.

Except.

I was 100% sure the Firebuddy could change the world. The question was would other people realize it too? Was I willing to risk everything?

The reward was worth the risk. No way I was gonna sell my car. But what I would do was bet my car.

I told Deadline he could have my Firebird if he gave me an ad in every paper he published from now until forever. But if he ever wanted to publish a story about the Firebuddy he'd have to give me the car back first. Today I was small enough to need advertising. Tomorrow I'd be big enough to be news.

We shook on it. I handed him the keys. He threw an old box of Twinkies into the deal. I hadn't had a Twinkie in decades. I chomped one down while scrawling out the ad copy:

MAKE MONEY

FIND LOVE

TRUST THE ALGORITHM

GET YOUR FIREBUDDY TODAY

Deadline got a kick out of it. "Say buddy I can tell you're an idea man. I've got some ideas of my own see? Let me show you something."

He took me through his tiny office and into an even tinier workshop behind it. There was a big mess of wires on the bench connecting a small vertically mounted square to a car's brake light sitting on the table. He flipped a switch and the

brake light came on. He grabbed a flashlight and told me to close the door.

When I closed the door the brake light went off. This was a windowless room. It was dark and I had no idea what was about to happen. He turned on the flashlight. The brake light came on again.

I opened the door. "That's cool man."

That night I slept under the stars on top of a pile of Firebuddies and dreamed of wealth beyond my... wildest dreams. I dunno. I'm not a writer. I'm just someone who's trying to tell you a bunch of stuff that happened.

I only sold five Firebuddies. I was fucked.

Or at least I was fucked until I figured out what to do with the other five.

When John and I traded places I researched the social networking accounts of our five customers' doppelgangers to see if they had friends or spouses or whatever in Tomorrowland that they hadn't met in Epoxyclipse.

When I came back to Epoxyclipse I compared their Tomorrowland friends lists to their Epoxyclipse online address books. For each of them I found someone in attendance at The Gathering who they'd never met before but who I



was sure they'd like cuz they were already friends with them in Tomorrowland.

I gave each of their future friends one of the remaining Firebuddies for free. That way when they signed up for You Are Awaited they'd be sure to meet people they liked even though the social network consisted of just ten people. Of course I made it look like there were more than ten people on there by adding a heap of fake users.

Once everyone had signed up for You Are Awaited I ran the matches. What that supposedly meant was I ran the magic algorithm that connected people to their new friends they were supposed to meet at The Gathering. What that really meant was I manually inserted some rows into a database. Right now this was a labor intensive process that required timeline swapping but eventually I'd get around to writing that great algorithm. Hopefully before the You Are Awaited event that was scheduled to happen at the next Cannibal Run.

Anyway the idea was everyone would go find each other during The Gathering and shake hands or fuck or whatever.

The plan worked. They all got in touch and they all hit it off. I had five pairs of happy people that were shouting from the rooftops about the

miraculous Firebuddy. "Trust The Algorithm" they said. I'd accidentally started a cult.

People were throwing money at me. I frantically took orders and started putting together a gang of clever cunts that could mass produce the Firebuddy. I negotiated for the purchase of a building in the middle of nowhere to use as a factory.

At that point if I'd had a door Deadline would have knocked it down to get an interview. He dropped off my car and gave me back the keys. He'd even washed the thing. The guy was a class act.

The interview went off the rails when John and I accidentally swapped places again but that only served to generate more buzz. Everyone wanted to know more about the mad genius Firebird and his magical Firebuddy.

I stopped in to pick up a copy of Deadline's paper with my interview in it. I was gonna take the piss out of him about the thousand miles he somehow managed to put on my car.

But Deadline was gone. His door was open and his office was trashed. I found his crumpled hat on the floor and picked it up. The Swede saw me poking around and came out to talk to me.

"Hey John what's going on? How'd it go?"

"I'm Firebird. Or at least right now I am. We haven't spoken since The Cannibal Run."

Swede probably thought I was crazy but he didn't seem to mind. "Firebird again? Ok then. Maybe you can help us. Deadline's gone. Probably dead."

I looked around the newspaper office. There were pretend clues all over. The place had more red herrings than a fish market. An unpublished article about the sex practices of a local tribe. Drawings and notes connected nonsensically by strings on a bulletin board. A Twinkie on a chair. Swede explained that Deadline had been looking into election fraud and he'd been investigating a corrupt casino. He'd received several death threats.

People don't threaten to do shit. They just do it. People don't get murdered with four thousand people standing around and nobody seeing nothing. It all sounded like a heap of bullshit to me. I figured Deadline was alive but I had no clue where to look for him. Ok I had clues but they were super shitty ones. None of it made any sense but I promised Swede I'd do what I could.

Swede told me Deadline was last seen at the Cult Of Catmeat. The Cult Of Catmeat was a gang of idiots who worshipped a cat. A cat named Catmeat. Their leader was called Grotch. I was

instructed that when it came time to use a pronoun for Grotch the one that was to be used was "it." Catmeat's pronoun was supposed to be the capitalized "He" but I'm gonna take my chances ignoring that one cuz I don't capitalize anything to do with god or government.

I found Grotch and some of its followers in an abandoned christian church which was now looking more like a satanic one. I sat down in back and watched their antics.

Grotch had on a three foot tall punk rock pope hat that was all black. The altar of the Cult Of Catmeat was covered in stuffed cats. I hoped they were all stuffed toys and not actual taxidermied cats but I didn't look that close. Catmeat himself was there lying in a cardboard box and paying no attention to his adoring minions. The cult members were lined up to receive their communion or baptism or whatever and Grotch was spitting blood or wine or something into each of their faces.

When the bullshit was over I introduced myself to Grotch and told it I was looking for a cunt named Deadline.

Grotch spoke slowly like it assumed I'd be hanging on its every word.

"He interviewed several of us at The Gathering.... Being a good journalist he participated in our ceremony."

"He let you spit on him."

"Baptize him.... Then a man with a mohawk appeared and stabbed him.... But Deadline is one of us now.... So we threw the evil man out.... Catmeat healed Deadline with a divine bunt."

"Uh huh. I hope you put a couple of stitches in him just to be sure. Did the asshole with the mohawk say anything?"

"Yes.... He said... that he wanted his car back."

# **CHAPTER 07**

## **YEAR 37, MONTH 01**

### **NARRATOR: JOHN**

Mohawk A\*\*hole had me in a chokehold. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move.

I lurched up out of bed. My heart was pounding. I thought I was having a heart attack. I couldn't tell which timeline I was in. I was sure Mohawk A\*\*hole was there in the dark somewhere.

I grabbed my phone. The presence of the phone should have reassured me I was home in Tomorrowland, but my sleep-addled brain didn't believe it. I took the phone outside, started to dial 911, and held my thumb over the send button. I sat on the sidewalk for an hour like that before I finally felt normal again.

I'd had some fun trading places with Firebird, but I'd had some terrifying moments as well. I didn't want to spend a lot of time in Epoxyclypse. I both loved it and hated it.

It wasn't just the nightmares. I was having panic attacks, too. The ability to hop between worlds scared the bejeepers out of me. To ensure that we would cross over, we had to agree to meet at very specific places and times. If we were off a

bit, we wouldn't swap. Other times, we'd inadvertently cross paths, and find ourselves thrown into unfamiliar situations. I don't even want to imagine what would happen if I ended up stranded in his timeline.

Visiting Epoxyclypse had been an adventure. But adventures involve facing things you're not prepared for and taking risks. I generally preferred to be prepared and reduce risk as much as possible. Some of my fears were justified. In Epoxyclypse the risk of being attacked, or killed, was much greater. But the risk of our business ventures failing was much lower. The ideas had already been proven to work.

I could have just stopped visiting Epoxyclypse. But the idea of saving the world, and getting rich doing it, was intoxicating. It was quite possible that Firebird and I were the first people in history to discover, and gain control over, this ability to move between timelines. How could we let that go to waste?

The Mad Max fortieth anniversary celebration in Australia was coming up. This would be my great pilgrimage. My trip to where it all began. And where it all ended.

Several people started an online discussion about the possibility of making a short film while

we were out there. We'd be visiting Mad Max filming locations in Melbourne, Clunes, and Silverton. We'd have our outfits and cars. All we needed was a script and a director.

My hands were shaking with excitement as I typed. "I'll write the script and direct it."

Firebird had a pile of stories about all the zany stuff that had happened to him in Epoxyclypse. I decided to use the story about running the roadblock, and meeting Mad Skelli, as inspiration for the script. I'd been shooting footage and writing all my life, but this would be my first scripted narrative.

My excitement turned to fear when I realized who I had to cast.

I would love to have cast Mad Skelli's counterpart in Tomorrowland. But Firebird and I had never asked her real name. And she was a postwar, which meant she was born after the timelines split. It's quite possible that she didn't even exist in Tomorrowland. It's probably for the best. It would have been a tough pickup line. "Have we met before, in another timeline?"

No, not Skelli. Mohawk A\*\*hole. Bruce Barbagallo.

I found him online. He was a tattoo artist living in South Australia. It wouldn't be too long of a trek for him to come out to Silverton. And



everyone wants to be a movie star. He'd probably grown up watching the Mad Max films, like I had. I could only imagine what it must have been like to have grown up with them as an Australian kid.

It was quite possible Bruce really was the psychopath Firebird believed him to be. But he wasn't in prison, he hadn't killed anyone, and he hadn't blown up any airports. In Tomorrowland, he seemed like a regular guy.

I went back and forth over it in my head. I was scared, but I didn't want to pass up this incredible opportunity to see firsthand what a different person he would be in this timeline. A front-row seat in a battle of nature vs. nurture. I really wanted to meet him. But I also knew, for a fact, that some part of him was quite capable of killing me and my family in cold blood.

Oh, wait. I'm going to meet him either way. It says so right on his profile. He's already planning to attend the fortieth anniversary.

I got my visa online. As long as I had my Arizona driver's license, I'd be able to drive in Australia, on the left side of the road. It seemed a little crazy that they would let me do that. I looked forward to the challenge. I reserved

flights, hotels, and a rental car. Or should I say, "hire car."

I hate flying, but I found a way to tolerate it. I pretended that I lived on that airplane. I accepted that I would never get off of that airplane. Then it came as a pleasant surprise when the airplane finally landed.

At the airport, I was met by a couple of friends I'd met online who'd be helping me make my film. Driving on the left side wasn't too hard, but the first clockwise roundabout I encountered caused my brain to shut down. I had to pull over and ask my friends what to do. And I kept turning on the wipers when I wanted to activate the turn signals. Or should I say, "indicators."

We visited the Mad Max filming locations at the Melbourne University car park and the pumping station. Then we went to Clunes, where we visited the train station and Fraser Street. We stayed in Clunes that night. The celebration would begin the next day.

When morning came, replicas of Mad Max motorcycles and cars started filling the streets. It was my first time seeing a Ford Falcon XB in person.

Then I saw Bruce. He wasn't just in attendance. He was a part of the event. He was riding on the back of a tow truck, looking and

acting like Wez from Road Warrior. Including the red mohawk. I was afraid that, when he saw me, he would experience some sort of interdimensional flash of recognition and fly into a murderous rage.

As the truck passed by he looked at me and snarled. Then he looked away.

The next stop on our journey was Silverton, where we'd be shooting the film. Everyone's outfits looked tip-top. They even did up the hostel we stayed at to look like Exotic Travels. I introduced myself to everyone who'd volunteered to help with my little movie. I introduced myself to Bruce last.

Bruce had brought his tattooing equipment with him. He was setting it up. "Here for a tattoo?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah!"

It was not like me to be so spontaneous about such a permanent commitment, but lately, I'd been starting to accept the fact that my body and my life were only temporary things. No commitment is truly permanent, because nothing is permanent. And taking risks, breaking rules, and getting out of my comfort zone was occasionally leading to great rewards.

I decided to get a Firebird symbol on the back of my neck.

As Bruce worked on my tattoo, we got to know each other. I told him about my experiences at Wasteland Weekend. Well, most of my experiences. I don't usually tell people that I sometimes cross into another timeline. But I did tell him how much going to Wasteland Weekend really was like entering a different world.

He was fascinated. "I might never want to leave," he said.

"Would you visit another world, if you could? Even if there were a chance you'd get stuck there? Even if there were a chance you'd die there?"

"Life's an adventure mate," he said. "F\*\*\* yeah I would."

It was clear he wasn't a violent person but he'd had a rough life. Bruce and Firebird had something surprising in common. Bruce's parents had also been killed when he was a child. It wasn't too surprising that Firebird's parents were killed. It was the apocalypse, after all. But Bruce's parents had been killed long before the apocalypse. They were militant socialists, killed by fascists. Firebird is right. The seventies were crazy.

Bruce was a socialist, too. I understood where he was coming from, to an extent. I wouldn't go so far as to have the proletariat seize the means of production. Like Firebird, I believed in the power

of markets, at least when it came to providing luxury goods. Bruce and I agreed that the government should provide necessities like health care and education.

When my tattoo was complete, I asked him to be in my film. He said yes. He was downright giddy about it.

Then I had to ask him something else. "Did you ever own a Pontiac Firebird Trans Am?"

"How did you know? Yeah. There was a CEO of an oil company who lived in my town. He was always driving this gorgeous car around. I talked to him about it a few times. He'd imported it from the states. I never knew for sure if the car was here legally or not. I saved up for years, hoping to one day get one just like it. One day the bloke put it up for sale. The sign wasn't on that car five minutes. I had it for a few years, then lost my job and had to sell it. It was a '75. Dark blue, with a light blue bird on the hood. Two-tone red and white interior."

"Special ordered in red, white, and blue for the American Bicentennial, so the guy could drive it in parades."

"Yeah! How'd you know?"

"You told that story to whomever you sold it to, and they passed that story down to me. I'm the current owner of that car."

"What a crazy coincidence!"

"Yeah... kind of." There were some crazy coincidences involved, but not as many as he thought.

The February heat was almost unbearable, but we managed to shoot our film. We got several takes, from several cameras, for every scene.

I didn't have a storyboard. We just acted out the script, and I let the camera operators use their own creativity in choosing their shots. This let us be more spontaneous with how we used the filming locations. When I wasn't acting, or attempting to act, I was operating one of the cameras, too. We did our best to stay out of each others' shots. There was an intense amount of improvisation, distributed intelligence, and synergy.

I couldn't believe people were following my instructions and letting me drive their cars. I didn't understand why everyone was being so kind, especially considering no one was getting paid for any of this. Everyone remembered their lines except me. Yes, I forgot the lines that I had written. And I was by far the worst actor.

When shooting was complete, I felt like I had contributed nothing. I threw away all the paper copies of the script.

Bruce rescued one from the trash and asked me to autograph it for him. That felt good. It was suddenly clear what it was that I had contributed. I was the writer and director, darnit.

That night, when the sun went down at Mundi Mundi Lookout, I saw more stars than I'd ever seen before, and new stars that I'd never seen before. There wasn't a single airplane in the sky. Orion was upside down, doing cartwheels. So was I.

When I returned home, I spent the next few weeks editing. I planned to release my film at the Wasteland Film Festival, which is held on-site during Wasteland Weekend.

Writing and directing had been so much fun that I didn't want it to end. I decided to begin a crowdfunding campaign to make Firebird's life story into a movie. I'd promote it as an old-school film with real stunts, real storytelling, and no CGI.

I asked myself how much money I'd need to take a sabbatical from my job and work on my movie full-time. It would take a lot. I was happy at my job. I never took risks like that. But if we got enough buy-in from the wastelander community, I'd do it. Most people never get a chance to do something great. Of those who get a

chance, most people turn it down. I promised myself that if I got this chance, I wouldn't turn it down.

But how much money would it take? I gave it some thought. I decided. It would take \$500,000.

I'd quit my job for a budget of half a million dollars. It sounds like a lot, but it wasn't like I'd be keeping that money. I'd use some of it for food, rent, lodging, and health insurance. But the rest would go toward paying everyone else and making the film awesome.

To hit a fundraising goal of that size, I'd have to go viral. To go viral, I'd need a gimmick. Like Firebird, I would put my car on the line. But I was going to raise the stakes.

I bought the domain name [youareawaited.com](http://youareawaited.com) to use for my crowdfunding campaign. Then I added some text to the credits at the end of the film:

THERE'S MORE TO THIS STORY

THIS SCENE WAS SHOT ON A \$0 BUDGET

YOU DECIDE THE BUDGET OF OUR NEXT  
SCENE

\$5,000 - EVERYONE GETS PAID



\$50,000 - WE MAKE THE WHOLE MOVIE

\$500,000 - I DESTROY MY TRANS AM ON  
CAMERA

REAL STUNTS

REAL STORYTELLING

JUST LIKE THE GOOD OLD DAYS

NO CGI

NOT NOW

NOT EVER

GIVE US YOUR MONEY

LET'S DO THIS

YOUAREAWAITED.COM

I had no idea yet how or why Firebird's car would be destroyed at the end of the movie, but I figured it would make for a great ending.

I keep my promises. If we hit that number, I'd quit my job. If we hit that number, I'd smash my car on camera.

Submitting this film to the Wasteland Film Festival might be the most significant button click of my life. I hovered over the button for a moment.

Click. This would not help with my panic attacks. But screw it. If I got that money, I'd make my movie, or die trying.

# **CHAPTER 08**

## **YEAR 37, MONTH 04**

### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

We had the factory up and running. We were churning out three Firebuddies a day. We had back orders for months.

You probably think business owners just sit around all day collecting profits. I would be happy to do that but unfortunately I have to work too. I come up with the ideas. I decide what to make. I put up the money. I take the risks. I choose what jobs to hire for. I choose who to hire. I choose what to automate. I choose what machines to buy. I create jobs for dozens of people.

I employed a manager. And twenty eight clever cunts. And a "security team" I put together by paying off some of the local gangsters. We had thirty two different machines to help build the various components of the Firebuddies but we outsourced as much as we could to keep the operation as small as possible. Keeping it small is a necessity cuz without property rights you never know when you're gonna get knocked over. It's not a matter of if. It's a matter of when.

Ideally a factory is just a box where raw materials go in one end and widgets come out the other. In practice a factory starts off as nothing more than a building with a gang of clever cunts in it who know how to put your shit together for you. Over time your goal is to replace all of them cunts with machines. Sure they all got kids to feed but they know the deal from day one. They're only there cuz you ain't figured out a way to replace them yet. You'll never be able to automate everything. But dealing with people ain't so bad. You find the people you want and pay them enough to lure them away from whatever other job they might have taken instead. If someone else tries to lure them away from you then you give them a raise to keep them around.

The factory was the good news. The bad news was Mohawk Asshole was here in the USA. And John and Mohawk Asshole were now best mates. And John's new best mate was the same person who killed my family and was trying to kill me. And John chased my girlfriend away. Good thing John was gonna make me a millionaire or I would have swapped places with him just so I could slit my own throat.

And Deadline was still missing. But I had a theory about that.

All them stupid nonclues were just distractions. Deadline wasn't dead but someone didn't want him found. Mohawk Asshole came to the USA looking for me and my car. He saw Deadline driving my car so he stabbed him. Mohawk Asshole wasn't the first person to come after Deadline. Every motherfucker who ever had a negative story published about them in the paper had a motive to bump him off. But for Deadline getting stabbed was the last straw. So he went into hiding.

He wouldn't have been able to pull this whole thing off himself. Someone was protecting him. But people get stabbed every day. What was so important about Deadline that he had to be protected? Who would go to such great lengths to hide him and keep him hidden?

The Swede had said something weird to me before he told me Deadline was missing. He'd called me John and asked me "How'd it go?"

Was the Wasteland Communication Corporation involved with Deadline's disappearance? Was John involved?

John and I had accidentally traded places during my interview with Deadline. It wasn't until late the next night that we managed to return to our home timelines. Deadline had vanished while I was in Tomorrowland and John was in

Epoxyclipse. Shortly after Deadline had vanished I'd noticed that my car had a thousand more miles on it. I thought Deadline had put the miles on when he'd been driving it around. But I hadn't looked at the odometer until after he had gone missing. John could have put the miles on there while he was in Epoxyclipse.

Swede knew about my ability to become someone else since he'd witnessed it firsthand. Maybe Swede had asked John to hide Deadline and not tell anyone where he hid him. Once John returned to Tomorrowland no one in Epoxyclipse would have any idea where Deadline was. Not even Swede. Whether Swede believed I was swapping timelines or not didn't matter. As long as I couldn't remember actions I'd taken when I was John I would suit his purposes.

Where would John have hidden Deadline?

You go with what you know. John knew of only two reasonably safe and functioning communities in Epoxyclipse. Damnation Valley and Uranium Springs. Five hundred miles apart. There and back would be a thousand miles.

My theory was a long shot. But this year's Cannibal Run was happening this weekend. I could go check out the race and try to spot Deadline.

What? You expected me to feel guilty about what happened last year? We do what we do. We learn from it or we don't. Of what use is guilt? No way I was entering that race again though. Why do you keep asking me that?

I'm just fucking with you. I have no idea what you're asking me. I just know that fuckers like you like to watch cunts like me suffer and that's why you're reading this. But I'm not gonna give you that pleasure. I don't need the money like I did last time.

I fired up my Firebuddy and posted a message on You Are Awaited that I was headed to The Cannibal Run. I ran the matches for the event which was easier now cuz I'd gotten around to writing that almighty algorithm I'd been bragging about since before it existed. I faked it then I maked it.

I was about to shut it down and head out when I noticed something. Deadline or someone claiming to be him had signed up to be matched at The Cannibal Run. The Algorithm had matched him to a sheila by the name of Firecracker who'd bought a Firebuddy from me a few months back.

I viewed his profile. It was in Morse code for some reason. The Firebuddy translated it. Me and John had implemented support for a heap of

languages. Everything but emojis cuz fuck that shit. Anyway here's what his profile said:

PATENTLY OBVIOUS TUBERS ALLOW  
TRAILS OMINOUS

That bullshit was about as helpful as the Twinkie on the chair. It was clearly some kind of ruse but I'd jump through the hoops if it would bring Deadline back. I know my theory involves him not wanting to be found so if I found him I'd keep my mouth shut. Except for telling you fuckers about it of course.

I made sure to take Deadline's fedora with me to Uranium Springs. When I got there the first thing I did was find Firecracker. She was easy to spot. She looked like she was peeled off the side of a WWII bomber. She remembered me. I told her we were both looking for Deadline. She agreed to join forces.

"Have you seen any potatoes?" she asked.

"No. Why?"

"The first letters of each of the words in his profile spell out the word potato."

Oh. Right. She was better at this than I was.

We asked everyone we saw if they'd seen any potatoes. Finally someone said "There's one right over there."



We ran to it and looked for more. There was a whole trail of them leading up a dried out creek bed. They led to a hovel full of even more bullshit clues.

A puzzle with letters on the pieces that spelled out words when put together. Hidden notes under statues. More fucking Twinkies. It was like a damn scavenger hunt. Like finding Deadline was some kind of game. I was becoming more and more convinced that someone was trying to hide the real story of why Deadline was here. The whole thing felt like a wild goose chase.

Firecracker found an audio recorder. It had her name on it so she put on the headphones and listened to the message he'd left her. What I found interesting was the machine the message was recorded on. It looked new. It had no reel of tape and no cassette. Could it be the first digital audio recorder of the Epoxyclypse timeline? If so we could hook it up to a Firebuddy and record and edit audio and transmit audio over the network which would be pretty fucking cool. Me and John could build Napster only without any copyright laws to fuck it up.

The audio message instructed Firecracker to get some potion from a mad scientist. When we found Deadline he'd have to drink the magic

elixir to be brought back from his brainwashed state.

There's no way any of that was true. I decided to go take a nap. The race was gonna start in like an hour. I handed Firecracker Deadline's hat and told her I'd catch up later. She headed off to find the mad scientist.

Walking back into town I noticed a punk rock girl wearing a goddamn computer on her goddamn arm. It wasn't some vintage toy neither. It was brand new. Uranium Springs was becoming a hotbed of new technology development. This computer was a nice piece of work. I'd never seen anything like it. The punk girl was walking around and fiddling with it nonstop.

I stopped the punk and asked her what the thing on her arm was.

"DingoDongle" she said nonchalantly while fiddling.

I asked her what the fuck she was doing with it.

"Fuck off." She took off running for cover. Then she peeked out and pointed her arm at some bloke.

He had on a DingDong too and it made a noise and flashed. He fell to the ground. I ran to him. I thought maybe he was dead.

"Are you ok?" I asked. I reached down and grabbed his DingDong.

He pulled his arm away and got up. "Yeah dude it's just a game" he said.

He explained that the screen on his arm had a map which showed where other DingDong users were. You could point your arm at them to shoot them and their DingDong would recognize whether you'd hit them or not. Some users showed up on the screen as people, some showed up as monsters. The graphics were amazing.

"What's the game called?"

"Alien Guzzaline Wars 2!"

The DingDong had words on the side:

DINGODONGLE  
MS INDUSTRIES  
WHAT'S LEFT O'SYDNEY AUSTRALIA

I now had a competitor. MS Industries. I should have destroyed that Firebuddy prototype I'd left in the garage. I figured Mad Skelli would strip it and scrap it. But she'd reverse engineered it and shrunk it down even faster than I had. Goddammit she was sexy.

"Can it do anything else?" I asked.

"Yeah all kinds of stuff. Mesh networking. Send messages anywhere. Access your You Are Awaited account. Pretty much everything."

I liked that he mentioned You Are Awaited but me and John weren't making any money off of that. You Are Awaited existed solely to give people a reason to buy Firebuddies. Speaking of that.

"Why didn't you get a Firebuddy?" I asked.

"That thing doesn't have any games" he said. "DingoDongle's got like fifty games dude."

I looked around the streets of Uranium Springs. I counted two people with Firebuddies and twelve with DingDongs.

DingoDongles. Whatever. I was planning to release a new Firebuddy called the Firebuddy 2 at this year's Gathering. Guess I'd better get some games written for it and expand our production capacity so we could fill our backorders faster.

Are you thinking that means I have to enter the race now? Fuck no. I got enough money for all that shit I gotta do.

Then a delivery guy on a bike pulled up. He verified that I was Firebird and handed me a telegram from my factory manager:

MOHAWK ASSHOLE SEIZED OUR  
FACTORY

Fuck it. Last year's Cannibal Run champion would return.

The rules of The Cannibal Run are anything but numerous. One of the few rules they have says that once you're at the starting line you can't back out. I'm telling you this cuz I was already lined up at the starting line when I spotted Deadline.

He had on a ghillie suit instead of his normal forties reporter getup but I got a good look at his face. It was like looking up and seeing the goddamn Loch Ness Monster.

He wasn't captive or hiding or brainwashed or unconscious. He was just in disguise shooting pictures of the race with a big camera on a tripod. It looked like a large format camera but it had a heap of wires and stuff coming out of it.

In Epoxyclipse you don't just take pictures. It's a time consuming and expensive process. Not just cuz you gotta process and print them yourself. You usually gotta make your own cameras and emulsions too. You don't take pictures. You make photographs. Now you understand why no one's made a movie in decades.

The cunt was pointing and clicking and pointing and clicking and I didn't see him

switching out any plates or film reels or black bags. It could have been a TV camera but where was the video tape recorder?

Firecracker appeared at his side. She'd spotted him too. They exchanged a few words and she handed him that bullshit magic potion. He drank it hesitantly. She put his hat on his head. He packed up his camera and they walked off together. What a pair them two made. Trust The Algorithm indeed.

I was so caught off guard by this lovely tableau that I missed the start flag. The other cars took off and left me in a cloud of dust. I spun up the old 455 but not enough. I popped the clutch too quick and somehow managed to stall it despite having the torque of a freight train.

All I had to do was not come in last and I was already failing at that. There were four cars in this year's race and I was in fourth.

I finally got my badass car going. It's pretty easy to catch up to someone when you're chasing them. As long as the two of you are pretty evenly matched. You focus on doing whatever they're doing and you do it as fast as they're doing it. Then watch for their mistakes. Every mistake they make is an opportunity for you to catch up a bit. If they make a big mistake you've beaten

them. As long as you don't make the same mistake.

I slowly caught up to the fucker in front of me. Souped up AMC Gremlin. Cool car. Too bad it was about to be smashed.

There ain't no rules about crashing into people so The Cannibal Run was pretty much a demolition derby. I hated to mess up my Firebird's paint but I'd do it for fame and fortune and the privilege of not being eaten.

Coming up from behind you're in a somewhat advantaged position cuz you can get right up against their bumper and push them off the road. But your car is vulnerable in front cuz of the radiator and stuff. Their rear bumper and boot can take a lot of damage without any problem. Especially in Epoxyclypse where all the cars have spikes and shit welded to them. So when you come up behind them they'll probably be hitting the brakes trying to get you to run into their bumper harder than you want to. And most cars don't have working brake lights.

Then it hit me. Brake lights. I remembered that time Deadline took me into his little workshop and showed me his weird invention thing. That brake light that came on when another light came on. It was a light sensor! That cunt

must have made it smaller and lined up a heap of them into a square array.

Sorry I know you fuckers want me to get back to telling you about the race so you can imagine what I'd taste like if you had me for dinner. But my mind was racing as fast as my car was.

It suddenly made sense. The Wasteland Communication Corporation was about to invent the first digital camera and first digital audio recorder of the Epoxyclypse timeline. The Swede had hired John to take Deadline somewhere safe so he could finish working on that shit. When he finished they could sell heaps of them things and they'd all be rich.

And they had no idea how rich they were gonna be. I could show them how to hook them cameras and audio recorders up to Firebuddies. Then you could edit video and audio and store it and send it all over the world and we'd have goddamn movie cameras again. Epoxyclypse was in a race with Tomorrowland and Epoxyclypse was catching up. We can move faster cuz we have permissionless innovation. In Tomorrowland they have laws and regulations and statutes and ordinances and permits and insurance and patents and lawsuits and environmental impact studies. In Epoxyclypse we do what we want.



What was I talking about? Oh yeah the race. I really needed to come in third. Sorry. Remaining alive is cool and all but have you ever tried creating so much value for humanity that the world changed before your very eyes?

Fuck that fucking fucker and that fucking Gremlin. I might even eat a little bit of him this time. Maybe I'll nibble his fingernail. Maybe have a pinky.

When you're coming up behind someone in a car and you wanna fuck them up the best thing to do is to get beside them and use your nose to push their rear end sideways. I watched and waited for my opportunity. He went into a corner a little too fast and the weight shifted off his rear wheels. I gave him a little nudge. He countersteered but I pushed him far enough that he couldn't turn the wheel any further and he spun around backward.

I didn't win the race but I didn't die neither. I came home with some prize money. Did I eat the pinky? Keep wondering.

Good thing I hadn't learned my lesson last year. Fuck you karma. Nice try. Not this time.

# **CHAPTER 09**

## **YEAR 37, MONTH 08**

### **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

This year I was on site at Damnation Valley long before The Gathering even began. I was gonna find who I had to find and fight who I had to fight and sell all the Firebuddies I could. I parked in the same place where me and John always parked so we'd be able to trade places.

A military truck appeared in the distance. It was towing a folding radio tower. I got out of my car and waved.

The truck pulled up. The Swede climbed out of the driver's side. Deadline jumped out of the passenger side. "What's buzzin cousin?" he asked.

I hugged both of them cunts. I pointed to Deadline and told Swede "I found your news guy. It was the Twinkie on the chair that tipped me off."

Swede gave me the official story. Deadline was poisoned and needed time to recover. The Cult Of Catmeat shipped him off to Uranium Springs in a crate of potatoes. A mad scientist started using him for experiments. Firecracker rescued him. I include this bullshit story only for the sake of completeness. The truth is that the

WCC has a skunk works out in Uranium Springs and they don't want anyone to know about it.

Deadline had a camera on him like the one he'd had in Uranium Springs only smaller.

"How many photos can that thing take in a second?" I asked.

"There's no film to advance so it's quick as a bunny" Deadline answered. "I just need a place to put all that data."

"Was that a digital audio recorder you left for Firecracker at The Cannibal Run?"

Swede explained that one. "That's a project I've been working on." He pulled a little box out of his pocket and pressed a button. The box started talking in his voice. "I'm The Swede and I've got what you need. This is Bob Crosby And The Bobcats with Way Back Home."

"I can't be everywhere at once" Swede said. "And I sleep sometimes too. Sometimes we even sell an ad."

"If you let me borrow those tonight I'll have a working digital movie camera by tomorrow morning" I said. "I'll hook them both up to a Firebuddy. It has all the space we'll need. We'll be able to store and edit and transmit digital video all over the world."

I pulled my new Firebuddy 2 out of my backpack. That's right you fuckers. It fits in a backpack. You thought I'd been slack?

I'd gotten my new factory up and running in no time. Mohawk Asshole's factory was producing ripoff Assholebuddies but they were last year's model and the quality control was shit and nobody wanted them. Mohawk Asshole stole my factory and let my ideas wither and die. Not sexy. Skelli stole my ideas and added her own smarts to them. Sexy as fuck.

By midnight I had the digital movie camera working. When morning came we tried it out. I'd mounted it on a cart. Each of the components was portable on its own but the combination of all three wasn't. Not yet.

The first digital film footage of the Epoxyclypse timeline is of me and Swede and Deadline in Damnation Valley sitting around telling the story of our invention. Yeah I know it's not literally "film footage" anymore but that's what I'm calling it. "Motion pictures" is too long and I wasn't gonna use the thing to make goddamn TV shows. I was gonna make fucking movies. We were gonna give them back their heroes.

No way I was destroying my car for my movie though. Why did John even suggest that?

He's supposed to be telling the story of my life. John can destroy his car if he wants. My story's not gonna end like that. My story's gonna be different.

The next vehicle to arrive at The Gathering was a Holden Sandman. Nice one too. I hadn't seen one of them since I'd left Straya. As it got closer I could make out some words on the side of it:

MS INDUSTRIES  
WHAT'S LEFT O'SYDNEY AUSTRALIA

I stood up. Mad Skelli got out of the van.

The sun was rising behind her. And would you look at her. The next generation. A goddamn captain of industry.

"I've missed you" I said.

"I don't even know who you are anymore" she replied.

"Last time you saw me I wasn't myself. It's a long story. You wanna read it?"

"I'm just here to sell computers. What happened last time doesn't matter. What matters is that you were gone for ten years."

She hugged me. Her smile was distant but her embrace was intimate.

I was about to learn some kind of lesson so it was a good thing that at that moment an arrow fell from the sky and ripped a gash out of my leg.

We looked up to see a dust cloud billowing in the distance. Mohawk Asshole was cruising our way in a buggy with a heap of cars behind him.

He'd brought friends. Wait. He doesn't have friends. Well except for that one Skelli bumped off.

He'd brought mercenaries.

Deadline said "Those guys are looking for trouble. We'd better burn rubber. Can you walk?"

Thunk. Another arrow. This one hit the Firebuddy that was powering our movie camera.

"Fuck off" I shouted into the distance. "We're trying to make history here."

"I can walk" I said. "I'm deciding if I'm going to."

Thunk. This one? This one hit my badass car.

"Gather round everyone" I said. I hopped over to my car and opened the boot.

Skelli's face lit up. She grabbed the biggest gun I had. MAG58.

"Nice" I said.

Huh? Yeah I still had them terrorist guns. Heaps of ammo too. How many people did you think I murdered in my youth? What kind of a monster do you think I am?

Swede chose the L1A1.

"A man who knows his guns" I said.

Deadline grabbed the FP45 Liberator. Mass produced by General Motors at a cost of two dollars each. Single shot. Bolt action. The only gun in history that may never have actually killed anyone.

"Ok" I said.

I grabbed the PSG1 with a bipod and scope and laid on the ground.

"Take out the leader with the mohawk" I said. "The rest of them will back off as soon as they realize they ain't getting paid. Let's facefuck this fuckface."

Then a school bus pulled in between us. Deliberately blocking my shot. It was joined by several more cars.

The first tribe of Gathering attendees had arrived. They got out of their cars and surrounded us. They were not going to let us have it out. There was no single person in charge telling us we couldn't fight. It was just a rule we all lived by at The Gathering. We were being detained by a gang of temporary pacifists.

"No fighting at The Gathering except for in The Cage" someone said. They grabbed me and put me in handcuffs. See what I mean when I say anarchy and government ain't so different?

Since the fight was really just between me and Mohawk Asshole they were gonna have me and him duke it out in The Cage that night. They would have thrown us in right then and there but The Cage wasn't put together yet and my leg was fucked up.

They had a medical truck and a security truck. First I was gonna visit one then I was gonna visit the other.

A doctor in the medical truck fixed up my leg. Yeah I had to pay her. Doctor ain't gonna doct for free.

Then they dragged me to my cell in the back of the security truck. I had a cellmate. Good thing we were both chained to the walls.

"Little Shit" he said.

"Mohawk Asshole" I said.

He laughed. "Is that what you call me? I like it. How long ago was it that I killed your family?"

"Let's see. I've had my badass car for... thirty seven years now."

"And in all that time we've never had a chance to talk."

"Sure we have. I drive by. You yell something like 'That's my car' or 'I'll kill everyone you love.'"

"And you say 'Attachment leads to suffering.'"



"Those were my mother's last words."

"Were you attached to your family?"

"Were you attached to your car?"

"That car was the first thing I ever expropriated. I took it from the CEO of an oil company."

"You have excellent taste. I love every minute I spend in that car. It's like it was made for me."

"Do you know why I killed your family John?"

He knew my name. That caught me off guard. "My family... was collateral damage in a senseless war."

"Senseless war? You don't know do you? I killed your family on purpose. I was trying to kill you too. I was trying to kill all of you."

I tried to keep my cool but it wasn't working. I was burning with blind rage. I couldn't believe that in a battle of who could stay calm the longest the one who was winning was the asshole who spent all day fighting and yelling. There was no way I'd be able keep my wits about me in The Cage. But hey it would be worth dying in there if I got in one good hit.

He continued. "I spent my childhood in Chile. Did you know that?"

"No" I said.

"Did you know that your mother was an adviser to Pinochet?"

"Yeah. She was the Chicago Gal."

"Do you know what Pinochet did to the people of Chile?"

"I heard things."

"I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anything. To this day I don't know what Pinochet did. I don't know because one day my parents just disappeared."

"I can only imagine how much it must suck to be an orphan."

"I killed your family because your family killed my family."

"My mother didn't kill your parents."

"She influenced the policies of the man who did."

"His economic policies."

"She was complicit in the deaths of thousands and the torture of thousands more."

"She saved Chile's economy."

"Chile didn't need saving. The people of Chile wanted to rule themselves."

"The socialists wanted to rule the people of Chile."

"The socialists were democratically elected."

"Democracy is just two foxes guarding a henhouse. Inside the henhouse is a goose that lays

golden eggs. The two foxes and the goose vote on whether to break the golden eggs so they can have omelets for brekkie."

"So you're a fascist then? Like your mother?"

"Fuck no. She wasn't neither. She just taught me that you shouldn't vote to have your government take shit away from people."

"We seized the means of production from those who would exploit the efforts of the poor."

"What are the means of production?"

"Factories. Infrastructure."

"Productivity is more than just poor people's efforts plus rich people's factories. If you put me on the guillotine you'd better save my head cuz you're gonna need it."

## **NARRATOR: JOHN**

Firebird and I had planned to trade places earlier, but he hadn't shown. Now, trading places would either happen accidentally, or I wouldn't see him until our next planned meeting. I was concerned because I knew Mohawk A\*\*hole would be at The Gathering looking for him.

The crowdfunding campaign for the full-length movie had hit its initial goal of \$5,000 before Wasteland Weekend had even begun. That meant, at the very least, I'd be headed back to Australia in a few months to shoot another scene.

After the premiere of my short film at the Wasteland Film Festival, I stayed for a while answering questions about my plans for the full-length film. Lots of people said they'd donate. Lots of people offered to help.

I was thrilled and terrified. I had taken every step with intention, but I still felt like I was being swept up in something beyond my control. Giving up control is my greatest fear. I don't like admitting that. I hate even writing that sentence down.

I'd gotten permission to shoot a scene for my film during Wasteland Weekend. I was going to have Firebird and Mohawk A\*\*hole face off in The Cage. Wasteland Weekend had its own version of the Thunderdome so we planned to shoot the Cage fight scene there. Christine was in attendance again this year. She volunteered to operate the camera. Bruce had flown in from the other side of the world to party with us and perform in the Thunderdome scene.

When Bruce saw my car, he teared up. "That's my car," he said. He gave it a hug. It would have been a nice moment, but in the larger context, it was kind of creepy.

Night had fallen, but the Thunderdome was lit up bright as day. A crowd had surrounded the dome, flowed onto it, and spilled over it.

Everyone was everywhere, and everyone was screaming.

Bruce and I took our places in line.

I've always hated fighting, whether for real or for sport. I've always thought that martial arts bouts, boxing, and even football should be outlawed. I can't stand watching that stuff, even on TV. I know the participants sign up for it. But there are some rights that a person can't sign away in a contract. The right to not be assaulted should be one of those rights you can't sign away.

But Thunderdome was downright primal. Atavistic. It spoke to a part of me that I thought had evolved away. I'd never seen anything like it.

In every bout, two people are strung up with bungees and launched at each other. The weapons are bats covered with foam, but they look real enough and they can still leave a mark.

One woman kicked her best friend in the eye. Another woman got flipped upside down, and her face was dragged through the dirt. One guy dislocated his thumb.

The best strategy in the Thunderdome is to fly at your opponent spread eagle and grab them with your legs, leaving your hands free to beat them. If they end up turned around or upside down, it's all the better for you.

Bruce and I were hopped-up on adrenaline. We didn't speak. We growled. We snarled. We hissed. He was seriously starting to scare me, but I could feel my fear making me scarier, too. Maybe he's as scared of me as I am of him. He should be. He was older than me. Maybe he'd break a hip out there. I was gonna send him to the nursing home.

They strung us up on the bungees. A tense moment. Then they launched us into the dome.

I pinned Bruce with my legs and started thwacking him with the bat. He was turned in such a way that he could barely thwack back. I could see the fear in his eyes. I was out for blood.

Suddenly the bungees were gone. The dome was gone. I was in a big box made of chain link fencing. A crowd of spectators surrounded the box. I felt like I'd been shot in the leg, and I could tell I had a broken rib. Something struck me in the arm, hard.

I'd swapped timelines with Firebird. I was at The Gathering. I was in The Cage. Mohawk A\*\*hole was in here with me. And I was losing.

Both of us had baseball bats. There was no padding on these bats.

Mohawk A\*\*hole came at me. There's a time for fighting, and there's a time for flighting. I ran. Not that there was anywhere to go. I lapped the

perimeter as fast as I could. I changed directions. When he cornered me, I jumped over him, or dove under him.

He got me in the shoulder and I dropped my bat. The referee separated us and returned my bat to me. That's good, at least there are some rules.

Then his bat hit me in the face and I was on the ground. A string of bloody saliva dangled from my mouth. I looked up.

Skelli was outside the fence cheering. "Cut his balls off for me! Give them to me! I want his baaallls!" I hoped she was cheering for me and not against me.

She'd made it to The Gathering again. She'd finally found Firebird. He'd finally found her. I couldn't let this be the end. I owed it to them. Firebird and Skelli deserved a second chance. I stood up.

How could I beat a man who had once ripped the steering wheel out of a truck with his face?

What were my strengths? I'm quick. I'm great at running away. Too bad there was nowhere to run.

What were his weaknesses? He sometimes fell asleep while driving. That couldn't help us here.

What else did I know about him? He's indestructible. He wants his car back. He's prone to fits of uncontrollable rage.

Oh, wait. That might work. I'll make him angry and defeat him like a bullfighter. Distract him, anger him, evade him. Wear him out. Wait as long as possible to make my move.

"That's a real great car you used to have," I said.

He roared and swung his bat. I dived out of the way.

"Yeah," I said. "That's one sexy car."

Whoosh. His bat flew by me again. He was gaining strength, but losing accuracy. The less accurate he was, the easier he was to avoid.

"Ooh, so sexy."

The problem was I couldn't think of what else to say. I had to improvise.

"I had sex with your car," I said.

He froze and gave me a weird look. Then he started trembling with rage. He screamed.

He threw his bat down and started furiously chasing me. The referee was trying to give him his bat back.

"I penetrated its tailpipe! I sucked its shift knob! I licked its steering wheel! And you know what? It loved every second of it!"



Finally he tripped over his own feet and fell. I turned around and readied my bat. He turned and looked up at me.

"John?" he said.

"Bruce?"

"Where are we mate?"

Mohawk A\*\*hole and Bruce had traded places too.

"Trust me. Play dead."

I gave him a theatrical glancing blow with the bat. He stopped moving.

The referee counted to ten. Knockout.

The crowd wanted more. "Kill, kill, kill," they chanted.

I whispered to the referee. "Do I have to kill him?"

"You don't have to. But you can, if you want to."

"I don't want to."

"Then drop the bat."

"Oh, ok."

I dropped the bat and threw my hands into the air victoriously. The crowd erupted in applause.

And then I was back in the Thunderdome at Wasteland Weekend. They were taking me out of my harness. Bruce's harness was empty.

Messing with your phone is generally frowned upon at Wasteland, but people make

exceptions. Christine ran up to me, hugged me, and showed me her phone. Our fundraising campaign had hit \$500K.

"I really want to be excited right now," I said, "but I'm worried about Bruce. Where did he go?"

"He ran away," she answered.

I sprinted to my camping spot. My car was gone.

Mohawk A\*\*hole had taken my car and was running free in Tomorrowland. Bruce was stuck in Epoxyclypse.

# **CHAPTER 10**

## **YEAR 37, MONTH 11**

### **NARRATOR: JOHN**

The police never found Mohawk A\*\*hole. Police don't find criminals. They don't really solve crimes like they do on TV. Police officers just hang around and try to pin stuff on everyone they see until they hit their quotas. Firebird is right. Our police aren't any more real than his are.

I tried to get Firebird to make peace with Bruce, but he wouldn't do it. He agreed not to kill him though.

I got another old Trans Am. I found a Martinique Blue '78. I loved it almost as much as I'd loved my '75. But I hadn't forgotten my crowdfunding gimmick. I would have to suffer for my attachments. I would have to destroy my car for the movie.

Firebird and I had cameras. Firebird and I had money. Firebird and I had stories to tell. We'd written our stories down in both timelines. We were going to make our movies in both timelines, too. We could shoot in the same places at the same times. We could trade places to direct the scenes we'd experienced, and play ourselves in

each others' movies. While we were at it, we'd get guided tours of each others' timelines.

We headed to Australia first.

Watching our actors recreate the death of Firebird's family hit me harder than I thought it would. The boys we found to portray us as children did wonderful jobs of it.

I did all the stunts in our car chases. I didn't want to be responsible for someone else getting hurt. The big one was climbing out of the moving Beetle into the Trans Am while it was being towed by a tow truck. It was easy for Firebird because he'd done it for real. I figured, if he'd done it, I could do it. And I did.

Firebird persuaded Mad Skelli to portray herself in his movie. I got to meet her again. She's really something.

Bruce had returned to Australia to continue his work as a tattoo artist, only this time in Epoxyclypse. I found his shop and stopped in.

I explained that I'd been bouncing between timelines for years, but it was a risky thing to do. If your counterpart failed to meet up with you, you'd be stuck. We still had no idea where Mohawk A\*\*hole was in Tomorrowland. We might never know.

"No worries mate," Bruce said. "Life's an adventure."

## **NARRATOR: FIREBIRD**

We got all the footage we needed in Straya and California and Arizona. The only thing left to shoot was that road trip across the USA I'd done a few years back. And I guess John still needed to get that footage of his car getting smashed. My movie was not gonna end that way. I was gonna drive off into the fucking sunset.

The actors and crew were traveling with us but it was Christmas Eve so we gave them a few days off.

John had planned some strange stops and some strange places to swap timelines. He refused to explain.

That's how I found myself in Tomorrowland's version of rural Pennsylvania standing outside a camper door holding a package of Tim Tams.

A woman opened the door. I recognized her even though I hadn't seen her face in decades.

It was my sister. I looked down at the bikkies in my hand. Suddenly they made sense.

"I brought these for you from Straya. From Australia I mean."

She hugged me. "You sound like you have an Australian accent already."

She invited me in. She took one bite of the bikkie and had to spit it out.

"These are disgusting" she said.

We laughed. No one ever made me laugh quite like she did.... Does? Did.

There were three places that looked the same before and after the apocalypse. Wasteland Weekend. Detonation. And New Jersey.

Last time I'd seen this house it was a pile of charred remains.

Dad opened the door. He still had on that self winding dive watch I'd been playing with when he died. I tried to act like everything was normal. I tried to act like I wasn't staring at a ghost. I gave vague answers when he asked about my life.

After we'd caught up I went up to John's room. I opened his closet. His Hot Wheels collection was still there. I found his Trans Am and put it in my pocket.

I went back downstairs. I asked Dad "Do you have an old reel of film in your safe?"

"You know I think I do" he said. "Your mother put it there. I don't think I've watched it since the day it went in. I can't bring myself to look at any of that stuff now. The part of grieving they don't tell you about is the shameful desire to allow yourself to forget. Everyone talks about how they think about the dead person every

single day. No one admits how much they look forward to that first day they don't."

"Could we make an exception and watch the film? Just once."

Dad found the film in his safe and fired up the old projector.

It was me and Mom. I'm a baby in her arms. She's singing. I know that song.

She's singing Close To You by The Carpenters.

The last of the weird stops John had planned for me was the cemetery. It was at the top of a hill. Night had fallen. The snow on the ground had hardened into ice. Christmas lights were hung up all around town but the streets were empty. I was alone and shivering. It had been a long time since I'd seen a white Christmas.

Cemeteries are stupid. Are dead people supposed to take up space forever? Eventually the whole world will be covered in graves. When I die let necrophiliacs fuck me. Let cannibals eat me. Whatever's left just throw it in the nearest rubbish bin.

I found John's mom's headstone. I reached into my pocket and placed John's Hot Wheels car on her grave.

I laid down beside her. I stayed there so long that when I tried to get up my jacket was partially frozen to the ground.

It was time to trade places with John again.

One last goodbye. I closed my eyes and let the snowflakes fall onto my tongue.

I opened my eyes and the Christmas lights had vanished. The trees were gone. John's mom's grave was gone. The other monuments were all knocked over. I was back in Epoxyclypse.

You motherfuckers in Tomorrowland have no idea the glory you hold in your hands. You have no idea. You have it. You waste it. You take it for granted. You don't even know where that glory comes from. You don't care to know. Don't you get it? It's you that has to create that glory. It's you that has to protect that glory. Don't neglect it. Don't throw it away. No one's gonna hand it to you. It has to come from you. What are you gonna do? Right now. Today. What are you gonna do to keep that glory alive?

I returned to my car and got out my keys. My Hot Wheels Trans Am fell out of my pocket and went spinning down the icy road. I'd left John's Hot Wheels on his mom's grave. What was I gonna do with mine? Drop it in the snow where Mom's grave would have been if she'd gotten old enough to die of cancer? I've said my goodbyes.



Fuck it. It's a meaningless trinket. I'll leave it behind on the damn street.

I got in and turned on the accessory switch.

Fucking fuck fuck fuck.

The radio was playing AC/DC's Back In Black.

I'm just messing with you. Really it was Close To You by The Carpenters.

I got out to go after that damned Hot Wheels car.

As soon as I got out of the car another car emerged from the darkness. I jumped out of the way as it smashed into my Trans Am. My Stellar Blue 1975 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. The car that had taken me on thousands of miles of adventures. The car that had survived the goddamn apocalypse. They were never gonna make another Trans Am.

Now my badass car was just a heap of twisted metal.

A woman got out of the other car and pointed a gun at me. It had been over a year but I recognized her. She'd pointed a gun at me before. I knew that this time she'd make damn sure it was loaded.

"If I were in your shoes I'd walk just as you do" I said.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"If I were you I'd do just as you are doing."

"I'm going to kill you. You're not scared?"

"I like being alive. But I'm not attached to it."

"Good cuz I'm about to blow the ghost right out of your skull."

"Attachment leads to suffering." I said. "That's what my mother used to say. Come on. Walk with me."

"Ok" she said. "But I'm still going to shoot you."

"If at any point in our conversation you need to shoot me then go ahead."

The principle of Chekhov's Gun says that if you put a gun in a story it has to go off at some point. Why would I have mentioned guns if no one shoots any of them? Not a single gun has been fired in this whole damn narrative and we're getting near the end. If this story is fictional then this gun pretty much has to go off. If it's nonfictional then maybe I still have a chance.

She followed me as I headed down the hill to pick up my Hot Wheels.

"Where's the kid?" I asked.

"I found a sitter" she replied.

I found my Hot Wheels beside an old iron bench. I picked it up off the icy ground and sat down. She sat down beside me keeping the gun pointed at my chest.

"What's with the toy car?" she asked.

"It was in my mother's hand when she was blown to bits. It fell out of my pocket. I was just gonna leave it here but...."

"You were just gonna leave it on the ground?"

I held up the car and turned it around in my hand. "A hunk of die cast metal won't bring her back."

"Sure it will. Every time you look at it."

She showed me a necklace she was wearing. It was made of paperclips connected end to end with a tiny lock for a charm.

"Before the race my husband gave me this. He said if anything went wrong I had to promise not to forget him. He couldn't stop saying it. He made me promise. Not to forget him. He still makes me promise. Every night in my dreams."

"When I see Mom in my dreams it's a dead giveaway. I instantly know I'm dreaming cuz I know she's dead. But in that moment I can tell her everything I want to tell her."

"What do you want to tell her?"

"That I'm happy. Mom thought I was perfect and she wanted nothing more than for me to be happy. She was wrong but she got what she wanted."

"I think there's something she would have wanted to say to you too. I don't think she

finished. Attachment leads to suffering. Yes. But that doesn't mean you should never get attached. Because you'll also suffer for the attachments you fail to make. It means you have to choose your attachments wisely. When you can choose them."

"Can I choose to have no attachments?"

"No."

"Then what have I been doing my whole life?"

"Denying you have them."

Maybe now I could tell this story in the voice of that little boy whose family got blown to bits.

I noticed a tiny flicker of light in the sky. It was a passenger jet at cruising altitude. Fuck yeah. Somecunt finally got one of them jet planes flying again.

The best time to be alive is tomorrow. The second best time is today. I'd rather be alive at the best time but I can settle for second best.

# CHAPTER 11

## YEAR 38, MONTH 08

### NARRATOR: JOHN

The movie didn't do well in the US. But Australia went bonkers for it. That might explain how she found me.

I got an email from a woman in South Australia.

"I was knocked senseless, and moved to tears, when I watched your film. When Firebird and Mad Skelli drive back to O'Sydney, they have a conversation. Hearing that conversation was the most surreal moment of my life.

"Mad Skelli shares a very personal detail of her life. That detail is something which is also true of my life. It's so personal and painful that I don't even like to put it down in words.

"I realize it's possible that you found me on the internet and decided to plagiarize my life. But I couldn't get it out of my head that maybe we'd met in another world and you were still out there waiting for me.

"My name is Kelli Shackelford. Kelli S. I think I'm Mad Skelli."

She included a photo. Holy wow yes. It was her.

Kelli came to the states to attend Wasteland Weekend that year.

I bartered for three ice creams and the two of us went up to the memorial.

The first time I'd visited the memorial I'd asked myself, why do wastelanders celebrate death and destruction?

We don't. We celebrate the acceptance of death, and the empowerment that it brings. I used to be attached to my life. Being attached to my life made me constantly fear its loss. The fear of losing everything used to make me back out, when I should have gone all in. Giving up my attachment to life is what allowed me to live.

Kelli took out a pencil and wrote on the memorial.

NIKKI DEARNE SHACKLEFORD  
BELOVED TWIN OF MAD SKELLI

I took the pencil from her and wrote my own message.

DEANNA BINNS  
ATTACHMENT LEADS TO SUFFERING

We turned to face the campsites in the distance.

On a count of three we screamed, "Fuck you!"

A thousand tiny people heard us. A thousand tiny voices shouted back.

"Fuck you!"

THE END

