

Adventures in Surveying

A short segment from River of Jordan

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March 1985/Present

Note: *this is but a short sampling of what goes on in Ellet Station, Kentucky and Lennoxton, Tennessee during a certain period in time that has yet to be determined. I figured it was fairly representative of what goes on in the rest of the story, and that's why it is presented here. Hopefully I'll be able to complete this sometime in this century.*

"I don't know how you talked me into this," Tyler groaned.

Jordan laughed. "Who talked who into what?"

"Don't remind me."

They were wallowing down a low, wide passage proceeding almost due west. It was one both were already quite familiar with, the continuation of the water passage which led from the Druid's entrance. It had been given no name, probably because no one had come up with a moniker descriptive enough for the wonderfully rare brand of despair with which this lead anointed its explorers. Rarely more than two to three feet high—high enough to tempt one to try crawling on hands and knees but too low to actually allow such travel—and usually half filled or deeper with cold, cold water, this was the passage no one had wanted to explore, let alone survey. But that was the purpose of this trip, to at least get a fix on the direction of travel of what was to date the only known flowing stream in Druid's Hole.

Their movement through the passage was painfully slow considering the chill, but it was a slowness with purpose. They were surveying—mapping—the passage as they went along, Tyler running point, setting the stations and keeping the book, while Jordan held the end of the measuring tape and took the compass and clinometer readings. From this progressive collection of distance and azimuth data they would add to Danny Wilson's steadily growing map of the cave, and hopefully to their overall knowledge of the subterranean watercourse as a whole.

It was tough work. Neither wore wetsuits; Tyler considering them unsporting while Jordan simply didn't own one. Neoprene outfits were not the sort of thing one requested of Joe Barrett, after all. So they relied on polypropylene underwear and extra layers of wool. Most of Jordan's were far too baggy, being Tyler's castoffs, while Tyler's own were so tight they barely covered all of him. So they suffered.

It wasn't so much the persistent chill of the water, which was certainly bad enough. Both had been in colder water in Big Spring Cave. No, it was the steady breeze that was the real cause for concern. Wet as they were, the wind would sap their body heat at a far greater rate. Even now Tyler had been forced to redraw some of his

passage sketches because they'd been, well, unreadable, and Jordan was having to hold his breath to keep the compass from shaking before he could call out the readings.

"Science!" Tyler would bellow with forced enthusiasm from time to time, harkening to an old Thomas Dolby song and expecting a similar reply from Jordan. When he didn't get it, he knew it would be time to turn around, but the young fellow had proven unusually strong thus far. Strong, or perhaps just overly determined. Or perhaps something else.

"How much have we got?" Jordan called as Tyler stood upright in a fortuitously located ceiling joint.

"Umm, let me check." Tyler added up the distance figures in his head. "Looks like a hair under eleven hundred feet," he said. "Not a bad piece of work for a day. You feel like quitting?"

Jordan gave him a black look. "Just fire us up something to eat," he said. "As soon as I get up there with you I'm taking a break."

"Fair enough." He reeled in the tape as Jordan put the compass back in its nearly waterproof plastic case and half crawled, half swam ahead to join him. By the time the younger man reached him, he was sitting on a slab of limestone, just barely out of the water, and had a carbide lamp burning fiercely under a tin of boned chicken and a second going under a can of water for coffee. And he'd lit a pair of cigarettes.

"Well, we're out of the water," Jordan said wryly, accepting the smoke gratefully.

"Till lunch break's over anyway," Tyler said. "I want to push this thing as far we can."

"Sure. Just try to keep in mind that we're going to have to go back the exact same way we came in."

"Eleven hundred feet." Tyler sighed heavily. "That's a lot of work in a passage like this. What do you say we drop the survey and explore ahead?"

Jordan shook his head. "I don't think Danny would like that."

"Danny's not here, is he?"

"No. But if we did that, we'd really be doing nothing more than...what do you call it?"

"Scooping? Maybe. But see, if we really can reach an end, we can always survey our way back here. Perfect strategy."

Jordan was beginning to be swayed by Tyler's arguments. "But what if we don't find an end? What if it just keeps going and going? We'll be too wore out to survey."

"I won't be if you won't be."

Jordan sighed, not entirely convinced but prepared to follow Tyler farther into what was looking more and more like hell. And fortified by a hot meal, he did just that.

As the minutes passed it was getting tougher and tougher for Jordan to keep up with Tyler, who was beginning to take on the look of a man possessed. On and on they pushed, the passage never changing from its typical obnoxious characteristic of low, wide, and wet. How far now? Jordan wondered, looking back at the murky water churned by their passage. Another half mile past the place we stopped for lunch? Was this a test, or was Tyler really bordering on the manic as he appeared to be? Had he ever intended to survey, or was this just an effort to run out the passage?

Either way, getting back would be interesting. In the past two thousand feet or so there'd only been two places where both of them had been able to get out of the water. One was a high, tight joint lead they'd had barely given a glance at, while the other was merely a bell dome, a point where swirling waters had incised a high point in the ceiling only just big enough for the two of them to sit face to face, passing a single cigarette back and forth. Two lit smokes in that confined space would've been asphyxiating. One was bad enough, but the warmth it created was at least comforting.

"I love you, man," Tyler had gasped between hits.

Jordan rolled his eyes and gave the stock reply: "Yeah, surre."

That had been thirty minutes ago. And now Jordan was becoming anxious...and exhausted...and furious.

"This really sucks, doesn't it?" Tyler finally called back to Jordan, a big grin on his tired face.

"Yeah," Jordan agreed. "It really does."

"You gonna have any trouble getting back?"

"Yeah, I really am."

Abruptly Tyler turned. "You're kidding, right?"

Jordan shook his head angrily. "Do I look like I'm kidding? Tyler, we're at least four thousand feet into this shithole. I don't know what time it is, but I'd guess we've been going for about five hours now. I have to go to school tomorrow, and my grades aren't so good that I can afford to coast a day."

"Well," Tyler sighed, "I guess you should've thought of that before you came in here with me, huh?"

Jordan didn't reply for a moment, taken aback by the uncharacteristically sharp response. Then he said, "I'm turning around. You go on if you want to, but if I go any farther I might not get back out. As it is I'm gonna be sick."

"Aw, run along home then," Tyler retorted. "Get yourself into a nice hot bath and bundle up good. Mommy'll be along with some nice hot cocoa in just a minute."

Again Jordan was stunned into silence, but this time he was angry. "Fine," he said quietly. "You go on ahead then. See if you ever find anybody to come this far with you again."

"Well, maybe you won't ever come in the cave again."

That was okay with Jordan too, and he said so before turning around.

Jordan wasn't sure whether to be angry, bitter, or just plain sad.

He was resting for a moment in the bell dome, smoking the only cigarette out of his pack that he'd been able to light. The last bit of warmth I'm going to be able to enjoy for a while, he thought. Maybe for quite a while.

It just wasn't right. What was eating Tyler? Sure, he'd seemed to be a little on edge when they'd gone under, but certainly Jordan had done nothing to warrant such harsh treatment. I bet nobody around here would've followed him so far, he thought. Or ever has, I bet. So what was the big deal? The passage wasn't going anywhere. They could always come back, maybe with warmer clothes and more food.

He tried to relax. It was impossible. He might as well have been on the South Col of Everest, so remote and far from rescue was he. He was also well past

hypothermic and had stopped shaking about thirty minutes before. It calmed him some, but at the same time he was more than aware that the cessation of his trembling was a bad sign, the last sign of fast approaching disaster.

Tyler Maddox was very pleased with himself. Not only had he pushed the most awful passage in Druid's Hole more than ten times past its known length, he'd in the process forged a real caver in Jordan Surrat, maybe the strongest natural caver he'd ever met.

Oh, he knew he'd just seemingly spurned the kid. Probably Jordan was pretty angry right now over Tyler's apparent monomania and subsequent harsh words. But it was all an act, a rite of passage of sorts. A test, just as Jordan had himself earlier surmised.

Tyler knew he'd have to catch up to Jordan and explain himself, but that he could do readily enough. He'd pushed himself pretty hard too, true, but not so hard that he couldn't extricate himself. And that was the way caving could be sometimes; like mountaineering, where climbers die when their drive to reach the summit eclipses their ability to get back down the hill, hardcore cavers were apt to push themselves far beyond their endurance barriers, real or imagined. Few in a situation such as this would have the good sense to turn around as Jordan had. But not before he'd exceeded Tyler's expectations in every possible avenue. The boy was strong, flexible, and determined. What's more, he had a dry sense of humor that made misery like this almost palatable.

"And he doesn't put up with any shit," Tyler smirked. "Not even from me." As such, he didn't believe the kid would have any trouble accepting his explanation and an apology. And from that point on, they would be...

Tyler's train of thought abruptly stopped. Even though he was still headed upstream, the water ahead was as murky as that behind him. And was it his imagination, or had the flow picked up?

Something was wrong, very wrong.

He didn't think. He just turned around as quickly as the small passage would allow him and began to scurry back the way he'd come.

He met Jordan at the narrow crevice where the young man was enjoying a stretch out of the water. "Jordan, we gotta get out of here," he said. "Right now. I think the water's rising."

"Oh, I'm getting out, all right," Jordan replied coolly. "And when I get out, I'm never coming back."

"We'll talk about that later. We gotta go, and I mean right now."

"All right."

They wallowed back downstream, now more swimming than crawling. And yes, the water was rising.

Quickly.

Too quickly. They both knew it. "Jordan," Tyler gasped, "how far do you reckon it is to that next dome?"

"At least another thousand feet," Jordan replied. "We're not going to make it, are we?"

They both stopped, brown water swirling around them.

"Oh Jesus Mary Joseph and all the saints," Tyler whispered. "This sucks, Jordy."

They looked at each other desperately for just a moment, then Jordan said, "That little ceiling joint back a ways? It might be big enough for us to get up into, at least a little way. It'd get us out of the water."

"Do you think? It looked awfully tight to me." Unspoken was the obvious: *and it's upstream, away from the only exit.*

Jordan shrugged. "Got any better ideas?"

The turgid water helped Tyler decide. "Let's go," he shouted.

So they worked their way back upstream, the water rising steadily around them till it so nearly filled the passage that they had to press their faces against the muddy ceiling to continue. It wasn't a swift flow, hardly some fierce current, but it was more than enough to sweep them away should they lose their footing, so they moved as carefully as they could. By the time they reached their last hope, the water had risen so high that they knew that this had to be it. They were utterly committed.

There was barely enough room for the two of them to stand at the same time. "Here," said Tyler, "let me boost you up. See if you can chimney up a little and find us a level spot where we can get out of the water."

Jordan put his foot in Tyler's hands and stepped up. There were no obvious handholds, but by pressing himself against the sides of the fissure he managed to work his way upward.

"See anything?" Tyler called up to him.

"Not yet."

"Well brother, I hope you find something soon, or I'm going to be moving up there with you."

Press, squirm, dig for a little more upward traction with his boots...inch by inch Jordan made his way up. Tyler would be better suited for this, he thought, he's wide enough to get some jam holds lengthwise. But he was making progress, and only ten feet above Tyler's head he found the hoped for cross passage, such as it was.

"There's something up here," he shouted to Tyler. "It's pretty small, but you might fit."

"I'm gonna have to fit," Tyler declared, wedging his way up the joint as Jordan slithered into the narrow canyon lead. "Can't stay down here anymore. The water was up to my chest. I can't believe it's rising this high! There was no rain in the forecast for today."

"Snowmelt," Jordan said, reaching a wider spot in the canyon and easing himself into a somewhat more comfortable position. "I bet that's what it is."

"Could be. Say, where the heck are you?"

Tyler's voice seemed to be coming from above him. "You've climbed past the cross passage," Jordan said. "Come back down a bit."

"Umm...if you're in that little slot I saw on the way up, I could be in trouble. There's no way I'm going to fit in there. I don't know that I can bend my body that way."

"Well, you could just wedge yourself up there and hope the water doesn't rise that high."

Tyler looked down. The dark water was less than ten feet below and rising, quickly too. "That ain't gonna work, brother. I'm gonna be sucking black in five minutes or less."

"Then you'll just have to get in here then." He looked up. "Seems like it keeps going up above. We'll just have to get up higher than it can."

"That's easy for you to say," Tyler muttered.

"Well, you have to try."

"All right," he sighed.

Tyler lowered himself until his head was level with the entrance to the cross passage, then he began to ease himself in until he wedged firmly. He backed out and tried another angle, with the same effect. "Nope," he said resignedly, "ain't gonna fit."

Jordan shined his light down the passage to get a better look. "You can fit, I bet. You'll probably have to corkscrew in, but you'll make it."

"Jordan, I've tried twisting, I've tried going straight in. I can't bend backwards, so that's out. The only other way I can think of would maybe be feet first, and the only way I think I could do that would be to climb back down and reverse back up and in, and that's just not possible, the water's too high."

There was a minute of silence, until the water reached Tyler's boots. Then he said, softly, "You're going to have to leave me."

"Yeah, surrre," Jordan replied. "Give me a minute. I'll think of something."

"I have maybe half a minute. Then it'll be up to my shoulders and it'll be coming into the passage you're in. You need to go, now, while you still can."

Jordan thought again, then said, "Did you think about climbing up a bit and coming in feet first that way?"

"Aw jeez, Jordy, that's dumb. The joint peters out too soon. I'd never fit that way."

"It's either that or drown, Ty!" Jordan shouted. "You decide."

Jesus, Tyler thought numbly. This really is it. He's right, it's the only way.

"Okay," he said, "I'll give it a shot."

He climbed up as high as the joint allowed, then, willing himself to be shorter, he pulled his legs up as high as he could and tried to wiggle his feet into the opening.

It wasn't working. And now he was wedged quite firmly into the upper portion of the joint.

"That's it," he called back down to Jordan. "I'm not going to be able to do it. Do me a favor and tell Rose..."

Something grabbed his right foot and pulled, hard. Tyler cried out in pain and cursed violently until he realized his foot was in the cross passage. "Son of a bitch!" he exclaimed. "How'd you get turned around in there? No, forget that, just get my other foot in. Break my ankle if you have to! Never mind how much I scream."

"Like it bothered me the first time." Jordan pulled roughly and managed to bring the other foot in. "Slowly now, ease on in and do exactly what I tell you to."

"We gotta be quick, Jordy. The water's almost here!"

Jordan guided Tyler's feet and legs along the narrow canyon while Tyler slowly maneuvered the rest of his body down the joint and into the opening. It was

excruciating, especially when he tried to fit his torso in. His body was extended all the way across the passage and twisted obscenely. But the worst was yet to come.

"All right," Jordan called, "you'll need to turn your body counter clockwise about three inches to pass a projection, then you'll be in all the way and I can get you started backwards."

"Fine," Tyler grunted painfully, "but if I do that I'll be face first in the water. It's here."

"Then you'll have to move fast. And trust me."

"No shit." He took a deep breath and twisted himself.

"No!" Jordan shouted. "Tyler, you're going to have to let your air out or you'll never make it. Do it now! And I'll pull you on in."

It went against every survival instinct ingrained into Tyler Maddox's DNA, but somehow in the back of his mind he knew he could trust Jordan. Without a word he forced out all the air out of his lungs, all of it and then some. He could feel his diaphragm contract, and no sooner had it done so that Jordan cried, "That's it! Now, twist counterclockwise just a hair more!"

Tyler did, and almost simultaneously felt a powerful yank on both his ankles. And into the passage he slid, but face first in water and powerless to get out of it.

Great, he thought. I'm gonna drown in three inches of water.

There was a pause, then another mighty pull, and he advanced another foot. Another pause, and, lungs afire, Tyler felt he could hold his breath no longer. He craned his head upward desperately and opened his mouth to the water...just as another pull abruptly gave him just enough room to lift his nose and mouth out of the water. He coughed and spluttered, and only then did he realize that he had enough room to move.

"Up here!" Jordan called from above him. "Fast!"

Tyler wormed backward another yard, then angled his body up into another, narrower joint. Jordan was about seven feet up, looking down with a grin. "Told you so," he said.

"Maybe," Tyler coughed. "But we're not out of this yet. We've just delayed the inevitable."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. There's another cross passage up here, and it's bigger. Longer too, from the looks of it, and it's trending up." He climbed up into it, then turned around and offered a hand to Tyler, who took it gratefully, joining Jordan in a low but comfortably wide passage that did indeed had a gentle upward grade to it. A shallow but swift little stream of water accompanied them, but it seemed pretty evident that they were well clear of the rising flood.

"Well son of a gun," Tyler exclaimed. "Do you know, Jordan, I think we're going to be okay after all!" He patted the ceiling. "It's dry. Chances are the water doesn't back up this high, and if it does, well, we can just crawl on upstream here and gain some more elevation. As it is, I bet we can wait it out." He wrapped his arms around himself and shuddered. "But Jesus, I can't imagine getting back down through that bad part."

"We might not have to," Jordan said. "Who knows where this goes? It might lead into cave we know."

Tyler shook his head skeptically. "I don't know of any unexplored drains, or at least not any I fit through."

"There weren't any leads out of the Volcano Room either, remember?" Jordan reminded him. "Besides, you didn't fit through that *last* opening. Take my word for it."

"I'll try anything, I reckon," he sighed. "But I'm gonna have to have a rest first."

"Don't think I can. I'm too cold. You take a nap and I'll crawl up ahead and see what I can see."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Tyler scrunched over as far as he could to get out of the persistent little stream, then closed his eyes. A minute or so later he was snoring peacefully.

Jordan advanced up the passage on his elbows and knees. He was too cold to feel much pain, but he knew that he was at least bruised heavily. So what's new, he chuckled. Long sleeves to school again. But nobody questioned him in winter, and in fact, damned few had ever bothered to speak to him anyway. No factor.

As crawls in Druid's went, this one wasn't all that bad. The little stream criss-crossed the passage repeatedly, forcing him to crawl through it, but that wasn't all that bad, especially considering everything else he'd been through that day. He was amazed at his sense of peace, as if nothing had really happened and the events of the day were nothing more than an everyday occurrence. But I go through worse pretty much every day anyway, he thought. Or perhaps none of it had really sunk in and would catch up with him later. Well, that was fine with him. As long as it happened after he got out of the cave everything would work itself out. It always did.

It was a long crawl, though. He went along in virtually the same conditions for nearly half an hour. He gauged his distance from Tyler at about fifteen hundred to two thousand feet. An hour out meant a two hour plus round trip, and he knew he was well past his endurance barrier. He was beginning to consider turning around when what appeared to be a blank wall seemed to make the decision for him.

"Well son of a gun," he sighed. "And isn't this just sweet."

He figured he was well above the high point of even a cataclysmic flood. That was well and good. But to wait here for the water to go down, with no food, no clean water, and with wet clothes in a breezy cave might well be death just as surely as drowning, only slower. And like Tyler, he didn't relish the thought of trying to get down the way they'd come up.

He smiled and shook his head. So he could still die here. So what? "Here killed by the cave, or up top by Joe Barrett," he murmured.

But as beautiful as it could be, as much as he loved it, the cave lost. Jordan decided a relatively quick death by beating at the hands of his sadistic stepfather was preferential to a slow, lingering demise in the cold darkness of Druid's Hole.

He lay there for a long time with his chin resting on his fists, his eyes screwed tightly shut as if to stem the tears that refused to come anyway. Crying, he thought, was as useless here as it was anywhere else. He tried to relax and conserve his energy. The crawl this far had warmed him up nicely, and had even helped dry his clothes a bit, the heat from his body raising clouds of condensation that billowed around and ahead of him, eventually drawn into and beyond the wall that blocked the passage.

It didn't hit him immediately, but when it did, he slid forward cautiously, as if not to tempt fate so brazenly when his luck had already been astonishingly good. The steam off of his clothing was going somewhere, somewhere ahead of him, and if that was true, then what looked like a blank wall might not be. He knew that steam could certainly go places he couldn't, but at the same time, all that air was going somewhere, and maybe...

He pulled the Mini-Mag from underneath his shirt and focused its beam to a pinpoint, then he aimed it ahead at the obstruction and squinted at what he saw. The steam was being pulled through, all right, passing underneath whatever the obstruction was, and whatever it was, it looked like...like...teeth?

His mouth dropped open in astonishment. Not daring to believe, not yet, he inched ahead, the flashlight in his mouth, pulling himself along through an awkward place where the ceiling dipped, but so did the floor. Just beyond this was the true "end" of the passage. He bellied into a collected pool of water, feeling ahead until his hands rested on the lowest portion of the blockage.

His mouth twisted into a grin so big that the flashlight popped out and dropped into the pool. "Flowstone," he said softly. Not the hardest of rocks, perhaps it could be breached. He grabbed a toothy projection and pulled. The bottom six inches broke away with startling ease. He tried another piece, with the same result, Then another, and another, and two more and he was sliding beneath the broken stubs and into a lofty, drippy dome chamber that looked curiously familiar. He stood in the center of the room and looked in every direction. There was an obvious lead about ten feet above him, and, barely visible behind an arc in the wall, a narrow but tall passage left the chamber. His heart racing, he ducked into the passage, knowing what he would find not a hundred feet away but still not ready to be entirely convinced until he held the evidence in his hand.

And then it was, and he was dashing back the way he came, whooping for joy.

"Tyler."

The big man barely stirred.

"Tyler. Wake up, it's time to go."

Tyler stretched, blinked like a mole in the light, and muttered, "Bugger off, Jordy. I've had this dream already."

"It's not a dream," Jordan said insistently. "Look."

Tyler rubbed his eyes with grimy hands and peered at what Jordan had thrust at him.

"D-2-1," he read aloud off the piece of lime green flagging tape. "What happened, did it wash down here?"

Jordan flicked the plastic strip at him disdainfully. "No, you big dork. I took it off the wall in the D survey passage, right where we left it. C'mon, let's get out of here."

Tyler looked up at him, jaw agape. "You're not making this up, are you?" he said softly.

Jordan shook his head, still grinning but wearily now. He turned away and led Tyler up the passage, and a little over three hours later they hoisted themselves from the maw of Druid's Hole into a cold, clear night.

They staggered out of the hollow and into the fieldhouse, where they changed out of their wet clothes, then without delay they hurried to Tyler's Buick and sped away from Slug Wright's farm with the heater turned up as high as it would go. Neither spoke, not even when they arrived at Tyler's home and found Rose's truck parked out front.

She was sitting on the sofa when they walked in. She took a deep breath and let it out in a great rush as she saw them, as if she'd just been carrying the tension for all three of them and had only now released it.

"Was it close?" she asked softly.

Tyler nodded solemnly. "Way close." He cocked his head toward Jordan. "This...", and you could almost see the words passing through his mind: *boy...man...*"this caver saved my life."

Rose strode over to where Jordan was staring at the far wall over her shoulder, an embarrassed look on his face. She took his face in her hands. "God, but you're cold," she said softly. Then she hugged him. "Thank you," she sighed in his ear. "Thank you for bringing him back, and thank you for bringing yourself back. I was so scared."

"Me too," Jordan said uncomfortably. But that was about to get worse, when Tyler made it a three way.

"I was joking in the cave," Tyler said, "but I mean it now. I love you, man. I treated you like dirt to see how strong you were, and not only did you never flinch, you saved us both."

"I didn't do anything you wouldn't have done," Jordan protested.

"Not the point," Tyler said. "You made me do something I couldn't do. That's the point."

"A hot bath and a warm bed for both of you," Rose ordered.

It should've been so simple. "I'll have to be getting home," said Jordan. "I'm going to be in pretty deep trouble as it is for being so late."

"It's a Saturday night!" Rose said. "And it's not even ten yet."

"But I told Joe Barrett I'd be home by seven."

She pursed her lips. "You let me take care of that." She walked over to the phone, picked it up, and dialed it.

Jordan gasped, paled, and nearly fainted. He might've toppled to the floor but that he was still being hugged fiercely by Tyler. "No!" he cried. "Tyler, tell her to stop!"

"Is this Mr. Barrett?" Rose said into the phone. "Corporal Barrett, this is Rose Weyrick." There was a pause, and she said sweetly, "Yes, yes I am." Another pause, then, "Why, thank you sir! We're not always on the best of terms, he and I, but he is my father and I certainly respect him and everything he's done for Breckinridge County. And you too, Corporal Barrett."

Jordan looked at her in horror. She gave him a funny look and continued. "Well sir, we're all over here at my husband's house. Jordan has had kind of a full day in the cave. In fact, it's my understanding that he saved my ex's life today. The thing is, he's pretty upset because they were hung up in the cave so long, and now he's late getting home. And there's so much to do yet—a debriefing, a look at the survey notes, and probably an incident report too. And I was wondering if you'd mind terribly if he stayed here tonight."

"Hey, great idea!" Tyler exclaimed.

"I am dead meat," Jordan muttered.

"Oh, at least through tomorrow evening, sir, if that's okay with you." She went on for another couple of minutes, chatting up Joe Barrett as if they'd been close friend for years, and when she finally ended the call with, "And you have a very pleasant evening, sir," she put down the phone and smiled at Jordan. "There," she said. "All fixed."

"Please don't ever do that again," he said.

"Never. I promise." Then she waxed serious. "Now, hero, get yourself stripped and into the shower. You look like you're chilled clear through."

He was. But not entirely from the cold.