

About Pain

“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.”

— Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

“What’s the book about?”

Holden looked up, grateful of the chance to stop his repetitions on the leg press so soon. He’d set the key so he would lift a small but at least not embarrassing chunk of the stack of weights, only to discover that the first press took most of what he had.

His mouth, open with his reply stayed open but silent. The girl, early twenties, surely no older than him, was arresting. No better word presented itself. Arresting in a way that bypassed the dark cloud that he had no more chance of lifting than all the weights in the gym.

“I ... uh.” Holden tried to kickstart his tongue into action.

Another good word would be “magnificent”. Holden wasn’t by nature or nurture given to the objectification of women, but here it was simple truth. She was so far out of the ordinary that some recognition of the fact was needed.

“I...” He was aware now that not only was the girl watching him, he had a large audience of those working the machines nearby. Several of the men had even stopped their reps to stare. The question on their lips would, of course, not involve the book. They’d want

to know what the towering redhead wanted with the newbie who struggled to lift a quarter of the weight stack.

The girl, surely the hardest bodied of all the hard bodied women to have ever entered the gym, bent and picked up the book in question. She was well over six foot and the face that her wild mane nearly obscured was frankly too intimidating for Holden to ascribe any other quality than ‘intimidating’ to it.

“Catcher.” She read the title.

“Y... yes. They made us read it in school. I hated it.”

“Why are you reading it now then?”

“I’m not. I’m taking it back to the library after my ... workout.” He felt self-conscious and the anger he’d been trying to rid himself of flared again. Who the hell was this girl with her washboard abs and too many questions? He always told himself he hated pushy people – though the truth was that it took a lot of pushing to be his friend. He stuck out a hand for the book.

“Why did you take it out then?” She showed no inclination to return it.

“I didn’t.” Holden stood from the machine feeling exasperated. Also, sweaty and stupidly embarrassed that she was taller than him. A rare occurrence. “I didn’t take it out. My ... my dog found it.”

His story didn’t make sense out under the gym’s harsh fluorescents, but the truth had made less and less sense to him recently. Volente had padded silently into his bedroom and dropped the book – mysteriously entirely free of slobber – at his feet. It wasn’t the first time the dog had brought unasked-for books to him or his parents. The hound had some weird compulsion to fetch them. Holden’s mother said the previous owner must have trained him to

do it as a party trick, and, if they didn't praise him for it, he'd lose the habit. This trick and his name had been all the dog had brought with him from the pound. Volente had been with them nearly fifteen years now and must be ancient for his breed, but the habit showed no sign of fading.

"You come here three times a week and yet you don't fight." The girl steered the conversation off at right angles. Holden would have bet good money that her next question would have concerned the dog.

"Who *are* you?" Holden managed to avoid adding the 'the hell', but only just, and the harsh edge on his words did the same job. "I've never seen you before." He didn't add 'and I would have if you were here' but it was implied. "Also, this is my second visit." Without waiting for an answer to his demand for identification, he stuck his hand back out. "Can I— Give me my book back."

"It's not yours. It's the library's. And I'm Clovis. You're Holden. I know all about you."

She walked off with the book, forcing him to circle around the bench and hurry after her, watched by dozens of eyes.

"Hey!" He stopped short of reaching for her shoulder.

"What?" Clovis turned on him. "You already said it wasn't yours and you didn't want it."

"That still doesn't mean you can just take it!"

She held it out to the side and slightly behind her, like a playground bully trying to tempt him to step in close. She'd walked them to the edge of the rings where the fighters practiced. The gym was one of a dozen or more MMA places scattered around London. None

of the famous fighters used it but there were enough wannabes to pack it out most nights.

Holden came because his uncle worked for the parent company and got him a discount. He just used the machines.

“Fight! Fight!” A mock-chant from someone in the small crowd previously watching the rings but now focused on the drama provided by the almost unreal Clovis and the all too real Holden.

“Fine. Have it.” Holden turned his back on her and walked away.

“No!” Clovis sounded outraged. She followed, trying to get ahead of him, hampered by the equipment and the people, mainly men, who stopped foolishly in her way. “Why would you do that? You’re angry about it. I know you are! So fight!”

“About what?” Holden rounded on her and found himself closer than expected, having to look up. He *was* angry – she was right about that, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that she was a stranger and had no business in his business. She’d still have no right talking to him like this even if she were his mother. “What? What am I angry about?”

“The baby of course.”

He didn’t mean to raise his hand. He certainly wouldn’t have hit her – whatever size she was – but her palm covered his fist before either of them could find that out. “Good! Now we’re getting somewhere.”

He shook her off and stalked away, aiming for the street. “Getting somewhere?” He couldn’t keep his voice low enough to avoid providing entertainment for the people watching. He wouldn’t be coming back. That was for sure. “The only place we’ve got is that you’re a stalker who needs locking up. How would fighting one of the sweaty apes back there help ... anything?” He couldn’t deny that he’d wanted to punch someone many times since Sarah

miscarried. He'd wanted to punch someone every day since then. Himself included. The pain he deserved was for that tiny voice that wouldn't stay silent – the one that said it was better this way, that he never would have asked Sarah to marry him if she hadn't been pregnant, that they had never been suited, were too young, too poor... He hated that cynical, calculating voice, and at the same time knew it to be himself, running through the core of every bone.

He hated himself for that voice. For wallowing in the loss of a nameless child he'd never seen, when Sarah's pain was surely a hundred times worse, having lost it from her body, having made it and carried it with her. Hated himself for surrendering so easily when she said she needed to be alone, and later, that they were done.

Holden stopped at the exit, glass doors beaded with rain. Bright lights. Darkness outside. He felt her at his shoulder.

"They came to be punched. To punch and be punched. You can't stop fighting just because the ones that hurt you are out of reach – or how will you be ready when they aren't?"

"Lady..." Holden bit back the angry words, they were just punches of a different sort, queuing to be thrown. "Nobody hurt me. Things just happen. It sounds like you've got your own deal going on." He reached for the door.

"Idiot." Clovis sounded almost friendly. "You forgot to change."

"I am an idiot." He'd been so wrapped up in himself that he'd almost marched out into a wet October evening in shorts and a T-shirt.

"Take it." Clovis took his shoulder and turned him as if he were a doll. She put the book in his hand. "Someone hurt you. You're not the author of your own story. And you're about to meet her." She turned and walked away, taut Lycra and twitching muscle. "You'll see her soon. She had the arrogance to write herself into the tale."

“W-where are you going?” Holden understood that however hale this ‘Clovis’ might look on the outside, on the inside she was even more fractured than him. Should he follow her? She was clearly suffering some sort of mental health crisis.

“To fight, of course. There are sweaty apes that need punching. I might not like her, but I have to admit she has quite the imagination! She made up a very interesting city. This ‘London’. So full of magic and dirt. I’ll be here ‘til my brother comes for his turn.”

He took two steps in her direction, then stopped. She had a brother coming. He’d look after her. Until then, she hardly needed Holden tagging around. Though he did want to know how she found out about— He shook his head, the anger returning, and marched off to the changing room.

A fully dressed Holden emerged from the gym twenty minutes later to find that the rain had waited for him. He hunched in his trench coat and headed out across York Way to the Camden Road. The book’s insert was the old-fashioned sort and somewhat worse for wear — it claimed to have been issued by the ‘Cat and’ ... the cat and something library. The ‘something’ had been torn away. It was so unusual a name for a library that Holden had no problems believing it had to be the Cat and Mouse library, less than a mile down the same road he was splashing his way along.

About halfway there, under the sodium glare of passing streetlamps, he remembered that one of the main consequences of the oft-reported slicing of library budgets was an ever-shrinking window during which they could be used. His destination very likely closed hours ago. He should have gone before the gym.

Sunk costs are a thing though, and he walked on, carrying one more reason to curse his own stupidity. Every hundred yards revealed a new thing he should have said to that girl,

Clovis – what sort of name was Clovis anyway? He was fairly sure it had something to do with cavemen... The lights were on – he could see that beneath the library’s illuminated sign from far off. And, against the odds, as he drew closer it seemed that the library was open. He could see people going in.

The place turned out to be far more modern than expected in a library – which in his experience were Victorian buildings with a touch of gothic splendour, or more worthy efforts from the early to mid-twentieth century, with paint seven layers deep, at least four of them on varicoloured display where the flaking was worst.

From the outside it could almost be a restaurant. The brightly lit interior and ranks of pale shelving soon dispelled that illusion. Shaking off the rain, Holden, went straight to the counter, ready with a list of valid reasons as to why any fine for overdue books should not attach to him.

The librarian at the desk was both younger and less professional in appearance than Holden had expected, a young woman in her early twenties with a shock of black hair as if she’d come straight from some convention of goths with only the briefest of attempts to change. But where goths were either born pale or powdered themselves a ghostly hue, the woman with the questioning look had a more middle eastern appearance to her. Perhaps Iranian.

“Can I help you?”

Holden realised he’d been staring. Again. “Sorry. I’ve brought back a book. It’s not mine. I ... my dog found it.”

“In your house?” she asked, arching a thick eyebrow.

“Well ... yes.” Claiming his dog found it was as far as Holden was prepared to go down that particular path. Volente got out of the house. Often. And it didn’t seem to matter how locked the front and back doors were. Holden had wondered whether his mother had early onset dementia until he too had accidentally closed the living room door, trapping Volente inside, only to see him sniffing the bushes in the back garden minutes later.

“So, did someone else in your house take it out?” The young woman’s nameplate declared her to be Livira Page. Livira almost sounded like a name he knew, though perhaps it was something middle eastern, or French even...

“I guess, my mother—”

“It’s a powerful book,” Livira said.

“I...” Holden felt it would be too crass to give his own opinion, even though he hadn’t asked for hers. “I guess it’s famous for a reason.”

“You didn’t get anything out of it?”

“I... Well, they made us read it in school.”

“Try it again?”

“I don’t think so.” He put the book on the desk and slid it towards her.

Livira set her hand to the cover, fingers spread. “It might read differently when nobody’s forcing you.”

“Well, you’re kind of pushing me to read it. So...”

“I guess I am.” She pushed the book back towards him. “I’ll tell you what: read it now and if your opinion hasn’t changed, for better or worse, then that’s the end of it. But if it has, then read it every ten years, and come back to tell me about it.”

“You’ll still be here in ten years?”

“You’ll be surprised.” She smiled, not a grin but something complicated. Something Mona Lisa.

“This sounds a bit one-sided. What do I get out of it if I ... win?”

“You always get *something* out of reading a book. It’s a reward in and of itself.” She turned away and began going through a pile of returns. Books she *had* allowed to be given back.

Holden considered just leaving *Catcher* where it was. He’d done his bit. Marched through the rain to see it home. He found himself staring at the large poster on the wall behind the reception desk.

At first, he thought it was modern art of the kind he most despised, a canvas of entirely one colour – as if that were somehow clever. In this case, the colour was white. Had it been sold as a rebellion against conformity, a bold declaration that deserved praise? To Holden, these things always seemed more like rather lazy cash grabs by smooth-tongued conmen with all the talent of house painters. A single word in a font almost too small to be seen caught his eye though, top left: ‘Potential.’ And whilst it still seemed a waste of wall space, he did begrudgingly acknowledge the message. He took the book and stalked out.

“Ten years!” the girl called after him.

Holden hardly heard her. His child, his unborn daughter, she had been potential, nothing but potential. He walked on wondering if the hollow pain in his chest was what people meant when they said ‘heartbroken’. He had always thought it was just a saying. The broken heart carved onto a school desk – a symbol to represent something nebulous – but this, what he’d been feeling for two weeks now, this was pain, actual physical hurt, as if he

needed anything to underscore the sudden inexplicable misery that had swamped him that night when she'd called him to the hospital.

It shouldn't matter. It didn't matter. She hadn't even shown. It was an indulgence to feel this way. He should shake it off, walk it off, lift it from him like a weight in the gym...

Livira wasn't there when Holden returned two days later. He'd jogged the last quarter mile for no reason, and arrived sweaty and out of breath, to find her gone and an older woman in her place, neat where her predecessor had been untidy, polite where Livira had been challenging.

"I'm returning this book."

"Thank you." She added it to one of the piles beside her and turned away.

Holden stood, mouth half open, ready to tell her what he'd thought of it, only to be given the cold shoulder of her indifference. "I hadn't remembered that Celia miscarried," he said. "I didn't remember her at all if I'm honest."

The woman turned back and peered at him over the top of her spectacles, puzzled.

"In the book..." He waved his arm at it. "Celia."

"Oh." A polite smile. "I've not read it."

"But... Everyone has? Surely? They make you read it in school."

"They made *you* read it. Not everyone gets the same list, and the list changes." The smile warmed a few degrees. "It was *The Conch King* for me. That was what we all had to read."

“Oh.” Holden had been running, he realised, to unburden himself. Jules, the disaffected schoolboy, so proud of his nihilism and the originality of his own thoughts ... the insufferable Jules who Holden had so wanted to punch in the mouth when he was first made to read the book ... that kid had been him. He’d been looking in a mirror and had been so caught up in being his own version of Jules that he hadn’t known it. He had hated Jules without irony, had arrogantly mocked his arrogance... all the time unaware of how the author had captured him on the page, and in doing so revealed not only each and every flaw but had relentlessly stolen away his imagined originality. Holden had been so predictable, so inevitable, that the author had known him without ever meeting him. A walking talking cracked-voiced spot-faced cliché. Holden felt a certain sympathy for the boy. He’d walked in the same shoes and was glad to be out of them.

“I met her once.” Holden gestured at the screen.

“Clovis Eventari? You met Clovis Eventari?” Julia snorted as she walked past, mug of tea in hand.

“True story. In one of those gyms Uncle Steve’s company run. She’s a ... strange ... woman. She stole my book.”

“That bit I believe. You would take a book to the gym. If you ever went to the gym.”

“This was in the old times, back when– Hey! Keep the playdough on the table!”

Timmy, with the mono-focus of a wholly engaged two-year-old, continued to pitch blue playdough zeppelins, or possibly dinosaurs, off the table’s edge onto the carpet. Holden

left him to his mother. Seeing Clovis's blood-stained victory grin on the screen had reminded him that he had a book to read. Livira had, of course, not been there when he returned to the library to take out *Catcher*, but the book had and since it was the same edition, seemingly unchanged by the passage of a decade, he'd signed up for a library card just to take it out. The evangelical librarian might have forgotten their bargain, but Holden considered himself made of finer stuff!

He picked the book up and began at the beginning, expecting to forge a swift path through the familiar pages of the twice-read classic. By the end of the first chapter Holden understood that he had a very different journey ahead of him. The fact that the book itself – the physical object – was unchanged and came freighted with memories of the curious challenge on a rainy night was part of it. Holding its weight in his hands put him back on that rainswept length of Camden Road, trying to out-stride his sorrow. It put him back beneath the bright lights of the Alpha Gym, trying to meet Clovis Eventari's stare. It struck him now that it hadn't been anger in her eyes, or not just anger. He'd dismissed what she was saying, but she'd been a mirror, and the hurt he saw in her face had been his own.

Holden looked up from the heading of chapter 2, blinking away a prickling in his eyes. Timmy sent another dinosaur tumbling to its doom just as his mother turned her back, and in that moment, with that old ache in his chest, Holden would have let a thousand playdough triceratops be mashed into the carpet's weave to make the toddler happy. What he would do to keep him safe didn't bear thinking about. What army he would fight to have held his baby, even for a day...

"Are you alright, honey?" Julia was giving him a worried look from the kitchen door.

Holden nodded, not trusting himself to speak for a moment. “Yes. This book. I’m back to thinking Jules is an idiot again. The little shit’s got so much going for him and all he does is sulk and mope.”

“Of course he’s an idiot. He’s sixteen. What do you expect?”

Holden stopped in the doorway of the Cat and Mouse library, letting the warm air escape into the October chill behind him. “Can’t be...” A whisper.

He found his voice as he approached the reception desk. “They told me you hadn’t worked here for years.” Livira Page, her nameplate declared it boldly, black on white, but it was hardly needed, she hadn’t changed.

“Holden! What did you think of it?”

“The book?” He blinked.

“Of course the book.”

“Well. I’m kind of back to where I started, but I think Jules is an idiot for different reasons. It’s just scary how the last ten years got behind me. And there he is wasting time staring at the wall. Honestly, it made me want to get off my arse and do more with my life. Get a more worthwhile job, really try to make a difference. There’s something irritating in Jules’ apathy, like he’s got all the time in the world. Like his schooldays are going to last forever. But we all know he just has to glance away and “bang!” they’ll be gone.

“And that bit with his sister’s miscarriage. Her boyfriend – I used to think of them both as grownups, like Jules does. But they’re kids, both of them, Celia and John. I know what that’s–” Holden looked up from his thoughts and fixed Livira with a hard stare. “How are you here? They said you left years ago.”

“I still have friends here. They let me come back for a day. To see you.” She smiled.

“And you’ll be here next time?” He frowned. “When I’m forty-two.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

They fell to talking about the book, and Livira, although she offered few opinions, seemed to know the work very well. It was when she mentioned the author, and the age he’d been when he wrote his opus, that Holden suddenly remembered Clovis and asked, “Do you know Clovis Eventari?”

“Why do you ask?”

“It was something she said that first time. I met her. Just before I met you. I had the book with me. She said ... well, a lot of weird things, if I’m honest. She said something about ... well, that I’d meet some woman soon, but she called her ‘the author’. I don’t think she liked her very much. And the only person I met that night was you.”

“I do know her. Yes.”

“Quiet librarian Livira Page knows world famous mixed martial arts champion and general hellraiser, Clovis ‘the knee’ Eventari?”

Livira shrugged. “You know her too. And who said I’m quiet?”

“Well...” Holden looked pointedly around the library. “And you’re a librarian, not an author.”

“I could be both.”

“Are you?”

“I wrote a book once.”

Holden hesitated. He didn't want to get suckered into reading something amateur and then having to lie about how much he liked it. "What was it about?"

"Lots of things. A collection of stories." Livira made no attempt at a sales pitch.

"But she was saying..." Holden struggled to remember. "You wrote yourself into your own story? No wait – she told *me* 'You're not the author of your own story.'."

"Very few people are the author of their own story. Perhaps we're all characters someone else is writing. Maybe in *this* world there are characters in books who exist in their *own* world and consider themselves as real as the people who wrote them. And maybe they're writing books that have us in. It could be that if you had a mechanism that could leaf through the pages of the multiverse, it would be able to take you to a world and a time and a location that matched the contents of any book you put into it."

"Ha. I believe you're an author now." Holden grinned at the overflow of Livira's imagination.

"Well." Livira waved to an approaching librarian. "This has been lovely, but I have to get to the exchange very soon. We'll meet in ten years' time?"

"Ten years." Holden nodded, his disbelief only partial this time. Perhaps they really would meet a decade from now.

“Holden!” Livira looked up from her work at the reception desk. She would be in her forties now, like him, though apart from the almost strategic streaks of grey in her hair she could still pass as a twenty-something. “How’s Volente?”

“Volente? I might equally well ask how you remember the name of my old dog.” Holden couldn’t think when he would have mentioned it... “Dead of course.” He grimaced. “But we have a new one. My mother got one from the same rescue centre – same breed, type I mean, almost identical. He’s a ... black ... dog. It sounded lame but the extraordinary blackness of his coat was his defining feature – it was like that new magic paint that reduced everything to silhouettes. “We call him V-2 because he’s version 2 of Volente. Also, because it’s when he goes quiet that you have to start worrying.” He paused then added, “But mostly the version 2 thing.” Because not everyone gets jokes about the mechanics of Nazi rockets used to bomb World War II London.

Livira grinned. “And the book?”

Holden held up the edition of *Catcher* that had joined them across two decades now. The book was baring up better than he was. Where he had a widow’s peak and laughter lines, the book sported a single stain the size of a thumbprint – spaghetti bolognaise sauce, courtesy of Timmy, now twelve years old and always too eager to be on to the next thing, certainly too eager to afford books their expected courtesies. He’d reminded Holden that he could read books on his phone ‘like normal people do’.

“This time I felt sorry for Jules.” Holden had never felt sorry for the kid, but he’d never really seen him as a child before. He was a kid though. His voice might have broken, he might be nearly six foot tall, but hell, he was only four years older than Timmy. What sort of age was that to put up with all the shit he’d had heaped on him. What age was it for any kid to deal with everything that’s coming at them, barrelling out of the immediate future at

sixty minutes an hour like out-of-control trucks. “Those teachers should have known better. And that mother of his, all tied up in her own drama. Jules needed her. She might have lost a son, but he lost a brother, dammit, and that’s not nothing. Not when you’re twelve, and then your mum dumps you at boarding school.”

He walked back to the tube station past electronic billboards from which Clovis Eventari’s 1000-watt glare bathed him in coloured light. They’d said it was a publicity stunt when she started taking on the men. They’d stopped saying it very soon after, when she won. In sports dollar terms she was a Tiger Woods, a LeBron James, a Lionel Messi. She was brave, there wasn’t any doubting that, with skills that went off the charts. Even so, Holden couldn’t help remember how she was that night. They’d both been so young. And despite her confidence, it seemed to him that the difference between charging at one thing, and running away from another, was often so small as to make it impossible to tell one from the other.

By their fourth meeting Holden was fifty-two and felt it. He had a son the same age he’d been when he first met Livira. He tied V-3 up by the cycle racks though he thought the library might be pet friendly now, since he’d seen a huge Maine Coon coiled in a corner when he came to check out *Catcher* the week previously.

“Stay boy,” he told V-3. A rather redundant command since, like others of his breed, the hound seemed able to slip his leash and do whatever the hell he pleased.

Holden walked through the doors of the recently refurbished Cat And Mouse (no to AI fiction) carrying a developing paunch and light by half a head of hair. Livira herself, apart

from going completely and uniformly grey, had made no concession to the passing decades, as if she kidnapped a few children from the Kiddies' Corner every year and bathed in their blood.

Holden had almost reached the reception desk when he became aware of a large shape bearing down on him from the aisles.

"Clovis fucking Eventari!" He covered his surprise with the oath. She was as big as he remembered, thicker in the torso, her red hair darkened towards wine, or blood, her features blurred by the near infinity of blows she'd returned with interest.

"Holden fucking Cornfield." She punched him playfully on the shoulder.

"Jesus, woman!" He massaged the muscle.

Livira looked up at them both. "Hello."

"Stop looking smug," Clovis said. "I didn't learn a thing."

"It's not about teaching," Livira said. "Who would want that? It's about sharing. The author lays out the things they've seen, the things they've felt. They try, using words, to convey ideas too delicate for words, building characters and places and times from which the ephemeral might bleed into the space between the lines."

"Fancy talk." Clovis reached out and took Holden's copy of *Catcher* from him. "I like the city. And the fighting, obviously. But this? A book within a book? What's the point? And him?" She nodded at Holden as if he weren't there.

"You read it though?" Livira asked.

"Every year." Clovis nodded. "I still couldn't tell you what it's about." She frowned.

“It’s about pain.” Holden understood it now. Though surely at sixty-two he’d have a new opinion. “It’s about how we’re all rattling through our lives without the least plan, even if we think we have one. Jules, his sister, his mother, the teachers. I started to see that he was a child, then that she was, then that the teachers were just children too. Sure, they’d had a decade or two added, and thought they’d figured it out, thought they knew the answers, but then they grow a bit older and understand that they don’t understand. And all of them are hurt, even that arse Davidson, and that’s what drives them and guides them, they’re all of them wrapped around their wounds, trying to shield them, trying not to hurt any more. It’s about pain.”

Clovis’s frown deepened and she kept her eyes on Livira. “Holden doesn’t matter. You wrote him. He’s just saying what you want him to.”

Livira shook her head. “No. I wrote *about* him. I don’t think anyone writes anyone – they discover them, carve them out of the ether like a palaeontologist chipping rock from a fossilised bone.

“Besides, I’m here because I wrote myself in. That doesn’t make me any more real than Holden in your view. You’re the only one who got here using the Mechanism.

“And I didn’t give Holden his opinion. The three of us found it together. Without you, Clovis, without you coming back to this story time and again, it would mean something different. Or nothing at all.

“And I think Holden’s right. That *is* what my story is about. Somewhere between the story, the book inside it, between Holden and you, somewhere in that dynamic ... it’s about pain ... it’s a message I can’t write out in words. A message that couldn’t ever be written out in simple lines, as if one person were explaining it to another. It’s a thing that emerges

between the reader and the text, and it's always changing, but it's always about the same thing."

"You think I'm not real?" Holden asked, bemused.

"I think everything's real. Just not at the same time. Or at least not in the same place." Livira took his right hand in both of hers. "I think if you wrote a story about your daughter, the life she might have lived, the wonders she saw, and the people who loved her ... I think that would be real too, and that somewhere her potential would play out just like that, and in a trillion other places it would flow down every other path she might have taken – *did take*.

"I think Clovis will keep fighting across a thousand worlds, ones she thinks are real, and ones she thinks are pretend. And I think that's about pain too. And if she finds a story that resonates with her, and she returns to it year by year, she might discover another way of seeing her own wounds, and live a happier life. Which is what I want for all of you."

Clovis snorted. "You and my brother deserve each other." Despite the snort it didn't sound unkind. "I'm out of here. I'll leave you two to sort out which of you is the story. Have fun." She nodded to Holden. "Holden. It's been ... real." And with that she was striding away, filmed none too discretely by half a dozen smart phones.

"I ... I should go too." Holden watched Clovis exit the glass doors. He had a sudden urge to be back with Timmy and Julia and the things that made sense, that grounded him, made him feel real. "Will we ... do this again?"

"Sure." Livira smiled. "This" – she held up the book – "will keep giving as long as you're game. All of them will." She nodded to the shelves. "I'll be here. Sixty-two, seventy-two, come and see me. I've checked my diary. You're written in."