

Infinity

*The grave is but a covered bridge leading from light to light,
through a brief darkness.*

-- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

On the last day, the sun woke Dale Ramsey up with a harsh glare slanted between the ill-fitting curtains into his eyes.

The motel was a bad choice. They made good time across Virginia, but by the time they reached Nashville they were at least half a day behind schedule. Ariane planned for them to stay at a supposedly haunted bed-and-breakfast in Memphis, but there was no way they could have made it.

Still, they should have picked one of the chain hotels by the interstate. The Bay Inn bed was a granite slab, the pillows felt like they were stuffed with dead leaves and there was an uncomfortable scurrying sound behind the wall that he fervently hoped Ariane didn't notice.

The whole crazy trip had been Ariane's idea, and their friends said they were nuts – who drives across the country in December? But Dale was happy to postpone their arrival in California as long as possible. They escaped from Baltimore Memorial Hospital just in time to skip the Christmas crazy, and Dale was in no rush to reach Los Angeles and submit to the Christmas Inquisition.

Stretching, Dale rolled over and watched Ariane sleeping in the thin shaft of sunlight falling over her copper hair.

Ariane Bennett. Doctor Bennett, to those who worked the emergency room with her, but Ariane to practically everyone else. Quirky, with a sense of humor that felled him every time. It was the first thing he noticed about her, called in to draw blood

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for the ninetieth time on a Valentine's-Day night shift that never seemed to end. The patient was a kid who had accidentally swallowed his grandmother's medication instead of his own attention-deficit meds. A hysterical mother hovering around and a kid on the verge of tears, and Dale was supposed to make him feel better by jabbing him with needles.

"Aha, the vampire is here!" Ariane cracked, and the kid raised an eyebrow at her. "Don't worry, his bark is worse than his bite."

The kid giggled at the ancient joke, and Ariane kept up with groan-inducing vampire puns while Dale drew the blood. He'd seen her before, of course – the copper hair that seemed to glow in sunlight made her noticeable to any heterosexual man with a pulse.

"Ve vant to suck your bluid," Dale said in the world's worst Transylvanian accent, and the kid cracked up. Even the hysterical mother relaxed a bit, and Ariane gave Dale a grateful smile that rocked him to his shoes.

At his break, Ariane asked him to join her for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. He'd been gone on her before they threw the Styrofoam cups in the trash can, and his feet didn't touch the floor for the rest of his shift. In a way, they still hadn't.

Doctors don't date the bedpan jockeys. It might not be one of the Ten Commandments, but Dale was sure it was carved in stone somewhere. The gossips at the hospital gave them six weeks. It had been just over nine months. There was an unreality to it all, an surreal exhilaration that somehow the fairytales were right, that you could find the other half of yourself in the most unexpected place. If it was a fall through the rabbit hole, Dale was happy to fall.

Even if that meant following her to every crazy-ass "haunted" spot in the deep south. They could've shaved a day off their cross-country drive by taking the I-80 route across the Midwest, but Ariane insisted on the southern route so she could check out this haunted house or that fabled cemetery. They'd stayed in two supposedly haunted hotels and visited four haunted locales, and Dale hadn't seen anything scarier than the smile of yesterday's

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waitress. The woman had maybe three teeth left standing, and one of them was green.

Still, no rush. Plenty of time on their vacation. Plenty of time to linger in a variety of hotel beds with Ariane. Plenty of time to put off the Christmas event: meeting the other Doctor Bennett. James Bennett the Third, Ariane's father, whom she described lovingly as "overprotective and grouchy."

Plenty of time to screw up his courage.

Dale smoothed a hand over Ariane's bare back, tenderly moving the copper curls from her shoulder.

"Hey you," she said without opening her eyes.

"She's awake," Dale said, leaning over to kiss her between the shoulder blades.

She shivered and reached out to him. "Not quite. I think you have to wake me up a bit more."

"A challenge," Dale declared, sliding his hand underneath the sheet.

She turned over then, reaching for him. He did not resist in the slightest.

Ariane was on her hands and knees looking under the bed when Dale stepped out of the bathroom after his shower. She was wearing only a towel, her hair still damp from her own shower. Just looking at her like that could get his motor turning over again, but she seemed to be searching for something. "Lose anything?" he asked.

"My necklace," she said, her tone rather sharp – not at him, but with a touch more emotion than he expected. "I took it off last night and put it on the bedside table. Did you see where it went?"

Dale shook his head, toweling off fast and joining her on the floor. "Did it fall behind?"

"No," Ariane said, and struck the table hard with the flat of her hand in frustration.

He caught her hand and held it still. "Hey. It's okay."

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“No, it’s not.” She blew out her breath in frustration. “They match.”

Ariane reached out and touched the neckband Dale had just slipped back on, a leather strip with a silver symbol that rested below his throat. She called it a Lemniscate; he called it a sideways 8. Whatever you called it, it meant the same thing: infinity. Trust Ariane to find a mathematical symbol with a romantic flair.

The craftsman who made them had a booth at a charming little crafts fair in the park a few months after Dale had finally screwed up his courage to turn the daily coffee break into an after-hours date. In fact, it was the morning after their first night together, still flushed with the excitement and newness of each other, holding hands and laughing at the sky. He wanted to buy a Lemniscate for her, and she wanted to buy one for him, so they each bought one and exchanged them under a tree.

He fervently hoped hers wasn’t lost. He never knew where he’d find another one. He’d wound his on a leather band, but she found a spiderweb-thin silver chain that rested hers just below the hollow of her throat. She never looked more beautiful than when the moonlight glinted on it.

Dale crouched lower, and for a wonder he caught a glimpse of metal beneath the cheap bedside table. “Aha!” he declared, shifting it aside and nearly knocking the lamp over. Ariane deftly caught it and prevented the concussion.

Dale snagged the necklace and pulled it free, letting the table return to its original spot on the faded carpet. “Got it.”

Ariane visibly relaxed. “Thank you, love.”

Dale slid the chain around her neck and reclasped it at the nape. He touched it gently. “Forever.”

She reached out and touched his Lemniscate. “Forever,” she repeated.

Then he kissed the line of her shoulder, making her shiver. “Quit that,” she said in an absolutely unconvincing manner. “Don’t start something you can’t finish, buster.”

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“Oh, I can finish, baby,” Dale said in an exaggerated swagger, turning her around and kissing her. Her arms slid around his chest and he held her close.

Ariane broke the kiss and leaned against his chest. “We keep delaying this way and we’ll never make it to California.”

“Gee darn,” he said. At her look, he held up his hands. “Kidding! Kidding.”

“It’s not beyond the realm of possibility that he’ll like you,” Ariane said. “It’s just since my mother died...”

“I get it,” Dale said. “It’s all right. I’ve got my armor on.”

Ariane smiled with a devilish glint in her eye. “I could always tell him how many body-shattering orgasms you give me. That will surely endear you to him.”

Dale buried his face in his hands. “I’m doomed.”

She glanced at the clock radio. “Not yet, but we’d better get rolling. Remember the covered bridge between Jackson and Memphis?”

“Oh come on,” Dale said. “A haunted bridge? Did Ichabod Crane gallop across it?”

Ariane swatted him playfully on the ass. “Extra points for literary reference, minus several dozen for being a pain.”

“Yes mistress,” he said, grinning at her. “Just tell me it’s right off the interstate this time.”

Ariane glanced at her travel book, a worn leather journal she had compiled in her spare time for many years. It was an exhaustive history of places she wanted to see with a space for her impressions of each, all of them haunted or possessed or otherwise part of the macabre. It was her hobby, sometimes her obsession, and this cross-country ghost trip in the snow had been an idle dream of hers for years. For the most part, Dale was happy just to be with her, but he protested anyway because it was fun to watch her growl at him.

She glanced up from the map. “About twenty-five minutes from the highway, tops. You’ll love it.”

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Dale loved it for the first hour. Then he wondered how much further his little Nissan could ramble down what west Tennessee laughingly called a “road.”

The winding country lane had never seen concrete or snowplow, and followed some line or plan known only to God and Nathan Bedford Forrest. It might once have been lined with gravel, but now it was barely more than a cow path, and he was quite sure they had left actual civilization fifteen miles back.

“Ariane,” he said.

She frowned at the map tucked into her journal. “We’re supposed to turn right at the T-intersection with County Road 12, any moment now.”

“Any moment now,” Dale grumbled. “I’m thinking we might have to give up on the Scooby Doo Bridge pretty soon, love. We’re already way behind schedule and it’s at least an hour back to the highway, assuming we can find our way back and that it doesn’t start to snow.”

“Not an hour, not yet?” She looked at the dashboard clock. “Oh.”

Dale patted her leg – half teasing caress, half an excuse to cop a quick feel. “Yeah, so what say we give it another ten minutes and –“

“There!” Ariane interrupted, pointing ahead.

Sure enough, the so-called road dead-ended at a cornfield half-covered in thin layers of snow, studded with dry, crispy stalks weighted with ice. It was uncommonly cold for Tennessee, even in December, and the remnants of the early snowfall persisted across the dour countryside.

“Turn right,” Ariane said.

Dale slowed even further and turned right, trying to remember a landmark so he could find their way back. Other than “turn right at the cornfield,” he was stuck. Well, if worst came to worst, he could follow Ronin’s tire tracks in the snow – surely no other cars would come this way until spring.

“Now go one mile and turn left near the windmill,” Ariane said, her nose buried in the journal again. “We’re almost there.”

“Finally,” Dale griped.

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Ariane smacked him lightly on the thigh. “Be nice and maybe I’ll be nice to you later.”

Dale made a low growly sound in his throat, and she laughed lightly. She leaned against his arm, her head resting against him. He felt her hand lightly touch the Lemniscate on his chest.

“Forever,” she said.

He slipped his hand up and touched the Lemniscate at her throat. “Forever,” he replied.

For the first time in his life, he meant it. Forever. Ariane didn’t know it, but there was a small box hidden in his suitcase, zipped into the lining where she’d never find it until it was time. He’d hawked his old guitar for it, one of the last remnants of his old life.

That kid was long gone, the greasy-haired, sullen kid more interested in scoring grass from the shop teacher behind the school at lunch than the honors English class his teacher pushed him into taking. A stoner who dorked around with his guitar in the garage while his parents shouted at each other, and played it louder and more out of tune the more they shouted. A kid who got busted for possession in his junior year by a cop who laughed while he cuffed him. His folks wouldn’t even come bail him out – his father had called him a “fucking whiner” and hung up on Dale’s one phone call.

It was the English teacher who came for him a day later, when someone told him why Dale missed school. Mr. Mack was the one who posted a bail bond that he couldn’t possibly afford and drove him home. And before Mr. Mack would let him out of the car, he turned off the radio and told Dale that he had one chance to be better than his parents, better than North Avenue, better than anyone ever thought he could be. It wasn’t money or family that made a man great, it was the stuff between his ears, and Dale had that in spades.

Mr. Mack had testified on his behalf, and Dale escaped with only a misdemeanor and community service. He graduated with two honors credits and got a scholarship to the local community college, swearing never to return to the old neighborhood again.

His father didn’t even come to his graduation.

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It wasn't a hard choice to pawn the guitar for the modest diamond ring. If Ariane didn't like the ring, they could exchange it for a better one. Assuming she said yes. Assuming he could get the courage to ask her. Assuming the moment came. He wanted to do it before they got to California, though he didn't know how the famously cranky Dr. Bennett would take it. Not just a boyfriend; a fiancé. Not losing a daughter; gaining a son.

Yeah, that was sure to go over well.

"Here, Dale." Ariane pointed at a slightly weather-beaten windmill and he turned too fast, the car skidding a bit in the dust. "Careful, don't kill us."

"Helpful," he snarked, straightening out. "Because I was really planning on killing us."

"Smartass." Ariane flipped through her journal again as they rumbled past the windmill. "The bridge is a quarter mile down this road."

"Road." Dale snorted as the car jostled. "Goats couldn't get down this thing."

Ariane grabbed at the door handle, trying to steady herself. "Your car must be a goat, then."

"Don't mock Ronin, he's sensitive," Dale said, patting the wheel.

She shook her head and spoke to the roof as if addressing God. "He names his car."

"Shhh." Dale stroked the steering wheel. "She doesn't mean it, Ronin."

Ariane grinned. "Do you two want to be alone?"

Ahead, Dale saw a large, snow-covered rock at least as tall as Ronin's grille. He rolled to a stop in front of it, but his eyes were drawn above it to the bridge.

It was dark wood with an odd entrance, not a curved arch but half a hexagon below a sharply angled roof. Icicles hung off it like jagged teeth, perilously sharp. It stretched across a long-dry riverbed overgrown with some kudzu-like vine so green it was practically fluorescent, gleaming in patches where the snow had melted. The vines entwined around each other and grew up the sides of the bridge, still flourishing in the bitter cold.

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The bridge itself showed more than a little age. The wood was splintered, but the marks were old and weathered. The roof seemed half-rotted with no attempts made at repair.

The boulder prevented going any further by car. Even if he could have coaxed Ronin around it between the trees, a long board was nailed across the dark entrance to the covered bridge.

“Don’t think we’re trip-trapping across,” Dale said.

Ariane smiled at the bridge, that light in her eyes that said she had gone somewhere else. It really lit her up to find these places, and while Dale didn’t quite understand it, he loved to watch her. “It’s so *cool*,” she murmured, and grabbed her camera from the floor of the front seat before getting out of the car. Dale got out and followed her, his breath pluming into steam in the cold air.

As soon as he was out of the car, his gut clenched and his skin crawled. It was something in the air, something that felt wrong. There was the utter silence – even in December, it felt like they should be hearing something. An animal’s footsteps, the creak of a branch weighted down with ice, anything.

For another, there was no graffiti on the boulder, the board or the bridge itself – at least, as far as he could tell with the ice and snow covering everything. The bridge was long enough that he couldn’t quite see through the thick shadows to the other side. But there should be graffiti – surely the local kids would come out here on a dare, or to make out.

Ariane was taking pictures, stepping from side to side to get all the angles. “Over a century and it’s still standing! Isn’t that amazing? It’s beautiful!”

Beautiful was not a word Dale would have chosen. But Ariane wasn’t really asking his opinion. “What’s the story? There’s always a story.”

Ariane nodded, taking more pictures. “Her name was Emily. There are several versions – the most popular is that she and her lover were to run away together, and agreed to meet on the bridge. But he never showed up, and in despair, she hung herself from the rafters.”

“Fun,” Dale said, approaching the bridge with her. He wished he could see through to the sunlight on the other side.

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“Another story is that she was left at the altar, and fled the church in her wedding dress on a horse,” Ariane continued, still futzing with her camera. “She took the turn too hard and fell off as she approached the bridge, breaking her neck.”

Dale glanced back at the sharp curve that they’d nearly missed. “I believe that one.”

Ariane grinned. “I doubt a horse would’ve had as much problem as Ronin.”

Dale pointed at her. “Keep dissing Ronin and you’re gonna walk to California.”

Ariane slid an arm around his waist. “I quiver in fear.”

He blew a raspberry at her. “Are we done, love?”

She shook her head. “Let’s go on the bridge.”

Dale’s stomach did a queasy forward roll. “Let’s not and say we did.”

Ariane looked at the bridge. “It doesn’t look that bad. We can duck under that board easy. I want to get some pictures of the inside.”

Dale pointed at the board. “This is exactly how people end up in the Darwin awards. They ignore the Keep Out warning signs, they step around the perfectly safe barriers, and end up with their stupid selves broken to pieces under the collapsed old bridge.”

Ariane made a bawk-bawk-bawk sound as she moved toward the bridge.

“Did you just cluck at me? Fine, I’m a chicken, but we’re not going on the bridge.” Dale trailed after her, but she wasn’t stopping. “Ariane!”

His voice was harsher than he intended, and she turned about hard. “Excuse me?”

Dale caught up to her fast. “It’s probably all rotted, or eaten by termites, or weakened by the snow. I don’t like the idea of falling through the floor into all that crap down there and needing search and rescue to haul us out before we freeze to death.”

“Fine, I’ll go by myself,” Ariane said.

Dale blew out his breath in frustration. “Can’t you just take the pictures from here, on solid ground?”

“No.” Ariane started to duck under the board.

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Dale grabbed her arm and pulled her back. She yanked her arm away from him in actual anger. “Stop manhandling me!”

Dale’s stomach rolled again. “Please, stop and listen. This could actually be dangerous. You can get anything you need from here.”

“No, I can’t.” She crossed her arms defensively across her chest. “So let me go, because I’m going to get this picture.”

Now Dale was getting pissed. “What the hell, Ariane? I mean, I don’t mind tramping all over the damn countryside to see this stuff, but this is getting –“

“What?” she challenged. “Crazy? Obsessed? I’ve heard it all before, stop trying to sound like my father!”

“Maybe he’s right about this!” Dale snapped. “It’s fine to have a hobby, but this is beyond a healthy fascination –“

“Spare me!” Ariane snapped. “I want to walk onto the bridge, not jump off a goddamn cliff!”

Dale paused to look at her, to let the tempers go back down a notch. Forget the bridge – this conversation was full of half-rotted boards and traps.

“Ariane, what do you think you’re going to see in there?” Dale asked softly.

She gazed down the bridge, peering into its shadows as he had. Her breath plumed into cold mist and vanished in the chill. “I don’t know,” she said, just as quietly.

Dale touched her hair gently. “She’s not there, Ariane.”

She looked back at him. “Who, Emily?”

Dale shook his head. “Your mother.”

Ariane jerked away then, the late-afternoon sunlight glinting copper highlights in her hair. She opened her mouth to speak, and whatever it was would probably have been harsh, from the look on her face. But then she turned away again – and ducked under the board.

“Shit,” Dale muttered, and followed her.

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It wasn't as bad as he thought. In fact, the bridge was strangely in good shape.

The boards felt firm under their feet, earth-dark and coated with a light film of dust. The beams overhead were old but unmarked, lacking the splintering or graffiti that comes with age. The shadows grew darker as they walked slowly away from the entrance, with only the barest hint of light on the other side. It didn't seem to make sense that it would be that dark inside, or that it would seem so long when the creek bed it spanned was so narrow. But that was the least of his worries.

Ariane took each step carefully, testing the wood planks before entrusting them with her weight. Her hands clenched the camera, and he realized she was as nervous as he was.

Nervous. That didn't quite cover it. Dale felt as though invisible ants crawled under his coat sleeves, as though his spine were suddenly a column of ice. The air felt too cold, the shadows too dark, and his stomach roiled as though he had eaten something rotten. The air tasted wrong, the smell of age and rot even though the boards seemed perfectly whole.

Too whole. There should be graffiti. The taggers found every piece of wood or metal that stood still on North Avenue in Baltimore, so how could the local kids have missed this giant fucking bridge, even if it was in the middle of nowhere?

"Here." Ariane stood in the center of the bridge. It was so dark he could barely see her face, swallowed by shadows. "This is where she did it."

Dale didn't ask how she knew. He could feel it too, a pocket of coldness that gripped around his heart. He looked up at the beams, half-expecting to see Emily's thin body twisting in a nonexistent breeze. There was nothing but the dim outline of wooden beams laid in place before the Titanic sank, and that overwhelming sense of being somewhere they shouldn't.

Ariane raised her camera.

"Ariane," he began, and she looked at him. The shadows fell over her face, and she was only an outline to him. He shook his head. "Nothing."

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Ariane focused the lens on the crossbeams above them and pressed the shutter.

The instant the flash exposed the upper beams, Dale felt an icy wind rush through him, a sudden rash of goose bumps on his arms. A chill ran down his spine under his jacket, clenching through his entire torso.

“Cold,” he said, and suddenly it intensified, December cold sinking through his jacket and into his body.

Ariane took another picture, nearly blinding him with its too-bright flash. In the moments after the flash faded, his eyes refused to contract and he saw only darkness, dancing kaleidoscope patterns of red and purple like a snarling face, only in his eyes.

He rubbed his eyes. “Can we go?”

Ariane stalked past him without a word. Dale followed her, stumbling a little on the perfectly smooth boards.

They got in the car without a word. She simply buckled her seat belt and waited. Dale back through that sharp curve and skidded, nearly binding them up against a tree. Ronin’s tires spun a little, then caught and lumbered them back on the so-called road.

Dale watched for the windmill, but when one minute turned into five, and then ten, he started to wonder if he’d made a wrong turn.

The snowy cornfields didn’t look familiar. In fact, nothing looked familiar. The windmill was nowhere to be seen, and the goat path meandered back and forth when it had been fairly straight before.

Minutes passed and Dale was starting to sweat. The miles began to rack up, and still no windmill, no T-intersection, nothing but a side trip to Bumfuck, Egypt.

Actually, at this point he’d settle for Bumfuck, because surely there would be at least one person there.

Ronin rumbled along the gravel pathways – deer trails with pretensions, really. Dale would bet money that he’d followed their route precisely, but somewhere he must have made a wrong turn. He’d tried the number for the auto club at least four times,

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but of course there was no signal in this particular corner of nowhere.

And there was no one to ask. No one at all.

On the way to the bridge they had passed at least a dozen farmhouses, those big rumbling structures with overlarge windows and giant wraparound porches standing next to massive aluminum-siding boxes that passed for modern barns. There was the occasional silo, a barn or three, and a handful of cows standing motionless in shin-high grass.

But they really must have taken a wrong turn, because the only houses they saw now were abandoned and had been for decades.

Gritty-gray wooden frames with fallen roofs and long-shattered windows staring blind eyes at overgrown yards no one had tended since before the motion pictures began to talk. Fences lay broken and rotted, snowdrifts covered the ground between dead cornstalks, barns were thin wooden skeletons waiting for that last storm to knock them into so much kindling.

Up ahead, Dale saw the form of a man by the side of the road, arm out as if hitching.

“Thank God,” Dale muttered. Ariane gazed out the window, lost in her own thoughts. He meant thank God that there was someone to ask directions, even if the guy was hitching and facing away from them. He wore a big hat and a threadbare jacket, and he might be local. The thought surfaced briefly in Dale’s mind that the guy would probably want a ride for giving directions, but was that a bright idea?

Hell, they were so far from civilization they were probably the guy’s only hope. It wouldn’t kill him to carry the guy back to the interstate. Assuming he could find the fucking interstate.

Dale slowed down even further, rolling up beside the guy before stopping and pressing the “down” button on his power window. “Hey, man, can you help me out? We’re trying to ...” Dale’s voice trailed off.

The man did not move.

Dale rolled the car up a bit and blinked.

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It wasn't a man. The dull painted face of a scarecrow stared at Dale, harsh black X's marked over what should have been eyes under the brooding hat. A red slash was its mouth, neither smiling nor frowning. One arm extended loosely to its right, supported by a thin wooden rod, Dale now saw. The other dangled uselessly by its side, threads of straw escaping from the empty jacket sleeve.

"Shit, do I feel stupid," Dale said, trying to make a joke of it. Ariane didn't respond.

Christ, he didn't know how to fix this. It had been dumb to bring up her mother – it was the one subject on which Ariane was absolutely intractable, refusing to discuss circumstances or emotions. He hoped that by telling her about his drug conviction she would come to trust him as much, open up about what had to be the worst experience of her childhood. But she had said nothing, just the simple fact that her mother had died when she was ten.

Dale kept rolling past the creepy scarecrow, wondering who thought it was a brilliant plan to put a scarecrow by the side of the road, on the wrong side of the fence where it could be sideswiped by every joyriding kid –

But there were no joyriding kids. No one for miles.

Dale pushed Ronin further down the road, though the dry tendrils of the cornstalks brushed against the windows. Pretty soon he was going to run completely out of road, and...

There it was. The end of the road, and a cross road with an actual honest-to-God *sign* that had words painted on it.

"Hallelujah," Dale muttered. It was a hand-painted wooden signpost, but at this point he would settle for any clue. And any word from Ariane.

Her hand stole out and touched his.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

Dale stopped the car immediately and turned to her. "No, I'm sorry," he said honestly. "I overreacted. You were right, it was perfectly safe."

She turned to him, and for the first time he saw the awful sadness in her eyes. He wanted to erase it, make it go away, fight

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it for her – and he would, if it were something tangible he could fight.

“I mean, I’m sorry for all of it,” she said softly. “For dragging you around to all these stupid tourist traps, for chasing my –“

“Hush,” Dale said, and touched the side of her face.

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. “I will not hush.”

“That I know,” he said, and kissed her gently. “I love you, Ariane. I’ll follow you through every snowy cornfield in Tennessee if that’s what you want.”

She laughed a little and kissed him back. “Hell no. Let’s get the fuck out of Dodge and haul ass to Memphis. I want to get to a hotel, tear all your clothes off and teach you the many names of God.”

“Yes ma’am,” Dale said, and got the car rolling again. That awful chill had finally faded between them, and for a second it seemed like everything was going to be all right.

He pulled up to the signpost at the cross street and stopped again.

“Oh my God,” Ariane said in a thin, strangled voice.

The signpost was ridiculously tall, at least nine feet. It towered over the cornstalks, weather-beaten and splintered, painted white with two arrow-shaped signs pointing to either side. The painted words were faded, as though they had been there for decades, but were still perfectly legible.

The one pointing left said *Ariane*.

The one pointing right said *Dale*.

Ariane looked wildly around, her fists clenched in her lap. “It’s a joke. Someone’s playing a joke on us.”

“It ain’t funny.” A bit of south Baltimore crept into Dale’s voice. “Two roads diverged in a wood –“

“And I said get the fuck outta here,” Ariane finished.

“Agreed.” Dale pulled into a three-point turn, reversing to go back the way they came. His heart pounded in his chest as they rolled past the creepy-ass sign. Could it be some horrid coincidence? No, Ariane was right – it was some stupid joke on the idiot tourists from the city by the good ol’ boys of west Tennessee. Hopefully not of the *Deliverance* variety.

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“Wait,” Ariane said, and he slowed to idling speed. “Wasn’t this where the scarecrow was?”

Dale looked behind and in front of him, his head whipsawing back and forth. “It should be. It was only a minute or two from him to the sign.”

Ariane wrapped her arms around herself. “They took it away. They took it away and now they’re watching us.”

That chill feeling was back, like ice ants crawling on Dale’s skin. It couldn’t be later than mid-afternoon, but it felt much later – dinnertime, even.

Dale punched it, forcing Ronin faster down the cowpath. The little car rambled along, jouncing up and down a bit in the ruts, dry cornstalks whipping against its sides.

“There!” Ariane said, pointing to the left. “There, a highway!”

It wasn’t exactly a highway, but it was actual pavement, a real road paralleling Dale’s rutted cow path on the other side of a strip of snow-covered ground, dead grass jutting up through the snow cover. They rolled along for a minute or two, but there was no intersection, no way to get over to it. He looked up ahead and saw the paved road curving away from them to the left.

“Shit!” Dale looked over at Ariane. “Hold on.”

He yanked the wheel hard to the left and gunned the motor. Ronin bounced harder than ever, crossing the snowy ribbon of ground between the roads with difficulty. As he reached the pavement, the rear wheels skidded in the snow and Ronin spun. Ariane held on to the oh-shit handle over her head and Dale floored it.

Ronin’s front wheels caught on the pavement, and the front-wheel drive pulled the rest of the car out of the snow.

“Yeah!” Ariane cheered. She flashed a dazzling grin at Dale as he straightened them out on the pavement.

“Onward to civilization, hotel and debauchery!” he declared. He really had no idea where this road led, but pavement meant civilization, and sooner or later they had to encounter human beings with the ability to give directions.

Elizabeth Donald

Beside him, Ariane visibly relaxed. She stretched those lovely long legs out in front of her. "I wonder how far we are from the interstate now."

"I wouldn't even want to guess," Dale said. "We're lost, but we're making good time."

She laughed, and he felt the last of that awful tension between them dissipate. He thought again of that little box in his duffel.

Lights flashed behind them, red and blue.

"Oh, you gotta be fucking kidding me," Dale muttered, glancing in the rearview mirror. Sure enough, there was a state trooper's car behind him, running the lights. His relief at seeing another living person warred with the hot anger that rose in his chest. "Shit. I'm not even fuckin' speeding!"

"Maybe he saw our death-defying leap over the grass," Ariane suggested.

"Sure," Dale said, and the old bitterness rose in his throat like bile. "Smokey there sees a car with out-of-state tags and he's rubbin' his fat hands together. Once Smokey got his hands on your balls, he squeezes 'em tight. Fuck, we're the best thing to happen to him since he stopped having sex with his sister."

Ariane laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Dale."

He took a deep breath. "Sorry."

"Be nice and maybe he'll give us directions back to the interstate," Ariane pointed out.

"Right after the big fat ticket," Dale grumbled.

Smokey got out of his cruiser and ambled up beside the car. Dale rolled down the window obediently, keeping his hands in full view.

"Sir, that was quite a stunt you pulled back there," the trooper said placidly. His craggy, middle-aged features were hidden beneath the traditional big hat and mirror-like sunglasses.

"I couldn't find another way onto the road –" Dale began, but Ariane leaned across him.

"We're so hopelessly lost, officer," she said in a sweet, helpless voice totally unlike her. Dale did not miss the way her T-shirt fell away from her chest in her open jacket, revealing a splendid view of her breasts barely contained in a white lace bra.

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The trooper was getting a spectacular eyeful. “Could you give us some directions back to the interstate? We’re not from here and it’s so confusing on these back roads.”

The trooper actually stuttered a second, and Dale held back a bray of self-destructive laughter with a monumental effort. “Well now, you’re generally in the right direction, but once you hit Route 89 you better head right if you’re trying to get to I-40.”

Dale memorized every word as carefully as the trooper was no doubt memorizing Ariane’s generous cleavage. Ol’ Smokey pulled out a pad that clearly read “warning notice” at the top, and Dale had never loved Ariane more than he did at that moment.

“Now, y’all try to stay on the roads from now –” Smokey began, but his voice suddenly trailed off and he staggered back a step as if struck.

“Sir?” Dale asked. Ariane recoiled in surprise.

The trooper’s mouth sagged. A crimson stain blossomed in the middle of his chest, and Dale saw a giant rip appear in his uniform. Smokey staggered back another step and collapsed on the pavement, his hands involuntarily clutching at his chest. He struck the ground and his hat popped off his head, revealing gray-black hair thinning at the top.

Dale shoved his door open and stepped out onto the pavement.

The moment his feet hit the ground, there was a sudden weight in his left hand.

Dale looked down and saw the gun.

It lay in his palm as though it had always been there and always would. A blued-steel Smith & Wesson, smooth and deadly. At least a .357, possibly a .44.

Ariane scrambled out of the car on her side and ran around the car. “Oh my God,” she said, kneeling beside the trooper. “Dale, get my kit!”

Ariane’s kit was buried deep beneath two suitcases, extra blankets and a box of Christmas presents. Numb, Dale dug the neckerchief out of his back pocket and handed it to Ariane before turning to the car.

Elizabeth Donald

Ariane deftly ripped the shirt down the center, exposing the unmistakable gunshot wound in the center of Smokey's chest. Ariane folded the neckerchief into a thick square and pressed it against that awful, bloody hole, trying to make a seal with her hands.

"Dale, call 911," she said. She was calm, hadn't even looked at him.

"No signal," Dale reminded her, his voice thin as though speaking from a great distance. He was supposed to be getting the kit. But the terrible cold weight of the gun in his hand seemed to have rooted him to the spot. He watched Ariane press harder against the wound.

The sunglasses fell off Smokey's face, and Dale felt sick. Smokey was maybe in his late fifties, with craggy lines around his eyes and mouth that spoke of a man who smiled a lot. Now his face was gray-pale as he gasped under Ariane's hands, and incredibly a tear escaped one blue eye to travel over the wrinkles.

Those eyes turned to Dale, blue as the sky right before dawn, as blue as his father's eyes. *Why?* Smokey mouthed, and it seemed Dale heard his father again: *Why you gotta go to that big-shit school? Think you're better than the Row? Better than me? Huh?*

But that stupid loathing in his father's eyes was utterly absent in Smokey's face. Pain, disbelief, even a bit of fear – no, a lot of fear, utter terror in fact, as his blood flowed over Ariane's hands onto the pavement of this shitsplat little road in the middle of Nowhere, Tennessee.

"Dale!" Ariane snapped, and he realized she'd spoken several times. "Use his radio!"

Automatically Dale turned to the cruiser – his brain seemed to be on autopilot. He half-ran toward it, then stopped still in the center of the road.

The tiny red light of the dashboard camera winked at him from behind the windshield.

Dale stared down at the gun again.
I didn't do it. I swear I didn't do it.

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“Dale.” Ariane’s voice came from behind him, flat and lifeless. “Never mind.”

He turned around, those invisible ants crawling all over his body again.

She still knelt in the road beside the trooper, but her hands were by her sides. The blood had stopped flowing. “He’s dead.”

Dale took a step toward her as she stared at Smokey. Ariane never took it well, losing a patient, but at least at the hospital she was in doctor mode, she was prepared. She wasn’t supposed to be Doctor Bennett out here, just Ariane.

“Better call it in,” she said quietly, getting to her feet. Then she looked at him, and her eyes widened.

Dale stared at the gun. He seemed helpless to do anything but stare at it.

“Oh my God,” he heard her say. “Dale, where did you get that?”

“I don’t know,” he said dully, turning it over in his hand. Then the enormity of what it meant struck him, and he dropped it fast, rubbing his hand on his jeans as though it had left a filthy imprint on his skin. “Oh God, Ariane, I swear I don’t know, I didn’t shoot him I swear to you I didn’t, it was just in my hand when I got out of the car! I never had a gun, I swear to you on my life, I never –“

He stopped the tumbling words with an effort. She stood in the middle of the road, the trooper’s blood coating her hands halfway to the elbow. Her eyes were wide, and he could see the pulse in her throat.

Dale’s whole body convulsed, and he stumbled to the side of the car. Everything he’d eaten in the last week came up, and he puked over and over until there was nothing but yellow bile in the thin, windswept snow. He raised his head and stared into the dry, dead corn. “You fucking happy now?” he whispered.

A hand rested on his shoulder, and Dale nearly jumped out of his shoes. It was Ariane, drawing him into her arms. “I believe you, Dale, I believe you,” she whispered. He shuddered against her, clasping her body tight to him.

Elizabeth Donald

“Jesus,” Dale said, pulling back to look at her. “No one is ever going to believe me. Oh God, with my conviction, Ariane –“

Ariane looked at the cruiser. She saw the camera. “Oh no,” she whispered.

“It’ll look like I shot him,” Dale said.

Ariane took a step back, looking at the cruiser, at the gun, and at Dale again. He saw misery cross her face in one heart-wrenching instant, and he felt it as well. Their whole lives, the lives they had, the life they might have together... all of it was gone. Everything was different now. Forever.

“All right,” she said, and picked up the gun.

“Shit, don’t touch it!” Dale protested, not really sure why. He just hated seeing it in her hand. She went back to the car and threw it in the back seat with almost as much distaste as he felt. “What are you doing?”

She didn’t answer, but reached under the piles of stuff in the back seat and pulled out her kit. It had been a joke between them – her old-fashioned black doctor’s bag, a real antique. It had been a gift from the famous Doctor Bennett upon her acceptance at Johns Hopkins Medical School.

She used the hygienic wipes to clean off her hands, scrubbing as intently as if she were going into surgery. Then she slipped on the latex gloves and went over to Smokey’s body.

She started to drag him toward the cruiser, and he went to help, lifting the trooper’s legs. He was amazingly heavy – *dead weight*, his mind mocked in a gleeful, capering voice that he didn’t recognize.

They carried him to the squad car and Ariane used her gloved hands to open the door. She lifted him into the hard, cushion-less back seat and placed him gently on his back. She crossed Smokey’s arms over his ruined chest and closed his eyes before climbing back out.

Then she reached behind the wheel and yanked at the wires behind the camera.

“No, don’t!” Dale protested, but it was too late. Ariane wrenched at the box, which popped off the dashboard with

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sickening ease. She threw it out of the car and smashed it onto the pavement, stomping it with her shoe.

Dale felt sick. “Now they’ll lock you up too,” he said dully.

She walked toward him, her feet crunching on bits of crunched plastic and glass. “Look at me, Dale Ramsey,” she said. He met her eyes. “Without the camera, it’s just unfortunate happenstance. Without the camera, we just came across him in the road and tried to help, and he died anyway, so we put him in the car and went for help.”

Dale rubbed his face. “That camera could have transmitted its images already. Certainly he called in the license plate. Either way, we have to run.”

Ariane recoiled a step. “Run?”

“Well, what do you suggest!” Dale snapped. “We could go to the nearest police department and simply explain that the officer pulled us over after we got lost in the corn trying to hide from fuckhead pranksters we never saw, and the trooper got shot by a magic disappearing reappearing gun we never saw before, honest.”

Ariane looked at the ground, and he felt that again, the sense that their whole future was slipping away from them. Missing their chance, the perfect happy ending they were promised by the storybooks. It was slipping away from them – no, it was wrenched away from them, stolen and smashed.

“Then we run,” she said, but her voice lacked conviction.

“We can’t run forever,” Dale said dully. “They find you. They always find you. And they’re gonna put a needle in my arm. Jesus, Ariane, I’m a fucking cop killer.”

“No, you’re not,” she said, her head snapping back up. “I know you, Dale. You are no killer. And if we have to run forever, that’ll be okay, because I’m with you.”

“You don’t mean that,” he said in that same dull voice, ants crawling all over his skin. He felt trapped, dead inside, just as he had in that long-ago jail cell while the cop laughed in the hallway and his father wasn’t coming to get him.

Elizabeth Donald

She grabbed his head, staring straight up at him. "I am with you. All the way. Wherever we go, we go together. I love you and I won't let you go."

He pulled her to him then, holding her tight against him in the deepening cold, holding her so she'd never go away.

The snow was falling again, tiny flakes brushing against Ronin's windshield and vanishing. Ariane's face was buried deep in her books, onto the third tome of ghost history, as Dale searched desperately for any hint of a way out of this goddamn cornfield.

They were lost again. The pavement had eventually given way to gravel, and it seemed the road would never end. Sometimes it curved, but there was no pattern. It was like one of those corn mazes people plowed through the corn fields at Halloween, but seemingly endless.

"Anything?" Dale asked.

"Four versions of the girl who hung herself," Ariane said. The tremors had mostly vanished from her voice, but he sensed the terror was still there beneath the surface, trembling. "I did find one reference to it as an 'infamous' spot before Emily. I'm working on that now."

Dale suddenly crowed in triumph. "Look! A person!"

Up ahead there was a man in coveralls and a heavy coat, his back to them. Dale would have thought he was another scarecrow, but he was moving, shoveling snow off the side of the road. It seemed a pointless task, but Dale was not about to nitpick.

"Careful," Ariane said in a thin voice.

Dale slowed up beside the man and rolled down his window. "Sir, could you help us find our way back to the interstate?"

The man stopped shoveling, standing upright while leaning on the shovel. Tilting his head to one side, he turned around.

Ariane screamed, dropping her book to the floor of the car.

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His face was entirely blank, flesh rolled smooth as though burned and melted solid. There was no mouth, no nose, no eyes – not even eye sockets, as though the ordinary bone structure of the skull were utterly absent. Just that blank mask of flesh.

In the place where eyes should have been, black X's had been marked by some kind of tattoo. A red slash replaced his mouth.

Dale rolled up the window fast as the scarecrow man leapt at the car, swinging his shovel. It struck Ronin's metal frame above the glass, bouncing off and falling into the snow. The scarecrow man slammed open hands against the glass, slapping it over and over.

"Fuck this!" Dale shouted, and floored the gas. Ronin leapt away down the cornfield path.

"What the fuck was that!" Ariane cried, wrapping her arms around herself.

Dale looked in the rearview mirror and saw the scarecrow man get back up and wave, obscenely cheerful.

Shivers struck him hard. He felt a column of ice through the center of him, as though he'd never be warm again. He looked at the rearview mirror again.

His father's face filled the small mirror, leaning forward from the back seat. "Think you better than me, huh?"

Dale felt the wheel slip through his numb hands, and Ronin swerved sideways. He slammed on the brakes.

"No, Dale, don't stop!" Ariane shouted.

Dale looked wildly over his shoulder. There was no one in the back seat, no one and nothing but ordinary suitcases, blankets and Christmas presents, their wrapping almost grotesquely cheerful.

He looked back at the rearview mirror.

"You ain't no better than me, boy," his father sneered. "Fuckin' whiner. Don't ever think you better than me."

Dale lowered his head and shuddered. "Jesus, Ariane –"

She gripped his hand in her left and used her right hand to turn the rearview mirror toward her. "What do you see? What do you –"

Elizabeth Donald

Her voice trailed off. Her free hand jammed against her open mouth in horror, while her left hand clamped on his in a death grip. “No,” she whispered.

“Don’t look,” Dale said. “Oh God, Ariane, don’t look!”

Ariane covered her face with her hands, slinking back down in her seat. Sobs escaped her and her voice was thin and high like a child’s. “I’m sorry, Mommy, I’m so sorry...”

Dale reached up and wrenched at the rearview mirror until it popped off the metal arm. He threw it in the back seat without looking at it. He heard it clink against something and when he looked over his shoulder, he saw it rested against the gun.

Dale drew Ariane’s shaking body into his arms. “Don’t, love, don’t. It’s not real.”

“It is, somehow it is, that fucking bridge, it’s all my fault.” Her voice was still that thin, awful, high voice of a child.

“Not your fault,” he said. “We don’t know the bridge had anything to do with –“

“Yes,” she said, and reached down toward the book that she had dropped a minute before. It was a leathery old tome, not something she had picked up at the Baltimore Public Library. She flipped it back open to the bent page she had been reading when they came upon the scarecrow man.

Scarecrow man. Dale looked over his shoulder again, but the scarecrow man was gone. Vanished into the corn. He checked all four car doors – still locked.

“Here.” Ariane pointed at a newspaper clipping reproduced in the book. “Four young women sacrificed on the bridge by a man who was trying to summon a demon. He took them onto the bridge one at a time, said the demon required ‘a singular sacrifice.’”

“I’m supposed to believe in demons now?” Dale said, trying to be skeptical.

“Blood sacrifice,” Ariane said, her voice tremulous. “But we came onto the bridge together, and we gave it nothing. We made it angry.”

“Fuck that,” Dale said forcefully. “That’s ridiculous. All of this – it’s fucking ridiculous!”

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She shut the book and put it down, wiping her hands on her jeans just as Dale had when he dropped the gun. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "My fault, dragging you onto the bridge, you knew better and –"

He hushed her with a kiss, a gentle comforting kiss that became something stronger, a desperate clinging to each other in the hopes that they could somehow be warm again. He kissed her again and again, as though she might disappear at any moment.

Dale popped Ronin into gear again, and as soon as the wheels were turning, the radio came on. "I'm on a hiiiiighway to hell," AC/DC sang, and Ariane hit it so hard the button popped off.

"We could try the cell phone again," Dale suggested.

Ariane gave a harsh, dry sound that might have been a laugh. "Do they have cell towers in hell?"

"We're not in hell," Dale insisted.

Ariane looked out the window, a tear rolling down her cheek.

Dale pulled out his cell phone and dialed the automated number for their auto club yet again.

"It's connecting!" he said as the phone began to ring.

"Can I help you, sir?" a male voice said.

"Yes, I need directions –"

"You need *shit*," the man replied, and his voice grew high and tittering – yet oddly familiar. "You're lost, Dale, and you'll never find your way out. Missed your chance, no escape for you."

"The fuck?" Dale shouted, slamming on the brakes. Ronin skidded to a stop as Ariane braced herself on the dashboard. "I know you, I –"

Mr. Mack cackled at him. "Died the year you started at the hospital, heart attack and I died all alone, just like you will. She won't be there when they strap you into the chair and put the needle in your arm, Dale. She'll be long gone. She's just a little dream, you know that? A dream within a dream. Look at her."

Dale couldn't help it, he looked.

Ariane was gone. The car was empty, the seatbelt flapping against the passenger door as if no one had ever sat there.

"Gone. Left you. Alone." Mr. Mack tittered in his ear. "Just a pipe dream after all."

Elizabeth Donald

“Ariane!” Dale screamed. He shut the cell and threw it onto the floor of the car. “Ariane! Ariane!”

Hands grabbed him, held his arms, and he flailed against them until he heard her voice. “Dale! Dale, I’m here! I’m here.”

He looked into her eyes. Of course she was there, it had been a trick of the fading light, of the voice on the phone. He gripped her arms hard. “Jesus, I thought...”

Ariane held his hands in hers. “I’m here.” He touched her face.

Thwap. Ariane let out a startled scream as hands slapped against the window on her side. It was the scarecrow man, hammering flat hands against the glass again and again. Its blank face was all the more terrifying for its featureless menace, mindless and malevolent at once. It slapped its hands harder, and a crack appeared in the glass.

Dale slammed on the gas, but Ronin just gave a frustrated growl and didn’t move. He hit the gas again in a panic, but the car still didn’t move.

Thwap. The window broke, showered chunks of glass into Ariane’s lap in a flood of icy wind pouring through with the scarecrow man’s hands, grasping at Ariane. Its hands roamed over her body, groping down her chest and stomach. She pushed its hands away from her, screaming, and the scarecrow man grabbed her throat instead, choking her.

Dale grabbed its wrist with both hands, pulling with all his strength. He could feel the crunch of dry straw beneath the rough denim of the scarecrow man’s jacket, but its grip held solid. Ariane’s fists punched at the bristly arm, to no avail.

Dale twisted his body around, reaching into the back seat for the gun. His fingers skated across its cold metal, but it slipped beyond his reach. He grasped for it and it slipped again.

It’s part of this place, his mind whispered. Part of this hell. It won’t let you use one part of it to hurt itself.

Ariane stopped screaming. Her face was turning a horrid plum color, and her struggles weakened.

Dale turned to get out of the car, to rip the scarecrow man to pieces with his bare hands if that’s what it took, and saw that the

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car had shifted into neutral. Quickly he shifted it into drive and floored the gas.

Ronin leapt forward as if something had punted it like a football. The jagged edge of the broken window sheared the scarecrow man's arm off as though it were made of paper, and the straw-stuffed sleeve fell harmlessly to the floor between Ariane's feet.

Ariane gasped for air, scrabbling at her throat in a horrible panting sound that was still half-screaming.

"Are you all right?" Dale asked, still gunning the motor. Ronin hurtled down the narrow corn-lined road, and Dale could swear something moved between the dry stalks, keeping pace with them.

Ariane nodded, tears spilling unheeded down her cheeks. Then her eyes widened and she pointed straight ahead.

Before them stood the old windmill, tenebrous and creaking against the deepening blue-black sky. "Oh shit," he whispered.

"We have to go back," she rasped.

"Yes," he said, shivering.

Ronin ambled along the road at a saner pace, turning at the windmill and weaving through the cornfield. Dale remembered the sharp turn and guided the car through it easily. Ants were crawling on his skin again, and his heartbeat had not slowed. In the corner of his eye, he saw movement in the fields, capering shadows that grew stronger with the later hour.

There was the rock. There was no snow upon it now. Beyond it lay the hulking, silent abyss of the covered bridge.

Ronin rolled to a stop and Dale put it in park. "Get the gun, Ariane."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Dale stared ahead at the bridge. "You're keeping the gun. Stay in the car. Keep yourself safe. I'm going into the bridge, and if I'm not out in ten minutes, get away as best you can."

Ariane shook her head. "What did I tell you? We're in this together."

"Singular sacrifice, remember?" Dale said. "Besides, I'm the one who's now a wanted cop killer, not you."

Elizabeth Donald

“That’s crazy,” she insisted.

Dale laughed, and this time there was almost humor in it. “Because the rest of it has been so sane,” he said.

Ariane looked down at her hands. “All right,” she said quietly. “But there’s something you’ll need first. Something the book mentioned.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

She reached into the back seat. He heard her fumbling about in the bags and boxes and a muttered curse when she dropped something.

Then there was a sharp prick in the side of his neck like a bee-sting. “This,” she said.

Dale wrenched away from her and the syringe fell into the back seat, but it was too late. His vision blurred and his limbs felt heavy. He reached for her, but it was as though heavy ropes held him down.

Ariane hovered over him. “It’s just a mild sedative, you’ll be all right in a half hour or so,” she said, tucking a blanket over him. “You’d better keep the gun.” She put it on the passenger seat.

“Ari...” His mouth wasn’t working right. His tongue felt numb and forming words was nearly impossible.

“I’m so sorry, Dale,” Ariane said quietly. “I should have read more about the bridge before bringing you here. But I can make up for it, I can make it right.”

She reached into the back seat and grabbed another blanket, awkwardly stuffing it into the broken glass of her window to block out the cold air. She reached into the back again, and her hand sank into his duffel. “Damn, where is it?” she muttered. “Where’s your...”

She froze, and her hand withdrew from the duffel. In her palm lay the small blue velvet box.

“Oh my,” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. She opened the box and looked at the small sapphire-diamond ring. “Oh, Dale. It’s beautiful.”

He tried to speak, tried to reach for her, but the drug held him prisoner in his seat, leaning backward against the car door.

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Her lovely eyes met his, and she slipped the ring on her finger. Then she leaned forward and kissed him. “I love you, Dale.”

Then she reached back into the duffel and came out with his Swiss Army knife.

No, he tried to say, but his mouth wasn't working.

Ariane slipped the knife into her hand. She reached toward Dale and his vision faded into white noise. Like the silent snow falling on dead corn.

When Dale awoke, he was alone.

Ronin's engine was still rumbling, and for a wonder he hadn't run out of gas. It couldn't have been that long, then. He fought the fog that seemed to have enveloped his thinking brain. They were lost, they were trying to get to the interstate, they –

Ariane!

The thought acted like a dash of cold water to his mind, and he threw off the blanket she had tucked around him. He reached for the gun she'd left on the passenger seat, but it was gone. The scarecrow man's lifeless stuffed sleeve was gone as well, and Ariane's window was whole and unbroken.

The blue velvet ring box lay open and empty on Ariane's seat.

Dale scabbled for the door handle and shoved it open. It was dark, the steadily-falling snow obscuring his view of the shadowed bridge ahead of him. It seemed empty, and there were no footprints.

Dale took another step toward it, but the rock was in front of him. He could have sworn it moved.

“Ariane,” he whispered. He looked back at Ronin, and felt a hoarse scream catch in his throat.

Smearred on the side of the little white car was a wide slash of gaudy red blood, drips down the side already gelid in the cold air.

Marked in the center of the blood-smear was a sideways 8. A Lemniscate.

Elizabeth Donald

Dale fell to his knees beside it, sinking into the snow. He reached out and touched the symbol with the tips of his fingers even as his other hand touched the leather neckband he wore.

“Forever,” he whispered.



Once upon a time, I did a book signing in a small town in Tennessee. When we were done, Jim and I decided to go for an adventure, rather than heading straight back to Memphis. We'd heard there was a lake with a covered bridge that went by the name Lake Placid, I kid you not. So we struck out for it.

We got hopelessly lost. Seriously, completely and utterly lost. We did eventually find the lake, and took pictures in the blazing July sun, but when we left we missed a turn or three. Somehow we ended up in a totally different area, driving through dead-ish fields with farms that looked deserted.

This was before either of us had a smartphone, of course, so we were dependent on our memories and my tattered highway map. That's assuming we could have gotten a signal that far out from the city. There were inappropriate banjo jokes, which became more strained and less silly as we wandered the apparently-empty countryside.

At last we took a random turn and found ourselves on a county road, which connected to the blessed interstate and brought us back to Memphis. Somehow we'd crossed half of west Tennessee on back roads, and I doubt we could ever find our way back to where we'd been.

We cracked a few jokes that we'd obviously crossed over into hell for a while, and should be lucky to be back.

By the end of the weekend, I knew the entire story of Infinity, and what happens to Dale later on. I guess you'll have to wait for that other part.