

CHAPTER 1

December 23rd, 7:35–10:14 a.m.

My friend Henry Quantum, whom everyone called Bones because he was so tall and thin, and because Dr. McCoy was his favorite character from *Star Trek*, had a single task that day, and that was to buy a Christmas present for his wife. Having put this off for several weeks (or months, actually), and having noted with alarm when checking his iPhone for updates from the *Huffington Post* that the twenty-third of December had arrived without the purchase of anything at all, not even a stocking stuffer, he knew he had no choice but to go shopping. It was a workday, so there were a few other things on the agenda, but in terms of mission only one: make Margaret happy. He had already settled on a bottle of Chanel No. 5—and decided where to get it, too: at Macy’s; and he

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also figured that the best time to get it would be first thing in the morning so that he wouldn't have to worry about it the rest of the day. All this he decided in a panic upon waking, but, having made his decisions, a kind of peace descended upon him and he entered the shower with a happy heart. Done, done, done, and done! he told himself.

However, when he reached for the soap his hand froze mid-grab because the water bouncing off his shoulders made him think about the miraculous impermeability of his own skin, and this made him think of the wonder of nature, which, when he thought about it, included the entire cosmos, and thus the Hubble telescope came into his mind and the pictures of the galaxies he had seen at the NASA booth at the Sausalito Art Festival back in September, particularly the Sombrero Galaxy, which actually did look like a sombrero, and this led him to recall something that had been drilled into his head since junior high school, namely that light travels at 186,000 miles per second, and when you look at a distant object, like, say, the Sombrero Galaxy, what you are actually seeing is how the object appeared millions of years ago (in the case of the Sombrero Galaxy, thirty million years) and not how it is now; in fact, who could say what it looked like now? For all anyone knew, it could already be colliding with our own galaxy, because a lot can happen in

thirty million years, and when he thought about that, he just couldn't quite reach the soap dish, just as he could never get to the Sombrero Galaxy even if he had the power to transport himself there instantaneously, because the galaxy that he envisioned no longer existed. In fact, *everything* outside of himself was happening in the past—that soap dish, for instance—it was already over, done, finished, kaput, history. He had been a sometime practitioner of Zen and was always going on about living in the present—the breath of the present, they called it—but now he had to admit he could never achieve that goal no matter how hard he tried. No one could achieve it, not even the Buddha himself. He stepped over the lip of the tub, and the velour of the bath mat felt the same as it always did, soft and welcoming, only now he realized it was an illusion. It used to be soft and welcoming, a nanosecond ago. But now? Who knew?

He threw on his robe and marched into the kitchen.

Margaret looked up from her oatmeal and said, “What now?”

He grabbed two slices of whole grain, slid them into the toaster, and watched the coils rouse themselves to brilliant orange. He warmed his palms over the slots. “What if a small star was suddenly created one light-year away from us?” he said to Margaret. “And what if it instantly began

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traveling toward us at just under the speed of light. What would we see? We'd see a star six trillion miles away, when actually it was almost already here, or maybe, because it was so close, we'd see it big and bright and also small and distant at the same time. But the main thing is, we'd never see it as it is and by the time we figured it out, by the time we knew it had been created, it would be on top of us and we'd all die."

"Would you like regular or decaf?" she replied. "

No, I'm serious," he said.

"I know," she said. "But it's a hypothetical star, isn't it?" "Yes."

"Then have some coffee first."

He carried his toast to the table and sat down dejectedly. "

Maybe we can worry about something else today.

What do you think?" she said.

"It's on my mind."

"I know, but why don't you tell me what your day's like today."

"Oh, I don't know, the usual," he answered cagily, remembering he was going to buy her a bottle of perfume. But then he also recalled he had a client coming in, and he had to present to them the new TV spots at around ten thirty, so he couldn't buy the perfume in the morning and he said, "Shit."

“What?”

“The Protox people are coming in today.” “You’
l do fine,” she said.

The words “fine” and “Protox” together instantly brought up an image of Denise, the art director, and her tattoos, and he tried to imagine what it felt like to get tattooed, the needle going into his arm, leaving behind lines of orange and blue, but he had no idea if this was really how it was done, whether it was lines or dots or what, or if you had to be drunk or if they let you do it sober, because he didn’ t like needles, period. And Denise had such thin arms. Whenever he went to have his blood drawn he had to turn his head away because he couldn’ t stand watching his own blood fill up the vial, and then he wondered how much blood there is in a human being, and the answer is ten pints if you’ re a man and less if you’ re a woman, unless you’ re a big woman, like a weight trainer, and he thought about the muscles on those women and he wondered what it would be like to sleep with a muscle-bound woman, it would be kind of gay-straight, because their breasts do sort of disappear. . . .

“Aren’ t you going to eat your toast?” Margaret asked. “
Oh. No. You take it. Thinking about Protox.”

“It’ s a disgusting product,” she said. “Don’ t you ever
get sick of hawking that crap?”

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Here we go, he thought. “It’s advertising. It’s what I do.” But, happily, she let it drop and, instead, leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Are you all right now, Bones?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“No more planetary catastrophes? Can I be sure that when you come home tonight the world will still be in one piece?”

“Ha-ha,” he said.

She gave him one of her slightly condescending smiles and then returned to the *Times*, which she now read electronically.

He went to the bedroom, threw on some slim-fit khakis and a sports coat, decided on the cordovan loafers, checked himself out in the mirror, congratulated himself on the fact his stomach didn’t stick out over his pants—which it did on practically everyone else his age, which was forty and some months. He still had a full head of hair, though he checked it every day for signs of thinning and could never seem to get rid of the cowlick that stuck out at strange angles whenever the wind blew. His eyes were a lighthearted blue, some would say dreamy, and Margaret complained that he always seemed to be gazing off into space, which of course he wasn’t; he was just thinking. Her kinder friends said he

resembled the actor James Stewart—by which they meant gangly and awkward, but he took to mean elegant and pure of heart—and maybe he was both, because he had to admit he could appear a bit discombobulated when he wasn't paying attention to what he was doing.

"Oh well!" he said, and grabbed his briefcase and made his way down to the garage.

They lived on a hillside, so their house was on stilts and their garage was dug into the earth and it reminded him of a bomb shelter, except that it was always damp and smelled of mushrooms. In the winter the ants invaded, and sometimes the back wall was stained with runoff, which made him worry about mudslides. But this year there weren't any ants because it wasn't raining, which meant there was a drought and come summer there could be a fire like the one in Oakland that had burned down a thousand homes. Although fires were actually worse in the summer after a lot of rain, which was ironic, but it was because of all the undergrowth. Some kid throws a match, some idiot knocks over the barbecue, and *whuffff*!

Margaret called down from the top of the garage stairs:

"Henry, take your scarf, you get chilly. And oh, I forgot to tell you, I won't be home for dinner; you'll be all right, won't you?"

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“Of course I’ll be all right,” he said. “I’m not helpless.” “You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure!”

She blew him a dry kiss and disappeared back into the house. He stood looking at the door, the one that connected the garage to the kitchen, a portal between their two worlds, and he suddenly felt relieved to be leaving.

“Fuck,” he said. “Now I also have to worry about dinner.”