

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

a *Back to the Future* novel

by

Mary Jean Holmes & Kristen Sheley

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*For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully,
even as I have been fully understood.*

1 Corinthians 13:12

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*For Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale,
for creating this wonderful "sandbox"
in which we have been so gleefully "playing,"
and
for all the actors who brought their characters to life so wonderfully.
Thanks to every one of you*

Chapter One

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 3, 1994

6:58 A.M.

LINCOLN CITY, OREGON

It was the sound of falling rain that woke Emmett Brown the morning of the third day of his family vacation. He wanted to ignore it, willed it to go away and be nothing more than a figment or trick of his imagination, but it did neither. Finally, he opened his eyes with a sigh, beyond weary of the sound that had been in the background of virtually every waking moment since their arrival. Had he known that the Oregon Coast had such a rainy climate, he would've drastically altered the location he had settled on for a family camping excursion, but he had thought August would offer something along the lines of warmth and sunshine.

Of course, the inventor reflected as he rolled over, the weather couldn't entirely be blamed for the state of the trip. That lay primarily on the individuals involved, and possibly his over-optimism that getting away for a week to a more primitive environment might allow everyone the chance to catch their collective breaths. Secure in an utterly rural area, far away from telephones and computers and other distractions of 1994 Hill Valley, he had hoped that his family might rediscover — or at least reappraise — each other.

Unfortunately, things had seemed doomed from the start. Jules, eager to take a break before diving into his junior year finals at Hill Valley University, had easily agreed to getting away when Doc had announced the plans for the weekend. The eighteen-year-old had had an ulterior motive, however, apparent from virtually the minute they had arrived in the past, when he had begun a full assault at persuading his parents that he was in desperate need of a car of his own. The cajoling and arguments were nothing new; Jules had been at it since he had turned seventeen and used the "Marty's parents gave him a car when he turned seventeen" tactic, one that brought about little sympathy from either of his own parents. Both Doc and Clara had tired of it all long ago. By mutual agreement, they had told Jules time and time again that he was welcome to wheels of his own, provided he got a job to pay for all the expenses involved with purchasing and maintaining a car. Jules, however, argued right back that his pre-med studies took up all his free time, and his parents were saving money on his education from the scholarships he had earned; therefore he was entitled to what they planned to pay for both Emily and Verne once they reached college.

Finally, Doc had had enough of it and, the morning before, told Jules that if he even said the word "car" once more, his privilege of driving the family's van would be revoked for the entire duration of the summer. The teenager had sputtered, then grew sullen and silent, doing his best to ignore and avoid his parents. Doc, frankly, wasn't too upset. The silent treatment would only last so long and, in the meantime, it was a nice break from the relentless nagging.

Sixteen-year-old Verne's mind wasn't distracted by cars like his older brother. Rather, the thing that was taking up all his energy was a girl by the name of Amber Corrigan. The teen had first mentioned her back in December, when the sophomore had transferred to Hill Valley High and ended up in his second year drama class. Verne had been smitten at once, and by spring they were an item. Unfortunately, the teen was so blinded by the girl's attractive looks that he was utterly unaware how much Amber manipulated and insulted him. Clara and Doc had seen it the moment they had met her, but both held their tongues on the matter. Doc knew there was nothing they could say to Verne that would make a bit of difference to his feelings toward her and, in fact, their disapproval might cause him to go out of his way to stay with Amber. The scientist knew the relationship would end at a certain point — last he checked, Verne had married someone he would meet in college — but in the meantime, the high school junior was spending almost every instant of free time out with Amber. He'd had to be dragged almost kicking and screaming into the train for the trip, aghast at spending seven days apart from his girlfriend. Like Jules of the last day, he had been quiet and rather sulky most of the vacation, going almost out of his way to complain about every little thing and seemingly determined not to enjoy himself in the least.

Emily, about to conclude her year of kindergarten, was at least trying to enjoy herself on the trip, marveling at the utterly empty beach and practicing how to skip stones on the water of nearby Devil's Lake. But she, too, wasn't having much fun. If she wasn't cold, she was bored; if she wasn't bored, she was wet, or hungry. Or something made a funny noise and scared her. The six-and-a-half-year-old was also going through withdrawal over being away from her computer, which was the precise reason her parents had wanted to spirit her away from the present. Doc was stunned by how skilled his daughter was with those machines, even running circles around Jules, who had taken a couple of required computer courses last year in college. The teachers at her school had termed Emily a "prodigy" with the talent, and encouraged Doc and Clara to enroll her in classes to further her talents. They thought they might wait a bit with

that, however. Emily was still quite typical of kids her age, with a shorter attention span and an eagerness for play and pretend, particularly with kids her own age, so the inventor wasn't sure how she would handle being in a computer lab with classmates older than her and a teacher that might not have the patience for a younger child, especially one that picked up things with computers so easily and quickly. The last thing Doc wanted was for his daughter to resent her talent, or lose the enjoyment she gained from it.

Beside him, in the tent, Doc heard his wife stir, the sound startling him out of his reflections. He looked over to see her tentatively poke her head out of her sleeping bag, then groan softly and pull the material back over her. "Is it *still* raining?" she asked, rather plaintively.

"From the sound of it, yes," the scientist said. "I would've thought after three days, the clouds had given up all they had in 'em."

Clara sighed heavily, popping her head back out. Her dark, curly hair stood out in a frizzy halo around her face. "Maybe we should think about going back home," she began tentatively. "I know you've had your heart set on a family vacation, Emmett, and I agree with you a hundred percent on the reasons you cited, but... well, no one is really enjoying themselves here."

Doc sighed at Clara's suggestion. It certainly wasn't anything new; he'd even had similar thoughts. Still, he didn't want to go home, not now, not quite yet. "Let's give it another day," he said. "If the weather still hasn't improved then, we can pack things up and go somewhere else. But I really wouldn't want to cut our vacation short. We're seeing Jules and Verne less and less, now, and Emily's almost at that age where she'll want to trade our company for that of her friends'."

Clara considered the words, then nodded. "I suppose so," she said. She settled back on her pillow and closed her eyes, grimacing a little. With the increasing daylight seeping into the tent, in spite of the clouds and gloom outside, Doc caught the expression.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Oh, I just feel... tired, I suppose."

"I'll start the fire this morning, if you want to try to sleep longer," Doc offered even as he sat up. He reluctantly slipped out of the warmth of the sleeping bag, chilled in spite of the layers of clothes he had slept in, and put on his shoes and raincoat. "Do you want me to start the tea and coffee?"

"That would be wonderful," Clara said with a faint smile. "Thanks, Emmett."

Doc unzipped the tent's door and stepped outside to the muddy, wet outdoors with a faint grimace. Rain immediately splattered against the hood and he made his way carefully around the puddles, past the other two tents, up a slope to where he had landed the train on their arrival. The inside of the time machine, and the tender that accompanied it, was the only spot that was remaining dry as the rain wore on, so the scientist had been keeping all of their food, firewood, and other supplies in it. It also kept the belongings out of the range of any wild animals, which were quite numerous in this time period. He had lost count of how many deer and eagles he had spotted. Verne claimed to have seen a bear on a hike, but Doc wasn't sure if he was serious or just trying to provide another excuse as to why they needed to go home.

Doc headed for the tender first, where he collected several logs, then dragged them to the pit and managed to get a fire going with the assistance of a Presto log. The food was in the cab, and when he was sure the flames had taken, he headed there. Although it was after sunrise, now, it was still rather gloomy out, between the trees and clouds above. Therefore, Doc didn't notice anything was amiss in the train until he had taken a step forward, towards the seats at the back, where the boxes of food were stacked, and his foot collided with something that he knew wasn't supposed to be there. Utterly unprepared, he toppled forward, landing on something soft... and alive.

"What's the deal?" someone moaned softly, shifting underneath the inventor. Doc quickly rolled to the side, realizing as he moved just who he had fallen onto.

"Marty, what are you doing in here?" he asked, pulling himself up to his feet.

Marty rolled onto his back and looked up at the scientist with a rather sleepy squint. "Jennifer kicked me out

of the tent last night," he said. "She said I *breathed* too loudly, if you can believe that one." He rolled his eyes, clearly annoyed.

Doc sighed to himself. It had been his idea to invite Marty and Jennifer McFly along on the trip, in the hopes it might provide them a chance to settle their own problems. For the last week, the couple had been waging an argument that Doc had heard lovingly detailed from Marty's perspective. Nearly three weeks ago, Jennifer had been promoted at KWHV, the TV station where she had been laboring as a desk filler and community interest reporter on the local news for the last year. One of the regular morning newscasters, Deborah Banks, had left her position to become a full-time mother to the baby she and her husband had just had, and Jennifer had fought tooth and nail for the vacant position of morning newscaster. To her delight, she had been granted it, which tripled her salary — sorely needed as Marty had left his position as a studio technician at radio station KKHV in April to concentrate on his slowly budding music career. Although he wasn't the world famous rock star he had hoped to be when he was younger, he had earned an excellent reputation during the last few years as a skilled guitar player and songwriter, and was in demand for both recording sessions and his songwriting skills. The money he was making at freelancing both wasn't much — half of what he had made at the radio station, and a quarter of Jennifer's new salary — but he was much happier working now from the studio he had built in the basement of his home two years ago.

Unfortunately, though both careers of the McFlys were on the upswing, such changes were straining their marriage. Jennifer had hardly received her promotion before casually mentioning to Marty how she was considering using her maiden name on the air to distance her professional life from her personal life. It had pushed a sensitive issue with the musician, who was already feeling weird, so he had confessed to Doc, for working out of the home and making less money than his wife. Marty had asked her, point blank, why she wanted to distance herself from her personal life: was she ashamed of him? Jennifer's response had been quick and to the point: absolutely not. Then why didn't she want to be known as Jennifer McFly? The newswoman's response had been to tell Marty to stop being so insecure and foolish, he had shot back that how did she think her announcement would make him feel, more harsh words had been exchanged and, finally, a week after it had first begun, the couple was barely speaking to one other, aside from terse, unavoidable exchanges.

Doc's brilliant plan had been to invite the young couple along, believing that being away from the pressures of both of their jobs might allow them to find a better perspective on the whole matter and the time to talk things out. Marty and Jennifer had managed to agree with that, though Doc suspected a great deal of the decision might've been due to neither having had a real vacation since their honeymoon, three years back. Marty's birthday was also just three days away from the date they had departed — June fourth, a Saturday — and he had liked the idea of taking a week-long weekend to celebrate it.

Between the foul weather and the tension between them, however, things seemed to be growing worse, not better, for the McFlys. From Doc's casual observations, it appeared to him that they were now going out of their way to avoid being alone together. Jennifer was sticking close to Clara or watching Emily, while Marty was hanging out with Doc or the boys. His old friend hadn't said much about the argument since they had arrived, though Doc had offered his ear if he just wanted to talk. Perhaps Marty was tired of repeating himself, even to the inventor; perhaps he just wanted to not think about it. At any rate, he hadn't asked for the scientist's assistance on the matter and Doc didn't believe in offering it unsolicited.

"And so you decided the train would make a better home?" he asked in response to Marty's explanation. The scientist frowned, once his eyes had adjusted to the dim interior, spotting a number of Marty's belongings now cramming the inside of the already crowded cab. He plucked the young man's coat from where it had been hanging draped over one of the gauges, dangling above the time circuit keyboard and bank of circuits. "I don't think that's a particularly good place for that, Marty."

"Sorry, but it was pitch black out when I came out here. I left the flashlight in the tent and it was so nasty out, I didn't want to go back and get it. Anyway," Marty added, sitting up in his sleeping bag to take the still-damp jacket from Doc and toss it down on his bag, "where else was I gonna go? I sure as hell wasn't going to sleep outside. Jules and Verne are irked enough that they've gotta share their tent with Emily, and I wasn't going to barge in on you and Clara. You guys don't need to be dragged into our problems."

"We already are to a great degree," Doc said drily. "You can't stay in the train, Marty. There's too much delicate equipment about and if something is accidentally bumped into or gets wet or crushed, we could have a big problem on our hands."

Marty frowned, clearly not happy with this new restriction. "All right," he said. "Then *you* talk to Jennifer about

it. In the meantime, can I just stay in here and get some more sleep, now? I think I was up half the night from the damn rain on the metal roof. And, you know, *technically* it's my birthday today."

"That's right," Doc said, half to himself. "All right, fine. But I can't promise you'll get to sleep in undisturbed. The kids will probably be in here soon rummaging around for stuff, once they get up."

"Whatever," Marty said, already burrowing back into his sleeping bag. Doc collected the boxes he needed and left the time machine, sealing it against the rain and wind. He nearly ran right over Emily, who was standing just outside the doors, waiting for him.

"Are you gonna cook breakfast, Daddy?" she asked, her dark, waist-length hair in a mess of frizzy tangles. "I'm hungry."

"I was just about to do that, sweetheart," he said. "And you might want to put your hood on. You'll be more comfortable if your hair is dry."

Emily complied, slipping her hair under the hood of her lavender raincoat. "Is Marty in there?" she asked, her blue eyes wide and a smile tugging at her mouth. "I thought I heard you talkin' to him."

Doc managed to keep a straight face at the query. Several years earlier, Emily had developed a crush of sorts on Marty. It was an almost constant source of amusement for her family — and one of embarrassment for Marty, who got a fair bit of good natured kidding out of it from Jennifer. ("See, Marty, you *can* still charm those schoolgirls!") Whenever the young man was around, Emily almost always dropped what she was doing to follow him around, or try to engage him in an activity with her. Marty actually dealt with it pretty well, humoring her more often than not, but Doc had taken his daughter aside more than once to tell her that she might want to cool down her attentions, just a tad. Emily didn't understand, though, not embarrassed in the least by her feelings and unable to see why others would be. It was a trait that Doc knew all too well, having had something like it himself, and it was a big reason why so many people in Hill Valley had been convinced he was a crackpot.

"Yes, he's in there," the inventor said, seeing no reason to lie to his daughter. "But he's sleeping now. and you don't need to bother him."

Emily frowned faintly, skeptical. "But it's morning," she said. "How much sleep does he want?"

"Probably about the same as your brothers — and you know how grumpy they get if you wake them up early."

Emily nodded sagely. "Okay," she said. "I'll let him be. Can I have some cocoa?"

"As soon as I get the water heated, sure."

"Can I help?"

Doc hesitated a moment, inwardly wincing when he remembered his daughter "helping" with cooking dinner the night before and dropping an unopened can of beans into the fire, thinking that would let them cook faster. Luckily, Verne had seen the move and knocked them out of the flames with a stick before anything could happen. Afterward, Clara had given Emily a long talk about asking before she did anything when she was "helping out." "Ah... sure, but let me get everything laid out, first."

Emily seemed to accept that as she trailed her father back to the fire. "What can I do 'til then?" she asked. "I'm bored *now*."

Doc consulted one of his watches, saw that it wasn't even seven-thirty, yet, and sighed to himself. "Didn't you bring some games to play?"

"Yeah — but they're in the train so they wouldn't get all wet and messed up." Her eyes narrowed as her mouth curved in a rather sly smile. She took a step towards the time machine. "I can get 'em—"

Doc saw immediately where that was going and grabbed onto the girl's hood, jarring her to a stop. "No, that's quite all right. You're right, it *is* too damp outside now to play with them."

Emily scowled, now. "But there's nothin' to *do* around here, Daddy," she said, her tone accusing, as if this was all his fault. "Can I go to the beach?"

"Not alone — and I can't take you right now, hon, I'm sorry."

Emily didn't like this. Her mood was swiftly growing cranky. "How come Jules an' Veme can go places alone, but I can't?"

"Well, they're a little older than you. When you're their age, you can do the same."

The girl scowled. "I always get the shaft 'cause I'm the youngest," she complained, her choice of words amusing Doc a little. Lord knew where she picked up some of her expressions — probably from her older brothers, television, or even Marty — but it always took him a bit aback when he heard some of the more teenaged expressions that came from such a young girl. And he'd thought Jules' elaborate vocabulary as a kid had been startling. "I can take care of myself!"

The scientist managed once again to keep a straight face. Showing any amusement to a six-year-old about something they clearly believed to be true was just asking for trouble. "Em, these woods are too dangerous to go wandering off alone in."

"But I'm not goin' to the woods — I just wanna go to the beach an' you can see the ocean from where the train is!"

"The ocean itself is dangerous, too. There are no lifeguards around, hon. This area is pretty desolate, now."

Emily's frown deepened. "You're no fun anymore, Daddy," she said. "I can *too* be okay if I go down there. Nothing bad's gonna happen. Where's Mommy?"

"She's still sleeping — as is everyone else. And I know that she would agree with me on this one." Doc paused as he unpacked the tin teakettle, deciding a swift change of subject was needed. "Didn't you bring some coloring books here?"

"They're in the train, too. Mommy told me the paper would get all yicky damp if I had 'em in my tent. I can just get my bag from there, Daddy. I know where it is, an' then I'll have something to do."

Doc sighed as he looked up from the box of cooking supplies. "I'll get it," he said. "Why don't you try to find the spatula in here while I do that, okay?"

"Okay," Emily agreed easily, clearly happy to have a project. Doc left her digging through the box and jogged to the train, opened the door as quietly as he could (which wasn't that quietly at all, but such a thing couldn't be helped), scooted past Marty on the floor, and managed to find Emily's bag without making too much noise. When he returned to the campfire, he found that his daughter had upended the box onto the blue tarp laid out on the ground and was pawing through the spilled contents, creating all sorts of clanging as the various metal supplies banged against each other. She looked up as her father quickly came over, kneeling down to scoop up the kitchen supplies and put them back in the box. "What's a stapula look like, Daddy?" she asked innocently.

"This is a *spatula*," Doc said, picking up the proper item and holding it up. "Here, hold on to this, will you?" Emily accepted it from him as he put the contents of the box back. By the time he had finished, a cranky Verne had come out of the tent with a scowl set on his face, his blond hair sticking up in a number of odd angles and corkscrews.

"What are you trying to do, Dad, wake the dead?" he complained, glancing up a moment at the gray sky to glare at the clouds and raindrops above. "Some people are trying to sleep, and since this is supposed to be my vacation, too, I'm one of 'em!"

"Sorry," Doc said immediately, not bothering to correct his son on who was at fault. There was a special bond between Verne and Emily, and the teen tended to let his sister get away with close to murder when left in charge of her. He could never say no to her, and Emily knew it. "Feel free to go back to sleep, then, if you want."

Verne looked like he wanted to do just that, but Emily popped up to her feet and beamed at her older brother. "Verne, will you take me to the beach?" she asked. "The tide's s'posed to be down now an' I wanna get some shells."

Daddy won't let me go alone."

Verne looked like he wanted to say no, if his posture and expression were any indication, but he sighed, looked at his watch, grimaced a little, then shrugged. "Fine, Em. You get the buckets, though."

Emily scampered off to take care of the task and Doc gave his youngest son a grateful smile. "Thanks, Verne," he said. "I appreciate that."

"Enough to let us go home today?"

"Don't push it. This is our vacation."

Verne snorted his opinion of that, reaching inside the tent with one hand to retrieve his windbreaker and baseball cap. "This isn't a vacation — it's hell," was his blunt assessment. "Vacations are to places like the Caribbean and Walt Disney World — and all in the same time frame as home."

Doc raised an eyebrow as he filled the teakettle with some of their bottled water and set it down on the rack over the flames. "And to think you once considered temporal excursions fun," he said. "Ah, to be young again...."

Verne's eyes told him he wasn't in the mood for teasing. "If you want to take us on a vacation, there are better places and times to go," he said. "The weather sucks here."

"Don't use that kind of language," Doc warned. "You know it bothers your mother."

Verne shrugged as he came over to the fire, towering over his kneeling father. Although almost two years younger, Verne now stood two inches taller than Jules, to his delight, and was just eye to eye with his father when both were standing. He had grown so fast, though, that the rest of his body hadn't quite caught up yet; although Verne ate like a horse, he was still quite skinny, to the point that he was rather insecure about it. Doc told him to not worry about it lasting, as it had happened to him when he had been that age, and since Verne bore such a strong physical resemblance to him, it was likely that by the time he reached about eighteen or nineteen that he'd finish filling out just as his father had. Verne had seemed doubtful about that — until Doc managed to find some old family photographs and one, in particular, from one of his college yearbooks that showed him at almost seventeen posed with the honor college students. The resemblance between Doc and Verne had been so uncanny that the latter's jaw had dropped upon seeing it — and after that he didn't complain much at all about being so thin and gangly.

"She's not around now," he said in response to his father's reprimand. "And I've heard worse from Marty."

"You're not Marty," Doc said bluntly. "And he's not my son. It's not my place to tell him how to speak."

Verne rolled his eyes in a kind of "whatever" expression too typical of the mid-1990's teen set. "You better get us when breakfast is done," he said as Emily returned with the two white plastic buckets in tow.

"Of course," Doc said. "Be careful."

The pair hadn't even gone entirely out of sight, yet, when Jennifer emerged from her tent, tugging her tangled, shoulder-length hair under a baseball cap, looping it through the hole at the back as she walked to the fire. She looked tired, like she hadn't slept too well, and Doc thought that was the case. The argument between her and Marty was clearly taking its toll on both parties involved. "I suppose it was too optimistic of me to think that the weather might've changed," she greeted him with a sigh, flipping back one of the tarps that was keeping their lawn chairs dry and having a seat. "Maybe I should've gone into meteorology instead of journalism"

"It looks like it's slowing down a bit," Doc said. "Maybe it'll stop altogether soon."

Jennifer managed a rather slanted smile. "I wouldn't bet on it, but it's nice to think. Did Emily and Verne go to the beach?"

"Yep."

"Maybe I'll join them," she said, but didn't immediately move. Doc studied her for a moment as he set the frying pan on the rack to heat up.

"I found Marty in the train this morning," he said casually.

Jennifer's cheeks flushed a bit with color and she shifted her eyes to the fire before her. "Yeah, I figured he might go there," she said.

"The cab's not really meant to be lived in," the inventor said gently. "I know you're both having some issues right now, but it really would be a bit of a bother for him — and everyone else — if he had to stay in another tent."

Jennifer nodded, looking even more embarrassed. "I understand," she said. "He was just getting on my nerves last night and... yeah, I see your point, Doc. It was childish of me to kick him out. I'm sorry. I'm *really* sorry that you guys are getting involved in this," she added, her face now burning with color.

Doc smiled at her. "It's all right, Jennifer," he said.

The twenty-five-year-old looked skeptical. "I don't think so," she said. "I don't understand why Marty's making such a big deal about this. How is wanting to use my maiden name just at my job such a bad thing?"

"I would speak with him about it," Doc said neutrally, not wanting to get caught in the middle.

"I'm *trying*, but he just doesn't understand." Jennifer sighed and settled back in the chair, shaking her head. "Never mind, you don't need to hear this." She changed the subject. "Will we get through this, Doc?"

"What do you mean?" the scientist asked, though he had a pretty good idea.

"You've seen the future — our future," she said. "Marty's told me that before. Is this going to last forever, this stupid fight?"

"Nothing lasts forever, Jennifer — and I don't know the answer to your question. The future is constantly in a state of flux from our actions of the present. What is there one day might not be there the next."

"Oh." The answer didn't seem to bring the newswoman much comfort. She stood. "I think I'll go after Emily and Verne. I *did* want to see if I could find some glass baubles from the high tide...."

"All right."

Doc found himself alone once more — until Jules came out a few minutes later, perhaps drawn by the scent of bacon cooking. He didn't say anything to his father at first, rummaging for a plastic coffee mug and the tin of instant coffee in the box of food. "Morning," Doc finally said to his oldest.

Jules looked up at him at the greeting, his brown eyes blinking. Seeing his son now always gave the scientist a faint start, perhaps due to the way he resembled more and more, by the day, the older man that Doc had met in the future a few years ago. Once people got to be about seventeen or eighteen, it seemed that they attained the general facial appearance that they would be stuck with for the rest of their days, and so he suspected it wasn't terribly unexpected. Jules, in general, seemed to take more after Clara's side of the family, physically, though his mannerisms were decidedly from the Brown genes. Although attractive, Jules hadn't yet had a girlfriend, an occurrence Doc speculated was due to both his son's serious focus on school and the fact he was about three or four years younger than most of his classmates. The eighteen-year-old regarded Verne's obsession with Amber with a fair amount of cynicism and rolled eyes.

"Morning," Jules said after a moment of hesitation. "Is the water hot, yet?"

"Almost, I'd wager," Doc said.

Jules sat down across from him, over the fire. "You know, Dad, I was thinking...." he began.

The scientist arched an eyebrow as he turned the bacon over. "Not about cars, I would hope," he said.

Jules shook his head. "No. It's just... I really think you should file the patent and send the security system in to the contest. It would be a shooin, I think, and you'd finally get some recognition."

Doc winced a little at the subject, rather wishing that it *had* been cars. When he had installed a new security system in the home and lab two years before, his entire family had been so impressed by it that they had immediately told him to patent it and try to market it to a company — and been just as appalled by his answer of “no.” They didn’t understand his reluctance to do such a thing when he had spent so many years trying and failing to do just that. Things had changed since then, though. He wasn’t so desperate to prove himself to the town of Hill Valley anymore. Money wasn’t really necessary, and, most importantly of all, he hadn’t taken any trips to the future back then. Now, he had incorporated so many parts and aspects from the future into his inventions, there was just no way he could try to patent and sell them with a clear conscience.

The subject would’ve stayed buried, perhaps, if Jules hadn’t discovered last month that Hill Valley University was holding a contest for newly patented inventions that would “protect the public” in some manner, with the first prize being a thousand dollars. The aim was likely towards the graduate students at the University, but Jules hadn’t found any restrictions against participation by the public at large, and since then had been waging a campaign to persuade his father to go for it. Jules wasn’t so excited by the cash prize as he was by the chance to shift the public’s opinion of the Brown family name. With the deadline now one week away, the teen was applying more pressure by the day to persuade his father to change his mind, and had enlisted the other members of the family to do likewise. Since arriving at the campsite, however, it hadn’t been brought up and Doc had foolishly believed that perhaps it meant the end of the matter.

Unfortunately, though, it appeared he had just enjoyed a brief reprieve.

“We’ve already discussed this, Jules,” the scientist explained patiently. “It’s too dangerous for me to try patenting anything.”

“Why? Just because you saw stuff in the future, and maybe took a transistor here or a circuit there that hasn’t been made yet? Even if you didn’t have the chance to do that, Dad, you know you would’ve found another way around that. Maybe the things would’ve been a little bigger, but they would’ve worked the same.”

“There’s that, yes,” Doc said. “But there’s also the fact that in some cases I saw some bit of future technology and decided to build it myself, with a few modifications — like the holographic projectors for the time machines.”

Jules wasn’t buying it. “So don’t show them that stuff — but I know you’ve made other things that aren’t around now. Like that computer program for analyzing REM waves and reading dreams. And the security system.”

“I’ll think about it,” Doc lied. His son knew it and opened his mouth to launch into another spiel, but he was saved by the arrival of Clara.

“Don’t nag your father about that, Jules,” she said as she made her way over to the fire. “You know he has his reasons for what he’s doing.”

“And you agree with me about them,” Jules said, looking up to his mother. Clara frowned faintly at him and the teen dropped the subject with a sigh.

“Are you all right?” Doc asked his wife, concerned by her unusually pale face.

“I just feel a little off this morning,” Clara said. “It’s nothing to fret over, rest assured. Is the water ready?”

“I think so.” He watched Clara carefully as she found a mug and a teabag, then picked up the water kettle by the handle, with a potholder, and poured the steaming water into the cup. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m just tired,” Clara said as she set the kettle down, only to have Jules pounce on it right away to get water for his cup of coffee. “I heard the others get up. Where did they go?”

“They’re at the beach. Actually, if you want, could you call them? I think breakfast’ll be ready in a few minutes, definitely by the time everyone makes it back here and cleans up.”

“Sure.”

Clara headed off to the task with her mug in one hand, making her way carefully around the puddles. Once she was out of eyeshot and earshot, Jules decided to resurrect the topic. “You know, Dad, I could always just submit the

stuff for you if you were too scared....”

Doc whipped his head around to face his son. “Don’t you dare,” he said, his tone threatening dire consequences.

“It’s not like I have the opportunity — I don’t know where you keep the schematics — but I was just offering,” Jules said, taking a sip from the instant coffee and grimacing a little. “I’m serious, Dad, I really think you should do it. I don’t think you’re doing anything illegal or unethical, and it would be nice for all of us to see you get some of the respect you deserve. Do you know how crazy it is to keep quiet about some of the stuff you’ve made when jerks around town start razzing me about you?”

“I know, Jules. I never said being my child was going to be easy.”

“No, but the perks are pretty nice — I wouldn’t trade it away,” Jules said. “I—”

Whatever he was about to say was stopped by the sound of a faint, girlish shriek, nearly inaudible over the sound of the constantly roaring ocean nearby. “Mommy!” Doc turned around, toward the ocean, in the direction that Clara, Verne, Emily, and Jennifer had gone.

“Did you hear that, Jules?” Doc asked, uncertain if it had been his imagination.

“I heard something,” the teen admitted. “Want me to check it out?”

“Please,” Doc said.

Jules started to stand, but he hadn’t gotten halfway up before Verne appeared over the rise, running past the train, his eyes wide. “Dad, come quick,” he said, skidding to such a stop that he nearly slipped back into a mud puddle. “Something’s wrong with Mom.”

Doc dropped what had been in his hands — the spatula and a plate — and was on his feet in a moment, running in the direction Verne was leading him back to. Jules was right on his heels. They ran up the slope, past the train, and then Doc could see a small group gathered on the beach, closer to the edge of the trees than the water. He made a beeline in that direction, his heart racing just as much from fear as it was from the exercise.

“What happened?” he called out when he was in earshot of the group. Jennifer was kneeling next to Clara, who was lying quite still on the sand. Her mug of tea lay a few inches away from her hand, the contents spilled into the sand. Emily hovered anxiously above, her eyes wide with fear. At the sight of her father running over, she headed in his direction.

“Daddy, she just fell over!” she reported.

“I think she fainted, Doc,” Jennifer said, touching the still woman’s face with her hands. “I don’t know why. Her pulse seems a little fast, but I don’t think she’s sick or anything. There’s no sign of a fever....”

Doc crouched next to his wife and checked her pulse, finding it pretty much as Jennifer said. Her face looked terribly pale framed by her darker hair, and the inventor hated how still she lay. “Verne, take Emily back to the campsite,” he said immediately, coming to a decision even as he spoke. “Start to take things down. We’re going home.”

There was no cries of joy at this announcement from anyone. Verne nodded soberly, taking his sister by the hand and reluctantly pulling her away. Jules hovered nearby with Jennifer, still. “Do you need our help getting her back to the train?” he asked.

Doc slipped his arms under his wife’s back and carefully lifted her into his arms, grunting at the weight. “I think I’ve got it,” he said. “You both help Verne and Emily. Take the tents down, put the fire out, stow the luggage in the train. And make sure that we’re leaving *nothing* behind to suggest we’ve been here.”

Jules hurried off after his siblings, but Jennifer lingered, matching Doc’s long stride as he hurried as quickly as he could through the shifting sand under his feet. “Do you think something is wrong with her?” she asked anxiously. “She seemed fine until she fainted.”

“People don’t just faint for no reason — especially Clara,” Doc said, rather grimly. “I *hope* there’s nothing wrong, but I’m not going to risk it. Clara turned fifty on her last birthday, and even with the future overhaul she had then, that’s not a guarantee perfect health will remain.”

Jennifer nodded. “Maybe she just ate something bad,” she suggested helpfully.

In his arms, Clara began to stir, moaning faintly. “Emmett?” she murmured, her eyes half opening.

“I’ve got you, Clara. I think you’ve fainted. We’re going home, now.”

She moaned again. “I’m so dizzy...” Clara half whispered, leaning her head against her husband’s shoulder.

“Hang on, I’ll have you down in a minute... Jennifer, can you get the door for me?”

The young woman nodded, scurrying ahead to open the train’s door. Doc ascended the steps carefully with the delicate package in his arms, then slammed to a halt at the sight of his pathway blocked.

“Marty, get up, now,” he said, concern for his wife sharpening his tone. The young man bolted up into a sitting position, clearly startled by the voice, his eyes popping open. He blinked, confused, at the sight before him.

“What’s going on?” he asked, not moving.

“We’re going home. Can you move, please? I’d like to set Clara down.”

The twenty-six-year-old stood, still in his sleeping bag, and hopped awkwardly out of the way to allow Doc access to the bench at the back, watching the proceedings with obvious perplexment. “What happened?” he asked.

“Clara fainted on the beach, Marty,” Jennifer explained from the doorway as Doc settled his wife down on the bench, sitting up. Clara’s eyes were open, now, but she looked dazed and disoriented. Doc gently pushed her back into the seat and picked up her ankles, setting them up on a couple of supply boxes to elevate them.

“Do you know where you are?” he asked her softly, looking into her eyes.

“Ah... the train’s cab,” Clara said after a moment of thought, her eyes glancing about the small chamber. She frowned. “Wasn’t I just on the beach?”

“Yes. You fainted. How do you feel now?”

Clara hesitated. “Woozy and tired,” she said. “Almost like I have the flu.”

“Maybe it’s food poisoning,” Marty suggested from behind the scientist, slipping out of his sleeping bag. “Are we really leaving now?”

“Yes,” Doc said, glancing at the musician and his wife. “Can you help the kids with breaking down camp?”

The younger couple nodded and left to take care of the tasks. Doc began to move things out of the way, setting them on the train’s stairs to be loaded into the tender or stowing them under the seats. Clara watched him from the seat, blinking as her brow furrowed. “Emmett,” she said after a moment, “don’t you think you might be overreacting a bit?”

“In what way?” Doc asked immediately, tossing aside a sweatshirt he recognized as Marty’s, removing it from the cold boiler. “Fainting isn’t a sign of good health, Clara.”

“Maybe, but is it serious enough to constitute cutting the trip short? I’m feeling a little better now. Maybe Marty was right, maybe it *is* food poisoning.”

“If that’s true, then we’ll find out with a visit to the doctor. Don’t fight me about this, Clara. I know you hate doctors, but you *are* going to see one today, as soon as we get back.”

The woman sighed, reaching up to touch her forehead, as if she had a headache. “All right,” she said.

The campsite was broken down in record time, though Doc knew that once they got back home, they would have to take everything and lay it out to dry in the sun before *really* packing things back up. Once things were collected and packed away — with most of it stored in the tender, as the cab was very tight with seven people — Doc had everyone take a portion of the campsite and search for things they might've left behind — a gum wrapper here, a piece of food packaging there — that might cause considerable questions if later found by locals or archeologists. When the scientist was satisfied that things looked as barren as they had when they had arrived, he prepared the time machine for departure — programming it to bring them back home five minutes after they had left, on June 4, 1994 at 9:15 P.M. back in Hill Valley — then ushered everyone into the train. It was quite uncomfortable; everyone but Clara and Emily were standing, and the humidity rocketed up with so many damp people in a small space.

“Is everyone positive they didn't leave anything behind?” Doc asked as he flipped the proper switches to activate the hover conversion.

There was a chorus of various affirmative responses. The train rose slowly into the air and Doc elevated it vertically until they had cleared the treeline and he had a clear path all around the time machine. He rotated the train a little, aiming it out towards the ocean, then accelerated it up to speed. The vehicle responded well, despite the wind and the rain driving at it. Doc watched the gauge measuring the speed as it crept up to seventy... then eighty... then eighty-five....

At eighty-seven miles per hour, there was a faint, brief vibration throughout the entire frame of the train that the inventor felt through the soles of his hiking shoes and the hand that gripped a hold at the front of the cab. A second after that, he heard a buzzer start to go off, loudly and shrilly. The sound hadn't quite registered with him when the vehicle hit eighty-eight and launched itself forward in time.

The sonic booms, Doc reflected, went on much longer than he had ever known them to go before. But that observation had hardly been acknowledged when a bright, dazzling light from outside illuminated the interior of the train.

“Lightning!” someone shouted — just as a terrific crash deafened every ear in the cab, matched precisely with an even greater glow of light that temporarily blinded Doc. The train buckled — and then started to fall.

Great Scott! the scientist thought, his eyes huge in his face as he gripped the handhold tightly, cold realization smacking him in the face. *We've been struck by lightning!*

Chapter Two

JUNE 4, 2002

4:00 P.M. PACIFIC DAYLIGHT TIME

EPB TECHNOLOGIES CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS

ELMDALE, CALIFORNIA

Meanwhile, in Another Dimension....

There has to be a better way of doing this.

That had been the thought on Emmett Brown's mind for the past six months, ever since someone in his company's Research and Development division had pointed out a particular flaw in his at-long-last unveiled designs and prototypes for automotive and heavy industry engines powered by clean fusion rather than polluting petrochemicals. It wasn't exactly a *flaw*, or so everyone in his firm's engineering sector kept telling him, just a part of a design that might pose some problems in manufacture, since it required a specific device most current engine plants simply didn't have available. This original design was, of course, the most efficient one possible; the more than three years Emmett had spent secretly designing and building the fusion engine had made sure of that, so there would be no complaints from powers like the EPA, or from auto companies whining that they couldn't afford to rebuild their factories just to *make* the engines. But if there was a way to rework that part of things, just for now, so that the auto industry could build the things without needing a rather expensive retooling of all their engine manufacturing facilities, nothing would stand in the way of the device gaining complete acceptance from every quarter that currently used polluting internal combustion engines.

That minor problem, however, was a major annoyance to the man who had invented the thing. He'd known when he'd started the project that they wanted to be able to show the industries who would build and use fusion engines in their products something that they could construct using the facilities they already owned. Granted, the profits to them wouldn't be as great, since that kind of manufacturing process wasn't as efficient and cost-effective, but a clean-burning, mechanically-simple, cheap-to-operate, and virtually silent engine was sure to be very popular with everyone, except devout gearheads who loved to hear the roar of an unmuffled engine. Once the things started to sell, the manufacturers' general profits would rise, thus giving them the capital to update their plants, make operations even more efficient, and ultimately increase their profit margin per unit by at least tenfold. All of this had been in Emmett's mind when he'd first sat down at his drafting table and began work on the project.

So how, after three years of working on it, refining it, double and triple and quadruple checking it, had he managed to miss such a glaring mistake?

It hadn't taken other people long to spot it. Three days after it had been unveiled at the main EPB facility in Elmdale — fortunately only to the firm's engineers, not to the general public — one of the company's newest R&D employees, Alan Parrish, had spotted the potential problem. Emmett wasn't mad at the young man; he'd been the one who'd recommended hiring him right out of college, having seen something in him everyone else appeared to miss, a quiet curiosity and creativity that the inventor somehow knew might someday do great things, if given half a chance. He was mad at himself. He should've seen this on his own, before he declared the design finished. And by now, after six months of struggling with the problem, he should've long since found an answer.

His family and friends, without exception, had one for him: He was working too hard. He was so determined to make this invention as perfect as possible, to get it absolutely right the first time, he was all but guaranteeing that if an answer existed, he would never see it. Ever since his life had veered off the path of failure and mediocrity and disappointment onto that of success, Emmett had been admittedly reluctant to do anything that might lead him back to being a public failure, an object of ridicule. For more than eighty years, he'd thought he'd long since come to terms with his status as the local crackpot, but apparently, he hadn't, not as well as he'd once thought. He suspected this change of personal attitude had a lot to do with his family. For himself, he could go back to being the town joke, but not for them. He had so dreaded exposing them to his bad reputation in Hill Valley of his present that now, when things had finally changed for the better, he never wanted to risk subjecting them to even greater humiliation if he failed again.

That's what he'd been telling them: He was doing this for *them*, not for himself. The fusion engine would benefit everyone, and he wanted to see it succeed, and not languish in the labs for another three years — or perhaps forever — just because of a small manufacturing glitch. There was a simple solution to the problem; he could feel it in his bones, though he couldn't bring it to the front of his thoughts. Once he had it, he could turn it over to his employees at

EPB, let them take the project from there, and finally relax and be done with it.

The suggestion sounded great in theory, but was turning out to be terrible in practice, something his family, Clara in particular, had been pointing out to him more and more often of late. Emmett promised to take time off after the engine problem was fixed, but so long as he refused to take a break, the problem would never *be* fixed. He'd gotten too involved with it, and until he let himself unwind a little, she knew without a doubt that the solution, simple though it might be, would continue to evade him. Moreover, it had been almost three years since their last genuine vacation, taken in the fall after Emmett had first installed the engine prototype into the Jaguar time machine, an event that had accidentally led Marty on a wild adventure across multiple dimensions, in search of help for his injured mentor and a way back home to the time and reality in which he belonged. So many things had happened since then: the opening of the main EPB facilities in Elmdale, Jules going off to begin college at Harvard, a bizarre temporal mix-up with another time traveler that had ultimately brought into existence their fourth child, Emmett Christopher Brown, born in 1995.... Those were merely the high points of the last three years, which had been filled with much, much more, and it was the opinion of the entire Brown family, as well as their closer friends, such as the McFlys and the Bannings, that Doc needed to put on the brakes before he had a head-on collision with disaster.

Emmett, naturally, disagreed. His health was fine, his wits perfectly in place; he wasn't doing anything any devoted inventor wouldn't do when confronted with a similar problem in a device he had labored on very hard to make as perfect as possible in as many ways as possible. If he could just find that elusive answer....

"Emmett?"

The sound of a voice close to his left ear startled Emmett out of his concentration, making him nearly drop the engine component he'd been staring at in an attempt to see, by sheer dint of will, the solution to this persistently annoying problem. He was in his private office — more like a miniature lab rather than a place of business — in the research division of the EPB compound, and thus hadn't expected any interruption. He looked up as he bobbed the small module, then set it down on the big electronic drafting table at which he'd been working when he saw who'd spoken, and identified the voice as that of his attorney and business partner, Peter Banning.

The middle-aged but still boyish CEO of their company saw what the inventor had been handling, and smiled crookedly. "Still working on *that*, eh?" he commented drolly, knowing for a fact that Emmett had worked on little else, these past few months. "I thought you were going home after lunch."

The scientist frowned faintly, puzzled by the accusation, until he noticed that it was now almost quitting time for many of the workers. He harrumphed softly. "And I thought you were going home after some two o'clock meeting. Isn't your family expecting you back in Tiburon tonight?"

"Yes, but my reason for not making it on time is legit." He nodded to the office's wide windows, which gave a beautiful view of the wooded hills to the west and north of the EPB grounds. A single glance showed skies so dark, one could easily have mistaken the hour as much later in the day, post-sunset. "We've got some nasty storms rolling in, Strickland Field's been closed for the last hour, and I'm not taking a chance with the corporate jet or myself until everything's safe again. I *know* that's not why you're still here. If you haven't been able to find another way to build that part of the engine, maybe you should let the rest of our engineers take a crack at it. It's just a manufacturing problem, Emmett, not a flaw in the design, and it's not even *that* big a problem. There's nothing wrong with letting fresh eyes take a good look at it and see if they can come up with the answer you need."

Emmett made a rather uninterpretable face, first at the threatening skies, then at the device and the designs displayed on the LCD drafting table, and finally at his partner. "Maybe not, but I'm so close—"

"—to becoming a nervous wreck, yes," the younger man said with easy honesty. "When was the last time you had a real vacation?"

"Probably the last time *you* did," was the inventor's snappy comeback.

But Peter shook his head. "No way. Moira and I went on trip to Hawaii in January. I *know* you haven't gone anywhere strictly for pleasure since you and Clara went to Ireland back in '99."

He was right, but that didn't mean Emmett had to like it. "Has Clara been telling you to lean on me about taking a vacation?" he asked, virtually certain that was the case.

Banning was nonchalant. “She mentioned that she’s got one planned, yes, and that she and the kids are leaving in a few weeks, whether you like it or not. She didn’t say anything specific, but I got the distinct impression she’d be much happier if you came along, of your own free will.”

“But—“

The lawyer/executive sighed expansively before his friend and partner could get out another word. “Y’know, Emmett, I thought I was supposed to be the recovering workaholic in this partnership, not you. But you’re starting to act every bit as bad as I did twelve years ago, burying yourself in work and not even noticing how it’s affecting the little people — like your family. I’d like to think this is just because you’re a creative type and you lose track of time too easily, but I know you and time and how you’re just about obsessed with it. Are you spending so much of it here, trying to figure out this problem with the fusion engine because there’re facilities in the labs you don’t have at home, or are you here because home is the last place you *want* to be?”

If anyone else had asked him that question, Doc would have summarily dismissed it as nonsense, but he knew very well that Peter understood the issue of family versus work better than anyone else of his acquaintance, having nearly lost the former because of his utter obsession with the latter. Hearing the question come from him, it was difficult to avoid the entire truth of the matter. “I don’t think so,” he said a touch defensively, returning his attention to the diagrams displayed on the electronic tabletop. “Why should I *not* want to be at home?”

Peter shrugged. “Because you still haven’t gotten used to the way home *is*, and you haven’t figured out how to reconcile that with the way it used to be. I can’t say that I entirely understand what it’s like to go time traveling and come back to a life that somehow got switched around in ways you never expected — mostly because I’ve never *been* time traveling, not really — but I’ve got an imagination. If I’d gone off and come back only to find I had a five-year-old son I didn’t have before... I think it’d take me more than a few months to get used to the idea, even if some of my memories changed, too. I’m not supposed to tell you this, but Clara’s afraid you’re throwing yourself into this engine project because you’re still uncomfortable around Chris.”

“That’s not true,” Emmett said at once, then qualified it. “Well, not entirely. I have to admit, there’re some days I’m still *startled* by Chris, but not because I don’t want him around. I just honestly had never stopped to consider how time travel can *cause* people to exist — which I should’ve, since I already knew it could erase them from existence, and if that can happen, then the opposite should also be possible.”

“Does that mean you *aren’t* trying to avoid him?”

The scientist had to ponder it for a bit before shrugging. “I think so. If I’m spending too much time here, it’s because I really do want to solve this manufacturing problem myself, Peter, I swear. I spent years working on this project, completely in secret, and I was positive I’d covered all possible bases when it came to designing a system that could be completely constructed using already extant manufacturing facilities, and then later could be built more efficiently and profitably using newer equipment. It just... *annoys* me, having a kid fresh out of college point out the one spot I missed twenty minutes after he first got a look at the schematics. Makes me feel as if I ought to go back to school and brush up on all the training I got too many years ago.”

“Now *there’s* an idea,” Peter reflected brightly. “Lots of people go back to school to catch up on changes and new developments in their field. Why don’t you do that instead of beating your head against a wall like this? Our staff’ll figure out how to get around this petty little problem, you’ll get out of here and off doing something else, and you’ll make your family happy, since they’ll get to see a whole lot more of you than they have lately. *After* you take a vacation, that is.”

The elder man’s dark eyes rolled expressively. “Me, go back to school, at my age? I’m almost eighty-nine...!”

The answering smile was pure mischief. “Then you can be the poster child for continuing adult education,” he teased, then sobered. “I mean it, Emmett. You’ve been here almost every day for nearly six months, you’re upsetting your family, and you’re making the R&D engineers feel like you don’t trust them to do their jobs. You’ve already done the hardest part, designing the engine in the first place; everybody knows it. Let them work out the kinks — *kink*,” he corrected, knowing there was only the one.

Banning could see on his partner’s face that Emmett wasn’t going to go for the idea, so he sighed again and reluctantly pulled out the big guns. “You can keep it up if you want, but I should remind you that it’s a direct violation of our corporate policy — policy, I might add, that we drafted together, and both agreed would pertain to us as much

as to any other employee, administrator, or investor.”

Emmett’s eyes now narrowed. “What policy?” he wanted to know, unable to see how his months of hard work could violate anything.

Peter remained calmly unruffled, in what his friend recognized as his attorney mode. “The one that applies to projects in research and development. Any person affiliated with EPB who deliberately interferes with or obstructs work in ways that hinder a project or delay its completion will be put on suspension, terminated, subject to investigation to determine the cause of their actions, and/or criminally prosecuted, as per the decisions of the responsible executive officer and the results of investigation.”

Both his tone and his expression softened. “I already know you aren’t doing this to hurt the company or interfere with your own patents, Emmett, but you *are* delaying this project from being publicly launched because you’re too damned close to the forest to see the trees. As EPB’s Chief Executive Officer, I’m putting you on suspension.”

The inventor was shocked and appalled. “You can’t do that..!”

“Yes, I can, it’s in our partnership agreement. If either of us has reasonable cause to believe the other is acting in ways detrimental to either himself or our business, we can bar him from all the company facilities until the problem has been resolved. We knew each other well enough right from the start to realize that sooner or later, one or both of us’d wind up overdoing it and need to be forced into taking a vacation. I know, I know,” he said, waving aside the elder man’s protests. “This is important to you, and I understand that. You’ve put a lot of hard work into it. But you’ve put even more hard work into your family, and *they’re* the ones who’re suffering the most because you just won’t let go of this. You’ve been so wrapped up in minutiae, you haven’t even noticed how they’re feeling. Go home, Emmett. Let Alan and the others take a shot at finding an answer to the problem he found. If they don’t, when you come back at the end of the summer — and yes, that’s how long I want you to go; I don’t want to see you here again until August at the very soonest — you’ll at least have had time to rest and clear your head and have a fresh go at it. And if by some chance you should come up with the answer on your own before then, you can always phone it in.”

For a while, Emmett said nothing. Presently, he sighed even more heavily than Peter had. “You came up with this on your own, didn’t you?” he said, mildly sulky. “Clara didn’t suggest it.”

“I don’t think she even knew we had that clause in our partnership contracts,” the attorney confirmed. “But I did know how much she and your kids and your friends like me and Marty have been bothered by watching you push yourself so hard over the last few months. You’re just frustrating yourself, you’re not making any real progress, and you need the time off to put yourself back in focus again. You don’t want to wind up like I almost did, Emmett. Please, go, relax, and try to remember that there’s more to life than being a success.”

After so many years of being anything *but* a success, hearing someone say a thing like that to him finally managed to make an impact on the inventor. “I suppose you have a point,” he grudgingly admitted, “though I *know* I’m closing in on the answer....”

Peter grinned. “That’s what you said a week ago, and a month ago, and four months ago. And maybe this time, you are. But you’ve got three weeks before you’re supposed to head off on whatever vacation it is Clara’s got planned. If the answer hits you before then, you can let the staff know, and they can take it from there. And they *can*,” he added with pointed emphasis. “We wouldn’t be paying them if they couldn’t. *They* need the practice, anyway. *You* need the rest.”

“All right, all right, I’ll go!” Emmett surrendered, signaling his acquiescence by shutting down the drafting system. “But you’re making it sound like I’m ready to be put in a home! And I still think Clara put you up to it....”

The attorney shook his head. “No, this was my idea, though she *did* tell me she wished she could think of a way to make you go along with them. I think she was seriously contemplating getting your sons and Marty together to hogtie you and drag you to the airport....”

The inventor snorted his opinion of how effective that method would have been — though in all honesty, it might’ve worked. Though Chris was only six, Jules would turn nineteen in September, at the beginning of his third year at Harvard, while Verne would be seventeen in October, at the start of his last year at Hill Valley High. Both boys had taken after their father in height, and while Marty was shorter and only a few days away from his thirty-fourth birthday, he was still in good shape, certainly enough to help two other young men pin down someone considerably older and not

quite as nimble as he used to be. He'd have to give serious consideration to having a better rejuvenation done one of these days, if he wanted to be able to live long enough to see almost-twelve-year-old Emily and Chris graduate from college and begin lives of their own. And when he did, he should find some way to talk Clara into going along, too....

His ruminations were interrupted by the sound of the phone, a not unpleasant electronic chime that nonetheless made the distracted scientist jump a bit. The particular type of ring indicated a call from outside the company; a good guess pegged it as being Clara even before he picked up the receiver.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important, dear," the former schoolteacher told her husband in what sounded to be perfectly honest tones, "but we have a little... situation here that I think you should come check out before one of the boys does something rash."

The particular quality of her voice reasonably convinced the inventor that this was not a joke, or some kind of ploy to get him home on time for supper. "What kind of situation? Is someone hurt?"

"No, no, nothing like that," she assured him. "It's the weather...."

"Yes, I noticed it's taken a turn for the worse." Which it had; the wind had picked up considerably; large drops of rain were beginning to fall, thunder was rumbling loud enough to be heard even inside the well-soundproofed building, and the timing between the flashes of lightning and the answering growls of thunder said that the brunt of the storm was not far off. Given the landscaping of the property near his home, an awful thought occurred to him. "The wind didn't knock another tree into the house, did it?" Only a year before, an ancient oak in front of the old mansion had lost a large branch during a nasty storm; the thing had smashed into the upper level of the house, breaking most of the windows in Clara's sewing room and doing considerable damage to both the room and its contents. There were a lot of large old trees around the former Morris mansion, a blessing for shade in the summer, but occasionally a curse when one of them came down during the wicked storms that all too frequently ran along Bald Ridge and flooded the low-lying areas of nearby Fairy Chasm and Silver Creek Canyon.

He could fairly hear his wife shaking her head. "No, thank goodness. But Verne was watching the storm roll in from the back deck, and he swears he saw something get hit by lightning and go down in the canyon, just a few minutes ago. He and Jules want to go out and check, because Verne's convinced it was a small plane or a helicopter and people might be hurt. I've put my foot down and told them they're absolutely *not* to go out in this dreadful storm, but Verne at least wants to call 911. I know you don't want the authorities poking about on our property unless it's unavoidable, but if Verne *is* right.... Well, I'm sure you wouldn't want to deny help to people who need it, either. Is there some way you can check with the airport to find out if a crash was reported by the pilot, or some aircraft's gone missing in the area? If there *are* people out there in need of help...."

Emmett understood immediately. "We'll help, of course. Yes, I'm sure there's a way to find out — but I'm also sure Verne must be mistaken. Peter just told me that Strickland Field's been closed for over an hour. If the Weather Service *has* seen the storms coming for that long, air traffic control would've been diverting flights away from Hill Valley and out of danger."

Clara loosed an expansive sigh of relief. "Then it must've been his imagination, or something like a big eagle diving after some rabbit at just the right moment. I'll tell him and Jules about the airport being closed, but would you mind coming home as soon as you can? I do worry about you at times like this, and with you here, I'll feel better about the boys not trying something they shouldn't. That canyon's so treacherous in stormy weather...."

The inventor knew it well, since their daughter Emily had had an unexpected and potentially fatal accident there not even a year ago, during a sudden summer storm. The rocky maze of box canyons, ravines, crevices, and creek beds that had been cut over the centuries by both the elements and Silver Creek — the stream that had once provided water to the old Delgado Silver Mine — was an intriguing natural wonder in good weather, but could become dangerously flooded during the torrential downpours that blew up during the spring and summer. Emmett had purchased the large tract of land and turned it into a nature preserve to keep it out of the hands of unscrupulous investors with development plans he — and no one living in southwestern Hill Valley — wanted anywhere near their backyards. It was a pleasant enough place to go hiking, but on days like today, it was also a potential deathtrap.

"I was just heading out," he told her, glad that for once, he wasn't fibbing. "I'll be home as soon as I can. Just make sure all the kids stay inside — use the security system to keep the house sealed, if you have to. The last thing I want to do today is mount up a rescue party to save my own kids when they ought to know better than to go out in the first place."

Chapter Three

TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 2002

4:00 P.M.

HILL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

The Emergency Landing System that came built into the train's hover conversion slowed but didn't entirely stop or control their descent. Shrieks both human and metallic filled the air of the cabin as the vehicle lunged sharply to the left, then twisted to the right. Finally, it came to a jarring, crunching halt on the ground, roughly tossing about the passengers as it settled. There was an angry hiss of steam, the sizzling sound of frying electronics, and then, briefly, silence — until another crack of lightning split the air above.

"What the hell just happened?" Doc heard Marty demand, his voice quavering uneasily.

Doc had to swallow a few times before he could answer, his mouth utterly bone dry. "The time vehicle was struck by lightning," he summarized, carefully getting to his feet from where he had been thrown back against the door. His back ached dully in a number of places from the stair panels hitting him just so, but that would pass. "Is everyone all right?"

"I'm fine, Emmett," Clara said immediately, also sounding shaken. Next to her, Emily started to cry, and Clara rushed to comfort her. "Emily and I were both strapped in," she explained as she stroked her daughter's hair. "Jules? Verne?"

"We're fine, Dad," Verne said, wincing as he, too, stood.

"I think I've just got a few bruises, Doc," Jennifer said. "And enough of a scare to last me a lifetime." She laughed nervously.

"You got that right," Marty agreed, standing from where he had been knocked to the floor and looking through one of the windows as Doc quickly checked the readouts. The smell of fried electrical components was beginning to fill the cabin, and he nearly groaned aloud, thinking about how much work the repairs were going to take.

"Well, the good news is we're back home, according to the time display," he said, nodding to the line of rolled letters and numbers that he hadn't gotten around to replacing with digital readouts, or an LCD screen. He rather liked the quaint display. "But I think it's going to take weeks to get this back up and running. The electrical system is shot..."

"Uh... Doc?" Marty began, glancing away from the window. "I don't mean to rain on your parade — no pun intended — but... where the hell are we?"

"What do you mean?" Doc asked, looking away from the bank of readouts and circuits.

"He's right, Dad," Jules said, already next to one of the windows and peering out at the stormy world beyond with a frown. "I don't recognize what's out there at *all*..."

Curious and a little worried, now, Doc stepped to the closest window and looked out, just as the others crowded to the panes of glass. In the flashes of lightning that lit up the sky, beyond the heavy sheets of rain, he saw what looked to be large walls of rocks stretching up to the sky, and sparse stands of wild brush. The train, so far as he could determine, had avoided crashing into the walls of what looked to be a narrow canyon or ravine — thank God — instead settling down on some unlucky scrub bushes that had taken most of the impact. The cowcatcher had stopped just a foot shy of a sheer rock wall. But both Jules and Marty were correct; he didn't recognize their surroundings at all. It certainly wasn't Eastwood Ravine — that was a bit wider — and he was all but certain this wasn't part of the wild property that stretched a mile behind his house. The scientist looked away from the window and at the location display mounted above the dates and times. A small frown settled on his face when he saw that it indeed read "Hill Valley, California, USA."

"What's wrong, Emmett?" Clara asked immediately, picking up on her husband's disquiet.

"I don't know," the scientist answered honestly. "The displays are telling me we're back home, and since they're not liable to be displaying false information, even if the electrical system is out, that can only mean one thing..." He paused, thoughtful, eyes narrowed as he eyed the time display and circuits — and then he reached out and touched the large keyboard, running his hands lightly above the keys. They were damp. An idea — a terrible one — began to creep into his mind. What if—

"Daddy?" Emily asked, her words coming out through a little whimper and snuffle. "Can we get out of here? The train smells funny and that water outside looks like it's getting bigger...."

Startled by her words, Doc looked back out the window — and saw what looked to be a small creek several hundred feet behind the train, the muddy water moving swiftly, growing wider all the while with the addition of the rain. For all he knew they were sitting in the dry wash of a creek bed, and with a storm like this...

"All right, we're going to have to leave," he decided, keeping his voice carefully calm.

"In this storm?" Marty asked, aghast. "Are you outta your mind?"

Doc swung his eyes over to his friend and spoke carefully, not wanting to alarm Emily, in particular. "We can't stay here, Marty. This kind of creek bed may look dry right now, but with the storm, there could be flash flooding. It would be considerably safer for us to leave this area."

The young man understood at once, glancing out the window to confirm the words. "But where are we supposed to go? None of us have rock climbing equipment, and we could be wandering around for hours at the bottom of this thing!"

Verne spoke up as Clara unbuckled herself and Emily from the seats at the back. "I think I saw a house right before we got struck," he said. "I dunno how far away it is, but I think we came in right behind it. I don't think we'd be more than a few miles away from it, tops. If we hiked out there, we could probably use a phone and call a cab or something."

"But where *are* we?" Jennifer asked, sounding worried. "Did you recognize it, Verne?"

The blond teen hesitated. "I dunno," he said. "Everything happened so fast after that bit with the lightning... It looked pretty big, though."

"I say we go there," Marty voted, already slipping on his backpack and his hood. "Civilization is better than nothing. The house wasn't abandoned, was it, Verne?"

"No — I saw lights on inside it."

"So we know we're definitely in a time with electricity," Doc said, half to himself. "All right, that sounds good. Bring only what you have to — we could be walking for a while."

Jules pulled his father aside as everyone gathered together their most important things. "What if the water gets up to the train?" he asked. "If we aren't back home, it could *really* ruin the only way out we have."

"We appear to be on a rise," Doc said, matching his son's soft tones. "And storms of this magnitude *usually* move through rather quickly. It would take a hell of a lot of water to physically move the train downstream, and I think even if it was flooded, we'd be able to salvage it. Lord knows there's not much more that can ruin the electrical system, after that bolt..."

Jules looked skeptical but didn't say anything more. In short order, hoods and coats had been donned, what could be carried in backpacks had been packed, and the rest of the unnecessary stuff that was in the cab was stacked on the seat of the bench, just in case water did come in. Doc manually shut down everything he could, but it was almost a joke; everything was already pretty well dead until he could replace wires and circuits, a project he was *not* looking forward to.

He left the train first, while the others were still gathering their things, to get a look at the external damage. The rain was coming down hard, the sky so dark it felt like dusk, but with the aid of a high intensity flashlight he was able to get a good idea of what he would have to face once he got the train moved back to its home. Based on the charred

discoloration on the exterior, it appeared that the lighting strike had hit the train through the anemometer — and half melted it in the process. The scientist made a face at the smell of ozone still lingering in the air around the time machine and walked around to the front carefully, doing his best to avoid slipping in the mud under his feet. A look at the flux capacitor to see how it had come through made his face pale almost to the same shade as his hair. The glass casing was broken open, as if something hard had struck it head-on; what looked to be feathers were scattered and caught in the bit of casing that remained. Exposed to the elements now, the entire Y shape of the device listed sharply to the left, with the bottom prong half broken and disconnected from the center, where it was supposed to meet in the middle. Shards of glass and bits of wires and metal littered the floor of the casing.

“It’s broken,” Doc murmured aloud, remembering only then the odd tremor of the train seconds before they had left the past. A bird, no doubt, had flown right into the flux capacitor — or, rather, the train had flown into the bird. A seagull, he would wager, from the amount of damage done and from the feathers remaining. The warning buzzer had indeed gone off when it detected the damage, he remembered that now — but they *had* traveled through time, obviously, in spite of it. There was no doubt of that at *all*. Nor was there any doubt that they were still on Earth, and in the future.

But something felt weird. A little off. Standing in the drenching downpour, lightning flickering overhead, the inventor felt chilled for a reason unrelated to the storm or the terrifying landing they had taken. He almost felt he knew what the answer was, but the more he strained to bring it into focus, the more it danced away.

Marty startled him out of his concentration a moment later as he left the train. “Is everything all right, Doc?” he asked, shielding his eyes from the gust of rainy wind to look at his friend. “Is the damage worse than you thought?”

“In some ways,” the scientist said honestly. “I think we struck a bird on the way out of the past — *right* before we hit eighty-eight. The flux capacitor is going to need some serious repairs.”

Marty blinked. “Really? Then how come we didn’t get stuck back there?”

“Luck, I suppose.”

Marty rolled his eyes, skeptical. “Too bad that luck it didn’t last until we landed. Don’t you think this storm is pretty weird, Doc?” he added, changing the subject a little. “There wasn’t anything like this on the horizon when we left.”

“True; but we *did* come back a half hour after we left, and a storm like this tends to blow up fast.”

“Maybe...” Marty said, his voice clearly doubtful. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but Doc changed the subject before he had the chance.

“Can you take a look at the back of the machine and let me know if there’s any damage that I should know about?”

“Sure.”

The young man set out on the task, half slipping from the mud and loose rocks underfoot. Doc studied the flux capacitor another moment, then stepped gingerly around the front cowcatcher of the train to the other side. The train appeared to list a bit to the left, but Doc saw at once that it wasn’t by any fault of the vehicle, which had its wheels still folded under the bottom of the machine; it was merely the bushes that had been crunched by the impact of the train. Aside from a cracked pane of glass on that side of the train, the inventor couldn’t see any other bits of external damage — but he knew that the internal damage was considerable, regardless.

By the time he had finished his inspection and rejoined Marty — who hadn’t seen anything amiss at his end — the rest of his family and Jennifer had left the train and closed it up. “Which way did you see the house, Verne?” Doc asked as he looked around, trying to see if there were any paths or signs of roads in the area.

The teenager frowned, turning around a little and looking up and about. “That way, I *think*,” he stressed, pointing forward, towards the east. “But if I’m wrong, don’t blame me. I don’t know how much the train moved around when we were crashing.”

They set out slowly, walking carefully with the rain, lightning, and slippery mud and rocks underfoot. Doc had n’t gone too far before he realized that they were in a pretty rural area. The dirt was softer underfoot, not hard-packed from the frequent passage of hikers or vehicles. There was really no path to speak of, unless one counted the one that likely

wore right down the center of the small canyon where all the water was gathering.

Emily stayed close to Doc's side as he followed Verne and Jules in the lead. Marty was right behind the little girl. Clara and Jennifer brought up the end, and the inventor cast quick, frequent looks to make sure his wife wasn't having any problems. He hated having her out in this weather, and hiking no less, when she might be ill, but it simply couldn't be avoided. Clara, however, looked better than she had earlier, a little more color in her cheeks, and he dared to hope that maybe the fainting that morning had been an isolated incident, a physical quirk of some kind.

They hadn't gone far before Emily started complaining, breaking the rather tense silence that had come over their group since leaving the train. "Daddy, I'm hungry," she said, tilting her head back to look at him, and holding her palm above her eyes, to shield them from the raindrops. "We never had breakfast."

"I know," Doc said, having completely forgotten about that in all the excitement of the last hour or so. "We'll get something to eat as soon as we can, I promise."

"But when?" Emily asked, whining. "I'm starving now!"

"When we can," Doc repeated, making no promises.

"I think I have some granola bars in my backpack," Marty said, heading off a potential tantrum. "Do you want one of 'em, Em?"

The six-year-old shifted her eyes to the object of her affection and beamed at him. "Yes, please," she said politely.

Marty swung his bag off his shoulder and fished around in one of the outer compartments as he walked, finding one of the snacks after a moment and passing it to Emily. The girl rewarded him with another beaming smile as she ripped open the foil packaging and started to eat the snack; her free hand snaked into Marty's. The young man quickened his stride a little, with Emily in tow now, to catch up to Doc's side. "You think the boys are leading us on a wild goose chase?" he asked in a low voice.

"I hope not," Doc said, not wanting to even think about that. "Worse comes to worst, we could head back to the train and set up camp — I think the worst of the storm might be past if the intervals between the lightning and thunder is any indication — but I'm not particularly excited by the idea of camping out here tonight."

Marty shuddered. "No thanks," he said. "I think I'd pay a million bucks now for a hot shower and hot food."

"Agreed. And I still want to get Clara to a doctor."

"What happened, again? She fainted or something?"

"Yes. On the beach. Verne, Jennifer, and Emily saw it happen and I don't think she was out too long — perhaps five minutes, tops — but perfectly healthy people don't faint for no reason."

"True," Marty said, flicking a wet strand of hair from his eyes with his free hand. "Didn't you guys go to the future a few months ago to get tuned up?"

"Yes," Doc said, nodding. "That was Clara's fiftieth birthday gift and I joined her so we could both reset our clocks, so to speak. And, no, nothing turned up with her health or mine that wasn't brought about by natural aging and repaired... but things can happen over nine or ten weeks to change that."

"I guess," Marty said. "Maybe she just had low blood sugar or something. I didn't see her eat much last night." He glanced over his shoulder at the women. "She's keeping up fine, now."

"So far," Doc said. He looked at his watch, frowning with faint irritation when he realized he hadn't reset it since their arrival. He did some quick calculations and guessed it was closing in on a quarter to five.

"Doc, do you think we're *really* in Hill Valley?" Marty asked. "I know it's a city and all, but... I really have *no* idea where we are. I don't think I've ever heard about a place like this."

"We could be in an area that hasn't been settled yet, even by 1994," Doc said. "It would be quite presumptuous of us to assume that we know every nook and cranny of the area."

"I guess"

"Anyway, if Verne saw a house like he thinks, it's quite possible this is all privately owned land. If that's the case, I wouldn't be surprised neither of us knew about this."

"Maybe There's something that's been nagging me, though, about the flux capacitor."

"What's that?"

Marty wasn't given the chance to explain. "There it is!" Verne cried, having rounded a bend a dozen feet ahead. "I knew I wasn't imagining things!"

The rest of the group hurried to catch up with him and saw the teen pointing at a large, sprawling house — a mansion, really — perhaps a quarter mile distant, outside the canyon but beyond an area of trees and brush, atop a slight hill. Electric lights glowed from the windows, and from all external observations, the house appeared both lived in and equipped with all the contemporary conveniences of what they considered the present time. Doc let out a huge sigh of relief, not realizing until then how much he had been afraid that they had ended up in the wrong time.

"You're probably right, Doc," Marty said as they started forward again, at a quicker pace now that help was so obviously close. "I'll bet this is all owned by 'em. That's a *huge* house! We must've landed out in the rich boonies."

"Could've been worse," Jules said. He glanced slyly over at his father. "Maybe they have some... automobiles they'd like to get rid of?"

"Don't push it, Jules," Doc warned.

The house was indeed large; in fact, Doc quickly found that he had underestimated the distance between them and it. By the time they reached what looked to be the actual backyard of the property, it was almost 5:30, by his guess, and the rain had lightened to a rather cloying mist, allowing all to push their hoods back, at long last. The scientist felt thoroughly soaked and hoped that whoever resided in the apparent mansion would be a kind sort who might offer them a snack and not shriek if they tracked in all the mud in on their shoes.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Verne asked as they halted at the edge of the backyard, half-concealed by a stand of tall bushes and old trees, studying the white house with the blue tile roof. It was an interesting bit of architecture, Doc had to admit, with octagonal Victorian-style turrets and two levels of decks. It looked like an older building, perhaps from late in the last century, that had been thoroughly modernized and updated by its owner. He wondered if it had been built after his family's departure from 1896. Surely he would've heard about it, otherwise.

"Go up to the door and ask to use the phone," Doc said. "It's really quite simple. I'll do it," he added quickly. "I've got a good cover story about how we ended up out here."

"I'll go with you, Doc," Marty offered, untangling his hand from Emily's, finally. The little girl frowned faintly, but said nothing. "Just to confirm things if they ask."

"Should we wait here?" Verne asked, sounding disappointed by the prospect.

"It might be a good idea," Doc said. "We don't want to scare whoever's home — and for all we know they might be a recluse who's afraid of large crowds."

"Lurking around in the shrubbery doesn't seem terribly wise, either, Emmett," Clara said. "They might think we're a gang or something."

Doc hesitated, thinking. "True enough. All right, let's go."

He led the way across the lawn toward the nearest door at the back of the home, an entrance with a small porch and a brass lighting fixture, near the bottom of the stairs to an upper deck. With so many windows set in the building, he felt terribly exposed, almost like they were doing something wrong. (Well, technically, they were trespassing, but it

couldn't entirely be helped.) When they finally reached the porch, Doc had the others wait a short distance away while he and Marty went up the steps to the door. Seeing no indication of a doorbell, the scientist knocked a few times, firmly, just in case the owners were in another part of the home. A moment passed before they heard footsteps running towards the door.

"What's the cover story, Doc?" Marty hissed quickly as they heard fumbling from the other side of the door.

"I'll explain all — just play along," Doc whispered, just as the door finally opened. A child blinked up at them, a boy of around Emily's age. The inventor felt a strange flash of familiarity as he stared at the face of the child, and it left him with a rather nagging feeling of *deja vu*. But why?

The boy's green eyes grew terribly wide when he saw Doc, and the door slammed shut in his face. "Mommy!" they heard him shriek from inside the house, footsteps frantically fleeing the door.

"What was *that* all about?" Marty asked, taken aback. "Did his parents teach him to be super paranoid of strangers?"

"Either that or afraid of the town crackpot," Doc said ruefully. He glanced at Marty for the first time, taking in the young man's wet and muddy appearance. "Actually, I suppose neither of us look particularly reputable right now. Maybe the boy's mother won't be so quick to judge."

But when the door was opened a minute later, it wasn't by the boy's mother. Marty gasped loudly at the face of the apparent owner of the home, and Doc took two quick steps back, nearly falling down the porch stairs, feeling the blood drain thoroughly from his face. He blinked rapidly in disbelief as he stared at the figure in the doorway. It had to be a joke. Or a hallucination. He couldn't be seeing what he thought he was, because that went beyond the logical — and that meant... that meant...

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "It can't be!"

And then Doc did the last thing he wanted to do at that moment: He fainted.

Chapter Four

TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 2002

5:20 P.M. PDT

10497 FAIRY CHASM ROAD

HILL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

By the time Emmett was able to leave the EPB grounds, it was well after 4:30. He had been delayed not because he was trying to squeeze in just another five minutes' worth of trying to solve his knotty problem, but because he needed to leave instructions, appointing Alan Parrish to head up the resolution of the situation, since he had discovered it and the inventor felt it was both suitable reward and punishment for his cleverness. Peter, waiting for the storms to pass so he could head home himself, let his partner see to this without protest, since he knew Emmett would be better able to at least *try* to relax if he wasn't worrying about someone else deciding who should do what with his pet project. It was almost a quarter to five when the scientist was finally able to climb into his lovingly maintained DeLorean and head home.

Home, happily, was only a few miles away, in the Hill Valley township area between the city proper and the once-again growing town of Elmdale, which was home to his burgeoning company and many of the people who worked for it. Unhappily, though the worst of the storm had gone screaming through while he was finalizing work assignments, rain was still pounding down in heavy sheets. The highway that led to his property, Fairy Chasm Road, wasn't often traffic-heavy, but that in itself was a problem, since the leaden skies and the fog of rain tended to blur everything — road, trees, telephone poles, oncoming traffic — into a monochromatic mess in which it was hard to tell one thing from another. Add to that the fact that the silver-finished DeLorean had a tendency to “disappear” in such conditions, and Emmett knew he was not going to be speeding home as fast as Clara would've liked. Well, Jules and Verne may have been typical recklessly curious teenagers, but they weren't stupid enough to risk their own lives in a deluge like this — and Clara would have no compunctions against literally locking them in, if they tried anything foolish.

The rain was finally beginning to let up by the time he pulled the DeLorean into its parking slot in the three-car garage near the house. The proliferation of vehicles, he noted not for the first time, was getting positively ridiculous; whenever they had company, the place looked like a used-car lot. Inside the garage was parked not only his DeLorean but the family van and the purple Celica Clara had received just over a month before as a gift for what the world thought was her fiftieth birthday, but Doc and certain others knew was actually her fifty-fifth. The van was still useful for things like toting about groups and doing major grocery runs, but Clara, having finally become comfortable with the art of driving in the Twenty-First Century, preferred something smaller and more maneuverable — and easier to park — when she was driving about town alone, or with only one or two passengers.

Outside was parked Jules' rather sporty-looking new three-door Saturn coupe — a gift for *his* last birthday, and a reward for having achieved perfect grades during his first year at Harvard. Showing remarkably good sense, the youth had picked the available bright blue finish rather than red or black for his first car. He knew all about the high insurance costs for males in his age group, and had heard the tales of how police tended to target sporty cars, especially red sporty cars, for traffic violations of any kind. He hadn't wanted to invite such troubles, and he even admitted that he wasn't really a red or black kind of guy. That was more Verne's thing. His younger brother's car — a rather worse-for-the-wear old Geo Storm that he'd bought off a friend who'd gotten a new car as his high school graduation gift — was red, though in places, it was showing other colors, as old dents and scrapes and rust took their toll. Verne was determined to save up enough to get the worst of the damage repaired and the car repainted, but at the rate he was going, his parents were quite sure the car would die before he managed it. Verne wasn't exactly a spendaholic, but he was rather free with his money when it came to buying things he wanted or having fun with his friends. Since he did do the requisite chores to earn his allowance and was working hard at school to earn scholarships toward his college education, his parents had decided not to lecture him on the subject, so long as nothing he did with his money hurt himself or anyone else. In that, Emily and Jules were more circumspect, Emily being very particular about the things on which she would spend her allowance, and Jules being downright frugal to the point of near stinginess. Chris, bright though he was, was completely disinterested in the matter of money, beyond very immediate uses, as was typical of six-year-old kids.

As he parked the DeLorean, pushed the button to close the garage door, and headed for the exit nearest the breezeway entrance on the north side of the old mansion, Emmett marveled once again at the strange twists his life had taken over the past eight years. In October of 1994, he'd been dead certain that before the year was out, he would be completely bankrupt again, would lose his house and everything he had, and would be out on the streets with his family, a greater object of scorn than he'd ever been before. Now, he literally had more money than he knew what to do with,

was in imminent danger of soon passing his partner to become the wealthiest person alive, a trend that showed no sign of reversing with the increasing success of EPB and all his inventions since the fusion reactor. He didn't exactly dislike this particular status; it certainly beat worrying about going broke and dragging his family down with him into poverty, though the people who inevitably pursued him looking for handouts could be annoying, which made him all the more grateful he'd chosen this rather remote — and now well-secured — property to be his home after his return from the past.

Sometimes, however, he did wonder what it would be like to be *normal*. Not poor, not wealthy, not considered either a pathetic crackpot or an inventive genius, just.... normal. Marty had seen versions of him closer to that description during his accidental interdimensional journeys in July of 1999. The tales intrigued him, and every now and then, he toyed with the idea of finding a way to visit other dimensions safely, just to see what might have been....

Then again, with his luck, he'd go off to see other directions in which his life could have turned and find all the bad ones, rather like Marty had with his own. He didn't really think he wanted to see himself as a *real* madman, a destitute streetperson, or someone whose life had gone wrong to the point he became bitter or mean or downright evil.... No, all things considered, imagining those possibilities was more than enough. No point in taking risks that might wind up showing him parts of what he might have been that he didn't want to believe *could* be in him, lying in wait for the right moment and circumstances to express themselves.

Before opening the side door, he glanced through the inset window and saw that the rain was letting up a bit more, but not enough to make the run from the garage to the house a comfortable one. He grabbed one of the emergency umbrellas from a rack beside the door and noted that it was the last one, meaning it was time to collect the others that had been taken to the house and not returned. He headed out, wishing yet again that either the people who'd added the garage had had the sense to put it closer to the house, or that he had the time to build a connecting tunnel or a completely covered carport or an enclosed breezeway to make days like today much more comfortable. If some poor pilot really *had* gone down in Silver Creek Canyon, Emmett didn't envy him — or any potential rescuers — the hike in and out.

Inside the house, Clara was attempting to finish supper preparations while listening to her second eldest son try to convince her that going out to make sure no one had crashed in the canyon was a good idea.

"I *know* what I saw, Mom," Verne insisted, his unsolicited help in the kitchen obviously a ploy to make her think more kindly toward his suggestions. "Okay, maybe I wasn't looking straight at it, and maybe it was a mile off and kinda out of the corner of my eye, but it *wasn't* an eagle, or any critter. It was some *thing*, and I *know* I saw it get hit by lightning and go down!"

Emily, who with Chris was collecting the utensils to begin setting the dinner table, sniffed a rather blunt opinion of her middle brother's certainty. "Sure, Verne," she drawled solicitously. "Just like you saw something land up in the high meadow a few months ago, and told Dad it was a real UFO. It was nothing but a real *kite*."

"A real *big* kite," the blond youth corrected, "with lights and other junk the guys in one of the university frat houses stuck onto it to make people think that's what it was, a UFO. Can I help it that they were trying to trick people as a prank?"

"No," Jules answered solicitously, "just like you can't help seeing things you *want* to see 'cause you'll believe just about any wild story that comes along. For somebody who used to say that anything science hasn't proved is real is totally bogus, you've sure turned into Real Believer. The truth is out there, and you've gotta be the one to find it...."

Verne took a swat at his elder sibling, who ducked it easily. "Oh, grow up," he grumbled. "That's not what I think and you know it. But I *did* see something, both times. I was right about something landing in the meadow, even if it was only a rigged up kite, and I'm right about this."

"No one's saying you aren't, honey," Clara said soothingly as she started chopping up the lettuce Verne had finished rinsing. "But your father asked Peter to check with the airport since he was on his way back to San Francisco, and when he called a little while ago, he said there weren't any reports of downed aircraft or distress calls. There hasn't been anything allowed in or out since three o'clock, so whatever you saw, it wasn't people in trouble."

"What if it was someone out hang gliding off one of the bluffs? The airport wouldn't know about that...."

Jules grunted. "Anyone who's stupid enough to go hang gliding with storms like this rolling in *deserves* to get hit by lightning," was his opinion. "You're really reaching, Vemie. I think Mom's right about it being an eagle or a hawk, and you just thought it was something else 'cause you saw it out of the corner of your eye just when the lightning was getting bad. It's nothing but an illusion, a trick your eyes played on you 'cause of the storm."

"Then if it's nothing, what'll it hurt to go check? If I'm wrong, you guys'll get to say 'I told you so,' and if I'm right, we might help somebody in big trouble."

Clara was sympathetic. "You have a point, but I'd rather wait until your father gets home, and see what he has to say...."

"He says nobody's going out until the rain stops and the wind dies down," Emmett said succinctly, entering from the hall to the breezeway door a moment after Clara's statement, which he had heard quite clearly. "And when we do, let's try to remember to take the umbrellas from the garage and return them where they *should* be, not cluttering up the hall closet. Doesn't anyone ever think to put things back where they belong?"

"Not in this family, Dad," Jules said with a laugh.

Verne was concerned about other things. "But if we wait that long and someone *is* crashed out there and can't call for help, we might show up too late."

But the inventor adamantly shook his head, sending a spray of errant raindrops flying. "It's still too big a risk in this weather. You know what downpours like this do to Silver Creek. If there's flash flooding down there, it could wash us and them away in a matter of seconds. And we don't have the right kind of equipment to effect that kind of rescue."

"Maybe not," Vemie agreed, "but can't we at least take a look to be sure? If someone's there, we can call the rescue people who *do* have the equipment before somebody dies or something. And don't tell me it's too risky, Dad. I know you installed that weather-shield equipment in the Jag last year, to make it easier and safer to fly in bad weather like this. You *could* go take a look without putting anybody else at risk. You wouldn't even have to take the chance that whoever crashed would see you, not if you kept the Jag invisible."

It was a remarkably logical suggestion. The inventor looked at his wife, who appeared startled by it. "Is this what he's been wanting to do?" he asked.

"Not in so many words," she admitted. "Why didn't you mention this earlier, Verne? It's certainly much safer and more reasonable than what you've been suggesting...."

The youth shrugged, flushing faintly. "'Cause I just thought of it, to be honest," he confessed. "But it could work, couldn't it?"

"Yes," Emmett said, "and if it'd convince you once and for all that nothing crashed that we need worry about, it's an excellent idea, but...."

He was interrupted by the ring of the phone; since he was standing nearest an extension, the scientist answered. He was almost expecting it to be someone from EPB, either announcing that they'd found the solution to the production problem in less than ten minutes, or complaining about something they found utterly incomprehensible. It was neither; the caller was Marty.

"I know this is kinda short notice and everything," the musician said most apologetically, "and if you say no, I'll understand, but would it be a bad imposition if we came over for a while after supper? We lost power here about an hour ago. Some electrical transformer got hit by lightning, and they're saying it won't be back up until late tonight. Jen had a bad day with the kids and her job, and she got kinda torqued when she found out that supper was completely ruined when the power blew. We've got other things to eat, but the kids are bored out of their brains, and if they keep whining at her all evening long, I think Jen's gonna throw 'em out with the trash...."

Emmett smiled crookedly, amused by the vagaries of modern life. When he'd been a boy, nights without power had been an adventure, a time to bring out candles and lanterns and cook at the fireplace, read by lamplight, or tell stories and play games to make the most out of the unexpected situation. With Marlene not even 5 and Junior just barely 3, they weren't able to do much in the way of reading without their parents' help, and the kinds of games kids of

today preferred required as much electricity and computing capacity as could be gotten. With the old estate rigged with fusion reactors to provide power supplies completely independent of local utilities, the Brown place was never affected by storms or other accidents that could cut service to their home. In a few years, fusion power would become so ubiquitous, housing developments like Marty's would no longer be troubled by power outages, but for now, they were still a matter of concern, especially in the more suburban areas such as Marty's neighborhood.

"It's not an imposition, Marty, especially under the circumstances," the inventor assured him. "We haven't eaten yet, but you can come by whenever you'd like."

"Did Marty's place lose power again?" Emily asked, startling her father with the accuracy of her question. She shrugged when he gave her a questioning look. "It does that just about every time there's a storm when I'm babysitting. Flickers for a while, or goes out for an hour. No biggie to me, but I think they ought to go after the guys who built their house and get 'em to do a better job with the wiring. My laptop *hates* the power surges they're always getting on their lines."

Emmett confirmed it with a nod. "A local transformer was blown, so they won't have power back for a while."

"Have they had supper?" Clara asked, exercising her own form of prescience. "They're welcome to eat with us, if they haven't. I haven't planned anything elaborate, just soup and salad and sandwiches, and there'll be more than enough, if Jules and Verne just eat like civilized humans for a change, instead of bottomless pits."

Grinning, her husband passed on the offer. He heard Marty do the same on his end of the line. Jennifer's sigh of relief was clearly audible before Marty answered. "If it's okay with you guys, yeah, that'd be great. We're kinda short on a lot of stuff 'cause we didn't have a chance to do the usual grocery haul last Saturday, and Marlie's complaining that we ran out of her favorite brand of peanut butter. Thanks, Doc. Any special time we should be there?"

The inventor's glance requested the answer from his wife. "Six would be fine," she said after consulting the nearest clock. "Everything should be ready by then."

"Six," Emmett told the musician. "Oh, and Marty, on your way here, would you mind stopping on the bridge over Silver Creek to see if you can spot anything unusual down in the canyons? Verne's positive he saw something crash out that way, and he doesn't believe the reports from Strickland Field that say he's mistaken."

"Sure, no problem, just so long as you don't want me to hike down there for a closer look. I know what it's like when we get these frog-strangling rains, and I'm not stupid enough to risk my neck on a wild goose chase."

"Not necessary," he was assured. "We'll see you at six."

Verne frowned at his father when Emmett returned the phone to its cradle. "Does this mean you're not gonna take out the Jag to look for yourself?" he wanted to know.

But the inventor shook his head. "No, it just means I'm going to wait until the weather's cleared up a bit more, and hear what Marty has to say. Before I was interrupted, I was going to point out that the wind's still pretty strong, and while the weather shield can keep the rain and even the lightning from hitting the car, it can't do anything about dangerous gusts and downdrafts. If some plane *did* go down in the canyons, I don't want to go down with them and maybe get killed by rushing in before it's reasonably safe. Even a professional rescue team knows better than to do that."

Verne reluctantly had to concede. "Okay, I see what you mean, but if things clear off before Marty gets here, will you go look? I'm gonna worry about it until I know for sure what I saw."

"Of course," Emmett agreed. "I'm not being inhumane, Verne, just cautious. Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked his wife, in case she was fibbing about extra guests not causing an imposition.

"I—" she began, only to be interrupted by the surprising and completely unexpected sound of someone knocking on the outside door near the old service stairs that led up to the second story and down to the cellar.

"I'll get it!" Chris volunteered, bored with counting out flatware from a drawer near the pantry. He took off before anyone had a chance to stop him. A few moments later, they heard the door creak open.

“Who the heck is *that*?” Jules wondered, as puzzled by the knock as everyone else. Not only did they seldom get unexpected visitors, but few managed to get past Emmett’s elaborate security around the estate, and no one had ever come knocking at any of the back doors. The youth started wandering in the direction of the windows at the back of the kitchen to see if he could get a look at whoever had knocked when they all heard the door slam and Chris came running back, shrieking.

“*Mommy!*” he cried, quite obviously distressed. He made a beeline for his mother’s skirts and hung on for dear life. “There’s — there’s — there’s....”

“There’s what?” she wondered, startled and concerned by the boy’s behavior. Chris was generally a very even-tempered and well-spoken child, easily excited, but not usually prone to being so frightened. And he was; she could feel him shaking with upset.

His atypical behavior was clear to everyone in the room. Verne started for the stairwell, intending to check out whatever had so rattled his little brother, but his father stopped him.

“No, let me go. It’s possible it’s nothing but some waterlogged hiker who got caught out in the canyon when the storm hit, covered with mud and looking like some totally disreputable monster, at least to a six-year-old. And if it’s someone looking for trouble, I’ll make sure they find it. But be ready to call the police, just in case.”

“Be careful, Emmett,” Clara urged, still soothing their distressed son.

“I will.” As he headed for the door, however, it occurred to the inventor that he really wasn’t all that well prepared to deal with any serious troublemakers. All the security he’d installed had been designed to keep trouble from reaching the house or entering it; if he opened the door, he could be letting in more than he could deal with.

Then again, his guess that it was probably nothing more than a rain-soaked hiker from the nature preserve, looking for shelter or a bathroom, was most likely correct. Chris had already opened the door to them and closed it again without incident. If it was indeed someone looking to break in, they’d had a perfect opportunity — and moreover, thieves seldom if ever knocked to announce their presence. With that firmly in mind, he prepared himself to see whatever had upset his son, and opened the door. He fully expected anything from a mud-encrusted backpacker who looked like the Swamp Thing, to some pitifully bedraggled Boy Scouts soaked through to the skin.

He did *not* expect to see a pitifully bedraggled version of himself, certainly not in the company of an equally bedraggled Marty McFly.

From his reaction, his reflection didn’t expect this, either. “Great Scott!” he gasped, turning white as the proverbial sheet. “It can’t be!” And then, he promptly fainted.

This wasn’t the first time Emmett had seen some other version of himself do that, and at the moment, he was beginning to feel as if joining him might not be such a bad idea.

Chapter Five

TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 2002

5:39 P.M. PDT

Marty had thought that the day couldn't possibly get any worse — but, then, life seemed to be tossing him one damned thing after another, as of late. The argument with Jennifer had been nagging him for weeks, and growing progressively worse, not better; apparently, they couldn't even sleep in the same room, now. Their third wedding anniversary two-and-a-half weeks ago, which was supposed to have been a romantic weekend getaway in a cabin at the lake, had turned into a nightmare after a breaking news story had delayed Jennifer half a day, putting Marty in a cranky state of mind about the matter of jobs before she had even arrived at the cabin. Five minutes after her arrival, they had been sniping at each other once again, and Jennifer had ended up turning right around to drive back home. Marty had spent the weekend in the cabin alone, having invested too much money with the deposit to justify bagging the entire trip.

He should've known that camping would be a bad idea, but it had been far too enticing to get away for a while... *really* away, for more than a weekend. Marty had figured that away from the glare of media lights and deadlines, Jennifer might come around and see, at least, why her wanting to take her maiden name as her "professional" name was bugging him so much. Marty wasn't entirely sure why it was, himself, but he suspected that it boiled down to a question: Why had she just now decided that Jennifer McFly wasn't going to cut it? What was it about his surname — *their* surname — that bothered her so much? He didn't think he was being a macho ass about the entire thing, backwards enough to believe that all women automatically needed to go by their married names; it was the timing that bothered him considerably more. And Jennifer wasn't getting that.

Naturally, however, the second trip had been a bust from almost the very beginning. They'd gotten to the place Doc had selected — quite randomly, the scientist had admitted, by searching for a location with a freshwater lake in a close proximity to a coastline, also fairly unsettled in the past and without dangerous animals or other hazards lurking about — in the evening and found the weather to be sunny and warm. Then the rain moved in overnight and didn't let up. The bad weather seemed to make Marty and Jennifer *more* annoyed with one another, not prone to the calm discussions and reconnections that he had hoped for — and, then, Jennifer had finally kicked him out of their tent the second night, after a whispered argument that made up in passion for what it lacked in volume.

Since waking that morning, the momentum of bad luck had just picked up the pace. Clara's fainting, their quick departure from the past, the problems with the machine, and the uncomfortable hike in the storm.... Marty was sure things couldn't get any worse, not unless they'd knocked on the door of the house to find it occupied by serial killers. What — or, rather, who — he saw come to the door after the kid had run off was almost worse than that. Almost.

The young man was peripherally aware of Doc topping backwards, nearly off the porch, as he stared at the Doc doppelganger in the doorway of the home. His skin broke out in chills and he felt woozy himself, needing to put his hand out to the nearest wall to steady himself. "Oh my God," he murmured without thinking about it. "Doc B."

The other Doc — who looked almost as pale as his now-prone counterpart but was still on his feet — turned his dark eyes on Marty and studied him for a moment. "I beg your pardon?" he asked.

Marty didn't know what to say. His mouth moved but no words came out. He half-expected the Doc standing to pull out a shotgun or Uzi and nail him there. Except... well, he *couldn't* be Doc B; that version of the scientist was gone forever, now. Not to mention, so far as he recalled from that misadventure nearly eight years ago, Doc B had never lived in an honest-to-God mansion like this, and had had no kids running around. Which, frankly, left Marty with only one idea as to where he might be.

"What year is it?" he asked the owner of the home.

"2002 — Tuesday, June fourth," the other scientist responded succinctly.

"Oh," Marty said, sighing hugely from the news. So they weren't in another reality, after all. Thank God. "We're from '94. That explains a lot, then..."

But did it? The other Doc frowned faintly, but before he could ask any questions there was a cry from behind

Marty. "Oh my goodness, Emmett!"

The young man turned in time to see Clara hurrying away from the rest of the group, still hanging back on the lawn, just out of sight from where he and the other Doc stood on the porch. The eyes of the inventor of the future went very wide at the sight of his wife from the past hurrying in his direction and he took a quick hop back, into the house. Marty thought he was going to slam the door shut and run away, as the boy had — and who was that kid? Did he belong to the Jules or Verne of the future, maybe? He was distracted from pondering it further by Clara as she ascended the porch and got her first look at who the owner of the house was.

"Oh gracious!" she cried, her hand going to her mouth as she stopped dead on the third step from the porch. Her eyes darted from the standing Doc to the lying one and back again. "I can see why he fainted," she said finally, regaining her composure amazingly swift for someone who, so far as Marty knew, hadn't had much experience with seeing doubles of people, even at different times.

"Yes," this new Doc said. He looked quite skittish. "Will you excuse me for a minute? I.. ah... I'll be right back."

He was gone, the door closed, before Marty or Clara could say a word. Alone, now, they looked at each other.

"What's going on?" Clara asked softly.

"We're in the future," Marty said. "He said it was 2002, so I'm assuming that this is your guys' future. Man, you must've won the freakin' lottery, big time!"

Rather than looked pleased by this news, Clara frowned, glancing down at her very still husband. Jennifer peered around to the porch, her face concerned. "Is there a problem?" she asked.

"A bit," Clara said, gesturing to Doc. "I believe we've got a situation of sorts on our hands...."

"What kind of situation?" Verne asked eagerly, wiggling his way past Jennifer — who was clearly trying to hold the kids back — in order to see what was going on. His blue eyes grew big at the sight of his father and the curiosity on his face was quickly replaced by concern. "Oh my God, what happened to Dad?"

"He fainted," Marty said. "He had a kind of shock when the owner came out."

"Why?" Jules wanted to know, right on his brother's heels.

The answer was provided a moment later when the door opened again and the Doc of the future reappeared. He started to speak, then had his first look at Jules and Verne and the words seem to leave him before they could be verbalized. "Great Scott!" he murmured instead, and Marty wondered if this one would hit the deck, now, too.

The boys did a doubletake and had considerably different reactions. Verne frowned, suspicious; Jules gasped, amazed. The latter spoke first. "Wow," he said simply. "I see what you mean."

Verne took a step in the direction of the other Doc, narrowing his eyes. "Who are you?" he asked.

The Doc stared at him a moment, clearly shaken by the sight of the two male Brown children. "Well," he began carefully, as Jules knelt down to look over the '94 Doc and Jennifer, holding Emily's hand, finally approached the porch, "up until just a moment ago, I thought I was the him of the future." He gestured to his still-unconscious counterpart. "But now, I think—"

"Daddy!" Emily cried, catching sight of her fainted father and pulling free of Jennifer's grip to run up the steps. She stopped when she saw that there were two versions of her father, now, frowned deeply at the one standing, looked between them both, then, quite abruptly, burst into tears. Clara quickly rushed to comfort her daughter as Jennifer gaped at the sight of the two men.

The other Doc, meanwhile, gaped right back at both her and Emily. "Are there any other people I should know about that you came with?" he finally asked Marty.

"This would be everyone," Marty said. "I dunno if we could fit anyone else in the train.... What were you saying earlier?"

Doc opened his mouth again, but behind the inventor, the appearance of a blond teenager wielding — of all things — a rolling pin cut him off before he could begin. “What kind of trouble is — oh my God!” The pin fell from the hands of the teen, hitting the floor with a clatter, and he took a step back, his face half hidden in the shadows, to Marty’s eyes. Verne, however, was either able to see more than the young man or else it took little for him to identify the newcomer. He took several stumbling steps back and nearly tripped over his father; Jules gave him a steadying hand and saved him from a fall. Marty didn’t get it until he tilted his head to the side, to peer past the other Doc, and saw the face better. It was Verne’s own — and it looked to be the face of a sixteen-year-old, not a twenty-four-year-old.

Marty felt more confused than enlightened by this. This was the future; that much was clear. But how the hell could Verne still be sixteen, eight years later? That didn’t make any sense! Unless... Marty finally remembered the busted flux capacitor and the thing he had been about to say to Doc on the hike, a thing *not* said when Verne had spotted the house and made him forget all about the possibility his brain had been gnawing on, ever since he heard that the delicate component that allowed for time travel had been damaged — and before they had left the past, at that.

“Is this another reality?” he asked the other Doc. “A parallel universe?”

The Doc blinked, obviously surprised by the question. “I was just about to suggest that,” he admitted. “This wouldn’t be the first time something like this has happened to us.”

“Same here,” Marty said. “Well, to Doc, mostly, I mean.”

“Like the other version, the so-called Doc B,” Jules said aloud, half to himself. His eyes glittered at this realization. “Fascinating! *We’re* actually in an entirely different reality, now?”

“I would wager so,” Doc said. “Especially if you’re from 1994. My Jules and Verne are... well, as near as I can tell, they’re the same age as both of you, now.”

“No kidding!” Verne said, spooked as he stared at the other reality of him, as it were, still hovering a step or two behind his own father, in the house, quietly studying the counterparts on the porch.

“And Emily and Jennifer... they look different.”

Marty was surprised. “Different?” he said, glancing at the little girl, weeping more quietly in her mother’s arms, and his wife, in turn. “How so? They’re different ages?”

“Emily certainly is. But their appearances, in general, are different. And fairly subtle at that. Interesting.”

From the tone in his voice, it was something that this Doc clearly wanted to study further, but that was going to have to wait. “Ah... Doctor Brown?” Jules began, hesitantly, from where he was still crouched next to his father. The other Doc turned his eyes on the teen with a faint, rather amused, twitch to his mouth. “Maybe this might be a little presumptuous, but do you think we could go inside? I think it might help Dad to get somewhere a little more comfortable, especially since he’s already soaked and obviously went into some kind of shock.”

“Oh, yes, yes, of course,” Doc said. He turned his head and looked at the Verne still behind him. “Can you get the first aid kit? There should be some smelling salts in there.”

The teenager nodded once, staring hard for another moment at the group on the porch. “The others are gonna *freak*, seeing their doubles,” Marty heard him say softly to his father, an odd little note of anticipation in his voice. Then, after picking up the “weapon” he had come armed with, he was gone.

“What did he mean by that?” Clara asked as the Doc of this world finally left the doorway and came out to the porch, to the side of his other self. “Are there... versions of us all here?”

“And then some,” Doc said. “You might want to brace yourselves for that. I hope Verne warned ‘em, but I can see him not doing it on purpose, too...” He took the fainted Doc under the arms, grunting as he pulled him up a little. Jules quickly grabbed his father’s legs, but Verne seemed to be in a mild state of shock, a hand to his mouth, staring at the space his double had recently vacated. Marty shook him out of it, by the shoulder. Verne turned to look at him, his blue eyes wide and a little scared.

“He looked almost just like me!” he whispered, pointing to the empty doorway.

"I know," Marty said. "It's weird as hell, isn't it?"

Verne looked skittish. "Is he evil, like the other Dad was?" he asked in an even lower voice. Years ago, he had not taken the existence of another version of his father very well at all.

"I don't think so," Marty said. "This one sure isn't like Doc B, not at all." He gestured to the other Doc, who had gotten a good grip and, with Jules' help, was carrying the unconscious version of himself toward the open door. Marty scooted out of the way and pulled Verne with him. "I've seen a couple other versions of your dad before, and only Doc B was a real bad seed. This one seems on the level."

"I hope so," Verne said. "Have you seen other versions of yourself before?"

"Yeah," Marty said. "Mine were all jerks or dead."

The teen nodded slowly, looking as if he was considering something to himself. "Yeah," he said at length, something in his voice causing Marty to stare at him, hard. It almost sounded as if Verne *knew* that was true... but how could that be possible? So far as he knew, none of Doc's kids had had a firsthand experience with an alternate reality. Of course, the young man quickly realized, just because he didn't know about it didn't mean it hadn't happened.

Clara hung back as her oldest son and the man who was not her husband carried their Doc into the house. "Should we go in?" she asked uncertainly, holding Emily, now, in her arms. The little girl had stopped crying, but watched the surrounding action with her face half-buried in her mother's shoulder. "I'd hate to give the other members of your family a terrible turn...."

"They've seen odder sights," the other Doc half grunted. Marty wondered just what the heck some of those things were, to put seeing alternate counterparts into the realm of the not-so-shocking.

"Are you sure?" Jennifer asked doubtfully. "We're a little... messy, too."

"Don't worry about that," Doc said, disappearing through the door. Clara, Marty, Verne, and Jennifer looked at one another a moment, then Verne boldly headed for the door still hanging open. Marty followed him, Clara and Jennifer bringing up the rear. Emily still clung tightly to her mother, unwilling to be separated quite yet. Marty braced himself for spotting members of this Doc's family, but immediately his attention was distracted by the building they had entered.

They came through the door into an entranceway that was half-corridor, half-stairwell, a set of steps leading up and the one beneath it leading down. The short parallel corridor led to another cross passage. Marty followed Verne around the stairs, through another doorway, into a staggeringly nice formal dining room that was also devoid of any people, and finally into a room that made Marty's jaw drop. The room alone looked to be the size of his home's entire first floor. Tall pairs of windows flanking a big granite-and-marble fireplace took up almost entirely one wall, incredible, when the ceiling looked like it was almost twenty feet above the floor. On the far end of the room were more windows, a bay with a window seat on the opposite wall and an octagonal alcove with windows set in each face in the joining corner. The walls were either painted or papered a soft yellowish beige, almost the color of very pale butter. The sea of flooring that stretched across the room was wood, but set in an interesting geometric parquet design rather than simple straight planks. The furnishings — primarily a grouping of couches and chairs and matching tables set before the hearth — were remarkably tasteful, as was the woolen hearth rug on which they were arranged. An honest-to-God interior balcony was set into the corner to the left of where they entered; two upholstered chairs could be seen on the other side of its rail, yet there was no apparent way to reach it. A lot of the furnishings appeared to be either antiques or very good replicas, as if whoever had done the decorating had attempted to keep with the styles popular when the mansion had been built. The place seemed to be the home's parlor or living room, but it was so formal that Marty felt like he was standing in a museum, not the home of a different version of Doc. The only thing that really gave it away were the clocks. There were plenty of them, on the walls, on the mantle, on shelves, in freestanding grandfather cases, though all were suited to the room's general decor.

By the looks on the faces around him, it was clear that the others were having similar reactions. "Oh my God!" Verne exclaimed as Jules and the other Doc set down his father on one of the couches. "Do you actually *live* here?"

"Yes," the other Doc said, distracted. He looked at Jules, who was peering into his father's face and taking his pulse. "Were you trained in first-aid?" he asked the eighteen-year-old.

"I'm a year away from graduating with my degree in biology," Jules explained. "Then it's on to med school. So you might say I'm trained in first aid, yeah."

The Doc looked shocked by the news. "You're almost done with college and you're... eighteen?" he guessed.

Jules nodded. "Yeah. I got a lot of AP credits that transferred to college and put me almost a full year ahead of other freshmen. And I started when I was sixteen; I skipped two grades."

Something about that appeared to amuse the local inventor; he smiled crookedly. "Interesting," was all he said.

The other Verne arrived in the room, then, carrying a small suitcase of sorts that Marty took to be the first-aid kit. "Here," he said, passing it to his father. "Mom and the others are right behind me."

"Did you tell them?" Doc asked as he opened the kit on a coffee table nearby.

The other Verne smiled faintly. "Yes and no," he said, earning a look of warning from his father.

The other members of this Brown family arrived right then. Clara came in first and stopped just a foot into the room, towels and blankets in her arms. Jules was behind her, then came Emily with the little boy who had first answered the door. The new Clara dropped the linens in her arms at the sight of the crowd in the parlor, and the Clara Marty knew nearly dropped Emily. Other Jules gasped; his counterpart's eyes widened. Other Emily — who looked to be eleven or twelve, oddly enough, and indeed slightly different in appearance — frowned; her younger namesake whimpered and hugged her mother more tightly. The little boy, although he had no twin of sorts, made a beeline for the Other Clara and clung to her around the waist.

Other Verne smirked faintly at the reactions of his other family members, an expression eerily echoed by the Verne Marty knew. Doc passed the smelling salts to Jules and took care of the introductions. "I'm sure you can recognize each other," he said. "These aren't past or future incarnations — they're alternate ones."

"Oh," Other Clara said softly, staring at her counterpart, transfixed but suddenly able to accept the situation. "Like what happened a few years ago, Emmett, with the other you Marty brought home from another dimension?"

"Exactly," Doc said with a nod. With that established, all the members of his family, save the youngest, appeared to relax. Marty was frankly amazed. Under similar circumstances, he would've fainted. In fact, under similar circumstances, he had.

"You might want to back away," Jules said, glancing at his non-father. "I think Dad's starting to come a round."

Doc resisted the smell that quite rudely invaded his nostrils for as long as he could. Something nagged at him the moment any sort of awareness returned. He felt wet and uncomfortable, yes, but that wasn't what bothered him so much. It was a sensation of something being wrong, something being out of place. It was as if he had forgotten or overlooked something, something important, and that very thing was on the threshold of blowing up right in his face.

"Dad?" A gentle shake to his shoulder. "Dad, wake up."

It was Jules, Doc knew, and he sounded a little concerned. Well, the scientist thought, he might as well open his eyes and face the music, whatever it was.

The action was executed slowly, Doc squinting as he did so, unsure if he really wanted to see what was around him. He saw Jules' face hovering above his own, first, and that was a faintly comforting sight. The inventor blinked a couple of times, then saw Marty standing at his side, looming above. "You okay, Doc?" the musician asked.

"I — I think so," Doc answered softly. "What happened?"

"You sustained a shock and fainted," Jules said. "Beyond that, nothing else appears to be wrong."

Doc frowned and started to sit up, but his son stopped him. "I want you to be prepared for what you see," he said.

The scientist wasn't sure he wanted to know. "And what's that?"

Marty answered the question. "Remember that mess with Doc B?"

"Yes..."

"Well, this is sort of the same thing — except *we're* now in his shoes." Marty chuckled, once. "I dunno how to tell you this, Doc, but we're in a parallel universe or something — and at the home of your counterpart."

Doc digested the news a moment, memory returning. He had seen... himself earlier? Was that what had caused him to faint? It certainly would make sense. "All right," he said at length. "I understand."

Jules looked uncertain about that, but backed away. Doc sat up and looked around... and felt a little dizzy in spite of himself. A few feet away stood the Emmett Brown of this world, and versions of both his sons, his wife, and Emily — who was, oddly, older than his own and looked, in fact, different... more like an older sister than an older twin to his Emily. The only people in the room who weren't sharing a double were Marty, Jennifer, and a little boy, about the same age as his Emily, who was clinging to the waist of the other Clara. Doc realized that he had been the same kid who had answered the door at the large mansion they had stopped at, for help. Everything else prior to his fainting spell came tumbling back, then.

"How long have I been unconscious?" he asked.

"Maybe twenty minutes?" Marty guessed with a shrug. "Not that long."

Doc looked, a little reluctantly, at his alternate self, trying to avoid the urge to stare at him. This Emmett Brown, unlike others he had run into, was neither dead nor demented. He seemed to share the same dressing habits as Doc did, looked to be around the same age and in the same state of good health — no doubt brought about by trips for rejuvenation in the future, if this one had a time machine at his disposal. He looked a little tired, though, and stressed. It was subtle enough that others might not have seen it, but Doc knew his own face fairly well and picked it up in a glance. He wondered if such a strain had been brought about by their arrival.

"I'm guessing from your reaction that something like this was both unexpected and new to you," the other Emmett Brown said.

"Unexpected, yes," Doc admitted, swinging his legs over the side of the couch on which he had been lying. "New... well, yes and no. I'm sorry about our... intruding on you like this."

Emmett waved his hand, brushing the apology aside. "No need. It's happened before, and I suspect it's just as well that you ended up here instead of knocking on someone else's door."

Doc nodded at that. The other Clara seemed to recover from whatever shock she had taken at the appearance of all the doubles and knelt down to pick up a pile of towels and blankets that she'd dropped at her feet. "You know, Verne, you might've told us who the visitors were," she said, mildly scolding her son as she began to distribute the linens to the wet and muddy travelers.

The other Verne smiled mischievously, his expression nearly identical to that of Doc's own Verne — except his eyes, he saw now, were brown, not blue. Fascinating. "I thought it was more interesting this way," he said. "Consider it payback for all the razzing you guys gave me about what I saw earlier."

Clara frowned faintly at that but said nothing more. By the time she had reached Marty, she had given the last of the towels away and promised to fetch more, but he stopped her. "I can do it," he said. "Just point me in the direction of the nearest bathroom. I was going to need to visit one soon, anyway."

Clara paused a moment, glanced at the man who was her husband, then looked back to the young man. "It's through that doorway, around the stairs, to your left," she said. Marty nodded once at the directions, then headed off the way she had pointed. Doc looked at his own wife, who was holding Emily in her arms and looking about the room in quick, nervous glances. When Clara's eyes drifted in his direction, he caught them and smiled. She returned the smile, but it was strained a bit.

"How did you all get here?" Emmett asked, curious. "I'm assuming you were in transit of some kind — your

Marty mentioned 'the train.' Was that a time machine?"

Doc studied his counterpart for a moment, wondering if this one had made a similar time machine. "Yes," he said. "We had been camping in the Pacific Northwest in the late Sixteenth Century when Clara suddenly fainted, and... is there by any chance a doctor around here who could take a look at her?"

"Emmett," Clara said softly, frowning at him. "I don't think that's the top of our concerns, now. I'm feeling much better."

"Well, *I'm* not, and I won't until I know things are all right," Doc told her, his tone leaving no room for persuasion. He looked back to Emmett. "Is there a place she could get checked out that wouldn't cause a lot of problems? Because I think that we might be stuck here for a few days, at least. Our machine was struck by lightning over the property beyond your home."

"I *knew* I saw something!" the Verne of this world cried. The Jules related to him shot him a look that clearly said to be quiet.

"Where did it land?" Emmett asked.

"I'm not entirely sure... maybe a mile or two out in that canyon west of here. At least, I think it's west. Where we're from, it really isn't around, so far as I know."

The other scientist frowned, looking toward the tall windows set in one wall, in the direction of the canyon. Doc had been vaguely aware of the room they were in, but it wasn't until his alternate self moved that he noticed — *really* noticed — it. It was quite obvious that this version of Emmett Brown was tremendously successful and terribly wealthy; Doc knew for a fact he couldn't afford a home with a room this size, not with the money he had. He wondered, for the first time, just how different *were* their lives....

Further contemplation and questions were going to have to wait, however. Doc heard a door open from the direction that Marty had gone off in, a clattering of footsteps — then a couple of *very* startled shrieks of nearly identical voices, followed almost immediately by a heavy thud that faintly shook the floor under their feet.

Doc had no idea what that was all about. He started to stand, worried, but his counterpart and his wife were already heading in that direction. The Verne of this world rolled his eyes. "Sounds like the Martys have just met each other," he announced drily.

Chapter Six

TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 2002

6:00 P.M. PDT

They had, but the heavy thud wasn't the result of either of them fainting; it was Jennifer. By this point in his life, local Marty had seen so many different versions of himself in so many other realities, walking into the old Morris place and finding another him around seemed like old hat. Even visiting Marty had lived through the experience of seeing himself — and, on occasion, counterparts in other realities — so that he didn't find the experience as overwhelming as he once had. But for local Jennifer, walking into Doc's house with her husband and seeing two Martys literally collide in the foyer was too much. She hadn't done much in the way of time traveling over the years, had seen only distinctly older versions of herself and Marty in 2015, and another version of Doc from a wholly different dimension who had once been nearly stranded here forever when he'd come to help Marty rescue his counterpart after an accident had happened during a trip to a remote area in the past. Oh, Marty had told her all about his many interdimensional trips back in July of 1999, but there was something very different about hearing the stories and seeing the reality. To top it all off, it had been a bad day for Jennifer, and this seemed like as good an excuse as any to say goodbye to it for a while.

While visiting Marty grabbed a post at the bottom of the sweeping stairway that dominated the foyer, the Marty who was fainted Jennifer's husband groaned. He was carrying his three-year-old son, Marty junior, on one arm and leading his almost five-year-old daughter Marlene by the other, else he would've tried to catch his wife before she unceremoniously hit the wooden floor. "Oh, cripes," he muttered to himself, foregoing a more tart curse in deference to the presence of his kids. He started to put down Junior and let go of Marlene to help Jennifer, but both kids were staring at the disheveled doppelganger of their father, and were not about to let go. "Aw, c'mon, kids, I can't help your mom with you hanging on like this!" he lamented, trying to get them to at least release him so that he could crouch down beside his insensate spouse. They still refused to cooperate, and he could see that asking his double to take charge of them would only make the pair hang on all the more tightly. "Doc!" he finally bellowed, feeling rather put out by the whole unexpected thing. "What the hell's going on around here? You didn't tell me you had a visitor from the Twilight Zone!"

"Not the Twilight Zone, just another dimension," Emmett said casually as he entered the foyer, trailed by his Clara and some of the older kids. Unable to see his eyes, he wasn't sure which Verne had followed, but the Jules was clearly the visitor, as he'd brought the first aid kit with him. "And not just a visitor. What happened?"

"I think she freaked when I bumped into my double, there, coming out of the bathroom, and she saw both of us standing right in front of her," local Marty explained. He was grateful when Clara took Junior from him; the boy's hold around his neck had been getting dangerously close to a genuine stranglehold. Marlene still refused to let go of him, but being at least partially freed was a relief. "She's really not used to seeing this kind of stuff, and this time, I don't really blame her for fainting. You could've at least *warned* us, for cryin' out loud...!"

"If I'd known when you called earlier, I would've," Emmett vowed. "In fact, I might've told you to stay home. I suspect this is going to turn out to be much more complicated than it appears."

As far as visiting Marty was concerned, that was an accurate statement. "That's Jennifer?" he said, looking down at the unconscious woman, whom Jules, kneeling beside her, had just turned onto her back. "It can't be. It doesn't look like her — well, I guess it kinda does, but something's just not right..."

Emmett shrugged as he knelt to give the visiting Jules a hand, lifting Jennifer's upper body so that she was sitting, a much easier position in which to employ the smelling salts. "It's undoubtedly one of the vagaries of multi-dimensional existence. We tend to think of reality in terms of our own, but given how long the universe has been in existence and how many people have lived and died on this planet over the years, all it would take is a slight variation in your ancestral tree or a change in the timing of your birth to alter your appearance, even though *you* are still *you*, in an existential sense. Conceived one day, and the genes expressed give you blue eyes and blond hair, a day later, and you get brown eyes and red hair. Reality's much more complex than we realize."

While other-dimension Marty tried to absorb this, Jules brought out the vial of smelling salts again and prepared to administer them to Jennifer. Verne grimaced. "Don't tell me you actually know how to use that stuff?" he asked, aware that his own elder brother's medical skills were rather limited.

Visiting Jules snorted. "It doesn't exactly take a rocket scientist, and I *am* in pre-med," he answered, rather primly.

Verne was scandalized. "Get outta town! Even Dad bombed out of med school, and our Jules wouldn't make it past the entrance exams for anything scientific."

Emmett gave his blond son a withering look, not noticing the surprised stare with which Jules was favoring him. "I didn't 'bomb out,'" he said bluntly, "I just decided I was too young to be pursuing that kind of a career despite what my mother wanted, and it wasn't really what I wanted to do with my life. Different life paths can change a person's interests. Your brother may have preferred another area of study, but that doesn't mean he couldn't do it if he wanted to."

Verne hardly thought so, but another stern glance, this from his mother, warned him against pushing it. Jules held the vial under Jennifer's nose, and presently, she came awake simply to avoid the stench. Her Marty crouched down once the vial was taken away, wanting to be sure he was the first thing she saw. "Ohhh..." she groaned, partly from shock, partly from the stink still lingering in her nostrils. "What happened?"

Marty-her-husband grinned at her. "Nothing weird'n some of the things that happen all the time at Doc's place. Sounds like this time, the doubles from another dimension came knocking on *his* door instead of me bringing 'em home."

The journalist was a little afraid to look up at the face above the other pair of legs standing nearby that she knew belonged to another Marty. But, with the bravery people in her profession sometimes needed, she hazarded a quick glance at him. Visiting Marty looked a little pale himself, which made her feel somewhat better about having passed out when she'd seen both him and her husband standing before her. He looked a little younger than her Marty, but not all that much, and for some reason, he looked to be considerably more worn out, if the dark circles under his eyes and the little stress lines all over his face were any indication.

"Sorry I reacted that way," she told him, since if someone had fainted in front of her in a like situation, she might've felt vaguely insulted. "Marty's a lot more used to this kind of thing than I am. It still seems so *strange* to me, seeing more than one version of the same person around at the same time. I guess I have this weird feeling that it'll turn out to be their long lost evil serial killer twin or something."

"I know *exactly* how that feels," younger Marty admitted fervently, still able to feel a twinge in his shoulder every time he thought about his Doc's evil twin from another dimension who'd shot him in an attempt to kill him. "Don't feel bad about it, it's probably perfectly normal." Somewhere back in the parlor, he heard a disgruntled noise, and knew that later, he'd probably wind up paying for demonstrating even that little bit of understanding toward his wife's counterpart.

Local Jennifer, however, didn't know a thing about the tensions between other-Marty and other-Jennifer; she was concerned with more immediate problems. "Are the kids okay?"

"I think so," her Marty answered as he and Emmett helped her to her feet. "Just a little scared something bad happened to you."

"Are you okay, Mommy?" Marlene asked right on cue, her big blue eyes full of worry, determined to focus on her rather than the person who looked like a dirty version of Daddy, but couldn't be. She took her mother's hand, now, to reassure herself that Jennifer would be all right.

Jen smiled at her. "I'll be fine, sweetie, after we've had something to eat. I haven't had a thing since breakfast, but maybe we should go out to a restaurant instead," she added to their hosts, realizing that they had probably barged in at a very inconvenient time, even though it hadn't been so when they'd called.

Clara, however, dismissed her concern as she passed Junior back to his father. "Nonsense, it's no inconvenience. We can settle the children to eat in the rec room, where they won't have to see all these confusing... duplications." She turned toward the guests still in the parlor. "And I'm sure there's more than enough food to go around. If any of you are hungry, that is."

The almost unison chorus of "Yes!" from their interdimensional visitors answered the question quite succinctly.

Before they settled down to supper, however, the unexpected guests were universally interested in cleaning up, to wash away both the mud and the chill from being soaked to the skin too long. That turned out to be much less of a problem than any of them would have expected, since the house was not only huge, but more than adequately equipped with both guest rooms and bathrooms. There was an entire guest suite in one corner of the upper level — a legacy, Emmett explained, from the house's original owner, one Judge Archibald Morris, who had had the dubious pleasure of allowing his mother-in-law to live under his roof as a concession to his wife. The suite had a bedroom, parlor, an attached bathroom, as well as direct access to the upper deck and its stairs that led down to the ground level. A second guest room in the interior of the house had no windows, but it was large, well-ventilated, and also had a connecting door to the big bathroom that was most often used by the kids. A powder room off the hall that led to the broadly curved front staircase was equipped with shower facilities and was near at hand to a third, much smaller guest room. The master suite, of course, had its own full bathroom, and there were two additional washrooms on the first floor, both equipped with the necessary facilities.

The plethora of both space and plumbing frankly astonished the visitors, though they didn't argue with it. Since they hadn't brought all their gear from the train, figuring that they would be back in their own homes soon, they hadn't come prepared with clean clothing, but that, too, posed few problems. Most of the members of the Brown family were able to borrow from their counterparts; only Emily was unable to do so, being six years younger and much smaller than her local avatar. She and Chris, however, were fairly close in size, and youngster's play clothes being rather unisex in nature, she was able to borrow from him, as Jennifer was able to borrow from Clara. Marty was the only person with a problem, but that was eventually solved when Verne remembered that his mother had made him do an excavation to clean out his closet the month before, and in the process, he'd found stuff he'd outgrown that wouldn't be too bad a fit on the visiting musician. Marty was mildly chagrined when he found that he still needed to roll up the hems of the teenager's outgrown jeans, but at least it was clean and dry, and he'd have his own stuff back once things had been run through the laundry.

While the visitors were cleaning up, the locals finished preparing supper, putting dirty clothes in to be washed, and mopping up the puddles of mud and rainwater that had been tracked into the house. Emily, preferring to avoid laundry and floor-swabbing duties, had volunteered to keep an eye on the McFly kids and her little brother until dinner was ready. Jennifer, who was taking it easy for a bit after fainting, had taken a seat in the kitchen, preparing more of the salad and sandwich fixings that would be needed to feed this veritable army. Jules and Verne, with some mild grumbling, were mopping up the floors, while Emmett and Clara made sure the visitors had or could find whatever they needed, and Marty collected dirty clothes to shuttle them down to the laundry. All three of them coincidentally met there at one point, and took the opportunity to discuss certain aspects of this unpredicted situation.

"So, what's the real deal here, Doc?" Marty wanted to know while they were sorting the mud-soaked things and preparing to load them into the wash machine. "Is this just some kind of fluke like what happened with me in '99? Do they just need to slam their doors, check for dead birds in the grill, and then pop back home again?"

"I doubt it," the inventor admitted with a heavy sigh. "I don't know all the details yet, but my counterpart mentioned that they'd been traveling in the train when it was struck by lightning out over Silver Creek Canyon — and I'm sure that's what Verne must've seen when he said he saw something go down. We all know first hand just how spectacular that kind of direct hit can be."

Both Marty and Clara nodded, remembering well indeed their arrival in 1741 Jamaica, which had been almost immediately followed by a direct and nearly disastrous lightning strike that had grounded the train for over a week. "Yeah, that can be nasty," Marty agreed. "So then all you have to do is fix whatever blew and send 'em home again?"

Emmett, however, shook his head. "No, I doubt it'll be that easy. They didn't mention any particulars about the damage, but their time machine must've had some sort of problem *before* they arrived here. If it had been working properly, they wouldn't've reached our dimension in the first place."

That very logical conclusion was not lost on the others. Clara looked up at her husband, worried. "I do hope it isn't something difficult — or irreparable," she said earnestly. "You know the troubles your other counterpart had when he was here. You said you experienced them yourself when you returned him to his own dimension."

The scientist nodded. "I know. Hopefully, it won't be anything troublesome to diagnose and repair. Even if it is, though, we know at least one viable way of preventing the subatomic incompatibilities from becoming fatal."

"Take a hop in a time machine," Marty said, remembering. "Man, this is really heavy stuff, Doc. I never really figured we'd see accidental visitors from other dimensions again. I thought that had to be a once-in-a-lifetime fluke, and

if it ever *did* happen again....” He rolled his eyes expressively. “Well, I never figured you’d drag your whole family *and* mine along for the ride.”

“Neither did I. And I do hope this won’t be a hard fix, because they may have been here too long already.”

The musician frowned, puzzled. “Already? When they just got here?”

“They just got *here*,” Emmett pointed out. “But how long did it take before you figured out the problem that was sending you from one dimension to another?”

“Days,” Marty had to admit. “If I’d had to figure it out completely on my own, probably even longer.”

“Precisely. Whatever sent them to this dimension may have been causing trouble that way when they first left home. My counterpart said they’d been camping in the late Sixteenth Century, and what prompted them to leave was his Clara suddenly fainting, for no apparent reason.”

His own Clara caught his line of thought. “Which might’ve happened because they’d already spent too much time in a different dimension but didn’t know it. But if traveling through time can help correct the dangers of that condition, they should all be fine now, shouldn’t they?”

“They should. Passing through n-dimensional space in temporal transition appears to be enough to reset the system, so to speak, even when it’s not an interdimensional jump. I know we’ll have to mention this to them if it looks like they’ll be stuck here for a while, but until we’ve had a chance to see what shape their machine is in, I’d prefer it if no one mentioned this to them — that includes Jennifer and the kids. It seems to me as if they’re under enough stress already. No sense in making them worry about something that may not even be a problem before they leave.”

Since there was more room in the guest suite than in any of the other spare rooms and younger Emily was very insistent about sticking close to at least one of her parents, for the time being, other-dimension Doc and Clara had been directed to make use of it, for as long as they were stranded here. Doc had washed up first to give Clara enough time to wash both herself and Emily, and hopefully encourage the little girl to calm down and begin to accept that this place wasn’t so bad, after all, that it might turn out to be a wonderful adventure.

When he was finished, having changed into the clothes their host had provided, he was more than half tempted to prowl around the huge place, seeing all there was to see, but curiosity was doing serious battle with discomfort. It wasn’t as if this was his own future and knowing too much could be dangerous, but the scientist had a strange feeling that discovering too much about this world and his counterpart in it could be terribly disturbing. Not disturbing in the way Doc B had been disturbing; so far, he had seen no indication that his local avatar was at all insane or inclined toward violence. But there was no denying that he appeared to be vastly more successful. Doc wasn’t sure which bothered him most, the possibility that his counterpart might have used knowledge of the future to make his fortune, or that he had done it through other perfectly legitimate means. That Clara and the kids were here, and he talked about time machines and interdimensional travel quite casually meant that he, too, was an inventor, to some extent or another. Was that how he’d made his apparent fortune, or was his area of expertise something more reliably lucrative? There were really too many possible explanations — a literal infinity of them, in fact, given how big the universe was in theory.

Rather than feel like a prowler, creeping about on his own, Doc decided to wait until his hosts deigned to show them the rest of the place, if they wished to do so. Instead, he went back down the stairs he’d come up, returning to the kitchen area, where local Jennifer and Clara were assembling the food for supper. From the corridor behind him, he heard the sounds of a running wash machine along with the clanks and clatters and splashes of what was likely buckets being emptied and mops being rinsed out. “Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked the women in the kitchen, feeling that he should be doing something to assist, since it was his family and friends who’d made the extra preparations essential.

Jennifer’s glance was faintly nervous, as if she was still having some adjustment difficulties; Clara’s smile was astonishingly calm and gracious. “It’s not necessary, but if you want to feel useful, Emmett might appreciate a hand setting the table. Marty and the boys are still busy in the laundry room, Emily’s of much more use keeping the youngsters entertained, and we don’t use the big dining room that often. I don’t remember the last time we had quite so many people sitting down for dinner at the same time.” When it became apparent that their visitor had no idea where to go, she smiled again and pointed to the appropriate service corridor. He’d been carried through it on the way to the

couch in the front parlor, but he didn't remember it, having been out like a light at the time.

Emmett did indeed appreciate the help, and in the course of things, seeing the room and its contents clearly for the first time, Doc finally couldn't refrain from asking at least one burning question. "Did you inherit this place, or did you buy it?"

This-dimension Doc smiled wryly. "I bought it — and probably not for as much as you're thinking. My parents did have a mansion, yes, but that was over on Riverside Drive, and... well, I burned it down a long time ago."

"Sounds familiar," the visiting scientist had to concede. "You don't have other kids who've already moved out, do you?"

Emmett shook his head. "No, just the four, and the story of how Chris entered the picture is... peculiar, to say the least. Why do you ask?"

Doc shrugged. "The place just seems a little... big for only six people. Why did you buy it?"

"Not to show off how much money I've got, if that's what you're thinking. The judge who originally built it did that, but when I bought it, it was over a hundred years old and in serious need of renovation and restoration. I got it for a virtual song because no one else wanted it and the developers who owned the land couldn't sell or subdivide this part of it, not with all the canyons and ravines in the area. I spent more on modernizing the place and bringing it up to contemporary code. I did a lot of the work myself, getting the place ready before we moved from 1895 to 1990...."

"You moved back to 1990?" Doc interrupted, startled by the information. "Not 1985?"

"Why would I want to move back to 1985?" Emmett asked, clearly considering it absurd, even as a suggestion. "It was hard enough coming up with a story to explain what I was doing with a wife and kids after being gone for years. I couldn't tell people Clara was a widow and the boys were her kids 'cause I knew sooner or later, Verne would look too much like me for anyone to believe I'm *not* his father. It was a big enough stretch, hoping people would believe we'd been married and living apart for only two or three years, and then skipped the country for five years because of the Libyans. I don't even want to think about the unkind things Clara and the kids would've had to listen to if I'd told people we'd been married for nearly ten years without *anyone* knowing about it."

Doc sighed softly. "Yes, sometimes I wish I hadn't rushed things, that way."

Emmett blinked, surprised. "You mean, you *did* return directly to 1985?"

His counterpart nodded. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, but every now and then, I can't help but think it wasn't as good as I'd thought. Just arranging to have the right documents put in the right places at the right times turned out to be something of a nightmare. But at least Emily was born after we'd returned, in December of '87."

"So was ours — though less than a week after we moved back, in June of '90. This explains a lot, especially about the kids and their ages, even a little bit about their physical appearances. And you only have the three?"

"Yes, and we certainly don't plan on having more. Clara just turned fifty, and I'll be eighty-five in August...."

The odd look on Emmett's face stopped whatever else his visiting avatar had been about to say. "Your birthday is in August?"

Doc thought he saw the point. "Well, technically speaking, I suppose it isn't, since I haven't kept an exact account of every minute I've spent traveling through time. But keeping the benchmark as August twenty-first is convenient..." When the look did not go away, he answered with a perplexed one of his own. "What, are you saying you weren't born on August 21, 1920?"

Emmett shook his head. "July 20, 1920. That's very interesting. Marty met several different incarnations of me when he accidentally went traveling from dimension to dimension. Some were married, some weren't, some were dead, some had no kids, some had more — but there was one constant: All of them were born on the same date as me — but not you. I wonder if that means the realities of our entire worlds are significantly more different, farther apart as it were in the existential neighborhood?"

“Possibly,” Doc had to admit. “I hope that isn’t going to make it more difficult for us to get back where we belong....”

“Not likely,” his counterpart assured him. “Not unless your time machine can’t be fixed at all. I can explain the particulars of it later, but in some respects, it’s an easier process than you might suspect.”

Doc sighed, relieved by even the hope that it would be so. “That would be a relief. Though I’d still like for Clara to see a doctor as soon as possible, if it can be arranged. I probably worry about her more than I should, but I imagine you can understand why.”

“Perfectly. And I don’t think there’ll be any problem arranging it. I’d take you to our family doctor, but he’s on vacation right now, and if all she needs is a simple check-up, the walk-in medical clinic just up the highway can take care of it. If she’s like my Clara, she’ll undoubtedly balk at the idea, but I know you won’t stop worrying until you’re sure everything’s fine.”

“Precisely. And you haven’t really answered my question, you know: Why did you ever buy a house this huge when you really don’t seem to need the space?”

Emmett smiled softly, amused by this persistence he understood very well indeed. “Because I got it for a good price, I wanted the privacy, I liked the area — but mostly for Clara. We knew the person who built this place back in 1886. He added that widow’s walk on top of the house when Clara showed him how good this area is for stargazing, and wrote a few articles about it for the *Telegraph*. I asked her to give up the only world she’d ever known to come live in mine, for the safety of the entire continuum; the least I could do was give her a house that she knew and loved, someplace *familiar* to call home in a time and a world that was anything but. We couldn’t move back to the house we’d owned in the 1800s; it was destroyed when I was just a boy, and the opportunity to buy this place seemed too good — and too remarkably coincidental — to pass up. Yes, renovating it and maintaining it wasn’t cheap, and we did almost lose it in ‘94 when I nearly went bankrupt again, but the way things worked out, I think we were meant to stay here for a while. Besides, I’ve always thought Clara deserves it, and more. She took a chance on me when no other woman would, and for that, I’ll give her the moon and the stars and anything else she wants, if I can. Wouldn’t you?”

And Doc couldn’t argue with that.

Upstairs, visiting Marty was fully expecting that Jennifer was going to argue with him over the matter of him showing understanding toward local Jennifer’s problem in the foyer when he apparently couldn’t show her any understanding at all, lately. After they’d been taken to the second large guestroom — which, for all its lack of windows, did not feel claustrophobic, since the ceilings were a little higher than usual and the room itself was large enough to allow for free movement around all the furnishings, and then some — Marty fully expected to be read the riot act. But instead, Jennifer turned him a cold shoulder, and, collecting the clean clothes she’d borrowed from Clara, went into the adjoining bathroom to take a shower. She didn’t exactly *slam* the door behind her, but she closed it so firmly, Marty knew she was telling him to get lost. Well, in this house, that might be possible, and could be the best thing for both of them. Maybe if he got stranded somewhere for a week and they needed to send out search and rescue parties to find him, her inflexible attitude toward him and this whole name business might begin to thaw a little.

He really didn’t think pity was the right solution to their problem, though, so for now, he resigned himself to the fact that there would be bigger and nastier arguments to come, and decided to make use of one of the other bathrooms.

Jules, he found, was using the small one in the corridor leading to the big front staircase, as he’d claimed the little guest room nearby to be his home base while they were stuck here, and Verne was probably in the one near the bottom of the stairs, the washroom Marty had come out of only to run smack into his local counterpart. Looking at him had felt a little odd, but not as odd as looking at literal older or younger incarnations of himself. After that one time he and Jennifer had accidentally come “home” to a different dimension following their trip to Woodstock, Marty had realized that if he’d only kept his wits for a few more seconds and looked more closely at his other-reality double, he would’ve seen that he wasn’t really an exact double at all, that there were subtle differences between them that to someone familiar with his own face fairly screamed, “I am *not* you!”

Granted, this Marty wasn’t as egregiously different as that drunken loser in that sleazy other world, but there *were* differences. He was older, for one, and it showed, not in things like gray hairs and potbellies and wrinkles, but in that he looked a little more... grown up was the best description Marty could think of. He had a wife and kids and

presumably some kind of career that helped support them... though maybe not. Marlene and Junior — whose presence had shocked visiting Marty almost more than his double's; he knew the kids might someday exist, but he'd never actually *seen* them before, not as youngsters barely out of toddlerhood. He'd only seen Junior briefly in 2015, and then, he'd looked so much like Marty himself, it had felt more like seeing another incarnation of himself, not his son. From the way the two of them had clung to him — their father — when their mother fainted, it might be that *he*, not Jennifer, was the stay-at-home parent, taking care of the family while she went out and earned the money.

That thought was a little too weird for Marty to consider for long. He didn't think he was the homemaker type, not at all, though if taking care of the house and cooking dinner every night was a way to get Jennifer off his back while he tried to get his music career moved into a higher gear.... He'd have to think about it. He wasn't sure it would really work, but it could be a stop-gap measure that would at least lessen the tensions between them for a little while. Though if she kept insisting that she needed to "distance" Professional Jennifer from Private Jennifer.... She made it sound like they were two completely different people, and for some reason, Professional Jennifer Parker should have nothing to do with Lowly Jennifer McFly. Why couldn't she see how that hurt him?

Marty didn't really care for the gloomy turn his thoughts were taking, and decided that the sooner he got out of his filthy clothes and cleaned up, the better. Since all the other nearby bathrooms appeared to be in use, he decided that, since he'd been given permission to use and directions to the facilities in the master suite, he might as well make use of them, since no one else appeared to be in there.

Once he entered the suite, his jaw hit the floor again. This room appeared to be as big as the huge parlor below it, though it had been subdivided into a number of smaller chambers. The main room was quite large, containing both the sleeping area, a little sitting-room type set up in front of the big stone fireplace, an eight-sided alcove with a desk and computer, and several other pieces of antique furniture arranged in appropriate locations about the room. There was even a little private balcony outside, for the enjoyment of the room's occupants. Once upon a time, Marty was sure, this place had been crawling with servants, though so far, there was no indication that this Doc had any hired help around. The floor was nicely carpeted — which made Marty glad he'd finally stopped dripping rainwater and mud — and the whole room was a surprisingly tasteful rendering of late Victorian styles tempered and toned down by modern sensibilities.

Taking it all in, Marty wasn't sure if the general level of classiness he saw around this place was an indication of local Doc's wealth or a sign of his different personality. Maybe it was a little of both, or maybe it was something even his own Doc would do, if he had the money and the inclination. He'd have to ask him, someday, provided they ever got back to where they belonged. For now, he was more interested in a nice, hot shower and clean clothes.

Local Clara had told him the bathroom was through one of the doors on the left side of the room, but there were two, and he couldn't recall which was the one. Experimentally, he opened the first, and saw inside a combination closet and dressing room which one could walk into, through a pair of sliding doors, and into the bathroom beyond. The facilities there, Marty found, were what he would've called luxurious. Aside from the toilet and sink fixtures, the tub and shower were separate units. The former, tucked into an alcove under some high windows at the far end of the room, was much bigger than most bathtubs Marty was used to seeing in ordinary homes; he strongly suspected this one had some kind of whirlpool in it. The thought of a long soak in a hot jacuzzi was powerfully appealing, but he knew if he so much as stepped in, he'd probably fall asleep, need someone to come wake him, and then get chewed out by Jennifer for being rude, monopolizing their hosts' own private bathroom, and not even inviting her to join him. These days, he couldn't do anything that she couldn't twist around and somehow find fault in.

Not that the frosted glass and marble shower stall was anything to sneeze at. It was spacious, had places to store anything the bather might want within comfortable reach, and boasted one of the more sophisticated adjustable shower heads that could do anything from drenching a person under a waterfall to delivering a soothing massage. He opted for the latter as a consolation for not getting to use the tub.

While he was scrubbing away the mud under his fingernails and enjoying the pulse of warm water on a back that was still aching from sleeping on a hard metal floor, he heard someone enter the room, then duck back out again without saying a word. Curious, he cracked the glass door open just enough to peer out, and noticed that his dirty clothes were gone. He vaguely recalled something being said about someone collecting them so they could be washed. Well, they certainly needed it, though he was glad he'd remembered to bring the borrowed clean stuff with him. He didn't like the idea of running around these strange hallways and maybe getting lost, wrapped only in a towel. And after Jen practically slammed the bathroom door in his face, he wasn't about to go see how she was doing. She'd probably just accuse him of checking up on her because he was trying to control her or something. He just couldn't catch a break with her.

Sighing heavily, he decided he was as clean as one good shower would get him, and had better end it now before Jen came looking for him and yelled at him for wasting their hosts' hot water. Funny, he thought as he used one of the provided bath towels to dry off, he hadn't noticed the slightest drop in water temperature while he was showering. Either this Doc's plumbing was directly tapped into some natural hot spring to provide his water, he had a heating tank big enough to service a good sized hotel, or technology in this future had come up with a way to heat it much more quickly than anything available in 1994. Whatever the case, he was grateful, both for it and the clean clothes local Verne had provided. It was lucky the teenager had a pair of plain jeans and a plain black t-shirt in his box of castoffs waiting to be taken to Goodwill, but it still embarrassed the musician to know that what had fit the boy when he was fourteen was the only stuff in the house that would adequately fit Marty now. Maybe, he reflected, that was really the bug up Jen's behind. Her co-anchor on the news was a good-looking guy closer to Doc's height and not a runt an inch shorter than her. He knew that back in high school and college, she'd been hit on a lot by taller guys who told her she was too pretty to be hanging out with a skinny little twerp. She'd always shrugged them off, or found devastating ways to tell them to get lost, but what if, after all these years, she'd finally met someone who'd made her think that maybe it wasn't such a bad idea....?

Again, he forced himself to stop brooding on it. It was just making him mad and frustrated — more frustrated than mad, really, because he didn't understand *why* Jennifer was doing what she was doing, and so far, none of his requests for an explanation had gotten a genuine straight answer. He was being immature, childish, sexist, old-fashioned.... Okay, so maybe he was, but telling him *his* faults didn't tell him why this was so important to *her*. That was all he really wanted to know, and the more she kept evading him with accusations about his shortcomings, the more he couldn't help but think she was avoiding the truth because it was something that would spell the end of their relationship.

He realized he was back to brooding, and, determined to end it, finished dressing so that he could go downstairs to join the others for supper. He wasn't quite sure how to get to places using any of the back stairs, yet, so he decided to go down via the big main staircase at the front of the house, from which he knew how to find the kitchen. Jules and Verne — the ones from his reality, their hair still slightly damp and their clothes recently changed — were coming down the corridor when he stepped out of the master suite and were headed the same way. Verne grinned at Marty as they met up with him.

"Y'know, I wonder if there's some way I can arrange to get into the will of this version of Dad," he said, a gesture indicating the house around them and by inference the wealth that had constructed it and kept it maintained. "I know he's probably a few years older than our Dad, but there's gotta be some *big* difference in their history. I don't think our Dad would have this much money even if he'd saved every single penny he ever owned."

Jules shrugged diffidently, though his expression and the way he glanced at everything around them said that he was more intrigued by this alternate reality than he let on. "It's possible it has nothing to do with Dad's counterpart's past, but rather his parents'," he speculated. When both his brother and Marty favored him with puzzled glances, he explained. "Remember, Verne, our father did inherit a mansion and a reasonable fortune from his parents when they died. Perhaps in this reality, they were much more successful, financially speaking, and left their son a considerably greater inheritance that he didn't spend entirely on the development and construction of a time machine. For all we know, in this reality, *this* is the Brown Family mansion, and Dad's counterpart never had an accident that destroyed it."

"Could be," Marty said as they headed down the long, curved staircase. "In that alternate universe Jen and I visited after our trip to Woodstock, I think the Doc there said the government seized his house and all his money or something — he never even had a chance to burn it down or build a time machine. Something made that whole world way different from the one we know, and it wasn't like the world Doc B came from, where everything was pretty much the same until Biff got money and power. I don't know if that Doc ever lived the same kind of life your dad did. Maybe that's what's going on here."

"That makes my theory sound all the more plausible," Jules declared as they reached the bottom of the stairs and turned toward the corridor to the kitchen. They were all still looking around, marveling at how different this was from the place they called home. "I'm sure there must be some major difference, here; we just haven't found it, yet."

Verne snorted softly. "There's *one* difference," he said, pointing to a number of framed things hanging on the wall near the bottom of the stairs. "Somebody here went into the Olympics."

Confused, both Marty and Jules looked in the direction he was pointing, and saw that one of the things was a hanging glass display case, protecting some sort of bronze medal from dust and decay. Jules squinted at it more closely, then gasped, his eyes widening. "That's not an Olympics medal, Verne," he corrected his brother. "That's a

Nobel Prize!”

Almost as one, all three of the young men leaned in closer to get a better look at the thing, and the other things around it. Directly below it was a framed photograph of local Doc being awarded the medal by the King of Sweden; directly above it was a framed newspaper clipping from the *Telegraph*, chronicling the event. Marty noted with some surprise that the byline read Jennifer McFly.

Jules swallowed thickly as he scanned the various items on display, probably understanding them much better than either Marty or Verne. “I thought it might’ve been something Dad’s father won years ago, for his work in medicine. That could’ve explained the different financial circumstances here. But it says *Dad* — or his local counterpart — won the prize in Physics in 1997 for the invention and development of a cold fusion reactor and extreme high-efficiency non-radioactive energy collection and dispersal systems. And only three years after he made the first announcement of the discovery and filed the patents!”

“I take it that’s kinda on the fast side,” Marty said as he looked over the other things on the wall, copies of a number of different patent applications and grants pertaining to fusion, pictures and news clippings of Doc and some other guy who’d apparently gone into business together in 1997, and had opened some large corporate and research facilities in a little local suburb called Elmdale late in 1999.

“It’s almost unheard of,” Jules confirmed. “It usually takes the prize committee *years* to decide whether or not a discovery will have sufficient significant impact in the field — and the whole world — before they award the prize.”

Verne snorted softly. “Hey, from what Dad’s told us about the future, and what we’ve seen of it — gadgets like the little Mr. Fusion thing he used on the DeLoreans — fusion’s gon na be big time even before 2015 rolls around. It had to start somewhere, so why not with Dad?”

Jules appeared distinctly uncomfortable. “Because maybe it *didn’t* start with Dad, not until he saw it already done when he went time traveling.”

Verne looked at his brother. “You think Dad’s other self here stole the idea from the future? That *that’s* why he’s got a big house and a lot of money? Because he ripped off someone else who should’ve been the one to invent fusion before he had the chance?”

After listening to his father’s misgivings about making any of his inventions public and seeing all this, Jules suddenly understood Emmett’s reluctance to enter the contest the rest of them had been attempting to push him into. “It’s a possibility,” he said softly.

Marty, oddly enough, shook his head, most emphatically. “No way, Jules. I may not know a lot about the way all these different dimensions and other realities and time travel and fusion work, but I know a crook when I see one, and this guy just doesn’t fit the bill. And I’m not saying that ‘cause I’m glad we wound up somewhere a lot more comfortable than a rainy gorge or a leaky barn. Call it a gut feeling. I’ve seen other versions of your dad, and wild as all of this seems, I think it’s on the up-and-up. But if you don’t believe me, ask him. After all, how do we know that even back where we belong, the guy who invented fusion isn’t Doc? That article says he announced the discovery and filed the first patent late in 1994. There’s still time for things to happen, back where we came from....”

But Jules was insistent. “It can’t be, not if Dad keeps refusing to show the rest of the world *anything* he’s invented, even a security system. He’s got it in his head that trying to patent anything that he might’ve seen even briefly in the future is dangerous because he might be cheating someone else out of their due.”

“Could be the only person he’s cheating is himself. But ask anyway. Maybe if Doc hears the story about how another him found success, he might stop trying to hide his light under a bushel.”

“And if he *did* steal it?”

Marty shrugged. “Then I suppose your dad’s got a point, and trying to patent anything he might’ve seen in the future can be dangerous. But I’ll bet anything you want that he didn’t. Doc might ‘borrow’ things like locomotives to try to save the space-time continuum, but unless he’s gone completely wacko, like Doc B, he wouldn’t steal someone else’s ideas. Count on it.”

Jules couldn’t help but have his doubts, but as they were called to come join the others for supper, he tried to

think of way to bring it up that wasn't completely rude and tactless. He could tell right away that it wasn't going to be easy.

Chapter Seven

TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 2002

6:49 P.M. PDT

By the time everyone had cleaned up and returned downstairs, the food was just about ready to be served — and not a moment too soon from the perspective of the visitors, none of whom had had a bite to eat since a campfire dinner the night before. While the younger kids, including a still-clingy Emily, ate in the rec room nearby under the supervision of the older Emily, the others, from the Vernes on up, ate in the formal dining room. The distribution of the groups tended towards having those from the same worlds clumping near each other, although the Docs sat across from one another at the table, perhaps for the ease of conversing. Conversation, though, wasn't immediately forthcoming, as the famished travelers first took care of the worst of their hunger pains. The food wasn't elaborate — sandwiches, salads, and soup — but it was fresh and homemade, and after a few days of eating things out of cans and boxes, it was as good as a five-course meal.

The visiting Clara couldn't avoid staring at the locals of this world as everyone ate, utterly fascinated by the recent turn of events. A part of her was surprised at how readily she had accepted the situation they were now in. Maybe it was because this wasn't the first time something of this nature had happened — the Doc B nightmare was still far too firmly embedded in her mind — or maybe it was the ease with which those from this world had accepted their presence in it and had been immediately gracious to their unexpected guests.

There were a number of curious differences between the people assembled around the table, in appearances alone. With the bold exception of the differences in the Verne's eye color and the Jennifers looking faintly but distinctly different from one another — like the Emilys, almost more like sisters from the same family — those around the table bore nearly identical appearances to one another. The major differences seemed to be the ages of some — the Marty of this world was eight years older than the visiting one — and such small details as hairstyles or ways of dressing. Although the clothes the visitors all wore were borrowed from their counterparts here — with the exceptions of Marty, Jennifer, and Emily — they seemed to wear them a little differently than their other-dimensional twins. The visiting Jules buttoned up the shirt he wore, for example, while the local one did not. Local Verne wore a watch; the visiting one did not. To Clara, the experience of seeing the doubles — including her own — was like looking into a mirror that was ever so slightly off. The sensation was decidedly odd, but she found herself less startled by it as the minutes wore on.

"I think we're going to have to postpone examining your time machine tonight," the Emmett of this world finally announced. "There's going to be too much water in the canyon to get out there, and by the time we'd reach it, it would be dark."

"I thought as much," Doc said, nodding. "Will it be safe out there?"

"Oh, certainly for a night, yes. Do you know how much damage it sustained in the accident?"

Doc sighed, taking a drink of the water set out before him before answering. "The electrical system is shot — and I suspect something beyond the flux capacitor went wrong before we left. Why else would we be in 2002 and not 1994?"

"Time in different realities could move at different rates," Emmett responded immediately.

"Maybe so, but that wasn't what was programmed into the circuits, and I can't see why we wouldn't have arrived here in 1994, unless..." Doc looked at his Marty, a couple of seats away. The young man seemed unable to take his eyes off the local Jennifer, much to her obvious discomfort and his Jennifer's annoyance. "Marty, how long did you have your jacket hanging above the keyboard?"

It took a moment for the musician to answer the completely out of the blue question. "Uh... I dunno. I hung it there after I finished moving my stuff into the train, and I think that was before midnight since... it wasn't real long after everyone went to bed," he finished quickly, perhaps aware of all the eyes on him, now.

The local Verne looked puzzled. "You slept in the train?" he asked. "Why? The floor's worse than the ground in that thing!"

"Tell me about it," Marty muttered, rolling his eyes. "It's a long story," he said vaguely, obviously uncomfortable, now.

Doc saved him from further questions by their hosts about the matter. "The keys were damp when we left," he said softly, half to himself. "Marty, did you know that some of the time circuits were built under the keys?"

"No. Why would I?"

Emmett was beginning to see the picture that Doc was also putting together. "That could definitely explain the destination discrepancy," he said, nodding.

Doc winced; Marty looked confused. "What did I do wrong?" he wanted to know.

"Water got into the circuits and components under the keys when you hung your dripping jacket there," Doc said. "The moisture was allowed to puddle there and spread for a few hours, at least. That undoubtedly caused some of the circuits to short out even before we left."

Marty looked horrified by the news. His counterpart smiled at him sympathetically. "Sounds like your luck's about like mine with that kind of stuff," he said. "I once did something like that with a stupid cup of Diet Coke."

"But I don't think that caused us to land *here*," Marty said, nearly knocking over his Pepsi as he leaned forward suddenly, towards Doc. "You said that the flux capacitor had been busted before we left and—"

"Your flux capacitor is broken?" Emmett interrupted, looking to Doc with surprise. "Why didn't you say so sooner?" Before the other scientist could answer, this one answered his own question. "Never mind that, I can see why. What happened to it?"

"As far as I can tell, we struck a seagull shortly before we hit eighty eight. The alarm had hardly gone off before we came out, here, then the lighting hit the train and we crashed. I didn't even notice the damage until I checked the machine over after we landed."

"The thing is," Marty said, clearly excited, "I think that's why we're here. When Jen and I ended up in that weird alternate reality after Woodstock, it was because pieces of the flux capacitor were missing entirely. The you of that time said something about how a flaw like that would make the time field unstable. You said almost the same thing before, too. Remember, problems with the capacitor was what made Doc B land in our world."

"Yes," Doc agreed, nodding. "That would make sense."

"Interesting," Emmett mused. "When Marty ended up visiting different dimensions, it was due to changes in the flux dispersal field, caused by the car door not being closed all the way."

"Which I didn't notice for a couple days," the local Marty said with a little shudder. "Not an experience I'd like to repeat."

Both Doc and Marty looked curious at this comment, but visiting Jules changed the subject, slightly. "Was it another DeLorean, or an Aerovette?" he asked.

Emmett blinked, looking a little startled. "Neither," he said, glancing at his counterpart. "Wasn't the DeLorean destroyed?"

"Oh, no, it was," Doc said. "It was struck by a train almost immediately after Marty returned from 1885."

"I hear that," local Marty said. "Same thing happened to me, too — and I'm still a little hacked with Doc for not even telling me he *planned* to have that happen even before we started to leave 1885."

As visiting Marty looked at the older alternate version of himself, surprised, Doc continued his explanation. "I built another time machine into a DeLorean shortly after my family moved back to 1985 — it was finished in early January of '86. Unfortunately, when Marty and I went to the future on an errand in '91, it was destroyed in an auto accident and we had to make a new machine to get back home. That one was built into a Chevrolet Aerovette, which will come onto the market about ten years from now."

“Those are sweet,” the local Verne said, sounding a little envious. “I saw some pictures of those in a car magazine a couple years ago, when they were a concept car.”

“I constructed a second time machine into a Jaguar XK8 in about five years ago,” Emmett said. “DeLoreans were a little impractical for me by the mid-90s — though I do own one, now, as a normal means of transportation.”

Visiting Jules looked jealous. “A Jag — nice,” was his opinion.

“Don’t even get started,” Doc warned his son. “There’s no way we could afford a car like that — and certainly not for you.”

“But I’m not asking for a Jag — I’d be happy with a junker at this point,” Jules said.

The local Jules looked surprised. “You don’t have your own car?” he asked.

“No — Verne and I don’t even share one,” the teen said, frowning faintly at his father, who returned the unhappy expression in his direction, clearly telling him to drop the matter.

“Lame,” was local Verne’s opinion, earning a surprised look from his counterpart. “We both have our own wheels, though mine’s more of a work in progress than Jules’. Just getting it to start’s about a fifty-fifty shot, most of the time.”

Emmett immediately tried to change the subject, perhaps catching the way his not-offspring were eyeing his own with definite envy and glancing to their parents with looks that promised a nice discussion later. “Did you still want to have Clara visit a doctor?” he asked Doc.

The inventor nodded quickly, much to his wife’s chagrin. “Do you think it’ll create any problems if something is wrong with her?” he asked. “They’ll probably assume that she’s yours.”

“Not really,” Emmett said after a moment of thought. “If something *is* wrong or shows up on a test, then we can use the excuse that the test was flawed or mistaken. It *does* happen. I should probably be the one to take her, though, just so I can answer any questions they throw at me.”

“Of course,” Doc agreed immediately. “Could we do it after dinner?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Clara frowned faintly as she listened to the two men discuss her just a few feet away. Her Emmett was being ridiculous, she felt. She would admit that she hadn’t felt very well that morning — or, frankly, for a number of mornings over the last couple weeks. That she had fainted had come as a complete and total shock to her as much as it had to everyone else. She could only assume that an empty stomach had been at fault, particularly since she hadn’t had much to eat the night before. The food then — roasted hot dogs, chips, and salad — had made her stomach turn. She felt a little better now, but any arguing with her husband over the matter wouldn’t do a bit of good. Clara could only hope that she was right and nothing was wrong with her; further complications now would just add to their problems. And, frankly, she thought they had enough of those, already.

As the adults finished their meal in the dining room, and Emmett and Clara prepared to visit the clinic, the kids in the rec room were already trying to find ways to amuse themselves. While the local Emily did her best to keep Marty Junior entertained, six-year-old Emily, feeling better after *finally* eating, took her first real look around the room she had been left in by her mother.

The girl’s understanding of their current situation was vague at best. She knew that something bad had happened to Mommy that had made her fall over on the beach, and that that was why they had left their camping trip so quickly. And she knew that something was wrong with the train that they sometimes traveled in, on mysterious and secret family vacations called “time travel,” that she wasn’t supposed to talk about to the people outside her family — excluding Marty and Jennifer. Emily also knew that they were in a strange place that wasn’t home, where everyone in her family, and Marty and Jennifer, had almost-identical twins for some reason. It had scared her, at first, since she had once overheard her older brothers talking about a bad twin of their Daddy coming for a visit before she was born.

But now, with a full stomach and clean clothes on her back, Emily had a clearer perspective of the situation. These twin people weren't evil and mean; in fact, they seemed a lot like her own family members and the McFlys she knew. For some reason the Marty and Jennifer twins had kids, now, a three-year-old son and an almost-five-year-old daughter, and that interested her considerably, even though she wanted to marry Marty herself, when she got older. And the twin Mommy and Daddy had a daughter named Emily, too, but an older one who didn't share the big blue eyes and same face she had, as well as a son her age named Chris. Emily didn't know how long they were going to be staying at this big, big house — overnight, at least — but now that she wasn't feeling so nervous, she wasted little time in searching for something interesting to do.

Unfortunately, at first glance, the room she was in looked a little boring — there were no real toys she could see around, none that a six-year-old would want to play with, anyway. There weren't even coloring books, or sheets of clean, white paper begging to be drawn on. About the only thing she saw remotely interesting was what appeared to be a video game machine of some kind settled near the large television, and she didn't hesitate to ask about that.

"Can we play some games?" she asked the older Emily. The nearly twelve-year-old studied her younger namesake for a moment, a scrutiny that the little girl didn't quite understand, then shrugged.

"I don't see why not," she said. "Chris, do you want to show her how?"

The six-year-old boy, who had been staring at the Emily of his age on and off throughout the meal, shrugged in return. "Okay," he agreed. "Do you have video games at your house?"

"My brother Verne has a Super Nintendo and a Sega that he lets me use," Emily said. Chris looked at her a little oddly as she settled down on the floor before the TV, other Marty and Jennifer's daughter, Marlene, following them.

"Those are real old," he said as he turned on the TV and the game system.

"No they're not," Emily said, frowning as she brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "They're younger'n me. What do you got?"

"A Playstation 2 and a Dreamcast," Chris said.

Emily sniffed, skeptical. "Never heard of 'em," she said.

Marlene, who had been watching Emily throughout the evening with little frowns and grimaces, spoke up then. "Chris is tellin' the truth," she insisted, scooting closer to the boy until she was almost touching him. "He's got the best score ever on the game."

"Which game?" Emily asked the younger girl.

"All of 'em," Marlene said. She looked at Chris and smiled at him. "Can I play, too?" she asked.

Chris glanced at her as he passed Emily one of the controllers. "Maybe after the first round. It's only a two player game, and Emily asked first. You're gonna hafta wait."

Marlene frowned at this bit of news, her blue eyes narrowing in Emily's direction. The other girl was oblivious, though. The game Chris had loaded was a racing game, she saw immediately, with graphics and details that she hadn't seen outside of the mall arcade. She squealed at the sight of it, delighted.

"Oh, wow, this is neat! How can you get away with havin' arcade games here?"

Chris shrugged. "I dunno. I told you, you got old systems."

Emily tossed her hair over her back, out of her way. "Well, then, I'm gonna ask for one of these for my birthday."

They started to play the game, Chris winning the first race as Emily was still getting used to the unfamiliar control in her hand. Marlene piped up again during the brief pause in the game.

"Do you got a boyfriend?" she asked Emily, curious.

"Yeah," Emily said. "But he's an *older* man." She giggled. Marlene smiled back, finally, her eyes widening.

"What's his name?" she asked, interested in this bit of gossip.

"It's Marty," Emily said. Across the room, the older Emily dropped one of the plates she'd been cleaning off a table set up, then was forced to slam her hand over her mouth against the laughter wanting to escape. None of the kids gathered before the TV noticed.

"That's my Daddy's name," Marlene said, amazed by this coincidence.

"I know," Emily said. "That's who I'm gonna marry someday."

Marlene looked scandalized. She drew back from Emily and closer to Chris, who was engrossed in his selection of the proper car and customizing the details on it. "You can't marry my Daddy, he's already married!" she said, frowning once more at the six-year-old girl.

Emily shrugged vaguely. "He is now, but maybe he won't be later," she said. "They're fighting, now, you know."

Marlene blinked, confused. "Mommy and Daddy are fighting?"

Emily nodded sagely. "And sometimes when parents fight, they break up. One of my friends at school, Karen Carter, had that happen to her parents when she was four. Now her Daddy lives in Las Vegas and she lives with her Mommy and her brother."

Marlene edged even closer to Chris. Emily changed the subject a little, not understanding how her words were being taken by the daughter of the Other Marty and Jennifer. "Do you got a boyfriend?"

"Maybe," Marlene said rather coyly, still looking bothered by what Emily had told her. She looked at Chris, still distracted by the computer game. "I'm gonna marry him someday," she said softly, pointing to the boy.

"Really?" Emily asked, amazed. "Wow. So you like an older man, too!"

Marlene nodded firmly. "Just remember that I saw him first," she warned, her tone threatening dire consequences if that wasn't understood.

Emily rolled her eyes. "I'm just visitin'," she said. "I won't be here long enough for anything to happen with your boyfriend."

Marlene didn't look particularly relieved by this, but she nodded once. Emily turned her attention back to the screen, now that Chris had finished preparing his racing vehicle for their next match, and focused on that. This was a lot better than camping, she had to admit, and she hoped they didn't have to leave *too* soon. One could get used to the neat computer games here. And if they had games this great here, she was *very* eager to see a computer in this house and what it could do. Definitely.

During the drive to the clinic, the other Clara said little to Emmett, seemingly fascinated by the scenery passing by outside the car window. The scientist wondered if their worlds were different enough to make the layout and maybe even cause the topography of Hill Valley to be significantly changed. Earlier, Doc had mentioned not recognizing Silver Creek Canyon at all as something from his home, but Emmett wasn't sure if one could base an assumption solely on that. He'd have to ask more questions, later, once things settled down a little.

The clinic was nearly empty when they got there, perhaps due to the still-gloomy weather or simply the hour of the day. Emmett filled out the forms for the visitor, bantering good-naturedly with the nurse on duty who was amazed it wasn't *him* who needed to be seen by the doctors for another accident in the lab. Clara was quiet, speaking softly when she had to and looking distinctly uneasy in her surroundings. It seemed one thing she shared with her counterpart was a skittishness with doctors, and Emmett wondered if that was a common thread due to their upbringing in a more primitive time, medically speaking. It would make a great deal of sense, though he had to wonder if his Clara and this Clara even had the same histories. If he didn't share the same birthdate as the visiting Doc, it suggested to him that perhaps the histories of the others might have similar discrepancies from their doubles.

Clara's name was called after only a few minutes and she headed back with a nervous smile to Emmett. "Good luck," he said softly.

"Thanks," she said, turning to follow the nurse through the door to the examining rooms in the back.

The inventor settled back in the chair to begin his wait, picking up a copy of the latest *Time*. He flipped through the pages without seeing them, though, heavily preoccupied by a number of things, now. Having heard a little more about the damage the train had sustained, particularly to the flux capacitor, he was relieved that the visitors hadn't been staying longer in the past of an alternate dimension, intrigued that damage to the capacitor had apparently had a side effect of propelling travelers in a machine to another dimension, and concerned that the damage might take a while to repair, meaning that sooner or later he was going to have to break the news to the visitors about the nasty side effects such traveling had on foreigners.

The matter of the flux capacitor was particularly interesting to him. From comments made throughout the evening by the visitors, he was given to assume that such a thing had happened before, apparently, to Marty and Jennifer (and, frankly, he was amazed that his counterpart had allowed them both access and permission to use a time machine without him along, especially on something that sounded like a pleasure trip, to Woodstock). That accident had landed them in a foreign reality — though, presumably, not long enough to have them aware of the subatomic compatibility problems — and another accident had brought them another Emmett Brown counterpart whom the group had apparently dubbed "Doc B." He had to wonder if such a phenomena with the capacitors was limited to that world or if something similar would happen if he recreated the same circumstances with his own machines. It would seem that such an occurrence would have a very slim chance of working; too much damage, and the things wouldn't operate at *all*, stranding the travelers.

That his Marty had crossed dimensions because of a poorly-sealed time vehicle and *not* because of a damaged capacitor also brought up an interesting question: Was the reason that these visitors were so different due to the different means of achieving dimensional travel? Did a damaged flux capacitor propel travelers to an entirely different dimensional neighborhood, as it were, than a poorly shut or sealed door? Or was it just a fantastic coincidence?

Emmett sighed softly at the mental puzzle, finding it a more welcome thing to muddle over than the problems with the fusion engine. He realized with a start that he hadn't worried once about that since arriving back home. It wasn't too surprising, though, he supposed; there were considerably more serious things to focus his attention on, now. If he hadn't known how impossible such a thing would be, he would've half-expected that his family had planned the entire matter of the visiting counterparts, knowing it would be an excellent distraction to the overworked Emmett.

Clara wasn't in the examining room for more than twenty minutes, and when she did emerge, there was a decidedly odd expression on her face. She didn't say anything to Emmett about it, and he didn't ask, until they were in the DeLorean again returning back to his home.

"They didn't find anything wrong, did they?" he wanted to know.

Clara looked away from the window, her face half in shadow now, with the combination of dusk and rain clouds still above. "No," she said, a queer note to her voice. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly?" Emmett echoed, suspicious.

Clara bit her lip and knotted her hands together in her lap. "Ah, well, I suppose the word will be out tomorrow, but... well, I'd like to speak with my Emmett about it, first. He might be a little hurt if he wasn't the first to know."

About what? Emmett wondered, but nodded his understanding. "Of course," he agreed. "I just hope it's not bad news."

"No, it's not," the woman who wasn't his wife said softly. "I suppose it's just... unexpected."

Doc stared at his wife, standing across from him in their guest suite, where she had ushered him up almost immediately upon her return from the health clinic. "You can't be," he said, numbly.

Clara nodded. "I am," she said, her mouth twitching, as if uncertain whether to smile or frown. "I'm as shocked

as you are, if it's any consolation...."

"Pregnant," Doc said, the word feeling foreign on his lips. "Great Scott, Clara, you're going to be fifty-one on your next birthday!"

"I realize that, Emmett," she said, a little coolly. "But when one is this age, you don't expect this sort of thing to happen anymore."

Doc sighed, knowing there was no use in laying the blame anywhere, especially not on Clara. It took two to conceive a child, after all. "How far along are you?"

"They suspect about four or five weeks. Not as far along as I was when we found out about Emily, last time, but this would explain why I fainted today and have been feeling a little fluish, lately."

The inventor winced. "You never fainted with the other kids," he said, rising from the edge of the bed where Clara had had him sit, prior to blurting out her news. "Clara, this is a nightmare!"

As Doc began to pace, his wife looked at him even more coolly, folding her arms across her chest. "Emmett, is this going to be a repeat of the times I told you about the other children? Because if it is, I don't think I can handle it, anymore. This has rattled me as well."

"I'm not worried about having another baby," Doc hurried to assure her. "It's... well, it's your health. And the child's. My God, Clara, we're in another time right now — and another dimension! You didn't travel at *all* in this sort of condition with the others! It could have serious negative repercussions on a developing unborn baby! You didn't faint with the others," he said again, that point bothering him considerably.

"I'm also older, as you pointed out," Clara said. "The doctor said that such a thing can happen sometimes, especially if one doesn't eat well — and I hadn't been at all on our trip." She sat down as he continued to pace, her face thoughtful, now. "Do you suppose this has anything to do with the rejuvenations we had a few months ago?"

Doc went three more steps then slammed to a halt with a wince. "Probably," was his immediate opinion. "Damn, I should've known about that. One of the so-called side effects can be increased fertility, but I really never worried about it because... well, you hadn't been rejuvenated, too." The scientist sighed heavily at this oversight, massaging his forehead. "Well, now we have a good idea about how this could've happened at our age...."

"This isn't a disaster, Emmett," Clara said softly. "Our counterparts here had another child after Emily. Maybe this is fated for us."

"I'd blame it away as coincidence, rather," Doc muttered. He considered something a moment, then sighed and decided he might as well say it. "The reason I'm concerned now is... well, when you had Emily, during the delivery, you lost a lot of blood."

"I know about that," Clara said.

"No, you don't, not entirely," the inventor said as gently as he could. "They couldn't stop the bleeding right away. They had to give you a transfusion, remember? It was quite serious. If it was like that last time, then this pregnancy is going to be *very* high risk. I want you to understand that. I want you to take it *very* easy — and the moment we're back you need to see your doctor so they can give you a thorough examination."

"I won't take unnecessary risks," she said firmly. "I don't want to lose this baby — or put my own life in danger."

Doc sighed again, looking out one of the windows in the room. "We already *are* taking an unnecessary risk by being here," he said. "I don't like the idea of you time traveling when you're expecting, let alone crossing into a foreign dimension. For all I know, there could be risks with such travel and one's health."

"There doesn't appear to be, not from what you and Marty have seen so far," she said, standing and joining him at the window. "Emmett, don't worry about me. It will be okay. It *will*," she emphasized, slipping her arm around him and leaning her head on his shoulder. Doc hugged her close, uneasy with how fragile she felt under his hands.

"When should we tell the kids?" he asked after a moment of silence.

“Soon,” Clara said. “But not quite yet. We should probably let your counterpart and the other me know about it, though. No later than tomorrow. The medical records are going to have her name on it, after all.”

“True.” He was quiet for another moment, holding his wife and looking out at the foreign, darkening world beyond the panes of glass. “Do you think we’re up to doing this again?”

“I don’t see why not,” Clara said. “And I’m quite sure this will be the last time.”

“I’m positive it will be,” Doc said, rather grimly. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Although the travelers had just started their day when they arrived in the future other dimension’s late afternoon, by eleven that evening, they were ready — or at least willing — to turn in when their hosts did. It had been a stressful and exhausting day, and the camping trip hadn’t exactly been relaxing for anyone involved. Local Marty and Jennifer had left with their kids around nine, much to the visiting Marty’s disappointment. He was hoping for the chance to speak with his slightly older counterpart and see how his life had gone since ‘94, and what he was doing now. Obviously, if he had a family and was still married, he was doing something right. But such an opportunity hadn’t presented itself after dinner, between cleaning up and entertaining small children, and then Marty trying to figure out how the hell he and Jennifer were going to get through the next God knew how many days without biting each other’s heads off.

The silent treatment from his wife lasted through dinner, into the evening, the preparations for bed, and turning out the lights. They lay at opposite sides of the bed, as far apart two people could be without falling off, and perhaps that would’ve worked out had Jennifer not startled Marty just as he was starting to doze off by yanking the blankets over to her side. The cool breeze from the air conditioning was definitely unwelcome, and Marty sat up immediately, annoyed. He didn’t say anything, not right away, and merely grabbed the edge of the bedding closest to him and pulled it back — only to have it snatched out of his hands a moment later.

“Jennifer,” he said, his irritation clear in his voice.

“What?” Jennifer snapped, her back to him.

“Think you could part with some of those blankets? It’s summer, for cryin’ out loud!”

“Then you shouldn’t be cold,” Jennifer said, clutching the bedding even tighter around her.

Marty didn’t buy that at all. He reached over and snapped on one of the lamps next to the bed. The illumination dazzled his eyes for a moment, but he knew it would be equally annoying to Jennifer. He grabbed the edge of the bedding and pulled, hard. “Jennifer, just give — me — one — of — the — blankets!” he grunted as he tried to tug something free, unsuccessfully, from his wife’s grip. Finally, when it became clear that wasn’t going to work, Marty let go and almost jumped out of the bed. “Fine Jen, that’s *real* mature!”

“More mature than you’re being,” Jennifer said, finally sitting up and turning to look at him. Her eyes were narrowed darkly in his direction. “Funny how you were so nice to the other Jennifer tonight, so understanding.”

Ah, so here it came. Marty had been waiting for this all evening. He stood at the foot of the bed with his body tensed, staring at her, waiting for it to finish, for the words to be said. Jennifer’s voice rose. “But you can’t even show me, your wife, the same sort of consideration.”

“Oh, excuse me for being polite to someone I don’t even know,” Marty shot back. “You could try seeing things from my side, you know. How do you think I feel, hearing you go on and on about how Jennifer McFly isn’t good enough for you? How do you think that makes me feel, Jen?”

“You don’t understand at all!” Jennifer said, rolling her eyes. “My God, Marty, I just want a professional name for myself, an identity of my own for work.”

“Why?” Marty asked. “Why, for god’s sake, is it so important for you to keep those so separate? Are you ashamed of me? Because I’m the struggling musician and you’re the big successful newswoman, who has people come up to you and ask for your autograph or a picture?”

“That’s only happened a couple times,” Jennifer said, neatly skipping her spouse’s questions. “And how could you marry someone other than me?”

Marty blinked, genuinely confused by that question. “What are you talking about?”

“That woman, that Jennifer that your other self was with tonight — she wasn’t me! She didn’t look like me. And I saw you looking at her tonight, all during dinner and after. You were staring at her, Marty! What’s wrong, do you have regrets about marrying the Jennifer you did? Do you think your other self got a better deal?” There was a genuine anguish to the words, but Marty was completely oblivious to it, her questions bringing up another point that he had considered earlier in the evening. Well, if she was going to say it, he might as well, too.

“Now you know how I felt when I was in that twisted future,” Marty said. “You were married to Ben Foster then, Jen — the same guy you’re anchoring with, now. That’s how you two met! What’s the *matter* with you lately? Is that pompous creep more attractive to you now than I am? Is he the one telling you to separate your name from mine, all in the name of work? Because it happened once before!”

Jennifer glared at him. “How *dare* you!” she exclaimed. “I would never, *ever* entertain the mere *thought* of cheating on you!”

“Well, you just accused me of doing that — and with yourself, of all people!” The irony of the situation struck him, then, and he started to laugh. His wife was *not* amused; her face had paled in anger, the only color being bright, pink spots burning in her cheeks. She grabbed the pillow from his side of the bed and hurled it across the room at him. Marty ducked the throw, and the pillow smashed into a picture hanging on the wall, knocking it off the hook from which it was suspended with a noisy crash that could’ve wakened the dead. The bad aim and the murder of the innocent picture just made him laugh all the more.

“Get out, Marty!” she demanded.

The young man held his breath, trying to stop laughing. After a moment, the urge finally passed and he let out the air in a sigh. “Sure,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Where do you expect me to go? The train, again?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Jennifer said, her voice low and threatening. “Get out. Now. I can’t look at you. I can even be in the same room as you.”

Marty studied her a moment with a frown and furrowed brow, noting how she had pressed herself firmly against the headboard, clutching the entire wealth of bedding so close, she looked almost like a contemporary mummy. Her face was turned away from him, towards the windowless wall. “Fine,” he said. “Fine, let’s just have a rerun of last night.”

“You started it,” Jennifer said flatly.

Marty had done a fairly good job of keeping his temper in check during the entire argument, but with that completely unwarranted accusation, he couldn’t take it anymore. He didn’t snap, not quite, but he didn’t think he’d ever been madder at Jennifer than he was at that moment. “No,” he corrected immediately, scooping up the discarded pillow from the floor. “*You* did weeks ago, Jen, when you decided that being Jennifer McFly wasn’t good enough now that you had a big promotion, a fat paycheck, and were anchoring the desk every morning! I never thought fame would go to *your* head, but I guess I was wrong. Well, fine, go ahead, distance yourself from your poor, struggling, musician husband! Use the goddamn Parker name for all I care. But I’m never going to support it, and I’ll never forgive you for doing it.” He paused, his hand on the door, Jennifer’s mouth twitching in her very still face. “Your counterpart used McFly in her field, you know, and she’s done fine!”

He opened the door and stepped out, prepared to make a dramatic exit — and found that he had accidentally opened the door that led to the bathroom, instead. Marty might’ve just ignored that and gone on his merry way — except that there were five pairs of eyes staring at him as the Juleses, the Vernes, and the older Emily had apparently been listening to the entire nasty conversation. Well, they hadn’t exactly been speaking quietly; Marty felt color flood his face when he realized that most, if not all, the members of the home had probably overheard a few things they shouldn’t’ve.

“Hey,” he said to the guilty looking kids, shutting the bedroom door at his back and walking towards the other exit, not bothering to stop and chat. As he headed for the stairs to the lower floor, the tossed pillow under one arm, he thought he heard someone weeping, softly, from one of the rooms. Jennifer, perhaps. Marty tightened his jaw, determined to ignore it, trying to think of something, anything, to distract him from the fact that his marriage was all but

over, now.

Things couldn't possibly get any worse than that.

Chapter Eight

“Well, *that* was rather unpleasant....”

“You think so? I considered it rather enlightening. I’ve been noticing a certain... distance between the two of them almost since they got here, and this explains the whole situation quite neatly.”

“Does it? I’m not so sure....”

Having just barely finished their own preparations for bed, local Emmett and Clara — whose room was very close to the inner guest room and happened to share a number of the same ventilation ducts — had heard every bit of that argument, loud and clear. The inventor strongly suspected that almost everyone else in the house had, too. Of all the sleeping rooms, only the guest suite was deliberately segregated from the others in terms of heating and cooling and such, to afford those staying there more privacy. Since little Emily was bunked out on the sofa bed in the suite’s parlor, it was just as well it had such a luxury. Blistering arguments between adults were something little kids shouldn’t be exposed to more than was unavoidable, and though Chris’ room was within easy earshot of this verbal battle, he tended to sleep very deeply, and had been out already when Clara had gone to make sure he was tucked in.

Thinking of what he’d just heard, Emmett sighed. “From what I’ve picked up, Jennifer’s counterpart chose to go into broadcast rather than print journalism. A bit surprising, given how our Jennifer dislikes being recognized by fans, and prefers that people know her and admire her work rather than her appearance on a television screen. Some difference in their backgrounds — perhaps the same thing that makes them physically different — changed that attitude in our guest. I wouldn’t care to base my entire opinion of the subject on one overheard argument, but it would appear that she was recently promoted into a prominent, highly-visible, and well-paying position, and now wants to use her maiden name rather than her married name in her job.”

“That’s not all that unusual for people in the media, though,” Clara pointed out, thinking of various things she’d heard about people in those professions. “It’s a way of protecting their personal life from their public life....”

Emmett snorted. “And how much privacy does using a different name, any name, provide when it’s your *face* people recognize and remember?”

She pondered this for a moment, then understood. “None at all, really. At best, it might turn people away when you say ‘no, I’m so-and-so,’ but it won’t stop them from seeing you and approaching you. Yes, I see what you mean. But Jennifer’s always seemed to be a much more sensible person, Emmett, not given to making bids for attention or craving that kind of fame.”

“Not *our* Jennifer,” the inventor agreed. “I remember that when she got that syndicated column job, she talked about using a pen name — a *completely* different pen name that could never be connected with her, because she wanted to be able to keep her home life quiet and be able to go places without being pestered. She didn’t do it because Marty thought she deserved some personal recognition for her work, and she decided she could live with the risk of someone recognizing her once in a while, since most people would really only know her name and not her face. And I suspect that given the right circumstances, even our Jennifer might succumb to the attractions of sudden fame, at least for a while. It also sounds as if their circumstances are being complicated by Marty’s career — or a lack of one. If he’s not doing as well as our Marty did at the same point in his life... well, that might provide a little extra fuel to his wife’s ego, giving her feelings of power and confidence ours never had in the same way because neither she nor Marty were ever that far apart in terms of their professional success. I’m sorry this had to happen to them, and I hope it doesn’t prove fatal to their relationship. But it seems to me that Jennifer picked what’s probably the worst sore spot Marty has.”

When Clara eyed him curiously, he explained. “His family name. I don’t remember things the same way Marty does because when he changed his parents’ past, I wasn’t a time traveler; my perception of reality changed along with everyone else’s. But I saw enough of young George McFly, knew some things about *his* father, Arthur, and have heard Marty tell me in extensive detail how his life had been before he accidentally went back to 1955. *No McFly has ever amounted to anything in the history of Hill Valley.* That was the attitude in his ears every day of his life, until history changed. Jennifer doesn’t remember it — nobody but Marty remembers it. But he *does* remember it. If you’d grown up thinking that your father was a loser, his father was a loser, your entire family was a bunch of losers, and that *you* were doomed to be a loser, you wouldn’t forget the feelings so easily, even when things appeared to change. And if his Jennifer saw their family in 2015 and told him about it, like ours did, and old Biff told him that he’d taken his life and flushed it down the toilet... Well, if you were having trouble making a success of yourself, mightn’t you worry that in the

end, you were going to wind up a loser, too, because you'd seen and heard of a future in which it happened, for real?"

Clara nodded as she absorbed these things. "Yes, I understand. From what I heard all evening long, there may be some differences between our visitors and us, but a number of significant things are the same, and the change in Marty's family appears to be one of them. But Emmett, if what you're saying is true, Jennifer *has* to understand that insisting on using her maiden name — especially only now, *after* she achieves success — is going to hurt Marty...."

"Oh, I suppose she knows it on some subliminal level, but from that argument, it sounds as if she's not ready to acknowledge it consciously. And while I know our Jennifer would never even think of leaving Marty for another man, I can't say the same about this one, not for certain. She's *not* precisely the same person, I don't know her, and I don't know the details of their situation. And without knowing more than we do, we certainly can't interfere. Even if we did know, we probably shouldn't. They have to work this out for themselves."

Clara sighed. "It's still painful to hear things like that. It's just as well our Marty and Jennifer went home for the night and took the children with them. I'm sure hearing people who look and sound very much like their parents fighting like that would upset them."

Emmett grunted softly. "It upset *me*, though not the same way it would upset the kids. And I'm sure they had no idea they'd be heard by everyone in the house."

"I can't imagine they did. Heavens knows, if I were to have an argument like that while I was a guest in someone else's home, I'd die from embarrassment when I found out it could be so easily overheard. In the morning, we should find a discreet way of mentioning it to them, if we can."

"If it's possible. No matter what, it's going to be embarrassing, especially if one of the kids heard and brings it up over breakfast."

The teacher grimaced at that possible scenario. "We should warn *them* to keep quiet about it, then. And if you tell Marty, I'll tell Jennifer — since I doubt we'll have an opportunity to speak to them together, in private."

Her husband agreed, sighing once again as he climbed into bed and turned out the lights. "I have to wonder if this kind of behavior is characteristic of this Marty and Jennifer, or if ours have fights like this, too, and somehow have managed to keep it a secret from the rest of the world for eleven years. Oh, I've heard them quibble and argue before, but not like this."

Clara smiled softly as she slipped under the covers. "Just because we haven't seen it doesn't mean it never happens. After all, I don't believe we've ever had an honest to goodness fight in public, but it's not because we never argue."

"Maybe, but even at our worst, I can't ever remember having an argument quite that..." He was at a loss for the appropriate word.

"Immature?" she provided accurately. "We did once, if you recall, but we never argued like that in front of the children or guests, and we did learn from the experience. They'll learn, too. If they really love each other, they'll find a way through this. And if they don't... well, they aren't our Marty and Jennifer, Emmett. In their world, it may not be destined for them to stay together and raise a family. From what little we've seen, their lives are remarkably different, and this may be their time for a parting of the ways. It may hurt to see it because they are so much like our friends, but we really shouldn't interfere with their lives, as you said."

"I know. And I won't. We need to concentrate on helping them all get back to where they belong, as quickly as possible."

Clara was quiet for a minute. "How long do you think that might be? If their flux capacitor is destroyed...."

"That's not as big a problem as it seems," Emmett assured her with surprising confidence. He elaborated. "Remember when I upgraded the systems in both the Jag and the train last summer? I removed the original flux capacitor from both vehicles and have them in storage in my lab. Unless my counterpart's made significant modifications to the train's systems or devised upgrades that use technology from their world that's very different from our own, there shouldn't be much problem removing the dead equipment and replacing it with what I removed from our train. So long as the computers responsible for programming and effecting the actual temporal transition are their

original equipment, they should be able to make a successful jump back to their own dimension, once all the other damage is repaired. *That's* what could potentially take more time than I'd like. So many parts of the train were hand-made, replacing or repairing even what appears to be minor damage could take weeks, if there's too much of it."

He could hear his wife's frown. "And if it does, I take it that means you won't be coming with us to Europe."

She in turn heard his sigh. "Certainly not right away, until I know I've done all I can to help them return home. This *is* more important than a vacation, Clara."

She conceded with a sound of resignation. "I know, I know. It just seems that something's conspiring against you going with us. On the day Peter finally kicks you out of EPB — and yes, dear, I know he did, he told me he had when he called to let us know about what he'd discovered at the airport — visitors from another dimension show up on the back doorstep, with problems only you can help them solve. I'm beginning to feel as if you've managed to conspire with Fate to make *sure* you don't have to go."

"That's not true. I do want to go, and I've already turned over the work on the engine problem to the staff. But you know they can't survive here indefinitely. We know that entering n-dimensional space can help negate the side-effects of being outside one's home dimension, but we don't know if that's a true solution or only a delaying tactic. For all we know, it's just slowing the inevitable, not stopping it. And they *are* our counterparts, yours and mine and the kids' and Marty's and Jennifer's. I couldn't *not* help them any more than my physician counterpart from that last dimension Marty visited could stay at home when he knew Marty was trying to find help for me when I was injured in a way that happened to be his area of expertise. I know it feels like bad timing to you, but if some fate was at work today, maybe it was meant for me to be free to help these people get home again. If I miss our vacation or have to join you later because of it, is that too much of a price to pay to help them survive?"

"No," she had to admit with a shake of her head he could not see. "You're right, of course, this does have to come first, and if worse comes to worst, the rest of us will stay home, too, until we can all go together. But after this, you *are* coming with us, even if it's just on a weekend trip to Sacramento and away from anything even vaguely resembling work. You have a responsibility to your family, too, and I'm *not* going to let you forget it!"

"I won't, I promise," he swore.

She thought it sounded a little too quick a response to be completely earnest, but she accepted it. "And I'll hold you to that," she said in her best no-nonsense teacher voice. "By the way, was there anything wrong with my counterpart that might be a sign of this interdimensional incompatibility trouble?"

She heard him shrug. "Not that she told me. Something was up, and she wanted a chance to tell my counterpart first. She didn't sound as if she was frightened or worried, more... confused. You don't know what sort of thing might confuse *you* under similar circumstances, do you?"

"Nothing I can think of," Clara admitted after considering it. "But if it *is* something serious and they can't return home right away, I suspect they'll tell us."

"I suppose so. Even if it is, I can't think of anything we couldn't take care of by making use of future medicine. It didn't hurt my physician counterpart, so far as we know. Just so long as she isn't pregnant, there shouldn't be any problem we can't deal with."

After Marty stalked out of the big bathroom to escape his angry wife, the five eavesdropping kids high-tailed it out of there rather than run the risk of Jennifer coming after him and catching them there. They slipped into the sunroom just down the hall, which visiting Verne had claimed for his temporary quarters, since, aside from a comfortable futon bed, it also boasted a TV and sound system and all the other electronic entertainment gadgets a kid his age liked to have available. They spoke quietly, to make sure their voices wouldn't carry into the guest suite bedroom just beyond the north wall of the room.

"That didn't sound good," local Jules said, his dark eyes wide with shock. "I've *never* heard Marty *or* Jennifer yell like that...!"

Visiting Jules groaned. "We've heard entirely too much of them yelling like that ever since we started this so-

called vacation.”

“Even before that,” his brother confirmed. “Watching them eat supper tonight’s the longest I’ve seen them go without bickering ever since Jennifer got that promotion at work. It doesn’t sound like a big deal to me. My girlfriend Amber says she’s gonna use her own name when she makes it into movies or TV, and it wouldn’t bother me....”

Both Jules and local Verne wrinkled their noses at him. “You’ve got a girlfriend named Amber?” the latter asked. “What kind of name is that, some sort of Hollyweird thing?”

“Annoying, just like she is,” visiting Jules assured him, before turning back to his brother. “For one thing, Verne, I doubt very much that Amber thinks of herself as your ‘girlfriend,’ not considering the abysmal way she treats you and flagrantly takes advantage of you at every opportunity. That scarcely makes you an expert on the subject of romantic relationships. Moreover, I suspect it’s a big deal to Marty because Jennifer’s been using her married name as a television news reporter for several years, now, and only made this decision about going back to her maiden name *after* she was given a significant promotion. If she’d been using it all along, I doubt Marty would be reacting so badly.”

Emily winced, suddenly remembering things she’d heard earlier in the evening. “They haven’t been yelling like this in front of your sister, have they?” When her not-brothers nodded in confirmation, she hissed softly. “That explains what she was telling Marlie and Chris. She thinks they’re gonna get divorced ‘cause they’re fighting so much, and that means she’ll be free to marry Marty when she grows up.”

Both other-dimension Jules and Verne made sounds and expressions of exasperation. “I don’t know where she picked up that crazy idea,” Verne opined, “but she’s sure not letting it go. All of us have tried to tell her to give it up, but Mom and Dad decided there’s no point, anymore, she’ll give up when she’s ready. As long as it’s not hurting anybody....”

“But it *is*,” Emily insisted. “She told all of that stuff about Marty and Jennifer to Marlene. She’s not even five, yet, and I don’t think she really understands that your sister was talking about *your* Marty and Jennifer, not her parents. Marlie’s a *real* impressionable kid, and after your Emily told her about them fighting a lot and her friend’s parents breaking up, Marlie got awfully quiet. She’s probably scared to death that it’s *her* parents who are gonna split, not some people who just happen to look like ‘em and have the same names.”

Both of her brothers groaned. “Oh, great,” Verne grumbled, “that’s just what she didn’t need to hear. You remember what happened a couple months ago when Marty’s friend Eric got separated from his wife and she went to visit Jennifer and cried all over her for a few hours. Marlie had nightmares about losing her folks for weeks....”

“That *doesn’t* sound good,” visiting Jules agreed. “We should tell Emmy not to talk about it in front of her.”

“Better still,” his double added, “we should call Marty and Jennifer in the morning and tell them not to bring the kids over again, if they can find someone to watch them. They’re both too young to really understand what’s going on. If it’s scaring Marlie....”

“That’s a good idea,” his sister agreed, “but don’t you *dare* tell ‘em I’ll babysit! Mom and Dad said I can skip going to school for the rest of the week ‘cause you and Chris are already done, Verne’s only got one more day of finals, and we’re just killing time until report cards come out. They want me to keep an eye on Chris and their Emily until they can go home. Babysitting two six-year-olds for God knows how long is gonna be bad enough. Junior gets bored way too easy, and Marlie’s always hanging all over Chris and driving him nuts. No way I’m gonna referee *that* for days!”

Other Jules saw her point. “It might be best all around, then, if they just stayed home, or if Jennifer stayed at home with the kids, if your Marty can be of assistance. I have a feeling our Jennifer would be happier if she didn’t see her counterpart’s face for a while.”

“I’ll bet,” local Verne had to agree, a little grouchy because of his sister’s reminder that he still had one more day of school to go and would miss out on anything interesting that might happen during the day, like checking out the train he’d seen come down. “Sounded to me like she blames her Marty ‘cause *her* counterpart looks different and his doesn’t.”

His brother clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Some so-called adults can be more immature than little kids. Do you think we should tell Mom and Dad about this?”

The brown-eyed blond snorted. "Why bother? You know how the ventilation ducts carry all the noise from that room into its whole half of the house. Remember that time we were gonna sneak off with the train and used that guest room to do all our planning 'cause it didn't have any windows and wasn't right next to Dad's study, and we thought no one would hear anything? Dad knew *everything*, and for years after that, I thought he could read minds or something, until I was in their bedroom and heard somebody talking in the other room. Good as an intercom."

"That's true. It's probably a good thing your sister's in the guest suite with your parents," Jules told their visitors. "It's pretty well sound-proofed, and it's not likely they heard much of it, if they heard it at all."

Visiting Verne nodded. "Yeah, it's just as well Emmy didn't hear another fight between Marty and Jennifer. But I suppose we should tell *our* Mom and Dad about it in the morning."

His Jules agreed. "Definitely, and *not* in front of Emily. I hope the two of them find a way to resolve their differences soon, or one of them may try to push the other out of the train and leave them behind when we head home."

The three local siblings glanced at one another, knowing from experience why it would be a bad idea for *any* of them to stay behind. When Verne opened his mouth and would have explained the dangers of living in another dimension for more than a few days, Jules deftly elbowed him, caught his eye, and shook his head. Verne understood what he was trying not to say — that it would be cruel to warn their counterparts of dangers they might never have to face — and for the moment, they said nothing.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5, 2002
5:30 A.M. PDT

Come morning, Emmett was the first person up, not because he'd gotten as much sleep as his body wanted, but because his brain refused to shut down after he'd been wakened shortly before dawn by some elusive, peculiar dream. He laid there and tried his best to go back to sleep, but he wound up tossing and turning, and finally decided to get up so as not to disturb Clara, who was still sound asleep. After quietly cleaning up and getting dressed, he slipped downstairs without disturbing anyone else, checked in the kitchen to make sure they had enough supplies on hand to feed this unexpected army — they did, though a trip to the grocery store would be necessary if they couldn't send their guests back home before lunch — then started toward the laundry room to see if anyone had remembered to remove the last load of their guests' clothes from the dryer. As he passed by the bottom of the stairs on the far side of the informal dining room, he noticed that the door to the music room, directly across from the stairs, was ajar. Normally, they left it closed so that the room's climate control systems would protect the wood of the baby grand piano, and keep the instrument from going out of tune too often. Someone had probably peeked inside and hadn't closed the door firmly enough to latch it; it happened all the time after Emily had been practicing, or was the last one out after her weekly lesson with Marty. He really needed to get around to fixing that, since there wasn't much point in maintaining that separate environment if the door was forever hanging open. When he reached inside to grasp the knob, however, he heard the noise of someone shifting position on the room's small couch, followed by an unintelligible mutter.

"Marty?" he said quietly, all but certain of the occupant, who would've known nothing about the door's recalcitrant latch. If the visiting musician wasn't awake, he didn't want to disturb him, knowing that he quite likely hadn't slept well at all.

The answering, "Yeah," sounded more alert than the voice of someone whose sleep had been interrupted. "Are you my Doc or the other Doc?" he wanted to know, his brain still sufficiently fogged to be a little tactless.

"The other," Emmett said with faint amusement. The business of identifying multiple persons with the same name and just about everything else was difficult at times, but also a little absurd as well. "It doesn't sound as if you slept very well."

Marty made a noise that Jennifer would likely have called rude. "I don't *remember* the last time I slept well," he admitted. "Jen and I had an argument last night, and she kicked me out."

"I know," his host replied, stepping into the room to make sure their voices didn't carry to anyone upstairs who might be awake. "I suppose I should've warned you, but that room shares air ducts with most of the other rooms on that side of the house. It was rather audible, I'm afraid."

"Swell," Marty groaned, embarrassed to know how public their fight had been, but at the same time rather

relieved, too, since it spared him the need to make up excuses or explanations or lies. Having things out in the open could be a comfort, sometimes. "I hope you don't mind that I came down here. As far as I knew, every room upstairs was taken, and this was the first room I found when I came down those stairs just outside. It was dark, and when I tripped over the couch here, I just decided to stay for the night."

"It's not a problem," the inventor assured him, "Appropriate that you should wind up here, too, since this *is* the music room."

As he took a seat on the empty bench, Marty only then noticed the piano the room had been designed to house. "Figures," he said with a crooked hint of a smile. "I didn't even notice, it was so dark in here. I really did trip over the couch, looking for a light switch or something, and it was comfortable enough, so I just stayed where I was. Didn't sleep all that well, but it's not 'cause the couch was lumpy or anything. My mind just wouldn't shut down."

"Understandable, given the circumstances. If you're all still here tonight and you'd rather not risk a repeat of what happened by staying in the same room as Jennifer, there's a room just down the hall and around the corner that has a real bed in it. I set it up for Clara to use when Emily was a baby so she wouldn't have to be running up and down the stairs to the nursery when Emmy needed a nap and Clara wasn't doing things upstairs. We used it that way with Chris, too, and the other kids and visitors have used it for the same thing, from time to time. It'd be much more comfortable than this couch, and there's a bathroom just across the hall from it."

"Thanks," Marty said, genuinely appreciating the offer. "I'd like to think I won't need to take you up on it, but I'm not that naive. Did your Marty and Jennifer have problems like this when they were the same age?"

The white-maned head shook. "No, in fact, at the time, they were both very happy and excited because they'd just broken ground on their new house two months earlier, and were looking forward to moving in in early September. Our Jennifer never was in broadcast journalism, she'd worked as a regular reporter for the *Telegraph* ever since she interned with them during her last year in college. She was given her own column just before Marlene was born in '97, and it went into national syndication two years ago. Marty's had steady work as a songwriter for other rock musicians since he sold his first piece during his last year in high school. After he finished college and he and Jennifer were married, he worked on and off as a freelance producer and agent for other musicians, and gave private lessons to help supplement their income. By June of '94, he'd earned himself a fair amount of respect — and work. After Marlene came along, he started doing more production work, and he's been quite successful. He's had some very notable clients, and right now, he's collaborating on a major album, producing and writing and even a little performing."

"Cool," visiting Marty said with a soft whistle, impressed. "Wish I could say the same. Oh, things aren't going too bad given the way the music business usually is, but..."

"But it does n't pay off as easily or as quickly as other kinds of work," Emmett finished for him when he appeared disinclined to say more. "I understand, my Marty's told me all about it, ever since the first day he picked up a guitar and decided he wanted to be rock star. That was when he was ten, if I recall correctly."

The blue eyes widened. "Really? You guys knew each other when he was ten? I first got into music when I was ten, too, but I didn't meet my Doc until I was almost fourteen. It's weird, how most of us seem like the same people, but things you'd think would be the same aren't."

"I know," the inventor agreed wholeheartedly, thinking about certain surprise variations he'd discovered in talking to his own counterpart. "It's almost the exact opposite of what one usually experiences in time travel, where small changes can result in drastic differences. But for all we know, our worlds *are* quite different, even though our parts of it are oddly similar. This particular variation, for instance, could explain some of the differences I've noticed between you and my Marty. He and I would appear to have a somewhat different relationship than you and your Doc. Not surprising, given that we met just after he turned eight, and then I was pretty much out of the picture in his life during his college years. After I came home, we had to get to know each other all over again, in many ways."

A small frown creased the musician's tired face. "Yeah, I heard someone say something about you not coming back from the past until the middle of 1990. I don't think I would've liked that much, if you'd popped back to pick up Einstein and say 'don't worry,' then disappeared for five years."

Emmett chuckled. "My Marty didn't like it much at first, either, but I had good reasons for doing things the way I did, he eventually agreed that they *were* good reasons, and he learned to live with it. In some ways, I think it was a good thing for him. He learned a lot during those years, not just about music. He found out how to stand on his own

and make his own decisions about important things, and if I'd been around, things might've gone differently. It's academic, in any case. I did what I had to do, he did what he had to do, and in the end, it all turned out for the best."

Marty sighed. "I wish I could say the same. The way my life is going right now, I'd say it's turning into garbage." He gave his host a curious look, visible mostly in the early morning light coming through the door of the otherwise windowless room. "I don't suppose that we can count on anything we see here being the way the future's gonna go for us, can we?"

Again, the inventor shook his head. "I wouldn't. We would appear to be incarnations of each other on an existential level, but there're so many differences in our past experiences, I'm surprised we have much in common at all. The fact that we do — and don't — certainly gives one a lot to think about, in a metaphysical sense."

"I guess," Marty conceded, though he wasn't entirely sure what the scientist meant. "If your Marty ever ran into problems like this, what would you tell him to do?"

An odd wryness flitted across Emmett's face. "Nothing. That is, I'd tell him he has to work this out on his own. I could give him advice, I suppose, based on what I know of his situation and my own past experiences, but I'm not him, he's not me, and his relationship with his wife isn't something I can fix for him. I could offer support or a good whack upside the head to remind him when he's acting foolish, but he has to make his own choices and his own decisions, just like you do. I'm sorry that you and your Jennifer are having problems, and I believe I understand why this particular problem might be bothering you so, but I can't give you an answer."

The visiting musician accepted that, though a bit grudgingly. "Did anything like this ever happen to you and Clara? Something where it felt like you were so far on opposite sides of something, you'd never work it out?"

Emmett was quiet for a moment or two, then nodded. "Once. It was late in 1995, about a year after I'd realized I'd always been the person who discovered practical fusion power."

Marty blinked. "That really was you? Jules and Verne and I saw that stuff you've got hanging in the front hallway — the Nobel Prize and the patents and all that. Jules thought that maybe the reason you've got so much money is 'cause you stole the idea from the future."

"Absolutely not," the inventor said firmly. "That was always *my* worry, too, that I'd accidentally plagiarize something I'd seen the first time I went to the future and change what should have been by fooling myself into believing it was my own idea. This really was my idea, my designs, and if your Jules is overly concerned about my honesty, I have the proof to show that it wasn't something I pilfered. In October of 1994, I was just about to go bankrupt, and I was getting so desperate, I finally had to go look into the details of my own future to realize that in only a month or so, I was supposed to unveil the discovery of a fusion reactor to the rest of the world. I almost did it too late because I was being so stubborn about that, and if I had, I might've messed up my own past and present."

"How? By going broke?"

"No, by refusing to invent something that needed to be invented in a particular way so that I could use it to power my time machine. If compact and clean fusion power hadn't been perfected and adequately developed by 2015 in just the way that I used it to power the time circuits, it might've changed the entire course of events that made my life what it was — in particular, the circumstances that sent me back to 1885 to meet Clara and have a family. If the equipment was too big, it might not have worked in ways I could use in the DeLorean, if it was too radioactively dirty, I might not have *wanted* to use it, and would've ended my travels after I ran out of plutonium I think you can see what I mean."

Marty nodded. "Yeah, this space-time stuff can get really complicated and super heavy. So what'd this have to do with you and Clara? Was she mad at you for telling people about your invention, or not telling 'em sooner?"

"No — though I'm sure she wouldn't've been happy with me if I'd let us go bankrupt rather than accept that I really did invent something significant I could reveal to the whole world. My attorney and I had been working very hard on both establishing my patent rights and negotiating with companies interested in manufacturing and marketing the reactor. Clara understood that a lot of hard work was needed to make this a success, but right around Easter in '95, she found out she was pregnant. I was... shocked, to say the least, since she was in her late forties, and though I wasn't exactly opposed to the idea, it was just one more worry in my life at a time that was already full of worries. In many ways, the same thing happened when she was expecting Emily, but then, I was shuttling back and forth between our home in the past and what would be our home in the present, here, trying to get all the repairs and remodeling finished

before we moved in. I drove myself crazy more than anyone else. This time, I couldn't avoid it, and about a month before she was due, we started bickering, getting on each others' nerves — and it was all over ridiculously petty things, because we were both under stress and not dealing with it the way adults should. We never fought in front of the kids, but when they were out of the picture....”

He grimaced, remembering events that were strangely vivid, though he knew he had lived through them only in a revised version of history. “Two weeks before she was due, when the boys were in school and Emily was in preschool, I told her that I'd need to be out of town for a few days just before she was supposed to deliver, because that was the date that had been arranged to finalize the first major corporate deal involving production of the reactor. It was set according to some financial schedule at the company and couldn't easily be changed. To say she blew her top is an understatement, and I didn't react any better. Being around for the birth of the baby was important, but so was being there to initiate the business that would make sure the baby and our entire family would never need to worry about paying bills or buying food or going to college or anything like that, ever again. She wanted to know why Peter — my attorney — couldn't do it for me, why couldn't the meeting be moved up or delayed until after the baby was born.... I don't even remember what I said, but I know I told her it wasn't possible, which wasn't what she wanted to hear at all. I don't know how long we yelled at each other, but we dragged up every petty grievance and gripe we'd ever had toward one another, and it accomplished nothing. It wasn't until the day before I had to leave for San Francisco that we finally sat down and discussed the situation like genuinely mature adults. We both had valid reasons for being upset, we both had good reasons for being stubborn, but neither of us had any decent reason for acting so childish. We couldn't change when the baby would be born, and it really was important that I go to that meeting at that time.”

“And did you go?”

Emmett nodded. “Yes, and the baby, Chris, was born on the same day as the meeting, about a week early. Clara was a little upset that I wasn't there — and so was I — but there wasn't any point in being angry about it. She managed to say ‘I told you so’ in a very permanent way, in the end, and ever since then, we've never let an argument get so far out of hand that we can't resolve our differences or at least reach a truce of sorts before we start behaving irrationally. I think that may be what you and Jennifer need to do, find some way of discussing your differences and airing your grievances so that you can figure out what the *real* problems are. It wasn't the fact that I wouldn't be around for Chris' birth that really was bothering Clara, or me, it was the fact that our lives were changing in a very sudden and extreme way and would never be the same again. It felt like we were losing control, and our ways of trying to get it back were clashing terribly. If we had n't acknowledged all this and found a way to compromise, it could've been disastrous.”

“Like it is with me and Jen right now,” Marty said reflectively. “I get the point, though I'm not sure either of us knows what the *real* problem is.”

“Finding out is usually the hardest part,” the scientist admitted, “and unfortunately, it's also the part you have to do yourselves. I hope you work it out soon, though. I can't tell you what may be in your future, but I'd hate for it to be unhappiness.”

“So would I. Did you say there's a bathroom not far away? I think I need to use it before I try to get a little more sleep. I'm still bushed.”

“I was just heading in that direction. C'mon, I'll show you where it and the nap room are.”

After directing Marty to the rooms in question, Emmett continued on down the hall to the laundry room at the far end, where he found that the last load of wash had indeed been left in the dryer when everyone had reached the end of their stamina for the day. He recognized the dress as Other Clara's, the playclothes as little Emily's, and the shirt and jeans as Other Marty's. He put the dress on a hangar and folded the other things, leaving Clara's and Emily's things to be collected later rather than disturb them. There was a load of linens waiting to be washed that his Clara had insisted be stripped off the guestroom beds and exchanged for fresher things, so he tossed them into the machine, set it to do its happily quiet business, then headed back to the kitchen to see about making some coffee for himself and anyone else who might rouse early. Along the way, he quietly opened the door to the nap room and left Marty's things on the dresser just inside. The musician was already sprawled on the bed and out like light, in a very typical Marty position. Emmett hoped their earlier conversation might turn out to be helpful without being overly manipulative, but only time would tell.

As he passed by the foot of the stairs, a small sound caught his attention; he looked toward it, and saw visiting Emily on the steps. She had been coming down, and when their eyes met, he thought for a moment that she might run away, back to her parents or at least away from this person who looked far too much like her daddy for any six-year-old's

comfort. Sensing her mixed emotions, Emmett smiled but made no move toward her, in hopes that he might seem friendly, or at the very least non-threatening. "Good morning, Emily," he said cheerfully. "I'm surprised to see you up so early. Is something wrong?"

One could watch the wheels in her head spinning as she attempted to sort out her priorities. "I'm hungry," she announced after deciding this was the most important thing, at the moment, more important than being upset or frightened. "Mommy an' Daddy 're still sleepin', an' I'm big enough to get my own breakfast."

"I'm sure you are. My Emily was very good at that when she was your age, too. But nobody showed you where anything is in the kitchen, did they?" She shook her head, her dark curls bobbing and brushing the shoulders of the borrowed t-shirt she was using as a nightgown. "Well, why don't we see what we have, and you can tell me what you'd like. Will that be okay?"

Her answering, "Yeah," took only a moment in coming. When Emmett headed off toward the kitchen, she waited only until he'd gone three steps before following. She was still keeping her distance, but not too great a distance. Whether that meant she was beginning to accept the situation and not be frightened by it or that she was sufficiently brave to brave anything was unclear. Time would tell.

"What sort of things do you like?" he asked as they headed toward the refrigerator and the cupboards that contained other supplies. "Cooked things or cold things?"

"You mean cooked like eggs an' pancakes an' waffles an' that stuff?" When he nodded, she made an odd face. "I like that when *Mommy* makes it."

Her emphasis did not argue well for his counterpart's culinary skills, at least not in the eyes of his daughter. Emmett chuckled. "Well, we don't want to wake up your Mommy just yet, so you'll have to settle for something cold." He reached into a cupboard over the counter beside the stove and pulled out a box. "This is my Emily's favorite breakfast cereal. She's liked it since she was younger than you."

The girl's blue eyes went round. "I like it, too," she admitted, "but Mommy usually won't get it. She says it's too expensive... it costs too much."

"Does it? I'm afraid I don't really know, I don't usually pay attention when we go grocery shopping, I just pay the bill at the end and carry the bags in and out of the van. I'm sure Emily won't mind sharing it with you while you're here. Will this be okay?"

Emily nodded emphatically and happily took a seat at the little table in the back of the kitchen, where once upon a time, Judge Morris' three daughters had eaten their morning meals and lunches, when they were still considered children. He found other things like juice and milk that were also to her liking, as they were to his Emily's, and she dug in while he finally got around to making coffee. When it was brewing, little Emily had eaten enough to blunt her appetite, and was now curious about other things.

"Do you call your Emily Emmy, too?" she wanted to know. "That's what Daddy an' Mommy an' Jules an' Verne call me, too. But I don't got brown eyes like she does."

"No, you definitely don't," Emmett agreed as he sat down to keep her company while he waited for the coffee maker to finish the brewing cycle. "My Emily's getting a little too grown up, though; sometimes, she only wants us to call her Emily, because she thinks it's more adult." He laughed. "I guess I can understand why. When I was little, your age and younger, my parents called me Emmy sometimes, and when I started to get older, it was embarrassing when they called me that in front of other people."

Emily giggled. "Why'd your mom and dad call you Emmy? You're Daddy, aren't you?"

"Yes, but only to my kids. Even your Daddy has his own name, and it's the same as mine, Emmett."

She rolled her eyes. "I know *that*," she said, as if he was being completely dense. "But only Mommy calls him that, nobody else. Your kids don't call you that, do they?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not, but I have friends closer to my age who do, though not Marty."

"I know. I'm gonna marry him, y'know."

Emmett's smile was crooked. "You may have to fight Jennifer to do that..."

"Uh-uh," she said, certain of it. "They've been fightin' real bad, a *lot*, an' I know what happens after that. They stop bein' married, an' they go marry other people. An' I'm gonna marry Marty, when I'm big enough."

The inventor was mildly surprised by her attitudes, not that she had a crush on Marty — even though his Emily never had — but more that she was aware of the problem of divorce at so young an age. Still, his Emily hadn't been that much older when she'd become aware of such things through friends at school and had begun to worry that her own parents might some day break up. He wasn't sure what he could say or should say in response, and had to settle for something vague. "Well, I wouldn't count on that just yet. People sometimes have a lot of very bad fights, and still wind up staying together because they really do love each other. You'll just have to wait and see."

"Oh, I will," she assured him, "but I'm still gonna marry him, someday. I'm not hungry, anymore. Can I go play with that neat game computer in the room over there?"

She'd eaten about two-thirds of the things he'd brought for her, which for a kid her age wasn't doing too bad, especially when she was in unfamiliar surroundings and possibly excited or upset by the situation. "Sure, though it might be a good idea if you wore the headphones. It's still early, and I don't think anyone would appreciate being rudely awaked by screams and screeches and explosions and all the other bloodcurdling noises those games make."

She giggled again as she hopped down from her chair and scampered ahead of Emmett toward the rec room. "You sound just like Daddy — though I guess that's okay, 'cause you look like him, too. Can I play Chris' skateboardin' game? He showed it to me last night just b'fore Mommy said I had to go to bed. He said it was okay, an' he was gonna let me try...."

Emmett supposed that was true enough. He'd watched the youngsters playing together for a while the previous evening. This Emily seemed every bit as addicted to computers as his youngest son, and Chris hadn't had any compunctions against letting her play his games. Marlene hadn't seemed terribly thrilled by their easy rapport, but given that Marty's daughter was as smitten with Chris as this Emily appeared to be smitten with Marty, that was only to be expected. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind," the inventor told her as he brought out the wireless headphones from a cabinet next to the game set-up. "Just be careful not to erase or reset his scores. The last time Marlene accidentally did that, he didn't want her to touch his things for a month."

"I'll be careful," she vowed. "I know lots about c'mputers, more'n Jules an' Verne an' Mommy, an' sometimes, even Daddy says I know more'n *him*. I won't mess up Chris' stuff, I promise."

She was in earnest, and Emmett knew it. He left her happily — and silently — playing the game, and went back to get a cup of coffee, which was finally finished brewing. He'd found a clean cup and had just filled it when he saw his counterpart coming down the same stairs Emily had used, still in his borrowed pajamas and obviously looking for something. "Don't tell me you couldn't sleep, either?" he asked his visiting avatar.

Doc shook his head, blinking to clear his eyes of sleep. "No, I got up to use the bathroom, and I noticed Emily was missing. I don't know what kind of trouble she could get into here without meaning to, but she finds plenty of it in our own house."

"So did mine, when she was that age. But she's not in trouble. She was hungry and decided she was enough of a big girl to find her own breakfast rather than wake either of you."

Doc winced. "That's one of her favorite ways of making a mess at home."

"I don't doubt it. Jules and Verne can still leave the kitchen looking like the aftermath of a hurricane, and they're definitely old enough to know better. In this case, I happened to be in the right place at just the right time, and helped her find what she wanted before she could tear the place apart. She's in the rec room, playing a video game, right now."

The visiting scientist breathed a sigh of relief. "That'll keep her busy for at least an hour or two, especially if she gets the computer all to herself and it's not one of the games the kids have at home. I'm sorry if she's been any imposition...."

Emmett brushed aside the concern with a gesture. “Not at all. I was already awake, and I’m glad I was there. I think I may have been able to convince her that this isn’t such a horrible place to be after all, and just because I look like you doesn’t mean I’m some sort of monster.”

“It’s not your fault. The only other version of me my family ever saw — a genuinely *different* version, that is, not merely me at some other age — was a monster, and I suspect she’s heard about that incident in too much loving detail from her brothers, especially Verne. That something like this could happen and be almost as positive as the other was negative is undoubtedly difficult for them to absorb in only a few hours. I’m glad they’re taking it so well. I wish I could say the same about Marty and Jennifer....”

“Oh, did you hear their argument last night, too?” Emmett asked casually as he filled a second mug.

Doc looked at him, his expression blank, then a half-grimace. “No, I didn’t. Was it bad?”

Emmett shrugged as he handed him the mug. “There was a lot of yelling and accusations, and she wound up kicking him out. I found him sleeping on the sofa in the music room when I came down.”

“She kicked him out of their tent the last night we were camping, supposedly for breathing too loud,” the visiting inventor explained. “If not for that, we might’ve ended up somewhere or somewhere else. Not that it was entirely to blame — the seagull undoubtedly did far more damage in that direction — but I asked them to come along to try to *resolve* this situation between them, not to make it worse. Emily didn’t happen to mention hearing last night’s argument, did she?”

“Not specifically, though from things she told me, it seems that she’s heard enough to believe they’re headed for divorce.”

Doc groaned. “I hope not. I feel bad enough that I dragged everyone on what turned into the vacation from hell.”

Emmett snorted. “This has nothing to do with that, not if it’s been going on long enough to give Emily the notion that she might have a shot at marrying Marty when she grows up because he won’t be married anymore. That’s not the kind of idea a kid her age would get in only a few days. And how much people enjoy or hate any situation is nobody’s fault but their own. They can make the best of it, or complain about every little thing. It’s their choice.”

“I suppose, but I can’t help but feel at least a little bit guilty about not checking to see if the weather would hold before we went there. At least Clara fainting had nothing to do with that.”

“It’s not anything serious, then?”

“No, not exactly.” Doc considered matters for a moment, then decided this was probably as good a time as any to tell him. “She’s expecting. Neither of us would’ve thought it possible, but she did undergo a thorough rejuvenation a few months ago. We didn’t stop to think how this would affect... this part of our lives. She’s in excellent health and there shouldn’t be any of the usual complications of a later pregnancy, since her physical condition and her chronological age are totally different, now, but there *were* complications with Emily, and I don’t want to take any unnecessary chances. If I know her, she’s going to want to go crawling up and down that canyon and all over the train, helping as much as she can. If there’s any way we can convince her to stay here, I’d appreciate it.”

As he listened, Emmett’s eyes grew wider while his face turned pale. “Oh, I have the perfect way to convince her,” he told his counterpart, wishing his persuasion was a convenient white lie and not this ugly truth.

Doc looked at him, then frowned at the disturbing expression on his face, an expression that for some reason made his blood turn cold. “What is it?” he asked.

Emmett swallowed, then gestured toward one of the chairs. “Sit down. I have just the thing to convince her, but you’re not going to like hearing it, I can guarantee it. There’s something about interdimensional travel you need to know....”