

OUT OF TIME
A NOVEL

(VERY) ROUGH DRAFT

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BENJAMIN CROWDER

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—Ben Crowder
<http://bencrowder.net/>

CHAPTER ONE

Weston poked his head into the bedroom door. “Lloyd, the home teachers are—” and he stopped. There, sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, was some kind of spherical, rusty, science fictiony looking thing. It couldn’t be legal. “Lloyd, what’s that?”

He opened the door the rest of the way. No Lloyd. Just a faint smell of...smoke? Or Old Spice deodorant. He couldn’t tell the difference sometimes. The machine on the ground had knobs and dials and looked like something Lloyd must’ve pulled in from D.I. Maybe it was just painted cardboard. As Weston got closer, though, he noticed a screen on the under side of the sphere, glowing with a faint greenish tinge. It looked real. A time capsule? Lloyd wasn’t exactly normal, at least not in the ordinary way. He was...different. Special. A nice guy, certainly, but the things he said sometimes just made you wonder what planet he was from.

Weston looked at the sphere, then up at the sky through the window. No. It wasn’t possible. He chuckled to himself.

But then he remembered that the home teachers were waiting in the front room. Blast. Where *was* Lloyd? It was like him to just up and disappear like this without telling anyone. Weston checked his phone—no messages. And Lloyd hadn’t left any notes on the fridge.

“Sorry, guys,” Weston said, returning to the living room. “Lloyd’s not here right now. He must’ve gone up to campus or something. But you can go ahead and teach me.”

The two guys in suits on the couch both rose suddenly to their feet. “That won’t be necessary,” said the one in the grey

suit on the right. He had sunglasses on, too. Weston figured he'd just moved down from the U. They were like that up there, most of them. But why were they leaving?

"No, really, you can teach me. Heck, I'll even give Lloyd the lesson when he gets back, if you want."

The other guy shook his head. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

Weston looked over at the whiteboard schedule on the fridge. Lloyd was usually pretty meticulous about writing down where he'd be and when, each hour of each day for each week. Paranoid about getting kidnapped or murdered, Weston thought. Or worried that he'd miss a phone call from some girl. You'd think that somebody as technologically inclined as he would have a cell phone, but no, he would always mutter something about being his own man, not a serf at the beck and call of whoever punched in the magic numbers. Lloyd had once said something about inventing his own phone—one where you didn't get calls you didn't want. Weston had tried to point out that cell phones did let you screen your calls, and you didn't have to answer unless you wanted to, but that didn't get through.

Lloyd had filled up his schedule up till that afternoon. And then it was blank. Erased, it looked like. And then the next day it picked up again. Weird.

"Um, no, I don't," Weston said, shaking his head. "I can just have him call you when he gets back."

"That won't be necessary," said the grey guy.

Whatever. "Sure. Oh, my name's Weston. What're yours?" He extended his hand.

They didn't shake. Or say anything. They just looked at

each other. How awkward.

“Did you guys move in recently?”

“Yes,” said the other guy. “But we’ve got to go. Other appointments, you know.”

And they left. Weston peeked out the window at them as they walked away and turned the corner. Not your usual type, he thought to himself. But some people were just odd. Like Lloyd. That’s how they came into the world, and that’s how they left. The normal people could try to change them, sure, but did it ever work? Not really. Sometimes it really messed them up, too. No, the dividing line between strange and sane was stark and clear. Not much made it through that fence. Not unless somebody normal lost their mind and went crazy—too much mercury on the brain, that sort of thing. It was sad when that happened.

The two guys crossed the street, looked back at the apartment—Weston dropped the blind to a mere slit, catching his breath at the thought they might have seen him staring—and got onto a Harley that was hiding behind another car. Wow. Definitely not your usual type.

Returning to the bedroom, Weston scratched his head. Should he try to move the sphere? It **was** kind of in the way. But maybe it would break—moving parts and all. Better to leave it there. Lloyd would probably be on his way back any minute now, with some Radio Shack gizmo in tow. He’d left screwdrivers and resistors and some circuit board cuttings on the bed. A messy business. But Weston had to hand it to him, it looked pretty cool, even if it didn’t work. Lloyd was one of those people who read science fiction books and then acted as if it was all real. At the beginning of the semester he was watching

Star Trek reruns and decided that there *had* to be a way to make a holodeck. So he read up on optics and projections and holography and all sorts of deep stuff that he probably couldn't understand. Half the time Weston thought Lloyd did it just for the sci-fi feel of it—and so he could say that he was figuring out how to make a holodeck. But of course it didn't work, and so he scrapped that idea until the next thing came along. There had been lots of next things in the year or so they'd been roommates. Lots. And nothing had yet worked. Once he'd managed to set the smoke detector wailing, but other than that he hadn't even been able to get anything to turn on.

Weston knelt down beside the sphere. It was about two and a half feet across and looked pretty heavy. He gently touched the outer shell—cold. Really cold. Tracing his finger down the rim, he came to the green-glowing screen and moved down so he could see it. A clock. And there were some other numbers in the corners, but the clock was front and center. Five thirty. He looked at his watch—5:20. Poor guy, couldn't even get the time right.

With a slight creak Weston stood up again and walked over to his desk. Lloyd was making a glorified clock. Maybe he meant to hang it in the living room. There were times when Weston thought it wasn't a bad idea to just go find a girl and elope, so he could stop getting weird roommates. He'd had one whose sole existence seemed to be made up of eating, watching TV, sleeping, and making out on the couch with his girlfriend. Not much of a life there, he thought. Just a carcass going through the motions. Once Weston got married, though, no more psycho roommates. No more battles over the heater. No more food theft from the fridge. No more disco parties in

the living room on Sunday nights.

He plopped himself down on his bed and pulled out his iPod. That morning he'd downloaded a bunch of podcasts on learning Turkish—this cute girl in his ward had just gotten her call to serve there, and he figured this would be a good way to stop her without her realizing it—and he turned one on.

It wasn't long before his upper eyelids began floating down in a back-and-forth dance to meet their partners down under. Like a Venus flytrap unsure of itself, they came down, flew back up again, fluttered down, and rocketed up again. Until finally they gave up the ghost and collapsed into a tranquil darkness.

The next thing he knew, there was a flash of green light and some kind of rippling shock wave that flung the iPod out of his hands and into the wall. He looked over at the sphere. It was hovering an inch or two above the floor, glowing and humming and slowly spinning around. Was it supposed to do that? Hang it, where was Lloyd?

Another burst of light, this time orange. And then Lloyd was sitting there on his bed. Calm, like nothing had happened. The sphere was still spinning and making noises, though.

“Lloyd!”

Lloyd didn't pay any attention to him, but just sat there, staring straight ahead. After about ten seconds the sphere slowly came to a halt, dropping to the floor and promptly looking as cold and dead as if it had been uncovered in an arctic dig.

Lloyd sprang off the bed. “What time is it?” He clutched for a clock. “What time is it?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said Weston. “What just happened?”

“What time is it?”

Weston looked at his watch. “Five thirty.”

Lloyd jumped up and down with limbs flailing all over the place. “I did it! I did it! It worked!”

“Lloyd.”

“I did it!”

“You did what? What **was** that? Where were you?”

Lloyd knelt down next to the sphere and started turning dials and pushing buttons. “I sent myself into the future.”

Not again. “You do realize that it’s not the future, right? It’s...now. The present.”

“Ah,” said Lloyd, “but it **was** the future when I left it. At two o’clock I left and arrived just now at five thirty. I just time traveled. For real.”

This did beat all, Weston thought. How’d he pull it off? He must have timed it to go off with a flash and then jumped back onto his bed while Weston couldn’t see. Had he been hiding in the closet? Underneath the bed? And yet he’d been sitting so serenely when he did show up. No, no, no, it was impossible.

“It worked!” exclaimed Lloyd again. “I can’t believe it!” He scratched his head, looked at Weston and then back down again at the purported time machine. A pause. And then, more somberly, he added, “But the problem is that I don’t know how to get back again.”

Weston cocked his head. “It’s a one-way shot?” Play along with him, tell him what he wants to hear.

“So far, yes. You see, I can’t actually take the machine **with** me when I go—it’s more of a chronological slingshot than a helicopter. If I went back into the past, I’d be stuck there, because they wouldn’t have the technology to send me back. And if I went to the future, I’d have to make sure I could find one of

these babies to throw me back again. If that's even possible."

"There's more than one?"

"No," Lloyd said. "That's the problem. And I don't know if I'll still have it in the future, or if it'll get stolen, or if someone'll buy it but I won't know who, or what. There are too many possibilities. It's too dangerous."

At least that seemed to make some sense. "You're right," Weston said. "Probably better to just take it apart right now."

"No!"

Okay, whatever. "What I meant was, make sure it doesn't accidentally send you somewhere without your permission." Right. An imaginary time machine could definitely act up on you.

Lloyd sat down at his desk, picked up a pencil, and started chewing the eraser. "Besides, what would happen if I ran into myself?"

"It'd be like twins," Weston offered.

"I don't think so," Lloyd said. "Maybe I *couldn't* run into myself. Maybe one or of the other of me would snuff out of existence. Like smoke. Or maybe my soul would split in half, part in me and part in the future me. Since I don't think I could have two souls at the same time, each thinking my thoughts. Or could I?"

Weston fiddled with his iPod. "That sounds kind of hokey." Then the scriptures on his desk caught his eye. "Oh, hey, the home teachers came, but they left when they found out you weren't here."

"Home teachers?" Lloyd looked over at him and took the pencil out of his mouth. "But Steve said they weren't coming till next week."

It was Weston's turn to be surprised. "Steve? Next-door?"

"Yeah," said Lloyd, "he and Trevor are our home teachers. I saw the list on Sunday."

Weston thought back to the two guys who'd stopped by. Definitely not Steve or Trevor. "That's weird. It wasn't Steve and Trevor. Some guy with sunglasses, both in suits. They said they were new to the ward."

"I definitely saw the list."

"They drove off on a Harley," he added.

Lloyd's eyes grew wide. He looked down at the sphere. "They're after it."

Weston blinked. "After your time machine?" Right. They knew about it and came to steal it. Sure. "Lloyd, why would they want a toy time machine?"

"It's not a toy!" Lloyd stood up. "I'm serious, Weston, it really did work. I went from two o'clock straight through to five thirty." His eyes grew wider. "Did they come in here?"

Weston shook his head and put his iPod on the desk. "No, they stayed in the front room. They weren't here long—just a minute or two."

"How could they know it was here? I haven't told anyone. Unless... maybe they saw me buying the parts. At Radio Shack and other places. Maybe they've been spying on me."

"Or," Weston said, "maybe we got new home teachers. Assignments change, you know. It's probably perfectly normal."

Lloyd's eyes were still wide. "They know about me. About the slingshot. Maybe they've got some kind of monitor watching the space-time continuum for pinches."

"Come on, Lloyd. Nobody's out to get you."

"What if they..."

“Lloyd!” Weston walked over to him and shook him by the shoulders. “Snap out of it! You’re too paranoid, too psyched out over this. Just breathe in, take a deep breath, it’ll be okay. You’re safe. It’s safe.”

A knock on the door. Lloyd yelped. “We’ve got to hide it! Don’t let them in, whatever you do. I’m not here.”

Weston let go of Lloyd and walked out the bedroom door. “It’s not them,” he said over his shoulder as he made his way through the hallway. “They already drove away, remember?”

He came to the door and peeked through the peephole. It *was* them.

CHAPTER TWO

Even though Weston didn’t really think there was anything to be afraid of, he couldn’t help but feel his breath catch a little. He leaned against the door and ran his hands through his hair. Could they really be after Lloyd? Sounded like something that happened in the movies, not in real life.

He could hear Lloyd frantically heaving and puffing in the bedroom, probably trying to stash the sphere in the closet. There wasn’t really anywhere else it could go—their beds didn’t have any room under them. Not that it would have fit anyway.

Weston quietly locked the deadbolt and darted back to the bedroom. “It’s them,” he whispered. “Maybe...maybe we should just pretend we’re not home.”

Lloyd stopped for a second to catch his breath. Just as he wiped his forehead, they both heard the lock on the front door jangling. And then a click. And then the slow creak of the door

swinging open. Blast.

There was only one thing to do. Weston slipped out of the bedroom door, closing it behind him, and marched out of the hallway. “Excuse me?” he said to the two guys in suits standing just inside the door.

“We... we forgot something,” said the guy with sunglasses. Suspicious. “Oh? What was it?”

The other guy stepped a little closer to Weston. “Are you *sure* Lloyd isn’t here?”

“Pretty sure,” Weston replied, forcing down a swallow. “I’ll have him call you when he gets back. Now, if you don’t mind, I was taking a nap.”

The guy with sunglasses looked past Weston down the hallway. “Mind if we take a look?”

Definitely suspicious. “I know you guys are new to the ward, but generally home teachers are supposed to believe what their home teachers tell them. You know how you always ask what you can do to help? Right now I want to take a nap. Please leave so I can. Now.” He was being uncharacteristically rude, he noticed with an inward cringe, but there was nothing he could do about that now except hope they got the hint and left.

Muttering apologies, they started backing out of the door. The guy with sunglasses bobbed his head and extended his hand to Weston, who shook it and closed the door behind them. Finally. He turned the deadbolt and looked through the peephole. They were just standing there. Not even talking to each other—of course, if they’d been talking, he could have heard them through the door. They were both facing away from him, looking down at something in their hands, as far as he could

tell. Then they walked up the stairs and turned the corner.

Weston returned to the bedroom. "They're gone."

"What did they say?" Lloyd asked, huddled on his bed, sweating.

"That they'd forgotten something. I could tell they hadn't, and the one guy with sunglasses kept looking back here. I...I think you might be right."

"Trash it all, I don't know how to hide from people like this!" Lloyd's eyes were still wide, and a bit red, too. "Do you think the Witness Protection Program would take me in?"

"You'd drop out of school?" Weston asked.

Lloyd looked down at the indentation on the carpet where the time machine had lain. "No, I guess not. But what would they do if they found me? Kill me? Kidnap me? Torture me?"

"I think they only do that in the movies, Lloyd."

Lloyd shook his head slowly. "No, where do you think the movies get their inspiration from? Bad things happen in real life. Real bad things. Nasty, horrible things. Oh man oh man oh man." He pulled a notebook off his desk, retrieved the chewed-up pencil, and began to write.

Weston sat down on the bed beside him and put his hand on Lloyd's shoulder. "It'll be okay. Really." But he didn't know if he was telling the truth.

After scribbling down a few lines with the pencil, Lloyd tore the sheet out and handed it to Weston. "If anything happens to me, give this to my parents."

Weston looked down at it. "I'm sorry it had to happen this way," it read, "but I love you and I'll see you on the other side."

"Whoa," Weston said. "Wait a minute. You're not going to

die just because two guys in suits show up on the doorstep.”

“And how do you know that?”

He had a point. “I don’t. But I do think you’re overreacting. They probably just want to get their home teaching done before the end of the month, that’s all.”

“Riiiiight. Look, I need some time to think.”

“Whatever.” Weston got up and walked back over to his bed, lying down and staring at the ceiling. Today was certainly turning out to be an interesting one. A time machine and two strange guys in suits. What next?

He got to thinking about the sphere. What if it really worked? Where would he go? He’d always wanted to go back and see how the pyramids were built, but on second thought it seemed rather cliché, too touristy. Ditto for Stonehenge. Maybe Lincoln’s assassination, or Columbus’s arrival in the New World, or the signing of the Declaration, or his own birth. Or the creation of the world. That *would* be cool, but it probably wouldn’t work—maybe the earth wasn’t ready for life until man was created, and if he tried to get there earlier, he might not survive. Not to mention the awkwardness of showing up ahead of schedule with God the only one around. The scriptures would have to be rewritten...

“So could you really send someone into the past?” he asked Lloyd.

Lloyd took a moment to respond. He too had been staring at the ceiling. “No.”

“But you said—”

“I know,” Lloyd said. “But think about it—going back into the past would mess up everything. The butterfly effect—a single word or action could change the whole course of history

forever. It's impossible."

That made sense. If he went back in time, Weston thought to himself, he might do something that would make it so his parents would never meet, and then he would never have been born, and then...would he stop existing right then? An uncomfortable thought.

"So what happens when you go into the future? Are you in two places at once?"

"No," Lloyd said. "That's impossible. Remember how you came in and I wasn't here? That's because I was already in the future, so to speak."

"What you're saying is that in between two o'clock and five-thirty, you didn't exist."

Lloyd smiled. "Basically, yes."

Weird.

"You see," he continued, "I'm still living in my own timestream, my internal chronology. There are never any gaps in that—I just keep getting older, second by second, minute by minute. Ordinarily my timestream intersects completely with the external timestream—everyone else's, the world's, whatever you want to call it. But with the slingshot, I can skip forward. It's like pinching a blanket—two points can be far apart from each other, but you pinch them together and they touch. Time is like that."

"So I could use this to get out of my finals?"

Lloyd grinned again. "Not really. Remember, you'd just vanish out of the present, so it's not like you'd be leaving a copy of yourself behind to take the test for you. You wouldn't show up, the teacher would mark you absent, and you'd come back to a big fat zero. I wouldn't recommend it."

“Time travel isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Weston said. “Can’t you figure out a way to fix all of that?”

“Right. I’ll just go change the laws of nature to suit you.” And he looked back up at the ceiling.

What was the value of having a time machine, then? It seemed kind of pointless. Besides, if you went very far into the future, everyone you knew would be that much older. It would be like going into a coma, except you’d come out and still be the same age you were when you went in. Or like the twin astronauts they’d talked about in Physics—relativity and all.

“Hey,” Weston said, “I could go into the future and see who I’m going to marry and how many kids I’ll have!”

Lloyd sat up. “Wrong again. There wouldn’t be any you to marry anyone until you popped back into the world’s timestream. No family waiting for you. But you never know, maybe you’d have better luck in the future.” He grinned again.

“Very funny. Look who’s talking.”

“I—wait a second, what are we doing? We’ve got to figure something out before those guys come back again.”

Weston wrinkled his brow. “The police? The FBI? The CIA?”

“No, that won’t work. What would we tell them? ‘Hi, we’ve got a time machine and somebody—we don’t know who—is trying to steal it.’ Yes, that would go over *really* well.”

“But who else is there? The girl scouts? The ACLU?”

Scratching his head, Lloyd gazed into the closet where the sphere was presumably hidden. “Maybe we could get the museum to take it. Or haul it off to Special Collections.”

“But then you wouldn’t be able to get to it,” said Weston.

“If you’re going to do that, you may as well just take it apart.”

“Good point.” Lloyd looked around the bedroom, as if the answer was lying just out of reach, perhaps on his desk, or on the chair, or taped up on the window. “This is the moment where the inspiration is supposed to hit us like a pan on the head.”

“Eureka!” Weston shouted, leaping from his bed. “I’ve got it!”

“What?”

Weston sat back down on his bed. “Just kidding.”

“Don’t *do* that,” Lloyd said. “It’s not funny. This is serious—I don’t know who those guys are, but they could be Mafia, or the Kremlin, or some Neo-Nazi group with plans to take over the world. Or Al-Qaida, even.”

“But...what could they even do with a time machine like this? It’s not like they could go back and help Hitler win the war, or topple the Empire State Building on 9/11 along with the towers. They couldn’t even get something from the future and bring it back. I’m sorry to break it to you, Lloyd, but your invention is kind of useless.” He smiled.

Lloyd was unfazed. “Maybe they don’t realize that it’s one-way. Maybe they think they can go back into the past. They could be searching for the grail or Atlantis or something. If they’re intellectual enough, maybe they want to go back and save the library of Alexandria. But I doubt it.”

“The holy grail.” Weston laughed. “Those old legends are great stories, but do you really think these guys could be stupid enough to think they’re true? I mean, really, a cup that could make you live forever?”

Lloyd looked into the closet. Weston did too.

“You know,” Lloyd said, “it doesn’t seem quite so farfetched anymore.”

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning was a Saturday, which Weston wasn’t particularly looking forward to because it meant Lloyd would be painfully nervous all day, and anxiety like that was contagious. They had to get out of the house. Last night they’d stayed home, talking some more but mostly just stewing in their own thoughts. Neither could think of any good way to deal with the two suits, so they did nothing. Lloyd had suggested giving them the sphere, preferably without any violence or bloodshed, but Weston had soundly smacked his hand on his desk and denounced the idea as hogwash. He didn’t really mean it—frankly, it sounded like a good idea to him—but he felt like playing the devil’s advocate at the time, and in the movies the good guys just didn’t give up like that.

This morning, though, as he was brushing his teeth, he wondered what on earth he’d been thinking. The movies weren’t real life. Heck, **this** probably wasn’t real life—Lloyd was living in some kind of cloak-and-dagger fantasy world with bad guys out to get him, and now he’d sucked Weston into the game, too. And in reality the two guys in suits were probably just perfectionist home teachers—retired elders quorum presidents or executive secretaries—who were trying to get their visits in by the end of the first week of the month. And the time machine? It couldn’t be real. It just couldn’t.

But what if it was? Over and over Weston’s thoughts revolved around the idea, poking at it from new angles, trying

to figure out what on earth to do with it. A time machine. A real, live time machine. Well, real according to Lloyd. Weston swallowed. There **was** one way to find out if he was telling the truth.

“Lloyd?” He went back into the bedroom and found Lloyd still under the covers. “Hey, Lloyd.”

“Hmfrmmph?”

“I want you to send me into the future.”

Lloyd threw off the covers and sat up straight. “You what? Who are you and what have you done with my roommate?”

“I’m serious,” Weston said. “I need to know if this thing is real or not. Help thou my unbelief.” Just as the words left his mouth, he wondered if that was blasphemous. Oh well, too late now.

“But...but then I’ll be here alone.”

Weston scratched his head. “Well, just send me an hour or two forward. Make it three, so that I don’t get confused and think it’s daylight saving time or something.”

“I don’t know about this. What if they can tell when I use it?”

“They can’t.” The kid sure had an imagination. “Look, if we’re going to be in this together, I need to know that this thing really works and isn’t just cardboard painted to look like a time machine with an old alarm clock attached. Is this Calvin & Hobbes or the real deal? I need to know.”

Lloyd slowly stood up and began pacing around the room, his scrawny legs sticking out from shorts that were a few sizes too big for him. He grabbed the pencil from the desk on one of his rounds and stuck the eraser in his mouth.

“You probably should stop chewing,” Weston said. “Looks

like you're addicted—maybe there's nicotine or coke in it. You could get graphite poisoning.”

He was just kidding, but Lloyd's eyes went wide—for the fifth or sixth time—and he gingerly put the pencil back on his desk. And then, apparently on a second thought, picked it up again and dropped it into the trash can.

After five more minutes of pacing, during which Weston sat patiently on his bed, Lloyd stopped. “Okay.” He bit his lip. “But only two hours.”

“Three.”

“Two and a half.”

“Deal,” Weston said. “So, how does this thing work?”

Lloyd shook his head vigorously. “Not *now*. We've got to wait. Tonight, just before bed.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said Weston. “I need my beauty sleep. Let's do it now so it doesn't make me sleep in tomorrow.” There were downsides to having church at 8:30 in the morning. But then again if these guys really were after them, sleeping in and missing church was perhaps the least of their worries.

After another few rounds of pacing, Lloyd shrugged. “It might be too soon after the last throw.”

“Lame,” said Weston. “That was yesterday afternoon. It's been over twelve hours—surely that's enough time to recharge or whatever it is it does. Stop making excuses, Lloyd. If you want me on your side, we do it now. Or never.”

Rubbing his hands wearily over his eyes, and slumping down onto his bed, Lloyd nodded. “Whatever.”

“Wait. Does this...hurt?” He'd forgotten about that. Lloyd had looked fairly serene after the throw, but you never knew.

Lloyd laughed. “It's just a little less painful than being in

labor.”

“What?”

“Just kidding. All you feel is a little tingling on your skin, that’s all. It only lasts for a second or two. You’ll be fine.”

“That is **so** not funny.”

Lloyd pulled his chair against the closet and, with no small degree of exertion, rolled the sphere out onto it. He then dragged the chair over to the bed, which was a little lower than the chair, and pushed the sphere onto it. Finally, he gently and slowly lowered the time machine down onto the floor, rolling it back into the indentation where it had been born.

“Okay,” he said, kneeling down and turning a dial. “What time is it?”

Weston looked at his watch. “Ten o’clock.”

“Exactly?”

“10:03,” Weston said with a sigh.

Lloyd gave him a disappointed look and shook his head. “It’s people like you who make space shuttles explode. Precision is what the world needs. Not rounding errors. Ten o’clock means ten o’clock on the dot, not 10:03 or 9:57 or some other abomination. Mean what you say. It could be the difference between life and death.”

“I...” Weston was speechless for a moment. “I hope you’re kidding. But somehow I get the feeling you’re not.”

“I’m not,” Lloyd said, “but I’ll forgive you this time. After all, in a few more minutes I won’t even have to deal with you for another two and a half hours.”

“Thanks, I love you too.”

Lloyd punched a few numbers into a keypad that slid out from the side of the screen. “12:30. It’s not exactly two and a

half hours, but you like to round.” He stood up.

“So, what do I do?” Weston walked over to Lloyd’s side of the room as Lloyd rotated the sphere, apparently aiming it.

Lloyd motioned to his bed. “Get on there. You’ll probably need to sit up. At least that’s what I did.”

Weston walked round the sphere and sat down in the middle of Lloyd’s bed.

“Shoes off, please,” Lloyd said. “Let’s keep things sanitary.”

Weston wanted to point out that Lloyd had had **his** shoes on when he’d come back from the past, but figured it wasn’t worth the effort. It **was** his bed, after all. And here Weston was, getting ready to be perhaps the second person to travel through time. If this contraption even worked.

“Hey, Lloyd,” he said, not wanting to disturb the scientist at work but feeling his question took higher priority, “what’s the chance of this thing **not** working? Like, what if the constituent atoms in my body somehow forget to, you know, come back together again? What if I show up at twelve-thirty without my legs? Or my hair?”

“They’re supposed to have pretty good prosthetics in the future. And you can always buy a toupée. I wonder where they sell those...”

“Lloyd, they aren’t going to have prosthetics two and a half hours into the future. And I don’t want prosthetics. I like my legs where they are.”

Lloyd grabbed a crescent wrench off the desk. “Loose bolt.”

“Loose? Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.” Weston didn’t want to look the coward, but Lloyd **was** an amateur, and while there were some things amateurs could do just fine—painting,

singing, and writing came to mind—you wouldn't really want an amateur operating on your brain. He could just imagine it—"Scalpel, please," the neurosurgeon would say, making the incision and then, as the skin parted, poking around and musing, "Hmm, what's this?", with an assistant to the side blandly responding, "The corpus callosum." Except Weston wasn't sure if you could even get to the corpus callosum with just one incision. Which was why he would leave brain surgery to the med school grads. Granted, there weren't any time machine school grads that he knew of, so perhaps his analogy was a bit weak in spots. Even so, the chances that Lloyd knew what he was doing were smaller than Weston would like. And yet he **did** seem to have successfully flung himself through time.

"Okay," said Lloyd. "It's ready. Are you?"

Weston caught himself on the verge of asking for a few minutes to write a will, maybe some last words, but then realized that was utterly silly. Besides, it was something **Lloyd** would do, not him. No, if something were to go wrong and splay his molecules across the next two and a half hours, never to be gathered together again, he'd just go find Humpty Dumpty and they could write a book together, make lots of money. His family would get over it. Besides, he'd be the first person to die while traveling through time.

Die? What was he thinking? He wasn't going to die. All of Lloyd's overanalyzing and worrying was getting to him, gnawing into his spinal cord and taking over his thought processes. He'd blip forward into the future—it was only two and a half hours, after all, and that was, what, a hundred and fifty minutes?—and everything would be just as he'd left it. Or it would all be a charade and he'd smile and play along and pretend like

he'd gone into the future. Which, technically, he *would*, if only because of the natural march onward of time—he'd be five or ten seconds ahead of when Lloyd pushed the button. Or turned the dial, or whatever it was he would do.

"Weston?"

He blinked. "Sorry. I'm ready. Go for it."

Lloyd turned another dial. "Maybe I'd better explain what'll happen, just in case something goes wrong."

"You're totally going to sound like one of those science fiction novels from the fifties, I can already tell."

"And you, my friend, will regret it if you get stuck halfway between times. It could get awkward. And messy."

Weston swallowed. "Wouldn't halfway between times be around 11:15?"

"Maybe." Lloyd put on a mock evil grin. "But that's assuming space-time is linear. And I don't think Einstein agrees with you there."

He had a point. Weston remembered something from one of his high school physics classes, about some ball rolling around on the continuum, getting sucked into a black hole. "So you're saying that maybe I *could* end up in the past? If something funky happens?"

"I'm saying that anything could happen. If there's a hiccup along the way, you could—in theory, of course—get jettisoned back to 1066 and find yourself fighting alongside William the Conqueror. Or, if you're really unlucky, get yourself flung so far into the future that you miss the end of the world and end up floating in space."

"You're forgetting that this world is going to turn into a sea of glass, the whole celestial kingdom business. And somehow I

don't think God would let me skip out on final judgment and go straight to the end level. But this is crazy, I'm only going three hours into the future."

"Two and a half."

"Whatever. There's not going to be any kind of hitch. Let's just do it and get it over with, and then we can figure out what to do about those two guys."

Lloyd swallowed. "Rats, I forgot about them. We'd better hurry."

"Whoa," said Weston. "Don't you go hurrying anything. I want to end up in one piece. Take your time, cowboy."

"Sit up straight." Lloyd checked the screen. "Twelve-thirty. That's right, right?"

"Roger."

"Oh, when you finish the jump, it'll take a second or two for the field to vanish, so don't move or you'll get shocked."

Weston looked at Lloyd. "How will I know when it's gone?"

"You'll know."

He swallowed. "Do it. Now."

Lloyd put his finger on a big green button. He looked up at Weston, then blinked. "Do you want to...you know...say a prayer before you go? Just in case?"

Good question. Was time travel a divinely approved activity? Or did it circumvent the laws of nature, kind of like trying to clone people or play God? What if time travel were a sin? "I guess I'd better," Weston said. "Just in case."

"Do you want me to say it?"

Weston shook his head. "I'll say it. My own prayer, that is." And he closed his eyes and said a quick prayer. Nothing special,

just a plea for safety. And, almost as an afterthought, he prayed that his family would be okay if something actually did happen to him. He almost caught himself asking that the food would nourish and strengthen his body, but luckily came back to himself before he actually voiced—well, *thought*—the words.

“Okay,” he said, opening his eyes. “Beam me up, Scottie.”

Lloyd pressed the button. “Goodbye, Weston.” A greenish haze started to crackle in a skittish dance around the bed. “And if, you know, it doesn’t work, I just wanted you to know that, um, you were my favorite roommate. Ever.”

And then a flash of light and everything went dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next thing Weston knew, he had landed on a patch of grass or dirt. It was dark, he was outside, and none of the street lamps were on. That was odd, he thought to himself. This definitely wasn’t twelve-thirty. Unless...could Lloyd have sent him to half past midnight instead of half past noon?

After a few seconds of staring around him, Weston noticed that the green haze had vanished. Probably safe to stand up, then. He got up and froze. As his eyes adjusted, he found himself in the middle of what looked like an urban battleground. An eery air of familiarity breathed over everything he saw—apartment complexes, but they looked like they’d been bombed, rubble strewn about, gaping holes in half of them, the other half tilted like the leaning tower of Pisa before they fixed it. The roads were an absolute mess, with slabs of asphalt jutting out at horribly odd angles that made Weston think of bones in the wrong places. But it wasn’t just the roads; most of

the ground was patchworked up in the same fashion, and as Weston looked down he saw that he was standing on a chunk of earth ten or twenty feet wide that had disconnected itself from the adjacent land.

An earthquake. It had to be—bombs didn't do this to the ground...did they? Weston closed his eyes for a minute, trying to stave off the sickening hollowness that was carving out his stomach. Something went wrong. This was bad. Where was he? More importantly, *when* was he?

There weren't any people out on the streets, he noticed. But then again it felt like it was three or four in the morning; the sky had a sweep of inky black with a fringe of blue near the horizon, and the air had that smell to it that breathed morning and not night. It had to be past midnight. Long past midnight. And here he was, in some ravaged city at an unholy hour when he was supposed to be making lunch and doing homework.

Standing around wouldn't get him anywhere, though, so he shifted his weight around to see if his earthy platform was stable. It was. He began slowly making his way from patch to patch, avoiding the downed power lines that lay strung about like spaghetti. Following the road seemed the wisest thing to do. When he reached the intersection fifty or sixty yards down, he stopped. Maybe he should mark where he was, so he could get back to his own time.

Except he couldn't get back. Shivers trickled down his body, just under the skin. There was no way to go back, no way to turn this video game off, no automatic ejection switch to flip. The only way was through it.

Trying to stop thinking about it, Weston began poking his way around the corners of the intersection, trying to find a sign

that would tell him where he was. Finally, at the third corner, he found one. With beautifully familiar white-on-green lettering the sign declared that he was on 300 East.

That was his street.

No, no, Weston thought, it couldn't be. There were lots of cities that had 300 Easts. This wasn't Provo. It didn't look like it at all.

But then most burn victims didn't look like their old selves, now, did they. He slowly looked back to where he'd landed. Not far from there stood the bent and bruised remnant of an apartment complex. One that looked all too familiar. Oh no.

Running back to the apartment, his body urging him faster but his mind pulling back on the reins lest he slip and fall into one of the gaping cracks in the earth that went down who knows how many dozens of yards, he thought of Lloyd. Dead? Wounded? How long ago had the earthquake ripped through here? How long had he been gone? It seemed almost unfair that he'd somehow been spared a disaster like this.

The dam. As he reached the door of his apartment, watched it dangling on one hinge like an eight-year-old's loose tooth, he remembered reading that the Deer Creek Reservoir would probably burst after an earthquake. And Provo would become a flood zone. A twenty- or thirty-foot wall of water crashing down through the valley, smothering south of campus on its juggernaut path of destruction. He had to warn everybody. They had to get up to campus, on the hill, where it was safe. How long did he have? Half an hour? Five minutes?

He pushed past the door. It was too dark to see. He pulled his cell phone out, flipped it open, and looked around. Was this even the right apartment? All the walls were in the right place,

but everything else was different. None of the bookshelves were there. Different couches. A much nicer TV.

Taking a deep breath as he quietly opened the door to his bedroom, he stopped. Nobody. In either bed. Had Lloyd left? Maybe he was at the hospital already. Or buried. But he couldn't think about that.

He suddenly became conscious of the light coming from his phone. Of course! The satellite synchronization would tell him exactly what day and time it was. Why hadn't he thought of that before?

It didn't tell him anything. A blank screen, with "No Service" plastered on the center of the display. No time, no date, nothing. Remembering the power lines outside, Weston figured that the satellites were somehow down, too. Except satellites weren't land-based, so the earthquake wouldn't have affected them. Great, just what he needed. He silently cursed T-Mobile as he looked closer at the bedroom. All of his stuff was gone, and from the looks of it had been gone for quite some time. Lloyd's posters weren't on the walls, either. Did they take all his belongings with him when he went to the hospital? As if they'd known he would...

But that was silly. Weston didn't *know* that Lloyd was dead. He didn't even know if he was in the right apartment. Sure, it was where his had been, but maybe things had gotten rearranged somehow. He left the apartment and walked up the hallway leading to the other apartments, peering in where the doors had come off their hinges. Deserted.

"Looting's illegal," came a voice from the street. Weston turned around. A goateed guy with a backwards baseball cap stood there, watching him. UVSC student? He couldn't tell if

the guy was dangerous or not.

“I wasn’t. I was just trying to see if anyone was still here.”

“Right,” said the guy. “So you can come back later with your gang and get the goods. I know how you work.”

Weston gulped. “No, that’s not it at all. I live here.” He went up the stairs, away from the apartments. “What happened?”

The guy sneered at him with a raised eyebrow. “Nice try. Playing dumb won’t get you anywhere.”

“I’m serious!” Weston said. “Was it an earthquake? Bombs?”

“You been living in a hole for the past month?”

Month? “I just...I was...” He couldn’t tell him about traveling through time or his credibility would be shot to pieces even more than it already was. “I was in a coma.” Even as he said it, he groaned and saw how stupid it sounded.

The guy raised his other eyebrow. “And you just...woke up?”

“Yeah. But really, what happened? I don’t know what’s going on. What day is it?”

“Saturday.” The guy looked down the street as if watching for someone.

The same day...was this really Provo, then, or had he been flung to some other city that looked unnervingly like it? What if he was in some alternate universe? The Provo that would have been if Hitler had won the war, or if the Lindbergh baby had been found alive, or if... There were billions of different possibilities for how the history of the world could have gone—what if he’d gotten stuck in the wrong one?

Impossible. Lloyd had said you couldn’t go back in time, and besides, the other possibilities weren’t real—they were just

shadows, unfulfilled potentialities. There wasn't a host of alternative universes. Just this one. Which still didn't answer the question where he was. Or when.

"This sounds kind of silly," he said, "but are we in Provo?"

For a few long, drawn-out moments, the goateed guy just stared at him. And blinked. Weston glanced down. "You really are out of it, aren't you?"

"I...don't remember anything."

"Yes, you're in Provo. Do you want latitude and longitude?"

So this **was** his apartment after all. Or had been. How long had he been gone? "Is it still the fifteenth? Of July?"

The guy shook his head. "That was yesterday."

That left one last question—the one Weston really didn't want to ask. Trying to brush off a shudder of goosebumps, he swallowed again. "What year is it?"

"2025. You sure you're okay?"

Weston's knees started to totter. This wasn't happening. It was just a dream, it had to be just a dream, a nightmare he'd wake up from and everything would be normal, just the way it used to be. Eighteen years. Two and a half hours had stretched into almost twenty years in that flash of light.

With a sick, nauseous knot gorging itself in his stomach, and as his lower lip started to twitch and tremble beyond his control, he closed his eyes. Eighteen years. He would have been turning forty next month. Lloyd—no wonder he wasn't in the apartment. He would have gotten married and moved on. Weston rubbed his now-aching forehead. How long Lloyd had waited for him to come back? Weeks? Months?

Where were his parents? They'd been in their fifties in 2007,

so they'd be in their—gulp—seventies. And his three younger sisters would be in ten to fifteen years older than him.

As Weston's world unraveled and flipped upside down right before his mind's eye, his legs gave out and he sank to the ground.

"Dude," said the guy, stroking his chin. "You look like you've just seen a ghost. Don't get sick on me, the hospitals are still closed."

He'd missed it all. All his friends would be in their forties with kids. Some of them—the girls who'd gotten married while he was on his mission—they could have grandkids by now. Another wave of nausea passed through him. This had to be a dream. Wasn't there some kind of undo button? Some way to just rewind what had happened and set things back to normal again? Weston just wanted to go home.

Except he **was** home. That was his apartment, or had been, twenty years ago. Now, though, he was homeless. His parents lived across the country in Virginia. He'd have to go find them.

What if they'd moved?

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

With a start Weston looked up. He had to blink a few times for the image to come back into focus. The guy was kneeling next to him. "I'm...I'm in the wrong time."

"You mean it's past your bedtime," the guy said. "You need help."

"No!" Weston shook his head. "I'm fine."

The guy gave him a quizzical look. "You sure aren't acting like it. Did you hit your head or something?"

Had he? He couldn't really remember. "I don't think so."

Then he came back to himself. “Wait. Was there an earthquake?”

“Ha,” said the guy. “Was there ever. The one they kept talking about, saying it was like three hundred years overdue? Well, the momma finally delivered. A twelve. On the Richter. Biggest one in the history of the world, probably.”

The earthquake. The one he’d heard about so much in the papers. It really *had* happened. “The dam!”

“Yeah, everyone thought it was going to go, but it’s still holding together. They’ve evacuated most of the people down here up to higher ground, though, and some people keep saying it’s going to blow any day.”

“Wait,” Weston said again. “When was the quake?”

“Just over a month ago,” said the guy. “June sixth. Add one more six and you’d have a nice description of how people are feeling about it. Hell didn’t freeze over, it came boiling up out of the ground and unleashed death and destruction on all of us.” His gaze dropped to the ground. “I still have nightmares.”

Weston had had a series of questions racing through his mind, but suddenly he felt like it wasn’t really his place to ask them—like he was treading in holy places. And yet he had to know. How many had died? And where exactly had all the survivors gone? *Were* there any survivors? How widespread had the quake been? The way things looked right now, he wouldn’t have been surprised if it had stretched all the way across the country.

“You seem to be safe,” the guy said, watching him closely. “My name’s Alex.”

“I’m Weston.” He wanted to tell Alex that he didn’t belong here, that he had been in 2007 just twenty minutes before, that

he had to find a way back. But he couldn't. He couldn't tell Alex—friendly or not, he was still a complete stranger—and he couldn't find a way back, either. The small flickers of hope that danced in his heart every few minutes kept extinguishing themselves, vanishing just when they promised to light the way back home. “Are there any hotels around here?” Even as he asked the question, he realized he'd left his wallet on his desk back in 2007. Another flicker died. No identification. No way to prove who he was. It was like being born—except he was lucky enough to come through with clothes. But nothing more.

Alex shook his head. “It's a ghost town. Electricity's down for miles.” He started walking down the street, motioning for Weston to follow him. “I took a wilderness survival class sophomore year. Never thought I'd actually use the stuff. And now I wish I'd kept the book.”

“If you don't mind, where are we going?” It seemed such a pointless question—did they even need a destination?—and yet some part of Weston's brain made him ask it. Force of habit.

“Around.”

An answer like that might have raised Weston's suspicions before, but now everything seemed to float in ethereal, misty surreality halfway between night and day, lost in the blurred edge dividing dream from wakefulness. In his mind's eye he rose above the ground, up past the trees and the brick corpses of abandoned buildings, surveyed the catastrophic mess that surely surrounded him as far as the eye could see. No power for miles. Transportation was probably down, too. And communications. And every other convenience of modern life. What was left? Just raw life itself.

They walked. Weston followed Alex, weaving through the ruins. Their path seemed to be leading somewhere—he got the impression that Alex did have a destination, even if it was unvoiced—and yet he couldn't tell where it was. He tried to break through the haze that had settled over his mind and figure out where in Provo they were—had they just passed where the library was, or were they too far south for that?—but nothing emerged out of the shadowy traces of familiarity into solid substance.

For a long time he said nothing, and neither did Alex. Then the fog cleared and a question pierced him. “Why are you out this late?”

Alex didn't respond, not at first. Was he himself a looter? His hair was unkempt, stringy, looked like it hadn't been washed in weeks. His clothes were a little cleaner, but not by much. He could be a criminal for all Weston knew. Had the power at the jails gone out, too? A vision of murderers, rapists, and pedophiles swarming out of prison and engulfing the county swept over his mind like a shroud. Alex seemed friendly, but that didn't mean he was safe.

Then he spoke. “I'm looking for my sister.” They turned a corner and passed a flat area with no buildings. Must have been a parking lot.

“Where'd you last see her?”

“Salt Lake.”

Weston tried to piece that together in his mind into a causal chain, but it didn't make sense. “Why are you looking down here, then?”

Alex stopped and looked at him. “Because this is where she was. When the earthquake hit.” He began walking again,

poking around in some rubble with his foot. “I’m from Salt Lake.”

“But I thought you said it was a month ago.” An image spun itself into being out of the shadows of Weston’s mind—the bones of some girl, strewn behind the remains of a garbage bin somewhere in Provo. Or scattered by the dogs. He pushed it out of his head.

“She’s still alive,” Alex said. “I know she is. Somewhere.” His voice quivered on the last syllable.

What were the chances? An earthquake that bad couldn’t have left many behind. “Were there many survivors?”

Alex didn’t answer. They walked on, moving in the direction of the bluish fringe behind the mountains. East.

“How many died?” Maybe he shouldn’t ask. But he had to.

After a long, drawn-out sigh, Alex locked eyes with Weston. “Too many.”

“I need to know,” Weston said.

“Does it matter? One or a thousand or a million, is there any difference? Nameless faces, sure, they’re all the same. But when it’s somebody you know, someone you loved—one death is just as bad as a million.”

Weston didn’t know what to say. So he didn’t say anything. And he didn’t have to, because Alex went on.

“My older brother,” he said. “They identified his body two weeks ago.”

Weston winced. “I’m sorry.”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

And they walked on in silence.

CHAPTER FIVE

After an hour of aimless walking, Weston stirred out of his reverie. This was going nowhere. He needed to find civilization. It was already starting to get light again—it had been closer to morning than he'd realized—and with the emerging dawn his nighttime fears began to evaporate. He could do this.

But where to begin? "Hey, Alex." A pause. Alex lifted his head in Weston's direction but didn't say anything. "Which way's the nearest..." The nearest what? Restaurant? Store? Hospital? "...the nearest place with people?"

Apparently discussing his losses had made Alex a mute. He pointed north, then continued his zigzag path across a street.

"I'm going that way," Weston said. He waited for a response.

Nothing. And so he made his way north, looking back at Alex as he walked, wondering if he was making the right choice. It wasn't long before a knot in his stomach started curdling for food. Scavenging through some of the abandoned apartments produced nothing edible, however, and with reluctance he realized he'd have to find people before he could find food. He probably wasn't the first to come through this area. It was just as well that he didn't find anything, actually, because climbing around in strange houses—the ones that still had their walls standing—felt eerily like trespassing in a haunted graveyard. Several times he thought he saw something move out of the corner of his eye, a ghost perhaps, only to spin around and see nothing. No, he had to stick to the streets. It couldn't be far.

As the light grew, he could see farther ahead. A hill—it had to be campus, he thought to himself. With his hope flickering

back into life he made his way toward the incline.

It was harder to get up the hill than he'd expected. Most of the trees had toppled over, forming a natural obstacle course, and the ground was even more uneven here than it had been down with the apartments. After what felt like an hour or two of missteps and almost-sprained ankles, Weston emerged from the jungle. Yes, this was campus.

Put the emphasis on the past tense, he said to himself. Most of the buildings had been shambled. Weren't they supposed to be earthquake-proof? He remembered some of the pains they'd gone through back when he was here, renovating old buildings and making them safe. Nobody was expecting the quake to be this massive, he thought. It must have seared through here like a toddler on a rampage, tearing buildings out of the ground and flinging them about like so many toys. Half of the buildings he recognized weren't even in the right place, but were jumbled and mixed. He found himself hoping there hadn't been anyone inside them.

How much of a warning had they had? Any kind of premonition? Maybe a smaller tremor, just before Satan himself rode through the ground with the firehounds of hell tailing him? Or had the destruction come as a thief in the night? It didn't seem fair—if this were a punishment for the wicked, then why did so many innocents have to die too? He could just imagine the Kimball Tower swaying like a cobra under a spell, then snapping in two, its neck broken, the limp body falling to the ground in slow motion as one half crashed into the JFSB and the other toppled onto the tree of life. Or tree of death, rather. As he walked past it, his spine tingled. What was going through their minds as they watched themselves fall?

He put the thought out of his mind. And out it stayed, for as he clambered over some twelve-foot concrete slabs in between where the tower and the Eyring Science Center had stood, he looked up and saw the temple in the distance. Still standing. From this far off he couldn't tell what the surrounding land looked like, but the pillar was still vertical. A flood of relief cascaded over him. Something had survived! And of course the temple would have made it—weren't they supposed to stand through the Millennium? He knew where safety would be found. Besides, it was on higher ground, which was where he needed to be if the dam burst.

But first he had to find food. There'd been rumors that BYU had food storage for everyone for a while. Depending on how bad the earthquake had been, many of those people would have died—he felt squeamish even thinking about it this way—and so there should have been leftover food, right? Maybe some of it was still around. Some food could last a really long time, he remembered. Maybe he'd get lucky. And if not, there had to be some place with food.

And people. Weston could hear voices coming from the other side of what remained of the library. His heart beat faster. Anyone who was still alive would have to know where food was. And maybe what was going on, too. Did the world know about this? Why weren't there rescue workers all over the place? After Hurricane Katrina and 9/11, he would've imagined that there'd be an around-the-clock effort to recover from the damage. But everywhere he'd seen was abandoned, almost like the survivors had barely had time to register what had happened, and then some bigger threat had leapt onto the scene and they'd run for their lives. A scene from Jurassic Park irrationally played

through his mind. No, no dinosaurs. This might look like a movie, but it was still real life.

Then again, he *did* just travel twenty years into the future in a single instant. Nothing was impossible anymore.

Trying to keep himself from running as fast as he could toward the voices, Weston started to make his way around the south end of the library. There was a deep chasm in the earth where the Kennedy Center had stood, yawning down at least thirty or forty feet. Weston got as far away from the edge as he could.

The voices disappeared. Oh no! With a panic surging in his throat, he left restraint behind and dashed toward the faint echoes of sound he could still hear in his mind. The thought of losing them—just when he'd gotten so close!

He came into view of the Wilkinson Center. Surprisingly, it looked fairly intact. Maybe there was someone manning the information desk. As if they'd have time, he thought. Now where had those voices gone?

"Hello?" he called, not too loud, but just enough to be heard. "Hello?"

Nothing. He was too late. A wave of sick nausea passed through him, followed by a barrage of loneliness. He remembered reading science fiction short stories about the last man on the earth, remembered what he'd thought it would be like. He never thought he'd really feel that way, though, and yet here he was, not the last person on earth but certainly feeling like it. He didn't really feel like praying. Or singing a hymn. Or anything. He just wanted to curl up in a ball somewhere and sleep, sleep, sleep until he woke from this nightmare.

"Weston?" An incredulous voice from behind spun him

around in view of a group of four—a family?—cautiously approaching him. The one speaking was a man who looked like he was in his 50s or 60s, dirty but shaven. Flanking him on the left stood a teenage girl and a woman, and on his right limped a nine- or ten-year-old boy, all equally dirty. They had their arms around each other. And the man looked unbelievably at Weston.

“How do you know my name?” Even as he asked it, he realized he knew the answer.

“I’m Lloyd. Lloyd Turner. Do you remember me?”

Weston slowly nodded, scarcely believing what he saw. Lloyd? He’d left Lloyd a few hours ago as a twenty-two year old college student, and now before him stood a—he quickly added the years—a forty-year-old man? With kids? *Lloyd*?

Lloyd let go of his family and stepped forward, reaching his hand out, touching Weston’s shoulder. “It’s you! It really is you! You haven’t changed a bit.” They both seemed to sense the irony. “When and where did you land?”

“Three or four hours ago, I think. I’ve kind of lost track of time. Something went wrong, Lloyd. Two and a half hours? It’s been twenty years.”

“Eighteen.”

Weston looked at him. Some things never change. “This is insane, Lloyd!” He motioned around him with his hand. “It’s gone. All gone. It’s like the world has died.”

“You may be more right than you know,” Lloyd said. “I could be wrong, but things are starting to happen. The kinds of things that used to only happen in the movies.”

“You’re the same old Lloyd.” Prone to flights of fancy. “I’m starved, but let me meet your family first.”

Lloyd turned and looked at the woman and children behind him almost as if he were seeing them for the first time. “Heavens, yes! Sandy, this is Weston, my roommate. The one I thought I’d killed.” He looked at Weston with a somber look on his face, and Weston felt chills drip down his back. How long had he waited? “Weston, I’d like you to meet Sandy, my wife. She moved into the ward a year after you left.”

Lloyd had found a wife. It almost didn’t seem fair. A pang of loss stabbed through Weston, a bitter reminder that he’d lost twenty years of his life. Except he hadn’t really lost it—he was just living it at the wrong time. He’d lost twenty years of everyone *else’s* lives, that was all.

“And these,” Lloyd said, placing his hands on the shoulders of the girl and the boy, “are my pride and my joy. Abigail’s sixteen and Wes is eleven.” They hadn’t wasted any time getting started, had they. Abigail was actually pretty cute, Weston thought to himself, and then with a jolt he realized what he was thinking. She was too young. Far too young. Had Lloyd noticed? He hoped not.

As Weston’s glance moved to the young boy, though, the import of what Lloyd had just said sank through. “Wes?”

Lloyd blushed. “Yeah, short for...for Weston. I hope you don’t mind.”

It was Weston’s turn to blush. “No, really, it’s okay. I’m...I’m flattered. Honored.” Had they held a funeral for him, too? The boy was skinny, almost Ethiopian in size. Maybe there wasn’t that much food after all. Weston couldn’t tell what was causing the limp—nothing looked broken. Following an inexplicable impulse, he took a step toward Wes and ruffled his hair. Then he stepped back and wondered why he’d just done that.

“I’ve got a ton of questions for you,” Weston said. “Where’s my family?”

Lloyd glanced quickly at his wife, then back at Weston. “Maybe we should get you fed first. You look white.” Noticing Weston’s look of concern, he said, “It’s normal after a time jump, don’t worry. You’ll be fine.”

“Normal? I wasn’t the only one?”

“No,” said Lloyd, “but you were the first. I’ll tell you all about it over dinner. Come on, kids, let’s go get Uncle Weston some food.”

Wes looked at Weston. “I don’t look at all like him,” he piped up.

With a laugh, Weston reached out and ruffled the kid’s jet-black hair again. “No, kid, you got lucky.” But the boy had a point. Weston wasn’t fat, but he certainly had some weight to spare; this kid, on the other hand, was a stick. Had he been like that before the quake? Lloyd and Sandy and Abigail didn’t look emaciated at all. Maybe that explained the limp, Weston thought to himself as he followed the family into the Wilkin-son Center.

CHAPTER SIX

Weston, Sandy, and Wes sat around a table in the Cougar-eat while Lloyd and Abigail went to get the food. “So, Wes, what are some of your hobbies?”

The boy rested his chin on his hand and rolled his eyes. “I don’t have any hobbies.”

“Sure you do,” Weston said. “Everyone does.”

“Nope.”

Sandy cleared her throat. “He’s...”

“Come on, Wes, isn’t there something like cars or basketball”—Weston cringed, wishing he hadn’t said that, since the boy clearly would never play any sport—“or astronomy or computers?”

Wes absentmindedly traced his finger around on the tabletop. “Stars. I like astronomy. But I don’t have a telescope.”

Lloyd had said the boy was eleven, but his reticence and his thinness kept making Weston think he was seven or eight. He didn’t want to talk down to him. “Astronomy’s cool,” he said. “I used to lie down on the trampoline in my backyard, back when I was your age, watching the stars, hoping I’d see a comet or a meteorite.”

Sandy cleared her throat again, and her glance told Lloyd that he was breaching a taboo subject. Weird. “Anyway,” he continued, “I bet you like not having to go to school anymore.” It seemed a safe assumption that the schools weren’t operating in post-quake Provo.

“It’s alright,” Wes said. “I don’t care.”

Lloyd and Abigail returned carrying small boxes. They placed them on the table and peeled back the lids, pulling out potatoes wrapped in foil. “They’ve been cooking since this morning,” Sandy said. “We made a solar oven.”

Baked potatoes weren’t bad. He’d hoped there would be a nice array of menu choices—fruit, vegetables, maybe some chicken or fish, a dessert to top things off—but it looked like they were stuck with potatoes for the time being. If only the Irish could see him now... It really could be worse, he thought to himself. What if they had to live off grass? Or saltines? At least potatoes were filling.

After Abigail gave a prayer over the food, they dug in, eating with their hands because there weren't any forks or spoons or knives left.

"Are we the only ones here?" Weston asked.

Lloyd nodded. "As soon as the earthquake settled down, they began moving people to the foothills. And to Orem, away from the canyon."

"Then why are you still here?" Weston had a growing suspicion that maybe they weren't supposed to be here after all—that they were inside the yellow police tape of a no-entry zone. If there were any police left.

"I..." Lloyd ducked his head, looking sheepish. "I thought you'd try to come here."

"But—but you thought I was *dead*."

"Well, yes, I kept hoping that maybe you'd show up, someday."

Wes raised his hand. "We pray for you every night."

Lloyd blushed, motioning at Sandy to change the topic. But Weston had more questions. "So, my family?"

An awkward silence. Lloyd's turn to clear his throat. Even before he started speaking, Weston's heart stopped beating, and goosebumps erupted all over his arms and legs. No. No.

"We don't know for sure," Lloyd said slowly. "They might be totally okay, but the missile...it hit not too far from their house. We haven't heard anything."

"A missile? In Virginia? What about the anti-missile stuff? Aren't we supposed to be protected from something like that?" At least they weren't confirmed dead. There was still a chance. "How much did it wipe out?"

"At first, not very much. A couple of neighborhoods." He

looked at Sandy, then back at Weston. “But it was loaded with some kind of virus. Spread through all the neighboring countries and killed off tens of thousands of people before they got it contained.”

Weston hadn't thought his heart could sink any further. Even if they'd survived the initial blast, how could they outrun something like that? But what really got to him was not knowing for sure whether or not they were still alive. If they were dead, he could deal with that—but this agonizing limbo? “How long ago?”

Lloyd's potato was starting to get cold. “Two years.”

And still no word from Weston's family. But then again why would they keep in touch with Lloyd? He was just his roommate, and they hadn't even been that close. Had his parents ever even *met* Lloyd? He couldn't remember. Maybe they had been on vacation when it hit, somewhere far away. They'd have no reason to tell Lloyd where they were all the time.

But they'd thought Weston was dead, and Lloyd was with him when it “happened.” No wonder. And if Lloyd had still been waiting, he would've kept contact with them.

Could they really be dead? Some vindictive, coal-black missile from who knows where— “Who sent the missile?”

“England.”

That wasn't funny. “Lloyd, I just found out my family's probably dead, and you're *joking* with me about who killed them?”

“He's telling the truth,” Sandy said. “Relations with England have gone sour in the last ten years. They say we're on the brink of war again—the second Revolution.”

Impossible. There was no way England would turn against

America like that—they were practically siblings! And the Revolutionary War was so long ago. They couldn't still be nursing *that* wound...could they?

Lloyd seemed to read Weston's mind. "Apparently they never quite got over the Boston Tea Party. We thought everything was peachy, but their quiet rage was boiling over just under the surface all along."

All this time Abigail had been silently eating, watching the discussion with big eyes. She reminded him of his kid sister Wendy. They were around the same age. And Mike, turning fourteen in a few weeks. Then the twins, Elise and Lily. Six years old, both of them, with the brightest green eyes and chocolate brown hair he'd ever seen. With a swallow he thought of his older sister, Rebecca. They hadn't gotten along too well. She was at BYU, too, studying electrical engineering.

Wait, wait, wait, this was all wrong. Eighteen years had passed. Wendy would be thirty-four—ten years older than him. Mike, thirty-two. Already back from his mission, maybe with half a dozen kids. The twins would be...twenty-four. His age. And Rebecca? She'd been twenty-eight when he left. Forty-six years old. Forty-six. Middle-aged.

But they couldn't *all* be dead—wouldn't some of them have gotten married and moved away? They could be anywhere in the world. "When you say my family, do you mean my whole family? Or just my parents?"

Lloyd blinked at the change in topic. "Your parents never said anything about your brothers and sisters, so I assumed they'd all left home."

There was hope! "I've got to find them, Lloyd." But...how? "Wait. You said there were other time travelers, after me. Did

you ever figure out how to go back in time?”

“It’s still unstable,” Lloyd said. “Dangerous. You can’t do it.”

“I’ve got to try.”

“You can’t. None of the time machines are working anymore. Three months ago something exploded in orbit around us—nobody’s been able to figure out what it was and why it didn’t show up on anyone’s instruments—and the hail started, and ever since then the machines have been dead. I figure it’s some kind of interference, maybe a disruption in the space-time continuum. Everything else works just fine.” He looked around. “Or at least it does when the power lines aren’t down.”

“There has to be a way,” Weston said. “I have to go back and tell them to move.”

Lloyd sighed. “Weston, it won’t work. There’s no way around it. Besides, time travel isn’t exactly popular these days. Not since things started happening.”

“Like what?”

“Like the hail—fire from heaven. Or this earthquake. Or the war. A lot of people are blaming it on time travel, saying we’ve torn the fabric of time and space, that we couldn’t take care of our own earth and now we’ve started to destroy the rest of the universe to boot.”

Weston frowned. “I think they’re reading too much into it.”

“Of course they are,” Lloyd said. “But they’re scared. They keep saying it’s the end of the world. And maybe it is, I don’t know.” He looked at his family. “I think—*we* think—that they just wanted a scapegoat. And time travel happened to be a convenient target.”

“Can’t you just ignore them?”

Lloyd smiled. “I try. It’s hard, though. Some of the Bible belt folks were calling me the antichrist not too long ago. And maybe they still are. We haven’t been able to get the news in a while.”

“The antichrist? You?” Lloyd may not have been perfect, but Weston had a very, very hard time believing that his roommate-turned-inventor had become—or ever *could* become—the beast fighting against God and his angels.

Sandy tapped both of the kids on the shoulder, as they’d finished their potatoes, and said, “You two go run off to the other side for a little bit.” She gave Abigail a knowing look.

When the adults were alone, Lloyd leaned forward. “This’ll sound kooky, but here’s a gang out there calling itself 666. They masquerade as humanitarian groups and go around pillaging. Back when it first got started, five or six years ago in Jakarta, the original group got thrown in jail. But they got out a couple months later and they’ve somehow become an international operation. And it’s not just criminals, either—a lot of normal people are joining them.” Weston must have looked incredulous, for Lloyd continued, “Not in the *looting*, just in claiming membership. It’s the ‘in’ thing to do.”

This kept feeling more and more like a science fiction novel mixed up with the Book of Revelation. Weston half-expected John the Beloved to walk into the Cougareat hand-in-hand with Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke. But this wasn’t a book. He wished it were, because then he could turn the pages back and linger on those where he was with his family. He need never go past that point again. Maybe that was what heaven was like, he thought.

“Lloyd, I know that pillaging is bad and all, but they don’t sound *that* bad. It’s not like they’re killing people, pretending to be God, putting the mark of the beast on everyone. C’mon, the ‘666’ has got to be just a joke. That’s not *really* how the prophecy will be fulfilled.”

“Why not? Sure, it’s an infinite loop, but where’s the law that says that can’t happen? And these guys do have a mark. Their leader has a shaved head—they all do—with the number tattooed on his forehead, with the loops of the 6’s colored in to look like eyes, and the upward strokes flame across the top of his head in orange and red and black.”

“Sounds more like someone’s gotten a little too excited about the Book of Revelation.”

“I know,” Lloyd said, “I know. I didn’t believe it at first. But they’ve got another mark, too—not just the shaved head. They all have to tattoo a red dot—about the size of a quarter—on the palm of their right hand. They’re taking over out there, the news is talking about it all the time, and they’re starting to make the red dot a requirement to get in to certain places—clubs, restaurants, that sort of thing. But if they keep getting more power, it’ll be grocery stores, hospitals, things that *matter*.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. This is crazy. Lloyd, they are *not* the antichrist. They’re just wannabes. Heck, *I* could tattoo a ‘666’ on my forehead and get a bunch of ‘No Dot, No Service’ signs put up around town, and that wouldn’t make me the beast. Did they start doing the dot thing after the hail and all that?”

“Well, yes.”

“You see! It’s just a charade, a game of pretend.”

Lloyd shook his head. “Weston, the president of the United

States has a red dot.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Weston looked hard at Lloyd. “So? A bunch of apocalyptic wannabes, that’s all. You can’t *seriously* believe they’re the real deal, can you?”

A glance at Lloyd showed that he could.

“Lloyd, look. That’s not how prophecies get fulfilled. It’s *too* obvious.”

“The earthquake wasn’t exactly subtle. Or the hail. Scripture doesn’t always have to be metaphorical, you know.”

Weston believed that, true, but this was just too far. It felt so artificial, so fake, too much like something someone would’ve come up with after reading Revelation. The fulfillment was *too* perfect. With all the prophecies Weston had read about in the scriptures, they’d been fulfilled, yes, but never precisely in the way you’d expect from reading the prophecy alone—it seemed like God always took some artistic license in spinning a little of the unexpected into his fulfillments. It was his signature. And this? Not a chance.

Trying to change the topic to something a little less ludicrous, he asked, “So are we at war with England, then?” And then with a pang he remembered his family. It still didn’t feel real—it was as if he’d heard a story about some family far on the other side of the world, not his own flesh and blood, not the people he’d grown up with for almost two decades. Detached. He hoped that perhaps the surreality of it meant that it was indeed just a story, not something that had actually happened. But then again he was twenty years distant from his family

now—they would practically be strangers by now. Would they even remember him? He shuddered.

“Sort of. After the missile, we dropped an A-bomb on them.”

Okay, now they’d *definitely* transcended into the realm of fantasy. “Lloyd. Truth. I want the truth.”

“It’s true,” Sandy said. “Horribly true.” Her voice caught.

Lloyd reached over and took her hand in his. “Sandy had family over there.”

“But...we were *allies* with England. And now we’ve nuked them?”

“Flattened London. All of it. But don’t forget that they started it by pulling out biological warfare. The rules of fairness don’t apply once one side starts cheating.”

Weston rubbed his head. “I’m sorry. This is just so much—this isn’t at all what I thought the world would be like twenty years from now. From then. It’s like a string of nightmares come true. Isn’t there anything *good* about the world?”

“No, I should apologize,” Lloyd said. “I shouldn’t have told you it all at once. I should have known.”

“It’s okay. But tell me something good.”

“Well,” Sandy said, “they just built the third temple in China. In Shanghai.”

Lloyd nodded. “There are only five countries left that don’t have a temple. China’s already got, what, two hundred thousand members?”

“Three,” said Sandy.

“And four or five months ago they started sending missionaries to Iraq. President Holland is determined to get to every country within the next five years.”

“Whoa,” said Weston. “Iraq? No way. And *President* Holland?”

“He’s been prophet since this last Conference,” Lloyd said.

How could he be prophet already? Weren’t there over half a dozen other apostles in line before him? “What happened to everyone else?”

“They...passed on.”

“I already know that—how?”

Sandy and Lloyd looked at each other. They tended to do that a lot, Weston noticed, and particularly when they didn’t want to tell him something.

“We’ll tell you later,” Lloyd said.

Weston sighed. “Whatever.”

Before he could ask his next question, Abigail and Wes came running back—well, Wes was limp-running—from the other side of the room. “There are two guys coming up the walkway,” Abigail said, somewhat out of breath.

Lloyd stood straight up. “Who?”

“I don’t know,” Wes puffed, “but they’re wearing suits. Maybe they’re missionaries?”

“Curses,” Lloyd said. “So this is where they went. Come on, we’ve got to get out of here.”

They left the boxes on the table and quickly scooted out of the Cougareat, down the hallway, and up to the third floor of the Wilk. “Lie low,” Lloyd said, getting on his hands and knees and crawling across the north hallway, which overlooked the terrace and gave a partial view into the Cougareat. His family followed suit.

Lying flat on the ground with a couch hiding him, Weston whispered to Lloyd, “Are they the same—”

“They’ve got to be.” Lloyd motioned for the family to stay still and be quiet. “I thought I’d lost them forever. Blast.”

“What happened after I left?”

“They stole the machine. I didn’t call the police, didn’t do anything. I wasn’t home when it happened—I had to go to class. Came back and it was gone.”

“So why are they here?” It didn’t make sense. They already had the time machine—they’d had it for almost twenty years.

Lloyd quietly let out a deep breath. “Because this is where the time machine was set to send them.”

It took a moment before it dawned on Weston. They’d used the time machine, and it sent them eighteen years into the future, just like Weston.

“Shouldn’t they have ended up with me, then? On top of me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe there was a fluctuation that shifted them chronologically or geographically. There shouldn’t have been, but the time machine was never really supposed to work anyway.”

“What?” Weston’s heart skipped a beat.

“I was young. I had no idea what I was doing.”

“And you sent me through it anyway?”

Lloyd shook his head. “I already knew it worked when I sent you. Remember, I went first.”

At this point Abigail tapped both of them on the shoulders. “Not to put a damper on your conversation, but couldn’t this wait till later? Because there are those guys.”

“I don’t have all the answers, Weston,” said Lloyd as he edged out from behind the couch to get a better view.

Weston pulled himself forward along the carpet. “But you’re

from the *future*! You're supposed to know everything."

"He doesn't," said Abigail. "But I do."

And then the two guys in suits—they couldn't have been much older than Weston—came into view. They looked almost the same as they'd looked the day before when Weston had seen them in 2007, one with sunglasses and a grey suit, the other rather nondescript and bland. The grey guy was scowling, muttering something.

Then he looked up. Weston ducked, but it was too late. Both guys started charging for the staircase.

"Run!" Lloyd's call lifted all of them to their feet and they began pelting down the hallway, Sandy helping Wes as best she could.

This wasn't good. They couldn't run that fast—because of Wes's leg—and there wasn't anywhere safe to go. Or anybody to save them. As they ran, Weston thought that perhaps they could try locking themselves in a room, barring the door. But that wouldn't really get them anywhere. Safe from the suits, but from starvation? It would only be a matter of time before they were drawn out like a village under siege, hands in the air, white flags above their heads.

When they reached the end of the hallway, they curved right towards the center of the Wilk, came out into the upper foyer area, and climbed down the stairs, popping out near the elevators. "This way," Lloyd said, passing the ballroom and heading for the stairs leading out the front.

And then they skidded to a stop as the two guys in suits showed up in front of them. They must have come around the other side. Blast. Weston looked at Lloyd. Should they turn around? There was no way.

“What do you want?” Lloyd asked.

The guy in the grey suit, who was apparently out of breath, smiled. “Him.” And he pointed at Weston.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Weston’s blood iced over. Him? Why did they want *him*? Wasn’t it Lloyd they were after? Maybe they were mistaken—maybe they thought he was Lloyd. After all, they didn’t necessarily know they’d gone twenty years into the future...did they? They might think they were still in 2007. Or they might have figured it out the same way Weston had.

“You can’t have him,” Lloyd said.

The bland guy shrugged and pulled out a gun, aiming it directly at Lloyd’s head.

“Wait!” Sandy said. “Don’t shoot!” Lloyd took a step back.

“Not now,” said the guy in grey. “Come on, Weston. You come with us and we won’t touch your friends.”

Lloyd shook his head slowly. “What are you going to do with him?”

“He’s the only one who knows where the grail is,” said the bland guy.

Weston blinked. “Excuse me,” he said, recovering his composure. “This is just a joke, right? A game? Because I’ve had enough. Stop messing with my mind.” The grail? He bit his tongue. It hurt. So he wasn’t dreaming...then what was going on?

“You see?” said the bland guy to the guy in grey. “He knows.” Turning to Weston, he continued, “And he’s going to tell us.”

“Hold on a minute.” Weston gave both of them a cold look of death. “I don’t know where the grail is. Really.”

The guy in grey stepped forward, waving his finger. “Don’t lie. It doesn’t look good on you.”

“I’m serious!”

The bland guy looked to the guy in grey with a question mark written all over his features. He whispered something. “It’s him,” said the guy in grey. “Positive.”

Weston took a step to the side, away from Lloyd and his family. Better to keep them safe. But as he did so, the guy in grey put out his hand. “Stop.”

There was a red dot on his palm.

Okay, this was insane. That 666 group that Lloyd had mentioned—they hadn’t even formed until five or six years ago, right? Which was thirteen or fourteen years after these two guys had come to his apartment masquerading as home teachers. There was no way they could have met up with the group and gotten the mark since they arrived here in 2025—the place was deserted. Right? Then how could they...was it a coincidence? Or maybe the group had been around a lot longer than the world knew. A lot longer.

“Tell us where the grail is. Now.” The guy in grey pulled out his own gun and aimed it at Weston.

This wasn’t going so well. “Look,” Weston said, trying to put on his most diplomatic face. “If I knew where the grail was, I’d tell you. Honest. But I really don’t know where it is.” He looked at the bland guy. “Besides, what makes you think I know?”

“Yamo wrote—” the bland guy started, but a sharp look from the guy in grey cut him off.

“You know how you know,” said the latter. “Stop playing games. My finger’s starting to itch.”

A plan came into his mind. He swallowed. Would it work? “Let them go,” he said, nodding at Lloyd’s family, “and I’ll tell you where it is.”

“Fair enough,” said the grey. He and the bland guy moved to the side, motioning for Lloyd to go down the stairs. “Move it.”

Sandy looked at Lloyd, then at Weston. “We can’t leave him.”

“Go!” Weston said. He gave her and Lloyd a whisper of a wink. Not that he really knew what he was doing, and he had a feeling that the guys with guns wouldn’t exactly be thrilled when he told them he’d been lying, but at least Lloyd and company would be out of range. “Go far. Don’t worry about me.”

Abigail looked like she was about to burst into tears. Wes just stared. Lloyd shuttled them all down the stairs. Weston waited until he heard the door downstairs open and close.

“Okay,” said the guy in grey. “They’re gone. Where’s the grail?”

If everything was going to be as incredibly impossible as it had been for the past few hours, Weston decided, it was time to play along. “I put it back where it came from. At the foot of the cross.”

The bland guy cursed. “I knew it!”

“He’s lying.” The guy in grey stepped a little closer. “Where’d you really put it?”

Weston scrambled to put on the poker face he didn’t know he had. “At the foot of the cross. In 33 A.D. I guess you’ll have to go ask Joseph of Arimathaea for it. Sorry.”

Did they know that traveling into the past was basically impossible? If they did, the whole plan would unravel quickly. The bland guy didn't seem to find any problem with it, but the guy in grey was suspicious. But was he suspicious because he knew about reverse time throws, or was it something else? Weston tried to think the way the grey guy would expect him to. Had he supposedly stolen the grail? Or maybe he'd just figured out where it was. But he'd already played that card—he said he'd put it back where he got it, and they went along with it. So he'd stolen the grail. Good gravy.

All of this was presupposing the existence of the grail, though. He decided that breaking the news to them—namely, that there was no grail—probably wasn't in his best interest at the moment. Better to play along, tell them what they wanted. How on earth did they get it into their heads that he'd taken the grail? The only time he'd even **thought** about the grail was watching Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade as a teenager.

“You want it so you can live forever, don't you,” he said.

The guy in grey rolled his eyes. “You've been watching too many movies.”

“You'll just have to go back and get it,” Weston said. If he could get them to try to go into the past, maybe they'd get disintegrated or end up in Cenozoic Siberia or Europe during the plague or something. And then he remembered that the time machines weren't working. Blast. So much for losing them in the past.

“I don't think so,” said the guy in grey. “Not without you.” He looked at the bland guy. “In fact, that's not a bad idea. You take us there. Now.”

Oh great. “But the interference...” Which they didn't know

about. Maybe he could try to talk to their manager. “I want to see your leader.” That was a patent lie, but he had to stall while he figured out what to do next. He could tell them right now that the time machines weren’t working, but what would they do then? Kill him? It seemed better to let them figure that out on their own. “Okay. Where’s the time machine?”

The bland guy looked at him and then at the grey guy. “You don’t have it?”

Ah, Weston thought. The perfect excuse. “You mean you didn’t take it with you? You left it back in 2007? How careless.”

“You know very well that we couldn’t take it with us. We’re not playing your games,” said the guy in grey. “It’s not back in 33 A.D.” He thought for a moment. “Well, it was, but you didn’t put it there. We want to know where it is *now*.”

Bother. “Probably still there at the foot of the cross,” he ventured. “You’d have to dig to find it, though.” Sounded plausible.

“I don’t think so. We know where it was until it disappeared around 300 A.D. Nice try, though.” Drat.

“Hold on,” Weston said. “Let me see if I can remember.” He tried to remember what little he knew about the grail. The only thing that came to mind was the old knight—with the Knights Templar?—trying to chop Indy in half and falling back over, and later, in the grail room, telling him he had chosen wisely. Cup of the carpenter. Except there was no grail room here. And no grail. And he didn’t know where it was.

“I think I saw it on eBay last month.” It was worth a shot— at this point he really had no idea what to say. May as well give up.

The guy in grey was tired of being referred to as the guy in grey, so he nudged the bland guy. “Say something to me, and call me by my name.”

“What?” The bland guy was a bit slow on the uptake.

“I can’t very well say to myself, Spike, yadda yadda. You have to do it for me.”

“Uh... okay. Spike, yadda yadda.”

“That’ll do,” Spike said. “Watch our backs, Charles. The family might try something.”

Having taken care of this minor bit of business, Spike and Charles resumed their interrogation. “Let’s make this simple,” said Spike. “You have the grail. We want it. Capiche?”

“This is too much like the movies,” Weston said. “Just watch, a helicopter will crash into the building now and rescue me. And the kid will be flying it.”

Charles laughed. “No, it’ll be the Marx brothers.”

“Enough!” shouted Spike. “Cut the nonsense. Or we cut you. Ever been circumcised, kid?”

“Let’s not go there.” Weston swallowed, trying not to think about it. “Besides,” he pointed out, “you’re my age. You can’t call me kid, or I’ll call you buckaroo.”

“Don’t do that.”

“You’ll play fair?”

“It’s a deal.”

Which still left the issue of the grail neatly unresolved, Weston astutely observed. Perhaps it had gotten lost in one of those Where’s Waldo books. Or the sphinx had eaten it. Or Dan Brown had borrowed it for his next novel. There was an infinitude of places and times where it could have gotten off to, none of which were here or now. Or at least he didn’t

think so—he checked his pockets to be sure. Nothing. That was good; didn't want to get framed like Benjamin did when Joseph put the cup in his mule's sack.

That was it!

Joseph of Egypt had the grail. That was where it had disappeared. It was Reuben and Issachar and Simeon and all the rest—they'd taken it! After that, it just plain vanished from the record.

Oh, wait. That was around two thousand years before Christ. Never mind, must've been another cup.

"If you'll indulge me," Spike said, "we were discussing the grail." He shifted to an inexplicable British accent. "Mind to be a good chap and let us know where the grailie is?"

"You do seem more evil with the accent," said Weston. "But I still don't know where the grail is. Here, how about you let me go, and then if I run into the grail, I'll call you."

Charles nodded. "That's a good idea."

"That's not a good idea." Spike shook his head. "Not good. First, the phones don't work. Second, how do we know you won't just disappear? We're not *that* stupid."

"Can't argue with that," Weston said. "Look, now that we're friendly and all, would you mind telling me what on earth possessed you to think I've got the grail? Do I look like Parsifal? The Fisher King?"

"I think he means Fisher-Price," Charles whispered to Spike.

Ignoring him, Spike cleared his throat. "We know you took it because we saw you."

"Um, touché?" Weston wasn't quite sure what to say. They'd seen him? Impossible. Unless he stole it while sleepwalking. Still

impossible, though a tiny sliver of possibility began to creep through. Did he go back in time in his sleep? There wasn't a chance. At least he didn't *think* he went through time in his sleep. The narcoleptic kleptomaniac. (And yes, he knew what narcoleptic meant, and he realized it didn't quite fit here, but that was beside the point. "Sleep" and "steal" were the two ideas to get across, and he couldn't resist the "lept" similarities between the two words. We may have forgotten to mention that Weston was an amateur linguist. But we digress.)

If he *did* steal the grail in his sleep, then naturally he began to wonder what else he'd stolen. The crown jewels? The Hope diamond? The golden wedge of Ophir? Where had he put everything? And why hadn't he been caught yet? If only he could somehow manage to wake up while he was doing it. Except he had a feeling that his night-side self was far better at getting away with it, and if he did indeed wake up while lifting the Declaration of Independence, he might get locked up in jail. And what kind of excuse could he offer? "I'm sorry," he'd say, "I steal things in my sleep. But the real me is innocent." That wouldn't fly.

If Weston hadn't stolen it while dozing, on the other hand, how had they seen him? Did he have an evil twin? Maybe some kind of Mr. Hyde escaped out of him when he wasn't watching? That *would* explain why he'd been feeling so nice lately, come to think of it... But no, he'd had some less-than-nice thoughts a few days before, so there was definitely some Hyde still in him.

What if someone were masquerading as him? They could have made some of those masks—the kind in *Mission: Impossible*—and pretended to be him. Framed. "I was framed!" he

exclaimed.

“Right,” said Spike. “Nice try. We got positive ID on the fingerprints.”

Could they make fake fingerprints as well? This **was** the future—they could do whatever they wanted to. Complete identity theft. Overlooking for a moment the fact that it had landed him into some hot water, Weston couldn’t help but marvel at how cool this was. It was as if he’d been cloned.

Cloned. That was also a possibility, he had to admit. And cloning would make more sense—though not quite as cool as identity theft. Wait, no, it was **much** cooler than identity theft. If he could find his clone (were there more than one?) and convert him over to the good side, heck, he wouldn’t have to take another test in his life. No more homework.

“Do clones have the same fingerprints as their...parents? Masters? Originals?” What **did** they call them?

Charles shook his head. “Nope.”

“Yes, they do,” said Spike. “But cloning’s just science fiction.”

“Like time travel?” Weston put on his imaginary halo.

“Touché. And **I** used it correctly.”

Weston frowned. “You seem to be quite the snobbish bad guy, I’ve got to admit. Who **are** you?”

“Beside the point. Grail time.”

“I told you,” Weston said. “33 A.D. We’re two thousand years later. You might want to revise your goal and find something a little more attainable.”

“No dice,” said Spike. “Where’s the grail?”

“Look. We’re just spinning our wheels here. You keep asking for the grail, and I keep telling you I don’t know where it is.

We're not getting anywhere. And I'm getting bored."

"If you want something exciting," said Charles with a gleam in his eye, "I could shoot you."

"I'll pass, but thanks."

Charles grunted dejectedly.

So he'd been cloned. That was the only real explanation for it. Where had they gotten his DNA from, though? On second thought, that was a dumb question—DNA was everywhere. They could've gotten it from him while he slept, or slipped into the laundry room when his clothes were going, or any number of other places.

But why him?

Seriously, of all people, why would they pick him? He wasn't anyone special. He had good grades, yes, but they weren't spectacular. He was in decently good shape, sure, but he wasn't a star athlete. Just nondescript, plain old Weston.

And the light bulb went on in his head. Nondescript. Plain. That explained it. Whoever it was had wanted someone who'd be hard to identify, hard to describe. Someone who could blend in. Someone who could disappear.

But that didn't really describe him. His schnoz was out of control. And his hair? Practically an afro. No, he was anything but nondescript.

The light bulb burned out, and in the vacuum of darkness it left behind, Weston's mind stumbled along, groping its way through the chaotic mess of confusion. Nothing made sense. Sleepstealing, identity theft, cloning, what next?

There was, of course, the possibility that Spike was lying.

Time to uncover his bluff. "You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

“Yes,” said Weston. “You are. And do you know how I know you are?”

Spike shifted his feet. “I don’t, because you don’t.”

Weston smiled. It was an outward smile only, for he had no idea what he was going to say next. A few foolish things came to mind. He squashed them. A few more came, and these too were unhelpfully ludicrous. Then his mouth opened and words began to come out. “I know you’re lying because Charles told me. When you weren’t looking.”

“You *what*?” Spike spun on Charles, who raised his hands up in the air.

“I didn’t, Spike, I promise. Really. Honest. Trust me. He must’ve figured it out on his own.”

Bingo, thought Weston. The cat’s out of the bag. Now he only had to get out of here without getting killed. Or worse.

Then the unexpected happened. A dull thud, heard from not too far away, rippled through the ground and sent a tremor up their legs. And then another.

“What’s that?” Charles asked, eyes wild with fear.

Were they being bombed? The sounds were coming from the east...which was the direction Lloyd and his family had gone. He did *not* need them to get blown to smithereens on him, not now. Another thud, followed by the tinkling of broken glass.

“Let’s move this part outside,” said Spike, and nobody dissented. They scurried down the staircase—still no sign of Lloyd’s family—and out the two front doors. Plumes of smoke. Rising like pillars into the sky, the dark, mucky grey billowed and swirled in half a dozen different places. But they couldn’t see very well.

“The view’s better from up on the balcony,” Weston said, running back inside and up the stairs. Another thud. The two hoodlums followed him. As they piled out onto the balcony, a flaming ball of fire fell to the earth—rammed the earth, rather—leaving a trail behind it like a sparkler on steroids. Weston got goosebumps again. The hail. Lloyd had said something about hail. Weston had been under the impression that it had stopped, but maybe he’d misheard. At any rate, the hail was back, and these were nasty hailstones. It wasn’t a *shower* yet, thank heavens, with a thud every ten or twenty seconds, but from his viewpoint Weston could see that the soccer ball-sized hailstones were wiping out entire blocks of neighborhoods. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to be outside in the open after all.

But first he had to find Lloyd’s family. If they were safe—and he didn’t see any plumes of smoke nearby—then they could burrow down in the basement of the Wilk until the hail stopped. If it stopped.

Then he remembered that he was with the two bad guys. Drat. “Look,” he said, “I know you were pointing guns at my head a minute ago, but can we just forget about that for the time being? At least till the hail stops?”

“Sounds good to me,” Spike said. “I think we should go inside.”

Charles nodded, and Weston said, “Yes, but I’ve got to find Llo...my friend and his family.” Wouldn’t do to tell them Lloyd’s name. Except they already knew it. That was right. He’d forgotten.

They went down the outside stairs and Weston started calling out their names. “Lloyd! Sandy!” What if he couldn’t

find them? What if they'd gone far away? There was no way to call them, no way to summon them back, no way to see if they were safe or not. Or for them to come to his rescue, if he needed it. Not that he really expected them to, but it seemed like the sort of thing that would happen in the movies, and you never knew, maybe it could be real as well. But that wasn't likely to happen.

After five minutes of searching—and scores of hailstones dropping perilously close—Weston decided that he'd just have to cross his fingers and pray that the family had taken shelter. “Okay, let's go inside.” And they did.

Now he had a moment to mull over what had happened just before the hail started falling. They'd lied about the grail, which meant there might not be any grail at all. Which was probably the case. So they were just grail-hunters, looking for treasure. Except Spike had said something about all their plans hinging on the grail. Were they planning to sell it to get enough cash to finance whatever dastardly deed they were cooking up? Or was it a pawn in their game, something to dangle in front of the enemy as bait? Maybe he could find a fake grail; nobody would know the difference, he'd be off the hook, they'd be happy, and everyone could go his own separate way. Brilliant.

“So, with all this hail,” Weston said, “I've had second thoughts. I'll get the grail for you.” Charles got a gleam in his eye. “But it'll cost you.” May as well play hardball.

“You forget that we've got guns,” said Spike. “I don't think you're in any position to bargain.”

Weston tried to put on a smile. These guys were serious, even after all their joshing around above the stairs. He made a mental note never to trust a bad guy. “Well,” he said, “grail,

hail, quail...rail.”

Spike and Charles looked at each other dumbfounded. “What?”

“Grail, hail, whale, nail. It’s the key.” It was a crazy plan, especially since he just pulled some rhymes out of his head and had no idea how he was going to make them mean something. “From one of the grail texts. You’re not familiar with the grail literature, are you?” And now he sounded like some scholar. Perfect.

“Not exactly,” said Spike, and Charles shook his head.

Weston stroked his chin, in what hopefully looked wise and sagacious. “It’s a poetic quartet”—he hoped none of them had ever studied literary theory, because he was pretty sure he was making all of this up—“with, of course, four components.” Uh, what next? “The first is grail, being the head. You could call it the title page of the quartet.”

The two thugs were riveted.

“The second bead on the string, if you’ll remember, is hail. To find the grail, you first have to find the hail. And it seems we’ve just done that.”

They nodded.

“Now, chronologically speaking, we’ve had to jump forward to this time to get to the hail.” He tried to remember some of the buzzwords Lloyd had dropped on him. “You may not have noticed, but our arrival here created a rift in the space-time continuum, grabbing the fabric of the universe and tearing it apart.” He wasn’t half bad at this, he thought to himself with delight.

And then his brain just stopped working. Whale? What on earth had possessed him to say that? How could he fit *whales*

into a hunt for the grail? Then it came to him. “Whale—the third word—is a metaphor. What do you think it stands for?”

“Moby Dick?” said Spike. Was he literate after all?

Charles shook his head. “Blubber.”

“Close,” Weston said, nodding. “The sea. The next step in our search for the grail is to get to the coastal regions.” But where? California? Virginia? Israel? Would they actually try to get there, or would they give up?

“Wait a second,” Spike said. “The fabric of the universe is tearing apart?” He looked at Charles. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t that kind of bad?”

Good, a change of topic. Their conversation was keeping his attention focused enough that he realized he hadn’t even noticed the thuds of the hail outside. And then he realized that the reason he hadn’t heard them was that there weren’t any more. It had stopped. Or at least for now—with these sorts of things you never knew when they might start up again. But he had a feeling in his gut that it was over, at least for today. Tomorrow was another question. But the one question that returned to loom over his immediate attention was how to explain his way out of Spike’s question.

“Yes, it’s extremely dangerous. We never should have traveled through time,” Weston said. “We have permanently altered not only the future—our present—but the past.” Not true, but what did they know?

“That’s all well and good,” said Spike, “but what does that *mean*? Strategically speaking, that is.”

Uh-oh. Maybe he was literate after all. No, no, Weston thought, he just learned a big word somewhere and wanted to say it. He doubted Spike even knew what it meant.

“It means that we’ve caused the hail. And the earthquake. Our presence here is shaking the world to pieces—who knows how long it’ll be before we hit the terminus and the whole thing goes kaput. Our arrival here in 2025 marks the beginning of the end of the world.”

“But...the earthquake happened before we got here.” Charles was scratching his head.

Bother. He had a point. “No, no, no,” Weston said, stalling for time. “The tear began back in 2007 when we left. To get here we had to step through the continuum—in a manner of speaking, of course—and the only way to do that is to rip a hole in it. I suppose I misled you when I said it was our arrival here that marked the beginning of the end; I should have said our departure. Granted, they were the one and the same, two chronological points so contiguous that they’re virtually identical, but I can see how this might have confused you.” Good heavens, he was talking like those dry professors he’d loathed back at school. It was easy to do—talking like them, that is, not loathing them. He hadn’t really despised *them*, really, just their rhetoric. But that was beside the point. What word was he on? Whale? Maybe he should just skip to nail.

“But we’ve digressed. The fourth word in the series is nail.”

“Wait,” said Spike. “You said the coast. Which coast?” Curses. He wasn’t as dumb as he looked.

Weston nodded thoughtfully. “That’s the right question to be asking.” Meaning, I have no idea what the answer is. But he couldn’t let them know that. “The answer hinges on the word ‘nail.’”

A pause. Nails and seacoasts. What had he gotten himself

into? He wished he'd thought through this *before* he opened his mouth. "You see, the east coast of subsaharan Africa is well-known for its nail production factories. The trade routes came down from Europe and the Middle East, seeking out the ores and metals that were only found on the coast of Somalia and Mozambique and other seaside countries." He should write travel books. This was *good*. "The only problem is that a tsunami devastated that coast one year ago. Lloyd told me about it earlier."

"So we'll have to get a submarine," Spike said.

That's not what Weston was hoping for. "No, no, that wouldn't work. The grail isn't actually there, that's just where the map is that leads to it. And considering that the map was, oh, two thousand years old, I doubt it survived the tsunami."

Spike and Charles just looked at him. For a long time. Weston swallowed. Then Spike lifted his hand and inspected the red dot on his palm. "The boss isn't going to be happy about this."

"I'm afraid that's just how it is, boys."

"Well," said Spike, "I guess we don't need you alive any more. Kill him, Charles."

"Wait!" Weston said, eyes wide. "You can't kill me."

Spike smiled lazily. "We can't?"

"No, the map may not have survived the tsunami"—had to think fast here—"but there were two copies made. One in a monastery in Ghent, the other inside the ark of the covenant."

"And you know where both are?"

"Just the monastery," Weston said. "I haven't seen the ark in a long, long time." Like, ever. "Do you fellows have a way to get across the Atlantic?"

Charles snorted. “We have connections.”

Bother. He was hoping they wouldn't have any way to get there. What monasteries were in Ghent? Where **was** Ghent? With no electricity he had no Internet, which meant no googling, which meant no clue. Maybe they'd know how to get there, and he'd take them around until he found a monastery. But he didn't want to go to Ghent! Not under these circumstances, at least. And yet it didn't seem like he had much of a choice. Maybe afterwards he could get back here and find a way back home.

Afterwards? The only way to make an afterwards would be to escape, preferably before they crossed the Atlantic, since he had a suspicion it would be a little harder to get home once he was in Europe. So he had to get away...but how? He wished a hailstone would come plummeting down right on top of these two. But if it did, well, he'd be under it as well, and that would be no good. He could try to overpower them physically, but there were two of them, and they were armed. And not exactly petite, either.

What he needed right now was a *deus ex machina*, or whatever they called those things in literary theory—saved by the bell, or at least by the random character who you'd forgotten about already. Lloyd's family would be a nice candidate, particularly because they were the only people Weston knew around here. The only people, period.

As it happened, he didn't need to wait long. At the back of his mind he noticed a low rumbling, thought it was his stomach, but the sound kept growing (oh, and by the way, Spike and Charles were muttering to each other while Weston was thinking all of this). And growing. More and more noticeable,

it steadily increased in volume and, though he wasn't quite sure how this part worked, breadth and depth. It just felt bigger and bigger with each second. Hailstones? No, they were periodic. This was constant. Another earthquake? Except the earth wasn't really moving, though this could be the precursor.

"Dam," he said.

"I thought you Mormons don't swear," Spike said, turning to look at him.

"No, the dam. Hear that sound? The dam's burst and there's going to be a flood. We've got to get upstairs!" He hoped Lloyd's family was already up there, somewhere.

He started running up the stairs, with Spike and Charles on his tail. They didn't even get halfway up before the rumbling became thunderous. Crashes and shatterings split the air. And then a wall of water—Weston couldn't tell exactly how tall it was, but it was at least two stories up—slammed into the building, shaking it and smashing through the downstairs doors and pouring in with a virile and serpentine energy. It was thirsty. Its forked tongues of water licked out at their feet as they pelted up the stairs, trying to pull them down with it, but they made it, just barely.

And then the walls came tumbling down, and the world went black for Weston.

CHAPTER NINE

When he came to, Weston was bobbing up and down in the sea. No, this wasn't the sea, it couldn't be, he thought, choking as he spit out some of the water that had gurgled its way down his throat. He had been in the Wilkinson Center...and then

what? He couldn't quite remember. Something about water.

He wiped some of the water out of his eyes and looked around. Not quite the sea, he realized—he was floating in the remains of some large building which had held enough water to give the impression of being a lake or a pond. He swam over to the edge and looked down. Only a few inches of water out on the ground. It must have—oh, yes, now he remembered, the dam had burst and the water had come crashing down. It must have kept going. That was good, at least, he thought to himself; he didn't know how much longer he could keep swimming.

The destruction had changed the landscape once again. Was he still in the Wilkinson Center? He couldn't tell. He did need to find a way out, down to solid ground.

As he swam around, looking for a door or a staircase or something, he found himself wondering what time it was. Clouds covered the sky. It felt like early afternoon, but it could've been morning. Or almost evening, for that matter. How long had he floated there?

And where were Spike and Charles? And Lloyd's family? Worry seized him in a tight grip for a moment as he thought of Wes, unable to swim. They had to have found a safe place. They just had to. But even as he thought it, he knew there was no real reason it had to be that way. Life just wasn't fair sometimes.

And then he remembered that he had just missed out on twenty years of his life, probably irreversibly. Yes, life wasn't fair. He'd probably die single, part of a time that wasn't his own, a stranger in a strange land. What had he done to deserve this? And he couldn't find an exit. He kept swimming. Had he com-

mitted some sin that he was unaware of? Running the catalog of his sins through his memory—the ones he could remember, at least—he tried to rank them and see if any were bad enough to warrant getting forcibly pulled up out of his own time and thrust down in another like this. It was like a tree branch getting grafted to the wrong tree. Just watch it die.

But maybe there was still a way back, a way to reverse all of this and avoid it. If he went back, maybe he could change the future, so that none of this would ever happen. But how do you stop an earthquake from happening? Especially one that was three hundred years overdue?

They could move. He could get everyone he knew to move to the Midwest, where they would be safe from quakes and missiles. Or they could find some island somewhere in the Pacific, far away from the end of the world. Maybe, if they were righteous enough, they could get taken from this earth like the city of Enoch. That might be the only way out, he thought.

His search had brought no results, and he realized he'd have to swim down to the ground floor and open one of the doors. There was a staircase off to what looked like the north side. Holding his breath, he dived under and swam down it.

There was Charles, stuck against the ceiling behind the door, blue and bloated. Weston almost threw up. He had to be dead, with eyes rolled open like that, skin wrinkly. If only he'd known... He could have saved him.

But now wasn't the time for that. Weston reached down and yanked on the door handle. An instant later, the weight of all the water above him pushed him out, caught in a forceful current pouring out of the doors and into what looked like a parking lot. He came to the surface, gagging again. And Charles's

body was floating next to him, face up. The nausea returned, and this time Weston couldn't hold it back. He staggered to his feet and stepped away.

By now the water had splashed its way out in a hasty retreat, running down the parking lot. Must be on an incline, he thought, though he couldn't really see it. Still too much gashed-up earth, sticking up in all the wrong places like a bone out of whack, though up here it wasn't half as bad as it had been down near his apartment. And now most of the debris had been swept away, tumbleweed in a windstorm.

He looked at Charles again. Or at what had once been Charles; the body's resemblance to anything human was swiftly deteriorating. He almost looked like an inflatable toy, with painted skin. Weston shivered.

Now he had to find Lloyd's family, if nothing else. "Lloyd!" he hollered. "Sandy!" He slogged to the edge of the parking lot, hoping he could get a better view. It was slow walking—the crevices and cracks were half-covered with water, and it would be only too easy to sprain his ankle. And that was the last thing he needed.

"Wes! Abigail!" Nothing, except for a few birds chirping in the distance as if nothing had happened. Weston wondered if Noah's dove had cared. Probably not.

Time dragged on as Weston made his way around, and it started to get dark. And Weston started to get cold. And it wasn't long before he started to get hungry, too. It became clear pretty quickly that he had been floating in the remains of the top floor of the Wilkinson Center—though how that much water had gotten in there and *stayed*, he didn't know—which meant that Lloyd's family was probably nearby. They should

have been, anyway, if they'd had the sense to stay close.

But why would they stay close? Two guys with guns, and Weston *had* told them to run away. To protect his family, Lloyd would've gone far enough away that they couldn't be found. And then he would've come back for Weston. Wouldn't he?

He had to have gotten caught in the flood. And out on the streets, he would've been swept to and fro like a fleck of dust in a river. Smashed and crumpled up, a paper doll all bent and mangled. That's what Lloyd had probably become. And it was Weston's fault. He felt sick again.

Whoa, he thought to himself. It was too early to start planning Lloyd's funeral. Maybe they hadn't gone far at all. Maybe Lloyd hadn't come back to look for him. Maybe they were all hale and hearty, sitting around in some family home evening, reading their scriptures and praying for Weston to come back safely.

Probably not.

Besides, did they even *have* scriptures anymore? He hadn't noticed any books on them. Then again, knowing Lloyd, they probably had the whole standard works memorized. Weston tried to recite to himself some of the words to the scriptures he'd once memorized, back in seminary, but he was too rusty. And lately—before the jump—he hadn't exactly been diligent with studying them, either. Just...skimming. And now here he was needing the living waters instead of these deathly waters, knocking on the bridegroom's door, and it was too late. Not a fun feeling.

"Be still, my soul," he said to himself, slowly, savoring each word. He couldn't remember much of the rest of the hymn,

other than, “the Lord is on thy side,” and “thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake.” But that was enough. Hopefully more of the words would come back to him later. “I need thee every hour” was next, and this time he meant it. He’d forgotten God, abandoned Him, so no wonder he’d ended up like this. God had kicked him out of the inn. No, that wasn’t right—God had been there by his side, wanting to protect him, but Weston had thrown his hands up in resistance and so there was nothing God could do when the dark powers of the night swept through and hammered him out of his own time and into this wasteland of a future. He’d stopped God from helping him. How stupid!

The real question, though, was whether it was too late. God had all power, didn’t He? Couldn’t He somehow fix this? Surely He could just send him back, patch this owie with a nice big bandaid, make everything okay again. Isn’t that what a God was for? Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, all of that. If time was one eternal round for God, then as far as He was concerned, Weston was still back in 2007, wasn’t he? And it **was** where he belonged. Not here in some nightmarish graveyard.

He prayed. Nothing too flowery, just the way he felt, spilled out into words. When he finished he felt pretty much the same as before, but a little of the despair had started to leak away, and a little of the darkness had been poked through by a sliver of light. But Weston wasn’t aware of that until later. For the moment, he was more worried about the onset of evening. His clothing stuck to his skin, and he wasn’t drying off very quickly. The shiver he’d felt earlier was recurring more and more often. He had to find some place to get warm—not that it would get very cold in July, but somehow it felt like fall already—or else

he'd be in bigger trouble.

He started making his way back toward campus, not really sure where he was going, just walking, walking, walking. Every once in a while he'd call out for Lloyd, but as the hours began to pass, his hope flickered and faded. He was alone again. Charles dead, Spike missing, Lloyd and his family missing. What he wouldn't give to find another human, anyone, even someone like Spike who wanted to kill him. That was what he hated most about this future, he decided—the solitude. The earlier barrage of loneliness crept back into his heart and sat there, watching him, taunting him. Not much he could do about it. If he'd had a book, he could read, and at least that would feel like contact with another person. But he had no book. And with the recent flood, he doubted there were any still intact for miles around.

So he thought about the books he would read next time he got the chance. He'd been meaning to read all of Shakespeare for a while now, but had never gotten around to it. As it was, he'd only read Hamlet and MacBeth, and he'd seen A Midsummer Night's Dream in the HFAC once. He tried to think of more books. Dickens? Not much was coming to mind. He'd have to read more when he got back, definitely. And memorize them. Being alone like this was...paralyzing, almost.

An image of Moroni walking through the wilderness passed through his mind. Moroni knew what it felt like, he thought. How had he managed to survive? Of course, he wasn't exactly alone himself—he'd had those Lamanites after him. Kind of the same situation, almost. But then again Weston wasn't any Moroni, and a few hours alone paled in comparison to years and years of it. Weston shivered again.

As the last rays of the sun slipped below the horizon, he found himself thinking that tomorrow would be the Sabbath, wouldn't it? He doubted he'd find a sacrament meeting anywhere around. Or bread. But there was plenty of water, enough and to spare. If only he could turn water into bread. Or into a time machine, for that matter.

Daylight melted into darkness. Figuring that he may as well try to get some rest, Weston found a fragment of a wall and huddled up against it. Not much of a shelter, but it would do, and it didn't look like rain. If only he knew how to build a fire. Except all the wood was wet. Come on, he thought to himself, can't things start to get better? The only *good* thing that's happened so far is running into Lloyd and his family, and they're probably dead now. Everything else has been awful. Couldn't things just start to head uphill now? Please? Just a little bit?

As he started to doze off, Weston noticed a glow of light coming from the side. His eyes opened wide. A flashlight? He couldn't hear footsteps, but that didn't mean anything. The light grew nearer and brighter.

He stood up, shivering even more. Should he run? What if it was Lloyd and his family? As it was, he was cornered in, and if he was going to make a move, now was the time.

And then the time was past. Into view walked—no, glided—a man. A glowing man. He wore a white robe, and the light that Weston had seen was emanating from him like a light bulb. An angel.

Weston's first thought was to scream, but his voice caught, and all he could do was stand there paralyzed. A real angel. An honest to goodness apparition from the other side. And

it—he?—was floating a foot or two off the ground. Was he dreaming? No, he thought, this was real. He could feel his cold jeans chilling his bones, and his eyes were definitely open.

The creature of light raised his hand in a salute. “Fear not,” he said. “I come bearing tidings from our Lord.” And there was a twinkle in his eye.

Weston was all ready to fling himself on the ground and swear allegiance to this messenger from another sphere, but something snagged in his mind. A verse of scripture. Something in the D&C, something about angels of light and messengers, something about shaking hands. Looking up at the angel, he almost didn’t dare ask to shake—it seemed somehow wrong, out of place. As if it would be disrespectful, even.

He swallowed and mustered up his courage. He had to—that’s what you were supposed to do, wasn’t it? As he extended his hand, he said, “Nice to meet you.” How prosaic. Dumb, dumb, dumb. An angel comes to see him, and that’s all he can think of to say? So much for impressing the higher ups.

The angel reached down his glorious hand. Weston watched it enclose his own and start to shake.

He didn’t feel anything.

Oh, great, he thought, as goosebumps ran up and down his spine like a zipper run amuck. What was he supposed to do now? Cast the angel out? Run away? Could the angel actually *do* anything to him? Except it wasn’t really an angel, now, was it—a devil masquerading as an angel of light. This couldn’t be happening. Not really. It was a dream. Please, he thought, please oh please let it be a dream. Wake me up now.

A second later, he was still standing there dazed. The angel—devil—“let go” of Weston’s hand and continued to speak.

“Your pain has not gone unnoticed. Draw near unto me, and I will draw near unto you.”

The words sounded right but Weston felt horribly, utterly squeamish, like he'd bitten into an apple and found a worm inside, and not just any worm, but one frothy with the plague, covered in fungus and rotting flesh, decay peeling off it as it writhed and groaned for life. This was wrong. This was so wrong. “Stop it!” he cried. “Stop! Now. Get out of here.”

The messenger paid him no heed. “Do not forget your Lord in this your hour of need.” Your Lord, my foot, Weston thought to himself. Like this devil had any real conception of the Lord. And then with another cascade of chills he had two realizations, coming down like a forked tongue. The messenger probably *did* know the Savior, or at least knew of him, knew what he looked like. And hated him. Loathed him. Despised him. This was the enemy.

And with like a lightning bolt Weston realized the devil hadn't been talking about the Savior at all. He had meant *his* Lord. The lord of the underworld. The real devil. Weston's squeamish worm became a fire-breathing dragon inside him, scorching and searing his mind, festering in his heart. No! He pushed the thoughts out of his head.

“Get thee hence!” he yelled, trying to remember if that passage in the D&C had given any instructions for getting rid of a devil once you'd found one attached to you. He couldn't think of any.

There was, of course, that thing Moses had done. Could he really do that, though? It seemed too sacred, too serious. But if it were ever to be used, now was the time. He'd never exorcised an evil spirit before—were there set words he had to say? A

proper procedure?

All of this flashed through his mind in an instant, and before it was through he already knew what he had to do. He raised his arm to the square and cast out the devil.

With a crackling sound like an explosion, the light vanished and took with it the messenger from hell, leaving only smoky darkness in its wake. For a second Weston's head pounded like a thousand hammers of Thor were upon him, but then that too left, he found himself splayed on the ground, breathing hard, more awake than he'd ever been but also more exhausted. This was definitely not a dream.

CHAPTER TEN

It took several hours for Weston to calm down enough to fall asleep. His body sank under the sleep-deprivation, but his mind was skittish, on fire, dancing from one thought to another so fast that his body had no choice but to stay awake. Eventually, though, his thoughts slowed down and his body caught up and he fell into a light and not particularly healthy sleep. But it was sleep.

When he awoke the next morning, still shivering, he remained huddled for warmth. Besides, he didn't really know what to do next. He could spend months looking for Lloyd's family but with no luck. Was he a bad friend if he didn't look for them? They at least had each other.

But he **had** to find them, he thought. They were his only friends here. He couldn't just give up at that easily.

And what if another devil showed up? He supposed he could keep casting them out, but maybe they'd start working

mischief, or doing whatever it is devils do. He'd read stories about devil worshipers who'd gotten killed messing with the dark side, and it made sense, but that meant devils could actually affect things in this world. Which was a scary thought. Hadn't the prophets said something about devils not being able to hurt us unless we let them? But maybe that was purely on a spiritual level—they couldn't make us sin unless we gave them permission. But that was the same with anyone else on earth. And anyone else on earth could maim and injure and even kill...could the devils do that too?

A good question, he thought, but not one he wanted to dwell on for much longer. Better to act as if they were real people and could indeed hurt him and leave it at that. But hopefully this was a moot point, and that had been not only the first but also the last devil he would run into. He had a feeling that was only wishful thinking.

After a while, huddling against the wall wasn't quite as warm as it had been, and Weston decided he needed to walk around, get the blood flowing. The sun was almost up. The ground was still mostly soggy, with puddles all over the place, and the air smelling like it had just rained. Weston wondered how Noah had felt when he'd gotten off the ark. A whole new world, fresh and clean and unencumbered. That's probably how he'd seen it, but he'd had those seven people with him, too, and a hordes of animals. Weston had nothing. And this? Not exactly a whole new world, and it certainly wasn't clean and unencumbered. *This* world looked like the innards of a sink disposal.

As he walked toward the center of campus, his eye caught a glint from the north. The temple. Still standing, too. That was where he had to go, he decided—it was the only place that

made any sense. Maybe there'd be someone there, someone who could help him. And Lloyd and his family would make their way up there before long, wouldn't they? He set out for the house of the Lord, humming "I Love to See the Temple" under his breath.

Slogging through the quad north of the library took *forever*, but it did give him plenty of time to mull over his experiences. If only he had his journal with him—he hadn't been an exactly devoted journaler, and now, when he had so much to write about, he had no journal. Not that his journal would have survived the flood. Maybe it was best that he didn't really have a journal—or *any* possessions, for that matter—with him. The ultimate in portability. The extreme anti-materialists weren't quite as crazy as he'd thought.

But maybe he was crazy. Had he *really* seen a devil? He'd thought it was real, yes, and he'd felt the cold biting through him, but maybe it was just an extremely vivid dream. Unlike all the rest of his dreams, which were always muddy and fogged up. But no, people didn't see things like that these days—that was just in the olden days, back when superstition reigned and psychiatry didn't yet exist. He couldn't have seen something like that. And even if he hadn't dreamed it, just why would some devil go out of his way to visit him? He wasn't *that* important. It's not like he was going to become the prophet someday—heck, there wasn't even much of a someday left, from the look of it. No, he was just Weston, an ordinary college student. Who happened to have gotten kicked twenty years into the future.

Was it the time-jumping that caught the attention of the devils? Did they care about that sort of thing? If it really did

start tearing a hole in the space-time continuum, maybe they would. As would the angels. But come on, he thought to himself, it's not like they'd let that happen. Like they'd *really* let some tinkering student build a time machine which could shred the universe to pieces.

Would they?

He and Lloyd did have their agency, after all. What if the angels and devils were trying to stop him from destroying the universe? That would be reason enough for them to come seek him out.

But he was being melodramatic. If some rift in the fabric of time was going to happen, it would have already happened, long ago. Besides, Lloyd said other people had jumped through time as well. It's not like they were cats clawing holes in the curtains.

A whirring sound came from above and off to the side, interrupting Weston's thoughts. He looked up to see a helicopter coming in his direction. Impossible. There were still people alive? On second thought, of course there were. The rest of the world would have noticed the flood, would have sent rescuers in to save people. Except everyone had been evacuated precisely for that reason. But maybe they were still sending people in anyway, to see if there were stragglers like him. He waved his arms wildly in the air. Would they be able to see him? He started jumping up and down. He felt like a Raggedy-Ann doll, but it didn't matter—salvation was on its way.

He watched as the helicopter drew nearer, hovering, seemingly slowing down. And then it kept going.

No! It wasn't fair. They had to have seen him—they were low enough. What if they weren't a rescue squad? But who else

would they be?

The image of Charles's bloated body in the parking lot flashed into Weston's mind. Group 666. That's who they would be, and they were looking for their two thugs. No wonder they'd passed him by.

They'd passed him by. They didn't know who he was. Which meant they hadn't yet found Spike, since obviously they would have swung round and come back to capture him once they saw it was him.

Sort of the way the helicopter was turning around right now.

Weston's feet were begging to run, to hide, to get away from the murderers who wanted him dead. But his heart was stuck in its place, yearning for some human contact, even from an enemy. He stayed. But he stopped waving his arms.

The helicopter stopped a hundred yards away from Weston and began its descent. The wind picked up. Like most copters he'd seen, this one was a slim, aerodynamic design, black except for the glass bubble. Even the blades were black. But then Weston noticed the red hourglass painted on the underbelly of the helicopter. Creepy. The urge to run returned, ten times as strong as before, but he stood his ground. And wondered if he was foolishly sticking his head in the noose.

When the copter had touched ground, out jumped two guys in camo, and they ran towards Weston. "Are you okay?" yelled one above the din. A strange question for an enemy to be asking.

"Yes," he hollered back.

They reached him. "Are you sure?" said the other one. Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Let's get you

out of here.” With their arms around him, they led him back to the copter and helped him get in.

“Hi there,” said a smiling red-haired man with at least a week’s worth of stubble dotting his chin. “My name’s Job.”

For a moment Weston’s heart leapt into his throat. The real Job? But then Job, apparently sensing Weston’s confusion, said, “My real name’s Jedediah, but my parents called me Job, and it stuck.” By now the glass bubble had resealed itself and they were starting to rise.

“I’m Gregory,” Weston said, deciding not to give too much away in case these were indeed minions from the 666. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” said one of the guys who’d run out to get him. “I’m Silas, nice to meet you.” He extended his hand. Weston’s heart leapt back into his throat, but he swallowed it down again and shook Silas’s hand. And felt it, which was an unspeakable relief. “How’d you survive that flood?” Silas asked.

“I’m not really sure. I just heard the dam burst, and then I woke up floating in the water.”

“Perhaps the more important question,” said the third guy, this one blond with blue eyes, clean-shaven, “is what you’re doing down here. The area’s been off-limits for over a week. You trying to get yourself killed?”

Not quite the convivial host, was he. But then Weston listened to what he’d just said—off-limits? That would explain why it had been so empty. He knew Lloyd had said they’d evacuated everyone, but he hadn’t known they weren’t letting anyone back in. It all clicked.

“It’s a long story,” Weston said. “What was your name?”

“Call me Jones.”

One of *those*. Weston quietly sighed. “Thanks, guys. Really. You probably saved my life.” And hopefully they hadn’t just saved it so they could take it on their own time and in their own way.

“No problem,” said Job from the pilot’s seat. “We’re going to do another run through and see if we can spot any other survivors, but we’ll get you up to headquarters soon.”

Headquarters? Great, it *was* 666. Should he try to open the bubble and jump out? It was impossible, especially with Jones sitting next to him, watching him with those dark, suspicious eyes. “Headquarters?”

“Quake headquarters,” Silas said. “Though now they’ll double as flood HQ, too. It’s not much, but there wasn’t much left after the quake, and the feds haven’t sent us much support. They’re too busy fighting England off.”

Jones gave Silas a look that said to shut up. Maybe they thought he was a spy—a paratrooper or something. Did they even still have paratroopers? Probably not.

“Did the flood hit anywhere that wasn’t evacuated?” Weston asked.

A silence. “Yes,” Job said quietly. The somber silence continued, like a blanket thrown over the conversation.

“I’m... sorry.” Weston sensed that there was more than met the eye here, but didn’t want to push it. May as well go for the dangerous question, the one he almost didn’t want to know the answer to, the one he was scared to ask. “So, what organization are you guys with?” He tried to plan out what his response would be if it were indeed the dreaded 666. Laugh? Pretend like it was no big deal? At any rate, he’d be able to find

out more about them, see if they were as big a threat as Lloyd seemed to think they were.

“The Utah Quake Squad,” said Silas. Weston sighed with relief. It wasn’t 666. Unless Silas was lying, which was possible, but he seemed to be a fairly trustworthy fellow.

“Why the black widow?”

Job looked back from the pilot’s seat. “You mean the cop-ter? It was just for fun. She came black, and we had some red paint, so I figured we’d put it there.”

How...charming. Except that wasn’t a word guys really said, so Weston hastily backspaced over it in his head and replaced it with “interesting,” which was a far more suitable word for his gender.

They flew for twenty or thirty minutes, up past the point of the mountain, across the Salt Lake valley, and then they began a circling descent. Right to the University of Utah campus. How ironic, Weston thought. But the hospital was supposed to be pretty good.

After landing on the roof of one of the taller buildings, Job and Silas helped Weston out of the copter—even though he didn’t really need any help—and walked him to one of the corners. There was a faint rectangle on the ground, but it wasn’t till Job hit a button with his feet that the rectangle began slowly going down. An elevator shaft. He’d forgotten this *was* the future.

Which was something he’d been almost surprised by so far. Sure, he hadn’t really run into much civilization, but it seemed like every time he’d read about the future—you know, in science fiction stories and the like—it had been chock-full of cool new technologies, like the Jetson’s. But this world? It

was mostly the same as what he knew, other than a few new things like this elevator. Maybe all the technological developments were all invisible, or you had to be around people to see them. Or maybe technology hadn't progressed. That would be sad, Weston thought, and he wondered how that could've happened. Repressive governments? Laws banning research? Back in 2007 the economy was pretty friendly to new technologies; maybe something had changed that. Apparently for the last few years there'd been a war, but didn't that usually stimulate research and development? Besides, that still left fifteen or sixteen years where nothing much had happened. Weston couldn't believe that. It had to be there, somewhere, under the surface. Maybe it just *looked* normal—maybe that was the great achievement of the next generation, making technologies that fit so perfectly into their existing lives that you wouldn't notice them unless you were actually looking for them. An interesting idea, he thought.

By this time they'd gone down a few floors. As they passed each one, Weston noticed that there weren't any elevator doors. Seemed like a minimalist design. Was there even any way to stop the thing? Or lights to tell you what floor you were on? He looked around—the only part of the elevator that stayed with them was the floor—and then, finally, he saw a series of green lights at Job's feet that were ticking on. Maybe technology had actually *regressed*.

At the next opening onto a floor, Job hit the button again with his foot. "Here we are."

The four of them walked off the platform and into a long, narrow hallway, brightly lit. Looked like a hospital. "This way," Silas said, leading them down the right, past several rooms that

had people in them in scrubs. Definitely a hospital.

They came to an open alcove where a girl sat at a desk. A cute girl, Weston noticed with a dash of satisfaction. Next to her stood a makeshift sign with “Registration” written on it in permanent marker.

“If you can just put your information on there,” Job said, “that way we can keep track of who’s been rescued.”

Jones had been silent all this time, occasionally eyeing Weston, but most of the time just staring off into space. Now, though, he was eyeing the girl at the desk. But not if Weston could help it.

“Hi there, what’s your name?” he asked her.

She smiled—one of those smiles to die for—and, brushing back a wisp of chocolate-colored hair, said, “Bridget.” Weston smiled back. No ring on her finger, which was a good sign. “Mine’s Weston.”

“Weston!” A small voice came from the couches behind the desk. Weston looked around and saw a little boy sitting there, nursing a scrape on his knee. Wes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Wes, my man! Where’s everyone else?” Weston walked around the booth—winking at the girl as he did—and sat down next to Wes on the couch.

The boy looked up at him with a solemn expression. “I don’t know.” Wes swallowed. “They got lost.”

Not good. “I’m sure they’re okay,” Weston said. He had no right to say it, knew it was probably false, but he said it anyway. The last thing the kid needed was to start worrying that his

family was dead. Even if it was probably true.

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

Weston thought back to his own family. Twenty years. They must’ve gone on with their lives, reforming the family around the gap where he once had been. The child who disappeared. How hard had it been on his mother? Sleepless nights worrying where he was? Or had she let time salve the wound? Did they even think about him after the first few years?

Were they even alive?

“I know how you feel, Wes,” he said. “My family was over there when the missile hit.”

“Yeah, Dad told me.” Wes fingered the scrape on his knee, which wasn’t too bad. The inner wound was worse.

Weston ran his hands through his hair. They couldn’t really go look for the rest of the family, not when they were up here at headquarters. All they could do was wait. But how long? How long before they counted them as dead? How long had *his* family waited for *him*?

Maybe they’d let them go out and help search. It was only fair, and it’s not like they were injured. But the rest of the family could be almost anywhere. “Where were you when the flood hit?”

“Outside. In the parking lot.”

Which meant they would have been swept away, till they ran into something. “Where’d they find you?”

“I don’t know, someplace.”

“Not in the parking lot, though?”

“No.”

Weston rubbed his chin. “Do you think you’d remember it if we went back there?”

“They won’t let us go back,” Wes said. “I already asked them.”

Weston stood up and walked back to the booth. Silas and Job and Jones had left, but the cute girl was still there. “Question,” he said. The girl looked up and gave him that smile again. “Bridget, right?” She nodded. “Do you think we might be able to catch a ride with the next copter, to go back and look for his family?” He motioned at Wes.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but that’s against policy.”

“Couldn’t we, maybe, you know, bend the rules?” He gave her a winning grin.

“Sorry. Besides, you’ve got a visitor coming.” She pointed down the hall with her pencil. A lone man was walking down towards them, slowly, almost sauntering. As he got closer, Weston noticed his shaved head. With a tattooed 666 on his forehead. Blast.

The man stopped. “Is that him?” he asked.

“I believe so,” said Bridget. She was in cahoots with him. That *so* was not fair. Why did the cute girls always end up being evil? Maybe, though, just maybe Weston could convince her of the error of her ways and get her to leave these guys. But right now he had more pressing things to deal with.

The leader walked up to Weston, stopped right in front of him, and looked into his eyes. A thick-set man, he had a poise and confidence that made Weston want to fall into his ranks. Dangerous. But the man also had a hollow look in his eyes, as if there wasn’t much life left in his soul, as if something had dried over. Not quite like a stuffed animal with marble eyes, but almost. And yet at the same time there was a piercing intelligence to them, hiding behind the hollowness, almost like

one of those trapdoor spiders that lie in wait. Weston got the chills.

“So you’re the one who started tearing the universe apart.” His eyes closed to slits.

Weston swallowed. “Excuse me?” Wasn’t he after the grail?

“The first time traveler. That was you, wasn’t it?” the man said.

“Well, yes, but—”

“I ought to just kill you now. Scum like you don’t deserve to live.”

Death threats he could expect, but because he went through time? Seriously, now. “I don’t understand.”

The man scowled. “My wife and kids died in the hailstorm. Because of you. I lost two of my best friends in the quake. Because of you. Volcanoes are erupting all over the world. Because of you.” He moved closer. “People are living in fear, clawing at each other for survival, murdering their own children. Because of you.”

Whoa. This was news. Weston swallowed again, tried to look the man in the eye, and said, “I think you’ve got the wrong guy. I didn’t make all of that happen.”

“No?” the leader said. “Then who did?”

A good question. Weston didn’t really feel entitled to say God had done it. And maybe He hadn’t—maybe it was just a natural cause-and-effect. Maybe some butterfly had beat its wings in the Ukraine.

“I don’t know.”

“Then you have to be responsible,” the man said. “You’re going back.”

“Back?” Weston thought of the flood zone, the wreck that

was campus. Did they want him to find Lloyd's family?

The man looked down his nose at Weston. "Back to where you came from. Back in time."

He was joking. He was, wasn't he? Could he really send Weston back in time? That would be the answer to...everything. He'd be back with his own family again, back in his own time, back where he belonged.

Was it a ruse? Could this guy—whatever his name was—actually do it, or was he just setting him up with false hopes so he could then kill Weston? He wouldn't put it past him.

"You know as well as I do," said Weston, "that you can't travel back in time." Time for the bluff to be uncovered, if it was a game.

"Bridget, can we send him back in time?"

With a sideways glance at the man, Bridget looked at Weston and solemnly nodded. She was probably just a pawn. Did she even know who she was working for? She had to. And yet she didn't have the shaved head. Maybe only the men did that.

"I don't believe you."

The man laughed. "*You* don't believe *me*? Do you know who you're talking to, kid?"

"Actually," said Weston, "I don't. You haven't bothered to introduce yourself."

"I'm Adolf Hitler."

Or a nutcase. And yet he said it with such nonchalance that if it weren't for the utter insanity of the idea, Weston could have believed him. "Right. Maybe you didn't read the history books carefully enough—they found Hitler's body. Suicide." Good thing he'd paid attention in some of his history classes.

The man *did* look kind of like a fat version of Hitler, though, sans the mustache. But Hitler didn't speak English.

"Ah, but there you're wrong," said the pseudo-Hitler. "There have been many goings and comings through time since you left. One of my devout followers returned and brought me here not very long ago. I am Hitler."

"Then how come you speak English?"

"Fool! Languages are easy enough to learn." He had a point. Could this really be *the* Hitler? That was crazy.

"If I go back in time," Weston said, speaking slowly, "you want me to not go on that first time trip, correct?"

"Correct."

Weston frowned. "But then time travel won't happen, and your 'devout follower' won't come back to 1945 to get you." He hadn't thought this through very well, had he. And just as Weston said this, he realized that he'd just made a very dumb mistake. He could get rid of this future Hitler—assuming this guy wasn't just a crackpot who'd shot up one too many times—and yet he'd just shown his card. Blast.

"Almost correct," said Hitler. "But I'm coming with you."

CHAPTER TWELVE

This wasn't happening. Hitler—Weston would have to get a DNA test done to see if it really was him—coming back to 2007 with him? No way. For one thing, Lloyd had said that you couldn't go back in time. Hadn't he? Or was it just difficult, spotty, that sort of thing? Then again, Lloyd probably wasn't the only one working on time travel in the last twenty years—maybe someone else had perfected the technique. Maybe going

back really was a possibility.

“You realize,” Weston said, “that most people hate you.”

Hitler smiled. “Of course.”

Fair enough. He'd have to find a way to turn Hitler in, to lock him safely up where no one could free him. Unless someone in the future came back in time again to get him. Goodness, was no one safe? Weston wondered how many others had been snatched from their doom by fans from the future. Maybe Elvis had disappeared because he was now making music thirty or forty years in the future. That could explain a lot of things, Weston thought.

“So,” he said, “how do we go about going back in time?”

Hitler walked over to Bridget's booth, motioned for Weston to follow him. Bridget took a map out from underneath the booth and unrolled it. Hitler pointed a finger to a spot in the Caribbean. “The Bermuda triangle.”

Bermuda. Planes and ships went in and never came out again. They couldn't, because they'd been thrown back in time. The Bermuda triangle was a time machine. Holy smokes.

No, Weston thought, that's bogus. Sure, it made sense in a wacky sort of way, but why would Hitler be telling him this? This probably wasn't even Hitler himself, just some Neo-Nazi wannabe who wanted to walk in the path of Der Führer. Lloyd hadn't mentioned any anti-Semitism from 666, but then again they hadn't really talked all that much about it.

But then again Weston **had** jumped twenty years into the future, so this **could** be the real Hitler. The man who killed six million Jews. Weston looked at the man next to him, who stood there examining the map, pointing at various locations with his finger. Could he be the same monster? This guy

definitely did not give off the Hitler aura that Weston would have expected, the one in all the movies. Here was no military leader...or was he? Take a Hitler out of 1945 and pull him into the twenty-first century, give him a few years to adapt—things would change.

And yet it seemed so out-of-this-world. Standing next to him, in 2025, was Adolf Hitler. The instigator of World War II. Weston's grandfather had been a fighter pilot in that war. He'd told Weston stories about the friends he'd lost, the paratroopers who got shot down, the death and hate and fear that had scorched Europe so many years ago. And this man was behind it all. Even so, Weston found it hard to hate him. But then again that was probably because he wasn't sure this *was* Hitler—deep down inside he still figured it was some escapee from an asylum. Hard to hate someone who thinks he's someone else.

Hitler was looking at him. Weston blinked. "Sorry—say what?"

"When did your friend build the time machine?"

He knew about Lloyd. Would he try to wreak vengeance on him, too? Weston couldn't let that happen. Maybe Hitler didn't *actually* know Lloyd had built it. Maybe he was just assuming things. "My friend? I'm the one who built it." Now please just don't ask me to explain how it works, he thought to himself.

"Don't play the fool with me. You know nothing. When did Lloyd build it?"

So much for that. "I don't know for sure, but I think it was right before I came here."

Hitler narrowed his eyes. "We need precision. We have to

get there *before* Lloyd builds the time machine.”

A few thoughts passed through Weston’s mind, and he realized that this plan probably wouldn’t work after all. “But the time machines don’t send you around in space—we’d be stuck in the Bermuda triangle in 2007, and how would we get out?”

“The helicopter will come with us.”

Oh. That made sense. “But going into the past will create all sorts of paradoxes. There’ll be two of me, for one thing.”

“Yes,” Hitler nodded, “there will. That’s your problem.” He grinned. “I just need you to take me to Lloyd before he builds the time machine so I can make sure it never happens.”

Weston’s eyes went wide. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“You’re not going to...”

Hitler raised an eyebrow. “Not going to what?”

Weston didn’t want to give him any ideas, but... “Kill him? Please don’t hurt him.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to stop the machine from being built,” said Hitler. “This is a matter of life and death.”

“But it doesn’t have to be *his* death! There are other ways—look, we can find a way to stop him without actually hurting him. Don’t do anything rash. Or I won’t take you to him.”

“You’re a fool,” said Hitler. He was rather fond of that word, wasn’t he. “But I’ll promise not to hurt Lloyd.”

A beeping noise came from the booth. Bridget looked down, apparently reading some hidden display. “The copter is ready, sir.”

“Can she come with us?” Weston asked. Sure, she was a bad guy, but maybe she’d change. And he’d prefer to have female company if he was going to have to bring Hitler along.

The man laughed, sticking his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. “Bring her along? Are you out of your mind?”

“I want to come too,” said Wes, who had limped over from the couch.

Weston shook his head. He couldn’t take Wes. “This is where you belong,” he told the boy. And felt awful for saying it. What kind of a world would he be leaving Wes to? Earthquaked out of recognition, wars and gangs, and his family lost and probably dead? It didn’t seem fair. Maybe he could take Wes with him, give him a better life. But then he’d be bringing him back to 2007, before Lloyd ever met Sandy. It couldn’t work. “I’m sorry.”

Wes’s lower lip trembled, and he blinked a couple of times. Then he scuffed his foot on the ground and limped back to the couch, burying his head in his arms, his body shaking every few seconds. Poor kid. Weston *wanted* to take him, really he did, but it wouldn’t be right. It would be just as wrong as it was for he himself to be here in 2025.

But here he was.

Maybe it would work after all. Wes would be separated from his family, probably forever. Or would he? Lloyd would still be around back in 2007, and so would Sandy, presumably. But how would Weston explain to them that this was their son from eighteen years in the future? They’d never be able to take him in—anyone could clearly tell that he wasn’t their child, not unless they’d had him when they were twelve and thirteen.

But the family resemblance was definitely there. Maybe they could pass Wes off as Lloyd’s nephew or something. That might work. It really might. And Wes could live with them, they could raise him as one of their own—since he really *was**

their own—and all would be well. Wouldn't it?

"Come on," said Hitler, "we've got to go."

Weston started walking back to the couch where Wes sat. "We're taking him with us."

"What?" Both Wes and Hitler looked at him in surprise.

"If he doesn't come, I don't either," said Weston. Wes's face lit up with a huge smile. Should he remind him that his family could still be alive? But maybe he had already given them up for dead, already moved on. And if they *were* dead, then Weston would be leaving him an orphan. Alone in the world without a family. And that was heartless.

Hitler shook his head. "Nobody's coming with us. Just you and me."

"I told you," Weston said, "it's two or none."

"Whatever." Hitler growled and stalked off down the hall. Forty or fifty paces away, he turned around. "What are you doing? Come on!"

Hand-in-hand, Weston and Wes followed him. And, through another hallway, so did Bridget.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The three of them took the same elevator back up to the roof. When they got there, they found Job, Silas, and Jones next to the copter.

"Ready, boss?" said Job.

Hitler nodded. "But we're bringing along the kid. Jones, you'll have to stay behind."

"What?" exclaimed Jones. "I don't think so."

"I said out. Don't fight me. Remember what happened to

your brother?”

Jones’s arms dropped to his side and he stepped back, silent. Apparently he *did* remember. Weston wondered what had happened, but it didn’t sound like it was too pretty. Poor guy.

“Into the copter,” said Hitler, motioning up with his head. “Help them in, Silas.”

When they were all seated and the glass bubble had been resealed, Weston cocked his head and gave Hitler a side glance. “I thought you said just you and me. What are Silas and Job doing here, then?”

Hitler coughed.

“If we’re going through the triangle in the copter, then they’ll be going back in time with us. What gives?” Not that Weston really cared, but he may as well take any opportunity he could to get the upper hand. He might need it later.

“They’re technical crew,” said Hitler. “Unless you know how to fly a helicopter.”

Weston didn’t. For a moment he thought about bluffing, pretending he did, but the thought of messing up and plunging both him and Wes into a fiery death didn’t have much appeal. “No. They can stay.”

Silas looked at Hitler with a quizzical glance, as if to say, What does this kid think he’s doing, talking to you like that? Hitler gave him a look in return that unmistakably said, Shut up, I already know that.

With a whirl of the blade above them, they felt the helicopter take off and start to rise. The sun was setting.

“Don’t you think it might be a good idea to travel in the daytime?” he asked.

“Of course it is,” Job said with a grin.

“But it’s night.”

“Of course it is,” said Silas with a matching grin.

Weston frowned. “We’re going to run out of fuel long before we get there.”

“Fool,” said Hitler, “we’ll stop for the night once we cross the border, and we’ll get more fuel there. Now stop asking stupid questions.”

Silence dominated the next few hours. As Weston looked down below them, he saw a comforting array of lights, city lights, signs of civilization. It felt so good to get away from that barren wasteland where there wasn’t any power, where the only people were—Weston swallowed—were dead. But there was hope. If he got back in time, fixed things the way they ought to be, then none of this would happen, and Lloyd and Sandy and Abigail would still be alive. And so would his family. And so would lots of other people.

But that was assuming he really was the cause of the earthquake and the war and everything else. And if he wasn’t? Maybe it would still happen this way. Maybe the only safety from this awfulness was in the past. He could gather all his people, all his family and friends, and they could escape to some safe haven a hundred years ago, some place far away where nobody would ever find them. Their own city of Enoch. Of course, they weren’t exactly righteous enough for that, but this was different.

The copter hit some turbulence, and Weston saw the controls’ reflection in Wes’s eyes as the boy looked up at him in alarm. “It’ll be okay,” he said. “This is normal.” He hoped it was.

After another couple of hours they pulled down and landed in some podunk field somewhere. Probably Mexico, from what Hitler had said. Job and Silas hopped out of the copter and disappeared. Weston started to get out, but Hitler put a hand across his chest. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“But I thought—”

“You think I’m going to let you run away from me? We’re staying here.”

“But weren’t we going to sleep—”

“We’re going to sleep here.”

It was no use arguing. A few minutes later Job and Silas returned, hauling a tank of what had to be gasoline or whatever these copters ran on. Clinking sounds commenced as they removed the old tank and installed the new one. They didn’t get back into the copter, though. Must be standing guard.

Weston tried to sleep, but there were too many thoughts racing through his head. He had to take care of Wes, had to keep him alive. That was what mattered. He could imagine Hitler trying to wrest him away from him, maybe, if he didn’t get what he wanted, but Weston would have to make sure that didn’t happen.

In just a few hours he’d be back in 2007. He could call his family, tell them to move away, far away from Virginia, and never return. He could tell Lloyd all about Sandy.

But if he were trying to stop Lloyd from building a time machine, it’d be better if Lloyd never knew Weston had gone to the future. Which meant he couldn’t tell him about any of this—about Sandy or Abigail or Wes, about the earthquake, about the hail, about anything. If he did, it would probably jinx things and mess up the future.

Mess up the future. Maybe he **could** stop the earthquake, merely by telling people about it.

No, that wouldn't work. Nothing he did or didn't do would change the rumbling of the earth; all that would happen would be people wouldn't believe him, and then the earthquake would erupt and everyone would be dead. At least those who didn't listen to him. But at least he'd know when it was coming. He would be like a prophet, in a way.

But what about the real prophet? Weston couldn't imagine that it'd be a terribly good thing for him to be predicting the future and all when there was still a real, live prophet on the earth. Wasn't there supposed to be only one? Not that he had gotten any visions from God, and it was more of an accident that gave him his foreknowledge, but he still knew things that were going to happen. Too many things. And didn't that make him a prophet?

Maybe not. He'd rather not be a prophet, anyway, he decided. Too much stress, too much to worry about. If things like that were going to happen in his future, he'd rather face them as they came. Having twenty years to fret about something didn't sound like much of a recipe for happiness.

Wes stirred in his sleep. Weston had forgotten about him. The boy knew what was coming, too—the first eleven years of his life had been lived in the future, and now he knew he was going back to the past. To stop his dad from building a time machine. Could Weston really keep it a secret? He'd have to explain to Wes just how important it was that they not tell anyone. Anyone. It would be hard on the kid, not to be able to talk to his parents about being their child, but that was the price he paid when he volunteered to come back in time with them.

Who was Weston kidding? The kid was eleven. He hadn't thought all these things through. All he knew was that he was alone in the world, with his family pretty much dead, and he wanted to be with someone he knew. Someone who knew his dad really well. You couldn't fault him for that.

So what could Weston do? Make the boy swear a vow of silence? Would he actually keep it? It was hard to imagine an eleven-year-old keeping a secret this big, this juicy. But Wes *was* pretty solemn. He was mature for his age. Maybe he could do it.

Weston softly tousled the kid's hair. Neither of them had planned for things to turn out this way. Neither had wanted to be cut off from their family. They both just wanted things to be the way they were. And yet here they were, on their way to the Bermuda triangle with the head of the Third Reich, one of the most evil men in history. If they survived, this would make for some *tall* tales to tell their children someday.

If they survived. For the first time since the jump, Weston realized that he might not actually make it through this alive. The fragile, quivering life he had was teetering on the point of a knife; one slip and he'd be gored through like a shishkebab. And maybe Wes too.

Somewhere in his musings, Weston fell asleep. He woke to find that the helicopter was already in the air, flying above the ocean. "How much longer?" he mumbled to Wes.

"They said around half an hour." Wes's hair was all tousled.

Silas looked back from the cockpit. "The perimeter of the triangle changes location pretty often. We don't know exactly where it begins, but it's around there."

“So, how will we know when we get there?” Weston asked. The ocean in 2007 would look pretty much the same as the ocean in 2025, wouldn’t it?

Hitler rolled his eyes. “We don’t know. We’ve never done this before.”

“What?” Weston’s heart sank. “I thought you knew what you were talking about.” All his hope of getting back home evaporated in that instant. Lloyd was right after all. You couldn’t go back in time. And the Bermuda triangle? Probably just some big whirlpool or something. No, he had to face the truth: he was stuck in 2025. With a lunatic. And his roommate’s son.

A cough came from the back, where the luggage sat. Where nobody was sitting. Weston glanced around the inside of the copter—Job and Silas were up front, check; Hitler and Wes were next to him, check. All accounted for. Which meant they had a stowaway.

The next thing they saw—for everyone had turned round to look, and Hitler was edging out of his seat, ready to pounce—was a hand, reaching over the top of the luggage. Hitler grabbed the hand and pulled a red-haired girl out. Bridget. She’d come after all!

Hitler swore, as Job and Silas turned back to their instruments with relief. “I told you not to come.”

“Sorry.” Bridget shrugged, then winked at Weston.

Hitler looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “There’s not enough food for you. Or water.”

“She can have half of mine,” said Weston.

“Nice try,” Bridget said to Hitler. “But you know as well as I do that we’ll be back in the States by evening, with plenty of food for everyone.” She looked at Weston. “You *did* have

McDonald's back then, didn't you?" He nodded weakly.

"I can't believe this," said Hitler. "You've ruined everything."

"Give it up. You're just a big baby."

Hitler frowned. "When we get to land, you'd better disappear. I don't want to see you again. Ever."

"Consider it done," Bridget said. "Now, how far away were we?"

With a mournful look Weston shook his head. "It's not going to work. We'll still be in 2025 when we leave the triangle. You can't go back in time."

"Look at me!" exclaimed Hitler. "I'm evidence that you can."

"He's right, you know." Bridget plopped down next to Wes on the seat. "I was the one who got him."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Weston and Wes looked at each other with dropped jaws. Bridget was the one who brought Hitler back from the past? Who saved him from his suicide? Who *wanted* him saved? She looked so nice on the outside; could she be a Neo-Nazi on the inside? The incongruity of her outer appearance and her newly discovered character were jarring. Weston didn't know what to think. And so he just sat there, staring.

"Don't look so surprised," Bridget said. "He *is* my great-great-grandfather, after all."

Hitler had kids? Weston couldn't remember ever reading about that, but that didn't mean it couldn't happen. And considering Hitler's character, he wouldn't be too surprised if the

Führer had sired some offspring here and there, come to think of it. In fact, the real question was, why weren't there more?

But apparently one was all it took. Were the ties of blood that strong, so powerful that they could overcome the revulsion towards a monster, even if he **was** family? How could she love him? She would only have known him from history books, really. And of course there would be a family tradition. But who could be proud of **that**? No wonder Weston had never heard about it. They would've kept it hidden, kept it secret, kept it safe. And it made sense—going around proclaiming that you were Hitler's son or daughter was a sure way to rankle the ire of anyone who'd lost a loved one in the war. They would've been killed if it had gotten out.

Was this really Hitler, though? If this man was an impostor, then Bridget was either lying or off her rocker. She seemed pretty sane, though. And pretty pretty, but Weston tried not to think about that right now. No sense getting distracted, especially if Bridget turned out to be sinister.

"But this is **Hitler**," Weston said. "Six million Jews?"

Hitler sighed. "And yet it wasn't enough. But this time round, we will exterminate them. And Mormons, too. And—"

"Grandpa," Bridget said. "Not now." She looked at Weston. "Don't worry, he's not really going to do it. But old habits die hard, you know?"

Slaughtering innocents didn't sound like a healthy habit to Weston, but he didn't have a chance to respond, for right then Silas turned around and said, "We're entering the triangle."

"Expect some turbulence," said Bridget, strapping herself into the seat. Nodding at Wes, she continued, "You'll have to buckle in with your friend there, since Grandpa needs a place

to sit.” Weston had Wes sit on his lap. He had a recollection that that wasn’t entirely safe, but then again they were in a helicopter, and the same rules probably didn’t apply. Hitler sat between them and Bridget.

Peering into the cockpit from where he sat, Weston watched Job and Silas intent at their instruments, recalibrating every few seconds, looking at each other with nervous glances. Scores of planes and ships had disappeared in the Bermuda triangle. If it was a time machine, that explained it, but if it wasn’t? Maybe they were flying into death itself, a gaping Venus flytrap spawned by Mother Nature, licking the air in search of prey. And they were making it easy for her.

The copter started shaking. Shaking bad. Before they’d hit the triangle, the sky had been clear, not a cloud in the sky. And now, out of nowhere, they were flying through a dark fog that seemed to swallow them whole.

“The instruments are going haywire,” said Job, his trembling voice raised a pitch or two higher than usual. “Altimeter’s off the scales.”

Weston looked down at Wes. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.” A string of goosebumps slipped down his back.

“I’m scared,” Wes said.

Darn, now he’d gotten the boy scared. Not what he intended. “It’s okay, Wes,” he said. “We’ll be safe. I promise.” And the words had scarcely left his lips when the copter bucked like a raging bronco. Bridget’s seatbelt snapped and she flew up against the bubble, and some of the luggage from the back lurched forward—why hadn’t they strapped it down?—and almost slammed Weston in the head. But all he noticed was a

blur.

And then the copter twisted upside down, writhing like a dying rattlesnake. As everything came loose, Bridget shrieked, Silas yelled, and Weston's world went black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Weston came to, he was no longer in the helicopter. He wasn't quite *where* he was, to tell the truth, but he was standing on solid ground, and the air was warm, and he felt lighter and healthier than he'd felt in a long time. A soft glow filled this place; he basked in it like he was drinking it in. Everywhere he turned he saw light. It wasn't cold, sterile light, like that of a fluorescent bulb, but more like sunlight except not quite so harsh. It was like a golden autumn afternoon.

With a start, he remembered the helicopter, the blackness. And he was now on the other side of it. Was this what it was like to be dead? Sure, it wasn't bad, but he'd been hoping for something a little more spectacular. And where were the hosts of ancestors and others to greet him? Had he missed heaven and fallen down below instead? But this didn't feel like hell. It was too nice, too soothing to be the pit of the devil. Maybe he was in limbo.

If he was, limbo was a hill overlooking fields of wheat or corn. The soft grass underfoot was more comfortable than any feather mattress he'd slept on, and just the thought of taking a nap on it was enough to draw him down. Ordinarily grass tickled his face when he lay down, but this grass was different—it too felt like feathers, soft, caressing, almost like fleece. His eyelids slumbered down.

Some time later, a noise got his attention. He sat up, leaned against a tree he didn't know was there. Was he awake? His eyes seemed to be open, but the warmth of the air and the softness of the light made him wonder if this wasn't just an extraordinarily vivid dream.

The noise, he found, was that of quiet footsteps, coming up the hill behind him. He wasn't scared. He didn't know why, but he wasn't. The soft plodding drew nearer, coming slower with each step.

Then there was silence. Weston slowly turned, looked over his shoulder. A lamb stood by his side. Someone had dyed it red, he noticed, from its head to its tail. He shifted his weight onto his arm and looked down the hill behind him. Nobody in sight, but there was a path of red footprints leading down and into the fields. It must have been dyed recently.

For a few long moments Weston sat there next to the lamb in silence. The creature's head hung down, as if it had a heavy weight strung to its neck. Then it looked Weston in the eye. Deep sadness welled up in it, and Weston knew that something had happened, something that cut raw, something that might never heal. The lamb blinked, and then Weston knew that more lay ahead for the lamb. He felt sorry for it, wanted to make it happy, but didn't know how. He thought about patting its head, the way he would a cat, but the dye would surely stain him. And so he looked down at the fields again. Somehow he knew that the lamb didn't mind, didn't think he was ignoring it. And that was true, for even as he looked away, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Another noise, this one heavier, down at the bottom of the hill. The lamb turned and began walking down the way it had

come, but slower than before. Weston looked from behind the tree and saw a man coming through the field with a chair in one hand and a blade in the other. The man, who looked like a farmer, was clad in overalls and a thick plaid long-sleeved shirt, with a wide-brimmed hat on his head. He set the chair down at the base of the hill and sat on it, apparently waiting.

When the lamb reached the bottom, the man lifted it up onto his lap, grabbed a handful of its wool, and with the blade cut it off. Over and over he did this, handful after handful of wool piling up on the ground next to the chair as the lamb shrank in size. Weston couldn't help but notice that the dye had seeped all the way down to the skin—even with its wool chopped off, the lamb was still red, still glistening in the soft light. And the shearer himself was covered in the dye, hands red, overalls splotted, a few streaks on his neck and face where he'd scratched an itch.

As the man took the last handful of wool and cut it off, Weston realized that it wasn't dye. It was blood. The lamb was bleeding, oozing out a sea of red that dripped down onto the chair and from there onto the grass, and the farmer wasn't doing anything to stop it. No wonder the lamb had such a sorrowful look on its face. And yet it had been so quiet.

The man raised the knife in the air, looking it over as if inspecting it for cleanliness. Then, with a suddenness that shattered Weston's calm, the farmer plunged the blade into the lamb's side. No! He couldn't be—but he did. The lamb's legs wriggled for a brief moment, then flopped down like there was nothing inside them but jelly. Its eyes—Weston could still see them from the top of the hill—glazed over and got a distant look to them. The man had killed the lamb.

Ordinarily Weston didn't particularly mind butchering, and the gore didn't even bother him that much, but this time he nearly keeled over. A hollow emptiness sucked away his breath. That lamb never should have died. He didn't know why, but he knew that something horribly, awfully wrong had just happened.

He wanted to race down the hill and grab the knife from the farmer, holler at him till the man realized what he'd done, even drive it into *his* heart, but he couldn't move. Somewhere the connection between his mind and his body had fallen out, and so he just watched, helpless.

The farmer twisted the knife around, then pulled it out and dropped it on the ground. He stood up and placed the lamb on the chair. After wiping his hands on the grass, he smiled and walked back into the fields, the way he came.

When he'd gotten to the far end of the field, where a dark forest stood, Weston's limbs came back to life. He clambered to his feet and ran down the hill. As he reached the lamb, hand outstretched to touch the body, he stopped. An inexplicable feeling of holiness settled over him. Yes, something terrible had just happened, but a soothing blanket over his heart told him that something wonderful was just around the corner, and that he should step back. He did.

At first nothing happened. There were no birds singing in the distance, no brooks bubbling their tune, just a heavy silence. Even the sun's countenance seemed to darken. Weston stood—watching, waiting.

Then a chirp sounded from above. Weston looked up to see a sparrow perched on the tree on top of the hill. Its single note burst into a flurry of melody, a rising cadence of notes, al-

most nonstop in its excitement. Another bird—Weston didn't recognize what kind it was—flew down to the tree and chimed in. Then another, and another, and before long the tree was bobbing with song.

Weston looked back down at the lamb. The gash where the blade had been was trembling. It was almost as if—no, it couldn't be—but yes, the two halves were reaching out for each other, moving closer of their own accord. And then they met. And fused. And where there was a hole, now there was nothing but a thin line, a mere bump on the surface.

The blood began to dry. Almost before Weston could blink, it crusted into flakes, blown away by a tender breeze that looked as if it were coming from the birds on the tree. Seconds later the scarlet lamb had become white as snow. Weston swallowed. The symbolism was too uncannily similar. And yet he didn't know what else to make of it.

From the tree the birdsong grew in volume. A shadow passed overhead, and Weston looked up and found that the birds had left their perch and were now circling overhead. Like vultures, but for a different purpose.

For as they flew around in circles, the lamb's head began to rise, almost as if the birds were pulling it up to them, forming some kind of avian vacuum. The lamb's body followed, lifted up above the chair, and then even its legs had lost contact with the chair. It was floating up to them. They were stealing the lamb. Weston quickly looked down at the ground, searched for a rock, anything he could throw at the birds to stop them. There was nothing.

Even louder came the song of the birds, rising in pitch and intensity, and the earth itself seemed to hum a response.

The lamb's body began turning, spinning slowly but then faster, catching up to the pace of the birds which circled it from above. Faster it twisted, its limp legs flailing about, then pulled out like an ice skater. He had to make them stop. This wasn't right.

Then a light began glowing from the lamb. Weston moved to the side to see if the sun had moved, but it was still behind him. No, as far as he could tell, the light was coming from the lamb itself. Was it spinning fast enough to generate electricity, send off light waves? Weston had a momentary thought of horror that the lamb might burst into flames from the heat. It wouldn't feel anything, but even so, he felt that the body deserved to rest. It was his friend.

The lamb kept rising higher and getting brighter. By now the birds had formed a spinning tube, circling around the lamb, lifting it to the skies. A conduit to heaven.

When the birds and the lamb reached a point far above the tree, almost invisible, there was a flash of light and the lamb disappeared. The birds scattered, as if they'd forgotten what they were doing there. Their confused flight dissipated and before long they too were out of sight.

Weston sat on the chair and put his head in his hands. He'd lost the lamb. He didn't know why it mattered, or why he cared so much about a creature he'd only seen for a few brief moments, but sobs started heaving their way out of his system. It was foolish. Absolutely foolish.

For what felt like hours he sat there weeping. It was as if his world had been torn out of his hands and shattered like a glass ball. All of his stress and fear and confusion had been building up underneath the surface, accumulating, growing, and he

hadn't even known it was there, but now it poured out of him, an emotional volcano.

In the midst of Weston's sorrows, he felt something cold rub up against his hand. Lifting his head, his heart almost stopped beating. The lamb. Weston blinked. Could it really be it? Was he just dreaming? But there it was, next to him, its nose touching his wrist. It was real. It was alive. And it was glowing.

"You're...you're not dead," Weston said. How had it come back? He'd thought the birds had carried it away for good.

The lamb tilted its head to the side. "No," it said in a soft voice, "no, I'm not dead."

It spoke. The lamb—it really spoke. Weston swallowed. This had to be a dream, or maybe a vision. Yet visions disappear; the lamb didn't, but instead began trotting up the hill, motioning with its head for Weston to follow it. He did.

"I once was dead," said the lamb when they reached the top. "Once upon a time. But that time is now long ago, and all things are made new." It gave him a knowing look.

"But...but what are—who *are* you?" Weston sat down in the grass, his knees too weak to keep him standing.

The lamb shrugged. "I am what I am."

Maybe it didn't know its name. But it seemed too intelligent for that—maybe it just couldn't tell him. Perhaps the name was too powerful.

"Where am I?"

"You are in the land of milk and honey," said the lamb. "The land where all things become one. The land of dreams."

"Then this is a dream?" Weston asked. It all felt so real, but the things that were happening certainly weren't within the realm of his normal experience.

The lamb shook its head. “Not a dream of your kind, where the dreamer lies asleep. This is the land of dreamers awake.”

Maybe he was dead after all. And yet they’d killed the lamb, and wasn’t it against the rules for things to die in heaven? Unless he really wasn’t in heaven after all. “Am I dead?”

“Dead?” The lamb tilted its head again. “No, no, you’re not dead. Do you not feel your body?”

Weston looked down at himself, felt his stomach, his legs. “Yes...I do.”

“Then clearly you are not dead yet.”

“But I don’t understand what’s going on,” Weston said. “You were killed, and now you’re here again, and I don’t know why I’m here or what I’m supposed to do.” He paused, and in that pause he remembered Wes, and Bridget, and Hitler, and the two pilots. It all seemed so long ago—like he’d known them not just in the past, but in an entirely different life altogether. “And I’ve lost Wes,” he continued, his heart sinking as he realized what he’d done.

“Wes is not lost,” said the lamb. “Come, let me take you to him.”

Weston’s spirits lifted. It knew where Wes was? And yet it didn’t really surprise him. The lamb seemed to know everything. As long as he didn’t lose sight of it, he’d be okay.

He followed the lamb down the other side of the hill, away from the bloodied chair, across another set of fields. They walked in silence through the soft grass, occasionally crossing a small brooklet, on and on. Weston couldn’t tell where they were going—there were mountains in the remote distance, but surely they couldn’t be walking *that* far. They didn’t have enough supplies, and it would take weeks. The lamb had given

the impression that it would only be a few minutes, anyway.

Before long the land began to descend. Weston almost didn't dare ask, but he couldn't help it. "How much longer?"

"As long as it takes," said the lamb without looking at him. They kept walking. "But we are almost there."

As they walked, Weston's memory began to come back. They'd been in the helicopter, trying to go back in time. And now he was here, alone. What had happened to everyone else? Was he in 2025 or 2007? Or some other time altogether? "What year is it?" It seemed such a silly question even as he asked it.

"Years have no sway here."

"So there aren't any calendars?"

"Nor clocks. This is a land plucked out of time, free from those shackles that oppress."

Weston had read about the end of the world, how time would be no longer. What if the triangle had shot them forward past the end? What if it was the Millennium already? He almost opened his mouth to ask the lamb if that were true, but then decided against it. He'd already asked enough foolish questions for now. It seemed better to just wait and watch.

They walked on, farther down the gradual incline, getting nearer to the mountains, which were closer than he'd realized. Maybe Wes was there after all.

A few minutes later they passed some trees with golden fruit hanging from their branches, and Weston realized that he ought to be hungry. But he wasn't. He felt the way he felt after downing a big bowl of soup, all warm inside, full, everything right with the world. And yet a few pangs of sadness remained. He didn't know why; after all, the lamb had returned to him, and he was about to be reunited with Wes. And hope-

fully Bridget, too, but he didn't particularly care to see Hitler or the two pilots again.

Then the land leveled out, and off in the distance Weston could see a small blob of color running around, cartwheeling and jumping and dancing. Wes? As they drew nearer, the child caught sight of them and bounded in their direction. It *was* Wes. But his leg...

"Weston!" Wes leapt toward him with arms open for a hug. "Look at me!"

"Your leg—what happened to it?"

Wes grinned, and Weston thought there was almost a touch of the same kind of glow that emanated from the lamb. "I don't know, but it works now. I can run!" And he dropped to the ground and ran off again. It was then that Weston noticed a small deer dancing in suit with Wes. Playing together.

"Did you do this?" he asked the lamb.

"Health is a beautiful thing, isn't it," said the lamb, watching the boy and the deer. It slowly and sagely nodded its head. "But sickness has its beauty as well. As does death."

Weston scratched his head. "Why have you brought us here?"

"I? I did not bring you here. You brought yourselves here."

True enough, but that still didn't explain it. "Are we inside the Bermuda triangle, then? Because that's where we were going."

The lamb cocked its head again. "I already told you, you're in the land of dreams. Far, far away from your Bermuda triangle. Far, far away from the lands you left behind."

Weston shivered. He did like this place, and it felt like home, but where *was* it? Some other planet? An undiscovered

ered island? He'd never been anywhere like it, but it felt—he thought himself crazy for thinking this, but it felt like being inside his mommy's tummy. Comfort and security. And yet even evil things could creep in, like that farmer with his deathful blade.

Now that he'd found Weston, he wasn't quite sure what to do next, so he sat down and watched. The lamb remained at his side, allowing Weston to get lost in thought. They stayed that way for hours.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sometime later, the lamb turned around and began walking the way they'd come.

"Wait! Where are you going?" asked Weston.

"To and fro," said the lamb.

But—"You can't *leave* us here. I don't know where to go."

"Oh," said the lamb, "you'll find your way." And it kept walking, till Weston couldn't see it anymore.

Weston sat there for another long while, watching Wes play. Shouldn't it be getting dark already? Maybe this place knew not night.

Either way, they needed to get on. Weston was growing restless. "Wes!" he called. "Let's go."

Wes and the deer ran over to him. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know," said Weston, "but we can't just stay here forever." And yet he almost felt like they could. Another nap, perhaps.

He shook his head. "That way," he said, pointing towards

the mountains.

They began their trek at a decent clip, not quite running but not walking, either. Weston almost had to jog to keep up with the boy and the deer. The ground began to rise again, slowly but noticeably. They'd been in a valley. Weston took note of that in case it would come in handy later on.

The terrain was mostly grass, but it got thicker as they proceeded, almost up to his knees in some patches. It was harder to keep track of Wes. "Hey, how about you hold my hand, okay? I don't want you to get lost in here."

"Oh, I won't get lost," Wes said, but he came back and grabbed hold of Weston's hand.

It hadn't been more than half an hour—or was it more? Weston couldn't tell—when they arrived at the base of the mountains. These were tall mountains, higher up than anything he'd ever seen before. But down here at the base sat a pile of squat foothills, like pawns on a chessboard, guarding their king and queen.

"Hey!" came a voice from off to their left. "Hey! Is that you?" An orange blob bobbed up and down above the grass, apparently running in their direction. Weston and Wes stood there, unafraid but still unmoving, waiting to see what it was.

"Hey, guys," said Bridget as she popped out of the grass and stood in front of them, panting. "Man, I thought I'd died and gone to the wrong place. There's *nobody* here."

"Well, there's the lamb," said Weston. Then wished he hadn't, remembering what the farmer had done.

Bridget blinked. "The lamb?" Weston nodded. "Good," she continued. "I'm hungry."

"No!" he cried out. "You can't eat it."

“Why not?”

“Because...because it’s not here. It ran off that way,” he said, pointing away from the mountains. Time to change the topic. “We’re going up there.”

Bridget frowned. “What’s up there?”

“I’m not sure,” said Weston, “but I think something up there is the key to all this. Have you seen any of the others?”

“No,” said Bridget. “But I’m okay with that.”

It was Weston’s turn to frown. “What about your grandpa?”

“Hitler? He’s not quite what I thought he’d be.” Weston wondered what she’d thought he would be.

“Well,” Weston said, “do you want to come with us?”

Bridget looked at Wes and nodded.

And so the trio began their walk up the foothills, where the grass thinned and rocks held their dominion. The ground was still mostly soft, though. Weston felt as if he could walk forever—his lungs felt clear, his legs weren’t sore at all, and his feet felt light—like he could fly.

They hadn’t gotten far when they saw a house perched at the top of the highest foothill, just before the terrain changed into a darker rock and the mountain proper began. Mansion would have been a better word for it—it was enormous, bigger than any house Weston had ever seen. It looked like one of those old Victorian-era manors he’d seen in the movies. “I think we’re going there,” he said. Bridget and Weston both nodded. It was obvious.

The rest of the way there was uneventful, each of them thinking their own thoughts, not really up for small talk. Weston looked back and saw that the deer was still following

them. Not really a problem, but eventually he'd have to do something about that. He didn't know *what*, though.

Finally they came to the cobblestone walkway leading up to the door. "Who do you think lives here?" asked Wes.

The lamb? thought Weston. But that didn't make any sense—lambs don't live in mansions. They hadn't seen anyone else around.

Except the farmer.

"Wait."

Was it safe? The farmer had walked off in the other direction, but maybe that meant nothing. Maybe his car was parked over there. If he did live here, perhaps they shouldn't be so hasty to barge in. Weston would hate to see the farmer plunge a knife into any of *them*.

And yet farmers usually didn't live in houses that big, did they? He imagined the man living more in a shack or a lean-to. Or, at the most, a normal-sized house, or even a ranch. But not a mansion like this.

Well, there was nothing for it but to go to the door and see for themselves. They strolled up the front walk—slowly, not altogether surely—and with a slightly quavering hand, Weston knocked on the door.

They all held their breath and waited.

Nothing happened.

After a minute or two, Weston knocked again.

Again, no response.

"Well," he said, "I guess that's that."

Bridget shook her head, reaching out to the door handle. "Try the door." She turned it and pushed. It swung open.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The inside of the house was, as they'd expected, incredibly large. Vaulted ceilings caught their eye and drew it up at least a hundred feet, if not more. It appeared to be a single room, perhaps a mile or two long, and only fifty or sixty feet across. Weston half expected to see stained glass in the windows and an altar at the end.

The odd thing, though—well, the *oddest* thing—was that the entire room was empty. No carpet, nothing on the walls, just marble floor, red brick walls, evenly spaced windows, and doors. Lots of doors. Every few feet was a door, on both sides of the room, as far as Weston could see. He poked his head out the door they'd just come in. It was the only one in sight.

Returning in, he walked over to the next door. The knob—they all had knobs except for the one they'd come in, which had a handle—turned easily. He hesitated. “There aren't any doors on the outside.”

“Well,” said Bridget, “go on, open it!”

“It's probably just a facade,” he explained to Wes. A chill ran through the room.

“Open it!” Bridget folded her arms and began tapping her foot on the floor. “We don't have all day.”

Weston turned the knob and pulled.

And saw nothing but inky blackness. It was so dark it was almost tangible, almost alive. Weston felt as if it was going to pour out of wherever this was and choke them in the hallway. In a panic he flung shut the door and backed up against it.

“What'd you see?” asked Bridget.

“Nothing.”

“It **was** pretty dark in there,” Wes said.

“No, I mean **nothing**. Not just darkness; it was like emptiness incarnate. I don’t know how to explain it. It was alive.” He realized he was panting for breath. And still holding tightly onto the doorknob.

Which began to turn.

“It’s turning!” he exclaimed. “Get away—down the hall.” Except that wouldn’t be much safety—there was nothing to hide behind. “Run!”

Weston struggled with the doorknob, which kept trying to turn. He twisted it back, held on for dear life, but then cold air wafted through the cracks and the knob turned all the way before he could do anything about it. As the door creaked open, he let go and ran as fast as he could toward Wes and Bridget.

When he reached them, saw their dropped jaws, he turned around. A black cloud was billowing out of that doorway. But it was definitely not smoke. The cloud extended, grew wispy claws, and began gathering itself in their direction.

“I am **not** staying around to see that come near us,” Bridget said, and she opened the nearest door and jumped through.

“Wait!” Weston said. “What if—” But the cloud was picking up speed. “Get in there!” he shouted to Wes, who followed Bridget. Then Weston himself jumped across the threshold and slammed the door shut behind him.

He turned, meant to say, “Keep running!”, but stopped. He stood on the edge of a cliff, looking down an impossibly far distance—so far that there was no way he could still be in the atmosphere. The clouds were specks beneath him. Vertigo almost toppled him.

“It’s okay, Weston,” came Wes’s voice from the side. “There’s

a path this way.”

Weston closed his eyes, willed himself not to throw up and not to faint. Then he remembered the cloud chasing them and his sense of urgency overcame his fear of heights, at least for the moment. He opened his eyes again and saw the path Wes had been referring to, carved out of the side of the cliff. It was wide enough that if he hugged the side and didn't look to his left, he would be fine. He took a cautious step.

A creaking sound behind him stopped his heart. There, where the door had apparently itself been carved into the cliff face, trickled out the cloud. It really **was** after them.

“Run!” he shouted, realizing the futility of it as soon as he'd said it—a cliff path three feet wide was not exactly the best place to be running. How far up was the top?

“There's a cave here,” called Bridget from about forty yards ahead. A cave. Just what they needed—to get holed in, where the cloud could come in at its own leisure. Or even just wait them out.

Weston coughed—his throat had gone dry—and hollered, “Don't go in!” But it was too late. He kept running, saw that Wes was standing at the entrance, looking in and looking back to Weston, obviously confused. And terrified, as he saw the roiling black cloud crawling along the cliffside after them. **Why** was it chasing them? All Weston had done was open the door, that was all. He hadn't even gone inside and stirred it up. But no, here it was with blood on its mind, ready to kill them or something. And they had nowhere to run. Where was the lamb when they needed it? It had said he'd find his way—surely **this** wasn't in the plan. This was no game. And all of the safe and secure feelings Weston had had in the other place, they

were all shattered. This was worse than the earthquake, worse than Spike and Charles, worse than Hitler. An unfaced fear brought to life, one without a name, without a voice, no way to reason with it, no way to bargain, nothing to do except run.

He skidded to a halt in front of the cave, grabbing Wes by the arm. Should they go in? The path kept going—maybe it'd there'd be a safer way farther on. But he couldn't leave Bridget behind. And yet to stay would be certain death. He had little doubt that the cloud would do anything else to them. No, it would cling to them, slide down their throats and suffocate them, blacken their insides until they were nothing but charred remains. The cloud did not look kind, not at all like the fluffy white clouds far beneath their feet.

“Bridget!” he called into the cave. No response. Not good. But the cloud was almost to where they were. His decision was made before he even knew he'd made it. “We're coming, Bridget!” he yelled as he plunged into the darkness, pulling Wes in behind him.

The cave was actually fairly large, over ten feet tall from the feel of it, and perhaps twice as wide. The ground, though, was rocky, and they couldn't make very fast progress. “Bridget!” Weston called every few seconds. “Can you hear us?” Where on earth had she gotten off to? From the echoes, it sounded like the cave was deep. Far off he could hear a dripping sound. Water. What if she'd fallen into an underground river? What a horrible way to die, he thought—stuck in some grotto, far beneath the surface, where no one could hear you, no one would know you were there to save you. These caves weren't exactly conducive to human living.

He looked back. Daylight still streamed in from the open-

ing, so they were safe, at least for now. Maybe the cloud hadn't noticed—maybe it didn't have any eyes. But then again it had known which door they'd gone through, and it had known they'd taken the cliff path to the left. It could see. It could definitely see.

And then Weston saw it. It crept across the opening, billowed into a ball, darkening the daylight. But then it stayed still. For a moment Weston couldn't tell if it really had stopped, or if it was just moving straight towards them, but no, it was sitting there. Waiting for them to come out.

He swallowed and prayed there was another way out of this place.

They kept walking in, hands out in front of them, feeling with their feet before they took a step. There could be anything back here—chasms, creatures, anything. But still no sign of Bridget.

By this time Weston's eyes had started to adjust, and what little light was coming in from the opening revealed that the cave narrowed considerably in another twenty or thirty feet. How had Bridget gotten this far so quickly? They'd only been a few seconds behind her. Maybe she'd run straight in and hit her head, fallen unconscious. He looked back and tried to see if he could spot any body-like forms on the ground. Nothing. It wasn't smooth, but there was nowhere a body could hide. She had to be back here, somewhere.

"Is Bridget dead?" asked Wes.

"No," Weston replied. At he least he hoped not, even if she *had* brought Hitler back from the past. Nobody deserved to die like this.

"Are *we* going to die?"

A hard question. For a brief second Weston was about to say that of course they'd get out of this alive, but lying just didn't seem to be the right thing to do, not now anyway. "I hope not." That, at least, was honest.

As the cave's walls drew nearer, Weston moved in front of Wes. "I'll lead the way. You look back every few seconds and make sure that thing isn't coming in after us. Okay?"

"Sure," said Wes.

"And don't let go of my hand, whatever you do."

Pretty soon there was only room enough for one, and the ceiling itself came down, so Weston was walking hunched over. Claustrophobia began to claw away at the corners of his mind, and his breathing grew more rapid. What if the cave didn't lead anywhere? What if they went so far that they got stuck? Before long none of the light from the opening would reach them; could they really get through by feel?

Weston suddenly remembered his cell phone. He'd given it up for dead, since the service was out, but maybe it could still give light. He pulled it out and flipped it open. A brilliant wash of blue light bounced around, off the walls and ceiling, and Weston couldn't help but smile. Score.

The passage looked like it opened up a few more yards down the way, and then curved up and to the right. Up was good—maybe it came to the surface. He kept walking.

"We good back there?" he asked Wes.

No answer. In alarm he looked back, afraid of what he'd find. But Wes was still there, plodding along behind him, holding onto his hand.

"Wes?"

Wes blinked, then looked up at Weston. "Sorry. I was pray-

ing.”

Praying. That was something he'd completely forgotten about. Did prayer even work in a world like this?

Of course it did. It worked everywhere. Weston stopped, still holding onto Wes's hand, and knelt down. “Thanks for reminding me.”

He offered the prayer, mainly directed at getting out of there alive, getting away from the cloud and back to safety, and, oh yes, finding Bridget.

After the “amen,” he stood up again, cell phone in one hand and Wes's hand in the other, and followed the path. From back there it had looked like it curved upward gradually, but when they reached it, they found that it actually went up quite steep—almost like stairs. Some of the rocks were slick and it took some effort not to slip off. “Watch your feet,” Weston said. “We don't need you to fall and crack your head. There aren't any hospitals nearby.” Or any *anything* for that matter. Just a cliff too tall for its own good and a dark cloud bent on chasing them down.

“Bridget!” he called again. He'd forgotten. Still no response, but the dripping sound grew nearer. Thinking back to the cliff face, they couldn't be *that* far from the surface. Unless it sloped upwards as you went in, in which case they would be just as close as when they started. But it didn't do any good to think like that. They would make it. They had to. Now was no time to give up hope.

The path kept curving and rising, almost like a spiral staircase. Shadows from Weston's cell phone flickered off the rocky wall, and with every step he couldn't help but imagine the cloud making up its mind to come into the cave after all, floating its

sordid way in, almost at the base of this pseudo-staircase now. There would be no escape.

“We’ll be fine,” he said to Wes, but mainly for his own good. “Just hang in there. You doing okay?”

“I’m okay,” Wes said. “Do you think it’ll be much longer? I’m kind of getting tired.”

Poor kid. He’d used up all his energy dancing with that deer. “I don’t know, but you hear that water?”

“Yeah.”

“I think we’re pretty close.”

They looped around at least six or seven more times, and the water sound grew louder and louder each time. Then Weston noticed that it was getting lighter. He closed his cell phone. Still pretty light. “Hey, we’re almost there,” he said to Wes.

As they turned the next corner, brilliant sunlight streamed into their faces. They’d made it! They ran out onto the lush grass in front of them, hollering for joy.

And came to an abrupt stop. There, not four feet from the rocky entrance they’d just climbed out of, was the black cloud.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Both Weston and Wes just stood there, frozen. The black cloud didn’t move either. Should they run? Weston quickly looked around—they were evidently on top of the cliff, with trees growing off to the side, towering over some thick undergrowth. On the right the grass grew in a wide, open field.

And directly in front of them, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, was another door. This one was also carved into the

mountainside.

“Hey, guys,” came a whisper from the bushes. “I’m in here.”

Weston cleared his throat, hoping the cloud couldn’t hear. “You see that door over there? Just ahead?”

“Yeah,” whispered Bridget.

“We’ve got to get there somehow. When I count to three, run for it, okay?”

“Okay.”

Weston looked at Wes. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

“One,” Weston said. “Don’t move until I get to three.” His heart started pounding. The cloud still wasn’t moving.

“Two.” The bushes rustled a little.

Swallowing hard, Weston quietly said, “Three,” and then took off running for the door with Wes in hand. He heard Bridget tear out of the bushes, hot on their trail. He didn’t dare look back.

The door drew nearer. They were almost there. Just a few more steps.

As Weston reached the door and grabbed the knob, he heard a scream from behind. Bridget. He turned round, opening the door as he did, flinging Wes inside. Bridget had tripped and fallen. And the cloud was almost upon her. “You stay here,” he told Wes, then he ran back.

He was too late. The cloud engulfed her before he was even close. Her screams died away, muffled at first and then utterly extinguished. A horrible smell filled the air.

With horror Weston watched, frozen, unable to do anything. Bridget was gone. Like that! And he didn’t—couldn’t—

do a single thing to stop it. Why did she have to trip? If only she'd watched where she was going... But now the cloud had eaten her alive. It hovered there, moving up and down a little but not coming any closer to Weston.

He shuddered, then ran back to the open door and jumped through. With one last glance at the cloud, he shut the door.

He was back in the hall. But there was no sight of Wes.

"Wes!" He did **not** need this. "Wes! Where are you?" No answer. Had he gone through another door? Confound it! Couldn't he have waited?

Unless something else had been in there, waiting for them. Weston had only been ten seconds behind Wes, but that was enough time to nab the boy and disappear into one of the doors. And there were many, many doors.

Then he looked down and noticed some slight tracks of mud on the floor, barely noticeable but definitely there. They led from the door straight across the hall and disappeared right in front of the door. Bingo.

But wait a moment, he thought. If someone **had** kidnapped Wes, surely they wouldn't have left such an obvious clue behind them. Maybe this was a trap—maybe he was being baited. But there was no way to tell, no way to know. Well, other than opening the door.

He had to be ready to jump back immediately, in case something came out after him. And he had no time to waste—the black cloud could be coming after him any moment, and who knows what was happening to Wes. He hoped it wasn't painful, whatever it was.

With his hand still trembling and his heart a-pounding, Weston held the doorknob at arm's length, twisted it, and flung

it open as he stepped back, up against the wall.

Nothing happened.

He waited a second or two, then inched his way closer to the door and peeked through. Water. Lots of it. The door opened out onto what looked like the ocean, or at least a very large lake. How on *earth* was he going to find Wes in this? He stuck his head out, trying to see if there was any path, any way around. There wasn't.

Well, Wes was out there, and Weston needed to find him, so he took a deep breath and jumped.

The splash he'd been expecting never came. Instead, he found himself in a large net, with the edges being tied together above his head. The ropes bit into his face. He twisted around, tried to get a glance at his captor.

He couldn't see anything. Or anyone.

In fact, he couldn't see anything holding the net up, either. By some invisible force holding onto it from the top, it swung away from the door. This wasn't good.

"Hello?" he said, but it was no use. There was no one there to hear him.

The net continued swinging out and away from the door, which Weston by the benefit of distance now saw was a wooden construction stuck on the side of a tiny island, not much bigger than the door itself. And behind the island, where he hadn't been able to see from the door, was a larger island. A volcano. With dark, inky smoke billowing out from the top. No, Weston thought, it couldn't be connected. And yet the smoke looked frighteningly similar to the cloud. Maybe it was smoke after all. But sentient smoke?

Unless it was like a homing missile, which meant someone

had sent it. But who? Who even knew they were here, let alone would want to harm them? Only the lamb. And Weston knew the lamb wouldn't do this to them. The farmer hadn't seen him, at least to his knowledge, but maybe he still knew they were there.

"Wes!" he hollered. "I'm up here!" Hopefully Wes would see him and...do something. He didn't know what.

By now the net had swung around completely, but its circle was widening, and he was approaching the volcanic island. Just what he needed. It looked like it was going to blow at any minute, and here he was, getting swung right up against it. Was there no sense of justice in the world? Of equity and fairness? He'd had enough for one weekend, really.

But that didn't seem to even come into the equation. The fact was, he was here, and there wasn't anything he could do about it. Well, except make the best of what he had. Which, at the moment, wasn't very much.

The volcano grew larger. He had almost reached it. He was pretty high up, though—hopefully they wouldn't just let go of the net, assuming they (whoever they were) were trying to put him on the island. Maybe they were just playing with him, taunting him. Maybe they were going to fling him *into* the volcano.

He really had to stop thinking about things like that, he decided. It wasn't healthy. Better to worry about those sorts of things when they actually came, since half the time they wouldn't turn out that way *anyway*. (They turned out worse, he thought to himself, but then repented.)

The teardrop-shaped net began a slow descent to the shore. Phew. They must want him alive. That was always good, he had

to admit. The entire island seemed to be made of hardened lava and rock. Not a plant in sight. Or any water. It reminded him of Mount Doom.

As he got closer, Weston saw that there was another net lying on the ground, with someone inside it. Wes. Ah, good, he was still alive! And Weston now knew where he was. At least they would go through this together.

He landed on the shore. “Wes!” he cried out.

No answer. Wes lay there a few yards away, tangled up in the net, his face tinged with a light blue. Oh no. “Wes?” He couldn’t be. “Wes? Can you hear me?” Still nothing.

Then came the sound of footsteps, heavy ones. Weston looked up to see armored guards walking towards them with spears in hand. At last, an enemy he could see. The guards—who had looked like men to begin with, but now Weston wasn’t quite sure—pulled out knives and cut the nets, freeing the two of them. But then they grabbed them by the arms, hoisted them up, and started marching back around the shore.

“Who are you?” Weston asked. “Where are you taking us?” But the guards remained silent, acted as if they couldn’t even hear him.

It was a long walk. Weston kept his eye on Wes, hoping the boy would wake up, that he wasn’t dead but was just sleeping. Oh, Lloyd, he thought, look what I’ve done to your son. He was safer back in 2025, even with the earthquake, and I’ve brought him here, to who knows where. Weston swallowed. He had thought he was far from home back there, twenty years away from his own time, but now he was stuck in some place where time apparently didn’t exist. They could be on another *world*, for all he knew. Or even in a different universe. 2025

suddenly felt so homey.

As they rounded a bend in the shoreline, the company came to a halt. From here Weston could see that it wasn't actually an island; it was a peninsula, connected from behind to what looked like the mainland, a huge mass of mountains. It looked familiar—the way he felt when seeing a friend from behind. Maybe this was the other side of the mountains—a lake, perhaps? For the ground floor was thousands of feet below them. Unless they were indeed thousands of feet below the cliff. Weston looked up. No, these mountains weren't that high. Either they were in a different place altogether, or they were still up near the top.

The guards looked at each other, twitching. One kept stealing a glance behind them. Something was up. Were they... nervous? He couldn't tell. They had faces similar to those of men, but something was missing. Weston couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was almost as if... as if they weren't really alive. As if they'd been dredged up from the underworld. Zombies.

As a chill ran through him, he nixed that idea. Zombies weren't real. And dead people didn't walk the earth.

Then again, they weren't on the earth, and for all he knew he and Wes were *already* dead. But then why was Wes blue in the face, scarcely breathing? Dead people don't do that. No, they were still alive. Even so, all bets were off in this otherworld, this place cut off from the rest of the world. These guards could very well pass for the dead—their lusterless eyes didn't seem to focus on anything, and they spoke not a word. Their helmets cloaked most of their faces in shadow, too. For all Weston knew, they could just be a pile of bones inside.

The guards continued to glance behind them, but still they

stayed in the same place. If they were so worried, why didn't they move?

Then one of the guards pointed out to sea. A huge ship—it looked like a galleon to Weston, but he didn't know much about ships to begin with—was sailing toward them. Its flag was a bright blue, with a golden crown emblazoned in the middle. It didn't look like the ship of a bad guy, and the way the guards were shaking, he guessed he was right.

They began to run inland. Weston tried to keep up with them, but they were running so fast that his legs kept thumping against the hard ground. Here the ground didn't slope up immediately, but went in for a while, forming a cove. He looked back, saw the ship drawing up against the shore. Maybe there was hope after all.

The group ran into the heart of the cove, ran up the bank of a black river that oozed its way down into the ocean. They were still in clear view of the ship, though; Weston wondered why they didn't try to find better cover. But there wasn't much cover. Just a bunch of rocks, most not much larger than a basketball, only a few big enough to hide behind.

Surely they weren't running to the top. For one thing, it was too far—they'd get tired before then. Unless they really *were* dead. Did the dead tire? Weston wasn't sure. They had enough of a lead on the men pouring out of the ship—the ship had anchored and sent a small army after them—that they could still get to wherever they were going before then. At least half a mile, if not more, separated them from the men.

"Huh?" Wes's eyes opened in alarm. He caught sight of Weston. "What's going on?"

"We're..." How to explain it? "I don't know. But I think

those guys down there who are chasing us, I think they're on our side."

"How do you know?" He had a point. There was no reason they had to be good; Weston just assumed they were, because they ran a blue-and-gold flag, and what kind of bad guy uses those colors? If it had been a skull-and-crossbones, on the other hand... But this was another world entirely, and blue and gold might just be the colors of evil. Maybe. But probably not—black seemed to be the universal color for that, regardless of culture. The cloud had been black, for example. But then again that was probably more of a chemical phenomenon, not so much a choice.

They kept running. When they were almost halfway to the top, the guards suddenly began to veer right, looping around the volcano. What were they trying to do? Go down the other side? They'd be out of sight before long. Weston tried to slow them down by dragging his feet—he couldn't let them get out of sight.

"Help!" he called out. "Help!" Then he realized it was useless; the army was already coming after them, so what could his cries accomplish? Nothing.

His feet started throbbing. They were almost around to the other side of the volcano—the guards moved faster than anyone Weston had ever seen, especially considering that they were clambering around a mountain whose skin was made up of loose rock. They could easily make a misstep, twist an ankle, and plummet down. And yet they didn't. They must know this place well, he thought.

He turned his head and watched the men climbing up after them. Some were riding some kind of creature—smaller

than a horse, but Weston couldn't see it clearly enough to make out what it was. Almost like a mountain lion or something. Back at the ship, someone sounded a horn. And off in the distance Weston spotted yet another ship coming into the bay. Reinforcements. Well, no matter how long these guards ran with him and Wes, the men would eventually catch up with them and save them, right? They could only go so far. The men would surround the island, storm it from below. He just had to bide his time.

He saw a flash of fire from the second ship, then a second later heard the boom. They were hit? By what?

Then a rocking explosion blew the aft end of the blue-and-gold ship to smithereens. Weston's eye dropped to the men. They stopped, as did the guards. And then the guards took off again, pulling around far enough that they were out of sight. The last Weston saw before they disappeared on the backside of the volcano was a black flag flying from the second ship.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As the company continued to wind their way both around and up the volcano, Weston saw a glint near the top. Where before he had noticed only rock, he now saw that a structure stood there, on the lip. It was...a castle? The closer they got, the more sure of it he was. "You see that, Wes?"

"Yeah. Wow." Wes had been out of breath for most of the way up, and his skin was still slightly blue. He must've swallowed a lot of water without meaning to.

"I bet they're taking us to their leader."

"I think you're right."

The real question, then, was what the leader would do with them. Torture didn't sound too fun. Death didn't, either. Maybe he would just let them go. Right. After sending his half-dead soldiers to get them, chased down by men from the blue-and-gold, he would let them go, just like that? Not a chance. He'd hold them as ransom, use them as bait to either lure the men in or get them to leave. No, they were definitely pawns in this game.

The castle loomed directly overhead, far larger than it had seemed from a distance. It had to be at least two or three hundred feet high, checkered with towers, looking like it was teetering on the edge of the volcano. But at the same time it had the impression of inimitable strength. There was no question that it was there to stay, at least until the volcano erupted.

As they drew nearer, the rocks at their feet seemed to be tossed aside into a sort of path. The castle looked like it had been carved straight out of the hard magma. Weston wondered how long it had taken to build—and if they had to recarve it every time the volcano blew its top. Except you can't carve something that isn't there, and there wouldn't be magma just sitting on top of the rim. It had grown there. And the closer they got, the more Weston was sure this was so. It had grown into place, into this shape, which meant there was more to it than met the eye. Who had molded it into a castle? It must have taken decades, unless magic of some sort was involved. Reflecting on all that had happened so far, Weston decided it was easier to believe that it was magic.

The company reached the castle. It actually wasn't on the rim after all, to his surprise—it was suspended in the air *inside* the opening of the volcano, floating on nothing. Defi-

nately magic. A drawbridge made of magma slowly came down, just in front of where they stood.

When it made contact, the guards pulled them across it. They were still a few feet from the big, black doorway when the bridge began to draw itself up again, thrusting them forward across the threshold. Luckily the door itself had already opened.

They were in a long hallway, not unlike the one in the mansion. In fact, it was almost exactly the same, except everything was made of hard magma instead of marble and granite. The windows looked like they were thin bubbles of hot lava, held in place by some unseen force. Doors stretched as far as they could see to both the left and the right.

But the castle wasn't this wide, Weston thought to himself. From out front, he could see that it was maybe half a mile from end to end—this hall, however, went on for several miles.

The guards didn't waste any time dallying around; they marched straight across to the door directly opposite the one they'd come in, and as they opened it, the far ends of the hallway evaporated as close walls—walls about a quarter of a mile away on each end—appeared. An illusion. But why would they want to create a facsimile of the house of doors?

They pulled Weston into a dark, narrow hallway, this one set perpendicular to the one they'd just been in. A set of stairs ran up along one of the walls, and it was up those stairs that they proceeded. Wes didn't say a word, but his eyes were gaping.

At the top of the stairs they turned right down another dark, narrow hallway, and this one also led to a staircase, which they climbed. Staircase after staircase they went up, higher and

higher, until they had to be near the top.

Finally, they emerged from the last staircase into a grand hall, larger than any hall Weston had ever seen in his life. The ceiling was as high up as that of the house of the doors had been, but it was dark, almost as black as night. The orange light from the lava outside trickled in through a series of circular windows on each wall, glinting off the magma on the ceiling and giving the effect of a starry sky.

As for the hall itself, they were at its far end, and as they came out, the company began walking towards the other end. Weston could see what looked like a throne there. And someone was on it.

Halfway across the hall, something changed. Before, the hall had appeared entirely empty except for the throne at the end. But now it was crawling with life. Or death, Weston thought, looking at the corpses surrounding him. It was like the innards of a graveyard, dug up and strewn all over the place. Piles of not just humans but animals and other creatures, all blackened with dirt, festering, rotting to pieces. He almost retched. Wes did. He must be able to see it too, Weston thought.

As they kept walking, the guards kicked aside some of the bodies, making a path straight through to the throne. So it wasn't just an illusion—the corpses were real. Great. He'd hoped they too would fade away, like the ends of the first hallway.

Before long they stood at the foot of the throne. Sitting on it was a man-shaped thing, cloaked in dark grey, with nothing but darkness visible inside its hood. In its bony hand it held a scythe. The grim reaper? It was real?

“Welcome, prisoners,” said the thing in a throaty whisper. “I have waited a long time for you.”

He had? “Who...who are you?” Weston ventured. Had to keep talking to keep from getting scared. Wes was shaking uncontrollably next to him.

“I am the prince of this world. My name is Death.”

So he was right. “Well,” said Weston, “can we see the king, then?”

“The king is *dead*!” shouted Death, rising from his throne. “Orlando, enter.”

From a side archway which Weston hadn’t noticed until now, in walked a giant. Wearing overalls and a plaid shirt, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. The farmer. Except he was five or six times as large as before—half the height of the hall. But his clothes and hands and face were still stained with blood.

“Orlando killed him.” The farmer nodded, a wicked smile creasing his face.

The lamb was the king?

“You didn’t kill him,” Weston said. Wes looked at him in surprise. “He’s still alive.”

“Oh, I’m afraid not,” whispered Death. “But I don’t want to argue. Guards, take them to their room.”

Before they could say anything else, the guards had whisked them off through the opposite archway, to the left of the throne. They went up another series of staircases, higher and higher. The top landing had a door, which the guards opened. They were just underneath the ceiling. And in the center of the hallway, chained to the ceiling by both their wrists and the their ankles, Weston could see Hitler, the two pirates, and...Bridget?

The guards took them along a foot-wide staircase that led straight up to the captives. Weston had to fight vigorously to keep from fainting—how were they not falling off? Far, far be-

low them he could see the throne, and Death's dark cloak, and the mass of bodies stretched out the whole length of the hall.

They reached the chained prisoners. The guards began floating in the air, taking Weston and Wes up to the ceiling. They were clamped to two empty sets of chains next to the three others, all of them hanging up on the wall like trophies.

"Hi, guys," said Bridget.

"How'd you get here?" Weston asked in surprise. "We thought you were dead!"

"I'm not entirely sure myself, to tell you the truth. The cloud caught me and everything went black, and the next thing I knew, I was hanging up here with Gramps and company."

"But how did *you* get here?" Weston asked Hitler and the two pilots. "We haven't seen you since the copter went down."

Silas and Job shook their heads. "The copter never went down," said Silas. "But all of you disappeared, we didn't know where to. When we flew out of the fog, the engine sputtered and almost died, but we managed to land it in a valley up in the mountains."

"As soon as we landed, though," said Job, "the same thing happened to us that happened to Bridget—a dark cloud came over us and took us here."

Weston looked at Hitler. "And you?"

At first Hitler didn't say anything. He just looked down at the corpses littered far beneath them, looked at the windows to their sides, looked nowhere. "I was on top of a waterfall. The highest waterfall I'd ever seen—higher than the clouds." Weston nodded—it was probably part of the cliffs they'd been on. "A lamb came up behind me, nudged me to go to the water. When I stood there on the bank, I saw many things in

it. People. Hundreds of them, thousands of them. Millions of them. Vast crowds, huddled together, all silent. They weren't in the water—they were someplace else—but I could see them through it. Then the lamb told me—I don't know how, but it did—to put my hands in the water. I knelt down on the grass and dipped them in. Instantly the water that touched my hands turned to blood, deep, thick, red blood, and all the people started screaming. They cried out so loud I thought the whole world would hear it. And the pain! My nerves, the skin, it was all stabbing, piercing with hurt. I almost fainted. In my agony I looked over at the lamb, my eyebrows raised in a plea for help.”

He looked down at the corpses again. “The lamb told me to reach farther in. I stared at it—could it not see how it hurt me? But still it looked into the water, watching the people, the horror. Surely if I took my hands out, they would stop screaming. But somehow I knew I must obey. I lay down on the grass and plunged my arms in, up to the shoulder. The blood flowed from where my arms were, but I knew it was not my own, even though the pain was more than I could bear. The screams grew louder, they pierced my ears, like hammers on my mind. And still the lamb just watched, silently.”

Hitler's lip was trembling a little. With a cracking voice he continued, “When I thought I would surely die, the lamb commanded me to step into the water, to submerge myself. I could not. I shook my head, told the lamb it was beyond my limits, beyond my strength. The cries of the people I could see in the water were as loud as the world, loud enough to reach the moon. But there was no moon here. Only me and the lamb and this waterfall of pain and suffering. I pled with the lamb, to

see if there was any other way, but it only shook its head.

“And so I stepped in. The pain nearly swept me from my feet. As I sat down—for the flow wasn’t so fast as to carry me down with it—the screams of the people grew silent. Their pain was beyond crying, beyond sound. Only death lay ahead. All the water in the waterfall turned to blood, not just downstream from me, but all of it. Down it fell, tossing and tumbling off the edge, down below, a blood rain. And I? The pain was so great that I lost control of my body, fell under the bloodwater, completely submerged. And then I truly saw.

“I saw cities ravaged, homes on fire, parents and children at war with each other. The mountains came and swallowed up entire countries, while others sank into the oceans. No place was safe. Only sickness, plagues, hatred, death. I could hardly bear it, knowing that what I had done had, in part, made the world this way. My hands were dirty. In my vanity and my blindness I had done the unthinkable. I sank to hell and took the world down with me.

“But then I felt something grab hold of my hand and pull me up. It was the lamb. When my head came up from under the water, its sad, sad eyes met mine, and a crystal tear fell. As it hit the surface, the blood grew cloudy, then began to fade, to melt away, spreading out in ripples to the whole river. And as it cleared to water again, the pain disappeared. I dipped my head and hand under the water to cleanse them, and I crawled out a clean man. The cries had stopped. The people had disappeared. And then the lamb disappeared as well.

He blinked away the tears that were dripping from his eyes. “I dried off and walked around. So many times I was tempted to fling myself off that cliff! To undo what I had done, so long

ago. But I could not, and so I walked, walked, walked until I could walk no more. And then some of these guards found me and carried me here.”

Weston didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. He could see that Bridget's eyes were wet, too.

Then there was a scraping sound, then a click, and both of Silas's feet fell out. Dangling by only the clamps holding wrists, his eyes were wide.

“Do something!” cried Bridget. But what could anyone do?

A second later, the clamps around Silas's wrists came undone as well, and he plummeted down, down, down to the floor below.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Silas landed on a pile of bodies, but even so the impact was enough to twist his limbs in ways they weren't made to go, and the soft thud was accompanied by a crack that split the air. Silas didn't move.

None of them dared say anything for a very long moment. Had his clamps gone rusty? Weston's felt secure, not loose at all.

Then Wes said, “Look.” Following his line of sight, Weston and the others saw similar clamps and chains covering the whole ceiling. Empty, all of them. They looked down at the corpses on the floor, then back up again at the clamps. So that was where the bodies had come from.

And that was what Death intended to do with each of them, not just Silas. Weston fainted.

When he came to again, Bridget and Hitler were talking, Wes was staring at the throne beneath them, and Job was muttering something to himself—probably a prayer. Weston had to figure a way to get them out of there, preferably *before* anyone else's clamps came loose. But what could he do? His hands couldn't curl enough to reach the clamps, and even if they could, they seemed to be bolted too tight to undo by hand. And then, if he *could* get loose, how would he keep himself from falling? The one-foot-wide stairway was at least fifteen feet away. Not to mention that he would have nothing to stand on.

Job's hand clamps came loose. "No!" Bridget cried, and a run of chills ran up and down Weston's spine. Job was dangling by his feet, twisting, trying to reach up and grab something—anything—but there was nothing to grab. "Forgive me," he said aloud, though it was clear to all of them that he wasn't speaking to anyone present.

And then with a click his foot clamps opened and he followed Silas down. He missed a pile of bodies and hit the magma. It wasn't pretty. "Wes, don't look," Weston said, but it was too late.

One by one Death would pick them off, send them to their graves, and there was nothing they could do about it. Nothing.

From outside Weston could hear the yells of men, filled with anger and fear. They were storming the castle. But who could fight against Death itself? Surely their weak attempt to get in was being met by merciless hordes of the undead, against whom no weapon would do the slightest bit of real damage. No, all the men could do was slow them down a little bit, but

would it be enough? And even if they managed to get all the way in here, up the stairs, past the sentries, and into the great hall, how could they possibly get up to the ceiling and save them? No ladder was tall enough.

Never before had he felt truly helpless. As he looked at where Silas and Job had fallen, his hope fell apart like sand. This was the end. And not only for him, but for Wes. He should have left him back in 2025. How **dare** he take an eleven-year-old with him on a journey like this—it was stupid, it was heartless, it was murder.

“I’m sorry I got you into this, Wes,” he said, as his own voice started trembling. “I shouldn’t have brought you here.”

Wes looked at him. Blinked. “I **wanted** to come,” he said. “Look, Weston, I know we’re going to die. But it’s not your fault. It’s his.” He pointed down at Death’s throne, where the cloak and hood remained. Did Death ever go anywhere? But perhaps he was keeping an eye on them. Perhaps the throne was the key to the clamps and chains. In which case, if he could get Death away from the throne...

“Hey, you!” he cried. Death looked up. “Yeah, you.”

He still hadn’t figured out what he was going to say when a glow came from the far end of the hall. A familiar glow. Up out of the staircase walked the lamb.

Weston’s heart lit up for joy. The lamb!

He looked back down at Death, who apparently hadn’t noticed. Should he point it out, or was it better for the lamb to arrive unsuspected? He wasn’t sure. He just had to keep Death from dropping any more of them.

“I see your friend,” Death said. “Nothing can be hidden from me.”

Weston swallowed. “And you thought you killed him.” Maybe trash talk would work. “You’re just a pansy. Can’t kill nothing. You think you can, but you’re just spun up in your own illusions, can’t even see straight.”

“Weston!” Bridget whispered. “You’re going to get him mad, and then we’re *really* going to be in trouble!”

“I’m afraid it’s you who is caught up in illusions,” Death said in its throaty whisper that somehow managed to carry up the height of the hall, amplified and bouncing off all the walls so it sounded like it was coming from everywhere. “This lamb is dead.”

By now the lamb was halfway across the hall. But it didn’t slow down at the halfway point; it must have seen the corpses all along. Of course it had. The lamb knew everything. And it most certainly was not dead. To the contrary, a radiant light surrounded it, made it look like a miniature star. Almost alight with a holy fire.

And it was growing. At first Weston didn’t quite believe his eyes, but the lamb was getting larger with each step, now as big as horse, now an elephant, now a house. And yet its feet somehow didn’t crush the piled corpses.

Death turned and faced the lamb. “You’re not welcome here.”

The lamb said nothing, but kept walking, though it now had only a short distance to go, for it was already half as tall as the hall itself. Weston bit his lip.

“Out! Leave!” Death was tapping the armrest of his throne with a nervous energy. “Orlando!”

No! Not the farmer again. But there were the heavy footsteps of the giant, coming in from the side archway. Weston

saw the glint of a blade in his hand. Not again. Not in front of Wes.

“Yes, master?” said Orlando, staring at the lamb—who was now as tall as he was—and scratching his head.

“You obviously didn’t do the job right. Finish him off.”

The lamb took another step. Its head almost reached the ceiling. “Death,” it said in its voice that still remained soft even though its body was so large. “Your thirst for blood has already been quenched today.”

“Has it?” retorted Death. “Has it, now? I’m afraid not. Do you even know how many have died here? How many times I have emptied this hall into the lava? Mine is a hunger that cannot be sated.”

The lamb was now looking down on the throne from above; it had to stop growing soon or it would run out of space and smash against the walls and ceiling. But perhaps that was the idea.

“Your dominion is ending,” it said. “Your time is past. Too many times have you emptied this hall. Too many times has your bloodlust run rampant, not only here but in other worlds as well.”

Death stood and shook its hand at the lamb. “I will have blood!”

“Yes, you will, but not the blood of these.” To Weston and the rest, it said, “I will loose your chains. Be ready to fall, but also be ready to land.” Apparently on its head, as far as Weston could see.

“It is against the law for you to steal my prisoners,” cried Death. “Against the law!”

The lamb softly whispered its response. “Who wrote the

law?”

Just then Orlando raised his blade high and plunged it—again—into the side of the lamb. “Quick,” it said. All the clamps on the ceiling suddenly sprung open, and Weston, Wes, Bridget, and Hitler fell onto the lamb’s head, tumbled down its neck and onto its back. “There isn’t much time.”

And it was good they hadn’t waited, for the lamb began to shrink again. Orlando pulled the blade out and stared at it in wonder—there was no blood on it. He too began to recede, not only in size but also into the distance, as if he were being pulled out through the archway.

Death stood in front of his throne like a statue, watching them and wailing a high-pitched shriek. The lamb was now half the height of the hall again. It began walking backwards, carefully, through the piles, back towards the staircase.

Weston looked back. It was no use—a cadre of guards was pouring out from the stairs, standing in row after row, blocking their way. “We can’t go that way!” he cried out.

“It is a good thing that is not our exit, then,” said the lamb. No sooner had the last word left its lips than all the windows above them shattered, and in flew a thick cloud of winged creatures. They were flying so fast that Weston couldn’t see them, but he already knew their song.

Around and around in circles they flew, and a tempestuous wind ripped through the hallway, strong enough even to fling all the corpses up against the walls. The castle shook. The birds were opening up a conduit. They’d rise the way the lamb had risen, out through one of the windows, and then they’d be free.

And then all the corpses caught fire. The flames licked high,

scorched one bird, then another, until one by one they dropped in a burning circle around them.

“You didn’t think that would work a second time, did you?” said Death, making the first movement since Orlando had tried to kill the lamb. “It’s a pity you don’t learn faster.”

The piles of bodies skirting the walls suddenly shook. Each one. Corpses began to rise, stumbling to their feet, shuffling toward the center of the hall where Weston and the rest of them stood. Flames scorched the decomposed bodies, but an invisible force animated them. Weston could see Death’s hands lifted high above his hood.

The lamb was normal size again, and all of them had slipped off its back. They stood round it, glancing this way and that, unsure what to do. Wes gripped Weston’s hand.

“Get inside,” the lamb said. Inside what? They were already inside the hall.

And then the lamb leapt impossibly high in the air, spun its legs, and melted into water. The spray froze into ice as it fell, surrounding all four of them with a cylindrical wall, tapered at the top into a ceiling. Almost like a giant teardrop. But didn’t it know that fire could melt ice?

Through the ice walls they watched the undead continue their advance. Soon they would be close enough, and the ice would turn to liquid. Boiling hot water. They’d be scalded to death.

The first corpse made contact, thumped its hands against the wall. The ice had to be thicker than it looked, Weston thought to himself. And then he wondered, was the ice the lamb? Or was the lamb elsewhere?

“Stay tight,” he said, and Bridget, Hitler, and Wes all backed

close together.

Wes looked up at him. “I thought the lamb could do everything.”

“It can,” Weston replied. “It can.”

“Then why are we still here?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just don’t know.”

Bridget and Hitler, who hadn’t said much at all, looked at Weston. “Maybe it would be better to let Death have us,” Bridget said. “We’re all going to die someday, anyway.”

“No!” said Hitler. “I have things to do before I die.”

“We’re not going to die. Trust the lamb.” Weston didn’t know what had gone wrong. Why had the birds died? And just when they were about to be saved, too. Maybe the lamb didn’t have all power after all. Maybe it only knew *some* things, not all. Maybe Weston was attributing strength to it that it didn’t really have.

By now the wall was dark with bodies pressed up against it, occasionally lit up by a flicker of light but then darkened again as the corpse pressed against the wall and extinguished the flame. The outside sounds were amplified in here, made terribly loud, dashing against their eardrums and bouncing around inside their skulls.

“You do realize we’re kind of stuck in here, I hope,” said Bridget. “Any plan to actually get out of here? Because there are more of them than there are of us.”

Weston looked at the wall, then back at Bridget. “I’m sure the lamb has thought it through.” He hoped.

They waited. For a very long time the corpses kept coming, until finally the thumping ceased. It was almost completely dark—the bodies must have been piled up all over their shell,

dead flesh gathered into one huge mass. The smell began to seep in. It got kind of cold.

“Maybe we can dig our way out,” Wes offered, kneeling down and fervently trying to scrape away at the magma with his hands. It was no use—the floor was hard and no finger, no nail was going to make it give.

Then the ice wall began to move. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, but it was definitely moving. Inching towards the staircase. Brilliant!

“We’re moving,” Weston said.

“We’ve noticed,” shot back Bridget.

“Stand on this side,” he said, at what was now the back. “We’re going to be moving right over the stairway opening, and you don’t want to fall in until you’re ready.” This might actually work. Unless Death noticed.

But they kept moving, centimeter by centimeter, inch by inch. Before long they’d be at the staircase. Some of the corpses would be pushed down into it, Weston thought, so they’d have to step over them. Hopefully the noise wouldn’t rouse Death’s suspicions. But then again he had to notice when he looked up and saw the pile had moved all the way to the back. Death was no fool.

“Try not to make much noise,” Weston said. “And watch out, there’ll be bodies down the stairs.”

Almost there. Then the ice wall began to spin, and fast. The darkness on top of them disappeared and the orange light of the ceiling, reflected from the lava outside, returned. “He’s getting the bodies away from us.”

The wall pushed on faster, urging them to hurry. And this way there wouldn’t be any corpses to block their path in the

stairwell. Again, a stroke of brilliance. “Run!”

“We can’t do much else *but* run,” Bridget drily commented. It was true; the wall pushed them forward regardless of what they wanted to do.

Then it slowed down. They must be getting near the stairwell.

And there it was, a hole that appeared in the floor, grew larger. The wall stopped while there was still room enough for them to stand. Weston took the lead and walked down the stairs, with Wes holding onto his hand and Bridget and Hitler taking the tail.

When he got to the landing and turned the corner, his heart stopped. There stood Death. And he was swinging his scythe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Doesn’t this guy ever let up?” Bridget exclaimed.

Weston’s muscles froze. They could run back up, but what would that get them? And yet there wasn’t anything else they could do. “Back, back, back!” he yelled, herding them up the stairs. Halfway up, he looked back. Death was gone. “Wait!”

Maybe Death had gone back up to the hall. He took a step down. It was too quiet. Had to be a ruse, luring them back down into a trap.

Just then the lamb bounded down the stairs past them. “Follow me,” it said, its voice still as soft as ever. They followed.

Apparently it wasn’t a trap after all; the way was clear, and they pelted down staircase after staircase, running through each connecting hallway. At the bottom of one set of stairs, Weston

looked back and saw Death at the top, flying after them, sickle in hand. “Faster!” he called ahead to the lamb.

While they ran, he couldn’t help but wonder where all the guards had gone. Surely they would stop them on the stairway, where it was easiest to corner them in. But there were no guards.

They reached the bottom and came out into the fake hallway of doors. To their left and to their right they were flanked by a whole army of guards, each holding a flaming spear made of magma. And directly in front of them, barring the exit, stood Orlando the giant.

Curses, Weston thought. They were stuck, unless the lamb had some other tricks up its wool.

It did. “Hold on to me,” it said, and they each grabbed a handful of its wool. The guards began advancing, marching towards them with those empty eyes staring them down. Orlando just smiled.

Then everything got bigger—the house, the guards, the giant. No, that wasn’t right, Weston realized. He was just getting smaller. And so was Wes, Bridget, and Hitler. But the lamb remained the same size, which was just as well, Weston thought—they didn’t want to get trampled underfoot like bugs.

Then the lamb started glowing, brighter and brighter. If Weston hadn’t known better he’d have thought it had turned into a star or a sun. He could barely see the guards and Orlando raising their arms in front of their faces, blocking the penetrating light that filled the entire hall. The magma began to look translucent. The lamb stepped forward.

And yet Orlando didn’t move.

The lamb took another step, then another, and yet Orlando

still didn't move. He just stood there, blinded.

The lamb kept walking onward, until it reached the door. But how would they get it open? They were too small, and Orlando was right on top of them. Even now he was lumbering around, arm still in front of his face. The guards had stopped advancing on them.

"Do you think we might be able to climb up and turn the latch?" Weston asked Bridget. She shook her head.

It turned out they didn't need to. The lamb kept walking, straight through the door. All Weston saw was a brown blur for a moment, like passing through a cloud, and then they were on the outside, on the drawbridge, then at the edge of the volcano. And surrounding them was the blue-and-gold army.

"You may now let go," said the lamb. They did so and immediately grew back to their normal size. The world looked so different when you were the size of an ant, but Weston liked it better his own size. And hopefully sometime soon he'd find a way back to his own time. At least he'd been able to keep his own clothes throughout all of this, he thought. Speaking of which, he was overdue for a shower. A shave, too.

And then Weston noticed that most of the men weren't moving. Weren't even standing. For a moment he closed his eyes at the carnage. The guards must have slaughtered them—there were almost more bodies scattered out here on the slope than there were in Death's hall. And all were clad in the blue-and-gold. Did Death not lose even a single soldier? This wasn't a battle; it was a massacre.

As he and the others began slowly picking their way down through the rocks, the lamb roamed to and fro, apparently sniffing each corpse, each wounded man who couldn't walk

any more. Identification, Weston assumed. But then the men began rising, standing, walking. When they got closer to the lamb, Weston saw that it was actually breathing on each of the fallen. The breath of life.

This went on all around the top of the volcano. When the last man was finally standing, and they were all gathered in a group underneath the castle, the lamb motioned to one of the men who held something shiny in his hands. It was a horn, and as he raised it to his lips and blew, the world began to quiver. Another earthquake, Weston thought, and his chest clamped shut with fear. Wes held tightly onto his hand.

But it wasn't an earthquake. Another of the men shouted, pointing up to the castle. As everything shook, the castle slowly began sinking down past the rim, out of their sight, into the lava. Weston could tell when it made contact because flames spurted up, the whole building caught on fire. A horrible, ghoulissh shriek pierced the air, wailing, moaning, but eventually both it and the flames disappeared, and there was a profound silence.

As the army rounded the volcano, the blue-and-gold ship came into view. But the black-flagged ship wasn't there. Not on the shore, at least—a look at the horizon showed the dark silhouette of a galleon sailing off out of the cove, into open sea. Looked like they were safe.

In all of this the men hadn't really said much of anything, Weston noticed. But they all boarded the blue-and-gold ship and pushed off. Nobody had said anything about a destination, but he had a feeling he knew exactly where they were going.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

On the trip back, Weston stood next to Wes, Bridget, and the lamb on the deck. He wasn't sure where Hitler had gone off to.

"Is he really gone?" Wes asked.

"Who," said Weston, "Hitler?"

"No, Death."

Weston turned to the lamb, who was looking off into the horizon. "For now," it said. "But he will return. He will build anew. His thirst for blood never dries. He will rise again and again, until that final day when he is cast off forever."

"Where to?" Wes said.

"The place that is no place," said the lamb. "In the time before the beginning and after the end."

Weston didn't quite understand, but the important thing was that Death would be very, very far away. Or at least that was the gist of what he got.

"And what about us?" Bridget asked. "We're still trying to get back to 2007, remember?" That last bit seemed directed more at Weston than at the lamb.

"Yes, my child," said the lamb. "I remember. I remember many things, things long forgotten, things not yet born, old and new."

Bridget looked hard at the lamb. "And?"

"Your time is near. Have patience."

Weston stared into the horizon, trying to see what the lamb was looking at. "So, does this place have a name?" Maybe it was a remote island somewhere in the Pacific. With really tall cliffs. Wouldn't they be picked up on radar or satellites or whatever it

was they used for that kind of thing?

“It has not yet earned its name,” said the lamb. “But someday it will have a name. It will have many names. As will you.”

Like those Spaniards with fourteen middle names. Weston preferred simplicity, but then again maybe the lamb meant titles—duke or prince or something. But when he opened his mouth to ask, another question came out instead, completely not the one he had in his mind. “Do *you* have a name?”

The lamb’s lips turned upward in what had to be a smile. “All living things have names.”

“Well,” said Bridget, “what’s your name?”

“I too have many names, but in this place you may call me the Lamb.”

Hitler appeared behind them at the tail end of the conversation. “I’ve been meaning to ask you,” he said, clearing his throat and looking at the lamb. “That vision I had, up there on the cliffs. What did it mean?”

The lamb looked up at him. “Vision? It was no vision. And already you know what it means, both for what has passed and for what yet lies ahead.”

“But isn’t it too late? These hands—they’re going to carry this stain with me forever, aren’t they?”

The lamb looked out at the horizon again. For a long moment it said nothing. “While you still have breath in your lips, it is never too late.”

With a smile, Bridget put her arm around Hitler. “That’s why I brought him.”

“Brought me?” He looked at her in surprise. “I brought *you*.”

“Not here,” she said. “Back from the past. To save you.”

Weston blinked. Here he'd assumed all along that she'd loved her great-great-grandfather's atrocities, wanted to carry the genocide into the twenty-first century, wanted to destroy mankind by resurrecting one of the worst the world has ever known. And yet she hadn't seemed evil herself. No wonder—she **wasn't** evil. Weston breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe there was a chance after all. A slim hope, of course, and he might not even be her type, but then again you never know.

They sailed on for what had to be hours but it felt like minutes. The golden sun was glowing just above the horizon, ready to plunge out of sight, out of mind. This wasn't half bad after all, he thought, already forgetting much of how he'd felt not too long ago. He wouldn't mind doing this sort of thing again, really. And with Bridget by his side...

“Land ho!” called one of the men on the fore deck. It was the first thing any of them had said aloud, to Weston's recollection.

And there, in front of them, drawing nearer and nearer by the moment, was a huge land mass. Somewhere in there, Weston thought, was the house of doors, the fields, the hill with a tree on top. Or at least that was the assumption he was operating under; maybe they were going someplace else entirely. Come to think of it, he wasn't entirely sure that the blue-and-gold army had come from the same place as the lamb. They'd been working together as if they were on the same team, but were they really?

“Where are they from?” he asked the lamb, nodding over at the men. “Are they your people?”

The lamb followed Weston's glance. “Some, but not all.”

“Where are the rest? The women and children?”

“In their homes,” said the lamb.

“No,” Weston said, “I mean where do they live?”

“Up in the mountains, beyond the house of doors, beyond the enchanted lake, beyond the dark forest, beyond the clouds.”

Weston couldn't help but feel a yearning to go up there, to see this place the lamb spoke of. “Is that where we're going?” he asked.

“It is not,” said the lamb. “Not at this time.”

“We're going back to the house of doors, aren't we?”

“That is one stop along the way, yes.”

Oh? “Where else are we going?”

“You'll find out in a very short time,” it said. And then it walked down the stairs and into the cabin.

Bridget looked over from across the way, smiled, and motioned for Weston to come over. As he walked up beside her, a thousand things on the tip of his tongue, she too looked out at the horizon. “A lot of things happened today, huh.”

“Yeah,” he said. And hopefully a lot more would happen, too.

She stared into the golden-crested water beneath them. “I'm...I'm glad you were here.”

Weston didn't say anything, but he crossed his fingers.

“I mean, you guys are great. We couldn't have done it without you.” And yet Weston wasn't really sure what he **had** done—it was all the lamb, really.

“When we get back to 2007,” she continued, “I thought that maybe we...well...you know...” Her voice trailed off.

“I think I know,” Weston said quietly, with a smile tugging

at the corners of his mouth.

Bridget's face lit up. "You do? Oh, good, I was afraid you'd say no."

"Say no?" Weston cocked his head. "Why would I say no? You're an attractive girl."

Bridget's eyebrows knit together. "Attractive? What does that have to do with anything?"

Oh no. That **wasn't** what she was talking about? Then what **was** she talking about? How embarrassing... "What I meant was," he said, coughing to stall for time, "you attract success." Hopefully that was generic enough to fit whatever she had in mind.

She didn't look convinced. Still with one eyebrow raised, she said, "You think I'm attractive?"

"Well, yes," he said.

She blinked a few times, looked back down at the water. "I can't, Weston. I'm engaged."

Engaged? Weston swallowed hard. But there was no ring. And they were here, not in 2025. "Oh, no," he said, voice crackling halfway through, "that's not what I meant. I'm not proposing. I just thought that maybe we... wait, what were **you** talking about?"

"Letting Lloyd build the time machine so I can get back to my fiancé."

"Oh." That wasn't quite the same thing at all, was it. "But won't that mess up the continuum? Isn't that the whole reason we tried to come back?"

"That's why my superstitious grandfather tried to come back; personally, I think that's a bunch of malarkey. The space-time continuum isn't going to be ripped to shreds because

somebody jumps through it. It's more like...I don't know...it's more like water than it is like a fabric. You can't tear holes in water." Bridget looked up at the swiftly darkening sky. Still no stars out.

"So it's safe?"

She frowned. "Not entirely, no, but you weren't the cause of the earthquake. Or the hail. Or England's missile. Sorry to break it to you, but you're just not as important as my grandfather thinks you are." She paused a moment, apparently in thought. "That sounds mean. All I meant was that it wasn't your fault."

"It's okay," Weston said. "I understood."

"Well, I'd better go get ready," said Bridget, and she walked away.

Ready for what? Oh well, Weston thought, that door had already closed. But then again they'd have some time to—but that was assuming they were going back to 2007. Weston realized with a sinking feeling in his stomach that the lamb had never actually said anything about that—he and Bridget had just assumed it. They wanted it so bad that without realizing it they assumed everyone else wanted it, too.

"Hey, Weston," said Wes, walking up with a monkey on his shoulder. "Look what I found."

Weston smiled a weak smile. "That's pretty cool." Maybe they were stuck in this place after all. Maybe it wasn't just a temporary stop. Maybe this was where he'd live out the rest of his life.

But that wouldn't be so bad, he thought—Bridget wouldn't be able to get back to her fiancé, and Weston *was* the only eligible bachelor around. He could live with that.

As he looked down at Wes, though, he softly shook his head. Wes deserved a better life than this. He needed to grow up in Utah, in his own time, or at least some place safer than this. Especially if Death was coming back, as the lamb had said.

They landed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

As they got off the ship and climbed up the bank, Weston noticed that none of the men were getting off. Just them and the lamb. Nice of them to give them a ride, he thought.

The bank was a soft grass, like that in the fields but even greener. They got to the top and saw that it sloped down into a huge valley. It was as if they were on top of a mountain—but they couldn't be, the sea was behind them. Weston didn't understand.

The lamb led them down a few steps through the thick grass, then to the side. There, hidden underneath the other side of the bank, was a stone-carved door.

“Open it,” the lamb said. Weston obeyed.

They walked across the threshold and into the now-familiar hallway. Bridget gasped. There, not fifty yards away to their right, floated the dark cloud.

Just as it began moving towards them, the lamb cried out, “Begone!” It had never raised its voice before. The cloud quivered, buffeted in and out, and then melted away as if it had never been.

“What **was** that?” Wes asked.

The lamb looked him in the eye. “One of Death’s messen-

gers. But fear not; it is gone.”

“For good?”

“Until Death returns,” said the lamb.

Weston cleared his throat. “How much longer till, you know, Death is banished forever like you were saying?”

“Ah,” said the lamb. “That is not for you to know. Live your life as if you will live forever. And live each day as if it is your last.”

No one said anything.

“And now,” said the lamb, “it is time.”

Weston’s eyebrows went up. “Time for what?” But he already knew the answer, and as he glanced at the others, he suspected they did, too.

“A time for separations, but also a time for reunions. Be not sad; all will be well.” It nudged Wes with its nose.

“So we’re supposed to stop Lloyd from making the time machine, right?” Weston stood there looking at the lamb.

It made a movement that looked awfully like it was shrugging its shoulders. “You may if you wish. But that is your decision.” That wasn’t what he wanted to hear. Surely there was a *right* choice and a wrong one... wasn’t there? The lamb *had* to have an opinion, had to know a better way. Why wouldn’t it tell him?

“I don’t want to bother you,” he said, “but will it make a difference?”

“All things make a difference.”

“Well, yes,” Weston replied, “but will it change the future? In a *big* way?”

“You have heard of the butterfly, have you not?”

“Yes,” Weston said. “I just...it just seems that if Lloyd

doesn't make the time machine after all, everything will be so different. My family won't die, there won't be an earthquake, and Wes here will be with his family." Except, as he said it, he realized that that wouldn't be true—Wes would be there in 2007 with him. Which raised a very good question: when Lloyd and Sandy had the child who was Wes, who would it be? Would Wes even be born? Maybe some other child would come in his place. But if so, then would Lloyd and Sandy really be his parents?

That was silly, he thought. Of course they would be. Somehow. It was like a Moebius knot, or one of those M.C. Escher drawings. It didn't make sense and yet it did. It had to. Besides, Weston would have Lloyd and Sandy raise Wes. They *would* be his parents, even if they didn't realize it. And Wes *was* carrying around inside him their genes.

Or was he? Did traveling back in time unparent him? Unravel his genes and replace them with someone else's? Would he even be Wes after the jump?

"Many things will change," said the lamb, who had been watching Weston closely all this while, "but many things will remain the same. You worry too much, my child. Let your fear pass from you and be free."

"I'll...I'll try," Weston said.

"Good. We will begin with you," said the lamb, nodding its head at Hitler. "Come, follow me."

It walked down the hallway to the right, with Hitler following. The rest of them tailed not far behind.

The lamb stopped in front of a door and turned around. "You will not have much time left," it said, "but use it wisely. We will meet again soon."

“I...I...thank you,” said Hitler. “Thank you.”

“Your hands are clean. When the time for our reunion draws nigh, I will expect them to have remained that way.”

Hitler’s voice trembled. “They will.”

“Open the door.”

Hitler turned the doorknob. Inside they could see a small room, poorly lit. Both Hitler and Bridget seemed to recognize it. “I guess this is it,” he said to her, pulling her tight in a hug. “Thanks for coming to get me.”

“Anytime,” she said. “Anytime.”

“Goodbye.”

“Bye, Grandpa.”

Hitler walked through the doorway, turned around and gave one last glance at them, then closed the door. The lamb rubbed its nose against the wood. It faded away, leaving nothing but brick where it had once been. It looked like a missing tooth.

“So is he back in 2025, then?” Weston asked.

“No,” said Bridget. “He’s back where I got him from.”

The lamb walked farther down the hallway, crossing to the other side. When it came to a particular door, it stopped again. “Wes.”

Wes looked at Weston, a question mark written all over his face. “It’s okay,” Weston said, smiling and nodding. Wes wasn’t going to be coming back with him to 2007 after all. A wave of relief passed over him, but it was followed closely by a pang of sorrow. He was going to miss that kid. Struggling to keep back the tears, he hugged Wes. “You should write me sometime,” he said, his laughter mixed with the cracking of his voice. “Don’t forget.” Wes nodded.

And then the boy turned the knob and pulled open the door. Inside it looked like a home, with the lights on. Lloyd's home. Before the quake. Wes turned around and waved a small goodbye, then pulled the door shut behind him.

Which left Weston and Bridget. The lamb didn't rub its nose against the door this time, though. "Bridget," it said. "Come." To the same door? Bridget didn't live with Lloyd and Sandy...did she?

Bridget looked at Weston. "Thanks again."

"Good luck with your fiancé," he said.

"It never would have worked out," Bridget added as she took hold of the doorknob. "You were eighteen when I was born."

Not if they stayed, here where they were the same age. But he couldn't ask her to do that. And he didn't know that he really wanted to, as well. There were plenty of girls back home. "Don't worry," he said, sticking his hands in his pockets. "See you later." Like *that* would happen, he thought, regretting the words even as he watched her open the door onto a sterile-looking, fluorescent-lit hallway and walk through it. Probably the hospital. This time, after she closed the door, the lamb walked up and rubbed its nose and made it vanish.

Weston's turn. He followed the lamb back to another door, this one clear on the other side of the hall. At first he almost couldn't say anything. His heart seemed to have gotten caught in his throat. This was it. He was going back home, for real. He had so many things he wanted to tell his parents, his family, his friends.

They came to the second-to-last door in the hallway. "Well done," said the lamb. "I am proud of you."

“But...but I didn’t even *do* anything,” Weston said in confusion. “Not really.”

“You made a difference. In Wes, in Bridget, even in Hitler.”

He still didn’t understand. But there was no trace of irony in the lamb’s words. Maybe it meant it. Weston’s heart burned warm.

“Now,” said the lamb, “you must go.”

Weston swallowed. “Goodbye. And thank you.” He knelt down so he’d be at eye-level with the lamb. “Thank you *so* much. I owe you everything.”

The lamb didn’t say anything, so after a short pause Weston stood back up again and grabbed hold of the doorknob. He looked back at the hallway, trying to etch its doors and windows on his memory. And then he turned the knob.

As the door opened, it revealed Weston’s and Lloyd’s bedroom. And no time machine on the floor. The room looked almost exactly the way he’d left it, but in another way it looked so new. He’d forgotten what it looked like.

With one last glance at the lamb and a whispered thank you, Weston stepped across the threshold and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

He was standing in front of his desk, next to his bed. Everything was in place. It was before the earthquake.

And then Lloyd walked into the room, carrying a spherical metal casing. “Oh, hey, Weston,” he said.

Weston blinked. Should he say anything? Should he try to

stop him? “Hey, how’s it going?” He didn’t know what else to say.

Lloyd looked at him kind of funny. “I’m good,” he said. “Are you okay?”

A tidal wave of emotion crashed into Weston—all the stress that had been building up over the past couple of days, all of the fear, all of the worry, all of the hurt. Okay? He hadn’t been okay. But now he was back, home at last, safe and sound. He couldn’t stop the tears.

Lloyd just stood there, metal ball under one arm, staring. Apparently he didn’t know what to say, either.

“Sorry,” said Weston. “Sheesh, how embarrassing. I’m okay.” Lloyd didn’t look convinced. “Really, I am. It’s just . . . just allergies.”

Weston looked down at himself. Clean clothes. He felt his chin—clean-shaven. It was as if he’d never left, really. He collapsed onto his bed, stretched out his arms, and stared at the ceiling in a joyful reverie. Home! All of his solitude had vanished.

And Wes was safe with his family in the future. He would tell them about the earthquake, would warn them. They’d be safe.

As for Bridget, well, she could marry her fiancé. And if it didn’t work out, Weston figured that if he was still single in 2025, he’d have to look her up. Would she still remember him? He wasn’t sure, but he hoped so.

Hitler was back in 1945. He’d been dead for years. Weston wasn’t quite sure what had happened between him and the lamb, but it seemed to be good, whatever it was. Maybe the history books would have to be rewritten.

Or maybe nobody would know but Weston. And, eighteen years later, Bridget and Wes.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Lloyd was sitting on his bed, looking worried.

Weston laughed. “I’ve just been through a lot lately, that’s all.”

“You fail a test?”

“No,” Weston said. “No.” He breathed in the air, ran his fingers along the wall. It was real. It wasn’t a dream. He was back.

He looked over at Lloyd and noticed the spherical casing again. Propping himself up on his elbow, he raised an eyebrow. “Whatcha got there?”

“Oh, this?” Lloyd asked, looking down at the metal. “Nothing much.”

“Looks kind of like a time machine.”

Lloyd’s eyebrows went up. “How’d you guess?”

“I don’t know,” said Weston, smiling. “It just looks an awful lot like a time machine.”

“I’ve got the blueprints here,” Lloyd said excitedly, pulling a wad of papers out of his back pocket. “It shouldn’t be very hard to finish. I’ve been reading up on it.”

Weston laughed again. Yes, he was definitely back in 2007 with his good old roommate, just the same as ever.

“Hey, Lloyd,” he said.

“Yes?”

With a smile, Weston put on an innocent look and said, “What do you think about the name Sandy?”

THE END.