

CHAPTER ONE



Nine-tenths of a second is just long enough for someone to make an irrevocable, unforgivable mistake. The moment before and the moment after might seem to belong to divergent realities. Nine-tenths of a second can change the world.

Leonard Tramer understood this only too well. Nine-tenths of a second haunted him, possessing every thought. He did not dispute the fact that his momentary lapse in concentration deserved to be deemed unforgivable. What the aging inventor could not accept was the notion that his error was irrevocable. For decades, Leonard tinkered and toiled in an effort to rectify the horrible mistake he had made on May 9th – thirty-one years, four months, and two days ago. He intended to pursue his quest for the duration of his life, if necessary.

Hunched over a desk, Leonard cursed under his breath while delicately manipulating a fine-tipped solder iron. The desk, littered with wires and electronic parts, had endured decades of blasphemy, burns, and solder stains. An ancient computer stood in the center, its fan clattering in protest, while a relatively new laptop rested in the corner, as far removed from the chaos as possible.

“Damn.”

Leonard placed the soldering iron on its cradle, pushed his chair away from the desk, and ran one hand through his thinning hair. Mostly gray, with a hint of brown, his short, loose curls scattered as his fingers passed. He had not showered in at least two days, and he could only imagine the state of his ever-decaying appearance. A two-day-old beard and a smattering of freckles accentuated fifty-one years of well-earned creases. A loose white t-shirt, half tucked into faded jeans, nearly blended with his pallid skin. Still, his medium build and square jaw preserved an essence of dignity. A shave and a smile would likely transform him, but grooming and pleasantries were not on his agenda that afternoon.

He noticed Michelle out of the corner of his eye and swiveled to face her. She stood in the doorway glaring at him, a small red suitcase at her feet. Her cropped, black hair did little to soften her long, thin features.

“I’m leaving, Leo.”

With a weary, defeated expression, Leonard stared at the young woman. “Okay. Do you have everything?”

“Okay? Is that all you’re going to say? Okay?”

He shrugged.

“I wasted nearly a year of my life trying to rescue you from this mess.” She gestured around the room. A disorderly array of boxes, disassembled electronic devices, and

dog-eared books spoke volumes. A well-worn armchair in one corner betrayed the fact that Leonard rarely left the room, resting briefly in-between periods of manic productivity that paid the bills, and stretches of creativity that fueled his obsession.

“I didn’t ask for a rescue.”

“You’re wasting away in here, pursuing this MacGyver-meets-Flash-Gordon nonsense. You had so much potential.”

“MacGyver meets the Time Traveler.”

“What?”

“MacGyver meets the Time Traveler from H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*. That would be a better analogy.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m just saying—”

“The boy is dead, Leo. You’re never going to bring him back with this insane delusion. He. Is. Dead.”

Leonard jumped to his feet and swiftly crossed the room, stopping inches from her face. She grimaced and took a step back.

“Tommy Richardson,” he shouted. “He is not *the boy*. His name is Tommy Richardson. And I *will* save him if it consumes my entire life.”

Michelle folded her arms, tears forming at the edges of her eyes. “It *has* consumed your life, Leo. Can’t you see that? Can’t you imagine all the things you could have done if you hadn’t embraced this crazy notion that you can change the past?” She pointed at the open door on the far wall. “This ridiculous conviction that you can build a time machine in your closet?”

Leonard looked at his feet. “Leave.”

“Leo, I—”

“Leave,” he said, his voice deep and menacing. When he glanced up, she was gone.

Michelle, Lisa, Brenda, and a series of other women who came and went meant little to Leonard. In fact, they proved to be a distraction. Online dating chat rooms. Late night blind dates in bars. Florence Nightingales hell-bent on delivering him from evil. What did these women want from him, really? He vowed for the sixteenth time since he traded the love of his life for his obsession that he would swear off women.

He returned to his desk and resumed the task at hand.

At 2:09 a.m., Leonard awoke from another nightmare. Three to five times a week for over thirty-one years the recurring nightmare taunted Leonard, spurring him on. The images, far more elaborate than they had been in the beginning, etched themselves on Leonard’s brain, details he could not possibly have witnessed at the time – eleven-year-old Tommy Richardson pushing his hands against the back of the passenger seat in an effort to minimize the impact; the horrifying sound of a boy screaming as the car frame buckled and crushed his little body; blood rushing down his face; eyes frozen in terror, devoid of life.

Leonard sat up, rubbing his temples. His tear ducts, long since dried up from overuse, merely twitched in irritation. He sighed, stumbled over to the closet, and

examined the useless contraption born out of decades of research and experimentation.

A small chair stood in the middle of the four-by-four space. Hard, plastic gloves, suspended mid-air, gripped a steering wheel which was bolted to the wall. A numeric keypad and a small screen glowed at eye level. Boots attached to pedals on the floor gave the eerie impression of a bodiless driver navigating a ghostly vehicle. Next to the boots a small fire extinguisher lay on its side. Wires and circuit boards clung to the walls and ceiling at what appeared to be random intervals. Several computers, stacked in one corner, languished in a tangle of cables. On the ceiling, a dark visor attached to a helmet hung from a retractable cord. To the left of the chair an enormous circuit breaker, positioned upright, seemed to be waiting for the incorporeal motorist to awaken and flip the switch.

An inoperative virtual reality game, the sum of a man's life.

Leonard retrieved a circuit board he had finished soldering earlier in the evening before he had fallen into the armchair, exhausted. He stood on the closet chair, unhooked several wires, and proceeded to add the board to a convoluted circuit on the ceiling.

His freshly soldered wire was an inch too short.

“Shit.”

He began to untwist the wires on the left, but he stopped short, gaping at the configuration on the ceiling as if noticing something amiss. He counted the circuit boards and followed the wires with his fingers to see where they led.

Leonard jumped from the chair, ran to his desk, and yanked open a large drawer on the right. Inside were dozens of composition books with notes and diagrams. He fumbled through the books until he found what he was looking for – book six, which he had completed and tossed aside twenty years ago. He flipped through the book, finally stopping in the middle, and inspected the diagrams sketched on the page. He shook his head and laughed.

You idiot.

Two hours later, after carefully disconnecting and reconnecting the circuit boards, Leonard stood back several feet from the open closet and stared in awe. *This isn't the first time you thought you finally had it, Leonard,* he cautioned himself. Still, after years of fruitless endeavors that took him nowhere near the past, it was just one more jump into the sea of possibility. *I only need two minutes, three tops. Just enough time to get my bearings, size up the situation, and hit the brakes.*

Having attached one boot to the brake and the other to the gas, Leonard had already presumed his reflexes might be compromised. He practiced driving with both feet so many times, he nearly caused another accident in the real world. At some point in the last five years, he stopped driving altogether, ordering take-out food and shopping via the Internet, in addition to using his various girlfriends as chauffeurs. By now well acquainted with the way the time machine's pedals worked, he was not going to make a mistake. He was ready.

He stepped into the closet, closed the door, and sat down. The small screen glowed with a series of numbers that represented the date, time, location, and duration of the visit. Leonard checked the numbers previously entered. After spending three minutes in the past, rectifying his fatal error and righting the unsettled universe, Leonard Tramer would embrace the present. Once his mission was complete, he planned to lock the closet and return to the real world in search of the life he had put on hold for over thirty-one years.

Leonard's feet slid automatically into the boots as they had done countless times. He pulled the helmet over his head and flipped the visor down before slipping his hands into the gloves. He stared at the image in the virtual visor – the dusty, smudged dashboard of his red Ford truck, the one he drove years ago when he attended college in Colorado. The vehicle's window looked out on a wall of gray, as if the car sat facing a cement barricade. If the time machine was properly calibrated, the cement wall should dissolve and Leonard would return to May 9th on that crucial day, heading north on Interstate 225 at 7:46 p.m. – the sun low in the sky, bouncing off the side mirrors. Every other time he attempted to return to the past, the cement wall had refused to vanish. This time he knew it would be different. This time, he prayed he would succeed. He removed his left hand from the glove briefly, flipped the circuit breaker, and held his breath.

The cement wall dissolved.

Leonard felt the steering wheel jolt, and he tightened his grip. Tapping the gas, he accelerated slightly to match the speed of the surrounding vehicles. The sun caught the truck's left side mirror, and a flash of light nearly blinded Leonard. Shielding the side of his face, he looked in his rearview mirror, searching for the blue sedan, the Richardsons' Chrysler.

There.

Leonard saw it approaching, passing on the left. In a moment the Chrysler would surpass the Ford, leaving the truck just behind the sedan's blind spot. Leonard would lean over and attempt to reach a candy bar lying on the floor, nudge his foot against the gas pedal, and look up just in time to see Mrs. Richardson merging. The sedan would clip the front of Leonard's car, do a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn and careen over a damaged guardrail, landing upside down in a small greenway, taking one of its occupants to his death. Leonard would brake hard and come to a rest on the shoulder.

He glanced in the virtual rearview mirror. Mrs. Richardson was peeking over her shoulder, talking to her son. *She wasn't paying attention.* The shame of three decades diminished just a hair. *All you have to do now is brake.*

Leonard braked slowly, mildly annoying the driver behind him, but creating distance between the Ford and the blue sedan on his left. A beautiful, spacious distance, enough room for two Chryslers to merge with no collision.

Unfortunately, at the precise moment Mrs. Richardson's tire touched the white line, the driver of a yellow sports car in the far left lane noticed the spacious gap created by Leonard's skillful braking maneuver, and the sports car driver changed two

lanes at once. The yellow car clipped the rear of the blue sedan and – as the Richardsons’ vehicle had done thirty-one years, four months, and *three* days ago – it began to spin.

Leonard gasped as the images faded and the cement wall re-formed before his eyes.

“No,” he screamed, unable to believe what he had witnessed. “No!”

He turned the steering wheel back in forth in vain, willing the traffic to reappear. A circuit board on the ceiling caught fire and a tendril of smoke slithered into the small room. Leonard yanked off the helmet, pulled his hands from the gloves and pounded the steering wheel.

“No, no, no.”

A cinder dropped from the burning circuit board and fell on his hand. It sizzled, and the aroma of burnt flesh and hair mingled with the smell of smoldering electronics. Leonard did not move. His eyes fixated on something far beyond the little room, he gazed listlessly. For the first time in a decade, tears streamed down his face.

Nine-tenths of a second changed nothing. Nine-tenths of a second were pawns in a cosmic twist of fate. Leonard Tramer had sacrificed his life in pursuit of nine-tenths of a second that made no difference at all.