

Chapter 15

Monday, January 14, 2002

First Day

As he customarily did on the first day of classes, Tannon arrived at school well before anyone else. The faculty parking lot was empty except for his dark green Jeep and the night custodian's brown Chevy. Tannon preferred being firmly in place before the first day of confusion began. The beginning of the January semester was not nearly as stressful as the August semester, but it was still worth handling with care.

He unloaded two 3-ring notebooks from the front seat of the Jeep, checked the pockets of his pants for school keys, and headed towards the windowless brick building. This was his seventh year of teaching, and it was a job that suited him just fine. He had avoided the responsibilities taken on so willingly by many other professors. Tannon was careful to avoid assignment to committees that involved controversial issues, and he never volunteered for any extra duties. His small department rotated leadership responsibilities regularly, but so far he had completely avoided the prospect of being the department chairman. Others seemed to enjoy the responsibility, so why should he stress himself? Other professors would not feel the sense of anxiety that Tannon felt at the nearest complication in life's routine. And teaching had enough demanding routines of its own.

The glass entry door was still locked, but he managed his key, the security latch, and his notebooks in a smooth pull of the door. The hallway floor caught his eye, shining as it always did on the first day of classes. He smelled the wax and noticed the quiet. The air conditioner was not yet on, and the hallway had a completely different smell and appearance from its regular busy mood. Glancing left and then right, Tannon noticed that the wooden fire doors were all closed, making the hallway appear confined.

He unlocked his office door and pushed it open. The telephone message light flashed in the darkness. The illumination from the hallway was just enough to see his office chair on top of the desk, a reminder from the custodian that his office had also been attended to during the winter recess. The office floor glistened, and the wax smell was even more intense in this small room.

He reached around the doorjamb for the light switch. The fluorescent overhead lights winked briefly, buzzed in the stillness, and then burned bright. Tannon dropped his notebooks onto the yellow chair by the door, reached for the telephone, and punched in his voicemail security code. The division secretary's voice came through in faster cadence than he ever remembered:

"Tannon, this is Laura." She barely paused between sentences. "I just saw the L A Times. Your name is right there on the front page." Laura went on to explain that she would be on campus early, in case he hadn't seen the newspaper article yet. Early to Laura was not Tannon's idea of early.

He smiled to himself and purposefully held the pose, feeling strangely calm. He hadn't seen the Times article and was a bit surprised to learn that it had made the front page. He composed himself, pushed his mouth purposefully outward and spoke out loud to himself.

"So here's your fifteen minutes of fame."

While driving to school that morning, he had listened to the news on the radio, thinking this might be the day. But he warned himself to be careful. First, he didn't handle society very well. Second, he was only the discoverer of the object, so he was finished with this whole thing, except for the expected questions by friends and maybe the news media. The truth was that he had looked up, saw something unexpected, and that was that. He wasn't a professional astronomer, so he didn't have an opportunity to learn more except through others. His fame would be brief. Very soon everyone would realize that he had merely found this object rather than invented it. It was too bad he couldn't be more involved in the adventure reserved for the astronomers, because that excitement was just now beginning. But it wasn't necessarily a bad thought that he would soon be forgotten by society.

Tannon walked down the hallway to the Division Office, unlocked the glass door to retrieve his mail, and then relocked the door behind him. Back in his office, he reviewed his small pile of first-day announcements, and then he walked to his nearby classroom. He was setting up the multimedia projector while the rest of the campus was just coming alive.

Laura burst into the classroom, holding the newspaper high in her outstretched arm.

"Professor Tannon, astro-geologist," she proclaimed.

"I'm definitely an amateur astronomer, and most would say that I'm an amateur geologist."

"So have you seen this yet?" she asked.

"No. I'm glad you brought it."

She extended the article forward to him, and he took the folded newspaper without expression.

"So this is what you call the front page. I guess the lower right corner counts."

Laura planted both of her arms firmly on her waist in her most motherly pose.

"I'll tell you what. The front page of the Times is the front page. You know, it's rather tough to compete with the big stuff about China."

"I suppose you're right. Will you help me with any incoming calls on this? They'll probably hit your office when my phone goes unanswered."

"Of course, mister astro-geologist. I'll invite everybody right into your classroom."

"Thanks. I'm sure I'd like that."

As if on cue, the classroom door swung open, and a serious-looking fellow strutted inside, with his tie swinging in front of his short-sleeved striped shirt.

"Professor Bessimer?" His raised eyebrows echoed his question.

"Yes." Tannon answered hesitantly as he and Laura studied this early arrival on the first day of classes.

"I'm from the *Valley Tribune*. Can I have a few moments of your time?"

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Tannon's classes went rather routinely that day. Not a single student mentioned anything about the discovery. Either they had not heard

the morning news or they hadn't noticed his name. Maybe the Los Angeles Times was the only local news source that had picked up the story that morning. In any case, Tannon was grateful for oblivious students.

He had three voicemail messages waiting for him when he returned to his office at noon, but none of them were from reporters. Even the morning's early visitor hadn't probed very much, as soon as he learned that Tannon didn't know any more than the major news wires had already announced. It seemed that the reporter planned to divert the thrust of the story toward the hometown aspect of the discovery. There wasn't much to say after that.

One of Tannon's messages was from the division dean, asking him to visit his office as soon as possible to formulate a plan in case things went a bit wild. Other than that interruption, there was little to deflect Tannon's routine. His fifteen minutes of fame looked like it would last cumulatively less than ten minutes.

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Kelly pushed herself up further in her seat, her routine action before entering a stall. It wasn't that she feared stalls as much as she wanted the added visibility to all sides. There were a lot of planes in this part of the Los Angeles Basin, many of them piloted by students practicing airwork. Kelly's student, Robert, sat fully upright next to her. His position of attention was dictated more by outright fear than by a concern for visibility.

"Let's clear the area, and then try a departure stall straight ahead."

"Okay," said the young clean-cut looking youth. His sunglasses gave him the desired fighter pilot look, but right now he was as meek as a kitten. He hadn't had much luck with his first series of stalls yesterday. Today was not something to look forward to.

Robert obligingly maneuvered the airplane to the left, craning his neck far out towards the windshield of the Cessna 152, looking for conflicting traffic. Then he repeated the maneuver to the right. Nobody was in this chunk of airspace at the moment.

"Now watch your rudder control closely this time," said Kelly. "That was the only problem yesterday. Keep an eye on the ball as you approach the stall, and that should help."

The future fighter pilot flexed his left hand on the control wheel, trying to relax a bit. He slowly pulled the yoke toward his stomach. Full power was how this tiny airplane flew in cruise, so there was no adding of power for a departure stall. Up came the nose, as the Cessna

slipped into an aggravated climb. The airspeed dropped rapidly, and Robert maintained control of the wings with the control wheel. The back-pressure required to hold this steep attitude wasn't a problem, but it certainly was noticeable to anyone handling the controls. All of the flight controls began to mush as the airspeed dropped, as if they were connected to their control surfaces by fat rubber bands. Robert was grimacing now and working the control wheel rapidly.

The Cessna 152 slowed further, the engine noise seeming even louder as the slipstream noise abated. The airspeed indicator dropped below 50 knots and then below the green arc itself, the indicator being notoriously inaccurate at this slow velocity. The small airplane started to turn to the left, pulled by the increased torque effect of this high power setting and unusually low airspeed. Robert gritted his teeth, not from the force required on the control wheel but from anticipation of what awaited him on the other side of the green arc.

"The torque is pulling you to the left," noted Kelly calmly. "Check the ball."

Kelly's feet were flat on the floor, and her hands were firmly in her lap. It was important for Robert to know that he had full control of the airplane.

Robert glanced down at the ball. It was half-scale to the right as the Cessna skidded leftward from the torque of the engine.

"Step on the ball," reminded Kelly, still taking no action to correct the slow speed skid.

Robert pushed down tentatively with his right foot, but it was not nearly enough, and the airplane was hanging on the edge. The departure stall was imminent.

Whoosh! The nose of the aircraft fell suddenly as the wings stopped flying. But now Robert's increased right rudder pressure caused the Cessna to drop off suddenly to the right. And he didn't counter with immediate left rudder. They were headed into a spin.

"Oh!" was all that Robert could exclaim as the airplane's nose pointed itself nearly straight down, the rotation to the right winding up into a fully developed spin. Kelly purposely tried not to overreact. These little Cessnas could spin quite safely. In fact, spins were supposed to be tomorrow's lesson. Maybe a little crisis could go a long way here.

Robert had instinctively pulled the throttle back to idle, so that was a step in the right direction. But the control wheel was still firmly in his lap, a natural reaction, but certainly not the right one.

"Okay, Robert. You've got us in a spin, but think it through, and get going with the recovery." She spoke as if the engine of her Mustang was hesitating a bit as it climbed a steep grade. No big deal for Kelly. Robert was nearly panicked.

Robert said nothing and did nothing. The control wheel was still full aft. The world was spinning by, the earth coming rapidly closer, and Kelly was watching it, counting the rotations. Altitude was beginning to become a factor as the altimeter unwound through 4000 feet.

"Yoke forward to break the stall," said Kelly in a slightly higher pitch but still showing little tension. Robert did nothing except continue to clutch the wheel in his left hand. His right hand was firmly glued to the idle throttle.

"I've got it," said Kelly distinctly but as calmly as possible. Robert released his death-grip with a groan, and Kelly immediately pushed the control wheel full forward and kicked hard on the left rudder pedal. At first the nose of the little Cessna was pointed even further earthward, and Kelly and Robert were staring at nothing but ground. But then the aircraft regained its flying speed and came smartly out of the spin. Almost simultaneously the rotation abruptly stopped and the airspeed smoothly increased. Kelly began slowly pulling back on the control wheel to regain cruise configuration. Robert reached up and pressed both of his hands firmly against the sides of his headset. He held onto his head as if it were about to depart his body.

Kelly said nothing for the next few minutes, giving her student some time to calm down. When she spoke, she simply explained what had happened and how it could be prevented. She asked Robert if he wanted the landing. He didn't.

Within Kelly, the world spun a lot, and it was not a problem. Recovery also came natural, a routine part of life. Sometimes those around her, like Robert, just didn't understand how routine that spinning could be. They also didn't understand how routine the recovery could be for a frail little flight instructor.