

Chapter Eighteen

FRIDAY, JUNE 7, 2002

6:00 A.M. PDT

Less than an hour after the kids departed on their hike into Silver Creek Canyon, Emmett woke, not stirred by any unusual noise or discomfort, but simply because his body finally decided it had had enough sleep for the time being. After visiting Clara had left to go talk to her husband and his own Clara had returned, they'd had a brief discussion about all the unpleasantry that had happened between him and his counterpart, and he readily agreed that they needed a little time apart to get their heads back together — and that he was in dire need of sleep. He hadn't been sleeping all that well for a week or so prior to the arrival of their guests, and he'd gotten even worse since then. He needed some decent rest, and fretting about things he couldn't solve wasn't helping at all. The fact that after he'd laid down to take the nap ordered by his wife, he'd fallen asleep very quickly and stayed asleep until she came to wake him for supper proved the need more than adequately. He'd expected to toss and turn, but he hadn't. Maybe the relief of finding out what had been driving him to overwork these past three years had removed more of a burden than he'd realized he'd been carrying; maybe the simple act of sending a brief apology to his counterpart was enough to ease his conscience. Whatever the case, he'd slept, and had not gone to bed any later than usual.

Now, however, if he tried to keep on sleeping, he was going to overdo and possibly ruin all the good the rest had done. Clara was still soundly asleep, and he decided to let her stay that way. Despite little Emily's misgivings about her father's culinary skills, he knew he was capable of preparing a perfectly edible breakfast for more than just himself, and decided to give his wife and her counterpart the day off, in that regard. They'd have enough on their hands with the little party they were planning for the Martys that evening.

The first order of business for any early morning cooking, the inventor had long since decided, was coffee, and after he'd cleaned up and dressed for the day, that was the first task he had planned for when he reached the kitchen. When he arrived, he found Tink and Nemo happily lapping up some spilled milk and cereal on the floor. Sounds from the direction of the TV room told him that Chris and Emily were probably the culprits. For a moment, he considered going after them to discuss the matter of messing up the kitchen, but he decided he'd save it for later. From the sounds of things, they were watching *Star Wars Episode One* yet again, which would at least keep them out of trouble for a couple of hours. It sometimes amazed him, how often kids that age could watch the same thing again and again and again and never seem to tire of it, but so long as it kept them occupied and gave little Emily something to focus on that didn't involve hacking her way into the house security computers, he wouldn't complain. He wiped up the remains of the mess before Nemo and Tink gorged themselves on things they shouldn't be eating, fed the pets their proper meals, then set about making coffee and preparing the rest of breakfast.

While the coffee was brewing, he set up the bread maker to prepare one of the quicker varieties of breakfast breads, which, given the hour, would be ready just about the time the older kids bestirred themselves. The convenient little gadget was doing its thing when Nemo whined to be let out. She was a well-trained dog and only seemed to get into trouble when the boys took her for walks in the woods, so Emmett had no qualms about it. When she was done with her business, she'd either go back to her dog house to keep her distance from the strange duplicates who had invaded the mansion, or would find a quiet spot on the back deck to snooze. He wondered if the animals would ever get used to such strange intrusions, then returned to the kitchen. As he strode back into the room, looking down to see if Tink had finished with his breakfast, he bumped smack into his counterpart, who was heading in the direction of the coffee maker.

Startled, they both took a step back, looked at each other with identically guarded expressions, then cleared their throats at precisely the same moment.

Visiting Doc essayed a crooked smile. "It would seem that your wife was right when she said we're more alike than we realize."

"Rather remarkably so," Emmett agreed. For another minute, neither said a word; then, the local inventor made the attempt just as his double was drawing breath to do the same. "For what it's worth, I think I learned more from our quarrel yesterday than I ever thought I could. Not about you; about *me*. I'm sorry things got so ugly, but I don't think the results would've been the same if they hadn't."

"I know," Doc agreed, his nod emphatic. "It gave me — and my Clara — quite a bit to think about that probably would've been put off again if it hadn't come out into the open so... forcefully. I'm not sorry about that, even though it's made me face up to things that aren't very pleasant. But I am sorry for the things I said because I was angry with you for telling me the truth. Some realities just aren't easy to swallow."

"I can agree with that one hundred percent, because that's exactly the way I felt. Both of us were partly right and partly wrong. Being in the right is easy to accept; being in the wrong never is, especially when you know, deep down, that it *is* wrong."

Doc did not argue with it. "So, will we be able to face up to these things and still work with each other or not? I must admit, I'm rather embarrassed to know that what I'd thought was something only I knew about was so utterly transparent to Clara, and you. Having my nose rubbed in it by another me... well, it did sting, rather nastily."

Emmett snorted softly. "Don't feel bad, I went through the same feelings. Nobody, not even me, was aware of the specific details of why I've been overdoing it with work and controlling things I should be letting other people handle, but you and the others at least recognized that I *was* doing these things. It wasn't until you said some of what you said yesterday morning that I understood why it's been happening in the first place — and now, I feel like a total fool because I *should've* known. That's a positive thing, even though it hurts to face the facts. And speaking of facts, when we have the time, I want to show you exactly how I figured out and proved that I didn't steal even the idea of a fusion reactor from the future. Seeing the reasoning might help you understand and sort out your own situation when it comes to your inventions."

"That might be a very good idea. Last night, Clara told me she's giving me until we leave here to reach a decision about our financial future, and what you're suggesting might help considerably. I really don't want to continue making ethical excuses to support my family; I *do* want to be an inventor — and one with a clear conscience. That's a luxury I haven't had since we returned to 1985."

"Then it's overdue. But first, let's make sure we're well on our way to getting all of you back home. I was able to make progress with the concept of a protective field for interdimensional visitors, but I'm not going to be able to finish it without another six months of work. Better to concentrate on what we *know* we can do, and solutions we know will work. That way, you'll all be home safe and sound as quickly as possible."

"As long as we don't get any indications that jumping through time is hurting Clara or the baby, I'll try to keep my worries to a minimum." He held out one hand as a gesture of peace. "Truce?"

Emmett shook his head and smiled. "No. Friends," he said simply, and accepted the offered hand. A distinct sense of mutual relief accompanied the handshake, the final proof that the war was over.

"This was probably the easy part," Doc admitted while his counterpart got coffee for both of them and started working on the other preparations for breakfast. "I'm not quite sure how we're going to apologize to everyone else."

"By being honest about it, I suppose," was Emmett's opinion. "We both let ourselves get carried away with stress and the notion that our way of living was right, but we were both wrong, and we stupidly let it affect everyone we care about. It's not an easy thing to admit, but it *is* the truth."

Doc sighed. "Yes, it is. I could almost wish time wasn't so pressing. I think I pushed myself too hard yesterday, to give myself something to do other than be furious with you and myself. I'm more than half afraid that if I don't take at least a couple of hours to decompress like the kids did yesterday afternoon, I'm going to wind up causing some serious mistake in the repairs."

"Then take the time off," his counterpart said easily. When he felt Doc's mildly scandalized glance, he explained. "There's no reason you can't. I've seen enough of your machine by now to know that the systems that need to be repaired or replaced are identical to those in my original train. At the moment, we need more willing and able hands than brilliant minds at work. We have plenty of those in our sons and Marty; my Emily and Clara know how to do a lot of the basic work that needs to be done. I could even call in Peter to help with that. He's actually remarkably competent that way, and I know he'd jump at the chance to tinker with a time machine if he's not tied up with business, or needed back home. We have options, enough to let you have the time you need to make sure you avoid mistakes that could wind up costing more dearly — in time or in actual life — in the end."

That sobering statement had a definite impact on the visiting inventor. The notion that a mistake made now in haste could cost him his family and friends was unthinkable. "Then I should do it," he admitted. "But I'm not really interested in going to a movie right now."

"Understandable. Sometimes, mindless diversions can be *too* mindless. But that's not your only option. If our Hill Valley is as much like yours as your Marty and Verne and Jules have said, then you should be able to find your way around without any problem. I know our wives are planning a birthday party for tonight, and mine said something about wanting to make sure both your Marty and mine are out of the house for a couple of hours later this morning while they work on something they don't want either of them to see — a birthday cake, I suspect. They were both putting together lists of things they want picked up, and I know there're a few electronic supplies we're going to run short of before we've finished repairing your machine. You could do them and yourself a favor and get some of their things and the lab supplies, and take your Marty with you. I can take care of the work on your machine and make sure our Marty doesn't show up until after our wives give the all clear. Wouldn't that fill the bill?"

"I suppose," Doc agreed after thinking it over, "but I'm sure people would recognize me if I went into town...."

"So? As long as we're not in the same place at the same time, they'll just think you're me."

"And is that good or bad?"

Emmett chuckled. "Well, not as bad as you might suspect. Look, don't worry, it won't be a problem," he assured his double. "We're not into thumbprint payment systems yet — that's not coming for a few more years — and so long as your signature and mine look reasonably alike, you can use my credit cards to pay for everything. I'll even let you use the DeLorean."

The visiting scientist contemplated the offer, then smiled wryly. "Are you sure you trust me, spending your money without supervision?" he joked, alluding to part of what had caused their altercation. "My track record with finances wouldn't appear to be the best."

This time, Emmett laughed outright. "It doesn't matter if you're the worst spendthrift in either of our dimensions. Trust me, I have more money than I know what to do with, and anything you can possibly think of buying — up to and including the whole of Hill Valley and everything in it — won't really make a dent in it. Get whatever our wives want, what we need to fix your machine, anything, even a car for your Jules, if you can find a way to get it home and make him stop pestering you about it. Just make sure you're finished and back before noon. That's thirty-five hours from the last incompatibility episode, and I want to run a scan on everyone to see if another jump is in order."

"Perhaps the trip to town should wait until after we've made the next jump, then," Doc suggested, feeling uncomfortable with the thought of any one of his family or friends suffering again from that apparently distressing condition.

Emmett shrugged. "Perhaps, but unless someone wakes up complaining of symptoms, I think we can take the chance. It doesn't appear to be an effect that runs like clockwork; other factors seem to influence the period of cumulative instability. We could be waiting until well into tomorrow, and I'd still prefer to expose your wife to time jumps as infrequently as possible. I don't think it's an unreasonable risk for you to go into town this morning. You need the decompression time, we need some of those supplies, and our wives are apt to turn on both of us if we disturb their plans over some piddly little worry about potentially lethal interdimensional subatomic incompatibility."

"Jeeze, I wish I was carrying around a video camera or at least a tape recorder," visiting Verne lamented after the Docs had apologized to their assembled family and friends over breakfast. Both Claras, having found that the task of preparing the meal was for once taken care of by their husbands, had decided to roust the others around 8:30, wanting to get a good head start on the day without depriving anyone of sleep. From the noises both Vernes had made, even that hour was much too early, but the surprise of finding that not only had their fathers reconciled but actually wanted to apologize for yesterday's behavior was worth the inconvenience. Chris and little Emily had been exempted from the session, largely because they were off behaving themselves, a situation none of their parents wanted to interrupt for the sake of an apology they might or might not fully understand. Better to deal with them individually, to make sure they knew for certain that whatever unpleasantry they might have witnessed or presumed was completely resolved. "This makes twice this trip that someone's said something that deserves to be captured for posterity! No one's ever gonna believe it really happened a week from now!"

“Oh, heavens, Verne, stop overreacting,” his mother chided. “Your father’s apologized for things before. It’s not like this was a once in a lifetime event.”

“It’s those theater classes,” was his brother’s considered opinion. “Everything’s a melodrama with you, nothing’s ordinary....”

The blond wrinkled his nose at him. “Hey, I’d rather be melodramatic than boring. So, Dad, does this mean we’re back to working on fixing the train today?”

“For the most part. The rest of you had a break, going to the movies, and I’m taking one this morning just to make sure I’m mentally recovered from yesterday’s... unexpected stress.”

His Jules blinked. “You’re going to the movies?” That seemed rather out of character.

Emmett chuckled softly. “No. I’m going to supervise the work out in the barn, and there are some supplies we’re going to need before we can finish the repairs. Since our Hill Valley proper is apparently all but identical to yours, your father can go do the shopping as easily as I can.”

“But,” Doc added, “since *getting* there isn’t quite so familiar, I could use a guide, and since today *is* your birthday, Marty, and you expressed interest in seeing more of the town, I thought you might like to come along.”

The musician appeared both interested and apprehensive. “Well... yeah, I remember the way in, but we’re not gonna just hang out at hardware stores and Radio Shack, are we?”

For some inexplicable reason, most of the locals winced or shuddered at that innocent remark; visiting Clara shook her head. “No, my counterpart and I have some... more mundane things we’d like you to pick up, if you don’t mind. We thought it might be a nice idea to fix a real homemade dinner and not rely so heavily on sandwiches and processed foods and whatever can be prepared rather quickly in larger quantities. And if you simply want to spend some time seeing the sights, so to speak, it won’t be a problem. There are plenty of others to work on fixing the train, and your absence for a few hours won’t be too dreadfully missed. Just so long as you’re back by noon.”

Marty didn’t even ask to question why that particular hour; he assumed that since the Claras were in charge of domestic matters, they wanted people back for lunch by that time. Even if he had thought to question it more, the looks Jennifer was giving him drove them completely away. Yesterday’s outing apparently hadn’t done one bit of good when it came to improving her attitude toward him. Now, she was glaring at him in ways he knew very well, accusing him of running off to “have fun” when she thought there was something “more responsible” he should be doing. Ever since he’d gone freelance and she’d started climbing the ladder at work, she gave him such looks whenever he was stuck on a song and needed to go for a short drive or something to clear his head. She never actually came right out and said it, but her vibes were loud and clear: He was wasting his time, doing something frivolous when he should’ve been spending every waking moment working, trying to get his career off the ground and generate income. For all that she was in a field with its own creative side, that end of things — writing — was apparently an aspect of journalism Jen had preferred to leave to others. She enjoyed the act of reporting, of telling others what was happening in the world in a one-on-one fashion; she used to write some of her copy, but Marty had always felt that wasn’t really her strong suit, and that the work on the air or in front of the cameras really appealed to her much more.

Maybe that was why she had such a bug up her behind about local Jennifer and his supposed “interest” in her. Really, the only reason he’d paid so much attention to her that first night was because he’d never even conceived that different incarnations of people could actually *look* different. Yes, she was pretty — but she was the wife of another him, for crying out loud. His Jennifer was overreacting to his idle curiosity big time — but perhaps that was less because of Marty’s attention to her looks and more because of the fact she was a print journalist, primarily occupied with that one part of their field with which his Jen maybe felt a little inadequate. Maybe....

His train of thought was shattered by someone dropping a glass of juice, sending liquid and broken bits of glass flying across the tile floor. Marty looked in the direction of the noise, saw a couple of the kids heatedly discussing whose fault it was and one of the Vemes head off for a mop and broom under his mother’s orders. When he turned back to Jennifer, she was gone. He grit his teeth in frustration. At the rate they were going, he might as well start thinking of moving back home with his folks. Jen obviously wasn’t going to cut him any slack, and he was beginning to have serious doubts that any kind of intervention or mediation — even professional counseling — could save this marriage.

"Let's go, then, Doc," he told his friend while the mess was being cleaned up. "I think maybe a couple of hours away from everything might be just what the doctor ordered for me."

Meanwhile, deep in the twists and turns of Silver Creek Canyon, Emily and Chris were facing frustrations of their own. "Are you *sure* this is where you guys crashed?" the latter wanted to know after they'd spent what felt like days wandering around some of the twistiest parts of the canyons, in search of the downed time machine.

"I'm sure," the girl insisted, annoyed that it was taking so long for them to accomplish their mission. "There's that funny lookin' rock I saw, right over there...."

"Yeah," Chris confirmed with a nod, "that's called Eagle Rock, 'cause it kinda looks like an eagle head, an' they make nests there, most years."

"An' I remember seein' it when Daddy told us to get outta the train so we could leave an' go to your house. It was right here, Chris, really!"

The boy considered this, thinking hard. "Maybe your Dad made it invisible. Can your time machine do that?"

She nodded vigorously. "Yeah, it's really cool. But Daddy says that just 'cause you can't see it doesn't mean you can't feel it. It just hides it, it doesn't make it go away. I don't feel nothin', an' it was here! See the scrapes on that rock over there, the black stuff? I'll betcha that happened 'cause the train got hit by lightning, an' it was still burnin' or somethin' when we crashed."

"Maybe. If you guys hadda get outta here fast 'cause it was rainin', maybe your Dad came back later an' moved it so no one would find it. My Dad really worries about that, people findin' his time machines even when they're busted, an' hikers come through this part of the canyon a lot."

Emily wasn't reassured by this. "But I think Daddy said somethin' about the train's flyin' stuff bein' broke. If he couldn't move it...."

Chris shrugged. "Just 'cause it can't fly doesn't mean it can't move. It's got wheels, don't it?"

"Yeah...."

"Then maybe he drove it into one of the box canyons, where people hikin' through won't find it, 'specially not if it's invisible. We just gotta check 'em out. It's gotta be down here somewhere. No way he could get it out if it couldn't fly."

From what she had seen of Silver Creek Canyon, Emily was very much inclined to agree. The walls were too steep and high and sheer, and there were tight places where something as big as the train simply would not have been able to pass through. But there were also dozens of the small side canyons, and if the train had left behind any tracks when it had been moved, they'd long since been washed away by the afternoon rains. She sighed. "That's a lotta places to check, Chris...."

"I know, but we hafta do this for our Dads, Emily. We gotta do somethin' to make 'em stop worryin' an' bein' upset an' not be mad at each other anymore. Our Moms couldn't do it, so we hafta."

His logic was impeccable, especially to another six-year-old, so Emily surrendered to it, and they began their careful search of the maze of canyons.

The route from the old Morris Estate into Hill Valley proper was actually quite direct. The rural highway that was known as Fairy Chasm Road in this dimension was, Doc noticed, the same road that in their own reality ran along a ridge that followed one of the smaller streams that, like Silver Creek, fed into the branch of the American River that had once given Riverside Drive its name. As had been speculated a few days before, the area in which the local Emmett Brown — and even Marty McFly — lived was unfamiliar to their visiting incarnations simply because in their reality, it was largely undeveloped. Parts of it, Doc seemed to recall, were a nature preserve even in their own world, and other

parts that had once been farms were only now coming under the interest of developers thinking to expand into the area with newer and more expensive bedroom communities. The land was reasonably attractive for such things, both because it was nicely wooded in places and because the major roads coming out of that area gave easy access to both the interstate and the main drags through town. It was even possible that a mansion similar to his counterpart's had existed at some point in his own world, but had been destroyed by fire or left to decay completely so long ago, it had been forgotten a hundred years into the future.

Now that he was better oriented as to their location in regard to the rest of Hill Valley, he realized that his counterpart's home wasn't really as far from his own as he'd thought. According to a map Marty found in the DeLorean — the musician had been intrigued by the fact that this was the first time he'd ever ridden in an unmodified version of the car, and had to look around to see just how much space had been lost to the time machine mechanisms — Elmdale Road, aka Highway 8 in both realities, was a major thoroughfare that ran through downtown Hill Valley, then made a major bend south, following first another branch of the river and then the southern portion of the railway spur that farther north crossed Eastwood Ravine and passed alongside Hilldale. Ultimately, it took one to the crossroads town of Elmdale, south of Hill Valley, before continuing on out of the foothills and into the Sacramento Valley. Elmdale Lane, the street on which visiting Doc and his family lived, was a smaller, quieter road that branched off of the larger highway about a mile or two south of Eastwood Ravine and the crossing where the first DeLorean time machine had met its end. Caught in a kind of cul-de-sac between the river and the railroad, it was no wonder the area hadn't been all that popular as a residential neighborhood in Doc's reality, not when there were places much more accessible and congenial for the developers to exploit. That very thing had made the place appealing to the inventor, since it kept curious neighbors at arm's length and gave him and his family some degree of privacy. Not quite as much as his local avatar enjoyed, but enough. Elmdale Lane was almost exactly halfway between Lyon Estates and the Morris Estate, as the crow flies, all three being not far from different portions of the same river that cut a swath across Hill Valley.

"We should go over there and see if your house is around, in this dimension," Marty suggested as he squinted at that detail of the map. "Nothing's really all that far from anything around here, just like back home."

"First things first," Doc replied, neither approving nor disapproving of the idea. "You said the area around the mall is the same here?"

"Pretty much," Marty confirmed as he folded up the map. "Not exactly, just sort of the way things change in shopping districts over eight years. Some stores are gone, some new things took their places, some got remodeled, stuff like that. The places you'd be interested in are all still there, though, and the stuff on Clara's shopping list shouldn't be hard to find."

He made a soft sound, looking out the window at the world and the traffic going by. "Y'know, I'm surprised things aren't a whole lot different, here. What we saw in 2015 was sure wild, but this is pretty much the way things are at home. Should it be like this, or is this world running different than ours?"

"Not really. It isn't until around 2010 that things started to change significantly in our world. Hover cars were introduced to the general public around that time, and that made some major alterations in things like urban layout and design necessary. When something that dramatic happens almost overnight, extreme measures sometimes become necessary to accommodate them. Buildings get torn down to make way for things that serve flying traffic, the need for surface streets diminishes, amenities for pedestrians become easier.... A lot can change in five years, and a lot has, according to some things my counterpart's told me. Have you taken a look at the sky around here, for instance?"

"Well... not exactly," the musician admitted, looking up at it now that his attention was drawn in that direction. "There aren't any flying cars, that's for sure...."

"No, but there also isn't nearly as much air pollution. There's still some, but it's primarily from engine exhaust, which is why my counterpart's been working on an automotive and industrial engine that works on fusion power. They apparently hadn't expected a shift from traditional power plants to fusion power to make as big a difference in air quality as it did, but it did, especially in more densely urban areas. Here, it's not as noticeable as it would be in, say, Los Angeles, but you *can* see it, in less haze, clearer skies — and no high voltage electrical towers. Emmett told me they took down the last of them two years ago, here in Hill Valley."

"Wow," Marty breathed, recalling his childhood at Lyon Estates and the years in which he'd lived in the shadows of those skeletal giants that had always given him the creeps when he got too close and could hear the crackling of the lines overhead. "If we've got time, Doc, I wanna see that. I can't picture my folks' house without those things around."

"If we have time," the inventor agreed. "But just to drive by. I don't want to take any chances of you accidentally running into your parents, or possibly your counterpart."

The youth shook his head. "Not gonna happen. Before we left, the other Doc told me that he called his Marty about coming over today. He's still straightening things out with that client of his who called in a panic yesterday, his folks left on their trip this morning, and he and his Jen are taking the kids over to her folks' place for the rest of the day. Her aunt's in town and she wanted to spend time with their kids, and my in-laws' place is nowhere near Lyon Estates. My double and his wife'll be coming over later today to help do the mediation thing with me and Jen."

He sighed heavily. "I sure hope this works. I swear, every day, Jen's finding some new reason to get madder at me, and I've been trying damned hard not to say or do anything to provoke her."

Doc was sympathetic, much more than he'd been the previous morning. "I know, I *have* been watching you. I even attempted to speak with Jennifer before we left the campsite in Oregon, but at the time, I didn't want to meddle, and I got the distinct impression she preferred it that way. I obviously have communications problems of my own, so I'm not really in a position to be giving out advice, but I do hope that your counterparts can find a way to help. I know you and Jennifer once had a miserable future because you got involved in that drag race, and I know that your decisions ultimately improved that situation. But what we see in the future one day may not be there tomorrow; the entire picture can change. Until we were stranded in the future when the DeLorean was destroyed, I really had no idea Jennifer would choose a long-term career in broadcasting. Something changed that prompted her to make that decision, and it might prompt her to make other decisions we can't predict."

Marty rubbed his eyes, massaging away a dim ache behind them. "I know, I've been thinking about that ever since Jen got the job working with that Ben creep. She told me she really loved me when I asked her about this before we got married, but how do I know that it won't change? That was when we were both on the same level, struggling to start our careers. We supported each other back then, but now..." He shook his head and sighed. "Now, she's taking off like a rocket, and I'm fizzling like our campfire back in all that rain. Maybe the future we saw a few years ago didn't turn out that way *just* because we got stranded and couldn't get home. Maybe it happened because Jen met Ben Foster and found out she likes him better'n me. It's easy to say you're gonna love someone forever when that's the best choice you have, and think you're ever gonna get. That doesn't mean you can't — or won't — change your mind."

"True enough," Doc admitted. "For what it's worth, I worried about the same things with Clara. For a long time, I thought she had to be pitying me on some level, and that when someone more to her liking came along, I'd be history. I suspect almost everyone worries about that at some point during a relationship. I don't know Jennifer as well as you do, so I can't say anything for certain, but I believe her feelings toward you always were genuine, and that they still are. She seems... confused, I think, conflicted. I don't know why and I can't say for certain that things will resolve in your favor, but I do believe that you *can* work this out and settle your differences without getting a divorce."

The musician snorted softly. "I'd like to believe that, too, but until I can get her to stay in the same room with me for two minutes and actually *talk*, I can't see how it's gonna happen. You wanna pick up your stuff first, Doc, or the stuff the Claras asked us to get?"

His sudden change of topic made it clear that Marty really didn't feel additional discussion about his marital life was going to help, right now. Doc tended to agree, and let it drop. "We should save the grocery shopping for last. Some of the items on the list are perishable, and we can make a market closer to our hosts' home the last stop."

"That's what I was thinking. There's a new strip shop just up the street from the Lone Pine Mall, we passed it on our way to the theater yesterday. I think I spotted some kind of huge electronic supply store on one end, and a big music store on the other. Can we take a shot at that? I'd kinda like to see the way music is around here, if it's the same, and how it's changed in the last eight years."

Doc thought it was a good suggestion, since he knew how easily Marty got bored in stores that sold parts for electronic repair and construction as opposed to finished products like sound or video systems. The musician's recall was good; the new mall, Pine Plaza, was precisely where he remembered seeing it, and his memory of those two stores was indeed accurate. "Didn't there used to be some kind of restaurant here?" the scientist wondered as they pulled into the parking lot.

Marty nodded. "Yeah, some big seafood joint. Jason worked there for a while, until it got shut down by the health inspectors — hepatitis or something."

“That’s right. It never did open again, and no one else wanted to buy it. No great loss, and what replaced it is *definitely* more useful for us. I’ll come and get you when I’m finished. Unless the place caters to nothing but classical music, I’m sure you’ll find more than enough to keep yourself occupied.”

Marty certainly did, for the store was quite large and boasted just about every kind of music he could imagine. The thing that struck him most strongly only a few moments after walking in was the almost total lack of any medium but CDs. A wall display held some blank cassette tapes that all claimed to be good for doing recordings from compact discs, and another case held a variety of personal players for cassettes, CDs, and something called MP3s, but in the large selection of pre-recorded music, there were no tapes, other than a few videotapes of concerts, which were almost as numerous as the concert recordings on DVDs. Frankly, he was astonished that so much had changed in what felt to him to be so little time, but he supposed it really wasn’t all that surprising. The trend toward CDs was something he’d been predicting since the things first came out while he was in high school, and it was rather nice to know that he’d been able to read the potential market trend as well as he had.

As he perused the racks of recordings, he was also glad to see that some of the groups he’d always liked were still around, if not as prominent as they’d once been, and that some of the faddishly popular junk had all but disappeared. The proliferation of certain other things both came as a surprise and no surprise — in fact, what startled him the most was a small section labeled “of local interest.” Some of the items in that area were recordings made by the high school choir, a collection of old folk tunes popular back during the Gold Rush days that had been assembled by one of the instructors at Hill Valley University, a couple of albums cut by local wanna-be’s in a variety of different musical genres — and to Marty’s amazement, an entire row devoted to *Marty McFly*.

Astonished, one of the jewel cases was in Marty’s hands before he consciously thought of picking it up. To his disappointment, it wasn’t a recording by the Pinheads; it wasn’t even anything with his name on the front. He’d heard of the group who’d done the recording — a mid-chart rock group that he’d liked since he’d first heard them on the radio — and thought that perhaps the thing had been mistakenly filed here by an inattentive clerk. Idly, he flipped it over to glance at the back, had almost put it back, then looked at it again in a classic double-take. Half the songs, he noticed, had been written by his counterpart, and in the even tinier print at the bottom, his name was listed as the producer.

“Jesus,” he whispered softly, startled all over again. He knew his counterpart did both songwriting and some other behind the scenes work, but he’d been under the impression that it was primarily agenting and managing, not anything as major as album production. Granted, this wasn’t a top-of-the-charts group and the label wasn’t one of the biggest, but both were respectable, much more than he would’ve expected after listening to his local avatar talk about his work.

Then again, local Marty hadn’t really said all that much about the specifics of what he was doing with his music career. Back home, he himself had been trying, unsuccessfully, to get into some kind of performance along with his songwriting and studio tech work, but he hadn’t actually thought himself cut out to be a manager or a producer. Was it, perhaps, something he *should* have been thinking about?

Curious now, he searched through the discs on display. There were a couple of dozen different titles available, about half with groups Marty knew existed in his own reality. Only the one still in his hand had him listed as the actual album producer, but it was also the newest of the bunch. In the others, his contribution was as a songwriter, and for several, the entire album was full of his music. Many of the albums were less than five years old, but a few — largely the more obscure ones — went back much farther. In this universe, it seemed, his counterpart had been selling his songs since late in his final year in high school, one of the tunes that had been on the demo tape Marty had agonized over sending to a record company on that fateful day in October of 1985. Success hadn’t exactly come overnight for his local self, but it *had* come, largely through what appeared to be persistence.

He was studying the back of one of the more recent albums of nothing but his songs, and was trying to figure out if any of the titles rang any sort of bell with him when one of the store clerks approached him, grinning.

“Checking up on us to make sure we’ve got all your stuff?” the youth — who was probably a college student, as Marty had been when he’d taken a job at a local record store — said with a chuckle. “Don’t worry, Mister McFly, we’re making sure everything stays in stock. ‘Cept the one that came out last month. Can’t keep it in stock right now ‘cause it’s so new, but we’re expecting a shipment from the warehouse tomorrow. Manager says it oughta be on the floor by noon.”

“Uh....” Marty’s brain was bouncing about in half a dozen different directions, trying to absorb everything the clerk had just said. For one thing, he didn’t know the guy, but the guy sure seemed to know him, and he couldn’t help but feel that such would be the case whether his counterpart knew the fellow or not. Nobody in Hill Valley ever called him Mister McFly, not like that — the way people talked to Jennifer when they saw her on the streets or in stores and restaurants, like they knew her because she was a local celebrity. The experience was very new for this Marty, and he had to admit, he rather liked it.

He swallowed, sure the clerk was thinking he’d lost his mind or was spaced out on drugs or something, the way he’d been standing there with his mouth hanging open. He shut it, swallowed again, and managed a shaky smile. “Yeah, well, um, that’s okay, I’m not worried. I used to work in a music store, y’know, and I know how tough it can be to keep new titles in stock, sometimes.”

The clerk rolled his eyes. “Tell me about it. With everyone surfing the net these days, people find out what’s gonna be released months ahead of time, and some of the idiots who can’t read dates come pestering us, looking for stuff we don’t even have yet. That’s one of my favorite albums you’ve got there,” he said of the CD in Marty’s hand. “Always liked that group, and you wrote some great stuff for ‘em. Y’know, some of us think our manager oughta have you come in and do a signing, but he thinks people don’t turn out to see songwriters, just the stars. Maybe he’s right. But I heard you’re thinking of doing a collaboration next year for one of the big labels, not just behind the scenes. Is it true?”

If it was, Marty was sure he would be drooling over the chance, were this his world. “I’m... thinking about it,” he said, the best answer he could come up with that wouldn’t run the risk of compromising his double if he came shopping here on a regular basis. “You know the way the business is. Lots of talk, but not everything pans out.”

“That’s what I hear,” the clerk said with a nod, accepting the evasive explanation. “You here looking for anything special?”

The musician shook his head. “No, just looking, pretty much. Gotta check out the competition.”

The clerk laughed, but accepted that as well, and excused himself to go help someone waiting at the register. Marty watched him go, then returned the CD he was still holding to its slot in the rack. That he might take a shot at some other aspect of the music industry had occurred to him before, but seeing that another him had actually pulled it off rather well without abandoning the music itself was encouraging. That might be useful not only in trying to get his career rolling back home, but maybe in convincing Jennifer that it wasn’t going to be a pipe dream, after all. Maybe....

“Excuse me, Mister McFly?”

The voice that interrupted his reverie wasn’t the clerk’s; he looked up and saw the person who’d been at the register, a young woman about the same age as the clerk. She smiled. “I just wanted to tell you that I bought the album with your newest stuff on it last week, and I can’t stop listening to it. I think it’s got the best songs you’ve ever written, and if that rumor about you collaborating with some big name is for real, I think you should go for it. That would be so cool...! Well, anyway, I just wish I’d known you were gonna be here, ‘cause I would’ve brought the album and had you sign it. It’s terrific.”

The visiting musician really wished he’d known what she was talking about, but he managed to return her smile and get out a reasonably sincere, “Thanks,” before she returned to the register, giggling as she talked with the clerk and occasionally glanced back at Marty.

Feeling both mildly embarrassed and a little elated, he turned his attention back to the rest of the merchandise. He decided that it would be a better idea to see what the music of this time and dimension had to offer than worrying about his problems with Jennifer, which wouldn’t be solved here and now. But for the first time in several weeks, he was finally feeling a little better about himself, and the possibilities in his future.

The electronics store, Doc discovered a few seconds after walking through the entrance, was actually more than just a supply house. A good half of the place was indeed devoted to the raw hardware for the construction and repair of such devices, but the other half sold a wide array of just about everything conceivable that used wiring or chips in its functions: sophisticated computers, cutting edge video and audio systems, even programmable household devices and appliances with a much higher degree of function than things he was familiar with at home. He probably could have

spent a considerable amount of time investigating the ways in which such things had changed in this world, but he knew that first things must come first. He glanced about the half of the store devoted to supply and repair, and started looking for some indication of where the things Emmett had written down for him might be. It was remarkable, he reflected as he glanced at the list, how their handwriting appeared to be absolutely identical....

“Good morning, Doctor Brown,” a pleasant woman’s voice greeted him. For a moment, he wondered if he’d stepped close enough to some sensor to set off an automated device, since he was near a display of home security systems, and he recalled such instant greetings as being a part of such things in the future. But this was not the least bit mechanical sounding, and these gadgets needed to be programmed to recognize specific subjects. He looked up, and saw that a young woman, perhaps his Marty’s age or a bit older, had come up to him when he’d been busy trying to get his bearings. She was wearing what had to be some kind of store uniform, and a pin-on employee nametag identified her as Sandra. She was smiling quite cheerfully, her manner not at all mercenary, like some of the clerks he knew in similar stores back home, where they saw him coming and were happy to help only because they had him marked as someone who would help them fill their sales quotas for the month in one fell swoop. “Is there something I can help you find today? We changed the layout since the last time you were in, and I know I’m still having a little trouble remembering where everything is now.”

“Ah....” Doc glanced at the slip of paper in his hand, making sure that nothing in the list might be what he considered suspicious. Of course, something in the woman’s attitude seemed to indicate that his counterpart had been here more than once before, and that whatever he might be there in search of, she had no motives above and beyond being genuinely helpful. There was something subtle about her expression that Doc was quite unused to seeing in his own world. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he knew that it was nothing to his disadvantage. He smiled back, returning the congeniality. “Yes, I have some supplies I need to pick up, and since I was out running errands and happened to be in the neighborhood....”

Sandra nodded her understanding. “I know, I like to take care of as many things as I can in one trip instead of running out all the time, and I live closer into town. It must be annoying, sometimes, living out on the edge of everything like you do.” From her belt, she removed a handheld device smaller and thinner than a paperback book. One thumb flipped it open with practiced ease, revealing a blank LCD screen and a few buttons, while the other took what appeared to be a plastic stick clipped to one side of it, made a few expert taps, and brought the thing to life. It was some sort of tiny computer, Doc realized, smaller and apparently more useful than anything back in 1994. Intent on calling up some information on it, she fortunately didn’t notice the scientist’s fascination with it. “Well, just tell me what you need, and I’ll see if we’ve got it in stock....”

While he read off the items on the list, Doc watched the young woman skillfully consult the store’s inventory database to determine availability and location. The list wasn’t especially long, nor any of the items highly specialized; all were located with ease. “We’ve got everything you need, though it’s going to take a few minutes to get it all together. A few of the things are still back on the dock, waiting to be moved out onto the floor. “If you don’t mind waiting, I’ll go in back and have a couple of stockboys bring everything out to register three. Shouldn’t take more than ten minutes, but if you’re in a hurry to get going, we can have everything delivered to your house this afternoon.”

That was a surprising offer to Doc, and not because he thought the attitudes of service industries had changed over eight years. He suddenly realized what that indefinable something in Sandra’s attitude toward him actually was: respect, honest respect for a fellow human being and not simply the respect of a clerk for a lucrative customer. He didn’t experience that attitude very often back home, especially not from younger people who had been raised on tales of the town’s resident crackpot and had nothing to gain from being nice to him. Sandra was being neither obsequious nor indifferent, and the genuineness of her demeanor was mildly startling to the visiting scientist. “No, I’m not in that big a hurry,” he assured her. “I’ll wait, but thank you for offering.”

She accepted his decision with a smile and a nod. “Give me ten minutes, then, and everything’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready to go.” With that, she cheerfully headed off to take care of things.

When she was gone, Doc wandered into the half of the store that carried finished electronics, and was instantly fascinated by the diversity as well as the technological progress everything embodied. The array of home computers alone was fascinating, ranging from faster and slicker versions of the computers he knew at home to incredibly small and even more incredibly powerful “portable personal computers” that were the newest and most advanced items of the lot. The tiny things, which were only about twice the size of the device Sandra had used — something called a Palm Pilot, he saw from the displays of such things on sale — employed extremely refined voice and visually-activated technology as the primary input. The square thing was a little bit larger and not quite three times thicker than a typical CD case, and in fact had a thin slot along one edge designed to take full-size compact discs, both for data input and

for recording data the user wanted saved. Activation buttons along the opposite edge turned on the power and allowed a number of other functions, while virtually the entirety of one flatface provided the plasma display screen. Infrared and other wireless technologies were used to connect to modems, printers, or other peripheral devices as desired by the user, but it was a full and, to Doc, an extremely fast and powerful computer entirely contained in this one little package.

There wasn't anything quite like it in his world, in 1994, 2002, or for quite some time into their future. He was wondering why such a thing existed here when he was given an answer from an unexpected quarter. "Those things really do work just as good as the advertising," he was told by a man who looked to be perhaps in his early fifties, dressed in the impeccable suit of a professional in some kind of business or perhaps law practice. He smiled at the inventor when he glanced up to see who had spoken. "I bought one after they first came out a couple months back," he explained. "Sure has made the briefcase a lot lighter, and it doesn't give me half the problems my old laptop did. I have to admit, I was a little skeptical at first, but when my boy Kurt told me it was using those new chips and things your company came up with a year or so ago, I figured what the heck, let's support a local business. Y'know, I'm glad I ran into you, Doctor Brown, because I've been wanting to thank you for giving my son a good job right out of college. He was scared to death he wouldn't be able to find work without needing to move halfway around the world, or take some high-stress entry level job in Silicon Valley or up in Washington, and wind up burned out inside of a few years. Things just haven't been the same since Gates' bubble burst. Kurt worked hard in school, we're all proud of him, and glad he got a chance to do the kind of work he loves right in his own home town. And I'm glad all those doom sayers who were predicting Hill Valley'd go to hell in a handbasket if any big company moved in and brought jobs with it were dead wrong." He smiled again, slightly chagrined. "Well, I didn't mean to carry on like this, but I did want to thank you. Kurt's happy in his job at EPB, and we're all damned proud he's getting a chance to do good work."

Rather like Marty in the music store, Doc didn't quite know what to say, but thanked the man for his words of approval. As the fellow headed for the checkout, the inventor began to understand considerably more of why his counterpart wasn't unhappy with his chosen life, even though it did occasionally mean a significant amount of work and time away from his family. The notion that an inventor can influence much more than just his little part of the world was not unfamiliar to him, but it wasn't just the inventions themselves that made a difference, it was the way they touched others' lives. Doc still was fairly certain he didn't want to go into business, not on the scale his local avatar had chosen, but there was an odd feeling of satisfaction received from hearing that something his other self had done had given employment and especially opportunities to people who otherwise might never have gotten such a chance. If he did find a way to safely market his own inventions in his own world, the thought that their simple existence might create even a few such jobs and opportunities for others was undeniably appealing. It was contributing to the world in ways that had nothing to do with personal income or pride; it was giving back to life something of what life gave to each individual in their native talents and gifts.

It was definitely something more to think about, something that might help him reach the decision Clara wanted before they left for home. He checked his watch, saw that there were still six minutes left before Sandra had promised to have his purchases ready, and went back to perusing the other merchandise. He tried not to think too hard about the issues he needed to resolve, knowing that it would undermine the whole purpose of the trip, but the incident just past simmered away at the back of his thoughts, to be thoroughly examined before the time came to bring it to the fore again. But it was nice to know that a time and a place existed where rather than being an object of local ridicule, he was actually a recipient of respect.

When the scientist was finished with his errand at the electronics store, he went to collect Marty to continue on their way. In comparing notes about what had happened, they were amused to discover that they'd had remarkably similar experiences, which Marty decided was a sure sign that this trip was meant to be. "Sometimes coincidences are just coincidences," the musician admitted as they waited for traffic to clear so they could leave the Pine Plaza parking lot and turn back onto the highway. "And sometimes, it's God smacking you upside the head to get you to pay attention to things you should've thought of years ago."

"Perhaps so," the inventor allowed as he paid careful attention to the traffic, not wanting the trip to turn sour by totaling his counterpart's DeLorean. "It's one thing to listen to someone tell you about their experiences, and to imagine what such things might be like, but being involved with them in unexpected ways can bring things into much clearer focus. I'm glad it happened, though. It makes me feel much better about making this little side trip."

Marty grinned. "Hey, great, if you're feeling better about wasting the time, let's go drive past Lyon Estates. We've only been gone half an hour, tops, it's just up the road a mile or so, and I'd like to see what the place looks like without all those electrical towers."

"That's heading in the opposite direction of where we should be going," Doc reminded him.

The musician snorted. "Not that far, and we can pick up Highway 8 to take us back in the right direction. There should be a supermarket just past the spot where 8 and Lost Canyon Drive come together. A little farther south, Lost Canyon cuts west, and unless things're different here, it should take us back to the street your double lives on, just south of it instead of north."

Doc considered his suggestion, and nodded, pulling out onto the road in the direction of Lyon Estates. "Yes, I know the store, we use it all the time, since it's not that far from our neighborhood. But..." He was about to say something, then stopped himself, and Marty knew why.

"...we shouldn't go there 'cause it *is* your neighborhood? You're not thinking other-dimensionally, Doc. That's your neighborhood back where we come from, but not here, like my double doesn't live in the same place, either. If people know you, it'll be just because they know you like they did back at the store, not 'cause they saw you over at your house on Elmdale Lane. Hey, as long as we're going that way, we should stop and see if your house is here, too. You didn't build it, right?"

The inventor shook his head. "No, we bought it from someone else. It might be interesting to see if it's here, too — but only if we have the time. I don't want to push the time envelope any longer than is necessary."

Unfortunately, he pushed it a little bit without meaning to. After Marty had gotten his gawk at his parents' neighborhood without the high voltage towers looming overhead — an absence that did a great deal to make the place seem less dated and down-scale — Doc accidentally wound up in the wrong lane at the turn onto Elmdale Road, a change in the intersection for which he'd been unprepared. There was far too much traffic to consider making a U-turn, so Marty consulted the map to see how they could get back on track with a minimum of fuss. Neither man wanted to rely on their memories of how they thought things should be, not after that slip.

"Okay, no sweat," Marty reported after a quick check of the map. "This is just like back home. Unless there's some detour we don't know about 'cause of road construction, we can keep heading this way 'til we cross Hill Street a few blocks south of the square, then head north and pick up Main Street going west. It dumps right into 8 where we missed the turn off Sacramento Drive. Shouldn't waste more'n a few minutes, 'cause I can see the intersection with Hill up ahead." He made a softly intrigued sound. "Hey, Doc, do you figure the Clocktower looks any different here than it does back home? Still stuck at 10:04 and all that?"

The inventor shrugged. "I suppose so, though they might've gotten around to doing some of the civic improvements to the downtown that they've been talking about for years even where and when we come from. I've noticed a few things have definitely changed for the better — road reconstructions, overpasses to eliminate grade level crossings on the railroads, a new intermediate school on the west side.... Things do change with time, especially if one of the changes improves the local tax base and makes such things possible."

Now on Hill Street and stopped at a light at the southwest corner of the Courthouse Square, a block away from their next turn, both interdimensional visitors stared at the familiar landmark, which had indeed changed over the years. Gone was the parking lot and the sense of general decay that had plagued Hill Valley's center in the mid-'80s and for year afterward. Urban renewal had begun, but not the kind that tore down everything willy-nilly to replace the worn out old with cookie-cutter new. About half of the buildings around the square had undergone renovation or restoration, depending on their historical value; where there had once been porn theaters, adult bookstores, and storefront churches designed to combat the moral decay were now much nicer and less objectionable businesses of all sorts. Half of the remaining buildings were in the process of restoration, and most of the others sported signs indicating that they, too, would soon be getting a much-needed facelift. Statler Motors had moved out fairly recently; the sign proclaiming the upcoming reworking of the site also proclaimed *Visit Our New and Expanded Showrooms at I-80 and Valley Drive!* Lou's, which had once been a café, then a fitness center, then nothing by the early '90s was Lou's Café once again, only more of a true café ala Paris or New York rather than an old diner. Customers — largely business folk enjoying a break from the office — were seated at the outdoor tables, sipping coffee and reading morning newspapers, a far cry from anything downtown Hill Valley had ever seen before. The courthouse itself looked as if it had been sandblasted in recent years, cleaning pollution stains from the aging stone. And the area before it — once a park that had been turned into an often litter-cluttered parking lot — was again a park, and a very nice one, boasting a small decorative pond and fountain. The clock was still stopped at 10:04 p.m., the ledge near it still cracked. On the whole, the change was quite remarkable.

"Man, they really cleaned this place up," Marty quipped, impressed. "You think the city council's ever gonna get its act together and do something like this back home?"

"Eventually," Doc felt certain. "Almost every version of the future I've seen beyond 2010 has some degree of positive urban renewal, and restoring the downtown is consistently a part of it. We might see this much by 2002, certainly. There's plenty of interest in getting rid of a lot of the porn purveyors, and Statler's already been making noises about wanting to move into an area with more room to expand, even in 1994. It's remarkable to see part of the evolution, though."

"Yeah, it's wild," Marty agreed as the light changed and they were able to continue to the other side of the square, then make their turn to the south. He smiled as he glimpsed the remarkably renovated Lou's before they turned away. "Never figured we'd see a place like that in Hill Valley," he had to admit. "Seems too... sophisticated, I guess. Though I never figured I'd see my Mom and Dad playing tennis, either. Time sure *does* change things."

Traffic was both lighter and flowed more smoothly once they were back on the highway, headed south. Though some things along the way had changed, Marty recognized most of it, quite familiar with the route since it was one of the easiest ways for him to get from his place to Doc's. "Are we gonna take a quick look to see if your house even exists here?" he asked as they neared the intersection with Elmdale Lane.

Doc grunted softly. "I don't see any particular point in it, other than wasting gas...."

The musician's grin was impish. "Not in this car, Doc. Your twin put one of his fusion engines in it, and he told me they can go for something like nine hundred miles on one tank of the liquid glop they use for fuel. C'mon, what're you afraid of?"

"Nothing."

The answer came a bit too quickly for Marty to believe it. "Like hell. You want to hurry up and run home so you can drive poor Clara crazy, worrying about her. Am I right?"

The elder man made a very disgruntled sound, ending with a sigh. "All right, if it'll make you happy, we can look. But I suspect it won't be here. There *are* some differences between this world and ours, after all. Clara told me about some things she read concerning the original owner of the house my counterpart and his family live in. I recall that there was an Archibald Morris living in 1885 Hill Valley around the time I moved into town, but he never built a home like that."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. In our reality, Morris was a judge, but in 1885, he made the mistake of fining Buford Tannen for starting a brawl in the Palace Saloon during a Saint Patrick's Day celebration being held by the local Irish community — all fifteen of 'em. Morris was one of the people Buford killed and bragged about, but he got away with it because there were no witnesses."

Marty grimaced. "Bummer."

"To say the least. I'm not sure why, but in this dimension, he didn't meet with that fate. Something either happened to prevent the brawl, or Morris was literally able to dodge the bullet. In either case, in our world, he didn't build the house my counterpart now owns."

"But that doesn't mean whoever built your house never got around to it, here."

"True, but you remember the shape it was in when we moved to 1985, and that was after we'd done the best we could to help preserve it for ninety years of standing empty and untended. I shudder to think what would've happened to it if no one cared for it at all."

When they reached the end of Elmdale Lane and the little cul-de-sac where Doc's house was located, both men were surprised to see that it was indeed still standing, and in good shape. The Hill Valley Preservation Society had taken ownership of it as their headquarters, and had obviously managed to raise the funds to preserve it. Moreover, it was no longer the only house for a quarter-mile. The previously near-deserted portion of the street had been divided into smaller parcels, now occupied by modest homes and one late-Victorian bed and breakfast.

“Guess the old neighborhood really has changed, huh, Doc?” Marty chuckled.

“It would seem that way,” the inventor agreed, both surprised and amused by the alterations. “Well, I can now tell Clara our house is safe and sound and perfectly preserved. I’m sure she’ll find this very interesting.”

“Too bad we didn’t bring a camera.”

“Too late for that now. We ought to get our errands done at the market and then head back. This car may not run out of fuel for a long time, but I’d rather not press our luck before we start running out of time.”

Marty knew precisely what he meant, remembering the strange sensations of what their host told them were symptoms of their bodies malfunctioning because of their mere presence in a dimension not their own. “Good idea,” he agreed without hesitation. “Let’s get going.”

The supermarket Marty and Doc both recalled from their own world was exactly the same here, and it took perhaps twenty minutes for them to find all the things the Claras had requested. At the checkout, Doc was momentarily concerned about his lack of local cash or checks, but things had changed during the past eight years. Where places like groceries used to balk at the notion of taking credit cards, now it was apparently common, and the debit cards which were only beginning to see widespread acceptance and use in his 1994 were equally ubiquitous. Marty was a bit surprised to find that they were both recognized by the staff with whom they interacted — this wasn’t local Doc’s neighborhood, after all — but after what had happened to them during their first stop at Pine Plaza, he supposed that all of Hill Valley pretty much knew both of them on sight. For himself, it was a pleasant change from being “Jennifer McFly’s husband,” and it was nice to see what were probably perfect strangers treating Doc like a decent and sane human being and not some pitiful nutcase.

They made one more error before returning to their temporary “home.” Highway 8 and Lost Canyon Drive ran together for about a mile; the supermarket was located just beyond the northern point at which they merged. When they split, Lost Canyon Road headed southwest and now became Highway 8, while Elmdale Road continued on almost due south. In their world, the split was quite obvious because traffic stopped in all directions, but here, an interchange had recently been built to accommodate increases in traffic volume in both directions. They wanted to follow the highway, since it would cross Fairy Chasm Road much farther north, but they accidentally took the wrong ramp and didn’t realize they’d made the mistake until they saw a sign proclaiming their arrival in Elmdale.

The appearance of the sign alone was enough to make Marty whistle softly. “Whoa, this isn’t the Elmdale I remember,” he admitted as they entered what was now an attractive little community of new houses, nicely maintained streets, and a small assortment of little shops and restaurants. “I wasn’t kidding when I said the place was nothing but empty falling down buildings, a bar, and a gas station, last time I drove through it. Eight years sure made a big difference here!”

“No doubt,” Doc agreed, remembering the place much the way Marty did, not at all like this. “Does this street intersect with the road to my counterpart’s house, or will we need to backtrack?”

Once again, Marty pulled out the map. “Uh... yeah, just keep following it for maybe another mile. It’ll bend west first, then meet up with Fairy Chasm Road.”

The traffic on the road was relatively light, though much busier than either Marty or Doc recalled from their infrequent visits to the area. They came upon the bend in the road, just as Marty had seen on the map, and soon approached Fairy Chasm Road. To Marty’s surprise, Elmdale Road ended at the T-intersection. “The map says it should keep going,” he said, staring at the paper as if by will, he could make it correct itself. “Guess it doesn’t matter, since we’re turning here, anyway. Must be an old map. Wonder why they changed things...?”

“*That*, I should imagine.”

Dead ahead lay what appeared to be either the world’s most aesthetically pleasing office park, or the campus of some private college where architects had been turned loose to design truly inspirational halls of learning. The buildings combined a number of different artistic and design styles from over a thousand years, threw in dashes of modern and futuristic, and somehow managed to blend them all into something truly appealing, not appalling. The

landscaping was equally tasteful, boasting a large number of the old elm trees that had originally given the tiny crossroads town its name.

Marty was impressed. "Wow, this sure isn't around in our dimension. What is it?"

Doc shrugged. "I don't know, but it's beautiful, whatever it is. Some kind of private school, I suspect, or possibly a museum — also private, I'd wager. I can't imagine this would've been built with public funds."

"Not unless all the taxpayers went crazy, or the politicians stopped caring about getting re-elected," Marty agreed as the light changed and they turned north on to Fairy Chasm Road. "I suppose someone back at the house knows what this place is, since they only live seven or eight miles up the road. Cripes, I didn't think we'd wind up this far sou— hey!" he exclaimed as Doc suddenly pulled the car off the road and slammed on the brakes. "Gimme a warning next time you're gonna toss me through the windshield, okay? What's wrong, anyway? Were we gonna run over a dog or some — holy cow!"

The last words just barely made it past Marty's lips before the rest of his breath was taken away by the sight of what had so startled Doc. As they drove alongside the campus or whatever it was on their left, they passed what looked to be its main entrance. The inventor, with a clearer view from the driver's side, had seen first what Marty only noticed when his attention was abruptly drawn to it, a sign made of silver letters mounted onto a low-profile slab of black granite:

EPB Technologies

The musician managed to find his voice before his friend, probably because he was marginally less flabbergasted. "Wow, is this the company your double owns? Doesn't look anything like a business to me...."

"Or to me. My God, they must've spent a fortune on it... of course, the investment does seem to be paying off." He shook his head in wonder. "I certainly didn't picture anything like this, though, and my counterpart never said anything...."

"Probably figured you guys had better things to talk about. It's pretty cool, though, a lot better'n some of the ugly industrial parks around town. Hey, Doc, if you ever went into business this big and could afford it, would you try to design something like this? I don't think I've ever seen a house or anything you didn't buy or inherit from someone else...."

The inventor didn't answer; his gaze remained fixed on the compound across the street. As time continued to tick by without even a hint of a response, Marty looked at his companion, and suddenly realized he wasn't blinking, wasn't moving at all.

For a fraction of a second, he worried that something fatal had happened to his friend, until he recalled what the local Doc had told him about the interdimensional incompatibility problem, and how it most noticeably manifested itself. He also remembered the terrible sensations he'd experienced because of it not even two days before, and pulled back his hand before touching the unnaturally still scientist. He couldn't remember if trying to bestir someone suffering from this was good, bad, or just plain useless, so he waited, until Doc finally moved on his own.

When he did, he blinked like a waking sleepwalker and took a deep breath in an attempt to clear his head. He leaned back in his seat, grimacing as he tried to orient himself.

"You okay, Doc?" Marty asked solicitously. He remembered how it had felt for him, like waking from some cold nightmare he couldn't recall, but that lingered on in a deep chill through his blood.

"I've been worse," the scientist admitted, making an effort to keep his voice clear and steady. "And better. I presume I just experienced an episode of incompatibility."

"I think so. You were so out of it, you weren't even blinking for a minute, there. Good thing you'd just pulled over, though, or things might've been a lot worse."

The inventor nodded. "Quite so. I suppose it might've been my subconscious understanding what was about to happen better than I. I thought my early rising and general jitteriness were symptoms of stress — and they may very well have been, but of kinds other than the obvious. I'll be all right, Marty, don't worry," he added when he could see

his young friend doing just that. “From what we were told, it's an intermittent recurring effect in its early stages, not a constant one, and more of a nuisance at this point than a danger — except under certain circumstances, like driving a car,” he amended, thinking that the musician was right, they'd been lucky surprise had prompted him to pull over for a moment to gawk at his counterpart's business. He'd have to remember to thank Emmett for making the place so striking in appearance, he'd had to stop and stare at it, once he'd realized what it was. “Just to be on the safe side, though, why don't you drive the rest of the way back? It's only a few miles, you've driven DeLoreans before, and once we're there, it'll only take a few minutes to round up everyone, make the jump through time, and guarantee that no one else need suffer through this.”

Chapter Nineteen

When the birthday cake for the Martys had finished baking, and was being frosted by a reluctant and grumpy Jennifer, the visiting Clara went about preparing lunch while her counterpart went out to the lab to see how those working — including her husband, the pairs of Juleses and Vernes, and Emily, who claimed the younger kids were doing fine in the playroom upstairs without her needing to be there, engrossed in movies — were faring. The older woman did her best to pry conversation from the young newswoman, but Jennifer didn't seem to want to talk at the moment, keeping her answers short and vague. She looked tired to Clara, and stressed from the tension and anger that was most prevalent on her face as she carefully iced the cake for her husband and his counterpart. The arguing with Marty was obviously weighing heavily on her, but if she was as reluctant to discuss the matter with him as she was with anyone else, it was no wonder the fight was dragging on so long.

Clara had just finished setting out the fixings for sandwiches when she heard the breezeway door open and close. Thinking it was her counterpart returning from the lab, she turned with a question about the progress first on her lips. It was never uttered, however, as she saw her husband heading her way, his face serious. "What's happened?" she asked immediately as Jennifer quickly slipped a cover over the cake, on the chance Marty was right on his heels. "Did something happen in town?"

Doc ignored her question. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Fine," Clara said, confused. "Why, what—" She stopped, the matter suddenly dawning on her. "Oh, did Marty have another episode?"

Her husband shook his head. Relief flooded Clara, but the sensation was extinguished a moment later. "No, I did."

"Oh, Emmett, are you all right?" she asked, concerned, immediately going to his side for a closer look at him. Aside from seeming a little tired and stressed, he appeared to be in perfect health. But, she reminded herself, Marty had seemed fine after his experience and there was supposedly no immediate danger from the early symptoms....

"I'm not going to collapse and I'm not on Death's door, if that's what you're asking, but I *have* felt better.... Marty's gone ahead into the lab to let the others know what's going on and get the machines ready. Where's Emily?"

"She and Chris are upstairs, watching movies. Do you want me to fetch her?"

"That would be great. I'm going to go ahead to the lab to see if I can help the others along." The visiting scientist turned to Jennifer, watching them both from the table. "Do you want to come with me now? I think Emmett wanted to get readings on people before we left to see the discrepancies between our normal and deteriorating states."

The young woman hesitated, and Clara was all but certain it was due to not wanting to see Marty more than she had to. "I'll be out after I clean things up in here," she said. "It looks like lunch is going to be delayed, anyway."

"True enough," Doc agreed without argument. "I'll see you out there, then."

Clara was already heading for the stairs as her husband went for the breezeway door again. She wasn't looking forward to trying to explain to Emily why they were going to have to get into a time machine, especially since they were not going to be going home for several days more, at least. In some ways, it had been a great relief the little girl had been sleeping during the first transit, since she and Doc were both in agreement about not scaring her with the harsh realities of their situation. There would be questions this time, Clara knew, and she braced herself to answer them as honestly as she could as she reached the door to the playroom and pushed it open.

"Emily—"

Clara stopped as she took a step into the room, getting her first look inside. The TV was indeed on, but there was no sign of Emily or Chris. The futon was still made up as a bed, the covers disheveled and slept in. Frowning a little, she turned the television off, and stepped towards the window and door that led to the balcony, peering outside. From what she could tell, the kids weren't outside, either. Odd. After a moment of thought, Clara left the playroom and went to the bedroom that belonged to Chris. She looked inside, feeling a tad guilty at snooping into the private rooms

of their hosts, but that, too, yielded no sign of the kids. After quick checks in the rooms her family and Jennifer were using as their temporary homes and coming up equally empty-handed, she returned downstairs.

"Jennifer, did Emily pass through here?" she asked as she returned to the kitchen. The newswoman glanced up from where she was replacing some of the sandwich fixings back into the fridge, frowning.

"No," she said. "Why?"

Clara shrugged as she moved towards the rec room. "She and Chris weren't upstairs," she said simply, peeking into the room where the youngest Brown children had spent most of their time. This one, too, was without the kids, though their empty breakfast dishes were stacked in the middle of the floor, before the TV playing *Star Wars: Episode One*. Clara frowned once more as she stooped down to pick up the dishes, noticing that the room appeared a bit messier than it had the night before, no doubt because Emily and Chris had spent time in it.

But *when* had they left it? And why had they left the TV on? Such a habit wasn't terribly characteristic of Emily, who had been chided before by her parents about wasting electricity. She would, on occasion, neglect to turn off the television if something distracted her from her viewing — but seldom did it happen with more than one TV in the house. And this was the *second* one Clara had discovered in the last fifteen minutes, playing a movie, no less. She began to feel the first pangs of concern, then, though it wasn't until she checked other rooms on the first floor, without turning up any further sign of the younger children, that she began to seriously worry.

"Maybe they went out to the lab earlier," Jennifer suggested when Clara returned to the kitchen empty-handed. "If they were upstairs in the room Emily was using, they could've used the door that goes from there, and we'd never know."

Clara wanted to believe that, but she shook her head. "They'd gotten out there the first full day we were here, and were brought back immediately," she said. "If they've indeed managed another visit into the lab, I know that my Emmett and the local one would have let us know, by now." She sighed, very concerned. "I haven't seen either Chris or Emily since last night, when we put them to bed. Have you?"

Jennifer shook her head. "Someone has, though," she said. "There's no way they could have been gone for a long time without anyone noticing."

Agreeing with the assessment, Clara headed out to the lab while Jennifer volunteered to check around the house again, on the slim chance the kids were merely holed up somewhere in the large mansion where they couldn't be casually discovered. Outside, she saw the local Jules and Verne unloading the DeLorean of the groceries and supplies that Doc and Marty had gone out for and, as she passed them, she asked if either of them had seen Emily or Chris in the lab. Not surprisingly, both told her they hadn't. Very concerned now, she quickened her stride to the large outbuilding.

Inside the converted barn, as expected, there was no sign of the younger children. Emmett looked to be concluding a scan on her Verne as Clara entered.

"Good," Emmett said, glancing over to look at her as she stepped inside. "You're just in time. As soon as I've finished getting your reading, Jennifer's, and Emily's uploaded into the computer, we can take care of the jump."

Clara smiled wanly. "That might be a bit of a problem," she admitted. "I can't seem to find Emily *anywhere*...."

"She wasn't upstairs with Chris?" Doc asked, pausing his nervous pacing to look at his wife in surprise.

Clara shook her head, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Nor were they downstairs," she said. She looked to her husband's counterpart. "Did you see them at all today? Since waking up?"

Emmett looked away from the computer screen where he had apparently been inputting or examining the data on Verne. "No," he said. "I haven't actually *seen* them, but Emily has...."

All eyes turned to the older girl, who was standing near her father to get a look at the information he was putting in. She blinked at all the pairs of eyes, flinching slightly. "Um, well, actually, I haven't...."

The local Clara frowned at her daughter. "Emily, I thought you said they were watching a movie upstairs?"

"I did — and I thought they were," Emily insisted, her eyes darting between her parents. "I heard the TV on and I assumed they were in there."

"You never looked?" Emmett asked, his voice carrying more than a hint of disapproval. "Emily, you were supposed to be watching them—"

"Yeah, I was *supposed* to be, but I was tired of it," Emily interrupted, frowning a little at her parents. "Every day you want me to babysit, and I never even got the chance to *do* anything. Just because I'm not as old as everyone else doesn't mean that I can't help out here, and it's not fair that Jules and Verne get to have all the fun. Emily and Chris don't need someone to watch 'em — all they do is play video games, color, or watch movies — and it was almost more boring than school."

"Obviously they *did* need supervision, or they wouldn't be missing right now," Emmett said, frowning at the almost-twelve-year-old. At the word *missing*, Clara felt chilled, the term bringing to mind a number of unsettling possibilities, especially in a world foreign to her daughter in so many ways. "You just heard the television on and assumed they were there without looking in?"

"You did, too," Emily said, her words a mere statement of fact. "You can't pin all the blame on me, Daddy."

Knowing that the girl was indeed right, and not wanting to prolong the argument when there were definitely more pressing matters at hand, the visiting Clara quickly spoke up. "The most important thing now is to find Emily and Chris," she said. "Did *anyone* see them this morning?"

After a moment's consideration, there were no's and shaken heads from all around. Clara inhaled sharply, horrified by the news that her daughter might've been gone for as long as twelve hours, but Emmett quickly pointed out, "I doubt they left in the middle of the night. It's fairly obvious they had breakfast this morning, before I got up."

"Maybe," Doc said, grimly. "Maybe not. It's entirely possible they planned to leave ahead of time. I find it a little suspicious now that the televisions in both the rec room *and* the playroom were apparently on all morning for no reason — other than giving us reason to think they were there. If that was their intent, then I wouldn't put it past them to try to leave the aftermath of a breakfast never consumed, just to fool us even more. Emily is certainly capable of thinking up something like that."

"So is Chris," Emmett admitted with a sigh. He ran a hand through his hair, now looking worried. "All right, first things first — Clara, can I trouble you for a quick scan, to make sure neither you nor the baby are in any immediate danger?" At her hesitant nod, he turned to his wife. "Can you and Emily look through the house and see if there's anything to indicate where the kids've gone? And send Jennifer out here so I can scan her?"

"Of course," local Clara agreed, hurrying off with their daughter to take care of the tasks. Doc gave his wife's shoulder a squeeze as she stepped over to where Emmett stood with the scanner.

"Are you seeing any discrepancies between the new readings and the baselines?" Jules asked curiously as he watched the local scientist scan his mother.

"Yes," Emmett said as he worked. "It's in various states of progression, of course, for each individual — Marty wasn't the first to display the symptoms, this time — and it's quite dependent on one's body chemistry and the condition of their nervous system. Extreme stress, disrupted sleep cycles, over-exertion, depletion of electrolytes, and even what one's had to eat can all influence how long you can go before showing symptoms. Too much caffeine, for instance, can cause things to manifest sooner. And any problems with the nervous system can make you considerably more vulnerable."

Jules nodded, understanding. "Have you seen differences in the rates of decay, so far?"

"Some. You and Verne are withstanding things pretty well, so far. Your father, of course, is showing signs of being farther along, as is Marty."

The musician, who had been watching the proceedings, quietly perched on the edge of one of the worktables, looked sharply to Emmett at the words. "I am?" he said, sounding decidedly uneasy.

“Yes. Not as far along as my counterpart, yet, or as far as you were the last time, but I suspect within a couple more hours, you’ll catch up.”

“Wonderful,” Marty muttered.

“Am I that far along, too?” Clara asked as Emmett finished his scan, wondering if her sons might’ve been spared due to their younger ages.

After a moment’s study of the displayed information on the computer screen, Emmett shook his head. “You seem to be about where Jules and Verne are — not in any immediate danger. The baby, too, seems to be doing just fine.”

“Good,” Clara said, her relief echoed in the sigh her husband loosed behind her. “Is there anything we can do to prolong that?”

“Keep yourself well-rested, hydrated, and relaxed,” Emmett said. “Beyond that, aside from a jump through n-dimensional space, not really.”

“I thought as much,” the former teacher said with a little sigh. She looked at Doc. “And I’m not getting in any of those machines until we find out where Emily and Chris have gone.”

Doc frowned. “I don’t think it’ll be a long wait. The kids might very well be in the house, somewhere.”

“Then it’ll be a moot point,” Clara said, rather calmly. “But should things turn out differently, I am *not* leaving unless she goes with us. Emily is in just as much danger as the rest of us, and I can’t bear the thought of her suffering alone.”

“Clara, there is absolutely no reason for you to be putting yourself or the baby at needless risk,” Doc said firmly. “It’s foolish.”

“I am *not* putting myself in danger,” Clara said, matching his tone. “Emmett just told us that this sort of thing progresses differently for different people, and that my case is not as advanced as yours. I’ve felt none of the symptoms yet, and if Emily is indeed nearby, then I won’t have the chance to be in danger. You’re overreacting.”

“And why shouldn’t I? You’re pregnant, Clara! You’re willing to put the health of our unborn son at unnecessary risk?”

“Son?” Verne asked, interrupting his parents. “You guys already know the sex of the kid? Since when?”

Doc and Clara both blinked at the sound of the query. Emmett answered the question for the couple. “I accidentally discovered that when I did the first medical scan on the status of the baby,” he admitted.

“But isn’t it a little too early to know that sort of information?” Jules asked with a frown. He answered his own question a moment later. “Oh, I suppose not, if those devices can pick up as much information as they appear to....”

“Quite so,” his father agreed. “Yes, from all appearances, it seems that we’re having another boy, but there are other things to worry about n—”

“Did you guys already figure out the name?” Verne asked, once more interrupting. He looked both curious and afraid. “It’s not gonna be Galileo or — what were you thinking about for a boy’s name last time?”

“Gabriel,” Jules supplied with a little shudder. “That was Jules Verne’s middle name. If you saddle the boy with that, though, you’re just setting him up for years of being harassed at school. Verne and I got enough grief for our names at various points — even when we lived in the past.”

“We haven’t reached any decisions,” Clara said, finding the new topic a welcome distraction. “I’d like to give him a meaningful family name that ties in with our history.”

Marty grinned. “What about Emmett Junior?” he teased.

Both scientists grimaced at the suggestion. “No,” Doc said flatly. “You may choose to give your son your name, but I’d rather not.”

“There’s a reason why we call Chris by his middle name, and that middle name was *not* Lathrop,” Emmett added. “And if I’d been present when Clara named him, he would *definitely* have a different first name.”

At the mention of the missing boy, Doc steered the conversation back to the original subject. “Clara, unless you want to endanger our baby, you *have* to take the time jump, with or without Emily.”

As the woman opened her mouth to retort once more, Emmett intervened. “It’s a wise suggestion,” he said. “But, so far, Clara and the baby are not in danger. If we monitor her condition carefully, perhaps every hour, she should be able to postpone the trip — as the rest of you can — and when it becomes dangerous, she’ll go. That should be several hours from now for her, at least — longer if she takes care to rest and not worry — and by that point, I’m sure the situation with Chris and Emily will be resolved.”

Doc didn’t look too happy with the suggested compromise, but Clara easily agreed to it. “That sounds very fair,” she said, turning to her husband. “Emmett, I won’t put my health in danger over this. Honestly, if I feel that things are going wrong, I don’t plan to hide it, and I’ll let you and your counterpart know. Anyway, I don’t see you clamoring to get into any of the machines now, either.”

The visiting inventor’s mouth puckered, as if he’d tasted something sour, but at length he nodded. “All right,” he said. “But you’ve *got* to keep up your end of this by avoiding the urge to worry, no matter what they find in the house. The kids really could be in there now, maybe playing hide and seek. They haven’t necessarily left the grounds.”

Clara studied her husband for a moment, his words ringing false to her ears. He knew as well as she did that the kids weren’t going to be in the house.

Sure enough, when Jennifer arrived in the lab a few minutes later, it was with the news that the kids had not turned up inside and that Emily and Clara were still searching for evidence related to their departure. She allowed Emmett to scan her, going out of her way to avoid looking in her husband’s direction and pretending, essentially, that he was not there at all. Emmett had only to glance at her readings before relegating her to the same category as his counterpart and her husband.

“You’re advanced, too,” he told her. “Have you been feeling any of the symptoms, yet? Chills, restlessness, sleeplessness?”

Jennifer shook her head. “No,” she said immediately. “I’m fine and I feel fine.”

Something in her voice or her attitude gave Clara the distinct impression she was fibbing. Her husband’s counterpart apparently picked that up as well. “Are you sure?” Emmett asked again.

“Yes,” Jennifer said, a faint irritation creeping in to her voice. “Honestly, Doctor Brown, I don’t feel at all different.” She paused as Marty rolled his eyes, thankfully out of her line of vision. “Can I return to the house now, to help your wife and daughter? From my job, I’ve gotten pretty good at digging up information.”

“All right,” Emmett agreed. “Just try to take it easy. Exhaustion and stress can accelerate the rate of decay in a person’s nervous system.”

Jennifer nodded and hurried from the lab, breezing past her husband without a second glance. Marty rolled his eyes once more at her departure, hopping down from the table. “You know, I’m positive she’s lying to you, Doc,” he said to the local scientist.

“I am, too,” Emmett confessed. “Certainly she must be aware of some symptoms, but I get the feeling she’s either ignoring them, writing them off as unimportant, or unwilling to admit to them around you.”

“I’d place a bet on the last one,” Marty said. “She probably still thinks I faked the other night, or something like that, and it’d kill her to admit she was wrong around me. Man, I hope she cracks next.”

Doc glanced at his friend, his expression one of disapproval. “Marty! She’s your wife!”

The musician snorted. "She sure as hell isn't acting like it now — and hasn't been for a while. Maybe spacing out and getting the firsthand experience would do her some good and make her realize that this thing is real as hell." He changed the subject before anyone had the chance to persuade him against the idea. "So, is there anything we can do now with this Emily and Chris thing, or do you want us helping out here?"

Emmett's answer was immediate. "I don't want either you or my counterpart to assist right now."

Doc looked terribly confused, and mildly offended. "Why not? There's no sense in shutting down everything before we know what the status is with the kids..."

"No, but you, Marty, and Jennifer are showing too many signs of dimensional incompatibility, now. You've already had one episode today, and it happened at a very fortunate time. But imagine if you blanked out while doing delicate electronic work. It *did* happen with my other counterpart and me, and we lost more ground than we gained as a result — and it could've been considerably worse."

While Doc nodded but grumbled about this to himself, Jules picked up on what Emmett hadn't said. "But Veme and I could still assist?"

"Yes, for now — but I do think there are other ways we need to spend our time. Finding the kids is the most important thing, and having you all do your best to avoid the need for a transit as long as possible is of equal importance. It's about lunchtime, I think, and we might as well all have something to eat while we can."

While those at the house were just now becoming aware of their disappearance, Emily and Chris were just now realizing that the train wasn't anywhere nearby.

"I don't get it!" Emily exclaimed, frustrated, when they'd checked yet another narrow side canyon without any luck. "I know Daddy didn't move it far — he couldn't, not with everythin' all busted up, an' it wasn't at your house...."

Chris shrugged, stumbling over a loose rock. "Well, are you sure you pegged it in the right place?"

Having heard that question more than once, Emily frowned. "Uh-huh," she said. "I'm positive. Daddy musta put it somewhere else. How many more of these places are there to check?"

Chris shrugged again, stopping in the shade cast by a small tree-covered cliff above to rub an ankle he'd just turned slightly on a rock. "I dunno, lots," he admitted. "You got anythin' to eat? I'm starving!"

Emily was feeling the same pangs of hunger, but thus far, their mission had allowed her to ignore them. Reminded of it now, she looked up at the sky, saw that it was probably around lunchtime, and winced a little. "No," she said. "I figured we'd get back hours 'n hours ago. I didn't even bring a candy bar, or anything to drink. I'm starvin', too, and I'm *really* thirsty. Are there any water fountains around?"

Chris shook his head. "There's a spring, though, an' a pond," he said. "Can I see the map?"

Emily pulled the now-wrinkled piece of paper out of the pocket of her jeans and passed it to the boy. He sat down on one of the boulders nearby and studied it for a moment, turning it about this way and that and glancing around at their surroundings. Finally, Chris handed it back and pointed to their left. "I think it should be this way," he said confidently. "We can check the box canyons on the way. An' if we find it, maybe we can go in the pond, too. I know where it's shallow and safe. Can you swim?"

The girl nodded. "Yeah, Mommy and Daddy made me take swimming lessons when I was four," she said. "But I dunno if it's safe to drink from ponds an' stuff. They're filled with germs and things that make you sick or poison you. Jules and Daddy's told me that and we learned 'bout it in school. We had to heat all the water we drank when we were campin' and put tablets in it to make it safe. An' it still tasted funny, then. I wasn't s'posed to drink any water unless they gave it to me."

"Well, this should be safe," Chris promised her as they set out again with a new goal in mind. "The water comes from a spring, and those're like nature's pipes. An' if it was dangerous to be in the water, then Mom and Dad wouldn't let us swim there, and we've done that before."

Emily remained skeptical, however. "Daddy said that people should never drink water without boilin' it or something, if it does n't come out of a faucet," she said. "It could make you real sick."

"Well, I'm tellin' you, this is safe," Chris insisted. "I've swallowed the water before, accidentally, when I was swimmin', and it never hurt me."

Emily considered arguing more, but decided not to. If Chris wanted to get poisoned, there wasn't much she could do. And swim ming did suddenly sound really fun, even though she hadn't brought a suit and would probably have to do it in her clothes or her underwear, the latter of which made her blush a little thinking about it, though Chris wasn't really much of a boy — not like Marty was to her, anyway.

"What about food?" she asked. "Are there any blackberry bushes or apple trees or somethin' like that?"

"We got blackberry bushes growin' wild out here, but there not gonna be in season, yet. That's not 'til later July or August, usually."

Emily groaned. "You mean there ain't nothin' to eat out here?" she asked. When Chris shrugged and shook his head, she sighed, annoyed. "Well, we'd better hurry up an' find the train 'cause I know there's snacks an' stuff in there from camping."

"If your Dad moved it to one of the little canyons, we should," Chris promised her.

Emily nodded and followed his lead, doing her best to ignore the rumblings in her stomach, for now. She just hoped they'd find the train, period, or they were both going to get in *big* trouble when they went back empty-handed.

After making sure that the visitors were settled around the dining table with plenty of food and drink — and, most importantly, that they were actually eating it — Emmett conducted his own quick investigation of the downstairs rooms that Chris and Emily had obviously been in. The rec room was rather messy, though he wasn't certain if the kids had created the mess or if it had been something Clara and Emily had done earlier, while looking for evidence. He straightened it up quickly, checking for anything that might've indicated where the kids had gone, and found nothing. The kitchen, too, yielded no answers, though Emily and Chris had clearly been through earlier to make the real or faux breakfast mess.

Where could they be? he wondered as he headed for the stairs, frowning as he considered the question. Emily hadn't seemed unusually interested in seeing the town — or, rather, none of those who had gone to see a movie the day before had mentioned such an interest. It seemed odd that she and Chris might decide to take off on a hike or outing in the middle of the night, or in the very early hours of the morning. And if they *did* decide upon such a project... He shuddered, then stopped mid-stride to check the compass supply in the cabinet. If one was missing, it might give him an excellent lead to their current location.

Fortunately — or unfortunately — they were all present and accounted for. While trying to decide if this was a good or bad development, he heard a rush of footsteps, then his Emily came into view. "Daddy, Mom thinks she found something in the playroom," she reported.

"What sort of thing?" Emmett asked. "A note?"

Emily half shrugged. "Not exactly," she said. "But that's close. Come and look."

Curious, Emmett followed his daughter to the second floor and the room that the visiting Emily had taken as her own. His Clara was standing next to the window, where the light behind her back gave her a clearer view of the piece of paper in her hand. She looked up as they entered, her expression concerned.

"I found this under the clutter on the table," she explained, passing the paper to Emmett when he reached her side. "It looks like they had indeed planned something ahead of time."

The scientist needed to only glance at the paper before realizing it was a topographical map of the surrounding area, particularly focusing on Silver Creek Canyon. A blue X marked the approximate location he recognized as where

Doc's train had gone down, and a line was drawn from that to the marking, where the words "crash sight" were printed in Chris' hand.

"They wanted to hike out to where the train had crashed?" he said, half to himself. "Why?"

"That's what I was wondering, too," Clara admitted. "Especially since the train's been moved. And they were working on this last night, apparently — see the date and time stamped on the corner of the page? This was printed off the Internet."

The scientist sighed as he stared at the printout in his hand. "And no one's seen them since last night..."

"I doubt they left, then," Emily said helpfully. "Chris would know better than to go for a hike out there in the middle of the night. And it was still raining, then."

Clara glanced out the window once more as her husband continued to study the printout. Clouds were gathering on the distant horizon, preparing to move in by late afternoon, once more. "Should we let the others know what we've found?"

Emmett thought about it, then nodded. "Knowing is better than not," he said. "And we're going to need their help if we want to track down the kids. If they left this morning, they should've made it out there and back by now. That they haven't is not very encouraging to me."

"They didn't take a comclip, did they?" Emily asked. When her father shook his head, she rolled her eyes. "Man, that was stupid. I would've figured Chris'd be smarter than that after what happened to me last summer."

At the reminder of that incident, Clara shivered a little. "We'd better let everyone know," she said. "This is already a serious situation, and if we can't find them before little Emily starts to have problems, it could get much worse."

"Great Scott, they're *where*?"

"As far as we can tell, they've gone to where the train crash-landed. See the map? That's Chris' handwriting."

"But why would they want to go there?" Doc couldn't understand the news his counterpart was relaying, and he wasn't entirely sure if that was because it was as baffling as it seemed, or had something to do with the increasing effects of the incompatibility with the dimension. The jitters and spacey feelings he'd noticed since that morning had gotten gradually worse, not aided by the fretting he was now doing over both the health and well-being of his daughter, as well as his wife. "The time machine's been moved..."

"Did they even know about that, though?" local Jules asked from his place at the dining table. "We put yours in the hangar and have ours outside under disguise. And neither Chris nor Emily went with us to move everything."

There was a rather uneasy silence around the table. "That's very possible," Emmett admitted at length from where he was standing, Doc at his side while he examined the damning evidence. "I never even thought about that. Is there anything left in the train that Emily might've wanted and we hadn't brought back with us the first day?" he added to his counterpart.

Doc looked over to his Clara, who shrugged. "I don't think so," he said. "So it's your understanding that they left... when? This morning? Or in the middle of the night?"

"It seems this morning would be more likely. I don't see any flashlights missing, and Chris wouldn't be too enthusiastic about hiking in the dark, away from street lights and with wild animals wandering around."

At the mention of flashlights, Doc saw the oddest look cross Marty's face. "Ah... you know... I think I saw Emily today..." the musician said slowly.

All eyes turned to him. "Why are you only mentioning this now?" Doc asked, confused. "I thought you hadn't seen her?"

Marty shrugged. "Well, I didn't even *remember* it 'til just now, really. And maybe it was a dream, I dunno.... But I think Emily was in my room and she dropped something that woke me up a little and said something about borrowing my flashlight. I could check and see if it's missing..." He was on his feet before he'd even finished talking.

"Do you know what time it was when that happened?" Emmett asked.

"Not really. It was still dark — but I guess that room doesn't have any windows, does it?" Marty said, half to himself. "So it could've been any time. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Emmett assured him. "That was a bit of valuable information. If you'd like, check and see if the flashlight is indeed missing."

Marty started to nod, then suddenly froze. He remained standing, but his eyes and face had suddenly gone very blank and very still. "Marty?" Doc asked softly, not expecting any sort of response. He was correct. His friend didn't so much as twitch.

"Oh my God, Emmett, is *that* what happened to you?" the visiting Clara whispered, horrified, staring at the still musician.

"He looks like a zombie," their Verne added, very serious, his face suddenly pale. "Is there anything we can do?"

"It'll pass on its own," Emmett assured them, his tone sympathetic. "But this is why participating in anything that requires uninterrupted concentration and attention is so dangerous. There's little or no warning when something like *that* is about to happen to you."

Doc shivered once more at the realization that he had come very, very close to having one of those episodes behind the wheel of the DeLorean. After a seemingly endless moment of tension, Marty suddenly blinked and dropped down in his chair, looking very dazed. He glanced around the room slowly, frowning in confusion, like a sleepwalker just awakened.

"What happened?" he murmured aloud, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his forehead. "Did I just... space out?"

There were nods all around the table. Seeing them all, Marty's pale face suddenly flushed with color and he looked very, very embarrassed. He distracted himself by taking a drink from the glass of water before him and avoiding the eyes of everyone around him, still watching the musician carefully. "You should probably take it a little easier, now that it's gotten this far," Emmett advised gently. "The seizures seem to happen about once every three or four hours, though over time they'll become more intense, and the periods between them will shrink."

The faces of all the visitors paled at the news. Jennifer, however, didn't seem as rattled as Doc would've expected her to be. Instead, she seemed skeptical, and her next question slammed the point squarely home. "How do you know it's a legit reaction and not something that someone just makes happen on their own... or *thinks* is happening to them?" she added, her eyes flickering unmistakably in Marty's direction.

As Emmett opened his mouth to answer, Marty quickly stood, so forcefully that the table shook and his glass of water tipped over. "How can you even *think* I was faking something like that, Jennifer?" he demanded, leaning forward to stare at her, hard.

Jennifer lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I never said you were faking it, Marty," she said coolly, glancing at him with a look that clearly told him he was overreacting. "But one can make something happen if they worry about it enough...."

"Yeah, and I've always been a *real* hypochondriac!" Marty snapped back. "I'd like to see how much you change your tune after *you* have one of those things happen to you — and I hope you do, 'cause that seems to be the only way it's gonna get through to you! You know, this is *exactly* your problem lately — you've warped everything in your head to just be what you want to see it as. There's apparently no intelligence left to consider anything more. Maybe it was sucked out of there by those TV cameras or by all those fans of yours kissing up to you, or maybe the idea that things aren't happening for anything or anyone other than Jennifer McFly — or is it Parker, now? — is too much for you to comprehend."

Jennifer flushed with anger; she stood to meet her husband's glare across the table. "At least I'm not insecure and paranoid about my spouse's co-workers — and at least I'm mature enough to take my job seriously and take the opportunities as they come!"

This new twist was something Doc hadn't heard yet from either side of the couple, but if it came as a surprise to Marty, he didn't show it. He had finally taken all he could from his wife, though if he was trembling from anger or as something of an after-effect of the seizure he'd experienced only a minute before, the scientist wasn't certain.

"Oh, so sue me if I'm pursuing something I enjoy and that involves creativity! And what, you want me to sell out and write commercial jingles for a living, or take a job teaching somewhere and be miserable, just so I can prove to *you* I'm taking things seriously? For Chrissakes, Jennifer, you *knew* that I wanted to do what I'm doing now, ever since before we were even dating! It's not my fault the damn popular music market's been so screwed up lately with that angsty grunge crap that's selling so well — or that I'm not making much now off the songs and everything. And I'm *sorry* I didn't become a big rock star — was that why you dated me in high school? 'Cause you thought you'd get in while the getting was good in case I got famous and rich, then divorce me and walk away with a huge settlement?"

"You *know* that's a complete load of crap!" Jennifer shot back, her cheeks burning with color, now. "The Marty I met back then was a *hell* of a lot more confident and self-assured than you've been lately! He wouldn't be flipping out and flinging out accusations to his wife that she's having an affair, or wanting to, just because she wants to use her maiden name at work! He'd be *man* enough to accept it and suck it up, to realize it's stupid and pointless to turn down jobs that pay when you can get 'em, especially when you've got a wife and mortgage and car payments! You're an adult, Marty, and it's time to start acting like one!"

Marty's hands tightened into fists and, had there not been a table of food separating them, Doc had to wonder if he would've dared lay a hand on his wife. The expression on the musician's face was one the scientist had seldom seen, unless Marty was facing malicious Tannens. "Oh, you should talk, Jen! What do you call ignoring me and running away every time I try to talk to you? That's what a little kid does, not a twenty-five-year-old woman!"

"No, Marty, that's what one who is *mature* does when the other is acting as whiny and childish as you've been," Jennifer said coldly. And, with one final sizzling glare in his direction, she slipped around her chair and walked rapidly from the room, heading for the stairs, her head held high.

Marty stared at the empty space where she had been for a moment, then pushed his chair back, hard enough so that it crashed into the wall behind him, and headed in the same direction as his wife. A moment later, however, they heard the breezeway door open and slam shut, so hard that it set Nemo to barking and rattled some of the china on the table.

Those left at the table glanced at one another uncomfortably. Finally, visiting Verne broke the silence with a little laugh. "So, we're supposed to keep things stress-free and relaxed, huh? Kinda hard, living in Soap Opera Central with those tw— ow, Jules! Don't kick me!"

His brother frowned in disapproval. "It's not funny, Verne."

The blond rolled his eyes. "I'm just trying to lighten the mood. Sheesh. Is there any way we could sedate them?" he asked, turning to look at Emmett. "Seriously. If they keep sniping like that, they're both gonna have *big* meltdowns soon, and not the arguing kind."

"Sedatives can help to postpone some of the symptoms," Emmett admitted. "But I'd hesitate to use them, since I suspect that we're going to need everyone's assistance — or at least mental clarity — to catch up with Emily and Chris. Right now, they're both somewhere in Silver Creek Canyon, and we don't have a clear way to track them. And we've *got* to do just that before the afternoon storms roll in and your sister runs out of time."

Chapter Twenty

"If things like this keep happening, I'm going to extend the surveillance cameras and security sensors into every nook and cranny of those canyons," Emmett muttered to himself a short time later, when he and the others had gathered in his study so he could show all of them a detailed display of Silver Creek Canyon, using the wall-mounted monitor that was the size of some home entertainment center movie screens. While he was calling up the appropriate view, the older kids, from both dimensions, were fascinated by the opportunity to gawk at all the fascinating things normally very much off-limits. Even Doc might've been curious to have a closer look at his counterpart's private study, if not for his worries about the safety of his daughter. Both Claras and Marty had also come along, but at the moment, Jennifer was conspicuous by her absence, having sequestered herself in her guest room once again.

Marty snorted, hearing the comment. He had gone outside to walk off some of his tension before he blew completely, but had returned inside of fifteen minutes, aware that something, either a short trip through time or an expedition to find the kids, would need to be done soon. He wasn't really in the mood for strategy sessions, but he was getting sick and tired of brooding over his wife's inexplicably infantile behavior. "You got enough of those things around the house here to show where Jennifer goes off to when she walks out on a conversation?" he drawled, not entirely joking. "The only way we're ever gonna have any chance to have it out once and for all is if I can even *find* her when the time comes — and talk about being immature! Running off and sulking when the kids are in trouble...!"

"Let it go for now, Marty," Doc suggested. "It won't help them if both of you keep this up. We need every clear head we've got, from the look of things."

The detailed map that blossomed across the face of the big screen confirmed that estimation. Visiting Jules whistled softly. "That place must cover at least thirty square miles!"

"Fifty-seven point two," Emmett said. "I bought it to keep it out of the hands of developers who either wanted to ruin it by turning it into an amusement park or a landfill. I'm sure the customers would be very amused the first time there were heavy rains and they were washed away in a flood or buried in a mudslide."

"Are those really common dangers, down there?" his not-wife wanted to know, doing her best not to worry but unable to stop it completely.

The local inventor sighed. "If the rain's heavy enough, yes. There's more rock than soil through most of the lower canyon, but soil erosion above it causes mudslides all along the canyon and Fairy Chasm, especially during the rainier parts of the year, when the ground's soft to begin with. Given the general slope of the land in the canyon and the pattern of drainage ditches and culverts upstream, half the rainwater that falls on Hill Valley gets funneled in this direction. All it takes is an inch of rain to wash out all the dry creek beds; more than two can cause serious flash flooding."

His second son shook his head. "Chris really should know better'n this, Dad," was his opinion. "He knows what happened with Emmy last year, and he saw what happened to that dam some stupid beaver started building near the pond last month. All it took was one good rain, and it was gone, gone, gone."

"He should," his mother agreed, "which is why the two of them must've had some reason to do this, not just running off because they're bored. He knows the way the weather's been lately, and whatever they were planning, I'm sure they set off early to avoid being out in the rain."

"Then why aren't they back?" Marty wanted to know. "You don't need to be watching the news to see there's rain coming again."

"Because you can't see the horizon down in a canyon," was Doc's certain opinion. "Those cuts are deep, and just look at how many there are. It's like a maze. If they're lost in there, they could be going around in circles, and not have any way of knowing it."

"Not exactly," local Jules said helpfully. "There're a few obvious landmarks, like Eagle Rock and the old mill pond. Unless they're really going in a circle, Chris should know enough to look for the stream that comes out of the pond and into Silver Creek. That never goes dry, 'cause it's being fed by a natural spring. Once they find that, they can follow it out. It twists all over the place, sure, but eventually, the creek comes out into Fairy Chasm on this end, and into

the American River on the other. They may wind up walking their shoes off, but sooner or later, they should be able to find their way home.”

“Which means they either *are* going around in circles, or can’t get out,” visiting Verne concluded, swallowing uneasily when he realized how the others were going to interpret *can’t get out*.

Fortunately, his father offered another possibility. “Or they haven’t accomplished their mission, and won’t leave until they do.”

“Then they never will,” his counterpart sighed. “They’re looking for your train, that’s obvious from the note on the map. It’s gone, they don’t know it, and they can’t find what isn’t there.”

“Where *did* the train come down, exactly?” visiting Jules asked, peering up at the display. Emmett did something with a large touchpad beside the keyboard, and a blinking blue spot appeared in one of the narrowest points of the canyon. “It’s amazing we managed to land without ripping the entire machine to pieces,” the youth admitted.

“Lucky it wasn’t in Silver Creek itself,” Doc noted, “or we might’ve sustained even more damage when the rainwater came rushing through.”

“Can’t we just fly over the area and look for ‘em from the air?” his Verne wanted to know. “That place wasn’t my idea of hiking fun.”

“Possibly, and it’s probably the best place to start. But unfortunately, there’s no way to disguise the sounds of the machines, and if the kids think they’re about to be caught doing something they shouldn’t, they might try to run and hide. If they do, they have a definite advantage. There’re probably thousands of rocks, cracks, crevices, and even small caves they could run into to avoid being seen.”

Doc made a thoroughly disgruntled sound. “Which, given their behavior of the past few days, is undoubtedly more likely, unless they’ve been more upset by being lost. *If they are lost.*”

“So perhaps we should use an approach from more than one side,” was visiting Jules’ suggestion. He reached up and touched the images on the screen, following the line of Silver Creek as it wound its way through the deep cuts it had long since made in the earth. “There are dozens of little box canyons off of the main canyon, but is the main passage the only way in or out?”

“From the ground, yeah,” local Verne confirmed. “That’s why Dad put up the fences in all the places people can bring cars and trucks onto the property. Idiots in SUVs and on dirt bikes used to go screaming around through those mazes, scaring and sometimes hurting the animals who have nests and dens and things in there. Getting in and out on foot isn’t as easy, so most of the hikers and backpackers are better behaved. Not that they haven’t caused some trouble now and again, but...” He shrugged.

Jules nodded, thinking. “Then maybe it would work best if some of us came in on the ground from the west, and others on the ground from the east, while others attempted overhead surveillance from one of the working time machines. The car’s considerably more quiet than the train, they wouldn’t be as likely to hear it coming, and if they’re spotted, a signal can be sent for others to go after them. I presume you have walkie-talkies?”

“More than enough,” Emmett replied. “And there’s no reason we can’t use other vehicles or the horses to make getting in and out easier and quicker for those on the ground. The faster we get everyone back here so the time jump can be made, the better.”

Nobody argued with that. “So who’s doing what?” Marty wanted to know, glad that they had some kind of plan going. They had just settled on their assignments when a loud animal screech followed by an even louder crash of glass and a heavy thud echoed up from the lower level, ringing clearly through the open study door.

Local Verne sighed, rolling his eyes at his sister. “What’s Tink into this time?” he wondered, since the first noise had definitely been the sound of a cat in distress.

Emily scowled at him as she headed out the door and toward the stairs. “Nothing,” she snapped back. “That sounded like he got hurt *before* something fell....”

“Yeah, he probably singed his tail walking across the stove....”

A stern look from his mother silenced him as she went after her daughter to see what mess might need to be cleaned up. She hurried along more quickly when Emily’s voice called out, “Mom! Dad!” in a tone of distress that had nothing to do with the cat knocking something off a shelf or table. Now that their plans were formed, the others followed to see what was up, Emmett lingering only long enough to grab the map printouts from the computer.

Downstairs, they found Tink on the breakfast nook counter, intently watching something on the main kitchen floor. Between the central food preparation island and the counter with most of the appliances, the floor was wet with spilled coffee and littered with shattered glass. But Tink hadn’t been the one responsible; from the litter and other evidence, Jennifer had been pouring herself a cupful of the hot liquid at the time of the accident. The first presumption was that she’d done something to startle the cat, missed her cup, singed her hand, dropped the pot, and then slipped on the damp tiles and knocked herself unconscious, but that theory was immediately dismissed the moment her complete stillness and the glassy blankness of her open eyes were noticed.

“Goodness!” both Claras exclaimed, noticing that the young woman’s legs had been drenched with the hot coffee and peppered with shards of flying glass. Tiny cuts on her ankles and calves were nothing compared to several on her right arm and one cheek, where she’d fallen onto the breakage. She was utterly oblivious to it, though Emily was trying to wipe away the scalding liquid with a damp cloth from the kitchen sink, and Nemo, who had come back inside at some point, sniffed at the unconscious journalist, whining softly with doggyish concern.

Emily swallowed thickly, trying to make sure their visitor wasn’t burned too badly. “I think she must’ve been walking away from the counter when she got hit by the seizure and just fell over, like Daddy’s double did in the front hall when he was here three years ago,” she told the others. “Only he wasn’t carrying something he could drop and break and hurt himself on. And she’s not coming around as fast as Marty just did, either.”

“Not surprising,” her mother said as neutrally as she could. “She’s been drinking far more coffee than she should, and I did warn her that it could have unpleasant results, from everything Emmett’s told me about this strange condition.” She glanced at Marty as she might’ve one of her sons when she wanted him to know she meant business. “I don’t want you telling her ‘I told you so,’ Marty.”

He grimaced. “Why not? She accused me of faking it, or bringing it on when I didn’t. Why shouldn’t I tell her it’s her own damned fault when it is?”

“Because it isn’t,” Doc said quietly, “not entirely. She didn’t ask to be stranded here any more than the rest of us — and neither of us were hurt by our episodes. Can she be moved in this condition?”

“I don’t think any of the cuts or burns are serious,” his Jules reported, having hurried to check her condition once he’d seen that an accident had occurred. “Nothing sunburn ointments and some band-aids can’t take care of. She doesn’t appear to have hit her head or broken any bones.”

“And we moved Emmett’s counterpart when he did this, without harm,” local Clara added. “Boys, why don’t you move her into one of the chairs at the back of the kitchen? She should be coming around soon, and tending her there will be much easier.”

The two Vernes took care of the maneuver while local Jules went to fetch the first aid kit from the pantry. Marty watched his wife being moved while Emily tried to sop up the still-too-warm spilled coffee and her mother fetched a broom from a nearby closet to clean up the shattered glass. A war was going on inside of him, a genuine worry for his wife’s condition doing battle with the still stinging wounds of how coldly she’d dismissed his own distress not even half an hour ago. When she began to come around, he was relieved, but the sensation didn’t last very long.

“Oh... what happened?” the young woman asked the people hovering nearby. “Did something hit me on the head?”

“No, dear,” visiting Clara said while she shooed away the boys and took the first aid kit from Jules. “You’ve just had your first encounter with the... ah... unpleasant side-effects of being in another dimension. We’ll have you cleaned up in no time. Does your head hurt? Jules didn’t find any evidence that you’d hit it, but....”

Jennifer closed her eyes and lifted her hands to check her head and face for bumps or bruises. “No, I don’t think so, but I don’t really remember. I think — oh my God, I’m bleeding!” she gasped when she felt her hands

encounter wetness and opened her eyes without thinking to see what they'd touched. Her breathing picked up, acquiring the panicky edge of hyperventilation. "I have to get to a hospital...!" The entire world felt like it was spinning, disoriented.

"It's nothing serious, Jennifer," visiting Jules assured her at once, "just some small cuts from where you landed on pieces of broken glass. They're not deep enough to need stitches. You won't even see them in a week...."

"A week?!" she echoed, becoming hysterical. "I have to go back to work — I can't do that with bandages all over my face, they'll let me go...!"

Marty's snort was not kind. "Yeah, and the truth finally comes out, doesn't it, Jen? Other people have these things, but they're faking it or it's all in their heads, but it happens to you, and it's call the ambulances, bring in the plastic surgeons, it's the end of the world — or worse, the end of your damned career. Who's the one being childish and shallow now?"

Jennifer tried to glare at him, but Clara deliberately chose that moment to use tweezers to remove a bit of glass from her cheek, then wipe it with a stinging antiseptic. "Why don't the rest of you get going?" she suggested before Jennifer could catch enough breath to spit back a response at Marty. "Find the children before anything more serious than this happens. I can take care of Jennifer, I'm sure you'll be happier if I don't go along, Emmett, and someone should stay behind, in case the children return before you locate them. I've seen how the communications system works, so I'll know how to contact you."

"Excellent suggestion," her not-husband agreed before either Marty or Jennifer had a chance to re-engage in battle. "Verne, take Nemo in the van with you. If we find any traces of the kids down in the canyon, she'll be able to lead us right to 'em."

"Hey, that's a good idea," the blond teenager said as he hustled the spaniel away from the floor his mother had just swept clean of glass.

Clara knew she was needed to help with the search, but as the others headed off toward the garage and the barn, she was caught standing with a dustpan full of wet glass. "Just set it aside," her counterpart recommended. "I'll take care of it. You have more important things to do."

She smiled her thanks, leaving the pan in the sink and the broom propped against one edge of the same counter. When she was gone, visiting Clara turned back to Jennifer. "I'm sorry you were hurt," she told the young woman, "but in this particular instance, I'm inclined to agree with Marty. Looking for sympathy for yourself when you had none for him less than an hour ago is deplorable and completely childish. And don't say a word about having suffered more. If you did, you brought this on yourself. Emmett's counterpart told all of us that a lack of sleep, poor eating habits, and excesses of things like caffeine can not only bring on these incompatibility seizures, but actively make them worse. You were warned just like the rest of us, and I heard my counterpart suggest that you go easy on the black coffee, more than once. I haven't seen you touch more than a few bites of food all morning long, but I lost count of the cups of coffee you drank after five. And here you were, about to drink yet another. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd call that excessive, and these circumstances are anything but. If you've been sleeping badly, barely eating, and drinking enough coffee to keep an entire school of medical students awake for a month, it's no wonder you can't keep your temper long enough to speak two civil words to your husband. Perhaps you think this isn't my business, but I've considered you and Marty my friends for quite some time, now, and I am *not* about to stand by and watch your marriage disintegrate!"

The unexpected but very earnest lecture caught Jennifer short for several moments; the last person she'd expected to scold her like this was Clara. She pressed her lips together to bite back a snappish response, realized that she must look like a pouting child, and schooled her expression into something a bit more mature. "I don't want that to happen, either," she said a little stiffly, "and I suppose I shouldn't've blamed him for something that's not his fault. But he just isn't trying to understand how I feel...!"

"And are *you* trying to understand how *he* feels? From what I saw over lunch, I'd say you're not making anything close to a reasonable effort. Regardless of what you consider right or wrong, compromise has to begin somewhere, Jennifer. Marty at least has made some peace overtures. If nothing else, he's tried to find a way for the two of you to talk without having it fall apart in less than a minute."

"That mediation thing?" Jennifer grimaced as Clara cleaned the last of the cuts on her face and covered the worst with small antiseptic-impregnated bandages. "I'm not sure it's going to work...."

"It certainly won't if you won't even try," the teacher answered crisply. "Even if it doesn't solve all the problems between you, if it can at least get you *talking* to one another rather than bickering, it's a step in the right direction."

The younger woman sighed. "I suppose," she said, unconvinced, as she touched the injured side of her face with one hand. She grimaced again, and Clara read the reason for it without even trying.

"I also suggest you stop thinking of yourself as Jennifer the Celebrity Newscaster and Jennifer the Misunderstood Career Woman and remember that you're Jennifer the young woman who made a commitment to love and *honor* the man she married. There's nothing honorable in accusing Marty of being a failure or not trying hard enough because he's irresponsible. I know what it's like to live with a husband who hasn't been living up to his potential, but Marty has barely had a chance to find out what that *is*. You were very lucky, Jennifer. Things happened for you at all the right times and in all the right ways for you to achieve something you wanted at an age far younger than most other people in your field. Marty has talent and he *is* trying, but all the effort in the world can't make good luck strike when you want it to."

"But I worked hard to get this job," Jennifer insisted.

Clara shrugged as she checked for bits of glass that might have been caught in other cuts on her arm and leg. "I know, but you still were very fortunate, and you know it. If you didn't, would you be quite so concerned that those cuts on your face might scar unattractively and make you less... appealing as an on-camera personality?"

Jennifer was about to insist that she wasn't so vain, but she knew it was at least partially true. She *had* been concerned about that from the moment she'd realized her face had been cut, because she knew very well that there was a very shallow side to her profession, one in which unattractive or flawed people didn't get the well-paying jobs with a future. Once, she'd seen how a drag race and a broken hand had destroyed Marty's dream of becoming a rock musician, and now, she realized just how close she'd come to having her own dreams shattered by a simple accident. What if the coffee had been hot enough to cause serious burns all over her entire face? What if the cuts had been worse, or had hit her in the throat rather than her cheek and somehow impaired her ability to ever speak clearly again? What if she'd scarred herself so badly, no one would ever want to look at her again?

Her blood ran cold, and she knew it wasn't even half because of the strange condition from which they were all suffering. Ever since the first time she'd stood in front of a camera to report the news, she'd felt a certain rush that she'd been telling herself was pride in her job, nothing more. She wasn't one of those airheaded look-good-for-the-camera bimboes who could smile charmingly, read words without tripping over them, and nothing more. She was a *reporter*...

...but was she? When was the last time she'd sat down and written her own copy? Oh, there were reasons she hadn't done it lately. Getting up so early to be to work in time and be presentable for the cameras was exhausting. But once she had the hang of this daily routine, she'd go back to doing more of her own writing... or at least look it over before she read it, to make sure it was okay, if she had the time....

As Clara finished cleaning and dressing the cuts on her arm, Jennifer groaned, and it had nothing to do with physical pain. She was becoming exactly the kind of newscaster she hated, all fluff and no substance. She enjoyed telling people what was going on in the world, but she was appreciating the work of collecting and assembling that news less and less, and more and more getting her kicks out of being an ultimate gossip, someone recognized by everyone in town. She wasn't angry with Marty for being innocently intrigued by the fact that this world's Jennifer Parker-McFly looked unexpectedly different from the woman he'd married. She was jealous of local Jennifer for eschewing the lure of the cameras and dedicating herself to be a writer, a nationally syndicated columnist who somehow was managing to juggle both her career and her family without fumbling either. The realization was making her sick to her stomach, and she knew better than to blame it on her fall or the conditions that had precipitated it.

"You're right," she finally said meekly, not wanting to look the older woman in the eye. "I *have* been getting a terrible swelled head over this, haven't I?"

Clara sniffed delicately. "I don't suppose it's entirely your fault," she allowed. "Almost anyone would find it difficult to ignore the pleasures of that kind of attention. But they do wear off in time, and when they do, what will you be? A good reporter who knows how to present the news with ethics and dignity, or a parrot who reads someone else's lines and preens to keep their job by keeping their good looks — like Ben Foster?"

Jennifer winced. "You know about him?"

The teacher sighed. “Dear, everyone for a hundred miles around knows about him. He’s under the impression that every female within range of your station is under his spell — but the only person who is is him. Ben Foster is a master manipulator. You’ve said you don’t like him as a person and would never consider any impropriety with him, yet when Marty reacts to his God’s-gift-to-women behavior with jealousy, you defend *Ben* and accuse *Marty*! I’m sure if he knows of it, Mister Foster’s ego must be considerably inflated by this. You insist you’re not having an affair — but if you’re not, why are you bothering to defend him even when you know it hurts Marty?”

“Because I still have to work with him....”

“Yes, of course, but you have to *live* with Marty. If you love him as you say you do, why are you refusing to listen to him?”

“I’m not,” Jennifer insisted. “I just.. I don’t understand why he’s being so touchy about me wanting to use my maiden name at work! I only want an identity of my own, to separate work from home and protect my privacy....”

The sound Clara made was pure skepticism. “From who? Your husband? If you’d wanted that sort of thing, perhaps you should’ve thought about it when you first started working in journalism, not only after you’ve achieved success. And frankly, what good would another name do to protect your privacy? People don’t see your *name* when they see you on television or on the streets, they see your *face*, and that won’t change with a mere switch of a name. It seems to me, Jennifer, that you haven’t stopped to consider what it is you really want out of life. You didn’t decide on your college major until the last moment, and most of your jobs since then have been more strokes of luck rather than the result of long effort.”

Her stern expression did not waver when Jennifer looked apt to protest. “You’ve been working toward your professional ‘dream’ for all of three years,” she continued, “and by the grace of God, you’ve had the good fortune to see it come true more quickly than it should have, by rights. Marty’s been working toward his for... what is it, more than ten years, now? And he *has* been working hard, whether you care to admit it or not. He was happy for you when you landed this job that means so much to you, but if he doesn’t seem happy about it anymore, I for one don’t blame him. From what I’ve seen of your behavior this past week, your precious job clearly means more to you than he does. You’re not being mature, Jennifer. You’re acting like a spoiled child who wants everything exactly the way she wants it, isn’t willing to compromise for anything less, not even for people she supposedly loves, and won’t stand still and keep her mind open long enough to listen to *why* her own husband feels so hurt and betrayed. You’re accusing Marty of jealousy and laziness. Perhaps you should sit and think about your own petty selfishness and why you don’t want to listen to his side of the issue before you open your mouth with another accusation — because one of these times, he won’t stand for it, and when you throw him out or walk away, he won’t come back.”

With that, Clara collected the first aid kit, then took it and the things her counterpart had left behind into the pantry, to be put away or disposed of. Jennifer was alone at the small table, left to contemplate the remains of the messes she had made, both on the kitchen floor and in her life.

“Are we gettin’ there, yet, Chris?” Emily asked when it seemed to her that they’d been walking forever. Not only had they yet to find a sign of the stream Chris had said would lead them right to the pond, but the ground seemed to be getting uncomfortably uneven, and the previously bright blue sky far overhead was beginning to darken with clouds.

The boy, tromping on ahead with what he hoped looked like confidence in his stride, stopped and frowned, glancing around at their surroundings. “We should be,” he grumped, mad at the creek for not being where it should have been, “but I dunno why we’re not. I’ve been all over this place, lotsa times....”

Emily favored him with a truly dubious pucker. “Are you tellin’ me we’re *lost*?”

His frown deepened. “Not lost, just kinda....” He shrugged. “I dunno, stuck. There’s gotta be a way outta here, but I think we’re goin’ in circles ‘cause we keep missin’ a turn or somethin’.”

The girl snorted. “Kinda like Jules drivin’ downtown. Okay, then what should we do? Sit here an’ wait for somebody to come get us? We’re gonna get in big trouble again if we do that, Chris, an’ I’m still hungry an’ thirsty.”

“Yeah, I know, I really wish we’d eaten more of breakfast ‘stead a makin’ a mess with it. Dad once told us if we get lost in the woods or places like this, we should just find a tree an’ stay there ‘til somebody finds us, but there ain’t

no trees down here, an' if we stay put, we're gonna be in *big* trouble, 'cause you don't wanna be down here when it starts rainin'."

Emily glanced up at the skies and nodded her agreement. "Yeah, it was rainin' bad when we crashed, an' it was really messy. Okay, so if we gotta keep walkin', how do we get unlost?"

Chris shrugged again. "I guess we try tumin' down every canyon 'til we find one that doesn't dead-end. I wish we'd brought some chalk so we could put a mark on the ones we already tried..."

"Oh, that's easy," Emmy assured him, struck by a sudden brilliant idea. "Did your Mom an' Dad ever read you *Journey to the Center of the Earth*?"

The green eyes rolled expressively. "Oh, yeah, lotsa times, an' I've seen the movie. You're thinkin' 'bout that, 'bout how Arne Saknussemm left marks he dug in the ground to show people where to go?"

"Yeah, an' we can do that with a stick or a pointed rock or somethin'. We only need ta leave somethin' we can see in the dirt, not make it last f'rever."

Agreed that this was an excellent course of action, the kids scouted about until they both found an appropriate implement, Chris a shale fragment that could have been used as a knife in a pinch, and Emily a chunk of a softer stone that could be used, chalk-like, to leave marks in places where there wasn't enough dirt. Thus energized by this new "game," they set about their plan to find a way out of the maze of cracks and crevices that had them confused and trapped in the twistiest part of Silver Creek Canyon.

Before another twenty minutes had gone by, they still hadn't found their way out, and a light rain was starting to fall. "Be careful on the rocks," Chris warned Emily as she clambered up a pile of loose mixed stones to leave their mark — three notches, just like in the movie — high enough to be seen, should they pass this way again. They were taking turns, him digging the marks in the dirt, her scratching them on nearby boulders, so they could both take part in the game. "They get pretty slippery when they're wet."

"I'm bein' careful," she assured him as she made the sign to indicate that the crevice they'd just searched went nowhere. "I hope we find a way outta here soon, though. I don't wanna be here when it starts pourin'."

"I don't hear no thunder," the boy pointed out after listening for a moment. "Those're the worst kinda storms, the ones that make floods down here, an' you can hear it echo real good off the canyon walls."

Emily only slipped a little as she clambered back down, not even enough to jar her feet. As they headed on toward the next passage, she sighed. "How come we couldn't find the train?" she wondered. "We saw where it crashed, but it ain't anywhere. Does this place have a zillion little canyons to hide in?"

"It's got a lot," Chris admitted, "but I think we've been in 'em all by now. I'll betcha our dads found a way to move it back up into our barn. That's where they've been workin' since the day after you got here."

She frowned. "But we were out there, an' those were *your* dad's time machines in the barn. My Daddy's wouldn't fit there, too."

"I dunno, maybe it could. Or maybe we just missed where he's got it hid. But I guess we're not gonna be able to find stuff an' help 'em not be mad, anymore."

She sighed heavily. "Yeah." She brightened as an idea occurred to her. "Hey, maybe if we stay lost an' they hafta come find us...."

"No way! That's a dumb idea! We've been gettin' into trouble so much, if they gotta do that, they're gonna be way hacked at us!"

She sighed again. "I guess so. Daddy doesn't get mad at me a lot, but when he's already feelin' cranky, it don't take much."

As they came up to the next passage, the rain began falling more heavily, making both kids damp and uncomfortable. Chris peered down the deep crevice, using his flashlight to lighten the shadows. "We don't hafta go

down this one," he declared after a moment. "We've already been here. I remember that big rock. This one won't get us back to the creek."

"Okay, then I'll mark it. You go check the next one. Maybe we're gettin' back to places you know better."

While Emily climbed up a damp pile of rocks to scratch an obvious mark that this passage had been searched, Chris headed on toward the next possible exit. He was almost there when he heard a shriek behind him, accompanied by the clatter of stones falling against one another. "Emily!" he shrieked back, seeing that she had fallen and was lying amid the scattered rocks at the bottom of the heap she'd been climbing.

Fortunately, she was awake, but she was making a face of definite pain. "I slipped on the wet stones," she sniffled, trying to pick herself up as bravely as possible, but not entirely succeeding.

"Are you hurt?" Chris' worry was genuine; he remembered how his own sister Emily had been pretty badly injured here in the canyon, not quite a year before. "Didja break anything?"

Emily shook her head as she rolled over and sat up. "I don't think so. I banged up my hand a little." She held up her left, displaying the scrapes on her palm. "An' I lost my writin' rock..."

"We can find another," he said reassuringly, considering that the least of their worries. "C'mon, I'll help you stand up."

When he did so, she let out a sharp cry of pain as weight came down on her left foot. Tears sprang into her eyes and she hissed as she flopped back to the ground. "It hurts *bad*, Chris," she lamented, hugging herself against the pain in her ankle. "I think I musta busted it..!"

"I dunno, it's kinda hard to tell," he said, peering at her injured foot. "There ain't no bones pokin' out, but I s'pose it could be. Can you walk on it?"

She shook her head vigorously, her damp curls bouncing. "Uh-uh, it hurts too much." She tried to sniff back her tears, but she was losing the battle. "I don't wanna stay here anymore, Chris. I wanna go home."

"Yeah, I know," he said as sympathetically as he knew how. "But we can't get back to the house if you won't walk, Emily."

"I can't go that far!" she whimpered. "It hurts, an' Mommy said you shouldn't ever walk far when you're hurt..."

"But we can't stay out in the rain!" he countered. "This is a *bad* place for that!"

"But I can't walk!"

Chris understood how she was feeling — he'd sprained an ankle pretty bad, once, when he'd come running down the front stairs and slipped, and he'd cracked the other ankle playing soccer earlier in the spring. It still ached sometimes, because the doctor said it would take a long time to get completely better, and he'd heard all about how careful you needed to be with broken bones and such. He thought as hard as he could, trying to come up with an answer. He glanced around, and finally got an idea.

"I know! I'm not sure how to get back to the creek from here, but I came here a coupla months ago with Verne and Emmy. See the funny stripes in that cliff there?" He pointed to a sheer stone face just shy of the passage he'd been about to investigate. Bands of a dark, almost black stone alternated with a much paler, slightly orangish rock. "Verne says it's called Tiger Bluff 'cause of that. We rode out here during spring break to check out a little cave inside that next big crack in the rock. It's dry an' it's pretty easy to get into. If I help you, d'you think you could make it that far?"

Emily eyed the distance, dubious. "I dunno...."

"Aw, c'mon, you gotta try," he cajoled. "It's not far, an' it'll be better'n sittin' out in the rain."

"But it'll hurt...!"

“Not so much if you lean on me. An’ I can find some sticks an’ tie ‘em up around your ankle, just like a real splint. That’d help, wouldn’t it?”

She thought about it, then nodded hesitantly. “Okay, but hurry. I’m gettin’ all cold an’ wet, an’ I got sick of that while we were on vacation.”

Chris did his best. He quickly trotted back to one of the fissures they’d recently investigated, and soon returned with an assortment of stout sticks that had fallen from some old raptor’s nest up on the cliffside. Using the web strap of the empty carry sack he’d brought, he put two of the shorter sticks on either side of her ankle, then bound everything as tightly as he could. Emily complained that that hurt, too, but when he helped her up again, she was able to stand, albeit rather unsteadily.

“You did that good,” she admitted when he found a bigger stick of an appropriate length for her to use to help balance herself as they started on their way, most of her weight leaning on him. “Are you gonna be a doctor, som eday, like my brother Jules?”

The boy shrugged. “Maybe. I like that kinda stuff, but there’s other stuff I like, too, like bein’ in plays at school and drawin’ and things. But bein’ a doctor would be cool.”

“I think I’m just gonna wait an’ marry Marty.”

“You can’t do that,” Chris told her flatly.

She grumbled, having heard that too much of late. “Why not?”

“Cause he’s already married to Jennifer.”

“So? Lotsa people get unmarried when they don’t like each other anymore, an’ Marty an’ Jennifer sure’ve been arguin’ a lot, lately.”

Chris made a rude noise. “Big deal. Lotsa people argue. That doesn’t mean they don’t like each other. Jules an’ Verne argue all the time, but they still like each other.”

“That’s different. They’re boys....”

“Doesn’t matter. Likin’s likin’. An’ I think it’s really mean of you to go around hopin’ Marty an’ Jennifer get divorced just so you can marry him. How would you like it if somebody decided she liked your dad, an’ made trouble so he’d break up with your mom?”

“They can’t do that!” Emily insisted, calling a momentary halt so she could catch her breath. “They’re married...!”

“Right. An’ so’re Marty an’ Jennifer. If you really like him, Emily, you should help him be happy the way he wants to be happy. That’s what bein’ a friend’s all about. Mom told me so.”

It was an excellent point, backed up by the fact she’d heard similar things from her own mother. It gave her a lot to think about while they finished the hike to the cave Chris had mentioned. She frowned as she looked at the small, dark hole of its mouth, several feet above the canyon floor — an easy climb for Chris, but impossible for Emily, at the moment.

“That’s creepy,” she said. “Are you sure we can fit? Are there bears inside?”

“Yeah, even Verne could fit,” he assured her, “an’ bears don’t live around here, not enough food. It’s bigger inside, though, an’ it’ll be dry. I’ll go in first, then help pull you up and in so you don’t have to put any extra weight on your foot, okay?”

She agreed with a nod. He reached for his bag, intending to use his flashlight, then realized he’d left his strapless sack back where his companion had fallen. He sighed. “Let me use your flashlight, Emily. I left mine behind, and I don’t wanna go back for it now. It’s too wet.”

She surrendered the borrowed device. Using its bright beam to guide the way, Chris climbed up and slipped into the hole. Emily saw the darkness inside brighten, reflecting the flashlight's glow, and when he leaned out to help her in, she decided any place dry would be an improvement over standing out in the increasing rain.

"This ain't too bad," she said after taking a minute to settle down and then glance at their surroundings. The cave was small, but not claustrophobically so; a constant rush of air moved through it, and she could see smaller pockets and a narrow fissure at the back of the chamber that disappeared into the darkness. "Does that go somewhere?" she asked, pointing to the crack at the rear of the cave.

Chris nodded. "Yeah, there're other little caves like this back there, if you're small enough to squeeze through to 'em. Verne almost got stuck a couple of times," he added with a grin.

Emily giggled, picturing her cocky brother trapped in such circumstances. The image — and being out of the rain — made her feel a bit better. "Too bad my ankle's hurt. That sounds like it could be fun. We're gonna be okay in here, aren't we?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. Heck, Verne said that the reason he an' some of his friends found this place was 'cause it'd been covered up by a mudslide before. We got a ton of snow this last winter, an' when it got warm all of a sudden this spring, it melted, an' there was a lot of floodin' all over the canyon. That washed most of the old mud away, so we could see the cave again. It's funny, what the mud can do, sometimes. Mom's told us a story about how Dad rescued her from fallin' off Bald Ridge Bluff when she got caught on the side of it durin' a big rainstorm. The whole side of the bluff slid right off into Fairy Chasm just a few seconds after Dad saved her!"

That sounded both romantically reassuring and horrifically unsettling. "An' the rain can't get in here, right?"

Chris nodded emphatically. "Right."

"An' there won't be any more mudslides?"

He waved one hand in airy dismissal. "Not unless we get a *lot* of rain. But that's not gonna hap—"

A sudden crack and rumble of thunder nearly sent both of them right through the roof of the cave. Outside, the rain began to fall in heavy, silver sheets, so thick it was hard to see beyond them. The water beginning to pool and rise on the canyon floor put an end to any notion of leaving the cave, especially not with Emily unable to walk quickly or without help. The water was unlikely to come up high enough to reach them, but the thought that an avalanche of mud might come slipping down and seal them in forever was frighteningly real. They huddled together, hoping the flashlight batteries would last out the storm, and prayed that rescue would come soon — if ever.

Chapter Twenty-One

It took a while for the rescue squads to collect their supplies and split off to go to their assigned target areas. By the time they did, rain was coming down heavily, and thunder and lightning was on its way, if the increasing volume of the former and frequency of the latter was any indication. Local Clara was to operate the Jag with the visiting Jules and Verne as lookout passengers, while the other Verne was to drive Emily, Doc, and Nemo in the van and Emmett, Marty, and Jules took three of the horses from the stable to ride. The groups had been split in such ways to provide each with at least one person possessing some strong first aid knowledge — just in case they found the missing kids injured, or any of the searchers were harmed in the effort — as well as at least one with a native knowledge of the area and the canyon. The comclips were distributed to everyone after a quick demonstration from Emmett on their operation; then, the groups were off. While the Jag took to the sky above, protected from the sheets of rain and increasingly close lighting by a weather protection system, the van headed for the western end of the canyon and those on horseback headed for the east, which had steeper and narrower trails less kind to vehicles.

Those on horseback were also probably the most uncomfortable of the searchers, being directly exposed to the elements. Emmett had scrounged up protective gear for them to wear, but they could only work so well in the wind and heavy rain. Five minutes into the ride, Marty felt as soaked and uncomfortable as he had at the end of the hike from the crashed train. His situation was made even worse by the fact that he hadn't ridden a horse in... well, a while. Emmett and local Jules had loaned him Emily's horse, Halley, a white Arabian who was a little more patient and calm, having become Emily's when she was not quite eleven years old. The horse didn't seem to mind the stranger riding him, though Marty probably clutched the saddle and reins a little more tightly than the Arabian preferred.

The horses — which also included Emmett's Tesla and Jules' Shadowfax — didn't seem too bothered by the storm and rain, moving sure-footedly down the narrow, muddy pathway to the canyon floor below. Marty was glad, since his riding skills were quite rusty, and the rain streaming down from the sky was blowing straight into his face and eyes, causing the need to almost constantly wipe the water away so he could see. He wished he'd thought to borrow a brimmed hat from someone at the house before they had gone out to the horses' barn; Jules and Emmett had been smarter in that sense, the former now boasting a drenched Harvard baseball cap and the latter wearing a hat that looked rather like Indiana Jones' trademark fedora. Overall, the situation was so miserable — made only worse by the annoying and eerie spacey and anxious feelings he was getting from the increasing incompatibility effects, coupled with the constant stress over his marriage and battle with Jennifer — that Marty wished with all his might that all of this was just some nasty nightmare and, when he woke up, he'd be at home, in bed with his wife, and the past few weeks simply hadn't existed.

It was a pipe dream, though, and he knew it.

"How far do you figure the kids walked?" Marty called to Emmett and Jules after they'd reached the lower region of the canyon. Already, several inches of water had pooled down there and was gushing along. "You think they've gone down this way?"

Emmett, who was riding behind Marty while Jules led the way, on the chance the musician experienced any problems from his condition, shrugged. "It's possible, if they got disoriented," he admitted. "And they've been missing so long that they could have indeed come this far, before the storm hit. Have you spotted anything yet?"

The question was addressed to Jules, who shook his head, scattering water droplets through the already saturated air. "No, I dunno if they've come through here," he said. "I'm not even seeing footprints, though I guess they would've probably been washed away by now."

Marty stared at the teen ahead of him as they went on, finding the differences between the Juleses to be one of the most startling contrasts in personality so far, one made all the more eerie because they looked so very much the same, facially. The local one didn't seem nearly as formal and serious as the one Marty had known for almost nine years — and, actually, the visiting Jules had gradually been loosening up ever since his family had moved to the future. Marty had always chalked up his behavior to some sort of genetic trait, or something influenced by a childhood spent mostly in the Nineteenth Century — but now, that explanation couldn't quite wash. Those same things hadn't seemed to make this Jules behave in the same way; they didn't even appear to have the same interests, not upon a casual observation. It was kind of frightening how many variations could be out there, somewhere, when it came to your own life and those of your friends and family, and Marty was rather relieved that such a drastic personality change wasn't present in his own counterpart here.

A splashing noise and slight jarring forward broke him from that train of thought. The musician looked ahead and saw the horses were stepping down into a few inches of water, kicking up the muddy liquid high into the air and soaking Marty's already-saturated sneakers all the more. The face he made was a strange mix of both disgust and concern. "It's getting pretty deep already," he said. "Do you think Emily or Chris are slogging through this on foot?"

"I think they sought shelter somewhere by now," Emmett said, glancing up at the sky for a moment as a brilliant flash illuminated things around them. "Chris would be smart enough to do that the moment he saw lightning, and I doubt your Emily would want to get soaked to the skin walking around outside in this, either."

"Yeah, and after what happened with the train crashing, I can't see her really enjoying storms like this on a first person basis," Marty said. "That shook *me* up a little, and I'm not six."

"Our Emily was like that, too," Jules said. "After the train crashed from being struck by a bolt, she went completely freaky when storms came, and she was four when that happened. She still hates being in 'em — that's why she volunteered for the van."

"It can't have helped that she had that accident last summer, either," Emmett added.

Marty blinked, both at the comment and from the rain stinging his eyes. "What happened with that, exactly?"

Rather than the local scientist explaining things, Jules answered the question. "Last summer Emily went for a ride out here to look for an eagle's nest and took a bad fall when she was trying to climb up one of the cliffs — just when a wicked storm hit, too. We found her and she was okay — had to have some surgery to fix her leg from a gruesome puncture wound when a stick impaled it — but if she was leery of being out in storms before that, she's twice as bad, now."

Marty shivered, chilled for reasons beyond the soaking rain. "I can see why," he said.

Emmett reached for his comclip to activate it. "How's the search going?" he called into it, the message echoing from the clips Marty and Jules also had on them.

There was a crackle of static as another flicker of lightning lit the stormy sky. "Nothing yet, Dad," Verne reported. "We've only gone about half a mile, since it's been raining so hard and the ground is kinda muddy."

"What about your mother?" Emmett asked.

"We haven't seen anything up here, yet," visiting Jules said. "It's been a little... turbulent, I suppose, but your wife is handling the car fine."

"Have you flown above the site where the train crashed yet?" Doc asked from the van.

There was a brief pause. "We did a pass over, but Verne and I couldn't see anyone down there. It's been hard, though, with the rain and the dark clouds, so checking it in person is probably a good idea."

"All right, we can take care of that," Emmett said. "I was going to head over to the pond, first, and see if they went that way and decided to wait."

There was skepticism in Emily's voice. "I dunno, Daddy, it's a good idea to stay clear of bodies of water during storms like these. I don't think Chris would still be hanging out there."

"Perhaps, but they might be in the vicinity, or left some sort of sign. Verne, why don't you keep heading down the main area of the canyon, and we'll do the best we can at checking the narrow side passages. Clara, be careful up there and let us know about anything you see that looks unusual."

There was a chorus of acknowledgments to the instructions. Jules turned Shadowfax in the direction of the pond, taking care to walk his horse away from the rushing water of the creek in the middle. They hadn't gone far when there was a particularly loud thunderclap, and Marty saw a part of one of the cliffs pull away from the wall and come down in a rush of mud and water. The brief slide was a ways ahead and by no means put them in danger, but he shuddered at the sight and sound of it.

"That normal?" he asked the locals.

"In weather like this, it can be," Emmett said, his tone ominous. "Try to stay away from the walls, if you can."

Marty eyeballed the immediate area and gulped, not finding the advice particularly easy to follow. Halley whinnied nervously, as if he had understood exactly what the inventor had said. Fortunately, they reached the pond several minutes later, where there was a more open space. Unfortunately, from all appearances, the kids weren't there, and there weren't any signs that they had even stopped by.

"What now?" the musician asked when it was clear they were going to need to move on. He winced as their surroundings were lit up again, the lighting and thunder giving him a headache. Or maybe it was something related to the incompatibility condition, something that came as the symptoms worsened from not being treated. The idea made him feel cold and shivery all over again, and he suddenly wished he was back at the house with Clara and Jennifer, even if his wife was acting like the world's biggest hypocrite, now.

"The crash site of the train," Emmett said. "Based on the evidence, it appears that was their destination all along, and I'm almost certain they reached it. Whether or not they're still there, of course, or left any messages for us to follow remains to be seen."

The rain was showing no sign of letting up and, as the latest rumble of thunder faded, Chris shivered. It wasn't looking good, he had to admit, and as he backed away from the opening of the cave, he did his best to conceal the worry on his face from Emily. His partner in crime had moved a bit deeper into the cave, away from the chill wind that gusted through the crack and the angry sounds of the storm outside. Emily clutched the flashlight she'd borrowed from Marty as if it was a lifeline, and in some ways, it was just that. Chris was crossing all of his fingers that the batteries wouldn't go out before they were found, or it was gonna be *real* freaky. And he wasn't a hundred percent certain that smaller wild animals didn't know of the cave and made use of it in weather like this. Light was a good way to keep them and their own fears at bay.

"Is it still rainin' hard out there?" Emily asked with a sniffle as Chris came back to her side. She wasn't crying, not quite yet, but her eyes were huge and glittery in her face.

"Uh-huh. An' the water outside is gettin' deeper." The boy sighed as he set his chin in his hands. "I hope the marks we made aren't all gonna wash away in the rain."

Emily sniffed again. "Is anyone gonna find us, Chris?" she asked plaintively. "My ankle's really hurting and my head feels funny from bein' so hungry."

Chris nodded confidently, though his own empty stomach gave a funny flop. He was almost positive his family and Emily's had noticed them missing from the house by now and had to be looking for them. He wasn't really looking forward to the trouble they were almost certainly going to be in when they were found, but if it meant getting back to the house and away from the mud and water gushing outside, Chris was ready for the sacrifice. Emily was worrying him, too. She looked ghostly pale in the glow of the flashlight, and as terrified as the boy felt inside.

"Positive," he said. "We just gotta stay here and wait, Em my. Someone'll come soon, I'm sure."

Emily rubbed her eyes, then her nose, quickly. "I'm scared, Chris," she admitted, a quiver in her voice. "We've been here almost *forever*."

"It just seems like that," Chris said, shuddering as lightning crackled across the sky once more, the answering thunder vibrating the rocks surrounding them. He scooted closer to Emily, for his own comfort as much as hers. "I don't think it's been more 'n half an hour. *Maybe* more, but not much."

"Are there any mudslides you saw out there?"

"No, just lotsa rain and water on the ground."

Emily let out a shuddery sigh. "I hope our daddies can get past all it," she said. "Is the water deep?"

“Not that deep,” Chris assured her. “Just real muddy and fast movin’. They could for sure get through it, ‘specially if they had a car or one of the horses and knew where to cross.”

Emily opened her mouth, drawing in a breath to say something more — and froze. Chris looked at her a moment, then glanced to where her eyes were focused, thinking she had spotted something he hadn’t — like a wild animal seeking refuge or, better yet, someone from the house on their way over. But there was nothing out of the ordinary he could see, just more rain coming down outside the cave. He turned back to the girl, who was still staring past him, her blue eyes wide and unblinking.

“What’s wrong, Emmy?” he asked.

She didn’t move or answer his question. A little worried, now, Chris waved his hand before her eyes. She did not blink or flinch. A chilly feeling crept around the back of his neck, like the damp, frozen fingers of a hand.

“Emily?” Nothing. “Emily, that’s not funny,” he warned. No reaction. Chris grabbed her and shook her arm, hard. “Emily?” No response. He shook her harder, her head bumping gently against the wall of the cave at her back. “Emily!” he yelled, fear sharpening his voice into a pitch that echoed repeatedly and loudly in the small space they were in.

But Emily didn’t react or respond, remaining quiet and motionless, her eyes set on something beyond the sight of Chris.

Verne swallowed hard as the Jag took a quick drop, bouncing a bit in the gusty winds above the canyon. In the driver’s seat, Clara grimaced. “Sorry,” she apologized, as if her skills as a driver were responsible for the bumpy ride they’d had since take-off. The Jag apparently came with a weather system that deflected lightning and protected it from getting mucked up from rain and snow, but wind was still a problem.

“S’alright,” the blond told his mother’s counterpart, doing his best to ignore the rather queasy sensation in his gut. “Stuff like this never bugged me before — I hope I’m not getting old.”

From the back seat, Jules snorted softly. “Yeah, sixteen is so ancient,” he said. “Maybe you’ve got a weak stomach.”

Verne turned to regard his older brother with a supremely skeptical look. “Yeah, so you’re telling me you don’t feel sick at all in this?”

Jules shrugged. “Not really,” he said, his hand clutching the back of the seat before him as the car once more took a drop and a close bolt of lightning briefly dazzled all eyes in the car. Thunder came seconds later, drowning out all other noises as it rumbled away.

“Close one,” Clara murmured, gripping the wheel with bloodless knuckles, her entire attention apparently focused on keeping the car as steady as possible while navigating it where she wanted to go. “Boys, I’m going to take us down a little lower for a closer look and hopefully get us out of this wind.”

At the news, the visiting teens moved closer to the windows, remembering their assigned tasks, peering down through the sheets of rain to the canyon below. As freaky and nauseating as the car ride was, Verne had to admit he was kinda glad he wasn’t on the ground, especially out in the middle of the mess like Emmett, Marty, and the other Jules were. The creek was swollen with muddy water, and the way the rain was bouncing and gushing down the sides of the cliffs, it looked like mudslides were more than likely to happen. He hoped to God his little sister wasn’t lying hurt somewhere down there, or in danger of being washed away by any of that water.

“Where are we supposed to be looking?” Verne asked, squinting down at the deserted ground below and not seeing anything remotely manmade or particularly eye catching.

“Along the stream, probably, and any place that one could move about on foot down there,” Clara suggested. “I very much doubt the children climbed the cliffs to the ground above — and I *sincerely* hope they didn’t try,” she added with a little shudder. Her reaction was echoed by both visitors.

“Where are we now?” Jules asked as he peered down.

Clara glanced at the dashboard display, which showed a small digital map of the canyon. “Here,” she said, pointing at the blinking dot that marked their position. There were a few other blips — four — that seemed to be the van and the team on horseback. The van was farther from their position, and the trio on the horses appeared to be trying to cross the swollen creek not far away.

“We’re near the crash site,” Jules said after a glance at the map. “A little east of it, it looks like. Actually, that’s the best place to be for a good look around, since the kids probably got this far. One would assume, anyway,” he added with a shrug, going back to peer out the window.

Verne frowned, concerned, as he returned his attention to the stormy outside world. The ground below was almost completely soaked and saturated with rainwater, deep enough that it might’ve been up to Chris’ or Emily’s ankles. An absolutely horrifying prospect, considering the lightning. Even Verne, who found his talents were geared more to creative and performing arts, not science, knew that hanging out in standing water during a thunderstorm was definitely *not* a good idea. He wasn’t entirely sure such wisdom had been imparted to Emily, yet, or Chris.

“Where could they go if they were out here when it started raining?” he asked, his breath fogging up the glass for a moment. “Under the bluffs?”

“That wouldn’t protect them for long,” was Jules’ immediate opinion. “Are there any caves or abandoned buildings in the area? Like old shacks or forts or something?”

“If there were any previously existing structures, Emmett and I would surely know about it, and unless the kids have had a project going on that we haven’t gotten wind of, no. There are a number of natural caves in the canyon, but I’m afraid I couldn’t begin to tell you where all of them are. I’m not even sure Emmett knows.”

Verne opened his mouth to suggest asking when there was a quick intake of breath from Jules. “Can you bring the car lower?” he asked, tension obvious in his voice.

“I’ll do my best,” Clara said, slowing the vehicle and trying to descend vertically, a move that rocked the passengers hard from some of the odd wind shears. “Is there something you spotted?”

“I think so.” Jules squinted down at the ground, Verne also scanning the area on which his brother was focused, using a pair of binoculars. A moment later, the blond saw a bright splotch of color in an otherwise brown and damp area.

“I see it, too, but I can’t tell what it is, even with binoculars,” Verne admitted. “It’s definitely not part of the natural landscape, though, not a blue like that. We’d better call the others and let ‘em know.”

Emmett jumped as his comclip came to life, a most unwelcome surprise when doing the delicate and potentially dangerous task of calming a very nervous horse. Since the crash site happened to be on the other side of the creek from the pond, it would take far too much time to go back the way they had come. They were left with little choice but to cross the creek. Normally — when it wasn’t pouring rain, as it was now — the water was only about ten feet across and no more than a foot and a half deep. Thus far, the storm had swollen the width to fourteen feet, and the depth to about three. The speed of the water was considerably more disconcerting to the scientist, along with the debris that was washing down along with it. Between him and Jules, they had found the shallowest and safest place to cross, where the creek narrowed to half its normal width and depth. Still, the horses were quite skittish about putting their feet into the water, especially since it was rushing by so fast and stirring up so much dirt and rocks that the bottom couldn’t be seen.

Shadowfax had made it across safely with Jules, and Emmett was trying to provoke a skittish Halley and an even more skittish Marty into making the trip when he heard his wife calling for him over the comclip system. “What is it?” he asked as Halley made a sudden jump back from the water, causing Marty to let out a startled yelp as he yanked hard on the reins to keep from falling off.

“Jules and Verne have spotted something almost directly east of the train’s crash site,” Clara reported. “We can’t see much from this height, and I daren’t get any closer in this wind, but could you go check it out?”

“You sure we can’t do it, Mom?” local Verne asked from the van. “We’re getting closer....”

“I don’t think so. It’s in a rather narrow area and I don’t think the van will fit very well — and definitely not with the mud. But keep combing the areas that you can reach.”

Emmett surveyed his surroundings for a moment, thinking. “Where is it, exactly?” he asked.

There was brief silence from the Jag. “It might be easier if you follow us,” she said. “We have the map up here.... I’ll be there in a few moments.”

That was fine with Emmett. He looked over at Marty, who had since regained his seating in the saddle and was watching the scientist curiously. “Do we still need to cross the water?” he asked, his tone indicating that he’d definitely appreciate skipping that particular chore.

“Yes, the area they want us to investigate is on that side. Why don’t you pass me Halley’s reins and I’ll lead him while I cross?”

Marty glanced at the water a moment, then back to Emmett. “What do I get to hang onto to keep from falling in there?”

“The saddlehorn, or even his mane. It won’t hurt the horse at all, trust me.”

Marty looked skeptical, but he passed the straps to the local inventor to allow him to guide the horse. Tesla entered the water without much hesitation, splashing through quickly and cautiously, but Halley moved only when Emmett tugged, hard, at the reins, and then hurried through so quickly that he nearly bounced a clearly terrified Marty off, right into the water. By the time they had finally joined Jules on the other side, the Jag was coming into view overhead. Emmett passed the reins back to Marty and allowed him only a moment to recover before they followed the car’s lead overhead. They passed the train’s crash site — which boasted no evidence of the kids, so far as the scientist could see — and wound through some of the narrow side canyons that branched off the main one, veering to the left. The ground sloped downward a bit, acting as a pool to collect more of the rainwater that was already soaking the canyon floor.

On the edge of this concave of pooled water was a bright blue backpack, lying half-open.

Emmett recognized it in an instant: it was Chris’. He swallowed hard at the sight, pulling Tesla to a stop in order to dismount and take a closer look.

“That belongs to one of the kids, huh?” Marty asked quietly as the inventor walked towards it.

“Chris,” Jules confirmed softly. “Mom, we found Chris’ backpack,” he added to the comclip.

Not unexpectedly, Clara sounded concerned by the news, as it was so strongly mimicking what had happened to Emily the year before. “What about Chris?” she asked.

Emmett glanced about a moment as he finally reached the discarded pack. “No sign of either kid,” he said, bending down to pick it up. A quick examination told him only that it hadn’t chanced to fall off due to a broken strap. The pack, and the contents inside — which amounted to little more than a flashlight and, oddly, a handheld voltage tester — were soaked through and had been sitting out in the rain a while. The pack’s main strap was gone, but not because it had been torn away. The lack of footprints in the dirt confirmed his theory that the kids had been through prior to the beginning of the storm.

Marty and Jules dismounted to spread out a little in the area while Emmett examined the evidence left behind. Moments later, the musician let out a soft cry. “Hey, Doc, take a look at this,” he suggested from several dozen feet away, peering at something on one of the boulders. Emmett came over curiously, splashing through the standing water without much awareness of it. He followed Marty’s pointing finger to see three crude marks etched onto the rock, quite obviously not an act of nature. He studied them for a moment, then smiled faintly in recognition.

“Just like in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*,” he murmured to himself. “They’ve definitely been through here,” he added to Marty. “See if you and Jules can find any other marks like these. Verne?” he added into the comclip.

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you bring Nemo over this way? Clara can guide you to where we are. I think we’re on their trail, now.”

Although it wouldn’t appear so from the outside perspective, Emily wasn’t completely oblivious to her surroundings during the episode of statue-like stillness. She could see Chris before her as he pinched her, yelled at her, and shook her — in short, doing anything he could think of to provoke any kind of reaction beyond a blank stare. But Emily felt rather detached from it all, as if she was viewing it on the TV or something. She felt tired, too, deeply weary, and wanted to tell Chris to cut it out, that she was fine, but her mouth didn’t seem to want to do that. And since none of what he was doing was bothering her, not really, it seemed easier to just stay where she was, letting things happen as they may.

And when she did move at last, perhaps a full minute later, perhaps five — time was completely out of her grasp, then — she did so feeling very groggy and confused. “What’s wrong?” she mumbled, finally blinking, to Chris’ utter relief. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Not unless you sleep like the dead an’ with your eyes open,” Chris said, clearly spooked. “Emmy, what happened? You just acted like you weren’t here! If you hadn’t been breathing, I would’ve thought you *were* dead. That’s not funny, y’know!”

Emily blinked again at the rather angry tone in her playmate’s voice. “I dunno what you’re talkin’ about, Chris,” she said, feeling tears burn the back of her throat at this completely out-of-the-blue accusation. “I dunno what happened.... I feel like I almost fell asleep, but I’ve never done that with my eyes open.” She whimpered a little, more miserable than before. “Where’s Daddy? My ankle hurts and my head still feels funny....”

Chris was still watching her uneasily. “I dunno, but maybe one of us should go an’ get help,” he said. “Maybe you hit your head when you fell an’ are having seizures. I saw that on TV before, on one of those emergency room shows.”

Emily knew of such programs, since Jules seemed so fascinated by them at home. “You can’t leave me alone,” she said immediately, reaching out to grab his arm before he could move an inch. “You’re not s’posed to do that when people are hurt, an’ what if you get more lost out there, too? Or hit by lightning?”

Chris started to open his mouth to argue, but another close bolt of lightning and subsequent earth-shaking echo of thunder seemed to be enough persuasion for him. Frustration filled his face, however, and he slammed one of his hands onto the cave floor, palm open. “It’s not fair!” he said. “We could be here for hours, an’ if you hit your head hard enough to do what you just did....”

“I don’t think I *did*, though,” Emily said firmly. “My head was never hurting me.... I just feel funny there, kinda spacey an’ sorta groggy. An’ that’s prob’ly ‘cause I’m so hungry an’ all that.”

The boy looked skeptical. “I dunno, Emmy. Then maybe you’re goin’ into shock from hurtin’ your ankle. People don’t just space out like how you did, no way. Not unless something’s wrong with ‘em.”

Emily stared at him for a moment, not sure of what to say. Her ankle hurt so much, it was almost numb, she was kind of cold, she was hungry, she was definitely scared, and above all, she just wanted to go back home! And now Chris was telling her that there was something wrong with her — and what if he was right? He seemed to know a lot about medicine for his age, almost as much as Jules seemed to, and Emily couldn’t see him lying to her about something so serious.... So, feeling terrified and helpless, she gave into the burning at the back of her throat and started to cry.

At the sight and sound of her tears, Chris immediately put an arm around her. “Oh, Emmy, don’t do that. It’s gonna be okay, I *swear*. We’ll get found soon, I know we will — Verne an’ Emmy know about this place, remember? — an’ you’re not gonna die before then....”

His effort at comforting her just made her sob harder, so Chris tried a new tactic. “Y’know, if Marty finds us, I’ll bet he’ll be loads impressed with how brave you’re bein’.”

This made her at least look at him and stop sobbing, though her blue eyes were still swimming in tears. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, for some one who hurt their ankle an’ got lost an’ is our age, you’re keepin’ real cool. I know he’ll notice that an’ prob’ly think it’s neat.”

Emily, however, didn’t seem as cheered by the news as Chris would’ve thought. She sniffed. “Yeah, but you said that I can’t marry him anyway, ‘cause of Jennifer....”

“So what? You can at least be his friend — an’ I wasn’t sayin’ you had to stop likin’ him. Just... you know, sayin’ you’re gonna marry him.”

Emily’s lower lip slipped out in a pout, but at least her tears were drying up. “But I *wanna* marry him,” she said stubbornly. “He’s the cutest an’ nicest guy I know, an’ he’s really funny!”

“Yeah, but you’re only six—”

“Six-an’-a-half, now!” Emily corrected immediately. “My half birthday’s on Marty’s birthday.”

“Well, okay, six-an’-a-half. Anyways, you’ll probably meet a lot more guys an’ stuff before you can get married. Marty’s not the only one out there, y’know.”

The girl scrunched her face up into a rather stubborn grimace. “But I *like* him...”

“An’ there’s nothing wrong with that. Keep likin’ him if you want — but he’s taken, Emmy. An’ even if he an’ Jennifer *do* break up, you can’t count on him marryin’ you. He’s lots older, an’ he’d probably like someone closer to his age.”

Emily frowned, looking perturbed. “But I can still like him,” she said, looking at Chris as if daring him to argue her out of that. He didn’t do anything of the sort, however.

“You can,” he agreed. “But hopin’ or plannin’ for him an’ Jennifer to break up is kinda mean, Emmy. If you like him, you want him to be happy, right?”

Emily nodded grudgingly, absently wiping away the drying tears on her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“So, if you want him to be happy, it’d be better to help fix things with him an’ Jennifer instead a rootin’ for them to split up,” Chris said. “‘Cause I know he ain’t happy about that now at all. Happy people don’t argue an’ sleep in different rooms, ‘specially if they’re married.”

Emily was quiet for a moment, her fingers fidgeting with the bottom of her shirt as she frowned into space, obviously thinking hard, now, and not lost in oblivion. “But we should make sure our daddies are done arguin’ first,” she said. “When they are, maybe I could help Marty with Jennifer ‘cause I *do* want him to be happy... but why do I hafta give up somethin’ that’ll make *me* happy?”

Chris blinked. “You mean marryin’ Marty?” At the girl’s half-shrug, he sighed. “Well, that’s part of bein’ a grown-up, doin’ things you might not wanna to so you can make others happy.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “I thought I’d get t’be a kid longer’n six years,” she grumped.

Chris nodded solemnly as the inside of the cave lit up brilliantly from another close bolt of lightning. Thunder followed almost simultaneously, shaking the inside of the cave hard. Both kids threw their hands over their ears to shut out the terrible echoing booms... but instead of getting softer as the seconds went on, the noises got louder, and the shaking grew more intense. Emily and Chris looked at one another, wide eyed, and the boy mouthed the words Emily already knew from the feelings of the shaking around them: “Mudslide!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

"That was a scream!" Marty shouted over the noise of the pounding rain, the echoes of mud falling somewhere in the canyon, and the tail end of a recent thunderclap.

Jules was doubtful. "It might've been an eagle — the shriek they make sometimes sounds like that..."

The musician returned an equally skeptical glance. "If you were an eagle, would *you* be stupid enough to be out in this?" he retorted, edgy. Between the driving rain and visions of being washed away in a mudslide like the ones eating away at the hills in Malibu, he was eager to find the kids and get the hell out of there.

"He's right," Emmett supported him, to Marty's relief. "Most animals have sense enough to find shelter in weather like this. But where did it come from?"

"I dunno," Marty had to admit, his momentary puff of pride deflating. "It's hard to tell what direction anything's happening just from the sound, in here. Too many places to echo, too many things going on at once..."

"Well, at least we can be fairly certain we're in the right general location."

"Unless some hikers got themselves in trouble," Jules pointed out as he climbed back into the saddle, preparing to head off after the kids.

His father sent him a glance that told him they didn't need such pessimism, then turned to his comclip. "Verne, hurry it up, if you can. We just heard what might've been the kids, and we need Nemo to help find 'em."

"We'll be there in just another minute, Emmett," Clara assured him, since she had the best information as to everyone's position from her viewpoint via the Jag's sensors. The hopeful relief in her voice could not be mistaken.

"Can't we just yell for 'em and see if they hear us?" local Jules wondered, eager to do anything to hurry this rescue operation to a successful conclusion.

His father shook his head. "Like Marty said, the echoes down here are confusing, especially with all this background noise. It might be more frustrating than comforting for both us and them, if we can hear each other but not be able to find one another. Besides, wherever they are, I want them to stay put. No sense in having them come running out from wherever they are only to go the wrong way and make finding them even harder. Nemo knows Chris' scent and her hearing's sharper than ours. If she can smell or hear any trace of him, she'll find him."

"Maybe we should try looking for that mudslide or whatever we just heard," Marty suggested, wishing the storm would let up, just a little. The rising water was making him nervous, so he decided to follow Jules' lead and climb back onto Halley's back. "If I'd been anywhere near it, I know I would've screamed..."

An awful thought occurred to Jules. "What if the kids got buried by it?"

"Don't even go there," his father said sternly, that thought having already crossed his mind. "We'll find 'em... ah, there they come!"

For a moment, the two younger men thought he meant Chris and Emily, but Emmett was looking west, in the direction from which the van would be coming. They saw the flash of headlights against the rock walls on the south side of the passage. The lights bounced for a few moments, tracing the motions of the approaching vehicle, then stopped. Local Emily's voice crackled from the comclips after a bolt of lightning rumbled through. "We're as close as we can get from this end, Daddy," she reported. "The guys're bringing Nemo, but I'm gonna stay with the van in case you need something from it."

Her father agreed it was a good idea, especially given his daughter's discomfort in severe weather, but Marty had his doubts. "Do you think a dog's gonna be able to find any kind of trail in this downpour? I thought even bloodhounds can't follow a scent through water."

"I don't know," Emmett admitted, "but I at least want her to try. It's better than wandering aimlessly in all these passages. There they are!"

Verne and Doc weren't as prepared for the weather as the trio on horseback, but they had rain slickers and boots with enough traction to slog through the muddy water. In this part of the canyon, the ground was slightly higher, so the water wasn't as deep, but they were as cautious as they could be with the need to hurry. Verne had a tight grip on Nemo's leash — the cocker spaniel actually loved water, even rushing water, and was happily bounding along — while Doc carried an emergency shovel and a large waterproof flashlight. There was enough light to see by in the main passage, but if they had to go into any of the narrower side-fissures, they were sure to need additional illumination.

Emmett brought the discarded pack to the dog. She snuffled it dutifully, but did not display her usual interest when she caught a familiar scent. Verne frowned. "Chris, Nemo," he told the dog, pulling her leash up to force eye contact. "You know Chris, Nemo. Find Chris!"

Obedient, the spaniel sniffed about, but finding nothing but water, whined softly. Jules, familiar with the dog's habits after many a day spent hiking with her through the canyon and the surrounding countryside, made a noise of frustration. "This isn't gonna work," he said, certain. "Not in this downpour."

Both inventors had to agree. "Then we'll have to start combing the area," was Doc's opinion. "Where haven't—"

"Emily!!!" The piercing bellow took all of them aback — all but Marty, who had been the bellow, having decided the time for caution was over. "Chris!!! Where are you???" His projection was excellent; even over the tail end of a roll of thunder, his voice went echoing down the maze of fissures. When the thunder was completely gone, he repeated the shout, and was at last answered by distant voices, shrill with panic and high-pitched with youth.

Verne got the idea quickly. "Go find 'em, girl!" he told Nemo, unclipping her collar from the leash. "Go find Chris!"

Released and with something to follow, the dog went bounding off up the canyon, splashing her way through the deepening water. The others followed, those on foot as quickly as they could. Jules grabbed Tesla's reins to bring him along as he and Marty followed the runners at an easier pace. "Good idea, Marty," the youth commended the musician. "What made you think of that?"

Marty shrugged. "Einie used to be able to hear things Doc and other people couldn't even when they were far off or covered up with a lot of background noise, cars, voices, light bulbs that were about to blow — weirder stuff'n that. I figured if the kids yelled again, he — I mean she — could pick up on it."

"Looks like you were right," Jules approved as he urged Shadowfax and Tesla to move a little more quickly, following the others. Nemo was racing on ahead, and the humans on foot were having a hard time keeping up with her.

A bend in the main passage momentarily allowed the runners to move out of sight of the riders; when they were visible again, they found that Nemo's race had ended near the opening of another narrow side-fissure. There, a considerable mound of mud was blocking the way, most likely the result of the most recent slide they'd heard. The dog was attempting to climb over it, but the heap of muck was so soft, she only succeeded in getting herself very muddy.

"Oh, God," Verne moaned, looking around and recognizing the place as he pulled Nemo back from the mud pile. "Dad, this is where Emmy and I found a new cave this spring, the one that'd been hidden by old mudslides. Chris came with us once when we went exploring it, and if they went inside for shelter...."

"Then they're not buried alive," Doc said grimly, but with certainty. "They might be trapped inside if the fall covered the entrance again, but unless they were sitting right at the mouth when the slide occurred, they shouldn't've been touched by it." He made an attempt to remove some of the blocking mud with the shovel, then grimaced. The stuff was thick, but still too liquid with all the rain falling. Whatever he removed was quickly replaced as more mud flowed in to fill the empty spot. "We won't be able to dig our way in by hand, not while it's still raining. I hope there's enough air in there, not just a pocket...."

"There is," Verne told him, sure of it. "It's a lot bigger than you'd think from seeing the entrance, lots of other little chambers and some passages we couldn't explore because things got too tight. There's probably enough air in there to last forever...."

"But Emily can't," Emmett said darkly, another clap of thunder punctuating that unhappy reality. When the last of the noise faded, he followed Marty's example and shouted at the tops of his lungs. "Chris! Emily! Are you in there?"

The sound of answering voices was a welcome relief. "We're here, Dad!" Chris' voice came shouting back, coming mingled with a similar cry from Emily.

"Are you all right?" Doc called, momentarily lightheaded with the knowledge that the worst hadn't happened, that both children were alive.

"We're okay," Chris answered after a pause, possibly made by a discussion of who should be spokesman. "We're in the little cave Verne found, and the mud didn't get this far. But we can't get out. There's a big pile blocking the way back to the canyon, and Emmy's foot is hurt. I think maybe it's just sprained bad, but she can't climb over it."

Some of Doc's worry returned at the news that his daughter had been injured. Jules appraised the situation near the fissure's mouth and shook his head. "Nobody could climb over that, if Nemo couldn't," was his opinion. "It's still too soft. But we'd better find a way to get them out, quick, or we're gonna have more problems'n Emily spacing out. From the looks of the wall on the east side, that part of it's gonna let loose soon, if the rain doesn't stop right now."

"I think he's right, Emmett," Clara's voice crackled via the comclips over another rumble of thunder. Less natural light from above filled the narrow fissure as the Jag hovered over it, the landing lights activated to give those inside it a better view of what lay below. "I remember what the wall of Fairy Chasm looked like just before it let loose and almost took me with it, and this appears frightfully the same."

"But there *is* room on the other side of the slide," visiting Jules added in more hopeful counterpoint. "If the entrance to the cave you've been talking about is on the west face, about three feet above the ground, then it hasn't been blocked by the dirt."

"Thank God," both Emmetts breathed at once, a sentiment echoed silently by the others.

"Could somebody get on top of that bluff and climb down or lower a rope to pull 'em up?" visiting Verne wondered.

"No," was Emmett's certain answer. "The soil composition around here can't hold much weight when it's wet; that's why we get mudslides so often. It's half of what made the canyon in the first place. I once needed to rescue Clara from the side of Fairy Chasm during a storm not even half this bad, and the wall couldn't support my weight without crumbling."

"But we *have* to get to them," his counterpart insisted. "This can't wait...!"

"Maybe it doesn't have to," local Emily's voice suddenly chimed in. "Daddy, what if you tried lowering someone in the way you helped Marty get away from Biff when he was gonna run him over?"

Just about everyone was perplexed by the reference, except the musician, who saw the point after a moment's thought. "She's talking about the second time we went back to '55, Doc, when you were up in the DeLorean and lowered a rope for me to grab so Biff wouldn't flatten me with his car. That'd be a way to get someone down to help the kids out without messing with the bluffs."

Local Verne whistled softly. "With this rain and wind? It'd be awfully dicey..."

"But better than waiting for another mudslide to block the cave entrance," was his father's opinion. "Clara, there's a widening of the passage northeast of here. It should be more than big enough to land the Jag..."

"I see it," came the quick response. "I shouldn't have any problem, so long as there aren't any sudden gusts. But if you ever build another time machine, dear, do see if you can come up with a way to at least minimize this kind of turbulence."

"Who's going after 'em?" Jules wanted to know as they watched the Jag move off in the direction of the landing site.

"I will," came immediately from both Docs and, surprisingly, Marty. The two scientists turned and looked at the musician, startled by his offer. Thus far, he hadn't been terribly comfortable with the whole rescue business; that he would volunteer to take on something even more hazardous genuinely surprised them.

Marty understood their reactions, and shrugged. "It's not a really huge opening up there," he explained, pointing toward the upper lips of the fissure, where one could see the driving rain slowly eating away at the eastern face. "I'll fit easier'n either of you, and... well, you know the way Emmy adores me. If she's hurt and she sees me coming to get her out, she'll probably be so thrilled, she won't think about panicking in front of me. That should make it easier, shouldn't it?"

"Quite likely," Doc agreed, unable to stop a crooked smile from twitching at his lips, despite the gravity of the situation. "But you know this might have the unwanted side effect of making her crush on you even worse, if you come to her rescue...."

The musician rolled his eyes in an expressive grimace. "Yeah, well, I guess that's a chance I'll just have to take. I've done this before, in windy weather, and at least this time, I won't have to hang on for a couple of miles. Besides, you had one of those seizures longer ago than I did, so you're probably gettin' due for another one. You want to take the chance of freezing up and dropping like a rock fifty feet in the air?"

Since his reasoning was valid, neither of the Docs argued with him. Verne reattached Nemo's leash and took her back to the van to get it, the two of them, and elder Emily out of the canyon before the rain and mud made it impossible. Doc gave Marty a hand dismounting while Emmett hurried to join the landing time machine to rig up the rope that would be needed to provide the means to suspend the rescuer and the rescued. "I'd prefer to use the tow chains," Emmett explained as his counterpart and Marty approached while he made a secure loop in one end of the long cord he'd brought out from the car's emergency supplies. "They're long enough and much less apt to break — but also a lot more attractive to lightning. No sense in making this any riskier than necessary."

"Sounds like a great idea to me," Marty said with nervous enthusiasm as he watched the rope being attached to the front bumper of the car. "You're sure this still won't make me lightning rod?"

"Not if you aren't hoisted up into clear air. No point in that; it's too much of a risk, between the weather, the condition of the canyon walls, and the narrowness of that fissure. You only need to get high enough to get over the mud blockage into the clear space beyond. Did you hear that, Clara?"

"Yes, and I'm sure I can manage it, if one of you can tell me what's going on below. The sensor display can tell me where Marty is, but not how high off the ground. You'll have to let me know when he's in the right positions, because I can't see under the car."

"No sweat, Mom," Jules assured her from where he still sat astride his horse. "I can see pretty clear from here, and Marty can still holler when to stop over his com clip. But you guys'd better hurry. I don't think that face is gonna stay together much longer."

When the rope was firmly connected, Clara took the Jag back to the air and hovered over the entrance to the fissure. Under the direction of those below, she went up just high enough so that end of the rope was only a few inches off the ground. Emmett had kept a hand on it to prevent it from flapping about in the wind, but when a strong gust pushed the airborne machine away, it was nearly torn from his hand.

"Sorry," Clara apologized, "but that was a very nasty one. Hurry, Marty, let's not waste any more time."

"Why do I have a terrible feeling I'm gonna regret this?" the musician muttered to himself as he set one foot into the loop at the end of the rope and hung on for dear life. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and prayed this wouldn't turn into the disaster he was fearing, then let go of the breath in a sigh of resignation. "Okay, then, let's do it, while I've still got the nerve."

"You don't have to get up very high, Mom," Jules told his mother in the hovering Jag as she carefully lifted the would-be rescuer off the ground. "About thirty feet up should be more'n enough to clear everything safely."

"That'd be about eighty on the altimeter," other Jules' voice came over the clips, distorted by the static from another crack of lightning. "I'll watch it and tell you when to stop...."

Once airborne, Marty hung on for dear life, squinching his eyes shut until he realized they might need his input to know when to let him back down. He regretted his timing when, just as he opened his eyes again, a blast of wind nearly blew him into the imperiled canyon wall and another stab of lightning dazzled his eyes as it streaked by overhead.

“Oh God...” he groaned, briefly shutting his eyes again to calm his suddenly heaving stomach. “Oh God, after all these years, don’t hit me with lightning now”

Then, as abruptly as the wind had jostled him, it diminished. The musician opened his eyes and saw that he had been lifted over the obstructing pile of mud and farther into the fissure, where there was much greater protection from the wind, if not the rain. He could see the open floor that hadn’t been buried in mud, but it took a moment more before he spotted the mouth of the small cave. “I see it, I see it!” he hollered into his clip. “Let me down right here!”

Fortunately, Clara had had the sense to move the Jag slowly, so the sudden stop was not a wrenching shock to Marty. The hovering vehicle above him actually provided some slight protection from the driving rain, but as he stepped off the rope onto the solid rock floor, heavier splashes spattered the musician’s head and shoulders. He looked up, annoyed, and saw that the opposite face of the fissure was curved slightly in his direction, and was indeed preparing to let loose the outermost skin of its rain-undemined mud. He gulped nervously, trying not to think of what it would be like to get caught under that avalanche of muck, and hurried toward the little cave.

The kids were just inside, having been tipped off to the potential of imminent rescue by the sounds of the Jag’s hover systems, the lights flashing from its underside, and Marty’s yells.

Both their pale and dirty faces were pictures of fear slowly giving way to relief at the sight of help. “I knew you’d come an’ get me!” Emily cried, delighted even though her knight in shining armor was more than slightly soggy and spattered with mud.

“You both okay, ‘cept for Emmy’s foot?” Marty asked before he helped them out of the cave. When they both nodded vigorously, he turned to Chris. “All right, then, you first.”

Emily’s rapture became appalled. “*Him* first? I thought girls get to go first....”

“Not when they’re hurt and need someone to carry ‘em out. I don’t wanna make any more trips than I have to. That other wall’s gonna give way any time, now. Chris, can you keep your foot in the loop and hang on tight while your Mom gets you outta here? Won’t take more’n a minute.”

Chris made a show of staunch courage. “Sure, I can do that. I’m not scared by a little wind an’ rain’ an’ lighntnin’.”

“Good, then let’s get you moving. As soon as you’re out, send ‘em back for me and Emmy, okay?”

“Okay.” With a little help from Marty — who used his own belt as a sort of safety strap around Chris’ waist, buckling it snugly so that the rope would be held tight against him, just in case he slipped and lost his grip in an ill-timed gust — the boy was on his way. As the Jag lifted him off the ground, another blast of wind shook it, and though Chris wasn’t jostled so badly he couldn’t hold on, the combination of wind and rain sent a small portion of the muddy bluff sliding down to the fissure’s bottom, a taste of things to come.

Emily, peering out of the cave’s mouth, shrieked at the sight, but saw a moment later that Chris was still holding on tight and moving off to safety. “You’re next, Emmy,” Marty told her with his best reassuring smile, which was only so good, given that his own heart was pounding. “You sure nothing’s hurt but your foot?”

“I scraped up my hand a little,” she admitted, holding it up for him to see and doing her best to be brave after that embarrassing scream she’d just made, which certainly had made her seem like some silly girl and not a mature young woman. “Am I gonna hafta go the way Chris did? I dunno if I can hang on that good, with a bad foot and a messed up hand....”

“No, we’re going out together,” her light of love told her as he helped her to sit on the lip of the cave’s mouth. The idea appealed to her so much, she offered not the slightest peep of objection.

Chris had disappeared beyond the mound of mud. After what felt like much too long but was only a matter of seconds, he heard one of the Docs — Marty couldn’t quite tell which — announce, “He’s safe!” over the little radios.

Marty let loose a sigh of relief. “Thank God,” he muttered as he watched the Jag already heading up again, coming back to get them. The wind and rain continued to batter the cliff-sides, and another fall of mud splattered the bottom of the fissure. “Come on, guys, hurry up,” Marty urged through the comclip. “I don’t think we’ve got more’n a

couple of minutes before we wind up in the mud pack to end all mud packs.” *If that long*, he thought, seeing the small mud-slips become more and more frequent.

As he saw both the car and the rope nearing, he turned back to Emily. “Can you ride piggy-back with your foot hurting and your hand scraped?” he asked, praying she would say yes.

Thankfully, she nodded. “Oh, yeah, Marty, I can hang onto you *real* tight, no problem.”

I’ll bet, he thought ruefully, though he did his best not to let her see or hear his exasperation. Still, it was better than having her bawling with fear. “Okay, then, sit here on the edge of the rock, and when I turn around, put your legs around my waist and your arms around my neck and hang on tight. You’re gonna have to hold on by yourself, ‘cause I’ve gotta hold onto the rope, okay?”

“Yeah, I can do it. Jus’ let’s hurry. There’s mud drippin’ all over the place....”

He didn’t argue with that. Larger globs of the brown goo were raining down on them, a situation made worse when the time machine moved directly overhead and the downrush of air from the hover system pushed against the already loosened and waterlogged dirt. “We’ll be out in a sec,” he said to encourage the little girl as the rope came closer. “Here we go, then, hop on.” Emily obediently did as instructed, her knees digging into his sides and her arms wrapping around his throat like a hunting python. “Jeeze, Emmy, ease up a little!” he managed to croak out, tugging at the strangling arms. “You’re choking me!”

“Sorry,” she said contritely, “but you said to hang on tight....”

“Yeah, well, not so tight I can’t breathe. Don’t worry, Emmy,” he added when he heard her heartbroken sob. “You didn’t do anything wrong, I’ll be all right. Let’s just get out of this mess, okay?”

“Okay,” she sniffled, doing her best to hold on without killing her rescuer. Marty made sure she was settled as securely as possible on his back, apologizing when he accidentally jostled her injured foot, then headed for the dangling rope.

A gust of wind blew it out of reach just as he was trying to grab it, and sent down another shower of mud, this much thicker than before. “Damn!” he swore, forgetting Emily’s presence in the face of another time-delaying aggravation. The rope swung back again, but before he could catch it, the wind, swirling about unpredictably inside the fissure, blew it away again. Another mini-slide cascaded down, this larger than the one that had followed Chris’ exit, splattering both of them.

“We’re not gonna get out, are we?” Emily asked in a trembling voice. Her fingers grabbed hold of Marty’s slicker and clenched so tightly, they caught both his shirt and some of his skin in a pinch.

He winced, but didn’t scold her. “Nah, we’ll get out, Em, I promise. Maybe just a little muddier....” He made a third grab for the rope, and again missed. “Hey guys, can you hold it still up there for just a second? The damn rope won’t stay in one place long enough for me to catch it!”

“It’s probably caught in some sort of wind eddy,” was other Jules’ analysis of the situation. “I suppose we should’ve taken precautions against this kind of thing and weighted it first. Perhaps if we move a bit farther into the crevice....”

The Jag edged in that direction, and the dangling rope moved along with it. Marty followed, with Emily still clinging to his back. Mud continued to drip down on them with frightening regularity, and when the line suddenly stopped blowing about and came within reach, the musician lunged forward and grabbed hold of it. “Go, go!” he shouted to those above, not wanting to waste a moment’s time. He fumbled to get his foot into the loop even as the Jag moved up again.

His toe almost caught, then slipped, causing a terrifying moment when he felt his hands also slipping on the wet rope. The wind gusted, pushing both the time machine and those tethered to it eastward. Marty’s flailing leg bumped into the fissure wall, and all of a sudden, the whole face began to slide. Both he and Emily screamed at the sight of the curtain of mud headed for them—

—then just as suddenly, they were lifted up, as if by the hand of God, and pulled out of the path of the torrent of liquid earth. With Emily shrieking in his ear, Marty wasn’t sure what had happened, if someone had seen the disaster

coming and told Clara to get them the hell out of there, or if Providence had blown the airborne vehicle up at just the right instant. Whatever the case, he and Emily both managed to hang on; his foot finally found purchase in the rope loop, and as they were lifted over the original mud fall, they twisted about just enough so that Marty could see what they had narrowly avoided.

“Jesus,” he whispered, too faintly for Emily to hear. Below and behind them, the mud that had just fallen filled the place where he and Emily and recently been standing; there was no longer any sign of the cave mouth to be seen. He’d have to mention this to the others — later. Right now, he was only interested in getting his feet back on solid ground.

“You look terrible,” local Jules commented as the mud-soaked pair settled back on the ground, and Emily happily let go of Marty to be claimed by her relieved father.

“I *feel* terrible,” the musician admitted, knowing that he was covered with mud from head to toe. The rain was helping wash it away a little, but not much, as the downpour was finally slacking off. “All I want right now is a long, hot shower.”

“Soon enough,” Emmett told him after instructing Clara to land the Jag where she had before. “I want all five of you to get into the time machine and head back to the house — by way of a fifteen-second time jump. Clara told us your Verne just had his first experience with an incompatibility seizure, and from the look of things, all of you will probably be joining him, if you don’t go now. Once you’re there, Clara can take her counterpart and Jennifer on a jump to make sure they’re reset, too.”

“You sure you want us to do that now?” Marty asked, gesturing to his utterly bedraggled appearance. “We’ll mess up the inside of your car but good....”

The local inventor dismissed the concern without a second thought. “It can be cleaned. Dirty upholstery is a small price to pay to make certain all of you are safe. You’ll all fit, if you don’t mind squeezing together and someone holds Emily on their lap. I’ll need to scan all of you again, when my Jules and I get back with the horses. I’d rather not delay taking the readings that long, but....”

“I can take care of it, Doctor Brown,” visiting Jules said confidently as he moved into the back seat to join his brother and Marty, who’d climbed in first. “I’ve been watching you, and the scanning equipment and program seems quite simple. If I don’t do it right, there’s no harm done, but if I can, it should help, shouldn’t it?”

“Yes, definitely,” his father’s double agreed. “All right, go ahead and do it. Your father can get you into the lab and bring up the computer for you.”

“Not a problem,” his counterpart agreed, climbing into the front passenger seat once the three younger men had crammed into the back. Emily squirmed as she settled onto his lap, grimacing. “What’s wrong?” he asked, thinking her injured foot must be hurting.

“Are you an’ Chris’ dad still mad, Daddy?” she asked, ever so seriously.

Both inventors smiled crookedly. “No,” Emmett told her. “That wasn’t very grown up of us, behaving like that, and we decided we’d rather be friends than fight over stupid things.”

“Quite right,” her father confirmed. “You two weren’t running away because of that, were you?”

She shook her very muddy little head. “No. We can go now, then,” she said primly, as if there was absolutely no more left to be said on the subject. And for now, both Docs agreed that there wasn’t.

There was, however, considerably more to be said after they were back at the house, all the visitors had been through the n-dimensional jump, and Jules had properly taken readings of their “reset” conditions. “We weren’t running away,” Emily told both of her parents, their counterparts, and their assorted family members after all the rescuers had had a chance to clean up and change out of their mud and rain soaked clothes. They were in the big parlor where the other dimensional visitors had first gathered in this house, both victims and rescuers enjoying the warmth of the fireplace after being soaked through to the bone. Other Jules had carefully examined his sister’s injured foot and declared it

merely sprained, but to help it heal, it had been wrapped in an elastic bandage and was now being elevated and covered with ice packs to bring down the swelling.

Emily didn't mind him checking her foot too much, since afterward, she got to be treated like royalty and waited on. "We thought you an' Chris' daddy were mad 'cause our time m'chine's broke, an' it was gonna take way too long to build a new one. So we were gonna get stuff from our busted one, chips an' circuit boards an' things you could use over again an' build the new one faster."

"Yeah," Chris chimed in, also cleaned up after his ordeal. "I know you're usually *really* cranky when you're worried about somethin' important, Dad. We thought if you had lots of stuff like that, stuff you wouldn't have to make all over again, you wouldn't be worried about it so much, an' you'd stop bein' mad at each other."

"And nobody told either of you we'd moved our train into the barn and the other's hidden outside under an invisible disguise," Doc added, seeing the mistake in their reasoning. "I suppose we can't blame you for making assumptions based on things no one mentioned to you."

"Though we *can* blame you for doing something you knew wasn't right to begin with," Emmett amended, giving his son a stern look that wasn't as stern as it might've been. "You *know* you're not supposed to leave the house without telling one of us where you're going, and it's a standing rule that any time anyone goes off hiking or riding, you take a com clip along. If you'd done that, you could've called back to the house the minute you realized you were lost and saved yourselves — and all of us — a lot of worry, and pain." A pointed glance took in little Emily and her propped up foot.

Both kids hung their heads. "I'm sorry, Dad," Chris said contritely. "We did take a map, an' Emmy was right about where their train crashed. We really did think we could help."

"That's right," Emily added with an emphatic nod of her still-damp but now clean head. "It was awful, watchin' you two fightin'. It made me feel all sick inside, an'... well, I guess maybe we shouldn'ta broke the rules, but we really did just wanna help make things better. Are we gonna get punished bad, this time?"

The two inventors looked at their wives, then at each other, then shook their heads as one. "No, not this time," Emmett said, sighing softly. "If the two of us hadn't acted like children, there wouldn't've been any reason for you to do what you did."

His counterpart agreed. "But just for the record, we stopped being mad at each other last night, after your mothers scolded *us*."

Both children stared at their respective fathers in wide-eyed disbelief. "No way!" Chris declared. "Mom yelled at *you*, Dad?"

The local scientist's smile was wry. "Not exactly. Emily's mom scolded me, and your mom scolded him. Oddly enough, it worked out better that way."

"Then why weren't you talkin' to each other last night?" Emily wanted to know.

"Because sometimes, even adults need a Time Out," her father replied truthfully. "Even when you stop being angry with someone, it doesn't hurt to stay out of each other's way for a little while, just to make sure you don't get angry all over again. Like waiting until you're sure a fire's had enough time to go out completely before poking around in the ashes."

"So everything's okay now?" She sounded tentatively hopeful.

Both men nodded. "Everything's okay," Emmett confirmed. "Except for your foot, but perhaps that's punishment enough for you. It'll certainly help make sure you don't get into any new trouble while you're here."

"Uh-uh," Emily vowed. "I'm gonna be *real* good from now on. That was all too scary, hurtin' my foot an' gettin' lost, an' all that thunder an' rain an' mud." Her blue eyes went wide with horror. "Marty an' me coulda been *killed*...."

"Maybe not killed, but sure plastered with mud," the musician opined as he joined them, having just finished his own ablutions. "I don't think I've ever taken a shower that long, and I still feel like I haven't gotten all the mud off. I hope that cave wasn't anything important, though. After that last slide, I couldn't see the entrance anymore."

“Nuts,” local Verne grumped, mindful of the fact that his mother was standing nearby and would doubtless chastize him for using stronger language in front of the two little ones. “We really didn’t get much of a chance to look around, the last time we went to check it out...”

“Then it’s just as well it’s sealed up again,” Clara said firmly. “You children shouldn’t’ve gone exploring there without an adult in the first place. None of you are trained spelunkers, and if you hadn’t taken Chris along to begin with, he wouldn’t’ve known where it was, they wouldn’t’ve tried using it for shelter today, and nearly been trapped inside.”

The blond teen wasn’t terribly chastened. “I suppose, but Chris was the only one who could fit in some of the tighter spots...” He curtailed that observation when his mother gave him a frosty glare.

“It may be sealed up now, but it probably won’t be forever,” his elder brother observed equably. “The rains and runoff this spring opened it up, so it’ll probably open up again someday.”

Clara would’ve had something to say about that, too, if her counterpart hadn’t interrupted. “Well, everyone’s back safe and sound, now, we’re all out of danger from these horrible seizures for a time, so let’s just put this behind us. Were you planning to resume work on repairing the time machine before dinner?” she asked her husband. “With this delay, I doubt we’ll be eating until almost seven. It know that’s not even two hours, but...”

“We should make use of the time, regardless,” Doc admitted. “We’ve already lost more than a day to other distractions.”

Visiting Verne groaned. “You mean, we don’t get any time off? That whole mess in the canyon was stress city...!”

His brother snorted. “It’s not like either of us had to put in any real physical exertion,” he reminded him. “You didn’t even step outside of the car and get wet from the rain. Besides, there’ll be time for relaxation this evening. Won’t there?” he asked their parents, wondering if the misadventures of the day had changed the plans for the impromptu birthday party.

“Oh, yes,” local Clara assured him. “All work and stress and no rest makes for too many mistakes in important projects like this, as I’m sure your father can tell you. Thinking of which, if we’re finished with this little debriefing, I need to call Marty and see if he and Jennifer are still planning to drop by for supper. That dreadful storm may have changed the plans with the children and Jennifer’s family....”

As if that was a cue to end the proceedings, everyone started off in whatever direction was necessary to take care of their appointed tasks. Before joining the crew out in the barn, other Verne helped relocate little Emily into the TV room, where she and Chris were to spend the remainder of the afternoon watching some of Chris’ favorite movies which Emily hadn’t ever seen, under the watchful ear of elder Emily, who would be helping out in the kitchen, and the watchful eye of Nemo, who had taken a proprietary interest in guarding the two children she had helped rescue. Older Emily had promised her young counterpart that if the two of them behaved, she’d let her play with her rather extensive Barbie collection tomorrow, so they could do girl things for a change. Chris wasn’t exactly thrilled by the suggestion, but little Emily was delighted by it, and happily vowed to be extra-good for the rest of the day.

As everyone dispersed, Jennifer, who had been keeping quiet and as out of the way as possible while the others discussed what had happened, almost collided with Marty as they both started down the same corridor at virtually the same moment. They paused and looked at each other — and to Marty’s surprise, his wife appeared neither cold nor angry nor even irritated. She actually looked... guilty.

“I guess the kids were really upset by seeing their fathers getting along so badly,” she said, her tone neutral.

Marty answered in kind. “Yeah, and I know how they feel. Kinda made me feel sick to my stomach, too. I’m just glad they didn’t get hurt worse than they did, trying to make things right with their dads.”

“So am I. And...” She paused to take a deep breath. “I’m sorry for the way I acted earlier,” she said in a rush, getting out the words before she lost the nerve to say them. “I guess I haven’t been acting much better than a kid, myself. If you still want to try this mediation thing with our doubles, I’ll do it. I really do want to find a way to work things out between us, Marty. I just don’t know why we can’t find a way to talk this out without yelling at each other. If having referees who sort of know us will help, I want to do it. I can’t promise it’ll work, but I promise I’ll try.”

Briefly, Marty wondered whether or not she was being sincere; after searching her face, he finally decided she was. "That's all I'm asking, Jen," he said honestly. "That's all I've ever asked. If we can't do that much, we might as well just give up — and that's *not* what I want."

"Neither do I. I just hope this works, because if it doesn't...."

"Don't even think that. It's gonna work 'cause it *has* to. Besides, today's my birthday, so it wouldn't *dare* not work. I've got a feeling everything's gonna be perfect." He said it with reassuring confidence, though he didn't quite feel it. He remembered only too well what had happened on the day his birthday had rolled around during their camping trip in Oregon, and how the rest of today had gone thus far. He was hoping with all his might that his words would be true, but he couldn't shake a sinking feeling that something was going to go wrong yet again.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Whether it had been by an understood mutual consent or just coincidence, Jennifer and Marty said little to one another after their brief exchange in the hallway. Marty, personally, didn't want to chance saying something that would inevitably incite Jennifer's irritation towards him again, thus endangering their talk scheduled for later. So while she went to see what she could do with the dinner preparations, Marty headed out to the lab with most of the others to see if his help was needed there. He half-expected to be sent back into the house because it was his birthday, exempt from the time machine repairing chores, a matter he wouldn't have minded after the hellish activities of the afternoon. But the Docs put him to work with their sons, and a short while later, the local Marty joined them, having apparently been sent outside to give some assistance while his wife remained in the house with the others to help with the meal.

"I heard you guys had some excitement today," he said as he pitched in with assembling circuit boards under Emmett's direction, while Doc was using his sons upstairs in cleaning out the train to make room for the new or repaired equipment.

Marty snorted softly at the understatement. "You might call it that," he said. "Between the horseback riding, hanging from a rope, and almost being given a full-body mud bath, I think I'll be lucky if I can get out of bed tomorrow. I'm *already* sore from the horses...."

"If you ride as often as I do, I wouldn't doubt it. At least your birthday's not *boring*...."

The visiting musician rolled his eyes. "No kidding. Since my birthday *technically* fell on the day we dropped in here, I'm almost afraid of what'll happen on this date when we get back home. God, I never thought I'd have *three* birthdays this year...." He looked up from the circuit board before him he was trying to assemble. "How'd your birthday dinner thing go last night?"

"Oh, it was all right. Mom went overboard as usual and pulled the bit with telling our waiter about why we were there, so they sang happy birthday and gave me free dessert.... Compensation, I guess, for the embarrassment."

"Yeah, I hate it when that happens.... And you're famous, now, so I guess that can be really weird."

Local Marty looked at him in surprise. "Famous?" he said, blinking.

"Yeah. Before the craziness this afternoon, Doc and I went into town to get some stuff for the repairs, and I got to check out the music store. Anyone who has a section to himself and gets recognized and asked for autographs is definitely *not* a nobody! When did you get into producing and all that?"

"Back in '98," the local musician said, looking both surprised and embarrassed by his counterpart's words. "But it's only really been a major part of things for a couple of years, now. I kinda fell into it accidentally when one of the groups I'd been writing stuff for lost their producer mid-album and thought I might be able to handle finishing it up. So I gave it a whirl, found it kinda fun, they liked the way it turned out, and it just went on from there. I never really thought I'd do that sorta thing before then, but I guess you never know what can happen."

"So you're doing that a lot now? It looked like it from the albums I saw at the store, and from what the clerk was saying to me...."

"More than before, that's for sure. People I've never worked with before are coming to me now with offers, which is a little weird, but what the hell?" He shrugged. "If you're wondering if this is something you should try, I'd say it's really up to you. Back in my '94, when I was your age, I never thought I'd be doing what I am now, or even *want* to do it. But it just sorta evolved that way. And since so much *does* seem to be different between here and there, maybe things will fall into place like that for you; maybe they won't."

"Yeah," Marty admitted. "I'm not doing everything you have by this time, so far. Like teaching. I don't think I have the patience for that sorta thing. It was hard enough for me to explain to people older than me how to work some of the sound and mixing boards at the broadcast station when I worked there as a studio tech." He changed the subject back to a matter he was more curious about. "They kept mentioning some kinda big collaboration or project you're supposed to be working on, though. What is it?"

Local Marty looked at Emmett for a moment, who was busy with showing his Jules how to do a tricky connection on the boards, then gave a little shrug. "Well, right now I'm working on something with Paul McCartney."

Marty's hand shook for a moment at the name, dropping the chips and tools he'd been holding. They slipped off the corner of the table and hit the floor with a clatter. "Holy shit," he breathed, staring at his counterpart for any hint that he might be kidding. So far as he could see, there was none. "You're serious?" At the other Marty's nod, he shook his head in wonder. "How'd *that* happen?"

"Peter had a little something to do with it," Emmett said as he knelt down to pick up the things Marty had dropped and set them back on the table. "They were involved with the same charity in England."

The visiting Marty, who'd felt his heart start to race the moment he heard the name, felt it now plummet. "Oh, man," he breathed, disappointed. "No way that's gonna happen to me, then, since this Peter dude doesn't seem to be around in our world...."

"That means nothing," Emmett said immediately. "I hadn't met him by June of '94. My Marty first hired an attorney from his firm to help with a contract negotiation that April, and he was the one who recommended them when I needed patenting help that October. Even if it hasn't happened to you quite yet, it's possible similar circumstances could bring him into your lives a little later. But if it doesn't, that won't mean you can never collaborate with someone of that stature, eventually. If you keep working at things, it'll fall into place."

"Definitely," his counterpart assured him. "What I have now didn't happen overnight. I know it must seem kinda weird from where you are, especially since we seem to have been in different places at the same age, but Doc's right. If you've got talent — and, trust me, I know you do — people will see it, especially if you keep plugging away."

The advice was sound and something the younger musician already knew, to a degree. "Yeah, I kinda picked up on that about your career when I was at the store. But... Jesus, McCartney? That's *huge!*"

The local Marty couldn't resist grinning. "I know," he said, sounding awed himself. "I keep having to pinch myself to make sure it's not some crazy dream! But if you go into town again and people ask about this, don't say anything. I'm feeling enough pressure over this already, and it's just in the early stages; we're working on writing the music. If nothing happens to delay things, the actual album should be out in about a year."

"No problem," his counterpart said, too stunned to resist agreeing. "I still can't believe it...."

Verne, who seemed to be having no problems with his job, much to the visitor's surprise considering the Verne he was familiar with, snickered a little. "You sound exactly like *him* a few months ago," he said, indicating the local Marty with a tilt of his head. "I guess some things are the same no matter where you go and all that...."

"Well, what did you expect, Verne?" Jules asked. "You'd probably be the same way if someone you respected in your field wanted to work with you or needed your help."

"Maybe so, but I kinda doubt that my counterpart would get all stoked about it, too. We have *completely* different professional interests, just like you and yours."

"Yeah, well, some reactions are the same no matter what...."

While the boys started bickering good-naturedly back and forth about that, local Marty decided to change the subject. He seemed a little uncomfortable talking about the collaboration, thought whether it had to do with a genuine unease at jinxing things or perhaps a feeling of not wanting to seem overly successful to his less-than-so counterpart wasn't clear. "Were you and Jennifer still wanting to do the mediation thing tonight?"

The visiting Marty nodded. "Tonight's still cool — Jen actually said she was gonna give it an honest shot, so maybe it won't be so bad." His tone did not match the words of optimism, however, and his counterpart noticed it immediately.

"Sounds better than what you had earlier."

"I guess so. What time do you think we should do it?"

“After dinner,” Emmett suggested immediately from a few feet away, his words causing the Martys to look over at him in surprise. “People are usually in better states of mind after they’ve had something to eat. And it also might be wise to wait until after Emily and Chris are in bed. If things *do* take an unpleasant turn, they won’t have to witness it.”

“Good idea,” local Marty approved immediately. “I don’t think we want to give your Emily any more fuel for her romantic fire — and from what I’ve heard about today, there’ve been enough problems caused by them seeing things they shouldn’t.”

“Yeah, well, I think Emmett’s probably got it *worse* for me, now,” the visitor said with a weary sigh. “The last thing I want is for her to be placing more bets on Jen and I being single again.”

“We won’t let that happen,” his counterpart vowed. “Even if Jen and I have to tie you guys to the chairs, we’ll make sure you talk it out tonight.”

Marty appreciated the sentiment, but he also knew that such an act might make little or no difference. Trying to shake himself out of his pessimistic thoughts — no doubt due to the exhausting and stressful events of the afternoon — he concentrated more on the project at hand, more or less putting the mediation matter out of his mind until they were called for dinner a short time later.

The moment they stepped into the house, however, he knew something was up. Emily and Chris stood at the breezeway door, allowing everyone but the Martys inside. The kids were both smiling, as if they knew some delicious secret that the two men did not.

“You can’t come in yet,” Chris told them, one hand held up to stop them, even as he let his older brothers and their counterparts scoot past.

“Why not?” the younger Marty wanted to know, in no mood for games.

Emily grinned up at him from the chair she’d been provided beside the door, her uninjured leg and ankle extended before her, to block the musicians from easily stepping inside. “Cause,” she said simply, not elaborating.

The local Marty groaned softly. “What are you guys up to, Doc?” he asked, turning to his mentor as the scientists finally reached the door, having lingered a moment to secure things in the barn.

Both of them blinked innocently. “Nothing,” Emmett said neutrally. “If you’d both like to wait here while I see what the delay is....”

The visiting Marty’s suspicion that something was going on tripled. “Is this something we’re not supposed to know about?”

“No doubt,” his counterpart said, grimacing a little as the Docs went into the house, leaving them behind. He turned to address the smiling kids. “This doesn’t have anything to do with our birthdays, does it?”

Emily giggled; Chris’ eyes widened quite innocently. “It’s both of your birthdays?” he said. “I didn’t know that....”

Visiting Marty would’ve bet that was a whopper of a fib. He didn’t mind that something was going on, oddly enough; a part of him was rather happy that the date wasn’t passing by yet again without some kind of real acknowledgment. He wondered if his wife was in on the plans, though, and if she was, how she was dealing with it.

After a few minutes of stalling them, the kids apparently received some kind of signal from within the house and abruptly let them in after first blindfolding them. Emily, of course, got the job of tying the fabric around her Marty’s eyes, and then leading him by the hand to wherever the destination was, a journey that bruised him a little as the little girl kept accidentally bumping him into walls and pieces of furniture, no doubt due to her injured ankle and limping steps. Finally, he was plunked down in a chair that, if the smells and sounds were any indication, was at the dinner table. The blindfold was removed, and he saw the faces of everyone staring at him and smiling. Next to him was his counterpart, who was blinking in a similarly dazed fashion as the visitor, having also just been relieved of the blindfold. Before the both of them were a small stack of gifts and cards. The chairs they were sitting in, too, had been decorated, no doubt by the younger kids, with crepe paper and glitter.

“Happy birthday,” the local Clara said to the both of them, smiling.

"Thanks," visiting Marty said, dazed, the sentiment echoed by his counterpart. "What made you guys decide to do this?"

"We started it, I suppose," visiting Clara admitted. "We thought that a small celebration might be just the thing to provide a welcome break from all the stress and work everyone's been under. And since your birthday a few days ago didn't turn out exactly the way Emmett and I had hoped or planned," she added to her Marty, "we thought this would be another chance."

The musician was touched. "Thanks," he said sincerely. "This is great." But he couldn't stop his eyes from flicking in the direction of his Jennifer, seated on the other side of the table from him. The young woman caught his eye for a moment, gave him a rather wistful smile, then turned her gaze to the food on her plate. Marty sighed, frustrated, any positive feeling evaporating into sadness when he glanced at his counterpart and saw that *his* wife was sitting next to him, her hand on her husband's.

It has to work tonight, he told himself, turning his attention to the food being passed around the table. *It has to work because it's my birthday.*

The pessimism, however, still tugged at him.

As it turned out, it was after nine before the mediation could get underway. Dinner lasted more than an hour between the meal, the dessert — a birthday cake for the Martys, naturally — and then the opening of a few gifts. Visiting Marty was surprised that he got anything, but apparently, Doc and Clara had brought along some gifts from home with the intent of giving them to him on his so-called "technical" birthday before all hell had broke loose on the camping trip. The older couple gave him a top of the line Discman — which was kind of amusing now, as what was top of the line in 1994 paled to the things available in 2002 — while the older boys had pooled their resources to get him a fifty dollar gift certificate to a music supply store, which Marty knew he could use towards some new equipment he'd been planning to buy for his home studio. Being more artistically than financially inclined, little Emily had made him a drawing and a card that day, the former depicting him in the afternoon rescue and looking rather like an overmuscled action hero. The only thing notably missing from the gifts, however, was a package from Jennifer. Unsure if this was a deliberate or accidental snub on her part, since she probably hadn't brought anything along on the camping trip, he did his best to ignore it — but the oversight gnawed at him.

When Emily and Chris had finally been settled in bed, exhausted from the day's ordeal, Emmett showed the two younger couples to the den on the first floor where they could hold their discussion, as work was still going on in the barn and lab. Everyone but the two youngest kids and visiting Clara were gathering out there to help, and the older woman had gone into the library to conduct more research on her family's local counterparts. Emmett assured them that they would have plenty of privacy then left them to the task at hand.

For a long moment, the couples simply stared at one another. Local Marty and Jennifer looked oddly nervous, but the feeling was twice as bad for the visitors. Finally, the former cleared his throat and glanced at the other-dimensional couple. "Should we all sit down?"

"Probably," his Jennifer said. She looked to their younger counterparts. "Did you both want to sit next to each other? I think we're here to make sure that you do actually talk, but we don't want to interfere more than we have to."

Marty suddenly felt grossly uncomfortable with the situation, and he wondered if it had really come down to this. Were things really so bad now between him and his wife that they couldn't speak to each other without someone there to keep them in line and away from degenerating into bickering and sniping? It was almost like therapy, though such a therapy — using dimensional variations on yourself as a mediator — surely hadn't been tried by professionals before. He opened his mouth, about to suggest to the other McFlies that maybe they should just go home, that he and Jen could handle it — but a look at his wife stopped him. If that had been the case, they wouldn't be here now. This was necessary, as weird and embarrassing and crazy as it might seem.

"All right," he said softly, taking a seat on one of the couches. Jennifer sat down beside him, while the others took a loveseat a few feet away. "I'm not really sure, how are we supposed to start this....?"

"Just start talking," his counterpart suggested helpfully.

“Okay.” Marty looked at his unusually pale wife, taking a breath before he started to speak. “I guess we might as well start at the beginning. Jennifer, why do you want to change your name so badly?”

The newswoman blinked. “I don’t want to change my entire name,” she said. “I just want to use my maiden name at work. We’ve gone over this before, Marty.”

“Yeah, but you’ve also never given me a clear answer, and when I pry, you get all weird. I just wanna know, why is this so important to you? What’s so wrong with being known as a McFly?”

“Nothing is, Marty, I’d just like a separate identity at work.” There was some of the old irritation back in her voice. “I’d like to draw the line somewhere between a private and personal life, and using my old name is a nice way to do it. A lot of people use other names to distinguish themselves in their professional lives.”

“Not in a place like broadcast journalism. Jeeze, Jen, that’d be like you’re some actress in Hollywood. You can’t leave your face at home when you go out, and that’s what people recognize — *not* the name.”

“I don’t care,” Jennifer said, frowning. “I—”

“Yeah, you *don’t* care,” Marty said, cutting her off. “Jennifer, do you have *any* idea how that makes me feel, hearing you want to erase your married name? I never forced you to be a McFly; if you wanted to keep being a Parker when we were married, I wouldn’t’ve put up a huge fight. But why the hell *now*, when you’re getting locally famous? And *don’t* say it’s cause you’re now getting famous and wanna be some nobody with a personal life separate ‘cause that’s BS!”

Jennifer looked frustrated and angry, an expression Marty had gotten far too used to seeing on his wife’s face over the last few weeks. “You know that’s not true,” she said frostily.

Local Marty spoke up for the first time, tentatively. “I can see where he’s coming from, Jennifer,” he said to his wife’s counterpart.

Jennifer turned to look at him, clearly confused, but the expression turned swiftly to hurt when her counterpart said, “So can I.” Before she could begin to give voice to the feelings she was clearly experiencing, if the blood in her cheeks was any indication, elder Marty spoke again.

“He can correct me if I’m wrong,” he said, glancing at his counterpart, “but I think this is bothering him because you *did* decide to just do this now, and not when you first started out.” At the nod visiting Marty gave, the local continued. “And I think the *reason* that’s bugging him is, well... what do you think of Marty’s parents, Jennifer?”

The young woman was clearly taken aback by the question. “His parents? George and Lorraine?” At the older Marty’s nod, she shrugged. “I’ve always thought they were nice people.”

“Do you remember them in any other way? Like Marty does?”

“No. Why would I?”

“I thought so.” Local Marty paused, studying her a moment. “Marty *has* told you what they were like before his first trip back in time, right?”

Jennifer nodded, looking as if this was the dumbest question she’d been asked. “Of course. What does this have to do with changing my name?”

Her counterpart answered the question. “A lot,” she said, obviously catching on to her husband’s ploy. “If your Marty is anything like mine, then he had to deal with seventeen years of being told that the McFlies of Hill Valley were losers who wouldn’t amount to anything. It was his family *name*, Jennifer, and his family pride. Imagine if you’d been told your entire life that all Parkers were like that.”

“That’s ridiculous,” the visiting newswoman said, rolling her eyes. “That might’ve been true once, but no one else around here thinks of the McFlies in that way — or even knows about that.”

“Yeah, but I don’t remember anything different,” Marty said to his wife, appreciating the points their counterparts had made. “I still remember things from *before*, and the shit I had to put up with from my father’s old legacy.

Jennifer didn’t look terribly sympathetic. “Well, they’re not that way now. And I don’t see why this has anything to do with *me* changing *my* name in the workplace! No one’s going to think badly of *you* if I do that.”

“That’s not the point, Jen!” Marty burst out, unable to restrain himself from raising his voice anymore. “You don’t even care that this bothers me or why! *That’s* what matters, not what people think!”

Jennifer pursed her lips, bristling. “Well, you’re not really giving me much of a chance to explain why this is important to me.”

The musician rolled his eyes. “Oh, sure, it’s all about you,” he said, rather viciously. “I’ve given you plenty of times to tell me why this is important to you, and you just keep saying the same things—”

“Because that’s the truth!”

“The truth?” He snorted, unkindly. “This is the truth, Jen: I don’t know what the hell’s happened to you in the last few months, but if that promotion meant I had to trade in the Jennifer I married, the one who cared about my feelings and thoughts and knew what it was like to compromise, then I’d much rather have a struggling stringer reporter covering the town’s biggest squash or the new opening of a Starbucks than this pseudo-celebrity that’s taken her place. She’s a bitch, Jen!”

The hazel eyes narrowed in a glare directed at him. “Did you just call me what I think you did?” she asked in a rather quiet, deadly voice.

“Well, unless you can think of a *better* term to describe your behavior lately....”

“What’s so wrong with my behavior? Aren’t you mature enough to accept change — and the fact that I’m more successful than you are right now? Is that what this is about? You can’t take that I’m making four times what you bring in, and I’ve actually *gotten* somewhere in my professional life?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right, go ahead and brag! That’s *real* mature, a *great* way of not explaining a damn thing and avoiding the real issue....”

The argument was turning nastier by the second and would’ve likely progressed to more sensitive issues had the moderators not intervened. “Why don’t we go back to the subject we started on?” Marty said quickly as the younger couple glared at one another. “The name thing seems to be a real hot button issue with you guys... but *why*?”

Before either could try and answer it, the other Jennifer joined in to address her counterpart. “I’m afraid I don’t really understand why it’s so important for you to have that separate name,” she said, keeping her voice carefully neutral. “It’s clearly bothering Marty, and if you really do care for him, why are you pushing for it so much? Is it really important enough to put your entire *marriage* at risk?”

The broadcast journalist sniffed softly. “You can’t possibly understand,” she said flatly.

“Why is that? I’m in the same field you are.”

“Yes, but you’re in *print* journalism and I’m in *broadcast* — it’s worlds different. You aren’t judged so much by how you appear and how people perceive you.”

“And you think being perceived as single would help you?” The local Jennifer sounded skeptical. “Jennifer, your Marty is right. Having a different name for what you do is not going to give you any kind of personal life or privacy whatsoever. It would be different if you wrote like me and used it for a pen name, but you don’t. Your face is your trademark, not your name.”

Visiting Jennifer looked frustrated and furious. “Why are you both siding with him?” she demanded. “I thought this discussion was going to be fair.”

"We're here to mediate," local Marty reminded them. "If you didn't want our insight and opinions, then we wouldn't be here right now."

"And it's not their fault you're being irrational, Jen," Marty said to his wife, annoyed by her rather childish behavior. "You haven't given a single good reason for why you wanna use a different name, either."

"Yes I have, but you're not listening to me!" Jennifer snapped, turning to him. "Why is this so hard for you to understand?"

"Because you're being completely deaf about why this is bugging me and why I have every right to be hurt and pissed. All you want to hear is 'Yes, Jen, go ahead and do whatever you want, Jen,' not anything else — even the truth. This doesn't make sense!" He paused, taking a breath in an attempt to calm down and clear his head. "What if I said fine, use the damned name? Would you just drop everything and things would go back to the way they used to be?"

Jennifer studied him a moment. "I want your approval," she said stiffly.

Marty laughed humorlessly. "My approval! Christ, Jen, you know you're never gonna get that over this! I keep thinking this isn't just about the name. We've never fought this badly or this long over things this petty before — or *anything* for that matter! What the hell's eating you? It's like you *want* our marriage to go up in flames over this 'cause you're sure as hell not cooperating now!"

"I'm here, aren't I? Shouldn't that tell you something?"

"Oh, yeah, that tells me loads, especially when you're doing the same damned things you did before: not giving a straight answer or one real explanation."

"And you *aren't*? God, Marty, stop acting like a martyr! Is it my fault your career hasn't been as successful as mine so soon? I feel like you resent me for that, and that's why you're being so deliberately stubborn with this name thing! If you really loved me you'd support me!"

"Yeah, that's it, drag it right back to *you* again, and what you want. So my feelings are suddenly worth nothing to you? Thanks a lot, Jennifer, now I know how you *really* feel about me! One more obstacle in your little career climb! Tell me, did you change your mind about other things, too, that I don't know about? Like being married to that jerk Ben Foster instead of me? Or like having kids?"

One could nearly feel the sensation as Jennifer ground her teeth together, hard. "There is *no* attraction between me and Ben Foster! He's an arrogant, egotistical jerk and I can't believe you'd think I'd be attracted to someone like that!"

"Well, it takes one to know one...."

Jennifer let that remark slide by, though it clearly annoyed her. "And what does having kids have to do with anything right now? You and I both agreed to wait to have a family for a while 'til things settle down with our jobs."

"Yeah, but a few years ago, you were totally into the idea of the stay-at-home mom thing. You *do* know that if you're Ms Hot Shot Journalist, that ain't gonna happen! So, are you gonna give up your little newswoman stint, then?"

"Well, I figured since *you're* working from home...."

This was news to Marty and he reacted accordingly. "Excuse me? You're thinking I could be Mister Mom? Do you know how much time I spend on things in the studio and how little I pay attention to things like clocks and ringing phones in there? Thanks a hell of a lot, Jennifer, for taking my work so seriously that you think I have nothing better to do than chase after rugrats and change diapers! Your faith in me and my work just keeps getting better!"

Jennifer snorted. "Well, it's either that or daycare, and that's still one thing you and I agree on...."

"No!" Marty snapped, completely forgetting the quiet presence of their counterparts in the room now, watching them. "The other option is for you to quit your job like a lot of people do and raise the kids you've wanted for years! I can't *believe* that you'd put me in that place without even speaking to me! Tell me, what other little assumptions have you made about me lately? I'm *dying* to hear 'em...."

“Stop it!” local Marty ordered as Jennifer drew in a breath to respond. He sounded frustrated and looked a little horrified, perhaps at how far the so-called mediated discussion had strayed. “If you want to yell at each other like this, fine, go ahead – but I don’t think Jen and I need to sit here and watch it like gawkers on the sidelines of a highway crash. Are you really serious about this mediation thing? Because right now, it seems like you’re not doing a damned thing to try to fix it; you’re just having the same arguments in the same ways and getting stuck in the same places. I dunno, maybe that’s what you both need at this point, spilling everything you haven’t said to the other and letting it go without being held back, but we don’t need to be caught in the crossfire. You guys are veering way the hell off track....”

“Oh, I think we were *perfectly* on track,” his counterpart said darkly, casting a sizzling glare at his spouse. “This conversation has been nothing but enlightening to me....”

“But this wasn’t the solution either of you wanted,” local Jennifer said softly, the volume of her voice in stark contrast to the full-blown yelling of their counterparts. “Like Marty said, you came to us because you wanted us to help solve your problems, not sit back and watch you slide into a divorce.” She eyed the younger couple’s body language, seated as far apart as possible, now, on the couch, postures straight and tensed, a stark contrast from the way she sat with her own husband. “Do you still want our help to keep you from getting to that point?”

The visiting Marty and Jennifer managed a glance at one another. “I don’t know if that’s possible, anymore,” Jennifer said to their mediators, sounding both frustrated and saddened. “This is *exactly* our problem; we can’t talk anymore. It always ends up like this and if it’s not working *now*....”

Marty echoed her sentiments. “There’re too many sore points and land mines. I just really wish there was a way we could talk without actually opening our mouths, but that’s basically impossible, isn’t it?” He sighed, dropping his eyes to study the floor below. His mind drifted to the inevitable future that lay before him and Jennifer — more arguing, more nights spent in separate rooms and beds... eventually they’d be in different homes and finally go to court to make things official. Probably by that point, their lawyers would be speaking to each other more than they would. Long, lonely nights would then become a staple, probably payments of alimony or something like that, draining him of money so bad he might have to end up living in some dinky one room apartment — or, worse, with his parents. There would be no teenaged kids in their future. Or, perhaps, they *would* stay together... and end up even more unhappy than their once future counterparts of 2015....

Lost in his dark thoughts, Marty didn’t see the rather enlightened expression cross his counterpart’s face at his words. Local Marty suddenly jumped to his feet and headed for the door. “Wait here, I’m gonna be *right* back,” he promised.

“Where are you going?” visiting Jennifer asked, the depression in her voice matching her husband’s feelings. “To let everyone know we’re hopeless?”

Her husband’s counterpart grinned at her from the doorway. “Maybe you’re not,” he said rather mysteriously.

“So, let me get this straight — you actually *did* manage to get the mind reading gizmo to work?!”

Emmett smiled at the visiting musician’s question as he brought the box with said equipment into the den and set it down on the coffee table. “Yes,” he said. “But not until 1991. It was a device needed rather critically a little more than ten years ago, when Marty and I needed to have a past version of myself forget something he had heard that would’ve ruined his future, my present. It was literally a matter of life and death, for me and my entire family.”

Doc, who had followed his counterpart into the house after hearing the local Marty’s idea, made a soft sound that was half a sigh. “Amazing. I’ve been able to change the function of mine to read into dreams, but I haven’t actually been able to devote enough time to it yet to get it to actually read into conscious minds. But you did?”

Emmett nodded as he began to set it up, under the curious eyes of his counterpart and the visiting Marty and Jennifer. “It can allow one to not only read current thoughts and memories, but also *feel* the emotions that the subject had during those moments, if the sensitivity is cranked up high enough. I’ve also used it to erase and manipulate memories — but we won’t be doing that tonight.”

Marty couldn't help feeling a little relieved by that news. "So how's this gonna work?" he asked, nervous in spite of the assurance that the process wouldn't hurt. "Jen and I are gonna be hardwired into each other to check out the other's perspective?"

"Essentially," Emmett said, gesturing for the both of them to sit down. "From what I've gathered, you both have some major communication issues, and this should allow you both a chance to see — indeed, feel — where the other is coming from. I suspect it'll be most enlightening."

"And it doesn't hurt?" Jennifer asked, looking as skittish as her husband was feeling.

Local Marty snorted softly at the question from where he stood a few feet away with his wife to observe the proceedings. "I wouldn't say it's *entirely* painless; the headsets really give you a headache if you leave 'em on for more than a minute."

"An unfortunate but necessary side effect," Emmett said honestly. "The sensors need to be in close contact with the skin for it to work properly."

Marty looked at said object as Emmett passed one to him and one to Jennifer. "Just how much can this thing show the other person?" he asked, uneasy for different reasons now. Not that he had anything to hide from Jennifer but the idea of anyone crawling around in his head, looking at anything they wanted — even if it was his wife — was decidedly creepy. There was a lot of personal stuff up there, after all.

"It depends," Emmett said. "It can allow one to essentially feel as if they've *become* the person they're connected to, if everything is turned up as high as it can go. But I don't think we're going to need to go quite that deeply," he assured the younger couple at the identical looks of wide-eyed discomfort that passed across their faces. "Unless both of you know exactly what you want to hide from the other that may be relevant to solving your problems and are deliberately fighting to conceal it."

Jennifer frowned, eyeing the sensor net in her own hand. "Just how does this work?" she asked. "How will I know what to look for with Marty — and vice versa?"

"I suspect you'll know it when you see it," Emmett said. "The experience is a little difficult to describe..." He glanced at local Marty, raising an eyebrow, as if asking him if he'd like to do the honor. The musician shrugged.

"I guess it's kinda like a weird version of virtual reality — you see things through someone else's eyes. It's almost like the way it is when you remember your own memories, except you know that they're not yours." He shrugged, sort of at a loss. "I dunno, like Doc said, it's kinda hard to describe."

Visiting Marty took a deep breath and let it out. "All right, might as well get this over with," he half-muttered. He looked to Jennifer, seated in the armchair a few feet away. "You ready?"

"I suppose so," Jennifer agreed. "How are these things supposed to be worn?"

Emmett took a few moments to help the both of them get the sensor net properly settled on their heads. Marty found that his counterpart had been right about their discomfort. He immediately wanted to take it off or at least reposition it so it didn't feel like someone was trying to tighten a clamp lined with nails around his skull, but Emmett gently swatted his hand away the moment he tried, apologizing as he did so. Once he and Jennifer were set up, the local scientist sat on the couch beside the visiting musician. He fiddled for a moment with the small device that Marty guessed controlled the entire process. Doc took a seat on the other side of his counterpart, clearly interested in what he was doing, while the local Marty and Jennifer hovered nearby in case their assistance was needed.

"I'm going to calibrate both of you, now," Emmett said. "You shouldn't feel a thing, and it should take about ten to fifteen seconds."

"Is that important?" Jennifer asked, her face scrunched up as if she expected the process to hurt.

"Oh, yeah," local Marty said, nodding. "The first time we used that thing I got to be the guinea pig, and it took forever to get the things calibrated and all that. It was really *really* uncomfortable. It's not like that now, not anymore, but if things aren't set properly, you'd notice. Believe me."

“That makes perfect sense,” Doc agreed, peering over the shoulder of Emmett as he worked. “And that step’s already finished. Neither of you felt a thing, did you?” Without waiting for Marty or Jennifer to answer, he went on to address his counterpart. “This is a fascinating setup. Did you make this computer yourself? I don’t think I’ve seen anything quite like that here....”

“And you won’t for about a hundred more years,” Emmett said. “I needed something quite powerful and sophisticated to handle this operation this easily. The makeshift version I put together ten years ago was much more ungainly, and it still needed sensor and processing equipment from 2025. Are you ready to begin?” he asked the young couple. “I’ll start at the lowest setting and gradually increase it. If either of you become too uncomfortable with this procedure, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

Marty nodded, doing his best to ignore the nervous sensations crawling around in his stomach. “I’m good,” he said, looking at his wife, seated across from him. “You ready, Jen?”

She took a breath and nodded. “All right,” she said.

Emmett bent over the screen of the computer. Marty tensed in spite of himself, but he didn’t feel anything at first. There was a faint sort of awareness that he wasn’t alone, exactly — almost like the feeling of being in a room and suddenly knowing without turning that someone else had come in — but it wasn’t anything stronger than that. By the look on Jennifer’s face, she felt about the same. The visiting musician opened his mouth to suggest that maybe Emmett might want to speed it up a little, but the scientist was already one step ahead of him. Awareness began to trickle in more strongly, and that awareness soon solidified into almost ghost-like images in his head. Very much like memories, except Marty knew quite well that they didn’t belong to him. It was a curious sensation, and perhaps that showed on his face.

“Are you all right?” Doc asked, watching him carefully.

“Uh-huh,” Marty managed. “This is just *weird*....”

It got weirder. Emmett cranked it up higher and the mental images solidified. There was a faint undercurrent of emotion to them, now, and the experience shifted more from remembering something to almost a dream-like sensation of virtual reality. Without thinking about it, Marty closed his eyes to better concentrate and focus on what was happening, not noticing that Jennifer was doing the same thing. The sensations grew stronger as seconds ticked by, and things became clear to him — sort of.

A part of him was still quite aware of who he was and where, exactly, but he felt faintly voyeuristic at peering so intimately into his wife’s mind. After three years of marriage and six additional years before that of dating, Marty had thought he knew Jennifer quite well. But plunging deep into her mind for a glimpse of things seen from her perspective was faintly unsettling because it made him realize how little he *did* actually know about her. Oddly enough, even as he saw what was going through her mind and her emotions — a fear that this wouldn’t work, images of a divorce and of more fights, things very much weighing on him as well — he picked up on the same sort of realization at Jennifer’s end from what she was seeing in him: surprise and almost a fear of looking too deeply and seeing more than he would want her to see.

Things danced across his mind in quick bursts with seemingly random jumps. There was a memory of an encounter with Ben Foster at a grocery store, and the emotions that went with it weren’t anything akin to love or like but a kind of fear and disgust toward him that, frankly, surprised Marty. There was a memory about her job, of sitting before a news camera and reading from the copy about the Memorial Day weekend celebrations, and feeling a thrill of excitement and pride about the situation. There was a memory of him, one accompanied by a great deal of affection and intensity, of seeing himself through Jennifer’s eyes when she had apparently come home without him being aware of it and had looked in on him while he was completely and thoroughly engrossed in working on something in his studio.

And then, there was the cloud of hurt, anger, confusion, and frustration that surrounded the memories and thoughts about their recent fight, about the name thing. Although he was resisting it on some level, he couldn’t stop feeling and seeing things the way Jennifer was. There weren’t ulterior motives to the idea, as he had been thinking all along. He saw how the idea had been planted in her head by some casual remark from a co-worker who had done something similar and found it rather fun to give her blood family something to be proud of — especially since she had been the only child of her parents and there was no male to carry on the family name. Just like Jennifer.

There was a stubbornness, too, rooted with the memories about his reaction when she had broached the name idea that she had already grown fond of, and Marty saw to his great surprise part of this had been because she was a little... jealous of him. Unlike herself, he was able to conduct his work from the home and be happy about the whole thing, never mind that he wasn't as financially successful or as locally famous as she was. He didn't have the stress that she constantly felt over her appearance, to look a certain way or behave a certain way, and though he saw Jennifer liked many aspects of her fame, there were also ones she did not, and being in the spotlight almost every time she went out was a big one. She could never leave the house looking less than perfect, and while Marty had chalked that up to a bit of vanity on her part, he saw now that it was behavior prompted by the fear that if she was seen in grubbies and without make up on, doing grocery shopping, there would be unkind gossip or rumors that might make her less popular with the public, cause a decline in the news ratings, and ultimately lead to her losing her job.

There was a fear, too, about the kids they might have in the future. Marty saw some rather idyllic images, imagined scenes of what she wanted someday — and that still included being a stay-at-home mother, concerned only with the happiness and health of her kids rather than a career woman having other people raise her offspring. The fear that those dreams would never happen now because he, Marty, wouldn't be able to generate enough income without her help to support them all weighed heavily. And then, quickly, an image that was far too clear to be just an idle thought or speculation bumped out the rather hazy imagination pictures. A pregnancy test held in a trembling hand, with a result that wasn't quite a clear positive or negative, accompanied by an obvious sensation of cold fear and the thought, *This can't be happening now....*

"Oh my God!" Marty said, his eyes flying open — and he suddenly had the most disconcerting and sickening sensation of being in two places at once. He could see Jennifer sitting across from him, her eyes now open and staring at him, but he could also see himself as she was seeing him, sitting forward on the edge of the couch, staring at her, and feel the things she was feeling and the things darting across her mind, changing by the moment. His head started to ache, unable to really absorb the dual input. He moaned softly, closing his eyes again to at least stop the disturbing double vision sensations. He registered the surprise and embarrassment Jennifer was feeling, a reaction from what she'd seen in him while he'd been looking into her, and then it was cut off abruptly as Emmett shut down the system.

For a moment, he didn't move or say anything, his mind reeling from everything he'd experienced in the last few minutes. He finally opened his eyes again and saw Jennifer looking at him as if he was some stranger she'd never seen before, her face a little pale. Doc was looking between the both of them with a mixture of both scientific curiosity and concern on his face, but he didn't ask any questions. Emmett, however, did.

"I suspect you'd both like a little privacy," he said, standing without bothering to dismantle the equipment quite yet. He looked at the others in the room, rather meaningfully, as he headed for the door. "We'll be out in the lab working on the repairs if you need us," Emmett added to Marty and Jennifer.

Doc immediately understood his counterpart's intent. "Will you be all right?" he asked Marty, glancing at Jennifer with the question as well.

The musician nodded, reaching up to pull off the too-tight sensors. "Go ahead, Doc," he said softly, adding to his counterpart, who looked like he wanted to voice a similar question, "We're not gonna rip each other apart."

Thus assured, the room cleared out quickly. Once they were left alone, however, neither of them spoke for another few moments. Jennifer was still looking at him as if he was a stranger, and Marty was still trying to assimilate the things he'd seen and felt while in her head. Finally, however, the newswoman spoke, breaking the thick quiet between them. Her words were soft, simple, and straight to the point: "I'm sorry, Marty."

Marty was still a little shaken from the process to immediately understand the meaning behind the words. "For what?" he said without thinking.

Jennifer shrugged as she removed the sensors from her own head. "For everything," she said quietly. "For this entire mess. It's really not that important, the name thing. I didn't know about what you went through before that first trip through time. I *thought* I did, but...." She shrugged again, at a loss.

"Yeah, well, I didn't even think that the reason you wanted to change your name had anything to do with letting it be some kinda family legacy...." He paused, studying her for a moment, then blurted out the question that was at the front of his thoughts. "Jen, are you pregnant?"

Jennifer froze for a moment at the query, looking at him, then sighed. “No, I’m not,” she said. “I thought I was a couple months ago, but I was just... late.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about that?”

“There was nothing to tell. And...” Jennifer hesitated, then decided she might as well say what she wanted to; there weren’t many secrets left between them, now. “It wasn’t supposed to happen yet. Not this soon....”

“Well, yeah, but accidents can happen.... Isn’t even the Pill just something like ninety-eight or ninety-nine percent effective?”

“Yes, but that’s not what I mean. I mean... well, you remember in the future that our kids were teenagers by 2015 — not young adults in their early twenties!”

Marty shrugged. “Maybe so, but things are always changing moment to moment, according to Doc. I never got in that car accident, did I? Could be that a lot more than that has changed since then.” He whistled softly. “God, I’m *not* ready to be a dad now!”

“And I’m definitely not ready to be a mother!” Now that the secret was out, Jennifer seemed almost relieved and eager to tell him everything. “Two days after you quit your job to work from home, I started to wonder if I was pregnant. I’m never late. And when I took the home pregnancy test, it gave me some strange maybe sort of answer, turned a completely different color than was on the box!” She shuddered at the memory, which Marty had seen all too clearly moments before. “I was petrified — especially since you’d just given up a steady income to go after your dream, and my job was still stuck in the trenches. It wasn’t what we planned or wanted, not then, not yet. I made an appointment with the doctor, but it wasn’t for a few days, and I think the very next day, you turned down an excellent offer to write a jingle for one of the stores at the mall... We *needed* that money, Marty. I couldn’t believe you did that.”

“Well, why didn’t you say anything about it then? You were the one who told me to do what I wanted. You can’t be mad that I chose what I did, Jen, especially since I had no idea you were thinking we’d have kids so soon.”

Jennifer pressed her lips together and nodded rather diplomatically. “I know,” she said softly. “But I didn’t want to have you worrying over it, too, and it turned out to be nothing. I wasn’t pregnant; the doctor thought I was just probably reacting to stress, which would’ve made sense. And a month later, things had changed when I got the promotion at work. But before that happened...”

“...you thought I wasn’t pulling my weight? That I was being too picky about work offers that came my way? Not being mature and taking responsibility?” At her hesitant nod, Marty sighed. “Jen, the reason I quit my job at the studio was so I could have more time to work on the things I wanted to with my music. And I was selling a lot of stuff before I dropped the steady salary from that job. But I’m not into marketing or making sell-out songs. That’s not what I want to do, and that’s not why I’m doing what I am. You know that. You *have* to know that.”

“I do,” Jennifer said. “I *really* do now, but I think I’d forgotten about that. Oh, Marty, I never dreamed how much you really loved music.... I thought I knew, but now I *know*.”

He smiled crookedly. “I know the feeling.... I never really thought about why you were so paranoid about leaving the house looking less than perfect once you got the big anchor job. I’d thought you were letting the promotion go to your head, especially since people would come up to you off the streets and want your autograph or something, but I guess that kind of job has its own weird little pressures. In some ways, I’m kinda glad I never did become a world famous rock star. I just want to make music, not keep up some public image....”

“I don’t like that part of my job,” Jennifer said immediately, shaking her head to emphasize that point.

“I know. I saw that.”

They stared at one another for a moment, still sitting across from each other. “We’re not yelling, anymore,” Marty finally said.

“Maybe that’s because we know each other too well, now,” Jennifer said, looking a little spooked. She dropped her gaze to the wedding band on her left hand, turning it so it caught the light from above and glittered. “I really am sorry about this mess, Marty. It’s my fault we’ve been having these problems. I should’ve told you back in April about the

pregnancy scare, 'cause after that, I really was a lot shorter with you. It scared me, and I just felt that you weren't acting very mature about things — although, you know, that's my fault, because I didn't even tell you and give you the chance. And the name thing, that was just the latest reason to be mad at you for something." She sighed as she dropped her hand and looked up at him again. "I've been a jerk."

Marty really didn't know what to say in response to that, since he privately agreed. If Jennifer had simply told him her suspicions when she'd had them, he doubted they would've been here now. But he also had seen how and why she had made the choices she had, and she hadn't kept her concerns to herself out of spite or anger; she had done it simply because she had loved him and didn't want to trouble him with something that had turned out to be nothing. And Marty couldn't really hold a grudge over that.

"It's all right," he told Jennifer, softly. "Just, you know, next time *tell* me this stuff before we're stuck in World War III. I'd rather know and worry with you than leave you grappling with it alone. We're in this *together*, Jen. Marriage, parenthood, the rest of our lives. I want to know everything."

Jennifer smiled, blushing a little. "I think we do, now. I love you, Marty. I think I love you even more after getting a peek into how your mind works. I just hope you weren't totally scared off after seeing what was in me...."

"*Enlightened's* a better word, like the local Doc said. I always wondered what went on in women's heads and how they thought, and I guess I've got a good idea, now."

"It's not very different," Jennifer said knowingly. "Are we okay, now? Finally?"

"I think so. If you really do want to use the name, Jen, I guess I can accept that...."

The newswoman shook her head. "No. I don't want to, anymore. I'd just remember this lousy fight every time I heard it, if I changed things. And I *like* being a McFly. There are a lot of Parkers in the world, even if they may not necessarily be related to me. But there aren't a lot of people with our last name. And, beside, who wants our kid to have hyphenated last names? That's too much."

Marty was a little skeptical, considering how many problems that issue had caused in the last few weeks. "Are you *sure* about that?"

His wife didn't hesitate in her response. "Absolutely. Marty, I'm *really* sorry about everything...."

The musician waved away the apology again. "It's all right — as long as this means I'm not gonna be spending another night alone down here."

Jennifer smiled coyly. "Not on your birthday," she agreed. "I have to do *something* to make things up to you for the way I've been lately -- especially since I didn't bring your gift here."

"So you *did* get me something?" The news came as something of a relief.

"Of course. But I really didn't think it was a great idea to bring that guitar you'd been drooling over at the music store on a camping trip. And with the way the weather turned out, I'm *real* glad I didn't."

Marty looked at her, dumbfounded. She grinned at his expression. "I bought it weeks ago," she admitted. "Right after I got the promotion. You didn't turn that up in the mind meld?"

"No... oh my God, Jen, that thing cost a small fortune...."

Jennifer waved her hand, brushing the concern aside. "After what I saw tonight, I now know how much you'll appreciate it," she said sincerely. "And it's nice to know that there are still *some* secrets I can keep from you."

"Just as long as you make sure you tell me about the more important ones from now on, I think I can handle that."

Chapter Twenty-Four

SUNDAY, JUNE 16, 2002

5:30 P.M. PDT

It took another ten days to finish repairing the damaged time machine, largely due to Emmett's insistence that everything that could possibly be salvaged be salvaged, down to the smallest chips and bits of wire. He knew it was the subatomic harmonic resonance of the machine itself that gave the things a "homing sense," allowing them to return to their dimension of origin once they'd passed through n-dimensional space — but he didn't know how much that transit could be affected if too many of the parts which allowed the machine to travel through time were replaced by materials from another dimension. They were taking a big enough chance, using the old flux capacitor he'd removed from his own train; he didn't want to take any more risks than were absolutely necessary. After hearing why they had to work so hard to recycle the bits and pieces of the broken machine, visiting Verne worried that they might wind up stranded between dimensions, which he had heard was a truly horrible experience that could drive a person mad in a matter of minutes. His brother told him that was ridiculous; so long as the repaired machine was capable of moving through time and space, if it failed to return them to their own dimension, it would most likely just strand them here.

Which was not the most pleasant of prospects, but not the worst, either. For one thing, there had been no more near-accidents due to the incompatibility syndrome. After four jumps had been made to "reset" the visitors, Emmett was all but certain that their conditions were genuinely stable, not slowly deteriorating in spite of the efforts to protect them. Moreover, there was no sign of any harm to either Clara or the baby, the latter of whom would have shown adverse cellular effects quite quickly, if such damage was occurring. The news relieved the minds of both the visitors and the locals, and thereafter, they made brief temporal jumps once a day to head off any problems long before they occurred.

Emmett had even found a way to cover up potential suspicions of any neighbors who heard the booms of transit on a daily basis. About two miles east-southeast, near the spot where the rail line from the Carson Spur crossed Lost Canyon Road, a tunnel was being blasted through a rocky hill. It was part of a project to eliminate all grade-level crossings on major roads in greater Hill Valley, since a number of the intersections — that one in particular — were known to be dangerous, locations where many accidents and several deaths occurred every year. There had been a strenuous debate over whether to reroute the highway or the railroad, and then whether to build a bridge or blast a tunnel. It had finally been decided to change the course of the road, which was much easier than altering that of a train. The choice of a tunnel had been due to the lobbying efforts of the local residents, who had campaigned in favor of that rather than a bridge, which they felt would be too visually intrusive on the local landscape. The blasting had begun on Monday the tenth, and the city had sent out notices, warning the residents in the southwest part of the region just when the blasts would occur each day. They simply timed the jumps to coincide with the blasting schedule, and no one in the neighborhood ever thought it was anything else. Since they tended to occur within the same four hour span every day, they took the weekend jumps during that same period, and if anyone noticed the noise, they simply thought the crews were working overtime to get the job done quickly.

Staying here for a time was also made more bearable by the fact that Marty and Jennifer had finally ended their quarreling, and were, in fact, all but acting like newlyweds. Their renewed marital harmony came as a sore blow to little Emily, but since she had a new friend with a shoulder to cry on and lots of really fun stuff to keep her otherwise occupied, her broken heart braved the loss without too much difficulty. Talking with Marty and hearing that he was very happy now made her feel somewhat better about the whole thing, and as she'd often heard her father say the future is whatever you make, she figured that in time, she'd get a chance to make it the way *she* wanted. Her mood was distinctly improved when, on Wednesday the twelfth, the locals celebrated elder Emily's twelfth birthday with appropriate ceremony, and included her younger counterpart in the festivities, since she had just recently passed her half-year birthday. All in all, the time passed quite well for all involved, far better than the soggy camping trip to Oregon.

The worst problem was, in fact, finally facing the notion that the time to go home was imminent.

"There's just one last test I want to make, and then everything should be finished," Emmett told the other adults after supper, when the teenagers and youngsters had gone off to entertain themselves elsewhere in the house. "It's not complicated, since it involves a scan of the time control chip, but it's going to take about five or six hours. If you're in a hurry to return tonight, we could skip it and just hope for the best."

"I'd rather have the peace of mind of knowing for sure everything's going to work," was Doc's resolute opinion. "As for any inconvenience... I suspect the kids are going to feel more put out by the idea of finally going home. There's

been enough hard work to do while we've been here, but I think they've all been enjoying this much more than that miserable failure of a vacation we attempted before we wound up here. From time to time, they've all felt a distinct lack of other relatives outside our individual family, and this has been like discovering long-lost siblings or cousins."

Marty grinned as he and Jennifer helped local Clara collect the dishes from the table around which the other adults were still seated. Ever since they had resolved the problems between them in a uniquely decisive manner, he and Jennifer were back to being the basically pleasant and cheerful young couple their friends had once known, not the unhappily bickering strangers no one (with the possible exception of little Emily) wanted to be around. Though local Marty had come by as often as he could to help out — occasionally startling his counterpart and other Doc with how much technical ability he'd picked up, on purpose and perforce, over the years of his friendship with Emmett — he had other responsibilities he couldn't ignore, especially to his family. Marlene had more or less been convinced that her parents were not about to get divorced; keeping her away from the possibility of seeing their doubles had helped restore her young sense of perspective. But that required having both of her parents around on a regular basis, though Marty did pitch in on the repairs to the broken time machine whenever she was off playing with friends, shopping with her mother and brother, or asleep. Sunday dinner was a time often spent with either his parents or Jennifer's, so after putting in several hours of work that afternoon, he'd bowed out to take care of his family duty.

Visiting Marty, now in a much improved state of mind, had used the opportunities to interact with his counterpart to discuss ideas for how he might get his own career headed in a similar — if not identical — positive direction. The local musician was more than happy to regale him with tales of both his own failures and successes, and soon painted a picture that Marty could easily see was not all that dissimilar from his own life. It gave him real hope that his struggles would indeed pay off and be worth it — and more importantly, it gave his Jennifer the same feelings.

Now that she was no longer upset and unwilling to be near her husband, she'd joined the others out in the barn and the lab to help in whatever ways she could. She heard many of the discussions between her husband and his double, and soon came to realize that if her Marty was to ever realize his dream in any way, she had to give him the room not only to succeed, but to fail sometimes, just as he'd done with her when she couldn't decide whether or not to take the shot at the anchor job. "You won't know if you can do it if you don't even try," he'd told her, and had also told her that he would be there and be supportive if the whole thing crashed and burned. The things that had clouded her thoughts over the past weeks had blurred that from her memory as well, but she recalled it clearly now, and was willing to do the same for him, whatever it took.

She'd also decided she needed to get over her fear of parenthood, so from time to time, she'd spelled elder Emily and the Claras in supervising the two young Brown children. Both tasks were educational to her, and now, as the struggle to return home neared its end, she, like her husband, felt that the trip had been well worth all the trials and tribulations that had been a part of it.

Their cheerful behavior as they helped clear the table was proof of it. "This sure beat getting stranded in the back end of nowhere, accidentally or on purpose," Marty noted with a chuckle as he collected the dirty dishes from one end of the table. "I've stayed at some supposedly first-class hotels that were grungy rat-traps compared to this place. It's really hard to believe a place like this just doesn't exist, where we come from."

"I'm reasonably certain the river and canyons and some of the other features of this area do," visiting Clara said. "Over the past two weeks, I've had more than enough time to study the differences between not only our families, but our worlds as well. When Emmett and I lived here in the Nineteenth Century, we saw most of the countryside surrounding Hill Valley — one of the benefits of traveling cross-country on horseback or in horse-drawn wagons rather than in automobiles on paved roads. The same features that made this region undesirable to real estate developers here made it undesirable to settlers back then. Since our Judge Morris met with a less kind fate than the one here, there was no one wealthy enough or pretentious enough to want to move out into the wilds and build a 'retirement residence' big enough to house half the local population."

"Well, I for one am just glad things were in the right place at the right time when we needed it," was Jennifer's heartfelt opinion. "And the right people. I don't know how to thank all of you," she told their hosts.

Emmett dismissed it without a second thought. "Not necessary. I've always felt that some of the most difficult lessons we learn in life are learned for reasons we never quite understand fully at the time — and often have importance far beyond that of the moment. Our experience with accidental interdimensional travel helped immensely in providing answers to your immediate difficulties, as well as invaluable understanding of the life-threatening problems that occur as a byproduct of it. And I may have perfected the mind-reading device to save my own life and that of my family, but

it also provided a more thorough solution to your personal problems than anything, even long-term counseling, could have done.”

“I’ll say,” Marty agreed. “I never thought that contraption would work, but God, am I ever glad it finally did. I’ve had friends who couldn’t resolve easier issues with their wives after years of heavy duty therapy. I’m never gonna forget this, what I learned about Jen — and about *us* — in just a few minutes. Never.”

“Lord, yes,” Jennifer added, nodding emphatically. “It’s amazing how much you think you know about someone you’ve known for years, but literally seeing the world from their point of view.... It really changes everything, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” the local inventor assured her. “When I was ready to test it the first time, the only person I could work with was Marty, and in the process, I learned things about him that were quite astonishing, in a positive way. And he’s told me the experience was equally profound for him, since my counterpart in 1977 believed that turnabout was fair play.”

Other Marty grunted softly. “That might explain why the two of you have a kinda different relationship than Doc and I do. I’ve never seen inside his head like that, and I’m not sure how I’d handle it if I did. I get the weird feeling we really do think in completely different ways, and seeing it like that might make my head explode.”

Emmett laughed. “My Marty thought the same thing, but it didn’t. Still, he said it was enlightening, and I have to agree. I’m glad that I had the equipment here for you and Jennifer to use to enlighten each other, and resolve your troubles.”

“So am I,” the young woman said as she set a pile of dirty plates on the counter between the kitchen and the informal dining room. “So if all that needs to be done is one more test, does that mean we’ll be leaving tonight?”

Both inventors shrugged. “It depends on whether or not the test is successful, and how long it takes,” Doc answered. “And in how much of a hurry we are to leave.”

His Clara made a soft, skeptical sound. “It sounds to me like you’re trying to delay our departure.”

He knew what she was insinuating, that he hadn’t yet made up his mind about his own future. “Not really. Not for the reasons I think you’re thinking, at least. It’s just that we haven’t warned any of the kids that we’re nearly finished, and I feel it’d be rather unkind to spring it on them only an hour or so before we head home.”

The others were all willing to concede that. “Yeah, I get a feeling Emmy’s not gonna like giving up a friend her own age who likes all the same things she does,” Marty said. With a grin, he added, “Though thank God *he* doesn’t have the crush on me, too. But I have to admit, it looks like Chris was a big help, getting her to back off a little and just try to be my friend. He’s a smart kid. Do you think this baby you guys’re gonna have will turn out just like him, since it’s a boy, too?”

“It’s possible,” Doc allowed, “in a physical sense, since our other children do look to be nearly identical to their counterparts, barring a few minor differences. In terms of personality and skills, though, anything goes. Environment and experiences play a major role in those things, and we know those things won’t be precisely the same. And we’ve already decided he won’t have the same name.”

“Thank goodness,” Emmett muttered under his breath, giving his wife an exasperated but good-natured glance for the way she had taken the name they’d agreed upon for their third son and turned it on its head because she was upset with him, and he hadn’t been there to stop her.

“And our kids *won’t* have ridiculous hyphenated last names, either,” Jennifer declared, her mind made up. “After Marty and I straightened things out between us, the more I thought about that, the more it made me sick to my stomach. Not only does it sound *way* too pretentious, but just thinking of the name ‘Parker-McFly’ made me think of that woman Prince Charles can’t quit mooning over, Camilla Parker Bowles. Gave me the creeps to even think that our kids might wind up like that somehow, home-wreckers or something even worse.”

Local Clara agreed. “Yes, it reminds me of some of the snobbish socialite families I once knew back East, the women who liked to go around spreading gossip and passing judgment on anyone and everyone. I certainly couldn’t

do it, for myself or my children. Clayton-Brown sounds more like it should be someone's entire name, not merely their surname."

The teacher's counterpart looked up, hearing something in the sound of it she liked. "You're right, it does, doesn't it? That mightn't be a bad name for the baby, come to think of it. Clayton Brown. What do you think, Emmett?"

Her husband made an odd face, then shrugged. "I think we need to think it about it a little bit more. I know it's something of a tradition in my family, but that was using the mother's maiden name for the eldest son's middle name, not first. We don't need to decide right now, and we *do* have the time, after all."

"True enough. So, will this test require any of the rest of us to help?"

Local Emmett shook his head. "No, it's a test of the main temporal control chip that needs to be done by a high performance computer. Even at that, it's going to take a while, since some of the scans are extremely detailed, and can't be done both quickly and accurately."

Marty, in the process of carrying one of the piles of dishes to the dishwasher, glanced at the inventor, curious. "Do you have computers like that around here? Well, yeah, I guess you do, if you've got ones that can make the brain-reading thing work...."

"I suppose one of those would suffice, but they weren't what I had in mind. I need something connected to a system that can analyze things on a *very* minute subatomic level. I'm concerned about the harmonics being correct for *your* dimension, not ours or another, to guarantee that your machine will make a safe trip home and *not* be stranded here or in an entirely different dimension."

"I hadn't even considered *that* possibility," visiting Clara said with a small shudder, referring to the notion of leaving here only to wind up in another dimension that was not home. "Is there really a chance it could happen?"

"Yes," her husband replied, "but a fairly remote one. We made sure we reconstructed that circuit, and several other vital ones, from salvaged materials and supplies from our machine. We just want to be certain the approach worked."

"But I know you don't have that kind of a computer here," this-dimension Clara said, a frown crinkling her brow as she looked at her husband. "You're taking it over to EPB, aren't you?"

Emmett was honest. "Yes, but just for this. And before you remind me that I've been banned from the property, I've already called Peter and told him what I need to do. It *is* important, Clara, and when I explained why I couldn't take care of it at home, he agreed that it would be a good idea to use one of the labs there. He was around when Marty brought home my physician counterpart from another dimension, so he understands why precision is so vital a part of the repairs."

"And you asked him to lift the ban, didn't you?"

"No," he said simply, surprising her. "I just asked him to shut it down for the one building I'll need to get into, and the offices, in case I need to access something there. Those facilities are empty on Sundays, and since both of us—" He indicated his other-dimensional double. "—are going to go, I can't very well drive through the front gate, not unless I want to concoct some ludicrous story about a long lost twin brother. We're going to use the Jag and fly in on invisible mode, the way you did when you brought my other counterpart to the labs there, three years ago. I won't go anywhere near anything having to do with the fusion engine project, I swear. But I *do* need to go. And he's your insurance that I won't wander off into places I promised to stay away from."

"Is that the only reason you're going, Doc?" Marty asked. "To keep an eye on him? I thought you'd want a good gawk at the place, seeing how you almost drove off the road staring at it, just from the outside."

"That's not true," the elder inventor rebutted. "I pulled over."

"Yeah, and nearly sent me through the windshield when we stopped."

"That's academic," Emmett intervened before the debate sank to a truly childish level. "Peter only cleared me for access to two buildings, and even if he'd lifted the security ban for the entire place, we can't very well go wandering

around it together, any more than we could risk driving through the front gate and being seen together. EPB isn't ever entirely shut down. There are some ongoing research projects that need to be monitored by human staff around the clock, even on weekends and holidays. We'll be safe enough where we're going since it's well away from those parts of the compound, but other than an aerial tour in the Jag, we don't dare do more. My counterpart is coming because catastrophic accidents like this obviously *can* happen with our time machines, and if they ever happen again, to him or another of our extra-dimensional duplicates who winds up in your version of reality, he'll be able to see a way of finding out where a dislocated traveler came from, and hopefully use this sort of information to safely return them home."

"That's a very good idea," visiting Clara agreed. "I don't care to think about something like this happening again — to us or anyone else — but it *is* best to know what to do when it does, even if it takes two weeks to correct the situation."

"Does this mean that the rest of us have the night off?" Marty wondered while he passed Jennifer dishes to be loaded into the washer while local Clara took care of putting away the scant remaining leftovers.

Both Docs smiled, amused by the eagerness in the musician's voice. "Why?" the other-dimensional inventor asked innocently. "Did you have better ideas for how to pass the time?"

Marty rolled his eyes in exasperation, but he was grinning, accepting the teasing. Since their reconciliation, he and Jennifer had been notably more affectionate toward each other, to the point that all four of the teenaged Brown boys couldn't pass up ribbing them about it. "Not what *you're* thinking, so just get your mind out of the gutter. I've gotten to hear most of the stuff my twin's been writing and selling over the years when he brought over CDs for us to listen to while we were doing some of that *really* boring monkey work in the lab, but I was kinda curious about the stuff he's working on right now, the things for that album with McCartney. He said if we got a break from the work tonight, Jen and I could come over after their kids are in bed, around eight. After hearing how much our of music's the same — a lot of it note for note and word for word — I'd love to see this new stuff, even unfinished. And Jen wants a chance to see their house. She's been thinking of remodeling a few of the rooms after we've gotten some money socked away, and this could give her some good ideas."

"Sounds innocent enough," Emmett said after considering the suggestion. "If you do go, though, have Clara drive you over and let one of them drive you back. Our Marty and Jennifer live in a quiet neighborhood and their neighbors aren't generally prone to prying, but just in case someone's out walking their dog when you arrive, we don't want them to see two of you any more than we want the security guards at EPB to see two of me in the same place."

The musician laughed. "Don't you trust me to drive myself?"

"Oh, I do, but given the way that subdivision's laid out, if you *are* like our Marty and Jennifer, you'll get lost trying to find the place. They had that problem for almost a month after they moved in. You wouldn't want to make people suspicious because you need to ask for directions to what they think is supposed to be your own house, while driving around with a woman who doesn't look like your wife, do you?"

Marty whistled softly as he sucked in a long breath. "No, I didn't even stop to think of that. After everything they did for us, I wouldn't want to make trouble for them by starting some stupid rumor that my double's running around with some strange woman behind his wife's back. That's just the kind of thing they don't need right now, what with Marlene just getting over that whole divorce scare. We'll be careful, I promise."

When the aftermath of dinner had been cleared away, Marty called his counterpart to make plans for the evening, while Jennifer and the two Claras discussed how to break the news that the visitors would soon be going home. Emmett and Doc headed off to EPB, a very quick and quiet trip in the invisible flying Jag. Since it was coming close to the summer solstice, the sun was still well above the horizon, providing a spectacular view of the entire unusual compound that truly deserved the designation of a business and research "park." Knowing that with the Jag running on a fusion rather than internal combustion engine, it would scarcely be heard on this rather breezy summer day, Emmett assuaged his counterpart's curiosity about the place, at least from the outside, and took him on an aerial tour of the grounds before they settled down to business. He explained what was what, and why they had chosen this particular location, but one thing continued to puzzle the other dimensional inventor.

“Why bother to make it so... artistic?” Doc wondered as they finally headed for the ground, moving to land near the back entrance of a building that blended several contradictory architectural styles in a very appealing manner. “I can’t believe it was just a case of showing off.”

Emmett chuckled. “It wasn’t — not really. But you should already know the answer without even asking.”

“Oh?”

The local scientist nodded. “If you’re going to turn a car into a time machine, why not do it with some style?” he quoted, clearly remembering that remark, once made to Marty so many years ago.

His counterpart apparently recalled it with equal clarity. He turned away from the sight of the surrounding buildings to favor Emmett with a startled glance, then smiled crookedly. “Well, yes, I suppose I do at that,” he said, and no more of a reply was necessary. When they were sure the coast was clear, they slipped out of the still-invisible car and headed for the nearby door.

The palm-lock security opened for Emmett without hesitation, once he swiped a passcard into a slot beside it. As he did so, he looked up, above the door, and made a sound of relief. “Peter definitely thought of everything,” he told Doc quietly as they moved inside. “I’d forgotten to mention shutting down the video security recorders to make sure there’d be no obvious record of both of us being here.”

“Won’t that be suspicious all by itself?” Doc wondered, trying not to ogle the various intriguing rooms flanking the corridors en route to the lab his double wanted to use.

“Any other day of the week, yes, but on Sundays, the system’s set to do random partial checks of the security programs. Not all the buildings are done at the same time or even on the same day; one week, it could be the video system in the research facilities, the next week it could be the pass card programs in the main administrative building. Some weeks, everything is checked, other weeks, nothing is checked at all. Unless an immediate problem crops up, it’s completely random. If no one knows when a given area is being checked, it’d be very difficult for someone to find an ideal time to break in. Peter and I can make specific alterations that won’t be detected by the system, and we can find out what checks will be done on a given day, but no one else can. When he cleared me for entry to the buildings I wanted, he must’ve inserted a command for their security recording systems to be on the list today.”

“Sounds like a bright fellow. Was he really someone you happened to meet purely by chance?”

Emmett shrugged. “As much as you can call getting Marty’s recommendation for the firm ‘by chance.’ I initially had an appointment with one of Peter’s partners, and the idiot thought he was being... less than kind to Peter by shoving me and my obviously insane business in his direction. Turns out he did us both a favor. Nail had no idea what fusion was all about, what it could mean not only for the firm’s profit but for the entire world. Peter did, and if it weren’t for his understanding of that and how to best present it to the business world, I doubt I would’ve been anywhere near as successful, either professionally or financially. It does seem that once in a while, the universe moves in ways intended to bring certain people together in the right place at the right time.”

“Just like with Clara,” the visiting scientist said, understanding. “I’ve tried to tell myself that was nothing but pure chance, but even I’m not that obstinate. I know that though science attempts to explore and make sense of the universe and how it works, what we know is undoubtedly a drop in a very large proverbial bucket. Someday, we might learn enough to understand why certain seemingly impossible things happen, but now, all we can do is accept that they do happen, from time to time.”

“Precisely. That’s part of why I wanted you to come with me. After we’ve setup the equipment in the lab to start running the tests, there’s something in my office I want to show you.”

The something in question was on Emmett’s personal computer, which, he explained to his counterpart, was heavily shielded from any unauthorized attempts to access it. “Professional paranoia, mostly,” he told Doc as he activated the thing, “but also because there’ve been times when I couldn’t wait until I got home to work on designs for things related to time travel or devices that use future technology, and my laptops just don’t have the capacity to handle it. I could’ve showed you this at home, I suppose,” he added as he gestured for his double to have a seat before the computer, “but I wanted to be sure there’d be no interruptions or distractions.”

Doc started to ask why, but before he could phrase the request, Emmett put a CD into the appropriate slot and inserted the passwords to open its files. It didn't take more than a moment for Doc to realize what he was looking at: the full trail of evidence confirming that his double had indeed been the one who discovered viable fusion power, and always had been. "I put this together for Peter when I was sued by another group of scientists who accused me of having stolen their research and beat them to the punch. It wasn't true, but since Peter's also my attorney and had a vested interest in establishing my prior claim as the inventor, he had to see exactly how my designs and research and theirs differed in ways that proved I hadn't ever seen their work. The first disc is the version I showed him at the time of the lawsuit, which uses nothing but my own past work and professional history to validate the claim, since then, he didn't know I had also invented a time machine. Later, after I told him about it, I made another, more detailed version that shows all the data collected by the CTFM and other sources, which not only proves that I was the inventor, it also shows that I was *not* influenced by what I'd seen in my travels into the future. They *confirmed* some of what I already knew about fusion as a power source, yes, but they in no way gave me any ideas I hadn't already had. That's on the second disc. Look them over, carefully. I think you'll find it enlightening."

He did indeed. While Doc studied the various documents and research notes in minute detail, Emmett returned to the lab to monitor and occasionally assist the computer tests of the vitally important time control chip. Several hours later, when the visiting inventor had finished his perusal of the discs' contents, he removed them from the computer, managed to figure out how to shut it down correctly, and retraced his steps to the lab where his double was at work. Emmett was not so engrossed in monitoring the progress of the scan that he didn't hear Doc arrive; when he looked up, he wasn't precisely sure how to read his counterpart's expression.

"Well, did you find it useful, or merely more confusing?" he asked, gesturing for him to take a seat on one of the stools around the lab table at which he was already sitting.

"Useful," Doc said after settling down. He studied the discs in his hand for a very long moment before surrendering them to their owner. "Seeing the reasoning done not only from a scientific but a legal perspective was extremely illuminating. I'd considered examining my own work from scientific and historical angles, but not a legal one, at least not in this depth. The ways attorneys make findings of fact to establish the truth of a case is its own kind of scientific method, but one I really hadn't used myself, especially not in regard to my own work. It does apply, though, doesn't it?"

Emmett nodded. "All the more so, since you and I have needed to find proof to determine whether or not something we *think* we may have invented was actually an idea we got from seeing another person's work. Back in my 1994, I didn't want to do what had to be done to find out once and for all if the fusion reactor really *was* my invention, or merely something I'd stolen from some future scientist. I was afraid to know, I admit it, because though discovering that I *was* could be exhilarating and a public validation of my life's dream of being an inventor, finding that I *wasn't* would've been equally crushing, the final nail in the coffin to prove that all the people who called me a worthless and misguided dilettante were right. But it's a moment of truth you have to face, or you can't ever succeed. You'll wind up languishing in mediocrity, and never really do anything you can call your own. You'll suffer for it, and so will your family. I know, because I've already been through it."

"So I can see, now," Doc agreed, motioning to the disc. "It wasn't easy, finding the proof, but it was possible. I suppose I'm still frightened, though. We're existentially the same person, and very similar in many ways, but our experiences haven't been the same. What if I'm the Emmett Brown who's destined to be the one who never does succeed, and spends the rest of his life as a hypocrite, profiting from knowledge I know I shouldn't be using?"

"That won't happen unless you want it to," his counterpart replied frankly. "If worse comes to worst and you can't find a way to be an inventor with a clear conscience, then you go with your other choices. Find a different field of work, a school that will let you teach, become an independent repairman, let Clara find work to support you — whatever it takes. You're *not* doomed to follow a path you don't like unless you refuse to turn aside from it. If I couldn't've been an inventor, that's what I would've done, been a teacher or even just a local handyman. But I had to take the shot, had to know if I was more than a one-note wonder. If I hadn't done that much, I would've spent the rest of my life wondering what might've been if I hadn't let myself be ruled by a fear I was afraid to face. I don't ever want to live through something like that again, but I don't regret what I did to move past it — and not just because it turned out the way I wanted. Win or lose, I had to know."

"And so do I," Doc said with a soft sigh. "I've known for a long time that sooner or later, I'd have to make this choice. I've just been afraid to do it — probably for all the same reasons you were. And I think I've always known that it was going to take a very hard kick in the back end in to get me to do it. I just thought it would be Clara doing the kicking, not another version of myself."

Emmett's answering smile was wry. "Well, you know how philosophers are always saying we should listen to our own feelings about things. It's just that we happen to be so stubborn, we don't even listen to our own gut, and only another incarnation of us has the authority to give us the proper whack upside the head. It was n't another dimension's me who persuaded me to finally bite the bullet and look at the possibilities of my own future, but it was close, an ancestor who just happened to bear a rather striking resemblance to me — or me, if I'd been born with dark hair and became a pharmacologist. It was something he said about being afraid to look because I was afraid to find out I'd wind up a complete failure that did it. He was right, that *was* the problem, and I realized that if I let fear control me like that, it was a guarantee that I *would* fail, because I'd end up doing nothing. Maybe your circumstances aren't quite the same, but I suspect they're similar enough."

"They are. There's just no running away from it, anymore. When we get home, I'm going to do *something* — either just go to the future and look, or stop worrying about how things I do now might change it. I have a feeling looking is going to wind up being easier."

Emmett tended to agree. "At least if you do that, you'll be able to make an informed choice about what to do afterward. It won't just be stumbling ahead blindly and hoping for the best."

"Very true. We *are* going to get back home, aren't we? How have the tests been going?"

"Oh, fine. I really don't expect we'll find any glitches; this is just for *my* peace of mind, so I'll feel reasonably sure that when we send you off, it won't be into the wrong dimension, or into that hell of n-dimensional space. It's about two-thirds finished, so it probably won't be more than another hour or so."

Doc glanced at a prominently displayed wall-clock, and saw that nearly three hours had passed since he'd been left to his reading in Emmett's office. He then watched his counterpart press a few keys on the computer at which he was seated. A faint smile flickered across his face. "And all this time, you've been behaving yourself? You haven't been using the opportunity to go back to tinkering with that engine problem you'd been having?"

Emmett shook his head. "No. I said I wouldn't, and I haven't. Clara and everyone else were right about me obsessing on it. It's not healthy, it's not solving anything, and it's only alienating me from my family and friends and even my employees. That's not right, no matter how important I might feel the problem is. After we've sent you and the others home, I'll go off to Europe with them for the rest of the summer, since that's what they had planned. It's not a bad idea, after all. I've always wanted to see more of the world — in my own time frame, and not necessarily others. I'm sure it'll be good for me, which I know is why they wanted me to come, not just because I was letting work control my life. And thank you for helping me realize that."

His counterpart shrugged modestly. "It's not like I did much, only lost my temper and pontificated about things I didn't really understand."

"Doesn't matter, it was what I needed to hear, even though I didn't like hearing it at the time."

"Yes, well, I suppose it was just returning the favor, since much as I didn't care to hear what you had to say about my professional life and personal ethics, it *was* true. I'm grateful someone finally had the nerve to say it out loud."

"Does that mean you *have* made a decision about what to do with your life once you get home?"

Doc made an ambiguous gesture. "Like I said, I've decided I'm going to do something, definitely. The status quo is obviously unacceptable, though I'm not entirely sure *what* I'm going to do to change it. I have a few ideas, but I need to consider them a little longer."

Emmett chuckled. "Not *too* much longer, I hope, unless you're planning to delay your return home, or get your Clara to change her mind."

Doc snorted. "Not bloody likely. She knows evasive tactics when she sees them." He glanced at the monitor screen his double was keeping an eye on. He understood most of the data being presented, and noted the progress indicator. "If we're going to be here for while, would you like me to take a look at the designs you've been having problems with the last few months? Perhaps a new perspective...."

But Emmett shook his head, very emphatically. "No — not because I don't think you could find the answer, but because I'm afraid you *would*. If you saw the solution and then I presented it to the rest of the staff, they'd think it was

completely my own doing because I couldn't explain how it really wasn't. And if I do that, I would've sidestepped the whole lesson of learning to let go, and delegate responsibility the way I should've been doing from the start. So no, thank you for the offer, but I have to leave this project for someone else to finish — and *not* another me.”

The visiting inventor smiled, seeing his point. “Yes, quite so. It's the ultimate cheat, isn't it, getting help from another incarnation of yourself. Though in my case, I'm glad you already knew as much about our particular problems as you did. I was aware that interdimensional accidents could occur — Marty and Jennifer experienced one when I allowed them to visit Woodstock — but I had no idea they could be dangerous to one's very life, and I didn't know a thing about the physics of how they happen, or could be corrected. I suppose there must be other versions of us in other dimensions who know those things, but I have to wonder how many of them have both the theoretical knowledge and access to sophisticated facilities like these, to turn hypothetical answers into viable solutions.”

“I wouldn't even care to guess,” Emmett admitted honestly, pausing to tap a few more keys and touch several spots on the interactive monitor screen. “It could be none at all, or it could be billions. I have no idea how many other dimensions actually exist, or *why* they exist, and I'm not even going to begin to try to find out. That would be the work of far too many lifetimes.”

“Very true. So, if things continue to check out well with the time control chip and there's no problem in completing its installation, what should we do about the last loose end we need to tie up?”

His local counterpart looked up from the monitor, a puzzled frown creasing his brow. “What loose end is that?”

“How do we tell the kids that the vacation's finally over?”

It was a good question, but neither of them really had a good answer.

Chapter Twenty-Five

In the end, it was actually the Claras who broke the news to their combined offspring while the inventors were at EPB. Once Emmett had found the test results to be successful, he had telephoned home with the news and the women took it upon themselves to warn the kids about the impending departure, tomorrow afternoon. The announcement of returning home wasn't met with much enthusiasm from the visitors, not even Jules and Verne, who had complained about their "vacation" during the camping trip on a fairly hourly basis. Even Emily grew quiet at the news, simply asking to stay up later, knowing by this time tomorrow she'd be back at home where all the normal rules and restrictions would apply. Her mother allowed this temporary bending of the rules, as did her counterpart, both knowing the imminent separation would probably be hardest for the youngest kids.

Although for the most part, packing was going to wait until the next day, it was after midnight by the time the adults all went to bed. The scientists were the last to come up stairs and, in spite of the late hour, visiting Clara was wide awake and waiting for her spouse when he entered their guest suite. Doc didn't notice her at first, sitting on the couch, as she had left only the light in the bathroom on to faintly illuminate the parlor of the guest suite. When he was two steps away from the bathroom, she cleared her throat gently, causing her husband to nearly jump through the roof. He spun around quickly, exhaling.

"Clara! Great Scott, what are you doing?"

"Waiting," she said simply, the word carrying a great deal of weight. Doc heard it; he took a breath, sighed it out, then nodded.

"My decision," he said. "I suppose it's no use for me I point out that we haven't reached the point of departure, yet...."

Clara smiled gently at her husband's penchant for technicalities. "Not very much, no, though I suppose if you really do need those hours tomorrow, it can be arranged. But I know it will be a bit hectic then and we have the time to speak about it now. That is, if you've decided what to do."

Doc sighed again. He walked slowly across the room to sit next to her on the couch, leaning back into the cushions. He didn't speak immediately, and Clara didn't press him, knowing how important and weighty this decision was for him to make. It was one that should've been made years ago, yes, but just because it was past due did not mean that she was going to rush him. She had asked for a choice to be made by the time they left, and there were still about fifteen hours remaining, technically. If he had no answer now, she might be a bit concerned, but she wouldn't be angry with him. Not unless he avoided or delayed their trip home because of it, and something told her that wouldn't come to pass. Her Emmett was an honest man and wasn't prone to resorting to such childish tactics.

"I'm going to try," he finally said softly, looking at her. "I can't promise success, not even on a minor level, let alone the kind of fortune my counterpart had come to him, but I've decided I'm going to try."

Clara thought she knew, but asked the question anyway. "How?"

"Well... I suppose first by entering that contest Jules has been pestering me about. I don't think I'll win, so I don't want you and the kids to get your hopes up. And I need to look at *my* future, too. I've been putting that off for years — rather hypocritical of me, since I've looked up you and the kids and the McFlies before."

"I should say," Clara said, with only mild scolding. She had known about her husband's phobia about seeing his own future. It had seemed odd to her, considering Doc's oft quoted advice that the future was whatever one made it, nothing set in stone, very malleable. But she supposed a fear of discovering things he might not enjoy learning might hold him back from prying too deeply into his own future. Knowledge concerning the fates of the other members of his family, even his own wife, was likely more bearable because of those reasons. If Clara hadn't been certain before, after this trip, she was now positive that her husband had a definite fear of success. Seeing himself as such in the future would make him uneasy about destroying it while in the process of trying to make it happen, and seeing things turn out badly would depress him. "You should remember, Emmett, that whatever you do see, for better or worse, it *can* change."

"I know that," Doc said softly.

“Do you? I know you’ve told that to the kids before, to me, to Marty and Jennifer, but do you know it yourself and believe in it? Truly?”

There was a long pause. “Yes,” he finally said. “I’ve seen a variety of futures, some that I hope do come to pass, and others that I would dread the mere thought of my friends or family experiencing firsthand. Ultimately, things are the way we decide to make them. I’ve got no doubts about that.”

Clara sighed softly, taking his hand to clasp it between her own. “Then keep that in mind when you go to the future. Whatever you see is not set. You may be as successful as your counterpart here. You may not. But neither could happen, if you make different choices.” She paused, thoughtful. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to go with you on that trip.”

The inventor blinked. “Go with me? Why? It won’t be too exciting....”

“Perhaps, but after this little adventure, a rather mundane trip would be welcome. No, I’d like to go with you because I *want* to — and because I think it will help you. No matter what you learn, I won’t change my mind or opinion about you, Emmett. I love you. You *do* know that after all this time, after everything, nothing will *ever* change that.” She spoke with a quiet conviction that nonetheless conveyed the passion and truth behind those words. Her husband heard it. His hand tightened to grip hers.

“Even if I’m nothing more than the local nutcase, still contributing nothing more meaningful to Hill Valley beyond the occasional blackout and unexplained noise?”

“Even then,” she said with a smile, serious nonetheless. “But I don’t think it will be like that, I really don’t. What your counterpart has done here is a grand example of what can happen if you *do* put your mind to something. Maybe you aren’t the creator of fusion in our world, but I’ve no doubt that you are capable of equally positive and life-changing inventions that can be shared with the world.”

Doc studied her for a moment, then smiled, tentatively. “I hope you’re right,” he said. “But either way, I’m going to find some way to support us. I’ll go back to teaching, somehow, if I have to, or maybe pick up repairing things again. We may be poor and it may get a little tight for a while, the kids might have to settle for community college and scholarships, but at least I should be able to sleep better at night again.”

“I’m glad to hear that, then. I suppose the news about you and the contest will be sufficient to cheer up Jules and Verne when we leave. It’s a pity we can’t come back and visit again, you know....”

“It’s far too difficult and dangerous,” Doc said, not without his own rather regretful sigh. “Believe me, if it wasn’t, I’d make sure we’d stay in touch. Lightning may strike in the same place more than once when you have a time machine, but I don’t think circumstances would align themselves again in quite the same way to bring us back here — or them to us. All we can do is enjoy the rest of our time here and keep the memories.”

The remainder of that time turned out to be rather fleeting. Most of the following day was spent conducting more last minute checks on the visiting time machine, doing the laundry of the visitors, and sorting things out while packing to make sure things wouldn’t be brought to the other dimension that shouldn’t. It had been decided to make the attempt to return at four, as that was the time of day to which the visitors were wanting to return home, meaning they wouldn’t have to suffer any sort of “time lag.” The blasting would also be going on at that time to conceal the noise from the transit. The locals and visitors had a late lunch, though not many people did more than pick at their food. Nervousness over the impending trip home and the coming goodbyes were on everyone’s mind.

Finally, however, things were packed up and delays were simply that — delays of the inevitable. Emily and Chris seemed to be the most skilled at it, pleading for one last chance at another video game until their mothers put a firm but gentle stop to it. Shortly before four, the entire Brown family, as well as the local Marty, gathered outside the lab where the visiting train was now resting, temporarily visible to better aid with a final systems check and packing of gear and belongings.

“I don’t know how to thank you for everything,” Doc told his counterpart when they were finally ready to go, the rest of their family members saying their own goodbyes to their counterparts and new friends. “Thank you doesn’t seem nearly enough.”

“It will do,” Emmett said with a smile. “I’m just glad we were able to help you out as much as we did.”

“Be that as it may, I’ve met other versions of myself that would’ve been less than inclined to do everything you have for us. Well, *one* version, at least. Thank God we didn’t end up in that world.” He changed the subject to something a little less disturbing. “So you’re really going to let things go and follow your family to Europe, now?”

There was no hesitation in the response. “Absolutely. I think after the last three weeks, we all need a vacation. And you’re really going to do what you said you would...?”

Doc had told him about his decision that morning. “Yes,” he said. “I won’t deny I’m a little scared about what will happen and what I’ll find, but in some ways it’s almost a relief. No more contradicting my principles — though hopefully it won’t come at the cost of being destitute.”

“I doubt that.” Emmett held out a flat, lightweight package that he’d brought with him. “This is a little souvenir I’d like you to have.”

Doc looked at the gift for a moment, not touching it, then up to his counterpart’s face. “What is it?” he asked with a trace of suspicion, not quite sure what to think.

“Open it and you’ll see.” When the visiting inventor continued to hesitate in taking it, Emmett smiled. “It’s nothing that’ll cause harm to take back. Trust me.”

Knowing with certainty that his other self wouldn’t take such a risk, Doc tore open the wrapping paper to reveal what it concealed, studied the gift silently a moment — then laughed. In his hands he held a framed photograph, a copy of the same one hanging in Emmett’s home of the inventor being awarded the Nobel Prize by the king of Sweden. At the bottom was the inscription: *“If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything!”*

“I thought it might be rather appropriate, under the circumstances,” Emmett explained. “Provided you put it someplace where the wrong people won’t accidentally stumble across it.”

“Oh, of course. Thank you. I wish I had something for you....”

Emmett waved away the lament. “I think simply being here was enough,” he said. “It’s been quite educational. Good luck with your future — and that new baby.”

Doc nodded. “The same to you. If you ever do find some way to break through this dimensional travel business that doesn’t have such... uncomfortable side effects, feel free to look us up. I suspect we’ve left enough behind in irreparable circuits and the like that could be used to track us down.”

“Of course.”

With that, there was nothing more to be said. Doc enlisted the help of Clara to gather their kids into the train, and after a few more words with his counterpart, Marty joined them with his wife. In his hand, he carried a CD case. At the curious look from the inventor, the musician explained: “My twin burned me some of his songs he wrote over the last few years, sort of a reminder of things here and what could happen.” He noticed the picture Doc held in hand. “What’s that?”

“A reminder of my own,” he said, passing Marty the photograph as he closed the door of the machine for their trip home.

Marty studied it for a moment, then grinned. “Cute. So you’re really gonna do it, Doc? Give the inventing thing a solid go and let the world in on things you’ve done?”

“He’d better,” Jules said from where he stood, near the back. “After what we’ve seen here, there’s no way you can pull off the excuse of not being capable of it, anymore.”

“The rumors are true: I’m going to enter the contest,” Doc confirmed as he started the machine, the rumblings and response perfectly normal. A flick of the switch, and the machine was rendered invisible, a result Doc saw reflected on the faces of the observers outside.

“Good,” Jules said, his response echoed by Verne. “It’s about time! Now, about a car....”

Doc looked away from the controls long enough to favor his oldest with a look of mild scolding. “Don’t start,” he warned.

The train lifted up into the sky, turning away from the Morris mansion. Belted in next to her mother, Emily suddenly burst into tears. “I don’t wanna go, Daddy,” she sobbed, not entirely understanding the danger that remaining here posed to their health. “Why can’t we see ‘em again?”

“It’s far too difficult, sweetheart,” Clara said, putting an arm around her to hug her close. “I wish it wasn’t so, but it is.”

Emily buried her face into her mother’s side and wept harder. Marty, standing near Doc at the front, handed Jennifer the photo and the CD for safekeeping and moved toward the girl at the back in the hopes of comforting her. Verne sighed as he passed by, craning his neck to look at the house one last time as they sped away from it, toward the speed of transition. “Too bad,” he said wistfully. “You sure you can’t figure out some way to do this again, Dad?”

“It could be possible, in time,” Doc admitted. “But it’s more difficult than the act of traveling through time — or at least being able to control where your destination is. Even if that could be done, though, you know how much of a danger it is to be in places like this for prolonged periods of time. We probably won’t see them again, but at least we had this chance and know that such places exist... somewhere. I find it a positive compensation to the idea of Doc B.”

“We still might see them again, sooner than you think,” Jules said, almost ominously. “If this doesn’t work....”

But when they reached eighty-eight moments later and reappeared on June 4, 1994 at 4:00 P.M., their surroundings had changed. They were still over Silver Creek Canyon — but it looked different in some important but subtle ways. And when Doc turned around and headed back in the direction of where his counterpart’s home had been, there wasn’t a trace that any such building had ever existed. The cab of the train grew silent, broken only by Emily’s quiet sobs. Several minutes later, as they drew near to the site of the Brown home on Elm dale Drive, they found it to be restored in precisely the same condition as it had been when they had left — more than three weeks before.

“We’re back,” Doc confirmed softly. And, though sighs of relief echoed in the small space, there were no outright cheers of delight at the realization that, finally, the strange little vacation was over for good.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1995
3:32 P.M. PST

Snow fell in gentle, hypnotic waves outside the cafeteria windows of Hill Valley Community Hospital, a soothing sight to behold. The flakes weren’t the small, angry ones born of storms, but more like a fresh, fluffy coating of winter over everything that rode the breeze outside for a while before coming to rest on the ground outside. Doc watched it fall as he stirred his cup of coffee, thoroughly drained in energy but able to enjoy the first moment of peace that he’d had in weeks.

Early that morning, at precisely seven-thirteen A.M., his new son, Clayton Edison Brown, had entered the world, two weeks late and already on the edge of life. Clara’s fourth pregnancy had been of the high risk kind, a result that would’ve been so regardless of the events that had happened to her early on in it, and for the last month she had been confined to bed under her doctor’s orders. She had made it clear she wasn’t happy, and Doc had practically had to strap her into the bed since she simply didn’t feel like lying around doing nothing. Between the stress of the baby’s and his wife’s health, and Clara’s irritation over being made to feel like an invalid, in the last month, they had done something highly unusual for them: bickering, a lot. The kids had picked up on the tensions at home and had generally tried to avoid both their parents, not wanting to set either of them off and suffer their unwarranted wrath. Ironically, though Dr. Watson had worried about her patient delivering prematurely, the baby had decided it liked where it was and remained in two weeks past the due date, requiring an induced labor on Thursday afternoon. Even then, the boy hadn’t come quickly, and finally, when there were signs of distress to the child, they’d had to perform an emergency Cesarean. The umbilical cord had become entangled around the baby’s neck — but the doctors had rescued him just in time.

Even though the lives of both Clara and the newborn Clayton were now well out of danger, Doc had been horrified by the events surrounding the birth. Although she had pulled through just fine, Clara had been clearly terrified by the emergency procedure and the way that the doctors had remained unusually tight-lipped about the status of the

baby once they had wheeled her into surgery. She and the baby were resting right now, a well deserved rest, and Doc supposed he should do the same, but there was too much on his mind to do just that. The kids were due to come back to the hospital soon, after school, and since Marty and Jennifer wanted to drop by as well, they were going to bring them over.

Doc took a sip of his coffee, grimacing a little at the bitter, burned taste, idly wondering if there might be a way to prevent coffee from suffering from such a malady from sitting on a burner for too long. It was simply yet another idea he had, and he was having almost far too many of them since June, of things he wanted to invent that were wholly new or improvements on something already in existence. Since he had spoken with his counterpart in June and promised him that he would try to make a more respectable living rather than profit unfairly off investments that would not have been made without the benefit of foresight, he had kept up his end of the bargain. The contest he had entered at the university had brought about the surprising and thoroughly unexpected — to him — result of a win. With that had come the more startling requests by consumers and businesses for the security system he had designed. He had fielded away offers from large companies eager to purchase the patent and rights to it, in favor of establishing his own, the former E. Brown Enterprises that he had managed before the completion of the time machine and the subsequent interval spent in the past. The money from the systems sold had mostly gone right back into the new company and the family savings, though he had used some of it in order to start construction of an addition to the farmhouse. He and Clara had discussed it shortly after their return home and had decided that having any of the kids sharing rooms would be unfair at this point. Instead, they opted to remodel, adding not only a new upstairs bedroom for the baby, but also a small sewing room next door for Clara's hobby, and below those, a computer room and study for the kids on the main floor. The project had broken ground in late July and had wrapped up in November, shortly before Thanksgiving. Now, it looked as if the house had always contained the new rooms rather than being adjustments made more than a hundred years after the original construction.

Money, he knew, wouldn't be much of a concern for many more years. He had finally fulfilled his vow of investigating his own future in mid-November, when the fortunate fallout from the contest had quieted down. Clara had come with him as she had wished and, knowing now that time travel wouldn't create all manner of havoc or damage on unborn children, he had permitted it, knowing that she was also his insurance for not straying from the purpose of his mission. He had been the one to search the archives in the library, and had forced himself to read the material it turned up — but she had been right next to him the whole time, holding his hand and encouraging him quietly with her mere presence. The news he had found had been stunning. On Monday, July 21, 1997, he had apparently called a press conference to announce to the world his creation of hover technology — the basis of flying cars, hover conversions, and all but critical to transportation in the Twenty-First Century and beyond.

To say that he'd been shocked by this revelation would've been an understatement. Although he had spent some time working on hover technology since the 1950s — particularly after Marty had visited him the second time and mentioned the DeLorean could fly — he hadn't ever dreamed that he'd be credited with creating the technology. Even learning that he had hadn't been easy; he'd been inclined almost immediately to brush it off as something he must've accidentally stolen from the future. Clara hadn't let him get far with that reasoning, and her words were backed up strongly by Jules and Verne, once they got wind of what had happened, as well as Marty, who knew with absolute certainty that he hadn't gotten close enough to the DeLorean to copy the hover conversion design in 1955. Even if he had managed to do a thorough investigation of it while his friend had been asleep or otherwise occupied — which Doc knew he hadn't done — the musician was positive he wouldn't've been able to figure out what was what, not if he was confused by a simple microchip at that time.

Although the revelation had been startling, it hadn't been completely outlandish. There was something that felt... right about the whole thing. Doc had actually managed to knock out a fairly primitive design that garnished encouraging results before the time machine caused the need to concentrate his full attention and resources there. He had never bothered to investigate the history of hover conversions, simply assuming that the auto companies had come up with it first and that other things relating to hover technology had followed later. But when he had found himself in 1885 with a very busted DeLorean, he'd gotten a good look at the entire system, as it had been one of those damaged by the lightning and the subsequent crash landing. There had been a great deal of similarities to the design that he recalled from his own plans, but such an observation had been all but forgotten in the months that followed. He remembered it again only when he had dismantled the hoverboard, a month after it had saved his life and Clara's. He'd noticed that the basic design for the hover operation was almost identical to his own. At the time, he had thought it was an extraordinary coincidence, nothing more.

Knowing what he knew now, though, Doc was fairly comfortable with the idea that he'd made it — *would* make it — and had a couple of years to perfect the designs and technology before patenting it and then announcing it to the world. July of 1997 seemed like a perfectly logical date to have those chores done, especially considering he had other

projects to keep him occupied — and a new baby. Although he was far busier than he had been while living off investments, he found, oddly, he was far happier now.

“So this is where you’re hiding out. Is the thought of being a father again for the fourth time *that* scary?”

Exhaustion was the only thing that kept him from jumping out of his chair at the sound of the voice behind him. Doc turned instead, and found Marty grinning at him. The musician had come to the hospital the evening before with Jennifer when it seemed that the baby would be born within hours — but as time dragged on, he’d stuck it out until the end, even though his wife had left, due to an early morning wake up call for her job. He had kept busy, helping Jules and Verne entertain seven-year-old Emily and trying to keep the mood light even when it turned darker as the labor refused to progress and Clara’s pain increased. Doc had been tremendously grateful for Marty’s presence and had thanked him more than once, but his friend had dismissed the words with the answer that this was doing just as much good for him, letting him see what the experience of waiting for a birth was like, since he was probably going to be a father himself, in a few years.

Once the baby had been born and found to be healthy, and Clara was also out of danger, Marty had left, taking the kids back home so they could get to school. Although Jules had refused the idea of missing any of his classes and Verne couldn’t, as they were preparing for semester finals, Marty had offered to watch Emily for the day, since she’d surely be too distracted in her first grade classroom to concentrate. Though sorely tempted to spend the day with the musician, whom she still harbored a crush on, Emily had opted to go to school so she could share the news about her new sibling, and Doc couldn’t see a reason why she should miss school if she didn’t want to. She had probably slept the most of all of them the night before, bunked out on the couch in the waiting room down the hall while the rest of them had paced and fretted, knowing how serious the situation was.

“Not really,” he said in response to Marty’s question. “There wasn’t much for me to do upstairs with Clara and the new baby sleeping, and I didn’t see any point in going home quite yet, not with everyone coming back for a visit.” Doc blinked, noticing for the first time that his friend appeared to be alone. “Did anyone come with you?”

Marty nodded as he took a seat at the table, across from Doc. “They’re all upstairs ogling the baby. Clara’s awake now, though, and wanted to know where you were, so I asked around, and one of the nurses said she saw you down here a little bit ago, so I thought I might as well check it out. You okay?”

“Just fine. Thinking a little.... I don’t believe I’ve had the chance to sit and simply do that for a while, not without other things intruding.”

“Yeah, it’s been a crazy few months for you, hasn’t it?” Marty half-sighed, half-yawned, having been up the entire night with the inventor.

“That might be a bit of an understatement.... Did you get any sleep after going home?”

“A little — more than you, by the look of it. She’s okay now, Doc, and so’s the baby. Things aren’t gonna go to hell if you take a nap or go home.”

Doc swirled the coffee in the cup, glancing at the depths of it for a moment. “I know that. But this is our last one. Sleep can wait. And after all Clara went through, I’d prefer to be with her as much as possible. She’s going to be here for a few days, more than she was with Emily because of the surgery, and I know she’s not happy about it.”

“Are you *sure* this is your last one? You thought that about Emily, too....”

The scientist smiled, a little grimly. “Oh, yes. There are ways to ensure it, and I’m going to do just that. I refuse to put my wife through this anymore, especially at her age. The doctors would start to wonder, too. She’ll be fifty-one in about six weeks, you know.”

Marty looked mildly surprised. “Yeah, I guess that could cause some problems. Cute kid you have, though. Jen’s totally in love with him, and I know she’ll be happy to practice her mothering skills with him anytime you need a sitter.” He paused a moment as Doc took another sip from his cup. “Are you guys really naming him Clayton or was that just a joke?”

“Oh, no, it’s his name. Clayton Edison. Clara was quite partial to that being his first name, and since it’s much better than what her counterpart decided to saddle their third son with, I didn’t put up much of a fight. I suppose it’s appropriate in its own way, though Jules and Verne moaned about it being too unusual.”

“It’s not that bad,” Marty said. “Kinda cute. Though I think if Jen ever wanted to name any of our kids Parker McFly I might put my foot down. I know that Parker’s been used as a first name before but... it just sounds too weird next to McFly.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Doc assured him. “It’s funny, though. I didn’t know about this baby before Clara told me she was expecting, but when I checked on my family in the future a few years ago, around the time of your wedding, I found a number and address for a Clayton Brown. It made me do a double-take, naturally, but we weren’t the only Browns in the area by that point — or even now — so I assumed it was just an extraordinary coincidence. I had no idea that he was actually our son.”

“Weird,” Marty said, looking surprised by this news. “So did you know, once Clara told you she was pregnant?”

“No. I’d forgotten all about that until I was going through some notes I’d made about that trip, while preparing for the jump Clara and I took in November, and I saw a notation I’d written about it. We’d already pretty much agreed on the name by that point, so I didn’t feel cornered by destiny, so to speak.”

“Good — ‘cause if you’re right about the future being what you want it to be, you gotta listen to your own advice. Can’t wait ‘til you hear it from another you all the time.”

“No, I can’t,” Doc agreed, smiling. “And I know that now, Marty.”

“Good. So, you think Clayton’s gonna look like Chris?”

The question was one Doc had wondered about on and off since last June. The baby — who Clara had become more set on naming Clayton as the months progressed, not so much because of it being her former surname but because it reminded her of their stay with the counterparts they would never see again — had been born with reddish brown curls and eyes that were a startling green in color, reminiscent of those that had belonged to young Chris in the other dimension. Although his hair was different from that boy’s, much redder than Chris’, the eyes made him wonder if, in time, he would grow to resemble that counterpart with the different name.

“Anything is possible, I suppose,” he said. “It’s definitely too soon to tell, though. He’s not even—“ Doc consulted one of his watches. “—nine hours old yet.”

“I guess so.” Marty glanced outside at the snow for a moment. “You think about them much?”

Doc knew who he was talking about without asking. “Yes, from time to time. I’m assuming you do, as well.”

“Every time I’m faced with a new choice or offer with my music.” Marty smiled crookedly. “Not that I’m trying to imitate my twin’s career, but... he had a pretty good thing going by 2002. If I had half of that, it’d be nice.”

“That’s understandable. I’ve had similar thoughts over the last few months, ever since I won that contest. But what’s right for them and what’s right for us may not be the same, you know. Ultimately, we were all different people with different life experiences and different personalities. The many similarities may have obscured that, but it’s true. And, oddly, I find that a little comforting.”

Marty turned that over in his thoughts for a moment. “Yeah, you’re right. But it’d be nice if we could exchange postcards or something, at least, let them know how things turned out for us — like the baby.”

Reminded of that once more, Doc glanced at the clock, realizing for the first time that he had been sitting there for a little more than an hour. Clara would definitely be wondering where he was, especially now that they had guests. “Perhaps so,” he agreed. “And I suppose we’d better go upstairs, now, before both of our wives send out the kids after us.”

As they headed for the elevators together, something occurred to the musician. “Hey, Doc, do you think *they* think about *us* at all?”

The inventor knew he was referring to their other-dimension counterparts. "Of course. Why shouldn't they?"

Marty shrugged. "I dunno, maybe 'cause they sure seemed to have their acts together a lot better'n any of us."

"Possibly, but I suspect that's more due to the fact that they'd had eight additional years to work on it. We were definitely different in terms of many of our life experiences, but on the most essential level, we're still the same people. Even Doc B still had enough of that part of me in him. If he hadn't, he wouldn't've cared about having a wife and children. That was a purely gut-level emotional response, and for all that he'd lived through hell, there were still traces of what he had once been — and what I, and all my other counterparts, are. They may think about us for their own different reasons, but I'm sure they do. You can't have something like this happen in your life and not be touched by it, forever."

"Yeah, I guess not. Seeing inside Jen's head with that mind-reading gadget really made me grow up in a way I didn't think I needed to. It made me realize just *how* we can love someone but not really know them as well as we think we do, 'cause we don't get outside our own heads enough. My double had already gone through that, a long time ago, for him. I'm willing to bet that's why he seemed so different to me. He really wasn't; he was just me, matured by some heavy experiences I hadn't had, yet."

"Exactly. Your reasons for thinking about what happened seem more profound, but I suspect they have their own reasons for thinking about it, and us, that we can't really understand, not after knowing them for only a few weeks. It was a very educational experience, in many ways."

Marty grinned. "And a hell of a lot nicer vacation than camping in rain-soaked Oregon."

Doc ruefully agreed, still regretting the dismal failure of that part of things, even though it had turned out much better than anyone could have expected, in the end. At last, the elevator doors opened, and they stepped out onto the floor where the others were waiting, ready to visit the new life, and face the new beginnings in store for both their families.