

# Walking a Fine Timeline



Jeanette  
M. Bennett

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***Walking a Fine Timeline***

*by Jeanette M. Bennett*

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***The Adventures of Serendipity Brown***

**Walking  
a Fine  
Timeline**

A detailed black and white illustration of a pocket watch is positioned to the right of the word "Fine" in the title. The watch has a circular face with numbers 1 through 12, and two hands. The watch is attached to a small ring at the top.

***Jeanette M. Bennett***

*Flight of Fancy Publishing*

## WALKING A FINE TIMELINE

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***In Loving Memory of  
Robert A. George  
and  
Donald R. George***

*My two uncles who kept asking about my book.  
Sorry I couldn't get this to you in time.  
(Now I really wish I had a time machine.)*

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# Chapter One

Sherman hated his town, he hated his life, but most of all, he hated his job. He looked across the counter at his next customer. “Would you like fries with that?”

“Ha!” The woman grinned and bounced on her heels. “They actually said that back then?—I mean, back now?—I mean—well, you know what I mean.”

Most customers melted into a blur to Sherman, but not this one. Underneath an explosion of brunette curls, her brown eyes glittered with a puppy-like enthusiasm, which Sherman found unusual for a middle-aged woman. Not much more than his own height of five-foot-four, she wore denim overalls over a passable figure. It wasn’t her appearance that made her stand out for Sherman; it was her attitude. She acted like she had never been in a McDonald’s before.

She looked up at the menu board again. “Wait! Can I change that order? Instead of a Filet-Zero-Fish can I have a Big Mac?”

“You mean Filet-O-Fish?” Sherman just couldn’t help but correct her.

“That’s an ‘O’? Whatever.” She flipped her hand as if brushing away the correction. “So, what’s on a Big Mac anyway?”

Sherman put his weight on his other sore foot. Linoleum might disguise the floor, but standing eight hours a day on it made him painfully aware it was solid concrete. “Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame-seed bun.”

The woman’s eyes widened as Sherman rattled off the tongue twister. “Oooh! Can you repeat that?” She reached into her hip pocket and pulled out what looked like a small calculator and held it in her hand.

Sherman fought the urge to sigh and repeated the burger mantra more slowly this time. Surely, he thought, she had heard the commercials.

“One can hardly go to a real McDonald’s Hamburger Restaurant and not have a legendary Big Mac. By the way, what’s today?”

“Saturday.”

“I mean the date.”

“Uh... May eighteenth.”

“1985, right?”

“Well, yeah....” Sherman frowned at the question.

“At least I got the date right, but I obviously missed Mount Saint

Helens. Where are we?”

“Kelso, Washington.” Sherman stared at her, bewildered.

“That’s not too bad. Not like I hit Paris, right?”

At this point, Sherman wasn’t sure if she was speaking to him or to an imaginary friend, so he chose to ignore the question. “Would you like anything else with your Big Mac and milkshake?”

“Yeah, give me some of those fries, since you recommend them so highly.”

Sherman poked the “Big Mac,” “Small Fries” and “Milk Shake” buttons on the cash register, and then hit “Total.” This register, specially designed for morons, was only one of the things Sherman hated about his job. “That will be two dollars and eighty-nine cents, please.”

The woman reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a crisp new fifty-dollar bill. When Sherman handed her the change, she held up a twenty and studied it. Her bright face turned a little dim for a moment. “I see they haven’t removed Andrew Jackson from your money yet. Guess that only happened after James Two Horses was elected.” She shrugged and stuck it in her purse.

Sherman wondered if the woman was high or crazy or just putting him on. He took a foam-boxed Big Mac out from under the heat lamp, snatched an envelope stuffed with fries off the rack, filled the paper cup with pink creamy-slush ooze, put it all on a paper-lined tray and handed it to her. “Have a nice day.” Sherman managed to sound polite, even though his voice lacked enthusiasm.

She looked at him as if she had never before heard the trite phrase. “Why thank you very much. You have a nice day, too!” She smiled at Sherman, then took the tray and walked over to one of the plastic tables.

The next customer in line stepped forward, then the next and the next and the next. Sherman kept glancing over at the odd woman. Instead of wolfing down her meal like most customers, she ate it slowly. Occasionally, she would stop, carefully set down her burger, pull out that pocket calculator of hers and proceed to poke buttons and talk to herself. Maybe that was a tiny recorder she was talking into, Sherman thought. She would nod, stick the calculator-thing back in her pocket and eat some more, chewing very slowly, often closing her eyes, savoring each bite as if it were some rare exotic treat.

She finally finished her meal, started to stand up, then looked back down at the trash on her tray. She sat back down and carefully wiped out the milkshake cup and foam container that had held the Big Mac. She studied the soiled place mat, then shook her head and gave the fry

envelope a long sniff with her eyes closed. She laid it down sadly, then stood up and proceeded to the door with the cup and foam box, cradling them like they were some lost treasure.

“I got to take out the garbage, Gilbert,” Sherman yelled at the assistant manager. He grabbed the plastic liner from the garbage can behind the counter and rushed out the door, where he stood for a moment, looking around. The sky was overcast as usual. Across the street and beyond the tall weeds, he could see the semis shooting overhead on the raised bed of I-5. He spotted the woman across the parking lot, striding past the enclosed playground. Beyond the driveway sat a thirty-five foot Winnebago parked atop mud and Shasta daisies in the empty adjacent lot. The woman headed straight for the motor home and climbed in, still hugging her cherished prize. Why in the world, with a real parking lot right there—one with plenty of vacant spots—she would take the chance of getting stuck on muddy uneven ground, Sherman could not fathom. Doesn’t she know how much it rains around here? Where is she from, anyway? He ran across the lot to get a closer look at the license plates. They were blank. Not even dealer plates. That made no sense.

Sherman suddenly remembered his assistant manager, Gilbert. The image of the jerk pulling out a stop watch and timing him flashed in his mind. Gilbert didn’t actually have a stop watch, but he was always looking for reasons to write people up. As much as Sherman hated his job, he desperately needed it, and jobs were scarce in this town right now. He spun around and jogged to the back of the building, where a detached brick enclosure successfully hid the dumpsters, but did not do as well hiding the smell. Sherman held his breath, opened the steel lid, flung in the bag, and had sprinted twelve feet toward the back door when the lid fell with a clang.

As soon as Sherman returned to the counter, Gilbert shoved a washrag reeking of bleach under his nose and sent him into the “lobby” to clean up. Why didn’t they just call it a dining room? Sherman wondered, stoically suppressing a groan. He went out front to get the chore over with. Mothers loved coming here, so their kids could enjoy food fights which someone else would have to clean up. Maybe they called it a lobby because the brats lobbed food at each other.

After spending his last two hours sweating over the metal baskets in the deep fryer, Sherman finally punched out, exited by the back door of the building, and began the mile walk to his rundown apartment he shared with four other guys. Still, it beat the single-wide trailer he grew up in with a mother who could hardly take care of herself, let alone six kids, and

a revolving door of official and unofficial step-fathers. Something wet hit his cheek. It had begun drizzling—something between mist and a real rain—so he sighed and turned up his collar.

He glanced across the lot and noticed the Winnebago still standing on ground which was getting muddier by the minute. He stopped and studied it a moment. Was she stuck? He shook his head, deciding not to get involved and started again for home. Ten feet further, he whirled around. The woman obviously wasn't from around here. He didn't know anything about motors, but he knew a repair shop that made emergency house calls.

Sherman didn't figure he would scare her even if she was alone, being nineteen-looking-fourteen, too short and too skinny, with horn-rimmed glasses. He walked up to the metal door, reached up and knocked.

A yelp came from inside and the door flew open with a bang. The woman poked her head out, brown curls bouncing like Slinkies, eyes bulging with panic.

“Uh.” Sherman asked. “Did—”

“Jiminy Criminy!” She grabbed his arm. “It's already started! Get in quick before you get killed!” She yanked him inside and slammed the door shut, locking it in one swift motion. “What?” Sherman looked around expecting to see a bed, table and tiny kitchen crammed in there with them, but instead found only two bucket seats bolted to the floor. The continuous, grey metal walls showed absolutely no sign of the windows which had been visible from the outside. The compartment only took up eight feet of the thirty-five available, and there was no door except the one he had just entered. “How come this is so much smaller on the inside?” Sherman asked, craning his neck around. His eyes popped wide open. “Hey, what's that weird noise?” The humming became louder and louder, rapidly growing from annoying to ominous, something like a cross between a buzz saw and his old television just before it blew up.

The woman shoved Sherman into a black leather seat and plopped into the one next to him. “Fasten your seat belt, kid, and hold onto your McDonald's hat!” She pulled her strap over her shoulder and fastened it at her waist.

Sherman just stared at her. “Huh?”

She rolled her eyes, reached over, grabbed Sherman's shoulder strap, and fastened his seatbelt for him. “Men. Helpless at any age.”

On the wall in front of Sherman was a large white screen with geometric diagrams and strange symbols that looked like some alien language. The figures would come into view, and then blink out. Buttons poked through the flat surface then receded and vanished. All around the

screen, swirling numbers continued to appear and disappear. It was like someone trying to animate Albert Einstein's acid trip. "Where's the windshield?" Sherman looked around. "Hell, where's the steering wheel?"

The whirring noise increased, and whatever they sat in suddenly jerked and then rattled like a jeep over rough terrain, an unnerving clanking adding itself to the strange hum. Only the seatbelt kept Sherman from bouncing out of his chair. He clenched his teeth to stop them from clacking. Man, Sherman thought, that was painful.

"S-sorry," the woman yelled over the cacophony. "I g-got to w-work on those minor g-glitches. Hope you d-don't lose your fries."

For what seemed forever, but probably only amounted to several minutes, the terrifying machine threatened to rip itself apart and them with it. Finally the shaking and noise wound down and stopped. Silence, at last—except for Sherman's heart beating in his ears.

"You okay, kid?" The woman unfastened her seatbelt.

"Sure?" Sherman answered, unsure.

The woman stood up and stepped over to the wall in front of them. She began punching the icons poking out of the screen. "Don't get up. Got to take you back, right now! Don't know what your being here will do. I'm all new to this; don't want to mess up anything—or everything."

"Mess up what?" Sherman felt too numb to move.

"Time."

"Time?"

"Hell's doorbells, said too much. Forget I said that."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Zilch. Bupkis. Nic." She poked more images on the screen and studied the numbers that kept popping up, all the while humming some senseless tune.

Sherman knew he did not want to go for another ride in this cement mixer. "Maybe I should go." He unfastened his seatbelt and stood up. "I need to get home. Got to feed the cat. Yeah, the cat." Sherman didn't have a cat, but it sounded like a good excuse. He turned, unlatched the door, pushed and stepped out.

"No! Wait!" The woman yelled behind him.

Sherman almost missed the step down. He stumbled, regained his footing, and gaped as he found himself, not in a muddy patch of Shasta daisies, but in a huge windowless room. It was brightly lit with light emanating from a glowing white ceiling, stretching high overhead. Strange equipment, Sherman couldn't even begin to identify, sat on the smooth

cement floor. On top of one machine a huge clear glass ball held miniature lights dancing inside. The whole machine had a spidery appearance, and Sherman thought it looked like a rack of drills. It raised a spindle which held a bulbous eye, and this huge eye stopped and stared at Sherman. Then the whole machine backed away on rubber treads. Sherman caught a whiff of acetone and—what was that—oranges?

It was the calendar on the wall that made his jaw drop. Not the picture of the muscle-bound pretty-boy draped over the hood of a sports car. Not even the car itself, which was unlike any model he'd ever seen. No, it was the large number "2353" printed at the top that made him forget to breathe.

"What does 2353 mean?" Sherman asked, his stomach fluttering.

"It means I may have messed up everything." She came out of the Winnebago to join him.

"Where am I?"

"Right where the calendar says you are."

## Chapter Two

"I'm dreaming, right?" Sherman rubbed his eyes, and when that didn't work, he pinched his arm. He blinked. He looked around and blinked again; the workshop was spinning. When Sherman started spinning in the opposite direction, he felt an arm under his. The arm guided him to a stool at a workbench which was strewn with tools, some recognizable, some not. The arm helped him sit down. The world finally stood still.

"Welcome to the twenty-fourth and a half century," the woman who belonged to the arm said.

Sherman shook his head. "I'm in a cartoon?"

"Not exactly." The woman smiled. "Daffy Duck said that in *Duck Dodgers*, I know, but this really *is* the twenty-fourth and a half century!" She laughed. "I always wanted to say that, but few folks in my time get the joke. You ok?"

"This is the *future*?" Sherman pointed at the motor home. "That's a *time machine*?"

"Yes."

"People can travel in time here?" He shook his head. "I mean now?" He stared at her. "Does *everybody* do it?"

"No, I'm the very first time traveler, ever." She frowned. "Of course, you are from 1985 so maybe that makes *you* the first time traveler. Hmm, my first trip and I've already got a time paradox."

"Who *are* you?"

She held out her hand. "Dr. Serendipity Brown, inventor among other things. And you?"

Sherman just stared at her.

She nudged her hand at him. "You're supposed to shake my hand and tell me who you are. I happen to know they did that back in your time."

Sherman, still numb, stuck out his right hand which in no way expected the vigorous pumping it got.

"So what's your name, kid?"

"Sherman Conrad."

"Nice to meet you, Sherman. Don't you worry, as soon as you collect your scrambled brains we'll get you back in the time machine and right back home. You can pretend this was all just a bad dream."

As scary as this predicament was, the thought of returning home was

downright foreboding. “No way! I don’t want to go back.”

“But you have your own life.”

“*Me?* I share a *dump* with three other guys. I work for minimum wage. I can’t afford to date. I have no *life*.”

“But I have to get you back to 1985. You don’t belong here.”

“I don’t belong there *either!* 2353 can’t be worse than 1985.”

Serendipity gave him a wistful look. “You’re tempting me, kid. What a souvenir!” After walking around him, staring him up and down, she paused and then shook her head. “No. You aren’t a stray cat that followed me home. I have to take you back. What if, later, you’re supposed to do something important, and I removed you from the time stream? No.”

“I’m a loser, from a family of losers. I’ll never be important.”

She pulled the gadget out of her pocket again. “Let me check the records.”

“How is a calculator going to tell you anything?”

She glanced up, puzzled, then smiled. “That’s right. Computers were huge in your day. You didn’t have pocket puters. That’s what this is.”

“No way!” Sherman stood up and stepped around her to look over her shoulder. “How did they get a computer that small?”

“They make them a lot smaller, but I like this size. So, Sherman Conrad—what’s your middle name?”

Sherman sighed. “Peabody.”

“Where were you born?”

“Longview, Washington. Kelso doesn’t have a hospital.”

“When were you born?”

“May twelfth, 1966.”

“No, you were never famous. No record of you at all. What about your family? Won’t your parents miss you?”

“I doubt my mom would even notice I’m gone,” Sherman replied sadly. “As for my dad, after the divorce he disappeared so he wouldn’t have to pay child support. I really don’t remember him.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Serendipity said punching one last button. She looked up. “Wait a minute; your name is Sherman *Peabody?*”

“Yeah.” Sherman rolled his eyes.

“Ha! Kismet!” A delighted grin spread across her face. “Pet boy Sherman!”

“Please, I’ve heard that enough times.”

“Mr. Peabody and his Wayback Machine. I love that old cartoon.”



“I wish it had never been made. Mom wanted to name me after her grandfather Sherman. Dear old Dad said if she was going to name me Sherman, she ought to add ‘Peabody.’ Mom was too dumb to get the joke, so she put it on my birth certificate.”

“Hmm, the Wayback Machine. I like that better than calling this thing a TARDIS, you know, like on that show *Doctor Who*. No, TARDIS really doesn’t fit. And it doesn’t come equipped with a cute British actor, either. Maybe I’ll come up with something original. The Browninator? No, don’t like that. Time Sequencer? Nah, don’t like that either. Temporal Contrivance? Ick. You got any ideas, Sherm?”

Sherman looked over at the Winnebago. “You mean this Timemobile?”

“Ooh, I like that! Kind of like the Batmobile, right?” She rubbed her chin with her left hand, studying him intensely. “I’m really tempted to keep you and hire you as my sidekick.”

“As long as I don’t have to wear a silly costume.”

“Hmm, got any talents besides asking people if they want fries? Go to college?”

“Can’t afford it. But I can do odd jobs and I’m a hard worker, Dr. Brown.”

“It really is tempting—someone from the twentieth century as my assistant.” She smiled, musing. “And, oh, just call me Serendipity.” She focused back on Sherman.

“Okay, Serendipity. Where are we, anyway?”

“Beaverton, Oregon.”

“Beaverton? Why would an inventor be living in Beaverton?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “What’s wrong with Beaverton? I was born here.”

“Sorry, I just figured a genius would live some place more interesting, like New York or London, not a dinky town like Beaverton.”

“It’s not that small anymore, kid.”

“You really built this time machine by yourself?”

Serendipity smiled over at the motor home looking proud. “All by myself.”

“Wow, you must be a genius.”

“I’m good at tinkering. Come from a long line of mechanics. Why don’t we talk out this assistant thing over dinner?” Serendipity climbed back into the motor home, then stopped and turned back to Sherman.

“Okay, let’s audition you for this job. Help me with my antiques.”

Sherman stood up and went over to the door.

Serendipity popped her head back out and shoved a very full paper sack at Sherman.

“Safeway?” Sherman read the lettering on the bag. “That’s a grocery store!” He peered in. The bag was stuffed with magazines, a Teflon spatula, egg beater, tin of Altoids, and other mundane items, including her trash from McDonald’s. “Hey, none of this stuff is antiques. It’s all brand-new.”

“Maybe to you. To me they’re antiques. In excellent condition,” she added, smiling. Serendipity stepped over to the white display panel on the front wall. Her hands once again danced across the monitor, poking icons and buttons, as Sherman watched through the door. “Is that one of those new experimental touch screen monitors?”

“Very old technology. Just put the sack on that workbench.” Serendipity pointed without looking up.

Sherman walked over to the crowded counter against the wall, trying not to brush any weird devices that might shock him or turn on accidentally. He didn’t even trust the rather ordinary-looking wrench. He heard a whooshing moan he assumed was a motor shutting off, as he carefully set the sack down on one of the few bare spots. He turned around. “Is this where you—*whoa!*”

The motor home had disappeared; a plain grey metal box, the same size as the Winnebago, sat in its place. The time machine looked much like a smooth-sided shipping container with a single rectangular door.

“How the heck did you do that?” Sherman blinked, amazed not only at the change, but that a time machine should look so mundane.

Serendipity took two steps down to the floor of the workroom. “Holographic projectors in the skin. I can program it to look like whatever I want. It just has to be the same size and shape to be believable. I could make it invisible, but people would bump into it. I call this gadget the Chameleon Switch.”

“*Doctor Who* again.”

“Yeah.” Serendipity had a sheepish smile. “Probably shouldn’t do that; BBC might sue me. I’m good at inventing and fabricating things, just not good at coming up with names. I usually leave that to whoever buys my inventions. They have fellows in marketing who come up with snazzy names. Not sure I should market this though.”

“Why don’t you just call it ‘Holographic Skin’?”

Serendipity grinned. “I like that, kid. You are good with names. Wish you’d been around when dear old Dad christened me.”

“Your name really is Serendipity?”

“Yeah, Dad said with an ordinary last name like Brown, I needed an extraordinary first name. Problem is it’s such a mouthful; everyone gives me a nickname. For some reason, they always come up with ‘Dippy.’ I really hate that. Oh, well.” She shrugged and shot him an effervescent grin. “Come on. I know the perfect dish for dinner. I’ll have Robbie make you a twentieth-century delicacy.”



Sherman sat at the dining room table across from Serendipity. He studied the room. The table had chrome legs with a red Formica top. Linoleum, in a nondescript design of grey and blue swirls, covered the floor. On the faux-wood-paneled walls hung several framed prints. A couple were Norman Rockwell paintings: a family sitting at a Thanksgiving dinner, and a little girl with her mouth wide, revealing her missing a tooth. Three others were black light posters from the early seventies in bright shades of chartreuse, hot pink, orange, yellow and cyan on black.

“What do you think of my decor?” Serendipity gazed about with a proud smile.

“You know I expected to see something more futuristic. This all looks pretty normal.”

“Why thank you. I’ve done my whole house in twentieth century.”

Sherman was no expert on interior design, but he was pretty sure the twentieth century would not want to be remembered this way. “It looks like second-hand stuff from a garage sale.”

“These are all priceless antiques from the twentieth century!”

“Melmac?” Sherman looked down at his plate. “I got Melmac at home. Picked it up at Goodwill.” Sherman didn’t mention his were in better shape. The pattern on Serendipity’s dishes had been nearly worn off.

“Yes, aren’t they great? I had a hard time finding them. They really set off my Coca Cola glasses, don’t you think? And how about this silverware? That’s real Allegheny Stainless Steel Flatware. Actually, a lot of this stuff, like the table, are replicas I had commissioned. Cost a fortune.”

“Are you a millionaire?” Sherman knew that was a stupid question. The house was huge.

“Multi-trillionaire. I’m not sure if a million a year will make you even

middle class these days. How's your tuna casserole?"

Sherman swallowed the bite in his mouth. "Fine." He tried to hide the fact that he hated tuna casserole. For that matter he didn't know anyone who liked tuna casserole. Well, until now. Serendipity seemed to relish it.

"Found the recipe in a 1962 Campbell's Soup Cookbook I bought at auction. I think I made Robbie a fairly good cook" She turned and yelled into the other room. "Hey, Robbie, come here!"

A handsome but dour-looking man came into the room. He was tall with dark hair and was dressed like a butler. "Yes, Dr. Brown?"

"So, what do you think of Robbie, kid?" Serendipity beamed like a proud mother. "Made it myself. I know I could just buy one, but it's more fun to tinker. I modeled the face after my third husband, Frank. Thought it would be nice to let Lord Lay-About wait on me for a change. Doesn't smile much—just like Frank."

"Robbie the robot? Isn't that from *Forbidden Planet*?"

"I told you I like the twentieth century. I collect ancient television series and movies from that era. That's how I became an expert in your period's slang, daddy-o."

"I think that's my grandpa's period." Sherman paused a moment, picking at the noodles. "Can I ask you a question? I know you like the twentieth century, but why would someone who has a time machine, who could go anywhere in the world, want to go back to a McDonald's in Kelso of all places?"

"Accident. I was aiming for the base of Mount Saint Helens."

Sherman set down his fork. "Are you bonkers? Why would you want to get caught in a volcanic eruption?"

"I'm not that stupid, kid. I went five years later. Got my date right, just missed my target. I wasn't sure if the Holographic Skin would survive the trip. So I picked a spot I knew would be isolated in that century. If anyone happened to notice a metal box sitting there, they would just think it was some biology lab or something."

"Okay, that makes sense."

"I couldn't believe my luck when I accidentally landed right next to a legendary McDonald's Hamburger Restaurant, the most famous diner of the twentieth-century."

"You almost landed in the middle of I-5."

"No, that would never happen. I installed mass detectors and motion sensors," Serendipity said, examining the delicacy on her fork. "Don't want to land inside a mountain or squash somebody." She took another

bite.

“That’s good, but you don’t know how to steer your own time machine?”

Serendipity put down her fork and glowered at him. “I’ll be sure to read the driver’s manual—as soon as I write it. This isn’t a car, kid. I have to calculate the transference of the machine through several dimensional planes using quantum physics and hyper-geometry. I’m making this up as I go along. No one’s ever traveled back in time before. I did get the date right, and I only missed my target by sixty-one point eight kilometers. Not bad for the first trip back in time.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She put her elbow on the table and propped her chin in her hand. “I still can’t get over the fact that I’m sharing a tuna casserole with someone from the twentieth century. I am *so* tempted to keep you.”

“You said you might hire me. What would you pay?”

“How about ten thousand a week? Plus room and board?”

Sherman choked on his warm tuna and peas. That was nearly twice what he made in a year. “Yeah, I could work for that.”

“Ten thousand isn’t what it was in 1985, but that’s just a starting wage. Tell you what. I’ll hire you on a temporary basis, see how it works out.”

“Sweet! That sounds so awesome!”

“You might say that now, but you haven’t seen the twenty-fourth century, yet. And you haven’t worked with me. I can take you back to 1985 anytime you want.”

Sherman nodded. He doubted he would want to go back, but appreciated the offer, just in case.

“I know I shouldn’t do this, but you go so well with my décor. Plus you seem like a nice kid. Besides, what’s it going to hurt if you stay here? From my own studies of time, I have to agree with Dr. Hugh Everett’s ‘Many Worlds’ interpretation.”

“What’s that?”

“Everett postulated the objective reality of the universal wave function, but denied the reality of wave function collapse, thus implying all conceivable alternative histories and futures are tangible and each represents an actual universe.”

“Huh?”

“When I brought you here, according to Everett’s theory, I did not change history but created a new one. Somewhere in another universe there’s another Sherman Conrad still back in Kelso.”

“Ew!” Sherman wrinkled his nose and then shrugged. “Better him than me.”

Serendipity smiled at him. “You’re here and the universe hasn’t imploded yet. If you ask me, time is tougher than some physicists think, and two people are incapable of even making a dent in it.” She studied his black hair that came just past his collar. “Sherman Peabody, huh? Maybe we could dye your hair red?”

“Forget it,” Sherman grumbled. “And don’t call me by my middle name.”

“Fair enough. I won’t call you ‘Peabody’ if you don’t call me ‘Dippy.’”

“So, what are my duties?”

“Fetcher and companion. Time Travelers always have a companion. Typically some perky kid.” Serendipity studied him a moment, then shrugged. “Okay, so you aren’t that perky, but at least you don’t get hysterical. Your most important job will be to listen to me ramble and then nod and say, ‘uh-huh.’”

Sherman nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“Perfect. You’re a natural, kid. You will be like the son I never had—or wanted.” Serendipity grinned an infectious smile.

Sherman found himself smiling back. The woman might be a little nutty, but she seemed harmless enough. Whatever happened, this would beat flipping burgers.



Serendipity kicked her slippers off onto the purple shag rug and curled her legs up on the black Naugahyde couch. She relished her moments alone in her Entertainment Room, which—in twentieth century decor like the rest of the house—held the couch, the shag rug, Danish modern furniture and a beanbag chair: all replicas, specially ordered. She gazed at her most prized antique on the wall behind her: circa 1970’s—in prime condition—a velvet painting of Elvis Presley wearing a white jumpsuit.

The only item not period in this room was the huge screen which covered most of the opposite wall. A small-screen television would have been more authentic, but she had opted for the feel of a wide screen, like in the old theaters. Serendipity cherished the notion this particular touch emitted the feel of a movie executive’s private viewing room.

Six movies from the twentieth century were playing at once on a split screen, all in their original 2-D format. She had turned the soundtracks off, and the action progressed with rock and roll music as background. She had

already seen these films many times and knew the dialogues by heart. At a particularly good point in any of these movies, by speaking the picture's number, she would turn off the music and turn on that movie's volume.

In the lower middle played *Some Like It Hot* with Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon dressed in drag. When Roy Orbison started singing *Pretty Woman*, Serendipity did not even attempt to repress a giggle.

The Entertainment Room was the place she always came to unwind, to lose herself in a simpler time. She knew it was late, but she couldn't sleep. She was far too excited. Her time machine actually worked. She had been to 1985. At this very moment up in her guest room, there was a real twentieth-century native who wanted to stay.

Amidst her elation, Serendipity's mind began to swirl with doubt. Would this even work out? Would Sherman become another pain in the rear end? She lived alone for good reason. She didn't like people telling her what to do, how to act, what to wear. Always trying to make her normal. She had tried being normal. Didn't work. She had given up trying to fit in long ago. Much happier being herself.

Perhaps Sherman, being from another time, would see Serendipity as simply the norm for the twenty-fourth century. That would work. He certainly didn't seem that put off by her. If he didn't try to change her or take over her life, they could get along just fine. He was old enough to take care of himself. He wouldn't be making demands on her time. Yes. It might just work.

So...where should she—no *they*—go next? In the upper middle section of the screen, Groucho was attempting to unpack his brothers from a giant steamer trunk. Hmm, thought Serendipity, curling her legs up a bit more. A voyage on a 1940s luxury liner crossing the Atlantic, now that would be nice. She smiled. In the lower left, Rosalind Russell looked out her window at Manhattan. Yes. New York City in the 1920s, Serendipity had to see that. In the lower right hand corner a college fraternity imitated Devo. Perhaps a 1980s rock concert?

Why did the twentieth century appeal to her so? Serendipity had always had a hard time explaining that to others; she couldn't really explain it to herself. Was it truly because it was an exciting century? Or was it because of the recordings? She considered that for a moment. Before the twentieth century, records of society were preserved only in books and paintings. With film and recordings one could *relive* this period.

She stood up a stepped closer to the screen. What was the main theme in all these movies?

Every protagonist was a misfit.

If these films were made now, the happy ending would have Charlie Chaplin's Tramp attaining a career, Elwood P. Dowd being cured of his delusions of giant invisible rabbits, and Auntie Mame learning to act like an ordinary woman. In the twentieth century, misfits not only won against their adversaries; they won the right to stay as they were. Eccentrics were admired, outcasts were loved, rebels were followed, and nonconformists got converts instead of the other way around. Even crazy people, if they were harmless, were tolerated. Nothing like the homogenous society of today, where misfits were looked upon with pity or disdain.

An epiphany smacked her between the eyes: Serendipity could never fit in, because she never wanted to. But she could fit quite nicely into the twentieth century. Yes, she thought, some people were born before their time, but she had been born four centuries too late. But now she had solved that little problem, hadn't she.

First, she better take care of her guest. Sherman might be low maintenance, but he was going to require a few essentials to live comfortably. Tomorrow they would have to shop. And day after tomorrow they would go back to the twentieth century—*her* century.



## Chapter Three

When one eye opened to two beady eyes and a mouth full of sharp, crooked teeth, Sherman woke with a jolt. In a blink, Three-D became two, transforming the ominous creature into a cartoon poster of the Tasmanian Devil. Sherman tried to remember where he was. He shifted his gaze, stared down at his body and saw Elmer Fudd in frozen pursuit of Bugs Bunny. The bedspread in Serendipity Brown's guest room. Sherman yawned. Wiping the crust from his eyes, he glanced over at the night stand to find Daffy Duck ticking away on the alarm clock and pointing to the hour of seven.

Sherman stretched, then yawned again, and as his ears opened, he could hear muffled voices. Loud muffled voices. Must be what woke him up. Curious, he grabbed the robe at the foot of the bed, and yanked it on, lest he be traipsing about in his briefs. He hurried out of the bedroom.

On the other side of the hallway stood a rail; beyond that, the entry hall below. A small crystal chandelier hung high above the main floor, just above his eye-level. No doubt another of Serendipity's bizarre visions of the typical twentieth-century home.

He looked over the railing at the black-and-white checkerboard tile below. At the wall to the left of the front door, stood a handsome middle-aged man with sandy hair and an arrogant air. He sported a red blazer with half-inch lapels and tight black pants which could have been stolen off Tom Jones.

In front of him, Serendipity glowered, arms crossed—a formidable figure if not for the frilly pink robe. “You said this was an emergency, Bruce. Give me one good reason I shouldn't sic my security-bots on you.”

“Sweetheart, don't be like this. Let me in.” Bruce stepped to the right and seemed to disappear into the closed door. After a rattling sound, he apparently moved left again, reappearing at the wall. “Come on, unlock the gate.”

“You can just stay out there. You aren't setting foot on my property ever again.”

Sherman eyes widened. Was this a hologram? What else could it be? It looked so solid and so real—not translucent like in sci-fi movies. Sherman crept down the stairs for a closer look.

“Come on, Serendipity.” Bruce smiled, flashing a dimple.

“You can say whatever you have to say, out there. What do you

want?"

"To offer you a really great deal, Sweetheart! I've been talking to A.J. and he'd like to produce a movie with me. An action-adventure. A band of heroes saves a planet of helpless aliens from an asteroid bombardment."

"That's been done to death." Serendipity reached for a button on the wall.

"No, wait! This one is different! These aliens look like cute little kittens."

"Let me guess, it's a mew-sical?" A poised finger hovered over the button.

The pun whizzed over the man's head. "What? No, it's a serious drama. I'll play the lead, of course. It'll be a big sensation. I'm going to let you in on the ground floor."

Both Serendipity's hands flew to her hips and she leaned forward. "Money? Is that it? What about the fifty billion? It's only been four years, Bruce. Did you already spend your settlement money?" Her left hand gravitated toward the button again. "Gambling or girls?"

"Those other women meant nothing to me, sweetheart. You were always the one I loved."

"You thought of me every time, right?" Finger poised again.

Bruce's fake smile dropped. "Aw, Honey. You spent all your time on your stupid inventions. There was never any time for me."

"One of us had to work." She stared at the panel and moved her finger a little to the left so it hovered over that button again. "You know, you could have played my arm accessory if you had just behaved yourself."

"I never hit you, baby."

Serendipity laughed. "Yeah and end up like my fourth husband? You would have found yourself tossed in jail and never would have gotten a dime out of me. No, you just hit me in the heart."

"Come on, admit it, we had some really good times." Bruce said, his voice pleading. "I'm willing to forgive you."

"Forgive *me*? Self-centered SOB! It's over, Bruce." She reached for the button again.

Bruce's smile dropped into a sneer. "And, now you're all alone, aren't you, Dippy?"

Serendipity's face twisted it into a snarl. "Stop calling me Dippy!" She looked away. "What makes you think I haven't found someone else?"

Bruce let loose a derisive laugh. "You aren't getting any younger, Dippy."

Sherman squared his shoulders, pulled his robe tight and clomped down the stairs, doing his best alpha-male. “Is this old fart bothering you?”

Serendipity looked up and smiled relieved. “Good morning, Sherm. It’s just my ex.”

“Who are you talking to?” Bruce frowned.

“Come over here, sweetie, so Bruce can see you on the monitor.”

Sherman walked over and stood next to her. She slipped her arm around him and turned her head to give him a wink Bruce couldn’t see. Then she turned back to her ex. “This is Sherman. He’s my new partner.” She smiled at Bruce like a Cheshire cat.

Bruce scowled. “And you accused *me* of robbing the cradle? Is he even legal?”

“I’m nineteen.” Sherman held his head up.

“Why would you want a scrawny kid when you could have a man?”

“Oh, Sherman’s a man, all right.” Serendipity smirked. “Remember when you were that age and had lots of—uh, vigor?”

Bruce’s smug smile drooped.

Serendipity let go of Sherman, but not before giving him a squeeze Bruce could see quite clearly. “I got on with my life, Bruce; I suggest you get on with yours. Good bye, Bruce.” She punched the button. Bruce winked out.

Serendipity turned back to Sherman. “Thanks for playing along, kid. That didn’t scare you, did it? Don’t worry I want to keep our relationship strictly business; last thing I need is another failed romance.”

“Uh, no offense, but you’re old enough to be my mom.”

She winked at him. “Don’t rub it in. And don’t worry; I like my lovers a little closer to my own age.” She sighed. “And to think I thought Bruce was finally the *one*. He was *one* all right.”

“I’m sure you’ll find the right guy.”

“Oh, really?” Serendipity flipped him a cocky smirk. “Yeah, you were born three hundred and eighty-seven years ago so I guess that makes you older and wiser than me. So tell me, oh elder from a simpler time, how does one find their soul mate?”

“How should I know? I’m only nineteen and hardly a babe-magnet. I am good at spotting losers, though. I could tell Bruce was a jerk at first glimpse.”

“Well then, I’ll be sure to run candidates for spouse number seven by

you first. That will be one of your duties along with getting me coffee.” Her teasing smile faded into wistfulness. “Sometimes I think the man who could really love me has yet to be born.”

“Don’t talk like that; he’s out there somewhere.”

“Hey, I got a time machine. If there’s none in this century, I’ll find some nice guy in the past.” Serendipity gave Sherman a cocky grin. “That’s not a bad idea. Meet with him in the past and he’d have a hell of a time chasing me down for alimony.” She grinned, turned, and tugged at Sherman’s robe. “Come on, kid. I’ll have Robbie cook us up some waffles.”



Sherman had expected the waffles to look—well, more futuristic, but they pretty much looked like your average waffles. The syrup however had the most fantastic taste. He read the bottle to see what amazing future ingredient had been added, but all it said was “pure maple syrup,” although it did mention only uncloned trees had been used. Come to think of it, he had never tasted anything but artificial maple syrup before.

He looked across the Formica table at Serendipity, as she stared at the black-light poster of a dragon curled around a castle. “What do you find so fascinating in that poster?”

Serendipity blinked at him, startled. “Oh, sorry, I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Sure I do.”

“Okay, I was wondering where I should take you to buy you some clothes; whether or not I should get my hair bleached blonde; what went wrong with my calculations when I set the time machine; what to have for dinner or should I let Robbie surprise us; if I should finish that hypertonic device I’m working on or if it’s a waste of time; how am I going to find a good man; and where we should visit on our next time trip.”

“You were thinking all that just now? Is that how the mind of a genius works?”

“No, that’s how the mind of a woman works.” Serendipity took a bite of waffle.

“No wonder girls act so weird. You mentioned something in there about buying me some clothes?”

“Yes. We can’t have you running through time dressed in your McDonald’s outfit, though it might be a giggle.”

“No way!”

“So, should we dress you up in the latest, or do I just let you pick off the rack and to hell with fashion, which is pretty much what I do? Any thoughts?”

Sherman considered it a moment. “Off the rack is fine. Do they still make T-shirts and jeans?”

Serendipity studied him, then smiled. “No reason we can’t dress you up in your native costume. Why not? This is the West Coast. People will think you’re just eccentric. Of course, we aren’t going to find twentieth-century clothes at the local Wong-Mart. We’ll have to go to a few specialty shops on the V-Mall.”

“V-Mall?”

“Virtual Mall. Soon as you finish your waffles, we’ll get started.”

Sherman was not at all sure how they would visit something that wasn’t quite there.

## Chapter Four

Breakfast completed and still in his robe, Sherman followed Serendipity into a small room. Except for a panel on the wall and a couple of recliners, the room lay bare. Sherman looked around puzzled. “Why did you bring me in here?”

“Told you we would have to hit the V-Mall first to scrounge you some clothes. Here sit down.”

“But I thought we were going to the mall?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Serendipity said, a little impatient. “V-Mall, you know, Virtual Mall. Now sit down.”

Sherman parked himself in the recliner.

“Here put these on.” Serendipity handed him something that looked like a baseball cap with a flip up visor where the brim should have been. Ear flaps hung on the sides.

“What the heck is this?”

“Sensory cap. Put it on and flip down the screen.”

Sherman set it on his head and lowered the shield.

“I can’t see anything.”

“You will. The screen shows visual, the speakers are audio. The cap has little electrode stimulators that talk to your brain and let you touch, smell and taste, as well as feel the sensation of movement.”

“Electrodes?” Sherman didn’t like the sound of that.

“Okay, HAL,” Serendipity said. “Take us to the V-Mall.”

“Affirmative, Dr. Brown,” the voice—creepy, yet somehow calming—came from nowhere.

“Who’s Hal?” Sherman looked about nervous.

“My computer for shopping. Voice activation. you know HAL—the Heuristic Algorithmic computer from the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

“Oh, this thing is harmless. I just programmed it to turn on with the word ‘Hal’, Could have used ‘orange juice’ or ‘bananas. Hey, that’s an idea; I could’ve made it sound like Woody Allen! But I named it HAL and gave it HAL’s voice. I liked HAL.”

“Didn’t HAL try to kill everyone?”

“It was taught to lie and went psychotic, poor thing. HAL was much nicer in the sequel after they found a solution.”

The smooth creepy voice piped up. “Which market backdrop would you like, Dr. Brown?”

“Market backdrop?” Sherman scanned the blackness.

“Yeah, you can pick a Middle Eastern bazaar, a medieval fair, New York’s Fifth Avenue, or dozens of others. Okay HAL, make it a twentieth-century shopping mall.”

“Of course, Dr. Brown.”

Sherman found himself standing in a walkway surrounded by shops, planters and benches, with a high ceiling overhead. “What’s going on?” Sherman reached out grabbing for something—anything solid—and felt his hands grasp invisible chair arms. “How did I get here?” Sherman looked around, but found himself completely alone. He tried to squelch the panic he felt rising. “Serendipity! Where are you?”

“Relax, kid. I’m sitting right beside you.”

“Huh?” Sherman, disoriented, looked all around for the body that should be connected to Serendipity’s voice. “I’m not sitting. I’m standing up. Where are *you*?”

“We’re both still in the virtual room. We’re just hooked up to the V-Mall internet. You ever shop online?”

“Shop online?” Sherman answered, even more confused. He wasn’t sure which was creepiest: HAL’s smooth talking or Serendipity’s disembodied voice.

“I guess the Internet hasn’t really made an impact in your time yet. I think it was about the turn of the twenty-first century when companies began to put up websites on the internet. Anyway, they’d show pictures of their products and you could buy directly from them.”

“Like mail-order catalogs?” Sherman found himself asking thin air. “You could order by phone?”

“You could order instantly, giving them your credit card number. Long ago advanced technology made virtual reality websites to replace internet pages with virtual showrooms and stores, so you can see things three dimensionally, their actual size. You can even pick things up and examine them.”

Sherman looked around at the empty mall. “You mean none of this is real?”

“Just an illusion, but anything here will be real once you buy it. Think of it as a 3-D catalog.”

“Everyone shops this way now?”

Serendipity chuckled. “*Bor*—ing! When virtual stores really took off

in the early twenty-second century, everyone thought it would replace real stores. Problem is, no other customers, no people watching, no rude clerks to spar with. No mall rats! No sense of adventure. No thrill of the hunt. It just doesn't have the zing of real shopping. So it never *replaced* stores, but if for some reason you can't get out, or if you're shopping for something rare or specialized—you know, like twentieth-century clothes—then it's okay

“Shopping is an *adventure*?”

“Well, few *men* get that, but sure! Anyway, the computer will show you whatever store you want.”

“What if I don't know what store I want?”

“Hey, HAL, what we got for historic costume-clothing stores?”

Suddenly a huge mall kiosk with a list of stores sprung into existence right in front of Sherman. “Hey! That almost hit me!”

“Don't worry. Nothing will hit you; it's not real. See anything there you like?”

“I just want a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and maybe some clean underwear.”

“Boxers, briefs, sports-unders or thongs.”

“Thongs? Don't you wear those on your feet?”

“No, you know—thongs. Never mind. Glad to hear you aren't a thong man. Thong men are too uptight. Full of themselves! Hah!” Serendipity laughed at her own joke.

Sherman didn't think he wanted to find out what a modern thong was. “Briefs, please.

“What size?”

“Not sure.”

The kiosk suddenly slid away into the floor, and in its place sprung a skinny man with thinning hair, wearing a waist coat and a tape measure draped around his neck. He began taking measurements of Sherman, starting with his inseam.

“Hey! Stop that!” Sherman protested, trying to move away.

“Relax kid. No one is actually touching you. He's just there to let you know not to move so the computer can take your measurements and store them.”

Sherman gritted his teeth and kept still.

When the tailor finished, he tossed the tape measurer back around his neck. “So, where would you like to shop first?” he asked in a Bronx accent.



“I don’t know,” Sherman replied, red faced. “I just want a pair of jeans.”

“You might want to try Western Wear Outfitters. Here’s a list of their stores.” The tailor jumped to the side, avoiding a three-foot-square panel that slid down out of nowhere and hovered in the air. “Please look it over.”

Sherman pointed at the board, not bothering to see where his finger had landed.

“Ah.” The fake tailor replied with faked interest. “Good choice. Rocky Mountain Western Outfitters in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.”

The panel, the tailor, and the mall corridor all disappeared, and Sherman found himself face to face with a snarling grizzly. Sherman yelped, then realized the bear was dead and stuffed.

Sherman looked at his surroundings: a store of western décor with shelves of jeans and cowboy boots, racks of cowboy shirts and the walls filled with Cowboy hats.

When a perky woman—complete with blonde braids, suede skirt, tooled boots, western blouse and 10-gallon hat—sprang into view, Sherman likened her to some kind of Cowgirl Genie. “Why, howdy partner! Welcome to Rocky Mountain Western Outfitters! You can call me Calamity. I’ll be your clerk. We offer a 15% discount to working cowboys with credentials.”

“They still have cowboys?”

“Of course. Where do you think free range beef comes from? Not everyone likes cloned and grown. If you want *real* beef, with that old-fashioned flavor, ya have to do it the old fashioned way. And that takes Cowboys! Now, what can I get for ya?”

“I need a pair of jeans.”

“Any particular style?”

“Just ordinary jeans.” Sherman gulped, realizing “ordinary” in 2353 might be something really weird. “Like the ones they wore in the 1985?” He added.

“How about these?” Calamity held out her arm. A pair of jeans suddenly appeared, draped over it. “Would you like to try these on?”

“I suppose.”

A large full length mirror materialized. Sherman looked into it and saw himself wearing the jeans, and nothing else. “What the—? How did you—? What gives you the right to—?”

“Calm down, kid.” Serendipity’s voice said from nowhere. “Nobody yanked off your pants. That thar is yore spittin’ image. Computerized. It

ain't you. H'ain't them neither!" Serendipity's disembodied voice imitated Calamity.

"How do I know they will fit, if this isn't really me or them?"

"You've been measured. Remember?"

Sherman blushed.

"You like 'em?"

"Looks okay." Sherman studied his fake reflection.

"Fine, then. Calamity, we'll take five pairs," Serendipity's disembodied voice said. "HAL, give them my credit card number."

"Order complete, Dr. Brown," the creepily mellow voice said.

"All righty, partner." Calamity smiled at Sherman. "Would you like to try on a western shirt?"

"No way. Got any T-shirts?"

"Fraid not." Calamity shook her head, looking disappointed.

"That will be all then," Serendipity's voice said.

"How would you like that delivered, ma'am?"

"Electronic delivery for one, with the rest overnight. Okay, HAL, we need a twentieth-century-style T-shirt. Pick the biggest company on the list."

The world around Sherman blinked off and then blinked back on again. This time he found himself in a store with seemingly-endless racks of T-shirts. What appeared to be a 50-year-old ponytailed hippy in a tie-dyed tee greeted him. "Hey, man, welcome to Moon Dog's T-shirt Emporium. We specialize in historic reproductions. We can custom make any design or color you like. We also have a wide range of tie-dye. So what year and color T-shirt you wanna start with, man?"

"Uh, 1985 black."

"Yeah, classic and classy. Good choice, man. Now what would you like on it?"

"Gee, I don't know, dude. Just something not too lame."

The flashing full-length mirror reappeared, and Sherman saw himself in a black T-shirt; thankfully, the magic mirror had kept him in the jeans. Unfortunately, the T-shirt bore a gold marijuana leaf. "Yuck! Too 60s!" Sherman exclaimed, and after much trial and error, Sherman at last found himself wearing a Def Leppard-tour T-shirt. "All right, dude! This is awesome."

"That'll be two hundred dollars, man," the old hippy clerk informed him.

“What!” Sherman felt sure he hadn’t heard right.

“That’s a bargain, kid,” Serendipity’s disembodied voice assured him. “We’ll take it. Got any other designs with Dead Leopard?”

“*Def* Leppard.” Sherman frowned at thin air.

“Sure, lady.” Moon Dog shrugged. “We got more than half a dozen.”

“One of each on black and put it on my credit card. Overnight delivery, but do this one electronically.”

“Sure thing, lady. Come again sometime.”

“I’ll do that. Pity you’re just virtual. You based on anyone?”

“One of the owners’ ancestors.”

“Hmm, would have liked to meet the original.” Sherman heard a grin in her voice. “Perhaps I shall.”

“I don’t believe this!” Sherman shook his head. “You’re trying to pick up *imaginary* guys?”

“Probably shouldn’t tell you about the virtual male strip joint.”

“What?”

“Never mind, let’s get you some underwear.”

## Chapter Five

Back in the guestroom at Serendipity's mansion, Sherman studied his image in a real mirror. The outfit looked and felt perfectly normal. He knew better for he had watched, wide-eyed, as Serendipity open a cabinet called a "fabber" and pulled out a set of clothes, freshly fabbed.

Sherman studied the reflection of the black T-shirt for any tell-tale glowing or holes. He looked over his shoulder at the new briefs lying on the bed. He had kept his old underwear on, not trusting the new pair. If his clothes suddenly dematerialized, he didn't want to be standing in public buck-naked. Better day-old skivvies than his birthday suit.

Well, he'd always dreamed of getting out of Kelso and McDonald's and into a different life. You couldn't get any more different than this! He shrugged his shoulders and opened the door of the guest room to find Serendipity leaning against the wall in the hallway. She was dressed in a baggy lavender-plaid tunic-like top that almost reached her knees and was cinched with a metallic gold belt at the waist. Under that were black tights that came to her mid-calf. Sherman assumed this must be the latest fashion, then realized he best not assume anything with this eccentric woman.

"Looks great!" Serendipity grinned at him, standing up straight. "Can I have the McDonald's uniform? I'll give you \$10,000 for it."

Sherman just stared at her.

"Okay, how about \$20,000? \$50,000?" She offered.

"Just take it. Burn it if you like." He said, grabbing the uniform off the chair, shoving it toward Serendipity, as he stepped out of his room.

"An antique in new condition?" Serendipity asked as they walked down the hall. "Are you joking? Not sure I even want to launder it. Mmm..." she sniffed the garments. "Authentic smell of grease. I'm going to have it framed." She started down the stairs.

"Just don't have me stuffed as a dummy to display it on." Sherman said, thinking of the bear.

Serendipity blinked at him, then laughed. "You have a dry sense of humor, don't you?"

"I live in Kelso where it rains constantly. Gotta have at least one thing in my life that's dry."

"Don't think Beaverton's much dryer." Serendipity stopped and handed the uniform to Robbie who was dusting. "Here put this in the vault

and don't launder it." She turned back to Sherman. "You ready to go shopping?"

"Oh gawd, not again! I thought we just did?"

"For clothes. Now we need to get a puter for you." She headed back down the corridor. "Don't want puters delivered by fabber," she said, turning down another hallway. "Electronics never work right done fabber. We'll go to a real store."

"I hate shopping." Sherman heaved a sigh.

"Of course you do." Serendipity smiled, sympathetic. "You're a man. Men treat shopping like a military operation. Get in, grab the supplies, get out. We'll try to make this as painless as possible. You want to see the outside world, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose, except—we aren't using a transporter are we?"

"Transporter? Like on Star Trek? Where they take your molecules apart then put them back together?" A look of horror shot across her face. "Good gawd, no! What made you think that?"

"Well, isn't that what you did to the clothes?"

Serendipity stopped and stared at him. "Of course not. A fabber is sort of a 3-D fax machine. On-demand manufacturing." She started moving her hands and fingers swiftly through the air as if to demonstrate what Sherman had no context for imagining. "It assembles macroscopic products from molecular feedstocks. Manipulates the atomic structure to create the needed material to produce the object being transferred by electronic data. You see?" She stopped and looked into Sherman's eyes.

Sherman grinned. "Oh! Like the food synthesizer on Star Trek?"

"The replicator? Yeah, kind of." She frowned a moment, then stopped and shook her head. "Not really. Same principal, different procedure." She started walking again and Sherman followed. "Weren't they eating recycled garbage on that show?" Serendipity made a face. "Yuck. I wouldn't eat anything that came out of a fabber. Cloned food is bad enough."

Sherman found it comforting to know he wouldn't have to eat food with a questionable past.

"Don't worry; kid, no one is going to take you apart. We'll go in my car. Come on." She grabbed his arm.

As soon as she touched Sherman, he got zapped by an electric shock. "Ow!" He jumped back.

Serendipity shook her hand, grimacing. "Sorry. Static electricity. That happens with clothes over the wire. Stuff never seems to last as long

either. Instant Delivery swears fabbering is as good as physical delivery. Yeah, right.” She motioned him down another hallway which Sherman could see led to a stairway. “Just follow me.”

Downstairs, a door led into a garage where Sherman spotted a gleaming red sports car with chrome spoke wheels. Half the car was hood, with a dual air-intake scoop in the middle, jutting up like flaring nostrils, while the roof swept down to stylishly scrunch the backseat, ending with a spoiler on the end of the short trunk.

Sherman blinked. “I kinda expected to see something more futuristic.”

“Isn’t it great?” Serendipity walked over to the car, arms outstretched like she wanted to hug it. “1967 Ford Mustang, Shelby GT500 Fastback. Replica, of course. Has real vinyl seats, though. Hop in.”

“Real vinyl.” Sherman muttered sarcastically with a whistle.

From the passenger seat, Sherman looked around; he couldn’t help being impressed. Even in his time, most cars from the 60s were considered junkers, while this model was a classic, all the way. Serendipity slipped into the driver’s side and turned on the ignition with a regular-looking key. The car purred—literally. The engine sounded far too quiet for an eight-cylinder sports car.

“So you still drive cars?” Sherman asked. “I figured you’d be flying around like the Jetsons by now.”

Serendipity grinned and pulled back on the gear shift. “Fasten your seatbelt.”

## Chapter Six

Sherman latched his restraining belt, then yelped and grabbed on to the edges of the bucket seat. “Dude! Is this thing *rising*?”

“Yup. Hovercar. Just made to look like a Mustang. Wilson, open the garage door, will you?”

A deep baritone voice replied, “You got it, baby.”

“Who the hell is that?”

“Car’s computer, voice activated. You know—Wilson Pickett—*Mustang Sally*? I gave the car his voice.”

“I’m sure glad that wasn’t HAL you just asked to open the garage door,” Sherman mumbled, scrunching down in his seat.

“Hey Wilson, sing our song!” Serendipity chirped.

R&B bass, thumping alongside tones of an organ, accompanied the raw voice of Wilson Pickett belting out *Mustang Sally*.

The car slowly floated out of the garage and down the driveway. Sherman blinked at the sunlight breaking through clouds overhead. On either side lay an immaculate lawn being trimmed by a lawn mower with neither handles nor operator. A metallic bipedal android knelt, weeding a flower bed. The familiar smell of fresh-cut grass contrasted sharply with the unfamiliar sight of robots tending the lawn. Off in the distance reared the high stone wall which surrounded the copious acreage of Serendipity’s property.

Sherman glanced over his shoulder to look at Serendipity’s house behind them: There crouched a three-story Victorian Gothic mansion painted a dreary grey. In the center of the building, over the front door, loomed a four-story tower and on the right side jutted a greenhouse of glass and black wrought iron.

A twitchy feeling of *déjà vu* crept over Sherman. “Why does your house look so familiar?” he asked.

Serendipity told Wilson to hover, then turned to grin at Sherman. “Remember the old 1960s TV show *The Addams Family*?”

“Yeah.” Sherman did a double-take. “Cripes! That’s their mansion!”

“From the front. Workshop’s in the back. And minus the broken shutters and cracked windows. I thought that might be going too far.”

“Why would you have a house built like *that*?”

“Same reason I had a hovercar built like *this*. What good is money if

you can't have fun with it?"

"*Eccentric* genius, huh?"

"I prefer 'mad scientist.' That's what I put on my business cards." She stepped on the gas and the car began to move forward again. "You should see the vid on my cards—original Frankenstein movie spoof." She glanced at Sherman. "I'm wearing a lab coat and rubber gloves, and I use one of my electro-graviton transducers as lightning to reanimate Boris Karloff. Then I look at the camera and say 'I'll bring your dead projects back to life.'"

Sherman had no trouble imagining Serendipity dressed up as Dr. Frankenstein, but he decided to keep his mouth shut.

An ornate iron gateway loomed ahead.

"Shouldn't you open the gate?" Sherman asked, a little terrified.

"Why?"

The car rose higher and passed over the entrance. As they crossed it, he saw a sudden burst of light.

"What was that?" Sherman yelled.

"Security system. Force field bubble over my property. Keeps people out unless I code it to their DNA. Coded it to songbirds, but not starlings. Don't like starlings. Kind of fun watching them bounce off."

Sherman didn't like starlings either but he didn't like the thought of doing them harm. "Grody! Isn't that a little harsh?"

"The shield has some give. It's not like they splatter or anything. They just shake their heads and go the other way."

Sherman looked down; they had turned and were now following a road upon which a jogger—wearing short curved stilts on his feet—bounced along like a gazelle. That looked like fun.

Lining the streets of this narrow valley, and working their way up the steep hillside, homes stood surrounded by trees and lawns. A few could pass for houses from his time, except for their updated shimmering roof tiles and siding. Others bore strange shapes like rounded domes or bubbles. Some were built into the hill, reminding Sherman of Hobbit holes.

Another hovercar whizzed past—silver, shaped like a bullet with doors, windows and bumpers. Another flew by with a shape Sherman couldn't identify. "How come everyone is following the road? Why not just fly over the houses?"

"And get a traffic ticket? We use roads to direct hovercars and for foot and ground traffic. Who wants cars constantly flying over their houses?"



Sherman looked at the ground. A dog behind a tall fence of transparent material barked up at them as they sped by. When the animal hit the fence, the fence rippled like water, but stayed firm. The lot within the fence showed a dozen thick posts with glass tops sticking out of a large flower garden. Sherman guessed this home was underground. “Everything is so radical.”

“Eh, this is just the suburbs.” Serendipity kept her eyes on the road below. “Wait until we hit the freeway. Multiple layers of traffic.”

“Multiple layers? *Of traffic?*” Sherman did not like the sound of that.

“Hey, woman, lookee—” Wilson’s voice spoke over his own singing, “freeway entrance, two miles. You’re gonna have to yield, baby—slow this Mustang down.”

“All right, Wilson. I know. Cancel verbal instruction.” Serendipity looked over at Sherman. “Cars! They’re like nagging mothers; I’m surprised they don’t tell you to sit up straight and eat your vegetables.”

When they rounded a big hill, Sherman shouted, “Oh, crap!” as he caught sight of the freeway. Four lanes of heavy air-car traffic flew fifty feet off the ground; above that another tier zoomed at seventy feet, and twenty feet further up whizzed yet another. Serendipity slowed as they approached the snarl then quickly gave a whoop, gunning the vehicle into a diminishing space between cars, and maneuvered a vault up to the second layer, meeting more hovercars which sped alongside, beneath, above and seemingly right at them. Sherman closed his eyes and tried to keep his waffles down.

“You okay, Sherman?”

He opened his eyes, swallowing his fear along with a little bile. “Sure, I’m fine.” He gulped.

“Ah!” Serendipity’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Here’s our exit.” The hovercar dove out of the line and wedged itself into a row of traffic veering off the freeway. Sherman thought a stunt pilot could not have done better. That’s when he noticed all the drivers drove with the same skill and apparent recklessness.

“How do you all keep from crashing?” he asked.

Serendipity glanced at Sherman and grinned. “Hovercars have sensors; they know where every other car is, keep on track and control speed.”

Sherman relaxed a little, figuring Wilson had to be a better driver than Dr. Brown.

As they headed into a valley, Sherman caught a glimpse of tall metallic buildings with sun glinting off them. “Is that Portland?”

“Nah, that’s Beaverton.”

“Wow! Last time I saw Beaverton it was just a couple of blocks of two-story buildings.”

Serendipity grinned at him. “So, what do you think of the future, kid?”

“Pretty gnarly.” Sherman looked around, “Although after four hundred years I would think things would look more advanced. You know, weirder. Shouldn’t you be living in bubbles or speaking Japanese?”

“Who wants weird? People like progress, but they also like stability. Why change something comfortable?” Then a devilish smile crept over her face. “And there was that little set-back in the late twenty-second century.”

“Set-back?”

“We can’t talk about it.”

Sherman leaned closer to her. “You can tell me. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Nothing to tell. Nobody knows what happened, not a soul remembers—biggest cover-up in history. Oh look, there’s our turn.” Serendipity rounded a corner.

Sherman stared at her, wondering if she was putting him on again. She had to be. The entire world couldn’t forget something...could it?

After a few blocks, Sherman couldn’t help noticing, looming behind a couple of tall dignified-looking high-rises, a twenty-story monstrosity. Each floor was painted a garish color, mismatching with the floors above and below it: purple next to hot pink and yellow, red with sky-blue and tangerine. Giant logos bulged out of the garish walls which made Sherman think of festering abscesses about to burst. “Ooh, grody!” He wrinkled his nose. “What the hell is that?”

“That is the Cedars Hill Stack Mall.”

“Slack mall?”

“Stack mall.” Serendipity corrected him. “Strip malls got replaced with giant warehouse stores which took up too much room, so architects decided to pile stores on top of each other, making stack malls.”

The first four floors looked like parking garages minus the ramps. Serendipity circled around the bizarre structure. “Hey Wilson, any empty spots?”

“Second floor, aisle G. Couple spaces there, baby.”

Serendipity flew into an opening on the second floor. Sherman heard the wheels folding down and the tires hitting concrete, at which point he felt a slight bounce. Serendipity slowly pulled into a slot between two other hovercars and turned off the engine.

“Wilson, lock up.” Serendipity opened her car door. “Come on, kid.” She unclasped her belt, jumped out, and took off across the parking garage.

Sherman dashed to catch up. The woman always seemed to be in a rush. “Where are we headed?” He asked, panting.

“Elevator. Help me find it, kid.”

“Okay, Ser.”

Serendipity stopped and turned around. “Ser?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“No, that’s okay.” Serendipity smiled at him. “I like that way more than Dippy. Ser’s good.” She scanned about then took off again. “Stick close to me. Don’t want to lose you. Once you have your PAL puter I can call you or track you down if we get separated.”

“A what?” Sherman followed after her.

“PAL puter. *Personal Assistant Lackey Computer*. The small computer everyone carries around with them in their pocket or purse. They come in a variety of small sizes. You *have* to have a PAL puter. No idea how people in your time survived without them.”

“Awesome! I always wanted my own computer,” Sherman said, catching up with her again. “Aren’t they expensive?”

“Snack Marts have ‘em cheap—really poor quality—made in Siberia. We’ll get you a good one made in India.”

They stopped in front of a pair of bare metal doors.

“May I help you?” a male voice asked.

Sherman looked about. “Who said that?”

“The elevator.” Serendipity fought back a smile. “Yes,” she replied, “we’re going to *Puter Place*.”

“Very good.” The bare lustrous doors slid open. “Seventh floor. Please step in.”

Serendipity obeyed and an astonished Sherman followed. The shiny panels slid shut and Sherman felt his stomach lurch as the silver box—as bare on the inside as it was on the outside—steadily and speedily rose.

The doors slid open to a store which seemed, to Sherman, to go on forever; he convinced himself it must at least take up the entire floor. The crowd and the buzzing electronics dazzled the small-town boy from 1985. In the distance, 3-D images popped out from twenty-foot-high screens. On a white pillar a man singing opera blinked out, replaced by a ballet dancer. Holograms, Sherman determined. Above many of the components,

identical four-armed Hindu goddesses floated, holding signs that read “Sri-Tech for the latest in Virtual Display innovations.”

“These are all computers....” Sherman tried to take it all in.

“Some entertainment centers, some V-mall shoppers, some game players—but yeah, I guess they are all puters. Some more specialized than others. Computers come in all sizes, shapes and interfaces. Stick close. Pretty crowded. Must be having their After-Siblings-Day Sale.”

“What’s that clanging?” Sherman noticed a background noise: Wind banging at an aluminum door, accompanied by a slide-whistle—the best analogy he could come up with.

“Piped-in music.”

“That’s *music*?”

“Yeah,” Serendipity turned up her nose. “I never liked Strunk. They call it Classic, yeah right.”

“May I help you?” a voice asked.

Sherman turned to see a guy wearing a yellow smock emblazoned with “Puter Place” and a badge that read “Bob, Manager.” His eyes looked spacey.

“Excuse me a moment, please.” The clerk rolled his eyes up. “What is it, Chan? I told you there aren’t any more of those models. They’re on order, due to arrive—let me check the Dash Delivery website—tomorrow. We can’t get them any faster unless they want them shipped over the wire. No, we can’t guarantee they will last if they are shipped like that.”

The clerk shook his head, and looked back at them. “Sorry, new kid. I’m trying to train him. Now, what were you looking for?”

“It’s okay.” Serendipity held up her hand. “I know exactly what I want and where to find it.”

“Okay, just look for someone in yellow if you need help.” The clerk turned and started walking off. “What, Juanita? That shipment of 3-D projector platforms didn’t come in? Let me check corporate shipping. What? No record? I know I ordered those. I have the file right here.” He tapped his head. “Let me call headquarters. Hello, Silas?” He continued to talk to himself as he walked off.

“What’s wrong with him?” Sherman whispered, watching the clerk cautiously.

“Wire-Head.”

“What?”

“Wire-Head. I mean I have a Ph.D. in Computers but you don’t see me putting one in my brain.”

“What!”

“I told you they could make computers really small. I mean I can see implanting a computer to fix a problem with the brain’s wiring that can’t be fixed any other way, but to have a full-fledged computer in your head, with the internet and phones buzzing away all the time, that’s wrong. It would drive me crazy. I think it drives most of the Wire-Heads crazy. They should make those things illegal.”

“Why would anyone even want a computer in their head?”

“Some people have to have the ultimate gadget. Come on. We need to find your puter.” She went over a couple of aisles and stopped, picking up a small silver box. “How about this? Small enough to carry in your pocket and big enough not to lose. Don’t know how many ring computers I lost as a kid.”

She handed him something the size of an Altoids box, only slimmer. Sherman looked it over. “Okay, I guess.”

She took it away from him and stuck it back on the shelf.

“Hey, I thought we were going to—”

“Floor model.” She pulled out her own computer and pointed it at the object. “Tom, buy.” She checked her screen and looked back at Sherman. “There, paid for. They’ll have a boxed one waiting for us when we check out.” She began walking down the aisle, her own PAL ready to make more transactions. “Now for accessories. How about a large monitor you can use at home? Virtual screens are nice but I get a headache staring at them for hours. Keyboard?—solid, not virtual? Rather go all voice?”

Sherman tried to keep up, both physically and mentally with Serendipity. Just then, someone brushed against Sherman. He turned. A teenage boy wearing a black skull cap, suddenly burst into flames two feet away.

“Oh, my gawd!” Sherman jumped back.

Serendipity looked over her shoulder. “Relax. Holo-cap. He’s not on fire.” She went back to studying three foot and larger monitors as thin as a CD case.

Suddenly self-conscious, Sherman looked around, noticing people staring at him. They totally ignored the human torch walking away. Sherman stuffed his hands in his pockets and scrunched down. Customers averted their gaze from him and returned to shopping.

It was then Sherman came to a realization: of all the weird things in this store, the other shoppers considered *him* the weirdest of all. What would they do if they knew he was from 1985? Would they run away,

afraid he might be the carrier of some extinct disease? Maybe they would throw him in a cage and study him. Sherman scrunched down further, doing his best not to call attention to himself.

## Chapter Seven

Sherman lay in bed, going over the events of the day, wondering if foreign-exchange students felt this way: suddenly finding themselves in a strange world, not knowing anyone and totally clueless. He might be able to adjust, if things weren't coming at him so fast. He glanced around at the Looney Toons memorabilia half hidden in the dim light. At first he had thought the décor childish, but now he found it comforting. At least Porky Pig and Sylvester were familiar faces.

He rolled over and looked at the clock: Daffy Duck's big index finger pointed at the one while his smaller hand was open to the twelve. Most people even in this century were probably asleep. Why couldn't he sleep? Was he scared? It didn't feel like fear. Maybe it was just excitement. Fear would have made him want to run home. He snorted. Things would have to get real bad for him to want to go back home, maybe torture racks or crocodile pits.

Sherman had spent his childhood sharing a tiny bedroom the size of a walk-in closet with two older brothers who resented his intrusion. The week after high-school graduation, Sherman quickly rounded up three guys, all desperate to leave home. His new roommates didn't push him around like his brothers had, but four teenagers crammed into a too-small apartment was not much better than three teenagers crammed into one small room. Sherman felt sure he got on their nerves, too, so he had kept his mouth shut, though there were times he'd wanted to strangle them all.

Sherman stretched, wiggling around in the double-wide bed, relishing so much room and wishing for someone of the female persuasion to share it with. He was beginning to wonder if that would ever happen. The few times he'd had enough nerve to approach a girl, she'd either laughed in his face or given him some lame excuse. He knew the real reason: he'd always been too short, too skinny, too baby-faced and too nerdy. To top it off, he'd had no money and a crappy car that didn't even run. Sherman hoped, with any luck, things would prove to be different in the twenty-fourth century—who knows? Perhaps losers are considered sexy now. Sherman sighed. Like there was any luck of that. The only girls who hadn't rejected him could be found back home in his hidden stash of old *Playboys*.

As he began to wonder if Hugh Hefner's great-great-grandchildren were still publishing in 2353, a dawning slowly emerged in his mind. "Wait a minute." Sherman's eyes shot wide open. Didn't Serendipity say

something about a virtual strip joint while they were V-Malling yesterday? Naked girls in 3-D? Sherman sat up. “Whoa, rockin’!”

Lovely ladies dancing and teasingly tossing their clothes all around was an idea which often haunted Sherman. Back in his day, he would have had to wait until he turned twenty-one. He chuckled at the thought of “back in his day.” Did that make him an old man now? Maybe he could use that to get into a strip joint! Back in *his* day, he would have had to go clear to Portland. Now he could just go right down the hall.

Sherman couldn’t help but wonder if Serendipity would mind him using the virtual room for such unvirtuous pleasures. What if she got mad and fired him? Took him back home and kicked his butt out of her time machine? He’d be back flipping burgers again. But why would she get mad? He was an adult, and he wouldn’t be hurting anyone. Besides she did it herself.

Damn it! He was nineteen, and it was about time he saw some *real* naked boobies. Well almost real, anyway. Was that asking too much? Sherman threw back the covers, determination in his eyes. He stepped manfully out of his room and skulked down the hall as quietly as possible.

Sherman snuck into the virtual room and closed the door. “Light,” he commanded the room to illuminate. “Psst! HAL, you awake?”

Nothing.

“HAL!” Sherman whispered louder. “Can you hear me?”

“Affirmative, Sherman, I read you,” the calm, slightly sinister voice replied.

“I want to get on that V-Mall thing.” He crawled up in the lounge chair and put on the sensory cap.

“I can do that. Dr. Brown left \$50,000 dollars in your account. What clothing site would you like to visit?”

“No shopping. I want to go to that virtual strip joint Serendipity mentioned.” As Sherman pulled the visor down, the world turned black.

“If that’s what you require, Sherman.”

Sherman suddenly found himself in a lounge room with a buffed-up male dressed in a policeman’s outfit, minus the shirt. “You’ve been very naughty. Am I going to have to detain you?” the policeman asked in a sultry baritone. “Don’t make me take out my night stick.”

“No, HAL, get me outa here!” Sherman closed his eyes.

“Which site would you like, Sherman? There are 6,547 virtual strip joints with various themes, catering to all proclivities.”

“One with *girls*.”



“I’m sorry, Sherman. I’m afraid I can’t do that. There are no strip joints for pedophiles. Child pornography has been illegal throughout the world since...”

“No, HAL, *big girls*.” Sherman interrupted. “A strip joint with *women!*” Sherman practically yelled. “Stupid computer,” he muttered under his breath.

“I can see your lips move, Sherman.”

“Uh, sorry.” Sherman felt grateful he was nowhere near an airlock.

“May I suggest *Disco Dolls Exotic Dancers*? Themed from your time period, I am confident you will find it satisfactory.”

“Perfect!”

Sherman found himself sitting on a wooden chair in a dark room; a light was trained on a pole ten feet away. Overhead hung a sparkling disco ball, bouncing spangles of light off red walls and a black floor. Popping into view—like the V-Mall Cowgirl Genie—stood a short balding man in a white polyester leisure suit.

“Hi, welcome to *Disco Dolls*. I’m Larry the emcee. Whatever you want, we got it. Hundreds of authentic wild strippers from the turbulent twentieth century, satisfying any taste.”

“Uh, you got any with big hooters?” Sherman asked hopefully.

“You’ll love Big Bertha.” Larry smiled, popping out of the scene like the Cheshire Cat would vanish from a tree. In his place appeared Big Bertha, and Sherman had to agree those were the largest breasts he had ever seen. Everything on Bertha was enormous; she had to be pushing 300 pounds, in every way overflowing her tiny tank top and short shorts, all trimmed in lace.

Sherman started to protest, but stopped when Bertha shot him the most seductive look he’d ever received. A bass drum reverberated, vibrating his chair, as Queen began singing *Fat Bottomed Girls*.

Bertha shimmied with such skillful undulations, Sherman found her quite alluring, and he found himself longing for peach Jell-O. She grabbed the pole, swung one leg around it, and licked her lips at Sherman who fancied she thought of him as a tempting chocolate sundae. Sherman quivered as Bertha slung her blonde cornrow braids around; dancing with far more grace than he had expected. Quite literally in his face, she nimbly protruded and swayed her rather large bottom in such a way as to make Sherman squirm in his seat. There was definitely something about her shameless, self-assured attitude that made Big Bertha very sexy.

“Oh, my gawd, I’m becoming a chubby chaser.” he muttered to

himself, his face getting hotter by the second. “More!” he shouted, “I wanna see more!”

“All right, sugah,” a husky voice whispered in his ear. “Leona will show you *more*.”

Sherman turned his head to discover himself eye-to-eye with a belly button chiseled on a firm brown stomach. Sherman looked up and up and up to see Leona towering over him. The Commodore’s song *She’s a Brick House* began strutting across his mind. This ebony Amazon was a big woman, too—just vertically rather than horizontally. Sherman felt a sudden urge to go mountain climbing.

Leona’s one-strap bikini top and her split skirt of leopard skin made Sherman think of her as Tarzan’s secret fantasy. She grinned at Sherman from under her huge afro and growled like the lioness she’d been named after.

Another spotlight lit up a second pole which Leona turned and leapt upon, cat-like, catching the pole and swinging around like a gymnast. She slid her dark leg up and down the silver pole. Sherman hoped she liked skinny men; he would love to take over for that pole.

“Wanna have some fun?” a third voice bubbled behind him.

Sherman turned his head as a soft whisper brushed his ear. “Hi, I’m Candy,” the sweet blonde murmured, winking at him with her twinkling eyes. She zipped away, roller skating to a lit pole, her long blonde hair swaying with each stride. She grabbed that pole giggling and let the momentum spin her around. Sliding and swaying most provocatively to Abba’s *Dancing Queen*, she maneuvered on those skates in such a way as to make her appear to glide through the air. The unmerciful tease would slowly unzip the one-piece sequined suit—just a little—then zip it up a little, only to zip it back down a little lower, each time lower and slower, while batting her eyes at him.

Sherman’s eyes darted from one lady to the next. As he turned his head to each, the music in his ears faded, merging into the next woman’s song. He couldn’t decide which he preferred: earthy Bertha, athletic Leona, or fun-loving Candy. Who was he kidding? Nineteen and woefully unappreciated by the opposite sex, Sherman would take anything.

“You all right?”

Sherman’s visor suddenly flipped up, and the disco scene vanished. Serendipity leaned over his head, frowning.

“I, uh—well, uh—I—” Sherman stammered.

“What are you doing up this late? Why are you breathing so hard?”

“I, uh—I just wanted to—well, you know—visit a virtual strip joint.” Sherman sank down, trying to disappear into the chair.

“Oh, is that all?” She looked relieved. “Carry on.” Serendipity waved her hand in the air as she turned and left the room.

Sherman sat and stared after her. The spell had been broken. He gave a sigh, and pulled off the cap. No sense going back. The disco wasn’t real. Now that Serendipity knew what he was doing, he felt foolish and maybe even a little pathetic. Might as well go back to bed.

Sherman walked down the hall back to the guest room, then stopped surprised to hear himself humming *Fat Bottomed Girls*.



“Wake up!”

Sherman forced his eyes open to behold Serendipity staring at him with her hands on her hips. Sherman couldn’t decide which jarred him more, Serendipity or the Tasmanian Devil. He managed a grunt.

“Time’s a-wasting.” Serendipity stopped, cocked her head to one side and laid a finger on her chin. “I wonder if one *can* waste time when one has a time machine?”

“Why are you dressed like an old hippie?” Sherman asked, shaking his head. He couldn’t help but notice her attire: white peasant blouse, red ankle-length skirt, leather fringed shoulder bag, scarf tied around her head as a headband, and a couple of strands of colorful glass beads.

“Never use the word ‘old’ around a middle-aged woman.” Serendipity plopped herself down at the foot of his bed. “Time-traveling time!” She grinned. “I’m in the native costume.”

“A hippie commune?”

“We are going back to one of the most important events of the twentieth century,” Serendipity replied, beaming.

Sherman pondered over what little he knew of the hippie era. “The moon landing?”

“Seen that.” Serendipity wrinkled her nose.

“I thought you said your trip back to McDonald’s was your first.”

“No, I mean I’ve seen *First Landing Monument* on the moon. They left all the original equipment from Apollo 11 right where it landed.”

“Really? You’ve been to the *moon*?”

“Who hasn’t these days? Not that exciting, just a bunch of rocks and gray dust with the landing site under a glass dome. The tourist trap they built around it kind of ruins the ambiance.”

Sherman found that depressing. Man's greatest achievement reduced to a roadside attraction. "So where *are* we going?"

"1967. The First International Monterey Pop Festival!"

Sherman racked his brain then shook his head. "Never heard of it."

"What? Never heard of it? How can you be from the twentieth century and never heard of Monterey?"

"Maybe because I was only a year old in 1967?"

"Monterey is the world's first rock festival."

"I thought that was Woodstock."

"Woodstock tried to copy Monterey and failed miserably. I did the research: outside of the music, the whole thing was muddy, smelly, and overcrowded. Monterey was much nicer and it *was* the first." She grinned.

"You can go anywhere in time, and you want to go to a rock concert?"

"What good is time travel if you can't have a little fun?"

"But a dumb hippie rock concert?"

"It wasn't dumb. This was the event that showed the world that rock was as good as any other music. Better, even."

Sherman smiled. "So, you like rock music?"

"Haven't you been paying attention? Why do you think I have a velvet painting of Elvis Presley and a car that talks like Wilson Pickett? Why do you think my PAL puter sounds like Tom Jones?"

"Your computer sounds like Tom Jones?"

"You're gonna love this," she grinned, grabbing his toes and shaking them. "The first major appearance of Janis Joplin and Otis Redding and the first major American appearance of Jimi Hendrix and the Who."

"Really?"

"Also the Mama and the Papas, Simon and Garfunkel, the Animals and Jefferson Airplane." Serendipity counted them off on her fingers. "Then there's the Byrds, Steve Miller Band, Booker T and the MGs, Grateful Dead, Ravi Shankar...oh yeah, and Canned Heat. Oh and the Association, Lou Rawls and a whole bunch more."

"Wow." Sherman recognized most of those names.

"Get dressed. I set your costume on the chair there. We'll eat then hit the road...or should I say 'hit the wormhole?'" Serendipity grinned at him and then bounced out of the room.

"Costume?" Sherman got up, scratched his bare ribs and stepped over to the chair. There lay a pair of bell-bottom jeans, a peasant shirt, a leather fringe vest, a peace-sign medallion and a pair of wire-framed glasses. "Oh,

groovy.”

After combing his hair, Sherman set the hippie glasses on his face and was shocked to discover the world suddenly crystal clear. He took them off and studied them, wondering if they worked by some sort of futuristic hocus pocus. He shrugged, set them back on his nose and stumbled downstairs to the dining room, where he found Serendipity already at the table.

“Good morning, Sherman. Glad you could make it.” Serendipity greeted him pleasantly. Sherman thought he noticed an air of impatience.

“Morning. What did Robbie make for breakfast?”

“Granola. I thought it’d get us in the mood.”

Sherman sat down on the other side of the table, bleary eyed. “Hope he made coffee.”

“Of course.” Serendipity pointed to his mug. She then scooted a small object across the table at him. “I programmed your PAL puter for you.” She grinned, almost bouncing.

Sherman picked up the silver metal object the size of a cigarette pack, but only as thick as a chocolate bar.

“I have no clue how to use this.”

“It’s voice activated. Just say ‘Lauren.’”

“Loren?”

The silver casing lit up like a tiny television screen with various symbols forming buttons. Serendipity leaned forward. “Touch one of the screen icons with your finger to tell it to make a call, play vids, take your vitals, whatever. It doesn’t have a tiny keyboard like mine, so you’ll have to run it on voice. Or have it create a virtual keyboard if you want one.”

“You didn’t give it *HAL*’s voice, did you?”

“I told you the cue is ‘Lauren.’”

“That creepy Peter Loren guy?” Sherman grimaced.

“That’s Peter Lorre. I said *Lauren*. Spelled with an A-U. Lauren Bacall. Bogie’s babe.”

“Oh.” Sherman tried not to sound disappointed that Serendipity used a movie star his grandpa probably had a crush on. Why couldn’t she have picked Daisy Duke or Madonna?

“Go ahead, say ‘Lauren’ and ask it a question.”

“Uh, hello...hello, Lauren, are you on?”

“Hello,” the small device answered in a sultry, no-nonsense voice. “What would you like?”

Sherman's eyes opened wide. "Whoa...."

"Shall I use reins or a whip, big boy?"

Sherman stared at the box then back at Serendipity. "A sassy computer?"

"I gave it Lauren Bacall's personality—well, really her character 'Slim' from the movie *To Have and Have Not*. Make sure you don't lose it; that puter will be your lifeline if you ever get in trouble, so I gave it level-headed voice. If we go back in time and get separated, Lauren can find me, call me, and I can track you. It has tons of history files as well as survival skills you'll need if we go to somewhen more primitive than the 1980s. It can tell you how to make a fire, find edible plants, make a splint, remove ticks—anything you need to know. It can also explain how to use all its applications. This puter can do anything but make coffee—although it could tell you how to do that over a campfire." Serendipity grinned.

"You need something, just whistle," the computer said. "You know—"

Serendipity interrupted Lauren, leaning over the table toward Sherman. "Just pucker up and blow," she whispered, giggling. "Wow, how about that?" Serendipity looked down at the small device in Sherman's hand. She tapped it with her finger. "Created a cue all by itself; looks like you can whistle to turn it on. Now that's funny—learning already; like it's got a sense of humor." She looked rather pleased with herself. "Damn, I'm good."

"How can a computer learn by itself?"

"Remember puters are a whole lot smarter than in your day. We have to be careful not to make them *too* smart; self-aware puters can turn into monsters. I programmed this one to learn fast and to adapt. Its first command is to take care of *you*. I also loaded the top 1000 hits of the 1980s, and all the period arcade games, TV shows and movies, so you'll feel more at home."

"Movies? On this little screen?"

A holographic screen, three-feet wide, suddenly appeared just above the computer showing young Lauren Bacall in 3-D. "If you want, I can make myself as large as you like." Lauren's image smiled provocatively.

"Wow, this is awesome!"

"Why thanks, Steve. You're not so bad yourself." Lauren winked at Sherman then winked out.

"Steve?"

"Must be a glitch," Serendipity apologized. "That was Bogie's character in *To Have or Have Not*. I can fix it when I get time."

“No, that’s okay. Never liked Sherman, anyway.” He looked up at Serendipity and grinned. “I really like this computer. She’s cool. Thanks!”

“You’re welcome, kid. Remember, keep that puter with you at all times. And learn to use it well. It’s the perfect tool for a time-traveling assistant. If you have any questions on anything, Lauren can probably answer them. Now, eat your breakfast so we can be on our way. I can’t wait to see Otis Redding. I hope he does ‘Sitting on the Dock in the Bay.’” She stared at the ceiling and started whistling the ending, a little off-key.

Granola may not have been Sherman’s favorite, but he ate it without complaint. With five siblings, he had learned long ago to eat whatever someone put in front of him. He mulled over the idea of going back to the sixties as he chewed on the rolled oats. It might be kind of cool seeing all these famous rock bands together, even if they were from his mom’s generation. Of course in 1967 the “old” hippies would all be his age. Maybe he’d meet some flower child into free love. Yeah, this could be good.

## Chapter Eight

As the flickering panel intermittently lit her face, Serendipity adjusted buttons winking in and out. Sherman, strapped into his seat, gazed at Joan Jett who snarled, “I Love Rock and Roll” on the small screen of his computer. Serendipity flopped into her seat, hurriedly clicking her seatbelt. “Jimi Hendrix, here we come!”

“I gotta put you away, Lauren.” Sherman apologized to his computer.

“Whatever’s your pleasure, Steve.”

As Sherman stuffed Lauren into the fringed pouch on his belt, the Timemobile shook like a bass speaker cranked up to maximum. Serendipity yelled, “I’m going to have to fix that! Snagging a mini black hole and forming a wormhole big enough to cram a big metal box through it...” she paused, scrunching her nose. “It just isn’t a smooth operation.”

“Mini black holes? How can something that eats planets be mini?”

“These black holes are too small to see. They’re all around us, though, so you just appropriate one and generate a wormhole and connect it to another mini black hole in an alternate temporal position. Fairly simple, just takes a lot of energy. That’s why I had to make the fuel batteries take up most of the machine.”

After the Timemobile finally ceased its seemingly-interminable shaking, Serendipity unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up. “Okay, it’s now June 16, 1967, just in time for the Monterey Music Festival. Got to disguise the Timemobile. Let’s go with something really groovy.” Her fingers flew over the monitor, pressing temporary buttons and brushing icons. “That should do it.” She turned to grin at Sherman. “Ready for three days of music and excitement?”

“Sure.” Sherman leisurely reached for the buckle on his seat belt.

Serendipity with a faint grimace muttered, “We have to do something about your boundless enthusiasm, kid.”

Sherman looked up. “Sorry, guess being raised in a bog sort of sucks the life out of you.” He unclicked his belt.

“I suppose it would. That’s okay. Probably not a bad idea to travel with a companion who’s sensible, restrained, sedate, cautious—you know, boring. We sort of balance each other out. This could work.”

Serendipity threw open the door, and Sherman peeked out around her and saw—white. All he could see was white. A blast of cold air hit him. “Brrrrr....”



He inched gingerly closer. Framed by the doorway appeared a small clearing. A few yards ahead, clinging to a steep bank, stood tall evergreens. Upon their boughs draped with snow, ice crystals sparkled in the sun, like sequins.

Sherman frowned. “Uh—Ser? Would Monterey, California have snow?” In June?”

“Oh, great! I overshot.” Serendipity stepped out onto the small metal stair and looked around. “We must have hit the High Sierras.”

“I hate to bring this up, but if we aren’t in Monterey, how do you know we’re in 1967?”

“You got a point there. Looks like I still got bugs to work out. Where are we? *When* are we?” Serendipity craned her neck, then stopped and frowned. “What’s this?” She bounded off the step into the snow, obviously hard packed as evidenced by her moccasin-style boots sinking only to the ankles.

“Ser! Are you nuts? We aren’t dressed for snow. You’ll get frostbite!”

Ignoring Sherman entirely, Serendipity took off into the wintry scene. Sherman let loose a groan, jumped onto the snow and chased after her.

They approached what appeared to be a pile of branches. Sherman quickly determined they were not branches at all, but rather bones extruding from some long-dead carcass. Sherman stopped and stared. A rather gigantic carcass, with very little flesh, judging from the parts sticking out of the snow. The skull seemed to have one narrow eye. “Cyclops? Uh, Ser—did you miss Earth *completely*?”

“That’s not an eye socket, it’s a nose cavity.” Serendipity kicked the snow at the base of the skull uncovering long, curved ivories. “Look, tusks.”

“Elephant? What’s an elephant doing in the Sierras?”

Serendipity stepped closer and reached down with her hand to peel something off one of the bones. “Look!” She shoved the desiccated flesh at Sherman.

“Ew!” Sherman pulled back then stopped, once he noticed it didn’t stink. Questioning whether it was too frozen or too dried out to smell, he leaned down to study it. “Is that hair?”

“Long hair. It reminds me of a musk ox. I think I overshot more than the location. I overshot the year. I am way off. I’d be willing to bet this animal is a woolly mammoth!”

“Mammoth? It can’t be. They went extinct at the end of the Ice Age, didn’t they?” Sherman looked at the remains again. His shoulders drooped

as he stared at Serendipity in disbelief. “Dang! Did you land us in the *Ice Age*?”

“Maybe I put in too many zeroes when I set the dials,” Serendipity pondered aloud.

“Let’s get out of here before we freeze.” Sherman pulled at her arm to lead her carefully around the mammoth.

“Okay.” Serendipity smiled, looking straight ahead. “Hey, at least the Holographic Skin is working great.”

Sherman looked up. Against the snow and beyond the woolly mammoth’s carcass, stood an old school bus painted with peace signs, daisies and psychedelic designs. “Yeah, I’d say that’s a pretty nineteen-sixties skin, all right.”

“Be nice if I knew exactly where and when we are.” Serendipity looked around. “Really need a starting point to recalculate. GPS isn’t going to help; satellites won’t be up for thousands of years. I wonder if we could find someone who could tell us at least *where* we are?”

Crunching noises approached from behind. Sherman turned to see a large man clomping out of the woods and into the clearing. His long dark auburn hair fell into his broad face and scraggly beard. With his stocky body rudimentarily clothed with stitched-together furs, he appropriately carried a flint spear in his large hands. He suddenly stopped and stared at them, as shocked to see the time travelers as they were to see him.

“Ser...” Sherman muttered under his breath in a warning sing-song, “we better get the hell outta here....” He grabbed her arm.

“He doesn’t look hostile, just curious. Relax.”

“He’s got a *weapon*—and he could easily crush your skull with his fist. I say we run!”

“I want to see who he is.” Serendipity tried to step forward, though Sherman’s grip held her tight.

“Come on!” Sherman tugged at her arm. “You don’t know anyone from here. You don’t *want* to know anyone from here. Look at that heavy brow. He looks like a Neanderthal!”

“Hi!” Serendipity waved. “We come in peace.”

Sherman groaned, first looking skyward and then glaring at the caveman with a half-steely, half-terrified stare.

The man moved cautiously closer; by his agility and smooth pale skin, he appeared to be about thirty. With clear blue eyes, he looked down at Serendipity. “Tocam tay domma?”

“Hi! Name’s Serendipity. What’s yours?”

“Biff cayuk?”

“Beefcake? Name certainly fits you. Look at that broad chest and those muscular arms. You’re a big fella, aren’t you?” Serendipity grinned at him. “You Tarzan, me Jane?”

“Ser!” Sherman stared at her in disbelief. “You’re flirting with a *caveman*?”

“He *does* look strong, don’t you think?” She cocked her head and smiled.

“He certainly smells strong.” Sherman wrinkled his nose, doubting this humanoid behemoth had ever bathed.

“I’ll bet he cleans up real nice.”

“He’s a caveman, a Neanderthal, a troglodyte.”

“Relax. Beefcake doesn’t look hostile. He’s got such a sweet face.”

The hunter stared intently at Serendipity’s breasts, then slowly reached toward them.

“Whoa, big fella! You’re moving a little too fast there.” When his hand touched the beads around her neck, she softened. “Oh, you weren’t getting fresh. You just want to see the beads. Okay.” She pulled them off and held them out to him.

The hunter took the shiny baubles and studied them. He let out a grunt of approval.

“So, you like them, huh? Those are authentic, genuine-reproduction twentieth-century hippie beads.”

With one last wistful look, he opened his fingers to Serendipity in a gesture to return the beads.

“Ah, keep them.” Serendipity closed his fingers back over the beads and pressed his hand back toward him. “Little present.”

The Neanderthal’s eyes lit up, and he delivered her a most endearingly crooked grin, complete with crooked teeth. He pulled the beads over his head and then lifted the strands to admire them. He gave Serendipity a rather reverent nod. “Nannag.”

“You’re welcome.” Serendipity smiled back.

The man then reached down into a fur pouch tied to a cordage belt, and pulled out a flint knife. Sherman started to lunge forward, but stopped when he noticed the hunter had turned the point away from Serendipity in the process of handing the blade to her.

She took it, and held it up to admire it. “Wow! Is this for me?”

Although the Neanderthal couldn’t speak English, he seemed to

understand Serendipity's gestures. He smiled and pressed her hand closer to her body as if to reinforce his meaning.

"Thanks!" Serendipity grinned at him. "How sweet! You do realize those beads are just glass, don't you? Yeah, I suppose you will be the only one around with a necklace like that."

"Come on, I'm freezing!" Sherman wrapped his arms around himself. "My feet are numb. Can we get out of here before we get frostbite and our toes start dropping off?"

"Yeah, okay." Serendipity smiled at her new friend. "Sorry, got to go. Have to get the kid out of the snow. Good luck on your hunt."

As Serendipity and Sherman reached the Timemobile's door, they looked back and realized they had been followed. Serendipity held out her hands and shook her head. "Sorry, Beefcake, as much as you'd probably fit in at Monterey, you better stay here."

Sherman followed Serendipity into the time machine. He looked back. The man seemed to understand Serendipity's sign language. He didn't follow, just stood there, head cocked and watching.

"Oh, he looks so sad...and macho. Can't we keep Beefcake?" she asked, eyes pleading.

"Tell me you're kidding, Ser. Please tell me you're kidding."

She didn't answer but motioned to the Neanderthal like she was shooing him off. "Better back away."

The hunter stepped back several feet.

"I'll say one thing for him, the guy's brighter than most of the men I've dated." Serendipity pulled her pocket computer from her leather-fringed shoulder bag and held it up to her face. "I gotta get a picture of Beefcake, at least." She held the computer up to her face, and the gadget emitted two bright flashes.

"Bye, sweetie!" Serendipity threw him a kiss and then dashed to the controls. "Keep an eye on him, Sherman. Make sure he doesn't get too close," she said, looking back over her shoulder. "Don't want Beefcake to get hurt." She turned and focused her attention on the control panel, her hand hovering over dials, while she nodded her head, adjusted a knob and smiled.

Sherman closed the door, but kept a crack open to look outside. The Neanderthal hadn't come any closer, but watched curiously. His eyes widened when the motor started up. He stepped back several more feet.

Serendipity moved her index finger toward a red button. "Okay, shut it tight and strap in," she yelled. "Next stop: Janis Joplin!"

Sherman slammed the door and jumped into his seat, fastening his safety strap. As Serendipity plopped into the captain's chair, the Timemobile began to rock furiously, as if a herd of mammoths were playing kickball with it. Sherman's stomach hadn't recovered from its last shaking, and he doubted granola would taste any better the second time around.

The motion finally stopped.

"Please, let it be Monterey." Sherman pleaded under his breath with the powers that be. "Please, be right."

"Of course, it's Monterey." Serendipity unfastened her seat belt. "I couldn't be wrong twice." She stood up. "I double-checked my settings this time."

"You didn't double-check before?" Sherman followed her, reaching the door just as Serendipity swung it open. Warm air greeted them and they beheld deciduous trees of varying heights swaying in the breeze. The Timemobile was surrounded by tall grass intermingled with purple asters and white pearly everlastings. Sherman smelled decaying leaves. "This doesn't look like any fairgrounds I've ever seen, Ser. Are you sure we are in Monterey?"

"Look, oaks. There are oaks in the San Francisco area, I think."

Sherman squinted at the trees. "Oak leaves aren't shaped like that."

Serendipity bounded out of the time machine. "Well they're trees, anyway. Let's go find the fairgrounds. I'll bet they're close by." She headed through the grove.

Sherman followed the trail Serendipity blazed through the tall grasses, wondering if they really made it to 1967 or even to California. At least the weather felt like it might be June. His feet tingled as they came back to life.

After a short distance, out of the bushes and onto a dirt road—which was well-rutted with tracks too thin to belong to a car—Sherman stopped to stare around his feet. Were these tracks made by bicycles? He looked for signs of tread. "Oh gawd," he muttered, "please tell me these weren't made by wagon wheels."

Serendipity looked up. "See there, a hippy! We've *got* to be close," she said, pointing down the lane. Along the path strolled a man wearing a buckskin coat and boots, his long sandy hair tied back. He appeared to be middle-aged, with a wiry build and tanned skin. Sherman nodded and relaxed. "This guy's been living off the land. Hippies did that, right?"

"Hey, you!" Serendipity hurried toward the man. "Are you going to

the Monterey Pop Festival, too?”

The man cocked his head at her. “Pop Festival? I know not what that is, my good woman. I am headed for Philadelphia, just up the road apiece.” To Sherman, his accent sounded a little hillbillyish, though his use of language seemed somewhat formal.

“Philadelphia?” Serendipity looked disappointed. “Okay, at least I got the year right, or close.”

“Uh, excuse me, sir.” Sherman stepped closer to the stranger. “I know this is an odd question, but can you tell me what year this is?”

The man grinned, revealing a gap in his teeth. “Not that odd a question, after what happened last year.”

“What happened last year?”

“Did you not hear?” The stranger looked irritated. “Our daft king took thirteen perfectly good days out of a perfectly good year. That’s thirteen days I shall never see. If that was not enough, everyone’s birthdays have changed, all for the privilege of having the same calendar as those damned Catholics. It’s 1753—unless His Royal Mad Highness changed his bloody mind again!”

“1753?” Serendipity glowered at Sherman. “You had to ask. We were doing so well up to this point.”

“You folks can join me if you like,” the now-obviously-not hippie offered. “I would welcome your company.”

Serendipity tossed him a polite smile. “Thank you but we forgot something back at the cabin.”

The woodsman nodded. “May the good Lord be with yeh.” He smiled at them and continued down the road.

Serendipity groaned and shook her head. “Let’s get back to the Timemobile and try again.”

Serendipity turned and stomped back through the trees. Sherman darted after her, trying to avoid tripping over fallen limbs while trying not to think of carcasses.

When Sherman climbed into the machine, Serendipity was already laboring at the controls. “Odd. They are set right as far as I can tell. Well, strap in and we’ll try again.”

Sherman sat down and fastened his seatbelt. Serendipity pushed buttons, to which the machine responded. But instead of shuddering, it issued forth a tired whine, a sigh, and then it sat silent.

“That doesn’t sound good.” Sherman said.

“No it doesn’t.” Serendipity replied. “You might as well get up. This

could take a while.”

Sherman unfastened his harness, wondering if they might not be stuck in 1753 for good. Suddenly 1985 didn't look so bad.

## Chapter Nine

Sitting on a log outside, Sherman played Pac Man on his computer, an entertaining challenge which kept his mind off their predicament. Knowing which virtual button to push was a task which took some getting used to, but Sherman caught on quickly enough. He looked up from the screen with a nervous glance at their only means of getting home, listened for a moment to Serendipity's indecipherable mutterings, sighed, and returned to his game.

Since the yellow hippie bus was anything but obscure in the 1753 countryside, Serendipity had instructed the Holographic Skin to turn the Timemobile into a log cabin. It had an odd appearance, being long and narrow, but not odd enough to arouse any suspicion. Sherman just hoped they hadn't parked on private property. He didn't particularly like the idea of the owner chasing them off before Serendipity could fix the problem.

"You blew it again," Lauren's voice said. "You aren't concentrating, Steve."

"Yeah, I know." Sherman looked down at his PAL just in time to see *Game Over* flash on the screen. "Kind of hard to think right now. We could be stuck here. What if the natives burn us for being witches?"

"Don't be silly, Steve. No one burned witches in the United States."

"Oh, good."

"They hanged witches here."

"What!"

"Relax, Steve, I don't have a record of anyone being executed for witchcraft in the 1700s."

"Still, to be stuck here—I could die from some disease that's easily cured in the twentieth century. Aren't they into leeches? Ewww." Sherman pressed a few buttons and grimaced.

"Leeching is considered a bit old fashioned, but they still use them sometimes. The importance of hygiene has yet to be discovered, and there are no painkillers here except whiskey. Promise me you won't let anyone operate on you, all right, Steve?"

Sherman grimaced again. "Okay. So, what's the average lifespan? Forty?"

"Thirty-six. But there is a large infant-mortality rate factored into that equation."

"No plumbing." Sherman slouched depressed. "No electric lights, no



cars or even trains, no television, no nothing—yuck. Don't think I want to spend the rest of my life here."

When Sherman heard a deep voice inside the Timemobile, he stood up and rushed over. He poked his head in to see Serendipity sitting alone, staring down at her PAL. "I'm at a loss, Tom, have I forgotten something?"

"Not according to my calculations, pussycat," the computer purred in a sexy Welsh accent. "Have you tried rerouting the trinalator?"

"Of course!" Serendipity snapped, insulted.

"Your PAL really does sound like Tom Jones." Sherman butted in.

Serendipity looked up. "Hey, if I got to spend hours working with this thing, I might as well make it pleasant to listen to." She stared back down at the screen.

"How come you don't use the voice thingy all the time?"

"I figure I'm rude enough as it is."

Sherman looked nervously at the panel. "I take it the Timemobile's still broken?"

"It's not broken," Serendipity retorted, now both offended and frustrated. She glanced up at the panel. "Just doesn't have enough power." She stared back down at the PAL in her hands.

"The batteries are drained?"

Serendipity looked up at Sherman, took a deep breath and sighed, attempting to contain her frustration. "If they were completely drained, the Holographic Skin wouldn't work. It just doesn't have enough power to start. I need to top off the tank, as you'd say. We've got to find an electrical outlet. And no jokes about 'current' bushes." She stood up.

"Where are you going to find an electrical outlet in this time period?"

"Exactly. Tesla and Edison haven't been born yet." She crossed her arms at her waist, tapping fingers of one hand on the other forearm.

"Steve, darling," Lauren piped up. "Could I make a suggestion?"

Startled, Sherman pulled his PAL up to his face and stared into the screen. "Yeah?"

"You told me this is 1753 and you are near Philadelphia?"

"Yeah?"

"And you need electricity?"

"Yeah?"

"A pioneer of electricity lives nearby, you know."

A big grin broke out on Serendipity's face. "Ben Franklin!" She

snapped her fingers.

“Benjamin Franklin?” Sherman looked at her. “He lives around here? Now?”

“Always wanted to meet Benny.” Serendipity mused softly, her face taking on a rather dreamy glow. “Understand he was quite the ladies’ man. He liked brainy women, you know.”

“So you’re going to tell Franklin to go fly a kite, eh? If I remember right he just proved lightning *was* electricity. I don’t think he found a way to harness it, did he? Has he even *done* that experiment yet?”

“Maybe we were the inspiration—” Serendipity pensively looked off into space.

“We can’t do that, can we? Besides we can’t go walking into 1700s Philadelphia in 1960s hippy clothes.”

“That stranger back there didn’t seem to notice. Not the height of fashion, but we can probably pass for backwoods bumpkins. Just take off your peace medallion. I’ll re-tie my headband as a kerchief.” She took the scarf off, shook it out and covered the top of her head. “Money will be a problem,” she said, tying a knot at the base of her neck. “I had replicas made of money from the 1960s, but I don’t think that’ll be accepted—”

“Replicas of *money*?” Sherman said, uneasy. “Isn’t that *counterfeiting*?”

“You got a better idea?” Serendipity lowered her chin, and raised an eyebrow at Sherman.

“Guess not. Hey—that money back in Kelso—”

“Not fake. Exact replicas,” Serendipity answered defensively, fiddling with her knot again. “F.B.I. couldn’t tell them apart. If I used real money that was four hundred years old, now *that* would look phony.”

“Okay, so we don’t have money, so what do we do? Get jobs? I don’t think there are any fast-food restaurants around here.”

“Neither of us is trained for anything they do here. Should have brought some gold chains or something negotiable anywhere. Next time I’ll have to pack better.” She smoothed the front of her skirt.

“Next time?” Sherman gave her a doubtful look.

“One day at a time. Or maybe I should say one century at a time. With my genius and your common sense, we’ll be okay.” Serendipity shot Sherman a cocky smile while patting him on the shoulder.

Somehow Sherman knew Serendipity had been putting on this flippant attitude to lighten the severity of their situation. But he was the man. And it was time he started acting like one. “I’ll be here for you, Serendipity. I

won't let anything happen to you, I promise.”

“Thanks, Sherm. I appreciate that.” She nodded her head. “Shall we lock up and go into town? By the way, Tom,” she addressed her PAL now sitting in the cockpit seat. “What is the definition of ‘a piece’ pertaining to distance?”

“An unspecified expanse, pussycat.”

“I was afraid of that.” Serendipity grabbed her PAL and headed to the door. “Okay, guess we better get started. Come on, kid.”

“Right behind you, Ser.”

She stopped and turned around. “And thanks.”

“For going with you? You’re my best chance of getting out of this mess.”

“No, for not pointing out that I got us into this mess in the first place.”

“Hey, first runs are bound to have some bugs; it could be worse.”

“Worse?”

“We could have been stuck in Kelso in 1985.”

Serendipity laughed and stepped out of the Timemobile.



Sherman bounced around in the back of the cart. He was thankful his burlap-sack companions—rather than stuffed with steer manure—brimmed over with earthy-smelling potatoes, whose aroma managed to blend nicely with the waves of chimney smoke wafting on the air. He gazed about at the brick and white-washed wooden buildings crowded around him. Sherman wondered if any of the structures were more than three stories high, save for the occasional church steeple he had glimpsed.

The traffic consisted of wagons pulled by oxen or mules, men on horseback and an occasional carriage, but the streets were mostly filled with pedestrians, some pushing wheelbarrows or carrying bundles on their shoulders. A few wore buckskin, but the majority of the men dressed in breeches just past their knees, and they wore tri-corner hats on their heads. The women swished along in long dresses with petticoats and wore white muffin caps, which made Sherman think of serving wenches in pirate movies.

Sherman was involuntarily sprung from his seat as the wagon hit another bump. He had expected the roads to all be paved with cobblestones, but most were just dirt, profusely rutted and full of potholes. Even the paved spots were like going over unkempt forest road chewed up by heavy log trucks with tire chains. Still better than walking.

He looked over at Serendipity sitting on the buckboard with their rescuer, Mr. Hotchkins, an elderly farmer with broad shoulders and grey, thinning hair. He had a round, pleasant face and smiled a lot—especially when he looked at Serendipity.

“So, my good woman,” Hotchkins yelled to be heard over the rattling. “What think you of Philadelphia?”

“Very nice,” she yelled back.

“It’s now the largest city in these English colonies. Twenty-five thousand souls, so I am told.”

Sherman tried not to laugh. Kelso in his day was twelve thousand, and it was only considered a wide-spot in the road. Was twenty-five thousand really enough to call this a city?

Still he had to admit, despite the primitive conditions, this was so cool. A restlessness infused the crowd with an energy no recreation could ever match. This was *real*.

“There!” Hotchkins pointed at a brick building similar to all the others. “That would be Mr. Franklin’s print shop.” He looked over at Serendipity wistfully. “Are you certain you would not care to join me for dinner tonight, my good woman?”

“Thank you, Hotchkins, but we have very pressing business.”

The grey-haired gentleman sighed disappointedly and stopped the cart in front of the shop. “Wait.” He turned to climb down. “I will help you dismount.”

“It’s all right. I can get it.” Serendipity climbed off the cart before Mr. Hotchkins could budge from his seat. “We really appreciate the ride.” She nodded and smiled.

“Yeah, thanks!” Sherman climbed out from the potatoes and brushed off the back of his pants.

Hotchkins’ brows furrowed in concern. “Do be careful. And be wary of cutpurses. If you have need of anything, I’ll be at the Chestnut Inn. I am your most obedient servant.” He tipped his hat.

“We really can’t thank you enough,” Serendipity replied with a charming smile.

“A good day to you.” Hotchkins smiled rather sadly, then he gently shook the reins and clicked his tongue to start his horse trotting down the road.

“I think he has a crush on you.” Sherman whispered.

Serendipity shrugged. “He’s a lonely old widower. He’d have a crush on any younger woman who paid attention.” She turned to the building.

“Let’s go find Benjamin.”

Sherman followed her through the door of the brick building which opened immediately to a small front room with a long counter. Behind it hung shelves laden with stacks of stationary and books apparently awaiting sale. A somewhat sweet acrid odor hung on the air.

Through a door, Sherman eyed a large workroom which held three old-style wooden presses of the sort he imagined Gutenberg used. Most of the men wore ink-laden aprons, and their hair was tied back off their ink-smudged faces. Two harried-looking young men sat at a desk carefully setting lead type—one letter at a time—into trays.

A teenage boy stood at one of the presses and held in each fist what Sherman had first thought were big hand bells—that is, before noticing these “bells” were solid leather with ink coating their flattish bottoms. The boy quickly pounded the bells onto blocks of type clamped onto the flat table of the press. An older man wearing a clean apron slammed down a tray on the other side of the press then spun a crank which positioned it over the type. He reached out with both hands and yanked a big handle toward him, pressing the frame into the inked type, then slid the tray back, opened it and gently pulled off the paper, which he handed to another printer, also wearing a clean apron. Both men studied the sheet carefully then hung it over a wire to dry.

When Serendipity cleared her throat, the first printer looked up. “Ah, good afternoon, Madam.” The man walked up to the counter. “I do beg your pardon, but I did not hear you come in. My name is Master Hall. May I help you?”

“My name’s Doc—er, Widow Brown.”

“And this is your son?” Master Hall looked at Sherman.

“No, he’s—uh, my nephew. Say hello, Sherman.”

“Hello.” Sherman stuck out his hand.

Hall took Sherman’s hand and shook it vigorously. “What is it that brings you to my shop?”

“Your shop?” Serendipity looked disappointed. “I was told this was Benjamin Franklin’s. Can you tell me where his shop is?”

Hall chuckled. “Forgive me, Franklin is my business partner. He retired when he turned forty-two years of age. Said he wanted to devote more time to his observations of the electrical fluids, though I cannot fathom why a man of such ample wits would be interested in daft parlor tricks.”

“Do you know where I can find him?”

“I shall draw you a map.”



Sherman studied the three-story brick home washed in long shadows cast by similar structures, all half golden in the setting sun. Wedged between these buildings, the house appeared unpretentious. “Do you think that’s it? It seems kind of small for somebody famous. It can’t be much wider than your time machine is long.”

“Franklin probably isn’t that famous yet,” Serendipity said. “Besides, history books say he liked to live simply. Let’s hope this is it. It’s almost dark and I’m exhausted.”

Sherman followed Serendipity up the brick steps to the heavy wooden door. She clanked the black iron doorknocker, waited a moment, and tried again. Finally, a man wearing wire-rim glasses slowly opened the door to them. Brown hair, streaked with grey, hung to his shoulders, and his hairline was beginning to recede. His pants stopped just below his knees, the remainder of his legs covered with white socks. His square-toed shoes bore large buckles, and he wore a brown vest and a long frock coat. Save for the fact he was hatless and mostly brunette, he reminded Sherman of the guy on the Quaker Oats box.

The gentleman seemed pleasant enough, studying them with a fair amount of curiosity through the wide crack he had made by opening the door. “Good evening, madam, sir. May I help you?”

“I hope so. Are you Benjamin Franklin?” Serendipity asked.

“I have that distinction, yes. You appear to be ready to drop, my good woman. Please do come in and sit down.” Franklin motioned them in, leading them to the parlor, a room with a small brick fireplace, whitewashed walls, and a bare wood floor. The sparse furniture—consisting of a small table and a few chairs—lent the place an uncluttered appearance. The walls lay bare, save for a few shelves which displayed some nicely-crafted pottery and a rather primitive painting of a toddler Sherman imagined might be a family member.

For Serendipity, Franklin pulled out a wooden chair which held a cushion in the seat. She plopped down and smiled at their host. “Thank you.”

Franklin motioned Sherman into another rather plain but well-crafted chair, and after Sherman was seated, Franklin sat in one just like it. He leaned forward, giving Serendipity his full attention. “So Madam, may I ask whom I have the honor of addressing?”

“I’m Serendipity Brown and this is Sherman Conrad.”

“Brown? Are you any relation to Dr. Brown?” He asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Uh?” Serendipity’s eyes widened.

“The Dr. Brown who owned that Inn outside Burlington. He helped me when I was in dire need as a youth.”

“No. Our family of Browns wouldn’t be around yet, I don’t think.”

“So your family is from elsewhere? Just as well. Dr. Brown was a kind man, but alas I must concede he was a quack. How may I help you, madam?” He folded his hands in his lap.

Serendipity stared for a moment then glanced at Sherman. “Maybe we should have come up with a believable story first.”

“I beg your pardon?” Franklin frowned at her, glanced at Sherman and back at Serendipity. “If you have come to bamboozle me out of funds, you certainly lack skill as confidence artists.”

“Don’t want your money, honey, although if you offered us something to eat, I wouldn’t refuse. I’d pay you for it, but our money isn’t any good here.” She looked over at Sherman. “Should we cut to the quick and just tell him where we’re from?”

Sherman stared at her wide eyed. “Are you nuts? He’d never believe us.”

“Benjamin was—uh, *is* a genius. If anyone could understand, it’d be him.”

Franklin gazed at the two with considerable confusion, his brow puckering with impatience. “What is it I am supposed to believe or not?”

“That there are more than three dimensions.” Serendipity smiled at him.

“You speak of Euclidean space: length, width, and depth?” Franklin asked.

“Uh, yes.” Serendipity looked surprised he caught on that fast.

Franklin looked thoughtful. “Other dimensions, hmmm. Interesting, go on, Madam.”

“What if there are dimensions we cannot see but can feel the effects of? For example, the fourth dimension is often assigned the realm of Time.”

“Time? You speak as if Time were something we could move through as easily as climbing a ladder or walking to and fro. One can only move forward through time, always at the same pace.”

“What if someday, in the future, scientific discovery was advanced such that we could freely move through time as well as space?”

Franklin stared at her, his eyes shining. “That is a very interesting speculation, madam. Where on earth are the people exploring this particular train of thought?”

“Next century.”

Franklin cocked his head. “If science explores this theory far into the next century, then how would you know it now?” He asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“History books. Okay, Benjamin—mind if I call you Benjamin? What would you say if I told you I found a way to move through the dimension of time? What would you say if I told you I was from the future?”

“I’m afraid I would have to say you are perhaps a brilliant yet deluded madwoman.” Franklin’s skeptical tone, coupled with his lively demeanor, belied the fact he wasn’t quite certain if he believed his own proposition.

“I’ve been called that before.” Serendipity smiled. “What if I could give you proof?”

“I would certainly love to see it, madam. I warn you, if this is some elaborate hoax—”

“I promise, no hoax. And please call me Serendipity. Actually it’s *Dr. Serendipity Brown*—you caught me off guard when you asked if I knew a *Dr. Brown*.” When Franklin looked at her quizzically, she added, “I have several doctoral degrees in the sciences.”

“I know of no college offering doctoral degrees to women. I do sense, however, you might well be intelligent enough to earn one.”

“Thank you. You asked for proof.” Serendipity pulled out her pocket computer and handed it to Franklin.

“What odd material is this?” Franklin asked, turning the thing around in his hand.

“Plastic. It won’t be invented until the twentieth century, I do believe.”

“What *is* this object?”

“A computer. For computations and other things.” Serendipity stood up and went to the back of Franklin’s chair. “Here, open it up. Now push this button.” She leaned over his shoulder and pointed to a key. “That turns it on.”

Franklin raised his eyebrows, pushed the key, and immediately the screen lit up. Serendipity wrapped her hand around Franklin’s to keep him from dropping the tiny device.

“What a marvel!” Franklin broke out in a grin. “This is like magic!” He cocked his head. “This light is hardly bright enough to read by.”

“We just turned it on. Now poke one of the numbers, then the plus



sign, and then another number, then the equal sign.”

Sherman stood up and slipped over beside Serendipity to watch.

Franklin pushed  $2 + 3 =$  and a 5 popped up on the screen. His eyes widened. “A tiny machine that does arithmetic? Please, might I open it up, to observe how it works?”

“That might hurt it. Besides its components are too tiny to see with your eyes—or with any of your magnification devices.”

“Does it perform multiplication as well?”

“Yes, just use this button.” Serendipity pointed to the X.

Franklin started typing in various numbers and began to chuckle. “What a wonderful contrivance! I have never met with anything so pleasing. What a boon to the businessman this would be. Oh, I would love to acquire one of these.”

“That’s not all it does.” Serendipity lifted the PAL from his hands and started across the room. She set it on a small nearby table. While Franklin stood to follow her, Serendipity said to thin air, “Okay, Tom, say hello to Benjamin Franklin.”

“Hello, Benjamin Franklin,” a sultry Welsh accent came from the computer.

“It talks!” Franklin jumped, startled.

Serendipity turned her head and grinned at him. “It’s a handheld computer with tons of information downloaded in it. Tom, what is the most famous thing Archimedes said?”

“Eureka!”

“Play Vivaldi’s *Spring*.”

A full orchestra began playing. Franklin stared open mouthed and would have fallen over if Sherman hadn’t pushed a chair under him.

“Okay, Tom, hit it!”

A life size image of Tom Jones popped up, hovering in space above the computer and began singing *Help Yourself*.

“Good Lord!” Franklin’s face shined with excitement. “Now, I *really* want one of these computation devices.”

“Okay, Tom, stop.”

Tom Jones disappeared and the room became quiet.

Franklin shook his head. “I would accuse you of witchcraft, if I believed in such nonsense,” he said, grinning.

“Yeah, I knew *you* wouldn’t believe in witchcraft.” Serendipity leaned on the table.

“Indeed I do not. Back in my younger days, I wrote a satire for my paper to demonstrate the silliness of such ideas. Unfortunately, some believed the story true and later called me a hoaxer, once they found out it was a practical joke.” He looked up in the air then winked at Serendipity. “The hobgoblin is to be found inside little minds of the superstitious.”

“I knew a man as smart as you would be disinclined to ignore evidence.”

“Tell me then, what year do you hail from?” Franklin asked.

“2353”

“Six hundred years in the future? With these advances, you must reckon me an ignorant savage—a veritable caveman.”

“Naw,” Serendipity shook her head. “I already met a caveman. You’re a much snappier dresser.” Serendipity smiled. “People in my time may be more technologically advanced, but it was pioneers like you who laid the foundations. You will be well remembered. You invented the swim fins, bifocals, free standing metal ‘Franklin’ stoves, and no one has improved on your lightning rod. You devised terms for electricity that are still used in my time. And yet all your scientific accomplishments dim in the shadow of your deeds in public service. That is what you will be remembered for most.”

“Do I prevail in the matter of paving all the streets?” Franklin grinned.

“What?”

“Since I became an Assemblyman, I have been urging for the paving of Philadelphia’s streets.”

Serendipity fought back a smile. “If you are the one responsible for that achievement, I congratulate you, but I tell you now, that will be the least of your contributions.”

Franklin stared at her, his mouth gaping. He removed his spectacles, wiped his brow, replaced the spectacles back on his nose, and swallowed hard before he found himself capable of speech. “Why have you revealed all this to me?” he whispered. “Do you not risk changing events by showing me these things and telling me my own future?”

Serendipity shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t know. I just invented time travel, and this is my second trip, and now I’m stranded. I really need your help.”

“How could my capabilities—primitive in the light of yours—possibly help you?”

Serendipity leaned closer and laid her hand on his chest. “Because history says one day you will fly a kite and capture enough electricity

from a lightning storm to prove lightening is in fact electricity.”

Franklin frowned. “I did that last year.”

“Oh. Sorry, got my years mixed up. It’s been awhile. Childhood history books. I should have checked my computer. Do you think we could repeat the experiment? We’ll have to beef it up.”

“Beef up?”

“Between me and my computer, we can rig up something that should do the trick.”

“Pray tell, why would you require *my* assistance?”

“Well, for one thing, I don’t have any money from this period of time. And you’re the kite expert! I’ve *never* been able to fly a kite!” Serendipity laughed. “Hey, it’s kismet! What’s the point of getting stuck in 1700s Philadelphia, if I can’t work with one of my childhood heroes?”

“Kismet?”

“Fate!”

Franklin looked at her and smiled. “Were you not from the future, I would still be honored to work with you, Dr. Brown.”

Sherman rolled his eyes while the two stared at one another with admiration and perhaps a bit of something else. Apparently Serendipity hadn’t been kidding about going back in time to pick up men.

## Chapter Ten

Sherman's caffeine-deprived body and brain carefully navigated the steep narrow stairs from the second-floor of Benjamin Franklin's house while following the sound of voices into a small, sparsely furnished room. To the left of the door stood a china cabinet next to a window, and in the center of the chamber, a table with a few chairs where Serendipity and Franklin sat drinking something from pewter tankards and chatting.

Franklin looked up at Sherman and smiled. "Good day, Mr. Conrad, do come in. Dr. Brown and I have been discussing the fourth dimension. Please, pull up a chair and join us."

Sherman sat and stared at his place setting: a tankard and crockery bowl. He looked up at Franklin. "Got any coffee?"

"For breakfast?" Franklin raised his eyebrow. "Is that what future folk drink in the morning?"

"Yeah. Some have tea or orange juice."

"You must all be wealthy. The favorite breakfast beverage here is cider or beer."

"Beer? For breakfast? Only losers drink beer for breakfast."

"I agree. That's why I drink cider." Franklin lifted a jug from the table. "May I offer you some?"

Sherman pushed his tankard over. "Cider's fine."

A wiry woman, wearing an apron and carrying a black kettle, plodded into the room. She wore a white cap like the ones Sherman had seen on other women. Underneath the cap peered a weathered somber face.

Franklin held out his bowl into which she ladled something Sherman could only describe as white goo. "Thank you, Martha." Franklin said.

She nodded and continued around the table, serving the guests.

Sherman lifted a spoonful of the strange substance, studied it then poured it back into the bowl. It appeared to be some sort of porridge, a bit like cream of wheat, only finer and soggy. "What is this?"

"Corn meal mush. Do you not eat this where you come from?"

Sherman shook his head. He took a bite and discovered why this dish had not survived. He couldn't say it tasted awful, but it was rather like eating gritty school paste.

Serendipity leaned on the table, absently eating the bland substance, gazing at Franklin and hanging on his every word.

“Tell me, my dear woman.” Franklin leaned toward Serendipity. “Where did you depart from this marvelous machine of yours?”

“We left it just outside of town in some trees.” Serendipity poured herself more cider. “I should be able to backtrack. I piled up some rocks at the side of the road as a trail marker.”

“Should we pull it into town? Or fix it there?”

“It’s pretty heavy and has no wheels. Getting it into town would be nearly impossible.”

Franklin nodded. “After breakfast, I shall transport you to the spot, so I can survey the situation. Perchance we can reckon a solution?”

Serendipity gave him a sappy smile. “That sounds lovely, Benjamin.”

Sherman tried not to roll his eyes.



Once again, Sherman bounced in the back of a small wagon, while Serendipity sat on the buckboard with the driver. Sherman took solace in the fact that he wasn’t sharing the space with dusty sacks of potatoes. He would have thought a local big shot like Benjamin Franklin would have a fancy carriage instead of a cart.

Serendipity stared at the screen of her computer, and Franklin leaned over to examine it. “Your computation device can tell you where your time traveling machine is?”

“Sure. Puter says we’re getting close. How far does your odometer say we traveled?”

“Odometer?” Franklin looked baffled.

“Yeah, the odometer you invented and hooked up to your carriage to measure distances between towns and—Oh, probably haven’t invented it yet.”

“How did I do that?”

“Not sure, but you’ll figure it out. Ah! There!” She pointed to stones piled next to the dirt road. “There’s the marker. The machine is over in that wooded area.”

“I do believe this is Moses Harlan’s farm.” Franklin halted the horse and looked out over the trees.

“Oh, great.” Serendipity shoulders drooped. “I’m parked on private property. I suppose he’ll be out here with a shotgun, or blunderbuss—or whatever they use nowadays—and run us off.”

“Moses is a friend of mine.” Franklin descended to the ground, tied off the reins and walked around the back of the cart. “This area is at the rear

of his property. There is no reason for him to venture out here into the apple orchard before fall.”

Serendipity climbed down off the buckboard. She stepped onto the ground and turned around to meet Franklin as he came around the back of the cart.

“Do forgive me.” Franklin looked disappointed. “I had planned to assist.”

“I’m not that old.”

“A gentleman always assists a lady from any precarious situation.”

“Oh yeah, forgot you used to do that chivalry bit. Women were supposed to be helpless, or some such nonsense. We know better in the future.”

“I think it pleasing to grasp a lady by the waist and help her down.” Franklin smiled.

Serendipity turned to him, disappointed. “Yeah, suppose it would be. I’ll know better next time.” She grinned. “Come on, then.” Serendipity hiked into the tall grass toward the trees.

Sherman followed Franklin and Serendipity over the uneven ground of mud and weeds. “This is a pretty haphazard orchard. Why are the trees planted so helter-skelter and so thick?”

“Apple trees are odd fellows,” Franklin said. “The only way to plant an apple tree—and know for certain what you are getting—is to take a grafting from another tree. That becomes a rather expensive endeavor. It is much more practical to go to a cider press to collect seeds, which cider makers are more than happy to give away, as there is less rubbish for them to deal with. But alas, you have no way of knowing what sort of apple you will get once you plant them. Why, you can plant six seeds from the same apple and get six totally different apple trees! So you plant as many seeds as you can and wait until the trees bear fruit. Those with sweet apples you use for eating, those with tart apples you use for cider, and those with inedible apples you use for firewood.”

“I had no idea apples were so complicated.” Sherman shook his head.

Serendipity nodded. “Apples have a genetic property called extreme heterozygosity. The alleles of a gene can be radically different in apples, far more than in human DNA.”

Sherman took comfort in the fact that Franklin looked equally confused by this explanation.

After walking around a thicket, they reached a familiar-looking structure. “There it is!” Serendipity proudly pointed.

Franklin scrutinized the log cabin and appeared unimpressed. “This is your time machine? Why would you make a time machine out of wood?”

“Wait here, Benjamin.” Serendipity pointed her PAL toward the door, and subsequently the PAL beeped. She walked up the steps, opened the door, stepped inside, and after a moment, the log cabin disappeared, replaced by a large grey metal box.

Franklin stepped back. As Sherman grabbed his arm to help him avoid a fallen branch, Franklin looked up to see Serendipity’s face suddenly in the doorway of the Timemobile.

“So, what do you think now?” She grinned.

“Most amazing! How in the world did you make it change like that?”

“‘Holographic Skin’—an illusion created with light lasers projected from several angles.”

“Like Magic Lanterns!” Franklin cocked his head.

“Magic Lanterns?” Sherman felt lost.

“Yes.” Franklin turned to Sherman. “A magic lantern uses light through a glass slide to project an image on a wall.”

“Slides? You have slides?” Sherman sighed, wondering if Franklin ever had to sit through a boring evening of someone’s summer vacation.

“This is a little more complicated than a magic lantern.” Serendipity grinned. “Come on inside.”

Franklin slowly stepped in. “I cannot begin to comprehend any of this,” he commented, looking around. “I am afraid I will be of little assistance solving your dilemma.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Serendipity took Franklin’s arm. “This baby runs on electricity, and you, my dear sir, are the foremost expert on the subject in this day and age.” She patted the sleeve of his frock coat. “We need to set up one of your lightning rods, you see—a really high one...” she said, pointing up, “and connect a kite on a wire to it. Once we get the kite up there, lightning hits it, travels down the rod...” she pointed down, “which will be attached to a cable hooked here in my storage cells, and—whoosh—they get charged up with electricity, and there we have it.” She grinned, folding her arms.

Franklin looked thoughtful. “I have a nine foot lightening rod attached to my chimney, and have run the two wires connected to it through a glass tube in the roof. The wires then run down my stair banister to ring a bell below, so perhaps it should work.” Franklin grinned and scratched his chin.

“You ran electrical wiring into your house?” Serendipity stared at him.

“Yes, it lit up the room quite brightly.”

“Benjamin, someday all houses will have electric lights.”

“If that is true, I do hope they use a safer method than did I. You will need a lightning storm, and there must be activity just above you. The wait could be days, even weeks. Would it not be faster and simpler to use batteries?”

“Batteries?”

“Yes, they are a little invention of mine that collects and stores electric fire.”

“You invented *batteries*?” Serendipity gawked at Franklin

“Yes. I simply connected Leyden Jars together.”

“Leyden Jars?” Serendipity looked doubtful. “Don’t those just collect static electricity?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not very much energy. What do you do? Charge them by rubbing a cat on them?”

Franklin chuckled. “No, in the past I have used my lightning rod, but I also have a hand cranked generator.”

“We need a *lot* of electricity. How much can you store in one Leyden Jar?”

“I have improved upon the design. But be forewarned, one which has been heavily charged must be handled very carefully.”

“Or you lose the electricity?”

“No, you lose the handler,” Franklin managed a sardonic grin. “Leyden jars are sometimes called Leyden death jars.”

“How many jars does it take to kill someone?”

“One.”

“One?” Serendipity looked amazed. “You can get enough electricity into one jar to electrocute someone?”

“If it’s charged well enough.”

“That’s a lot of voltage. How many jars in a battery?”

“My first had four jars. I now have one with thirty-five.”

“Thirty-five!” Serendipity’s eyes widened. “That’s some serious voltage, Benny. Quite a jump—at least enough to get my machine started. I just need to hop ahead two centuries; there I can plug into an electrical outlet. You really are a genius!” She patted Franklin on the shoulder. “Now I see why they were paying so much attention to your experiments in Europe.”



“I have been attempting to find some practical applications for electricity,” he replied, nodding his head. “I utilized a small motor, running on Leyden jars, for the purpose of turning a rotisserie. I also employed Leyden jars to humanely slaughter livestock. Hmm—I’ve never considered it for time travel.” Franklin grinned, turning toward the door. “I suppose we should get back to town and get those batteries on the cart.”

“Lead on.” Serendipity turned to Sherman. “I knew the man was smart, but I had no idea he was this smart.”

“Yeah,” Sherman whispered. “Now I see why he’s on the hundred dollar bill.”



The wooden case of Leyden jars reminded Sherman of the old crates used by Coca-Cola distributors back before his time. He carefully set Franklin’s electrical battery on the back of the cart and examined the whole apparatus. This was much nicer than the beat-up pop-bottle racks he’d seen in antique stores; this wood was lovingly stained and polished. The compartments were divided into five rows, each with seven glass jars. Through the cork in each bottle poked a short rod, topped with a brass ball. Hanging from the bottom of the rod, a chain dangled in the jar. Filled with invisible electricity, each was connected to the others by way of a grid of brass rods and balls.

Next to the large case, a smaller battery held only four jars. Serendipity studied it. “You said these are already charged up?”

“Yes, a few days ago an electrical storm rang my bells, so I took the opportunity to charge all my Leyden jars.” Franklin set a bale of copper wire on the cart.

“Do you think we’ll really need the generator?” Sherman asked, staring at a large and very strange apparatus in the cart: a tall wooden stand, with a large glass ball on top, underneath which hung a hand-cranked disk, reminding Sherman of an antique spinning wheel. Franklin had explained how the wheel, when turned, would cause the glass ball to rotate, which would then rub against a piece of leather and create static electricity.

“With such a large apparatus, the more electricity the better, I do believe.” Franklin smiled at him. “The generator will add an extra boost to Dr. Brown’s device. It is a pity I dare not write to my friend, Mr. Collinson in London, and tell him about *this* experiment!” Franklin let out a hearty laugh. “He would most likely attempt to commit me to Bedlam, were he to catch wind I was attempting to power a machine that travels

through time.”

Serendipity grinned at Franklin. “Benjamin, you are probably the only man in the eighteenth century who *can* power a time machine. We were so lucky to land near Philadelphia.”

“Most fortunate for me that you did! Affording me the opportunity to meet an amazing inventor—a woman at that—from centuries into the future, and an American, no less?” Franklin smiled. “I am the lucky one.” Franklin brows furrowed as he pushed the wagon gate up. “It would be prudent to pack hay around our cargo, so it does not move about too much. Both of you be very careful not to touch the jars. If you handle them the wrong way, they can kill you.”

Sherman threw straw into the back of the cart, while Franklin arranged the gold strands snugly around its precious, dangerous contents. This time Franklin insisted Sherman sit on the buckboard up front with him and Serendipity.

On their brief journey, Sherman felt a bit awkward scrunched next to Benjamin Franklin on the crowded buckboard. He peered around the man at Serendipity. She certainly didn’t seem to mind being forced to cuddle up to Franklin, and Sherman quickly gained the impression that Franklin was not adverse, either. In an effort to distract them from their ardent glances, Sherman piped up: “You ever get shocked, Mr. Franklin?”

“You mean by the electrical currents, my lad? Oh yes, on numerous occasions. Once I was rendered unconscious for nearly half an hour, bless my soul.”

“Knocked out? That’s not good.”

“It was not at all pleasant.” Franklin seemed amused by the memory. “I was trying to electrocute a turkey for a party, and wound up electrocuting myself! Hah! When I awoke my arm was swollen.”

“You could have killed yourself!”

“That is too true, young man.”

“Why are you studying something so dangerous?”

“Electricity is a great mystery,” Franklin replied, his eyes glinting. “Little is understood about it. Through my experiments, I have perfected the lightning rod in such a way to actually stop fires. The lightening rod is nothing without a ground wire. You see, the whole point of the lightning rod is to attract lightning to the rod instead of the roof and thus prevent a fire. When you lack a ground wire to safely dissipate the electricity into the ground, the rod would only serve to attract the lightning to the building and start a fire for certain. I have been told my invention should save countless lives.”

“Okay, I guess your playing with electricity isn’t completely stupid then.”

Franklin frowned at Sherman, and then chuckled. “You are an honest young man and probably have more common sense than I, Mr. Conrad.”

“It’s the main reason I keep him around.” Serendipity winked at Franklin.



Straddling a log about six feet from the Timemobile and facing the generator, Sherman sat pumping. As his arm muscles grew weary and the hair stood on end, always being certain to never touch the glass ball, he eyed the time machine anxiously. The holographic skin was switched off, so Serendipity could now see what she was doing.

To take his mind off his arms, Sherman let his eyes follow the copper wire running from the Leyden jars and generator to a small flipped-up panel. He thought it was kind of cool that the inner workings of the time machine were exposed to view. He noticed Serendipity studying the coils as Franklin watched over her shoulder. How much of this the eighteenth-century genius could follow, Sherman had no clue, since Sherman couldn’t wrap his head around even half of it. While he pondered this, a familiar hum issued forth from the Timemobile.

“Yes!” Serendipity cried in triumph.

“Is it working?” Franklin’s voice crackled with excitement.

“It worked!” Serendipity threw herself at Franklin and hugged him. “It worked!” After depositing a big kiss on his lips, she pulled back, grinning. “You’re wonderful!”

“And you, madam, are a marvel!” Franklin reciprocated, grabbing Serendipity tightly and kissing her back even longer.

Mouth gaping, Sherman stood up, marched over, reached between them, grabbed Serendipity’s shoulders and pulled her off Franklin. “Serendipity!” he shouted. “What do you think you’re doing? You can’t make out with *him*!”

“Why not? He likes it.” She answered, grinning. “Don’t ya, Benjamin?”

“I do find it most pleasing!” Franklin smiled.

“That’s Benjamin Franklin!” Sherman admonished, holding her fast.

“Yeah?” Serendipity replied, nonplussed and nonchalant.

“He’s one of the Founding Fathers!”

“And a great kisser. Who says I can’t fondle a Founding Father?”

“Ser!”

“Don’t be such a wet blanket.” Serendipity smiled and patted Sherman’s cheek. “Besides he likes older women, don’t you, Benjamin? We don’t tell, we don’t swell and we’re grateful as hell, right?”

“Oh, I do like that, madam. May I have your permission to borrow it?” Franklin’s eyes lit up.

“Heck, honey, I think you wrote it!”

“Ser!” Sherman tugged her arm. “How long will that charge last? Shouldn’t we get out of here while we can?”

Serendipity looked wistfully at Franklin and sighed, “Sherman’s right, got to run—”

At long last, Serendipity allowed Sherman to pull her away.

“Would it be all right if I come with you?” Benjamin peered at Serendipity over his glasses.

“It’d be nice, Sweetheart, but you’ve got too much to do here.”

“Yes...the Almanac.”

“That, and a bunch of other stuff.”

“I suppose you are correct. Besides, I should think of Deborah.”

“Deborah?”

“My wife.”

“Your *wife*?” Serendipity blinked.

“Yes, she and our daughter, Sally, are away visiting relatives.”

Serendipity glared at Franklin. Sherman grabbed the opportunity to shove her into the Timemobile, as Serendipity continued to glower at their host. Sherman closed the door.

“Why that stinking mole rat,” Serendipity fumed, brushing herself off.

“*You* kissed him, Ser. Now, set the coordinates. Sheesh! What would you do without me?”

“Have a lot more fun?” Serendipity, grinning, turned to the control panel.

Sherman moaned, plopped down in his seat and buckled his strap.

“Still,” Serendipity said, turning dials and switching buttons, “how many women outside of the eighteenth century can say they ever got to kiss Benjamin Franklin? That’s one for my autobiography, huh?” She took her seat.

“Please, don’t include that.” Sherman shook his head as the Timemobile began bouncing worse than a cart over potholes.

## Chapter Eleven

The good news being that his seat was no longer jerking, Sherman did not relish the idea of a rerun of “Timemobile as Blender Set on Puree.” Sherman opened one eye. All was still.

Serendipity bounded out of her chair. “We should be in the twentieth century now. We just need to find an electrical outlet, plug in and pump up. When we get back to my workshop, I have to do more work on this contraption; I’m still determined to see Eric Burdon. Wonder if he’ll sing *House of the Rising Sun*?”

Sherman unfastened his seatbelt and followed the beaming Serendipity to the door. As she flung it wide open, her expression fell. They had somehow managed to land in a muddy work yard surrounded by a tall wooden fence. Lumber and pieces of rusty metal lay scattered about in piles. A square wooden structure stood in the corner. Brick buildings two or three stories high could be seen beyond the fence.

“I don’t see any outlets.” Sherman said, scanning the area.

Serendipity whirled back to face the dials and began setting them frantically. “Don’t know where we are, but your generic wooden shed should work as a disguise.” She moved back toward the door. “We have got to figure out when we are.” She stepped out and glanced left and right. “See anything that could give us a clue?”

“Nope.” Sherman studied the yard. “That little shack over there looks like a tool shed maybe, but it has a lock.” He looked up at the sky. “Looks pretty grey. Not sure if it’s rain clouds or smog. Air smells funny. Yuck,” Sherman said wrinkling his nose, “smoke and rotten eggs.”

Serendipity took a sniff, turning her head slightly. “Coal fire,” she said matter-of-factly. “Not a good sign.” She walked over to the fence gate. “Let’s look outside.”

She yanked on the wooden handle. The door held fast. “Lock must be on the other side. See if you can look over the fence.”

Sherman climbed up a stack of planks against the fence. As he pulled up and peeked over, a black carriage clattered by on a muddy road, pulled by two black horses driven by a man in a black top hat. He let out a sigh. “Holy crap.”

“What—what is it?”

Once the carriage passed, two ladies emerged from the door of a shop across the street. They wore bonnets and bell-shaped ankle-length skirts.

Each carried paper-wrapped parcels in her arms. A small boy in shabby clothes darted into an alley behind the building. Sherman mischievously looked over his shoulder at Serendipity.

“Hey, Ser!” he whispered down to her. “I think I just spotted Oliver Twist!”

“Oh great, 1800s. Victorian age. A whole century short. Any idea *where* we are?”

“America? Europe?” He whispered. “Don’t know. A city, anyway, wherever we are.”

“Come on, let’s get back in the Timemobile and I’ll try again—that is, if I can power her up at all.”

Sherman groaned and with due care, he climbed down his makeshift ladder and hurried after Serendipity back to the Timemobile. He plopped down in his seat and strapped on the belt.

Serendipity studied the monitors and shook her head. “Better undo your seatbelt. We’re stuck here, wherever here is.”

“Battery down again?” Sherman asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yup.” Serendipity plunked down in her seat, seemingly defeated. “Currently, steam is the best energy source. Probably not enough to power us.”

“Great. Now what do we do?”

Serendipity rubbed her chin, a spark of determination in her eyes. “First we find a way out of this junkyard or whatever it is and figure out exactly where and when we are. Then I’ll have to build some gizmo using current technology. At least we are up to the Industrial Age now. Let’s figure out how to get out of here.” She stood up and headed for the door.

Sherman unfastened his seatbelt once again and followed her out into the yard. Serendipity walked over to the gate, this time studying it with extra care. “If we had a screwdriver we could undo the hinges and remove the door. Of course, then we’d leave our Timemobile unprotected from scavengers.”

“Won’t they just think it’s a shed?” Sherman looked back at the structure. “How will they know it’s a time machine?”

“They won’t, but they might try to explore it; we’re in a fenced yard, here. Plus, this shed doesn’t belong, and if we removed the door and the owner showed up... I don’t know. At any rate, someone might want to steal whatever is in the so-called shed—who knows?”

“Yeah, guess you’re right, but could anyone get into the Timemobile? You have it locked.”

“Don’t know how it would stand up to a sledge hammer. In any event, anyone poking around is going to figure out this is no ordinary wooden shed.”

“Yeah.”

Serendipity walked along the fence, pushing at it. “Maybe there’s a loose board here somewhere.” Sherman joined her on other side of the gate, checking in the opposite direction.

The gate rattled.

Sherman looked over at Serendipity, already staring toward the noise. She mouthed “Hide!” pointing to a pile of boards.

Now positioned on the other side of the yard from the Timemobile, Serendipity sprinted to the smaller tool shed and hid behind it. Sherman dove behind the heap of lumber scraps and peered through a crack in the pile. The gate swung open.

A gentleman emerged, dressed in a brown coat sweeping down to his knees and a brown top hat. He promptly closed the gate behind him, placing the padlock back on the latch, now from the inside.

The stranger turned. Sherman studied the man: medium height, medium build, medium brown hair with sideburns that weren’t too long and a mustache that wasn’t very noticeable. His looks were average—not ugly, but not striking either—though he currently had a rather baffled look on his face.

“My word, what are you doing here?” The man asked in an English accent.

For a moment Sherman assumed he had spoken to Serendipity but then, following the stare, he realized the man had his eyes fixed on her Timemobile, which was still disguised as a long narrow shed. If this yard was his, he would certainly know this shed didn’t belong here. The stranger walked over to the structure, ran his hand over its surface and frowned. “Too smooth. Not wood.” He looked around.

He opened his coat, revealing a green paisley vest made of satin. Sherman now realized what he thought was an overcoat was in fact part of the suit, even if it didn’t match the brown and tan striped pants. Reaching inside his coat at the left breast, he pulled out a small black leather book which reminded Sherman of those Bibles the Gideons gave away at his school. The stranger opened the book to the middle, then clicked his tongue a couple of times, after which he muttered something.

The man gasped and stepped back. Turning, he pointed the back cover of the open book toward the yard and muttered something. Then he began

waving the Bible about, pointing it at one thing and then at another. He peered at a page inside again, his expression becoming more and more agitated.

Reaching into his right breast pocket, he pulled out a small ornate pistol with a short barrel. “All right, come out, both of you. I know one of you is behind the shed, and one is behind the woodpile.” He darted the gun’s barrel from shed to pile. “I must warn you, this may look like a single-shot derringer, but I am just as capable of shooting you both as I am one of you. Come out now, hands up.”

Serendipity stepped out from behind the tool shed, her hands raised. Sherman followed her example, standing with his hands in the air.

“Good.” The man waved the pistol. “Come closer and tell me who you are. Renegades?”

“I’m Serendipity Brown and this is my assistant, Sherman Conrad.”

“Americans by your accent and—wait, did you say *Serendipity Brown*?”

“Yeah, real mouthful, huh?”

The man raised one eyebrow, glanced back at the large shed, then again at the woman standing before him. “You can’t possibly be *the Serendipity Brown*. You do resemble her, but—”

He looked down at his book and made a clucking noise as if he were urging a horse to trot. “DNA scan,” he said, pointing the back of the open Bible at Serendipity. He studied the inside of the book. “Compare to DNA of Dr. Serendipity Brown.” His eyes widened, seemingly in awe, and he stared back at Serendipity. “Not *the Serendipity Brown*, inventor of Time Travel?”

“What!” Serendipity blinked at him. “Wait a minute! How do you know who I am and that I invented time travel? And how can anyone from the nineteenth century do a DNA scan with a Bible? And how would you have *my* DNA record? For that matter, how do you even know *what* DNA is? You are no more Victorian than I am. Oh my—you have got to be from the future, *my* future?”

The man smiled at her, slipping the gun and the Bible back into his breast pockets. “Merciful heavens. Serendipity Brown before my very eyes.” He smiled.

“You’re a time traveler, too, huh?”

“Yes, I am a *Licensed* Time Traveler. I must say, I never in my wildest imagination would have dreamt of stumbling upon *you* in the past, in a work yard of all places.”



“And who are you?”

The man tipped his hat. “Dr. Howe.” He offered his hand. “Glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Doctor Who?” Serendipity looked incredulous as he pumped her hand.

“No, Howe. H-O-W-E. Common enough name.” He looked a little annoyed. “I am Dr. Wendell Howe.”

“Wendell? Let me guess, your nickname is Wen? Wen Howe? So, is your middle name Watt or Ware?”

“It’s Abercrombie, if you must know.” Dr. Howe frowned at her. “Marvelous, I run into one of my childhood heroes and she makes fun of my name. I daresay, with a name like Serendipity, I would think you a little more sensitive to that sort of thing.”

“Sorry.” Serendipity ducked her head.

“Apology accepted.” Dr. Howe replied, appearing appeased.

“So, exactly when and where are you from?”

“Cambridge University, 2660.” He pulled out his Bible again and clicked his tongue twice. “My business card. Solid. Two.” Instantly a two by three and a half inch card materialized over the Bible. He snatched it out of the air and handed it to Serendipity. Another card immediately appeared; he handed that one to Sherman.

“Now I know how Ben must have felt when he met us,” Sherman muttered, fingering the fine heavy cardstock. In the middle of the card, in a fancy script, he read, “Dr. Wendell A. Howe” and under that in smaller, plainer letters: “Temporal Anthropologist, Victorian Specialist with Cambridge University since 2610.” The two upper corners showed “Licensed Institute of Time Travel” and “Anthropology and History Ph.D.” At the bottom Sherman noticed several numbers and letters which he assumed to be contact information.

Serendipity looked impressed. “Wow! How did you do that?”

“Years and years of training and study. I think the Time Travel License was harder to get than the two PhDs.”

“No, I meant how did you make those cards appear out of nothing?”

Dr. Howe seemed baffled by her question. “Buzzy Card Application. Asked the Techs at the Institute to install it.”

“Temporal Anthropologist?” Sherman read the card aloud.

“Yes, we journey into the past to study ancient cultures and collect artifacts that won’t be missed. By the way, what are you two doing in 1851 London? Come to see the Great Exhibition?”

“No, my Timemobile broke down. We’re stuck here. I don’t know how to get back to my own time, unless I can charge it up.”

“Yes.” Dr. Howe smoothed his mustache. “You documented that your first machine was a failure, but you improved it by changing your energy source from electrical batteries to a Neutrino Dark Energy Generator.”

“Dark energy?”

“You combined neutrino energy with accelerons to create a condensed dark energy similar to that which pushes galaxies apart.”

“Hmmm, that might work.” Serendipity rolled her eyes up and nodded.

“It also allowed you to drastically reduce the size of your Timemobile.”

“Really? But no system of Neutrino power I’m aware of would fit in this machine,” she said, glancing at the Timemobile shed.

“You invented a Dark Energy Generator the size of a beach ball.”

“I did? How did I do that? Would you mind if I had a look at your machine, see what I did?”

“Oh, I can do better than that. I can download the diagrams if you like, from my computer.” Dr. Howe pulled out his Bible again.

“That’s an interesting puter design.” Serendipity slipped closer to look. Sherman inched over, craning his neck.

“Yes, perfect disguise for this time period. Many people in the Victorian era carry a pocket Bible. Perhaps it’s meant to be a magic talisman, or perhaps the trend is a reaction to the growing atheist movement. At any rate, no one here thinks it odd for someone to walk around with an open pocket Bible. If anything they admire my piety for reading it so much.”

Wendell opened his Bible. “The computer is basically in the spine,” he said running his finger along it. “The back cover has a sensor for scans, he said, flipping it over. “This heavier page in the center, ‘The Epistles,’ is in fact the main screen. The rest are real pages with the New Testament and Psalms printed on them to fool anyone who might pick it up.”

“Wait a minute!” Sherman barked. “Did you say you could give Serendipity the diagram to this generator? If you do that, how is she going to invent it?”

“Maybe this is where I got the idea.” Serendipity looked over at Sherman playfully.

“But you can’t do that.” Sherman shook his head.

“You could be right.” Dr. Howe said uneasily. “I probably shouldn’t even be talking with you. But this is an emergency. Dr. Brown getting

stuck here—well, that could certainly change history. We can't have that. As for giving out secret documents, I don't have access to any. The Dark Energy Generator is a fairly common system in my time, hardly hush-hush like time-travel technology, which the Institute keeps under wraps. Sharing her own invention with her would be completely cricket, old boy, wouldn't you say?"

Sherman stared at Serendipity and then at Dr. Howe. He knew there had to be a good argument, but he was darned if he could find it.

Dr. Howe offered Sherman a sympathetic smile. "When you've time traveled as much as I have, you get used to these paradoxes. It's why the Institute has very strict rules regarding private conduct when traveling. We don't want to wind up as our own great grandfathers, now do we? Very embarrassing when someone does up a family tree."

"The Institute?" Sherman asked.

"Of Time Travel—an activity heavily regulated in my day. Only those registered to do so are allowed to travel in time. We are trained to blend into the culture," he waved his hand in the air, "go unnoticed. Speaking of which—" Dr. Howe said, looking them both up and down. "I hate to criticize, but you could have done better with your costumes. You look more like twentieth-century hippies, than Victorians."

"That's what we were going for to start with." Serendipity looked sheepishly at her long skirt. "I was trying to get us to the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, and we ended up in eighteenth-century America, and now we're here."

"Eventually you enhance your steering system by converting from magnetic to laser, and you improve your wormhole detector feedback to determine and control where your wormhole extends. At least that's what they taught us in physics."

"Of course!" Serendipity exclaimed. "Lasers! Wow, I'm brilliant!"

Sherman cringed. "Ser, I don't know if you should be doing this."

"And you don't know if I shouldn't."

"Erm—" Dr. Howe interrupted, a hint of hopeful excitement in his voice. "Would it be too much to ask if I could look at the inside of your time machine? Perhaps take some pictures? You didn't save your first prototype, so we have no idea what it looked like inside. It would be a great honor."

"Sure, why not." Serendipity replied, flattered.

"Wait." Sherman grabbed her arm. "Maybe this is all some elaborate trick. Maybe he's from your own time, and he came here to steal your

plans for the Timemobile!”

Serendipity shot him a look of disbelief. “Sherman, if that’s true, then how did he get to 1851 without a time machine?”

“What if it’s not 1851? Maybe it’s 2353 and this is some holographic illusion. What if we are really in your workshop?”

“That is the craziest story I’ve ever heard. I haven’t announced my invention to anyone but you. How could anyone from my time even know about it? This guy must be legit. Look at that face—did you ever see a more honest face?”

Sherman studied the rather bland features of the stranger, who in turn blinked innocently. He had to admit, even though Dr. Howe didn’t look sneaky, he sure wouldn’t want to play poker with the guy.

Serendipity patted Sherman on the back. “If you really believe he’s a con-artist, then ask Lauren to verify it.”

“Quite the imagination.” Dr. Howe moved his eyes from Sherman to Serendipity. “College student?”

“I picked him up at a fast-food restaurant in 1985.”

“What?” Dr. Howe raised one eyebrow. “You can’t take natives out of their own time.”

“He goes with my décor.”

“Eh?”

Sherman pulled out his computer, not sure if he should feel mad, or just stupid. “Uh, Lauren?”

“Yes, Steve?” Lauren Bacall’s voice purred.

“Who’s Steve?” Dr. Howe looked baffled.

“Computer glitch,” Serendipity said. “Long story.”

“Where am I?” Sherman asked Lauren, ignoring the other two.

“Standing here holding me, Steve.”

“Not you, too.” Sherman answered, feeling rather betrayed.

Serendipity stepped over to Sherman. “You aren’t asking questions it can answer. It doesn’t have enough information. Lauren, scan for any electrical activity that’s not natural.”

“Only coming from within this yard,” Lauren said.

“Any radio frequencies? Television, cell phone, internet, telltet or any other broadcasts?”

“None.”

“There.” Serendipity turned to Sherman. “Happy?”

“I guess. It just seems a bit of a coincidence that we run into another

time traveler.” Sherman stuffed his hands in his bell-bottoms pockets.

Dr. Howe smiled. “Rather serendipitous, eh?”

Serendipity grinned back. “That was good. When people try to make jokes about my name, they usually call me ‘Dippy.’”

“That’s better than ‘Wennie’ or worse: ‘When-dull.’” Dr. Howe wrinkled his nose.

“Come on, Wendell.” Serendipity stepped over to the Timemobile. “I’ll give you the grand tour of the world’s very first time machine.”

“Ooh!” Dr. Howe’s eyes lit up. “This *is* exciting.” He pulled a pair of oval, gold wire-framed reading spectacles from his breast pocket and set them on his nose.

Sherman followed Dr. Howe who was already trailing after Serendipity up the steps.

Once inside, Dr. Howe’s head pivoted about. “Oh my word, it’s so much smaller on the inside than the outside! There’s hardly any room in here.” He turned and nearly bumped into Sherman. “Bit crowded, eh.” Then he gave Serendipity a wistful smile. “Would it be all right—I mean, would you mind terribly—that is to say, it would mean a lot—if I’m not being too forward?”

“What?”

“Would you mind too awfully if I had my picture taken with you, Dr. Brown?”

Serendipity chuckled. “You act like I’m a celebrity.”

“You are. Among time travelers at any rate. You are what Sigmund Freud is to psychiatrists or Isaac Newton is to physicists. You started it all.” He smiled.

“Sure, why not.” Serendipity shrugged.

“Oh thank you so much!” Dr. Howe removed his glasses and shoved them at Sherman. “Would you mind taking our photo, old chap?” He stepped beside Serendipity and struck a pose, grabbing the lapel of his coat.

“What? You hand me your glasses and you want me to take a picture—we don’t have a camera here, dude.”

“Sorry. There’s camera hidden in the spectacles. In the nineteenth century, no one gets suspicious, if I pull out a pair of glasses to get a better look at something. What do you use *your* glasses for?”

“Seeing.” Sherman stared at Dr. Howe like he was someone from another planet. “I’m blind as a bat without them.”

“That’s right, you’re from the twentieth century, back when people still wore glasses to see. Before laser eye surgery and other techniques were perfected in the twenty-first century.”

“Wait a minute!” Sherman looked accusingly at Serendipity. “Are you telling me I don’t have to wear these ugly things?”

Serendipity shot Sherman a sheepish smile. “Oops, sorry, kid. I didn’t even think about that. Personally I like you in them. They are so twentieth century. Tell you what; if I get your eyes fixed, could you wear frames with plain glass?”

“The point is to get rid of them.”

“All right, I’ll pay you an extra \$1000 a week to wear them. Make it \$3000.”

“I suppose they do make me look smarter.” Sherman stared down at Dr. Howe’s spectacles, turning them in his hands. “So, how do I take a picture with these?”

“Let me show you.” Dr. Howe leaned over. “Just take off your glasses.”

When Sherman removed his glasses, Dr. Howe carefully placed his pair on Sherman’s nose, reached up and tapped the temple. “There, they are on. Just point your nose at me.”

Dr. Howe stepped back to Serendipity, and resumed his pose.

Sherman stared at Dr. Howe, who stood beaming, and at Serendipity, who looked amused. “So now what do I do?”

“It’s kinetoscope...flickers...talkies.... It’s making a motion picture.”

“Oh, video?”

“Yes, vid.”

Serendipity slipped her arm around Dr. Howe’s waist. “Go ahead, Wendell. Put your arm around my shoulder.”

Dr. Howe complied, looking quite pleased, and Sherman continued to point his nose at them.

Serendipity looked up at Dr. Howe and winked. “Now, how about a shot of us kissing?”

Dr. Howe’s grin dropped to a look of embarrassment. “I—erm—That is to say—I—”

“Don’t do it, Dr. Howe,” Sherman warned him, his voice rising. “Her next request might be to undress you.”

“Oh, ha-ha!” Serendipity frowned at Sherman. “Don’t push it, burger-boy.”

“Sorry.” Sherman fought back a smile. “But I think you’re embarrassing Dr. Howe. He is English, you know.”

“Yeah.” Serendipity looked at Dr. Howe’s red cheeks. “And he’s probably been in the Victorian Age too long. Sorry, Wendell. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Erm, that’s quite all right, Dr. Brown.”

“Please, call me Serendipity.”

“All right, Dr. Brown,” he said, stepping toward the door. “My word, it is getting a bit hot in here. I think I need some air.”

Sherman handed the glasses back to Dr. Howe as he passed. “Don’t worry,” Sherman whispered to him. “She’s harmless.”

Sherman and Serendipity followed their fellow time traveler out into the yard, with Dr. Howe tugging nervously at the sleeves of his frock coat. “I say, thank you so much for the tour and the photos. I must be going. I have things to do.”

“But we’re *stuck* here.” Serendipity pleaded. “I thought you were going to help us.”

Dr. Howe turned and blinked. “Erm...yes...of course, I’ll help you. But first I have to complete my mission. Most important.”

“Mission?” Serendipity asked. “Gathering Victorian teapots for the London Museum?”

“The Albert and Victoria Museum, actually, and that was years ago. This project is far more important than that. All top secret, very hush-hush. I can’t tell anyone from this period of time.” Dr. Howe studied Serendipity. “But then you aren’t from this period of time, now are you? I suppose I can trust *you*, Dr. Serendipity Brown.”

“So, what is this top-secret mission?”

“Long story, I’ll explain later. So, how long have you been stranded here? Are you hungry? I would love nothing more than to take you two to dine. But first, if you will pardon my rudeness...” Dr. Howe glanced about. “I need to retrieve a few items.” He stepped over to the small tool shed. Instead of pulling out a key, he pointed his Bible at the shed and clicked his tongue twice. “Unlock door.”

“Is that clucking you do the cue for your computer?” asked Sherman.

“Exactly! People assume it’s a nervous habit and I’m talking to myself. My computer is programmed never to speak unless I ask it to.”

“I got a bigger question.” Serendipity got closer to the tool shed. “Is this your time machine?”

“Yes.” Dr. Howe opened the door. “Using the Holographic Skin you

invented.”

“Hey!” Sherman perked up. “They kept the name I gave it!” he exclaimed, peering into the machine. Dr. Howe entered, stepped over to the far wall and opened a door. Inside sat a small shallow cabinet. He pulled out one of several cloth pouches, a couple of small boxes, and closed the door.

“You may come in.” Dr. Howe beckoned to them.

Sherman hesitated a moment. After all, Wendell’s time machine was less than a quarter the size of Serendipity’s. Surprisingly, once inside, instead of a telephone-booth-sized compartment, he found a room appearing to be about the same size as the inside of Serendipity’s Timemobile. He presumed the controls must be hidden, since he didn’t see any dials or knobs. The only thing in the room—other than the cabinets in the wall—was one chair with a large red button on the arm. Everything looked slicker, plusher than Serendipity’s proto-type, like something commercially produced.

“Wow!” Serendipity looked around, impressed. “You certainly have improved on my machine.”

“I didn’t do it. This isn’t very different from your final model. Mostly cosmetic improvements,” Dr. Howe replied, pleased to have Serendipity’s approval. He opened his coat. “I’ll stow my stuff away and step out, so you can have a better look.” He slipped the items into his inside pockets below the waist seam.

“You certainly have a lot of secret pockets.” Sherman commented.

“The frock coat has tailcoat pockets in the back seams, but those are so easily picked, it was standard practice to add inside pockets.”

“So, that’s a frock coat?” Sherman studied Howe’s attire. “Isn’t a frock a dress?”

Dr. Howe nodded. “There is a correlation. Both have skirts attached at the waist and billowing out.”

“They had coats kind of like that back in the 1700s.”

“Yes, the basic design predates the Victorian Age.”

Howe stepped out of the crowded machine, then turned to poke his head back in. “Speaking of clothes, we really need to do something about you two.”

“Oh?” Serendipity looked at him quizzically.

“I’m afraid you will be delayed for at least a day, until we get your machine repaired. We can hardly have you two running around looking like Bedlam escapees, now can we?”



“I refuse to wear a bustle!” Serendipity put her foot down.

“Not to worry, those won’t be in fashion until the 1870s. Right now, it’s the hoop skirt.”

“No way!”

“Serendipity Bo Peep!” Sherman laughed. “Ya got one of them staffs with a hook at the top?”

Serendipity glared.

“Dr. Howe continued, unfazed. “We will find you something a little more conservative, not the height of fashion. Perhaps a modest starched petticoat in lieu of the whalebone cage crinoline.”

“I can see why no women came with you from the twenty-seventh century.”

Sherman sobered as he studied Dr. Howe’s stiff, high collar around which was tied a thin neckerchief. “I don’t know Ser. Men’s clothes don’t look very comfortable either.”

Dr. Howe rolled his eyes. “Time travelers must acclimatize themselves to wearing period clothing. You mustn’t stand out.”

Serendipity glanced at Sherman. “He’s the expert.”

“I will be your host in Victorian London, if that is all right with you.” Dr. Howe tipped his hat. “I’m afraid lodgings are scarce with the Great Exhibition in town. I managed to scrounge rooms in Marylebone. You two may stay at my diggings, if you like.”

“You don’t live here?” Sherman looked around.

“In my time machine? Heavens, no!” Dr. Howe pulled out the pouch he had just procured from his machine. “Not when I have these.” He handed Sherman the bag.

Sherman peered inside. His jaw dropped open when he saw sunlight glint off several gold coins. He handed the pouch back to Dr. Howe.

Receiving the pouch, Dr. Howe replied, “I only dropped by the yard—which I sublet, by the way—to retrieve more gold sovereigns and a couple of other items.” He started toward the gate. “Now if you two will follow me, I know of some nearby clothing shops. I shall hail a taxi. Come along then.”

Serendipity shrugged at Sherman. “Guy’s a little unconventional, but he seems harmless enough. Besides we need his help.” She followed after the quirky person who called himself a “temporal anthropologist.”

Sherman saw no other choice but to tag along.

## Chapter Twelve

Sherman sat in the upholstered armchair of Dr. Howe's third-story lodgings. A few feet to his right, Serendipity perched on a dining chair, her skirts draping over the sides, hiding most of the legs. She flipped through a newspaper with no photos. It did have an occasional drawing. She studied it curiously like she had never seen a newspaper before. Their host stood in front of a small table in the far corner, fastidiously making tea.

Sherman looked around at the apartment. Far more cluttered than Benjamin Franklin's parlor, the room was brimming with worn furniture. The wood floor lay bare save for an oval rug in front of a cast-iron fireplace, which stood just behind and between him and Serendipity. It had to be about half the size of any fireplace he had ever seen, with an arched—rather than square—opening and no mantle. An oval bucket full of coal sat beside it.

He stared at the faded wallpaper covering the walls with a repeating pattern of flowers and vertical stripes. A couple of dreary landscapes hung on the walls, with blotchy clouds and cows whose legs didn't bend right. Sherman wondered if landlords throughout time decorated their rentals with cast-offs.

To his left, an open door to a smaller room revealed a bed with a five-foot-high headboard. Sherman looked around for another door leading to a kitchen or bathroom but found none, and it dawned on him that an outhouse probably served as Dr. Howe's toilet.

Sherman noticed a small table standing next to the bed in the other room, where a white porcelain pitcher sat in a huge bowl. Under them, on a very low shelf, sat a large porcelain pot with one handle on the side and a lid on top. "Oh, grody!" thought Sherman. He would explode before he used a chamber pot. Suddenly an outhouse didn't seem so bad.

Sherman tugged at the annoying high collar and cravat around his neck. When Dr. Howe had tied it for him, he had given Sherman a short lecture on how this simple single knot of the cravat would one day evolve into the more elaborate bowtie.

At least the tie didn't look as lame as the vest, or waistcoat as Dr. Howe called it. Sherman had picked out the least feminine-looking one and went with stripes. At least the waistcoat covered up the dweeb suspenders. Sherman would have preferred a belt, but the high-waist pants didn't have belt loops, just buttons for what Howe called "bracers." Belt

loops weren't all that was missing—no zipper, just buttons. At least he found short ankle boots that didn't button but laced up like normal shoes.

Sherman looked over at Serendipity wearing a lacy bonnet tied under her chin and a light blue dress with ruffled layers of skirt over a puffy petticoat. The woman looked ridiculous. Sherman fought hard not to laugh, if only because he knew he looked just as silly in his frock coat.

Sherman's gaze turned to Dr. Howe, who didn't look absurd at all and who wore exactly the same attire as Sherman. Somehow it fit the Englishman's personality. Sherman found it hard to imagine the man wearing anything else.

With an air of ceremonial pomp, Dr. Howe bustled about a small gateleg table making tea. A copper kettle steamed on an oddly contrived camp stove, under which a flame rose from a small metal canister set in a brass stand with spindly legs. He picked up the kettle and poured some hot water into a medium-sized teapot of white glazed pottery. He swished the water around then poured it out into a deep white porcelain bowl. Next he filled the teapot with water, measured into it some loose tea and then placed the lid on. Pulling out a brass pocket watch, he carefully timed the brewing. After a few minutes, he put away the watch and poured the tea through a strainer into a teacup that matched the pot. He did all this silently with intense concentration as if performing the English equivalent of a Japanese tea ceremony.

He glanced up at Serendipity and finally spoke. "Would you like sugar with your tea, Dr. Brown? I'm afraid I have no cream."

"Got any rum?"

Dr. Howe raised one eyebrow a bit.

"I'm only kidding, Wendell. Sure, sugar is fine."

Dr. Howe opened a small metal canister from his collection of tins and lifted out a couple of sugar cubes with small silver tongs. He carefully stirred, neither clinking the spoon nor sloshing the tea, then handed the teacup on a saucer to Serendipity. Turning to Sherman, he asked, "How would you like your tea, Mr. Conrad?"

Sherman noticed there were only two teacups. It was obvious the Englishman meant to sacrifice his cup to Sherman. "No tea, thanks." Sherman studied the tea accessories. "I see you brought a few things from the future with you."

Dr. Howe looked somewhat insulted. "What things?"

"Your tea setup. You know, your camp stove there and sugar cubes."

"My dear fellow, I'll have you know the spirit lamp pre-dates the

Victorian age and was used throughout this and the next century to keep teapots warm. Larger ones like mine were used by travelers to heat things. They were also utilized in households as a way to heat tea water without having to start a fire in the woodstove in the summer. The sugar cube goes back to 1841 and predates granulated sugar. I will admit most Victorians probably didn't bother to travel with a tea chest like mine, but I spend so much time on the road; it helps me feel less homeless." Dr. Howe patted the wooden chest on the table like it was a pet. About twice the size of a large shoebox, it had a leather handle on its curved lid of wooden slats stained a dark brown.

"However, I can assure you, all of this is perfectly period. I researched meticulously. Indeed I bought all of it in the field. Nearly everything I have with me is from the nineteenth century. The few necessary future-technology items I have here, such as my computer, are carefully disguised as period pieces. I even shave with a straightedge razor."

"Uh, sorry."

"Quite all right, sir." Dr. Howe unbristled and gave Sherman a sheepish smile. "I'm afraid you touched upon a sore spot there. The Institute of Time Travel rifles through our luggage to make certain everything is period. I have to defend the silliest items from those ignorant know-it-alls, giving them historic documentation to affirm that 'yes, the Victorians had teapots, you twits.' Do forgive me if I sounded crass, Mr. Conrad."

"It's okay. I've gotten into a few arguments like that running Dungeon & Dragon games. And please call me Sherman. The only time someone calls me Mr. Conrad is when they either want to sell me something or I'm in deep trouble."

"I do apologize." Dr. Howe poured a cup for himself. "I know you Americans are far less formal. I do not wish to appear stuffy."

"Yeah." Sherman gave an understanding nod. "You're English."

"Not just English, *Victorian* English. The professors at Cambridge try not to laugh at me. That's the thing about being a temporal anthropologist. We are so ingrained in our specific period we no longer truly fit into our own." Dr. Howe picked up the saucer in his left hand, balancing it on his fingers, his thumb on the rim. The teacup sat serenely on the saucer.

Meanwhile, poor Serendipity looked like she was juggling hers.

Dr. Howe easily raised the teacup with his other hand and took a sip. Sherman noted the pinky was not extended as he had expected.

"I daresay, I know one poor chap who studies Vikings. He has become so uncivilized no one will invite him to any function unless it is

unavoidable. I remember him when he first started the program. He was a very well-mannered young man. Now he walks around with his hair in greasy braids, laughing too loud, belching, and eating with his hands.”

“Sounds like my roommates,” Sherman said.

“They wear braids?”

“No, I meant the table manners. Only bikers wear braids.”

“You don’t say? How interesting.” Dr. Howe shook his head, and smiled. “I must say, there are quite a few customs from your century to which I have no clue.” He examined his cup. “I suppose I could have done worse than choosing Victorian. I may be dull, but none are afraid to let me into their homes. Better a bore than a boor, eh?” Dr. Howe gave a chuckle over his weak joke and then cleared his throat when no one else laughed. “I’ll try not to be so formal. Please, feel free to call me Wendell if you like.”

“Okay, Wendell.” Sherman nodded.

“And I will do my best to call you Sherman and Serendipity.” Wendell gave them a nervous smile. “So tell me, Dr. Brown, was the meal to your liking?”

Serendipity fought back a smile. “It was perfect. Nice restaurant.”

“Yes, I always fancied that establishment. Would you like me to attempt to procure hotel rooms for you? It’s very likely none are available with the Great Exhibition in town, but given that this is a weekday, there is at least some chance I could find you some lodgings. You are welcome to stay here, of course, if you would feel safer. You may take the bed, Dr. Brown. I shall sleep on the floor.”

“No!” Serendipity protested. “I’m not kicking you out of your own bed. I’ll sleep on that psychiatrist couch.”

Wendell looked over at the backless coach she pointed at. “Oh, you mean the fainting couch. If that is what you want. Sherman can share the bed with me.”

“What!” Sherman almost jumped out of his chair. “No way.”

Wendell frowned at his reaction, and then nodded. “Oh yes, do forgive me. I forgot. They were quite homophobic in the twentieth century, weren’t they? No one thinks anything of two men sharing a bed in the nineteenth century. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we wear so many layers of clothing. We’ll see if we can’t find a more agreeable arrangement for you.”

“They don’t have gay guys in the Victorian Age?”

Wendell looked confused. “Yes, of course. You can locate a throng of

gay chaps down at Haymarket most any evening—getting inebriated in the pubs, carousing with their mates, picking up ladies of the evening.”

“Why would gays be picking up women? They like other guys.”

Wendell frowned, and then nodded. “Oh, yes, that was the connotation of the word gay in 1985, was it not? Now it means a pleasure seeker. Hmm, I believe it means flamboyant dresser back home in the twenty-seventh century.”

“It kind of means that in 1985, too.”

Wendell stared nervously into his cup. “I’m afraid my knowledge of twentieth and twenty-fourth century culture is a bit sketchy.” He scratched his head, looking around. “I’m not sure what you two need to be comfortable. If you want anything, please do not hesitate to ask. I’m afraid I do not receive many guests. In fact, I’m not allowed any at all when I’m in the field, unless it’s another Temporal Anthropologist. It’s so nice having company.”

He poured himself more tea and sat down on the sofa across from them. “So tell me, Dr. Brown. Where have your time travels taken you so far?”

“This is actually my second trip. First one was to a McDonald’s restaurant in Kelso, Washington in 1985. This time I was trying to get to the First International Monterey Pop Music Festival in 1967 and somehow wound up face to face with a Neanderthal. I tried to hop ahead to 1967, but missed and landed in 1753 Philadelphia. We got a jump, hoping to at least get to the twentieth century and find an electrical outlet, but only got as far as here.” Serendipity shrugged. “That’s it. That’s the extent of my traveling in time. Not much to tell.”

“My word, you have been around.” Wendell’s nondescript face revealed a little excitement. “You actually saw a Neanderthal? What did he look like?”

“Heavy brow, big chest, sweet smile.” Serendipity picked up her hippie-style leather fringed shoulder bag and opened it. She pulled out her PAL. “Tom. Show photo of Beefcake on screen.” She held it out to Wendell.

Wendell stood up and took the pocket computer. “I say, he does have intelligent eyes. Hardly the brute Victorians paint him to be.” Wendell studied it a moment, then handed her back the device.

“He gave me a present too.” Serendipity drew out the flint knife.

“May I?” Wendell held his hand out eagerly as Serendipity passed it to him. “Oh, I must say, nice workmanship. He just gave this to you? How long were you with him?”

“Oh, ten minutes maybe.”

“You must have made quite an impression on him.” Wendell handed the blade back.

“I just gave him some glass beads.”

“Glass beads?” Wendell’s smile dropped. “You gave a Neanderthal glass beads? They never had glass beads. That could change history.”

“How could that change history? I didn’t show him how to make them.”

“What if archaeologists found those beads at a Neanderthal dig?”

“That would be funny, wouldn’t it? Don’t worry, they would think someone put them there as a joke.”

“Perhaps.” Wendell frowned unconvinced. “You said you got a jump in 1753? I’m afraid to ask how you managed that.”

“Benjamin Franklin had a bunch of Leyden jars.”

“Benjamin Franklin! You met Benjamin Franklin? What story did you concoct to get him to help you?”

“I told him the truth.”

Wendell eyes grew quite large. “What! You told him you were from the future? You can’t do that. It’s against the rules!”

“What rules?”

“Oh, yes. I suppose you can’t break the rules if they haven’t been written yet. That must be nice. So, you met a Neanderthal *and* Benjamin Franklin and you’ve hardly gotten started? That is quite amazing!”

“So, how long have you been time traveling?”

“About fifty years.”

“Fifty years? You aren’t that old!” Serendipity studied Wendell. “You look forty at the most.”

“Actually, I’m eighty-five.”

“No way!” Sherman shook his head.

“I’m from the twenty-seventh century. We’ve slowed the aging process down considerably by fiddling with the genes. They have been doing that since the twenty-fifth century. They estimate the average lifespan is two hundred and ten now—erm, in *my* now.”

“Wow, the average lifespan in my time is only about a hundred.” Serendipity looked impressed.

Sherman stared at both of them amazed. “I think it’s only seventy in my time.”

“So, you’ve been time traveling for fifty years?” Serendipity turned

the conversation back to Wendell. "I'll bet you must have seen lots of great places, been everywhere in time."

Wendell gave her a sad smile. "Not really. Just the Victorian Age."

"That's it?"

"On occasion they will allow me visit the very early Edwardian Age, but believe me, it's like pulling teeth with the Institute. I have a devil of a time convincing them how little things actually changed between 1901 and 1903."

"But why just the Victorian Age?"

"The Victorian Age is the only era for which I am licensed. I have been specially trained to blend into this era so well that no one here notices me. All temporal anthropologists are indoctrinated in this manner. People say we get a little too immersed. Indeed I've heard rumors the instructors may be enhancing our thinking processes in such a way as to ensure proper absorption into our chosen time period. Of course, they could just be rumors."

"Enhanced?" Sherman frowned. "Do you mean *brainwashed*?"

"I suppose you could say that." Wendell stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "If they do, I'm sure it is for our own good. We are also trained to be so unremarkable as not to stand out, and so introverted we don't interact with others. This is to assure that we have no undue influence upon others' lives and never appear rude or in any way draw attention to ourselves. No one in the past must ever truly get to know us; few remember us and those who do...well, they have vague recollections of us at best. The Institute goes so far as to insist on plastic surgery for anyone whose features would be conspicuous in that culture. We have to be unmemorable, just another face in the crowd, quickly forgotten."

Sherman had noticed Wendell looked like he could model for store mannequins. "Is that what they did to you?"

"No, I was just born with a bland face perfect for temporal anthropology."

"Sounds like a lonely life." Serendipity studied Wendell. "What if you fall in love?"

"Disallowed. At least in the past. We not only must have all immunizations before traveling, but must be sterilized so we can't possibly bring someone into the world that shouldn't have been."

"You can't just use birth control?"

"Institute doesn't trust us. Besides it's only 99.9999% effective. There is always that one-in-a-million chance."



“So, that just means you can’t have kids. It’s not like you’re *broken*. I mean you could still get married or at least have a love affair.”

“What if the woman I married was meant to marry someone else in order to become the mother or even the great-great-great-grandmother of someone famous? Or what if her descendant will be an unknown person who inspires some key figure to change the world? To top that off, just as you could become your own ancestor, what if you prevented your own ancestor from ever being born and you suddenly ceased to exist? No. We can’t even fall in love with a place. We can’t stay in one spot very long for fear of being noticed, and for fear those who do notice might observe how we age so very slowly.”

Serendipity offered Wendell an encouraging smile. “At least you get to witness great events of the past.”

“Only from a distance as part of the crowd. It’s not like I can participate in any of the action. Alas, usually it’s the little things we are sent to research, like what sort of underwear was worn, or identify the usage of some odd implement in a museum, or what did the laborers have for breakfast, or what embroidery stitch was used by a particular ancient culture. All those little mundane things no one ever bothered to record, because they were simply, well, too mundane.” Wendell sighed.

“Can’t you just get in your time machine and go anywhere you like?” Sherman twisted around in the overstuffed chair, flopping his leg over the arm.

Wendell shook his head. “It’s not mine. All time machines are the property of the Institute. I could never steal one, for I have no idea how to run it. I don’t even know where the controls are hidden. The Institute set the machines to go to a particular place and year. The Institute tells us where we can go and how long we can stay. Before the set date, we must go back to the twenty-seventh century by pushing the return button. If we fail, Enforcers come back to either save us, arrest us, or collect the remains. We are required to have an implanted tracking device, so they can find us easily.”

“So remove the device.”

“It’s wedged in our brains. No surgeon before the twenty-third century could remove it without killing us or paralyzing us.”

“So quit!” Sherman shrugged.

“Like I said, we get so immersed in the past that we no longer feel comfortable in the twenty-seventh century. I’ve met retired temporal anthropologists. They usually become history professors or re-enactors for museums, and all they talk about is the past, still dressing in their period

costumes. I thought they were exciting when I was young, but now I see they are, well, very sad.” Wendell released a gloomy sigh.

“That’s terrible!” Serendipity said, appalled.

“Everything has a price. Time Travel is addictive.” He brightened. “Sometimes we are offered more exciting assignments. Occasionally some special mission comes up that requires a temporal anthropologist. Since I’m a Victorian England specialist, one particularly challenging assignment has come my way just recently.” His eyes began to sparkle. “I have never been on a special mission like *this* one before. This is all very thrilling!”

“Special mission?” Sherman perked up. “What is it?”

“Have you ever heard of the Koh-I-Noor Diamond?”

“Sounds familiar,” Sherman said.

“Oh!” Serendipity excitedly waved her hand in the air, much like a child in class who knew the answer. “Once the biggest diamond in the world, right? Later part of the British Crown Jewels?”

“It won’t be the biggest for long,” Wendell said. “Prince Albert will have it re-cut, reducing it in size by one third.”

“Why would he do that?” Sherman crinkled his nose.

“Most felt it didn’t have enough fire, enough sparkle. Prince Albert didn’t know what to do with the jewel, since it had a curse on it, unlucky for any man who owned it. Probably just coincidence Prince Albert died an early death. The diamond is however supposed to be lucky for women, so they put it in a brooch for Victoria and then eventually placed it in the crown of the Queen Consort. The jewel originally came into the hands of the British Monarchy when the East India Company insisted it be made part of the spoils of war, after they annexed the Punjab. Now, India wants the diamond back.”

“I thought you guys already returned it.” Serendipity took a sip of tea.

“Yes, but now India wants the *original* diamond. They want it returned intact, the way it was before Prince Albert began fiddling with it.”

“That’s impossible!” Serendipity’s teacup clinked on her saucer. “How could you put a diamond back together?”

“I know!” Sherman sat up straight in his seat. “You just have to take it before they start cutting on it!”

“Precisely, Sherman!” Wendell nodded at him. “Except no one must ever know it was taken, since history makes no mention of the incident. I simply have to remove it and then replace it with an exact replica; no one can detect any difference. As a matter of fact, the British Government did

analyze our present Koh-I-Noor Diamond, using twenty-seventh century technology, and they discovered it was a modern synthetic. Since the deed was obviously already done, we were given the go ahead by the Institute.”

“So, you know your mission will be a success.” Sherman relaxed.

“No.” Wendell’s jaw stiffened. “We simply know *someone* from the twenty-seventh century will succeed. Hopefully it will be me. If I fail I will be arrested by present-day authorities and sent to a prison or hung. I asked if the Enforcers would come save me, but they avoided giving me an answer. The Institute will then send someone else, until someone succeeds.”

“So your life is over if you fail?” Serendipity asked appalled. “And what is your reward if you succeed?”

“I’m not at all sure.” Wendell frowned. “I didn’t ask. I was just so happy to be doing something really exciting for a change. I would be performing a great service for my country. Perhaps I shall receive a medal. I say, perchance Queen Victoria will knight me!” Wendell smiled and sat up straighter.

“Why would Queen Victoria knight you for stealing her diamond?” Sherman asked.

“Not Queen Victoria the First,” Wendell replied calmly, regaining composure. “Queen Victoria the Fifth. Most charming woman. Bears a strong resemblance to her ancestor.”

“Victoria the First?”

“No, Princess Grace the First of Monaco.” Wendell disclosed a wistful smile. “Hard to say no to that woman.”

“And all she’s going to give you is a useless knighthood?” Serendipity shot him a look of disbelief. “Hate to tell you this, Wendell, but I think you’re getting the short end of the stick.”

“Yeah, dude.” Sherman nodded. “You could get killed.”

“If one desires the privilege of traveling into the past, there are sacrifices to be made,” Wendell replied, more stiff-upper-lipped than usual.

“Humph.” Serendipity scowled. “I don’t want to be responsible for you getting killed. When I get back to my own time, I’m tempted to just dismantle the Timemobile, destroy all the files and pretend it never happened.”

“No, Dr. Brown!” Wendell stood up, his eyes enormous. “Please, you must never do that! You must never give up on what will be your greatest contribution to mankind. You’ll be remembered forever.”

“And if I’m not, I can go into the future and remind them?” Serendipity smirked.

Wendell first blinked at her, then chuckled nervously and sat down. “Yes, I suppose you could. Besides you were meant to experience amazing adventures.” Wendell stopped, suddenly apprehensive. “Erm, you will be good enough not to mention this episode in your records, won’t you? It could change history.”

“Of course, Wendell.” Serendipity offered him a reassuring smile. “Never met you.”

“Yeah.” Sherman sent Serendipity a sideways glance, crossing his arms and muttering. “Let’s hope you don’t mention your kissing Benjamin Franklin.”

Wendell’s jaw actually dropped. “You *kissed* Benjamin Franklin?”

“Not a bad kisser.” Serendipity’s smile quickly changed to a scowl. “Then he tells me he’s married.”

“I don’t recall any of that in the history books.” Wendell raised his eyebrow.

“Good,” Sherman said. “Glad to hear you had sense enough not to record it.”

Serendipity shot Sherman a miffed glance and turned back to Wendell. “You have to *steal* this rock? Do you even know where it is? Surely they have it well hidden and guarded.”

“Oh, I know exactly where it is. I’ve seen it several times.” Wendell set his teacup down.

“You have?”

“Yes, it’s at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. It’s one of the star attractions at the Great Exhibition. That and the Waiting Rooms.”

“Waiting Rooms?” Sherman frowned confused. “What are they waiting for?”

“The water closets. The loos. The Great Exhibition has the world’s first public flush toilets. For a penny you not only get to use them, but they give you a towel, a shoeshine and a comb.” Wendell proudly pulled a comb out of his pocket to show them. He frowned. “I hope I was allowed to take this. I would hate to think I stole it.”

“Wow, the world’s largest diamond can hardly compete with anything as fantastic as flush toilets.” Serendipity added with sarcasm. “I do hope the Koh-I-Noor is more heavily guarded than the restrooms.”

“Oh, it is,” Wendell clarified, unfazed.

“Then how are you going to steal that big rock out from under the

noses of all those witnesses and guards?”

“I didn’t say it would be easy.”

“Sounds downright impossible. Why in the world would they just send a history scholar? Why didn’t they send a thief?”

“Yeah.” Sherman nodded. “Or some kind of Special Ops.”

Wendell shook his head. “They need someone trained to blend into this time period. I do know Victorian England’s culture better than most. All right, possibly better than anyone now alive in the twenty-seventh century, since I have spent most of my life here.”

“Then why didn’t they send someone with you to do the actual stealing while you ran interference with the natives. Why didn’t they send you some help?”

“I do have help.” Wendell withdrew from his breast pocket one of the boxes he had taken from his time machine. He opened it up and removed a round pewter case. It looked like an ordinary Victorian pocket watch. “I have this—a Stop Watch.” Wendell stepped closer and handed it to Serendipity.

Sherman stood up and came closer to get a better look. Serendipity studied the watch for a moment and then turned it over to Sherman. He studied it carefully. The face was marked off in seconds rather than hours, bearing 5, 10, 15 up to 60 rather than 1, 2, 3 up to 12. It only had one long hand, and below the center was a smaller dial displaying minutes. Outside of ornate Victorian decorations, it appeared to be a common stopwatch. Sherman instinctively started to punch the knob on the top.

“NO!!” Wendell screamed. “Don’t push that—”

Sherman had already done it. He looked at Wendell to see why he had stopped in mid-sentence. Wendell just stood there, his hands reaching toward Sherman, his mouth open, completely frozen.

“Wendell, are you all right?” Sherman asked.

Wendell said nothing, not moving, not even blinking.

Sherman turned to Serendipity. She just sat there, her mouth hanging open, as still as a wax dummy. Then Sherman noticed something even stranger. Serendipity had dropped her teacup. It and the remaining liquid hung, a still-shot slosh, in midair.

Sherman sprang to the window and stared two floors below to the street. The twilight sky hovered over people frozen in mid-stride. Even the horses pulling the carriages were not moving. All had been anxious to get home before dark, but that would never happen. Not unless they took one more step. “Why won’t they take one more step?” the voice in Sherman’s

head kept asking.

Glancing up at the sky, he saw a pigeon hanging in the air not ten feet from the window. Not even a feather ruffled.

He looked down at the Stop Watch. All this started—or more accurately stopped—when he pressed the button. “Damn!” Sherman felt the world close in, suffocating him. “Did I do this?”

He pushed the button again. Nothing changed. He pushed it again. The ticking it made and his own panicky breathing were the only sounds he could hear.

“Oh,” Sherman groaned aloud, just to hear a voice. “I feel like I’m trapped in the Twilight Zone. This is impossible. You can’t stop time.” He glanced down at the street again at Victorian London. “Yeah right, and time travel is impossible too.”

How far did this inertia reach, he wondered. Was it only this block? Or did it extend to this city? This *planet*? Had Sherman somehow stopped the entire universe? Was this how the world ended, not by blowing up, but by freezing, never to move again?

And all of it Sherman’s fault.

“Oh, hell!” Sherman clung tightly to the watch, lest his trembling hand drop it. “Now what do I do?”

## Chapter Thirteen

*“If you cease to exist, you won’t be missed.  
When traveling, don’t tamper with Time.”*

*—Dr. Jonathan Taylor, founder of the Time Purists*

The Institute of Time Travel sat like a fortress in twenty-seventh century Bohemia, New York guarding time like an overly-protective mother. The wardens of this technology carefully orchestrated their tours to allay suspicions without revealing much to the public.

Most rooms inside appeared as stark and grey as the outside, geared toward functionality and imposition of order, the one exception being the white walls and skylights which lent the huge lobby a bright and welcoming demeanor. On one forty-foot high wall, more than a dozen five-foot screens jutted out forming a collage of moving images—holovids of scenes from the past: a group of serfs harvesting wheat in feudal France; Julius Caesar waving at the cheering crowds of Rome from his chariot, returning from conquering Gaul; two nineteenth century locomotives facing each other, while a group men in top hats drove the Golden Spike connecting the Union and Pacific Railroads; a small herd of myrtle-green triceratops of various ages lumbering across a fern-covered prairie lead by a male with a bright red head crest...each film, actual footage.

Below the screens, a group of teenagers gawked about, all of them dressed in fashionable one-piece jumpsuits. With them hovered a middle-aged man, scanning his charges and clicking off names on a small hand-held computer screen.

“Good morning.” A young woman with a silver bob walked into the room. Her smile looked as disingenuous as her hair color. She wore the same sort of jumpsuit, in light blue, with a dark blue sash across her left shoulder and fastened on the opposite side at her waist. On it hung an emblem matching the one on the wall behind her: an hour glass in a wooden stand, clutched by two powerful hands.

“Welcome to the Institute of Time Travel. My name is Clarisse and I’ll be your guide. Please stay with me at all times.” In a voice excessively chirpy, she warned, “Do not enter any of the restricted areas or a force field will render you immobile until a guard can escort you off the premises.” She presented them a well-practiced smile. “I understand you

are students from Steven Hawking School in Cambridge, UK? You're here on a field trip?"

Their chaperone held up his hand. "Yes, these are pupils from my history class. We came over to see the latest reconstruction of the Statue of Liberty, the subway catacombs and other ancient sites. I thought I would bring them out on Long Island to visit the Institute, too. I think all of these students have met our own local temporal anthropologist, who's a bit of a local celebrity. Rather hard to miss in his top hat and frock coat."

A murmured giggle could be heard throughout the group.

The guide smiled knowingly. "Ah yes...Mr. Clay." She glanced over at his nametag. "You mean the famous Dr. Tobias Leach?"

Clay gave her a cold look. "Dr. Leach is from Oxford. Cambridge University's temporal anthropologist is Dr. Wendell Howe."

"Dr. Howe?" The tour guide looked at her wrist band. "Computer. Photo of Licensed Time Traveler Dr. Wendell Howe."

A six-inch tall three-dimensional image of a man hovered over her wrist. It showed the rather mild-looking fellow in a brown top hat and frock coat with brown sideburns just to the bottom of his ears and a modest mustache.

"Oh yes, Dr. Howe. How could I forget him? Records show he's in 1851 London at the moment."

"Dr. Howe is a modest chap, not above sharing a spot of tea with any of the townsfolk. Always polite to everyone." Clay defended their local hero. "Leach is a dim git who fancies himself a super-nova."

"I do apologize, sir." The guide delivered to him her best disarming smile. "Remember, temporal anthropologists are supposed to be unmemorable. They must not affect people in the past. Dr. Howe is a master wallflower. I know you university towns are rightfully proud of your T.A.s. Speaking of which, here comes one now." She looked past them, sounding relieved at the distraction.

The teenagers turned toward a tall, striking man with tanned skin and long black braids, sauntering through the automatic glass doors of the entrance. He was dressed as an ancient Native American, in a breech cloth, leggings, fringed vest and moccasins. He stood erect and proud, yet seemed to emanate humbleness.

"This is Dr. Chester Black Buffalo, from the University of South Dakota." The guide announced.

The Native American stopped and looked at Mr. Clay and the guide with a calm, patient expression, not unlike a great-grandfather indulging a toddler. His eyes, far older and wiser than his middle-aged face, scanned



the crowd.

“Dr. Black Buffalo. This is the tour group from Cambridge, England.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “Howe.”

“How?” The guide, incredulous, quizzed him.

“Dr. Wendell Howe of Cambridge University. I’ve worked with him. Good man.” He nodded at them. “I welcome his people.”

A student raised his hand. “Excuse me, sir. Do you always dress like that? I’ve never seen Dr. Howe wear anything except Victorian clothes.”

Black Buffalo nodded. “Yes. Temporal anthropologists are trained to fit in the period we study. We do not feel right in modern clothing.”

“Are you an Amerindian?”

“Yes, Cheyenne. I study my ancestors as Howe studies his.”

The guide pointed to a video screen of a Native-American hunter on horseback, running down a buffalo. “The holo-vid of the buffalo hunt was taken by Dr. Black Buffalo on one of his trips into the field.”

Black Buffalo bowed his head to the group. “Please excuse me, but I must go. Time machine to catch.” He offered the group a warm smile, then turned and left the room.

The guide watched him leave. “I think that’s the most I’ve heard the man speak.”

A blonde teenager raised her hand and pointed at a framed portrait on another wall. It showed a middle-aged woman with brown curls and a saucy grin. “Was that photo taken in the field?”

The guide followed her finger. “No. That’s an old photo. That is the great Dr. Serendipity Brown, the woman who invented time travel three centuries ago in 2353. She made all this possible. No one would ever be allowed to go back in time and meet her. That would be too dangerous. It might pollute the time stream. Does anyone here know what time manipulation is?” She pointed to a young man with brown skin raising his hand.

“That’s what happens when someone from the future goes into the past and tries to change what happened. That changes history and so it changes the future.”

“That’s right. That’s why all temporal anthropologists are trained to fit into their time periods and are never allowed to interrelate with or influence people in the past. They live by the motto of the Institute of Time Travel.” She pointed up to the ceiling where shining gold holographic letters hung spelling out the message: *Leave no footprint in the sands of time.* “One casual comment, a word of encouragement, the

smallest act of charity, could change everything. You could return to find your own present completely changed and never know it. We have no idea how much damage a hundred years of unmonitored time travel has done. Luckily it was too expensive then for many to do it. When Dr. Jonathan Taylor, in his brilliant book *Time Manipulation: Are We Polluting Our Own Time Stream?* pointed out the truth to us, the citizens of the world went into a panic and demanded all time travel stop.”

“Wasn’t Taylor really just a dentist?” a cheeky girl with red hair interrupted.

“Yes, Rachel.” The guide read her nametag. “That just proves how brilliant the man truly was.”

“Brilliant?” Rachel sneered. “He wasn’t a scientist, just a fraud. He didn’t know what he was talking about. No one has ever proved you can even change the past. The Time Purists are just a bunch of nuts.”

The guide’s smile became even more forced. “The Time Purists have every right to be concerned. Dr. Taylor pointed out that when time is changed everyone’s memory changes, even that of the time manipulator. So proving the time manipulation theory is impossible, which makes it all the more dangerous. Everyone knows that trying to change the past will only make things worse. What else could explain those horrible events of the past like the Black Death or the rise of Adolph Hitler or sinking of the Titanic?”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Right. Some time traveler stuck an iceberg in front of the Titanic.”

“Rachel!” Mr. Clay barked at her. “I didn’t bring you here to start a fight. Behave yourself.”

The girl mumbled something and slumped.

A tall boy raised his hand. “So if time travel was so dangerous, why didn’t the Time Purists just stop it?”

“They did at first. There were riots, world-wide, demanding an end to all time travel. Others felt time travel was too valuable. Think of all the extinct animals and plants temporal biologists have brought back. Not to mention bringing back extinct strains of seeds, so we could save wheat. All the historians’ questions temporal anthropologists have answered. And that’s just the beginning. So as a compromise the Institute of Time Travel was formed to regulate all time travel. The Institute’s Enforcement Agency is on the job, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Only licensed time travelers in Institute-owned time machines are allowed to travel into the past on Institute-approved projects. If anyone tries to travel without a time travel license in an unregistered time machine, the

Enforcers will find out and immediately go after them. We can all sleep peacefully at night knowing they are on the job, protecting the past and thus preserving the present and our future.”

A tan girl, with jet-black hair, raised her hand. “Are the rumors true? Can Enforcers go back and erase temporal anthropologists even if they just make a mistake?”

“Erase?”

“You know, erase from history? Go back in time and kill someone and make it look like an accident just before the time travel bloke makes the mistake? That way the time manipulation never happens and no one knows he was murdered. That’s what *The Shirazi* vid-cast said.”

“Oi!” The girl beside her crossed her arms. “Would they do that to *our* temporal anthropologist? He’s a nice chap. Could these Enforcer blokes really murder a right mate like Dr. Howe?”

The guide delivered an obviously-forced chuckle. “Now, why would you think Enforcers would ever do anything like that?” She turned. “If you will all follow me, we have a holographic demonstration to show you how it feels to travel back in time.”

The group dutifully fell in step, but the two girls paused, looking at each other. The tan-skinned girl snorted. “How stupid does this bot-brain think we are?”

The other girl whispered back. “Yeah, twit didn’t even bother to deny it.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Sherman, staring out the window, resigned himself to fate, sighed and closed his eyes. Would the world ever return to order? He opened his eyes again, and to his delighted surprise, the scene in the street below began bustling, with everything moving as if nothing had happened. He heard a teacup shatter on the floor behind him; Wendell's voice loudly yelled "—button!"

Sherman spun around to find both Wendell and Serendipity staring in shock at the empty space where Sherman had been standing five minutes ago.

"What the—?" Serendipity jumped up. "What happened to Sherman?"

Wendell whirled about, searching. He found Sherman at the window on the other end of the room. Stomping over and snatching the watch from Sherman's hand, he reprimanded, "If you don't mind; that is not a toy!"

"How in the cosmos did you get over there, kid?" Serendipity turned around wide-eyed.

"What the hell just happened?" Sherman's voice shook.

"I told you it was a Stop Watch." Wendell put it back in its box. "It stops time."

"What!" Sherman and Serendipity both yelped in unison.

"All right, technically it just appears that way. Time doesn't actually stop, it continues on. The person holding the watch gets kicked into the fourth dimension, putting him out of phase with the rest of the universe, hence the world seems to slow down to less than a crawl. If Dr. Brown had started to stand up, you, Sherman could have died of old age before she ever got to her feet."

"Radical!" Sherman exclaimed. "How did I get back? I tried, but I couldn't make the watch start back up, I mean stop stopping... I mean—"

"The effect only lasts five minutes. I don't know if that's as long as it *can* last, or if the technicians fear the user might suffer harm being out-of-sync for more than a few minutes. This is all very experimental and top secret. I had no idea the Institute had such a project in the works. They loaned it to me for my mission. They will probably erase my memory of it on my return."

"Is that where you got the gold coins?" Sherman asked. "Did you rob a bank using the watch?"

"Heavens, no!" Wendell scowled. "The sovereigns are gold replicas

the Institute gave me for my needs. I don't want to be carrying them all at once, in case my purse gets lifted by pick-pockets."

"Wow, so you're rich?"

"Hardly. I am allowed a comfortable lifestyle, but I would be calling attention to myself if I lived extravagantly."

"How would this Institute know if you did use the Stop Watch for anything else?"

"They have ways." Wendell swallowed hard. "The Enforcers always interrogate us after a mission. We have no choice but to tell them everything."

"They torture you?" Serendipity looked concerned.

"No, nothing painful—well, not too much." Wendell's left cheek twitched with a sudden nervous tic. "You just tell them everything—*everything*. Everything you saw, everything you said, everything you did, even things you forgot. If they think you did something intentionally wrong, they arrest you. If they think you merely showed poor judgment in any way that might possibly jeopardize history, they can eliminate you from the program and you'll never be allowed to time travel again. When you're a temporal anthropologist you walk a fine line!"

"And yet they expect you to *steal*?" Serendipity shook her head. "You obviously have no experience being dishonest."

"I'm not stealing. I'm merely exchanging." Wendell reached into his pocket and pulled out the other box he had taken from his time machine. He opened it and showed it to Serendipity. Her eyes opened wide and she gasped. Sherman came over to see the contents. There sat a huge diamond that glittered even in the fading light from the window. "This is an exact replica of the Koh-I-Noor Diamond before it was cut down."

"Wow!" Sherman's eyes widened. "It sure sparkles."

"Yes," Wendell nodded. "'Koh-I-Noor' does mean 'Mountain of Light.'"

"It's beautiful!" Serendipity said. "They should have left it alone."

Wendell's mouth turned up at one corner. "Yes, I agree. As I said before, many felt it didn't have enough facets, didn't catch enough fire. Of course the display at the Great Exhibition isn't properly lit."

"It looks so real." Sherman studied the gem.

"It *is* real!" Wendell handed it to him. "This is a real diamond. All right, so it's manmade, but technology by the twenty-seventh century has perfected the synthetic diamond. Indeed it takes our technology to discern

this isn't natural. We have enough documentation and photos to replicate the Koh-I-Noor exactly. They'll never know the real one was—erm, exchanged.”

Sherman frowned. “But you said they figured out the diamond in the crown was a replica. Apparently it's *this* replica? So wouldn't that make this the real Koh-I-Noor Diamond?”

“No, this would be the real ‘Queen Consort's Crown Diamond’ and not the ancient Koh-I-Noor Diamond which is thousands of years old. I'll be rescuing that one from Prince Albert.”

“Then this diamond, since it was made in the twenty-seventh century, would be *minus* seven hundred years old?”

Wendell held up his hand. “Rule number one in time travel: Keep things simple. Never over-think things. Don't go looking for time paradoxes. Just ‘go with the flow’ as the ancient sages from the twentieth century used to say. Just think everything is normal, because it is. Otherwise you can go barking mad.”

Sherman shrugged. “You never met my dysfunctional family. I can think abnormal is normal. So, are you ready to exchange this fake diamond for the real diamond?”

“Yes, I believe I am. I have visited the exhibit several times to case the joint as you Americans would say. I gathered enough footage to create a virtual mockup of the safe and its surroundings. I've gone through the scenario countless times with an ordinary stop watch. I'm down to two minutes and fifty-five seconds. Everything is ready. It's now or never. I'll do the deed tomorrow. I would ask you along, but if I get caught, I don't wish you to share my punishment. Before I go to the Crystal Palace I will give you the diagrams for the Dark Energy Drive. If I can be of any assistance I will postpone my mission to help you procure materials.”

“Maybe you could just give me a jump?” Serendipity asked.

“A jump?”

“Hook up your machine to mine and have it power up the batteries. You know, like I did with Franklin's Leyden jars. Your time machine would have a lot more power. It should have enough to get me to the twenty-fourth century.”

“If you need to drain my machine, that would be fine. I couldn't possibly get into any more hot water than I am in now.”

“It won't drain any power at all if we do it right.” Serendipity suddenly frowned. “What do you mean you're in hot water?”

“Have I not told you I'm not supposed to become involved with people in the past? I have broken that vow by just conversing with you.”

“But I’m from the future.”

Wendell relinquished a patient smile. “You may not be from the nineteenth century, but you are from *my* past.”

“Oh yeah, I guess I’m to you what Sherman is to me, huh? So, what will the high mucky-mucks do to you?”

“Revoke my time travel license—that is if I’m lucky. Possibly throw me in prison to make an example of me. Either way I’ll be stuck in the twenty-seventh century.”

“The future is that bad?”

“Oh no. Everything is wonderful and perfect...and boring. We have pretty much become one homogenous culture. Even the weather is controlled. Thanks to gene manipulation we live longer. It seems the longer we live the more aging slows down. Birth rates have to be carefully controlled, at least on Earth. Not every couple is allowed to have even one child. We have become a society of mostly the elderly, stuck in our ways. We are stagnating.”

Wendell crossed to the window, looking out at his beloved Victorian Age. “Things may be more chaotic and primitive here, but it is more alive. There are untouched places with wild animals still running free—not in some park that’s no more than a glorified zoo. There are so many different cultures and ethnic groups, indigenous people in various parts of the globe; during this period we have societies all the way from Stone Age to Industrial. Quite fascinating. There are innovators who see no limits; crusaders fighting the mighty for the sake of the powerless; the powerless fighting back and demanding a place at the table. To top it off, this is the birth place of most of the sciences and reform movements.”

Wendell turned back to his guests, and his eyes glittered with enthusiasm. “This era is really the beginning of the modern world. The Victorians started with carriages, candles and sketchpads, and finished with automobiles, electric lights and motion pictures. Everything is changing fast. Man has crawled out of the dark ages to finally exceed the Egyptian builders and Roman engineers and Greek philosophers. If the Victorians seem barbaric, it’s only because they were the first to really look at themselves and record the barbarism around them, all the while trying to change it. These are exhilarating times. You can’t ask me to give this up forever. Death would be preferable.”

“Then why are you throwing it all away?” Serendipity asked. “Why did you help me?”

Wendell blinked, as though trying to comprehend it himself. “I-I guess I just felt compelled to help you somehow. You *are* Dr. Serendipity

Brown, after all. I could hardly leave you stranded. Without you, there would be no time travel.” Wendell shook his head, and a wry smile crossed his face. “I may have ruined my career, but it was worth it. I will take the consequences—whatever they might be—distasteful, humiliating...it was well worth it.” He lifted his head, stiffening his lip.

Serendipity stood up and stepped over to Wendell. She put her arms around him and patted his back. “This isn’t fair, Wendell.”

Wendell appeared torn—as if part of him wanted to pull away embarrassed, and part wanted to hug her back—but instead, he stood motionless and bowed his head. “I’ll be fine, Dr. Brown. Don’t worry about me. Perhaps I shall not be incarcerated.”

“No, but you’ll be a prisoner in a time you don’t like and all because of me.” Serendipity pulled away and studied Wendell, then smiled. She turned to Sherman. “What do you say, kid? I have an assistant. Do you think I could use a consultant?”

Sherman cocked his head. “Consultant?”

“You know, Time-Travel Consultant. Should we ask Wendell here to come along with us?”

“Ah!” Sherman caught on. “Dude strikes me as okay. He’s cool.”

Wendell blinked at Serendipity. “Are you suggesting I run away from the Institute of Time Travel and go gallivanting across time with you, with no restrictions whatsoever?”

“Pretty much.”

“What about the Enforcers? They’ll come looking for me. They can follow me by my tracking device.”

“They’ll be looking all over 1851 London. You won’t be here.”

“And if perchance Enforcers were to travel to the same time as we might also be traveling? If we were there at the precise moment as they? Think about it, Dr. Brown. Suppose they detect my location chip? What then?”

“We’ll have your homing device removed.”

“But no one before the twenty-third century could do that.”

“In case you forgot, I live in the twenty-fourth century. And I have lots of money.”

“But my mission!”

“We’ll finish your mission and send the diamond back in an empty time machine.”

Wendell fiddled with his cuff link. “I’m hardly qualified to be a consultant to Dr. Serendipity Brown. I know nothing about the mechanics



of a time machine, and I don't really understand the physics."

"Wendell, you have fifty years of experience traveling in the past. You have a doctoral degree in anthropology, so you know how to deal with other cultures. You have a Ph.D. in history, so you know what to expect. You are a Licensed Time Traveler. Where would I find someone more qualified to be my time-travel consultant? Of course you would be useful to us."

"Yeah," Sherman said. "I know I could use your help looking after a mad scientist."

"See there, we both need you. What do you say, Dr. Howe?" Serendipity offered him an enticing smile.

Wendell stared at her, a look of despair, then confusion, then hope, and a half a dozen other emotions playing across his normally stoic face. "I—I will have to give it some thought, Dr. Brown."



The next morning Sherman woke up on the sofa to the sound of someone moving about. He opened his eyes to find Wendell packing his tea chest and a large bag that looked like it had been made from an old Persian rug.

"What's going on?" Sherman sat up.

"Good morning, old boy." Wendell gave Sherman a friendly smile. "I do hope you slept comfortably. I really must apologize for the poor accommodations."

Sherman blinked, half asleep, trying to remember where he was and who he was talking to. Back home, anyone speaking in this manner would have done so merely to be sarcastic. Then Sherman remembered this was a Victorian gentleman and the sentiments had been expressed in all sincerity.

"No prob. Thanks for letting me crash." Sherman stretched.

"Crash? Ah, you Americans have such a colorful dialect." Wendell carefully screwed the lid tightly on his spirit lamp lest the alcohol spill out. "I always enjoy visiting your country. I especially liked my trip to Seattle."

"What's Seattle like in the twenty-seventh century?"

"I was referring to my trip there in 1894."

"I thought you stayed in England." Sherman untangled his feet from the covers.

"Oh, no." Wendell packed the spirit lamp and its metal stand in the chest. "My basic persona is a Victorian English gentleman, but I can go

anywhere a Victorian English gentleman might go. I must say, the historians in my time were quite interested in the sewer-system problems in fledgling Seattle. Apparently the city had to raise the streets up a story or two for the sewer lines, so the toilets could flush, and yet they kept the stores and sidewalks at their original level. People had to climb ladders to cross the street. Some of my colleagues felt it might have all been some tall tale invented by the local inhabitants to—now, what is the term?—oh yes, pull the legs of the tourists. Westerners are known for their dotty senses of humor.”

“I’m from Kelso, Washington which is just south of Seattle. Our only claim to fame is that we are just across the river from Longview, which has the world’s smallest bridge.”

“Smallest bridge?”

“Nutty Narrows. It was built for squirrels.”

Wendell studied Sherman’s serious expression, and then grinned. “Oh, I say, that was a good one. You had me fooled for a moment there.”

“What fooling? I’m serious. It’s built over the road next to the library. It kept a lot of squirrels from becoming road-kill.”

“You *are* serious.” Wendell peered at him. “Come to think of it, so were the Seattle residents. And Americans think the English eccentric.”

Moans wafted from the fainting coach on the other side of the room. Serendipity sat up, the blanket falling away, revealing her lacy chemise. Wendell turned away, blushing.

“What’s wrong?” Sherman looked at Serendipity, then at Wendell.

“I did not wish to embarrass Dr. Brown by witnessing her in her undergarments.”

“Are you kidding?” Sherman tried not to laugh. “Everything important is covered. I’ve seen girls wear a lot less at the mall.”

“Sorry, I suppose I have been in Victorian England far too long. Any Victorian lady would be mortified if I saw her like that.” Wendell replied, his back to the scene.

“What’s wrong?” Serendipity rubbed her eyes. “Why did Wendell turn his back on me?”

“You’re in your undies, Ser.” Sherman tried not to smile. “You’re indecent.”

“Well, I am so sorry,” Serendipity’s voice dripped sarcasm. “I didn’t have anything else to sleep in.”

“That is entirely my fault.” Wendell stared at the floor. “I take full responsibility. I should have bought you appropriate nightwear yesterday.

I do apologize.”

“We were only going to be here one day.” Serendipity frowned at him. “It would have been stupid to buy us a full wardrobe.”

“Perhaps that is true. But still, I have caused you some discomfiture and I do regret that. I will be in my room so you may get dressed. I will leave you your dignity.” Without turning around, Wendell picked up his carpet bag and retired to his bedroom.

Serendipity stared in disbelief at the shut door. “Is he for real? And people say I’m weird.” She shook her head and stood up, revealing the ankle-length pantaloons beneath the chemise.

Sherman started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Serendipity looked down at herself.

“I’m sorry, Ser. It’s just your underwear looks more silly than sexy.”

Serendipity looked down at herself. “I do look ridiculous, don’t I?” She reached for her clothes lying across a chair on the other side of the couch.

Sherman threw off his blanket. “Yeah, I better get dressed, too.”

Serendipity bit her lip and snorted back a laugh.

Sherman looked down at the wool underpants covering his legs. “Yeah, I look pretty stupid, too. It’s hard to believe anyone would find Victorian underwear scandalous.”

“Oh horrors!” Serendipity threw her arm to her forehead, faking an English accent and Victorian swoon. “That my poor virgin eyes should ever be assailed with the sight of a man in his unmentionables! Okay,” she fell back into her Pacific Northwest accent as she repositioned herself upright. “Once we get dressed you go tell Mr. Prude we’re appropriately attired.” She stepped into her petticoats and pulled them up, trying to remember how to fasten them.

Sherman had finished buttoning his shirt when Wendell opened the door and poked out his head. His eyes continued to avert to the floor. “Are you decent, Dr. Brown?”

Sherman began to wonder if Wendell had overheard everything. They hadn’t exactly kept their voices down.

“Yes, Wendell,” Serendipity voice contained forced patience. “You may enter.”

“I do apologize for any—”

“Wendell, will you stop apologizing!”

“Please, forgive me.” Wendell gave a slight polite bow then

straightened up. “Oh, dear! I beg your pardon. I didn’t mean to—”

“Wendell!” Serendipity snapped.

Wendell revealed a sheepish smile. “Do excuse my behavior. I fear I have spent too many years alone in the Victorian age. I’m never quite sure how to act around people who are not Victorian. Please, be patient with me.”

“My social skills aren’t that great either.” Serendipity offered him a sympathetic look. “At least you’re polite. You are just culture shock for people from a region that tends to be informal. We are so laidback, we think a semi-formal wedding means wear your best pair of jeans.”

“What?” Sherman stared at her. “You mean I shouldn’t have worn jeans to my cousin Nancy’s wedding?”

Wendell raised an eyebrow at Sherman. He glanced at Serendipity. “He is making a joke, isn’t he?” Then he looked back at Sherman again. “Oh dear, he’s serious. I will try to adapt as best I can.”

Sherman looked away, covering his grin.

Wendell turned to his tea chest. “Now if you will excuse me, I must finish packing for home.”

“Packing for home?” Serendipity asked.

“Yes.” Wendell began wrapping his teapot in flannel and setting it carefully into the box. “Today I procure the diamond, but first I must pack all my paraphernalia and take it to my time machine.”

Sherman shot a baffled look at Serendipity, who just shrugged back.

Wendell picked up a tea canister. “After appropriating the diamond I will immediately head to the twenty-seventh century. Before my task at the Crystal Palace, I shall give you a jump of course.”

“You decided not to come with us?” Serendipity sounded disappointed.

Wendell looked surprised. “I didn’t think—I mean I know I don’t fit in. Of course, I really don’t fit in anywhere. It’s apparent I would probably be more of an annoyance than an asset to you.”

“Wendell, you are our time-travel consultant. We need you. It’s not like I fit in anywhere either.”

“Yeah.” Sherman shrugged. “I’m not exactly one of the popular dudes.”

“Oh, I say, if you really do want me as part of your team, I would be greatly honored and would do my best to be a boon to you, Dr. Brown.” Wrapping his saucers and remaining teacup in a tea towel, he placed them in the chest. “I would like to continue time traveling, and going with you

will probably be the only way to accomplish that, at this point. It also would be nice to have traveling companions with whom to share meals and conversation.”

Sherman had thought his social life sucked. The guy had to be lonely. Sherman remembered Wendell did have two teacups instead of one; as if all these years he had held the hope he might someday have someone to share tea with.

Wendell finished packing up his tea-making implements and closed the lid on the small chest and latched it. “There, that should do it.”

Setting his top hat squarely on his head, then giving it a slight tilt to the side, Wendell turned to the two. “You may want to grab the parcel with your clothes, Sherman.” He then picked up the chest by the handle on top and then grabbed the large carpetbag. “Very well, I guess that takes care of everything. Landlady should be satisfied; I’m paid up to the end of the month. Shall we then?”

Sherman snatched up the hippie outfits the store clerks had wrapped up in brown paper and string and hurried over to get the door for Wendell. Serendipity tied on her bonnet and followed.

The anthropologist, the inventor, and the fast food worker set off to steal the world’s largest diamond.



***I hope you enjoyed this preview.***

***If so and you want to read the next twenty-six chapters, go to my website [www.scablander.com](http://www.scablander.com) for ordering instructions. The ebook is available. The print version I'm hoping to get out in February 2013.***

***Let's hope I can keep that promise.***