

## Chapter Nine

Emmett had been right — Doc did *not* like the news that the local scientist had to share. He listened as his counterpart detailed the circumstances in 1999 that had sent his Marty reeling from one dimension to the other, in search of help for his injured friend, and then, after bringing another Emmett Brown from a different dimension back home, they had discovered the terrible price one paid for dimension-hopping. Disbelief was his first reaction, then shock, followed by a cold fear, and, finally, nagging curiosity.

“Unbelievable!” Doc finally said when Emmett had finished. “I *never* saw an inkling about this sort of thing in the other universe situations we’ve dealt with....”

“But did any of those involve prolonged periods of stay in another dimension? A jump in the time machine does appear to ‘reset’ the symptoms, though I’m not sure how long or how effective such a method would be over a long period of time.”

Doc thought about that a moment as he nervously drummed his fingers on the table before him. “I think Marty once mentioned to me that he and Jennifer had been in the other dimension after Woodstock almost two full days. And in the case of Doc B... well, we weren’t the strangers to that continuum, *he* was. And he did make an awful *lot* of time jumps, at least when we were following him. The longest we were in one place was half a day, if I recall....”

“Then you wouldn’t have necessarily noticed anything was amiss,” Emmett concluded. “It takes at least a day and a half for the... side effects to become very distracting or dangerous, and if your Marty and Jennifer were under stress at that time, they probably wouldn’t have noticed the symptoms as anything that couldn’t be blamed on stress. That’s what happened in my Marty’s case. I don’t think any of you should be suffering from the syndrome quite yet, but I don’t think we should go more than two days before taking all of you on a quick time jump. It can be as short as two seconds, so long as time is spent in n-dimensional space. That’s what seems to do the trick.”

Doc nodded. His stomach twisted unpleasantly as he thought of his wife. “What about Clara? What kind of effect will this have on someone who is pregnant? It won’t cause her to miscarry, will it? Or create developmental problems with the baby?”

Emmett sighed. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t know, but it certainly *can’t* be good for her or the baby. How far along is she?”

“Four or five weeks, as far as they can tell. Is there *any* good solution to this problem?” he had to ask when Emmett didn’t say anything right away. “Bad enough she’s done temporal jumps while expecting — two, now — but being in an entirely different reality that’s grossly incompatible with her system....”

“The only solution we’ve found that works, barring returning home immediately, which can’t be done yet, seems to be the jumps through time. My counterpart tried drugs, but those merely delayed or blunted the worst of the symptoms — and that’s out, anyway, for Clara, if she’s expecting. We also tried setting up an electromagnetic interference field around him, and that had the nasty trade-off of postponing the seizures, but making them *much* worse when they did hit.”

Doc sighed, feeling that cold, icy chill snake through his blood again. “Wonderful,” he grumbled, frustrated by the situation. “Should I let the others know about this problem?”

“It would be wise,” Emmett said. “I know it’s not the most pleasant news in the world — and we were going to tell you as soon as we knew it would be necessary — but it might clue everyone in to not ignore things like sleep disruptions or difficulty concentrating — two of the first symptoms.” The local inventor frowned once again. “I hope that things aren’t already that far along for you all....”

Doc blinked as he took a sip of his coffee, now lukewarm. “What makes you think that? We’ve only been here approximately....” He looked at the clock hanging in the kitchen and did some quick calculations. “...fifteen hours.”

“Maybe so, but between Marty, Emily, and now you getting up this early, I’m beginning to wonder if things are happening already.”

“Well, the only reason I didn’t go back to bed was because I saw that Emily was missing; I slept fine before then, more or less. And Emily normally gets up this early, especially if she’s in a new place. I thought you said you found Marty sleeping down here?”

Emmett waved his hand in a so-so gesture. “I think he was more awake than asleep when I found him. He talked with me for a while about the problems he and Jennifer are having...”

“Oh, well, then that’s more to blame than anything else. I don’t think Marty’s been sleeping well since the entire argument began, and that was just over a week ago, now. I can’t say that I blame him. Where is he now?”

“In the nap room down the hall, actually asleep, last I checked.”

“Well, that’s good, then.” Doc changed the subject, slightly. “No one else knows about Clara’s pregnancy,” he said. “You can tell your Clara, of course, but we haven’t told our kids, yet, and I’d prefer to sit them down together and break the news to them that way. When we found out about Emily — which was another surprise — Verne had a terrible time adjusting. He was ten by the time she was born, and had gotten some strange notions in his head that not being the youngest anymore was going to mean he had to grow up too quickly. I don’t think we’ll have any problems with Emily — she’s actually asked Clara and I more than once about having a younger brother or sister closer to her age — but I wasn’t expecting Verne’s reaction, either.”

“Another interesting discrepancy,” Emmett noted. “Our Verne was about five when Emily was born, but he didn’t have any sort of reaction like yours. I suppose part of that could be due to the differences in age when she arrived.”

“Quite so,” Doc agreed. “Our Verne did warm up to her, almost immediately after she was born. He’s actually the one who gave her her name, something Clara and I thought might help him with the adjustment. It’s almost funny, now, to see their relationship — Verne dotes on her more than he should — but Clara seems to think part of the reason Verne warmed up to her so quickly was her eyes. A legacy from my mother—”

Emmett interrupted him. “So *that’s* where it comes from,” he said, half to himself. “I’d wondered....”

“You mean your mother *didn’t* have blue eyes?” In spite of the differences between them, Doc found this rather surprising.

“No. Eleanor, my mother—”

“Wait a minute! Your mother was named *Eleanor*?”

Emmett nodded slowly. “Eleanor Hamilton, before she married my father, Everett.” At the shocked look on his guest’s face, Emmett sighed. “Let me guess, that’s different for you.”

“Very,” Doc said, amazed that they could be as similar as they were when they clearly had entirely different parents. “My mother was Sarah Lathrop and my father was Robert Brown — well, Von Braun, prior to World War I. Mom was a nurse and worked with my father, who was one of Hill Valley’s most prominent physicians until he retired.”

“Fascinating,” Emmett said. “I wonder—”

What he was wondering remained unsaid, as a piercing alarm suddenly shattered the quiet of the home. Doc spilled his cup of coffee on the table as he simultaneously leapt up to his feet, his heart thumping hard in his chest from the startling racket. Emmett also jumped up from the chair, fast, but his expression was more concerned than anything else. He moved rapidly in the direction of the informal dining room, Doc right on his heels.

“What’s that alarm for?” he asked over the din.

“Security system’s been triggered,” Emmett explained, uncovering what appeared to be an elaborate panel built into the wall between the rec room and the entrance to the dining area. “I don’t understand — damn!”

“What is it?” Doc asked as his counterpart’s hands moved over the console, quickly.

"The system thinks there's a break in! It's in full lockdown mode — and the police are being called as we speak." Emmett didn't see the wince on Doc's face at this news. "I should — damn, the thing's locked up! It's not recognizing the password!"

"Where's Emily?" Doc asked. His counterpart frowned, either from the problems he was apparently having in shutting the system down, at the too-loud alarm, or at the seemingly random question.

"She should be in the rec room, playing videogames. Why?"

Doc didn't bother to explain. He hurried for the doorway of the room, peeked inside, and found it empty. "She's not there anymore," he said, quickly. "Where are the closest computers you've got?"

"There are a few in the library and in the kids' study. Why?"

Doc's smile was both rueful and embarrassed. "Emily can be a little too precocious for her own good when it comes to computers," he said. "I'd lay money that this is something she set off. Which way would I need to go?"

Emmett directed him to the correct doorways as he stayed behind to continue the attempt to shut things off. Doc half ran down the corridor for the proper doorways, and nearly collided with Marty, rounding the corner in the hallway and looking distinctly unhappy, his hands clasped over his ears. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded with a hint of a whine in his voice, squinting his eyes against the light coming from the dining room. "I *just* got to sleep...."

"The security system was set off," Doc explained quickly. "I think Emily found one of the computers...."

"Oh, great," Marty groaned. "You know, Jennifer's probably gonna find some way to blame this on me, now...."

Doc hardly heard him, or noticed the musician following him, as he entered the children's study and snapped on the lights. It was empty, the computer in this room shut down. But a door hung ajar across from where he had come in, lights on in the room beyond it, and he continued ahead. When he pushed open that door, he couldn't help gasping, and heard a similar reaction from Marty.

Although he had heard his counterpart tell him that the home had a library just a moment before, he hadn't been expecting anything more than a room lined with book shelves, similar to the library that had been in his own family home. *Not* a room that was almost the size of the elaborate parlor and had two floors to it. Shelves stuffed with books lined almost all the walls in the room, and what walls were without had many large windows. Not one but two staircases were contained in the room, one a spiral style that apparently went to somewhere on the second floor that was off limits, if the sealed exit was any indication. There was a fireplace, with several arm chairs and lamps set before it, and a long hardwood table perpendicular to that, where one could spread out any research or notes without a problem.

While Doc was staring around at the contents of the room, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to look at Marty, who was pointing almost straight ahead, at the space under a computer desk across the room. Emily was kneeling under it, her hands over her ears and her eyes screwed shut, as if she believed the old myth that if one couldn't see someone, then they couldn't be seen as well. The inventor sighed wearily, then turned back to his friend.

"Let Emmett know we've found her and that he might want to come join us," he said. Marty nodded once and went off on the task while Doc started across the hardwood floor towards his daughter.

"Emily Marie," he said loudly, allowing some of his irritation to creep into his voice. Emily shuddered a little and edged back a little more under the desk's legwell. "Didn't we tell you never to touch other people's computers without permission?"

Emily whimpered as she uncovered her ears and opened her eyes to stare up at her father, her blue eyes wide and guileless. "I just wanted to see what kinda games were on 'em," she sniffed. "I didn't know that there was somethin' set up that c'ntralled the house. I thought it was a game, like Sim City or somethin'."

Doc frowned at his daughter, not about to let her charm her way out of this. Although he doubted very much that Emily had triggered the security system on purpose, he was equally doubtful of the entire truth in her excuse. "What did you do, Emily?" he asked.

Emily backed out of the space in the desk and got to her feet, going back to the keyboard. "I just opened the program codes and put in a new password," she said. "I thought it might let me play the house game or skip to the next level."

Doc sighed. Emmett arrived just then, his stride quickly covering the floor of the library in a few steps. "What happened?" he asked. At the sight of him heading her way, and the rather grim look on his face, Emily started to cry and reached immediately for her real father. Doc sighed as he hefted her up into his arms and stepped aside to allow his counterpart access to the computer.

"Emily is what happened," he explained. "I'm *really* sorry, I should've warned you, I guess. She's very talented with these sorts of machines, and I think she just accidentally hacked her way into your security system."

Emmett's mouth quirked a moment in amusement as he looked at the computer screen. "She changed the password," he said. "That explains a lot..." A few keystrokes later, and the alarm was finally, blessedly, silenced. The expression on Emmett's face remained tense, though, as he looked away from the screen. "The police are no doubt on their way, now," he said. "We've got to get all of you out of sight before they arrive."

Doc saw the point immediately. He tried to set Emily down, but the girl clung to her father hard, unwilling to let go just yet, her tears reduced to sniffling and whimpers, now. "Where?" he asked as he followed his counterpart back the way he had arrived into the library.

"The attic will suffice," he said over his shoulder. "Why don't you help me rouse everybody?"

That was unnecessary, however, as every member of the household had trickled downstairs in the last few minutes, drawn by the overly loud alarm. Nobody was in the best of moods after a waking like that — at around seven in the morning, no less — but the visitors quickly followed Emmett back to the library, where he opened the sealed top of the spiral stairs and led them up to the second floor, through what seemed to be a very large laboratory or study, and up to an attic that was anything but cramped. After instructions to keep quiet, and a promise to return as quickly as possible, he left, just as the sound of sirens was becoming audible.

Jules and Verne immediately turned on their little sister, while Jennifer raked Marty with a glare far too sizzling at this early hour of the morning. "Nice one, Em," Jules griped. "Can two seconds go by without you getting into something you shouldn't?"

"It's not my fault an alarm went off," Emily immediately defended herself, her tears put away, now. "I thought it was a *game*..."

"They have better games with systems, now, not on PCs," Verne said, annoyed in spite of the soft spot he had for Emily. "You shouldn't've been messing with that, Emmy. That's called hacking."

Emily scowled at her blond brother. "I ain't a hacker!" she said immediately. "Daddy said those are *bad* people, and I'm not a bad person!"

"Kids," Doc warned, remembering their host's request to keep on the quiet side. "Settle down. It's too early to be arguing already."

"It's too early, period," was Verne's opinion. A look from his father made any other words he might've said remain unspoken.

Marty, meanwhile, was clearly not liking the looks his wife was giving him, and he didn't hesitate to speak up about that. "If you stare at me much more, Jen, you're gonna freeze that way," he said, the words coming out snappishly. "This thing wasn't my fault, you know."

"For once," Jennifer said flatly, seemingly oblivious to the Browns nearby. She probably would've said more had Clara not interrupted, quickly.

"Emmett, maybe this might be a good time to tell them about what we discovered last night," she said, meeting his eyes meaningfully.

“Now?” Doc asked, frowning a little. With the excitement over the alarm, he had almost forgotten about the disturbing bombshell that his counterpart had dropped on him, and being reminded of Clara’s pregnancy made all the worries and fears come shooting back.

“Well, everyone is here, now, and there aren’t any distractions — not really,” she added.

“What’s going on?” Jules asked, a little suspiciously. “We aren’t stranded here forever, are we?”

“God, I hope not,” Doc half muttered. Before the curious looks his family and the McFlies gave him could turn into questions, he dropped the news. “Clara fainted because she’s expecting.”

Silence greeted this statement. Jules and Verne stared at their parents, their jaws just about ready to drop; Emily looked vaguely confused; Jennifer and Marty appeared stunned. “Wow,” the musician finally said. “I would’ve thought Jen and I would have kids way before you guys had another baby in your house....”

The cold look his wife gave him told him that the possibility of them having kids anytime soon was about as remote as flying penguins darkening the skies of North America. Meanwhile, Veme reacted with a half groan and half shudder. “Gross!” was his immediate opinion. “You guys are too old to still be doing that kind of stuff....”

While Emily looked even more confused by this, Jules smacked his brother upside the head, Jennifer blushed, and Marty coughed, clearly trying to cover up a laugh. Doc settled his eyes on his youngest son. “Verne,” he warned, as the blond rubbed the back of his head and scowled at his brother.

“All right, sorry,” he apologized. “But... jeeze! I thought Emily was gonna be the last!”

At the sound of her name, Emily looked up at her parents. “What are you *talkin’* about?” she wanted to know.

Clara knelt down to her eye level. “I’m going to have a baby,” she said. “You’re going to be getting a little brother or sister in February.”

Emily blinked at the news, her eyes widening into little blue saucers. “Really?” she asked. “Are you jokin’?”

Clara shook her head solemnly. Emily beamed widely at the confirmation and jumped up to the air, pumping one of her fists. “I’m gonna be a big sister!” she cheered. “Finally, I getta boss someone else ‘round!”

Doc put a hand on his daughter’s shoulder to keep her from bouncing up again, not wanting mysterious thumps from the ceiling to draw the attention of the local authorities. “Settle down,” he said with a smile. “The baby’s not going to be here for a while yet.”

“Where is it going to sleep?” Jules asked, suspicious. “You’re not going to make Verne and I live together again, are you? I’d rather move into the doms at HVU!”

“We’ll work out something,” Doc assured him. “Even if it means adding onto the house.”

“Congratulations, then,” Jennifer said softly, with a tired, strained smile. “I think you’ll do great the fourth time around.”

Verne groaned again, the sound good natured. “Jeeze, by the time this kid’s born I’m gonna be seventeen and Jules’ll be nineteen! That’s *crazy!*”

Clara looked at her son with a faint frown, not liking the reminders of their ages. “I do hope you’re feeling a little better this time around, Verne,” she said.

Verne looked confused a moment, as if he wasn’t sure what she was talking about, then shrugged. “Oh, *that,*” he said. “I was just a kid then, what did you expect?”

*Not that reaction,* Doc thought, remembering the near tantrum Verne had thrown at the news of Emily’s impending arrival, but he didn’t say it aloud. There was something else that needed to be said, frankly, though he didn’t want to do it alone. Not now, and not yet.

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Emmett rescued them about fifteen minutes later — just in time, as the kids had become obsessed with the discovery of another spiral staircase and the widow's walk to which it led, making Clara *very* nervous, and Marty and Jennifer had taken to sniping at each other, rather than ignoring one another or exchanging glares. By the time they returned to the main floor of the house, the other Clara had started preparations for breakfast.

While they waited for it to be finished, Doc pulled Emmett aside, then took his group — sans Emily, whom he didn't want to scare unduly — into the rec room to break the news to them. He allowed Emmett to explain most of it, as he'd had the firsthand experience of dealing with the dimensional compatibility troubles. All faces in the room paled considerably with the news, especially Clara's. Emmett emphasized that there were ways to delay the symptoms, but that if anyone noticed any of the problems at all associated with the sub-atomic discrepancies, then they were to immediately let him know, even if they were *sure* it wasn't what it seemed. Doc looked at Marty especially with this, knowing that his friend had far too often suffered silently with some seemingly innocent ailment, only to have it spiral into complications at being ignored, and usually at a most inconvenient time. Marty met his eyes, smiled crookedly, and nodded once to show he got the message, clearly.

Once the lecture was finished, Emmett opened it up to questions. After satisfying Marty's curiosity about why he and Jennifer hadn't noticed anything amiss during their almost 48 hour stay — "Yeah, I guess we *were* kinda wrung out and stressed during that time" — and assuring Clara that they were going to do everything in their power to make sure that neither her health nor that of the baby she was carrying would be harmed or permanently damaged, the topic was shifted to the project of the day — investigating the damage to the train. Emily and Clara, of course, needed to stay behind, and Jennifer volunteered to keep the older woman company, though Doc was all but certain the journalist's generosity on that matter had a lot more to do with avoiding Marty, who was planning to join Doc, Jules, and Verne on the trip out to the train.

Breakfast was ready, then, before further plans could be made. By the time that was consumed and everyone had gotten showered and dressed and otherwise ready for the day, it was almost ten o' clock. Emmett was on the phone in the kitchen when Doc returned downstairs, and Other Clara was making a list at the table. She looked up at the entrance of her non-spouse and smiled in greeting. "Your wife is in the rec room with Emily, making sure, I think, that there's not a repeat of this morning," she said.

Doc grimaced at that reminder. "I'm *very* sorry about that," he said, not having apologized to the rest of the members of the Brown family for that disruption. "Sometimes I think Emily is too skilled for her own good when it comes to computers. She's already surpassed her brothers on the machines, and doing things that even I don't know."

"She has a talent, then," Clara said. "She'll grow into it in time, I'm sure, with guidance. It was an accident, too. I don't think she intentionally meant to trigger the alarm system."

"No, but often times she doesn't intentionally try to do any harm when she's using those machines — she just stumbles into it because she doesn't know better and she has too much of a feel for how to work computers and the codes in 'em. You're right, though, I'm sure eventually the rest of her will catch up with it." He sighed as Emmett hung up the phone across the room. "In the meantime, we have things like this happen. I think it scared her a little, though, so I'm hoping she'll leave the rest of the computers alone as long as we're here."

Clara nodded. "Are there any foods that you or your family are particular to? I was planning to go to the grocery store to restock our supplies while you set to work on the repairs."

"Ah... not that I can think of, offhand. It would seem our families share similar tastes. Thanks, though, for asking."

Emmett joined his counterpart at the table side. "That was Marty," he said, nodding at the phone. "He's cleared his schedule for the afternoon to come out and help us out."

"Does he know about my Marty and Jennifer's... difficulties?" Doc asked, knowing it would be all but impossible to hide, today.

Emmett nodded, a little reluctantly. "Apparently, Marlene kept them up half the night, scared to go to bed alone from nightmares about her parents moving out and away. It thoroughly baffled her parents until one of 'em was able to pry out the news from their daughter that Emily had told her."

“Oh, Lord,” Doc groaned, rubbing his forehead. “Let me guess — Emily repeated to Marlene that Marty and Jennifer were fighting and didn’t clarify who she was talking about.”

Emmett nodded again. “That’s about the gist of it. My Marty was really surprised by that, and I think he’s hoping to put his two cents in to his counterpart about the matter, among other things. He should be here around one.”

Visiting Clara joined them in the kitchen. “I think Emily should behave herself today,” she said to her husband and their counterparts. “She did seem rather upset by this morning’s incident. If not, don’t hesitate to treat her just as you would your own daughter, and *not* as a guest. She’s quite good at using those big eyes of hers to her advantage.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Clara assured her double. “Emmett — mine — told me about your condition, and I don’t want you to fret about a thing. Our Emily is going to be keeping an eye on yours and Chris, Jennifer and I are going to do the marketing, and the menfolk will handle the business with the time machine repairs. I think first thing on the agenda for you should be a cup of tea and a good book. We’ve a vast selection in our library.”

By the look on his spouse’s face, Doc could tell that Clara wanted to fight the idea of “taking it easy” while everyone else so clearly wasn’t, but she smiled graciously at the offer. “All right,” she agreed, allowing local Clara to guide her in the direction of the library.

Doc looked over at his counterpart after they’d left. “Jennifer’s going out with Clara? Couldn’t that be a problem?”

“Not really,” Emmett answered. “She looks different enough from her counterpart that there shouldn’t be any incidents of mixed identity as there might be with the rest of us — excepting Emily, of course, and Chris. She asked to go, too, and I couldn’t find a reason why she shouldn’t. The fighting is just as hard on her as it is on Marty, and she might as well find something to take her mind off it for a bit.”

Doc couldn’t disagree with that. A few minutes later, both Jules and visiting Verne had gathered, along with Marty, and the six of them set off in the direction of the train’s crash site on foot. Emmett had proposed the idea of cutting the time to get there by using his own train time machine to fly them out, but Doc had politely declined, knowing how poor of a spot his machine had chosen to settle down, and unwilling to risk damaging one of his counterpart’s machines. Lord knew that they were going to need to keep those in perfect working order if they wanted to survive their stay here. At some point, he knew the machine would need to be moved — likely by the end of the day — but until he had the chance to determine exactly how much damage had been sustained, he didn’t want to do that quite yet.

When they reached the wounded time machine, Doc found that the unobstructed shafts of sunlight made it look a lot worse than it had the day before, in the lightning and the downpour. He didn’t allow that show in his face, however, as he circled around the train while Marty and the boys went in the cab to collect the necessary bags with their personal belongings. Emmett joined him as he stared pensively at the broken capacitor that had brought them there.

“It could be worse, you know,” he said, interrupting his counterpart’s gloomy thoughts.

“I suppose,” Doc agreed without much enthusiasm. “Not by much, though. The capacitor is going to have to be replaced entirely, and I have a *real* bad feeling about the wiring needing to be almost completely redone. And between the moisture and the bolt, I shudder to think of the state I’ll find the circuit boards in...”

“Yes,” Emmett agreed. “We’ve got our work cut out for us. But at least the water didn’t reach the train and make it worse. And the machine doesn’t appear to have sustained structural damage, beyond a cracked pane of glass and a dent I saw.”

“It’s what’s *inside* that troubles me a great deal more.” Doc sighed, running a hand through his hair as he finally headed for the open cab door. “I don’t necessarily know if I want to know how bad it is.”

Emmett shrugged as he followed him. “I suspect you might feel better, knowing where you stand. Not knowing is a great deal harder. If it’s any consolation, something like this happened to my family back in 1994 — in October, not June,” he hurried to add as Doc turned to look at him in surprise. “And the circumstances were a little different — but when my family and Marty and Jennifer arrived in 1741, the train was hit by a bolt of lightning. It was strong enough to erase the computers and cause the need for a *long* rebooting, which took a week, but I think, too, that my machine is a little... different from yours,” he added, glimpsing the cab’s interior from the doorway as the visiting inventor went inside.

“How so?” Doc asked as he examined the time display and frowned down at the keyboard.

Emmett pointed to the front of the cab, where the massive typewriter and analog display were set. “That was all digital by that point,” he said. “The train was entirely fusion powered, too.”

“I’ve got the fusion power and I did put a small LCD display over here — for the Temporal Influence Projection System I set up about seven years ago that should allow one an unshielded look at history to see if anything’s been altered enough to have big effects down the line — but I *like* the display,” Doc said. “Reminds me of the time I spent in the 1800s.”

Local Jules edged past the Docs with a couple duffle bags under one arm. “Do you want us to hike these back now or stay here and help out?” he asked.

Emmett looked to his counterpart for the answer. Doc shrugged. “I don’t think we’re going to be here much longer. I just need to check out the damage before we can prepare to move it.”

“All right.” Jules took that as permission to leave and headed in that direction. Verne and his brother followed shortly, carrying bags of their own, but Marty — obviously wanting to avoid Jennifer as much as she wanted to avoid him, now — lingered behind as his friend and Emmett examined the train from stem to stern, and then some. It took an hour before Doc finally had an idea of where they stood, realistically, and he sighed when announcing it to Emmett and Marty.

“Ninety percent of the wiring is melted or shorted out,” he said, ticking the items off on his hands. “All the circuit boards immediately under the keyboards — the time circuits — need to be replaced. The flux capacitor needs to be replaced, entirely. The anemometer *should* be replaced, but I don’t know if it’s essential to achieve an unflawed temporal displacement. The HIS — Holographic Imaging System” he quickly added for Emmett’s benefit, “needs to be reinstalled and some of the key components replaced.”

“So what does all that mean?” Marty asked when the scientist had finished his assessment. “How long do you think we’re gonna be stuck here?”

Doc and Emmett looked at each other. Emmett took the question. “I’d say at least a week,” he admitted. “It’s going to take time to repair and replace parts that were damaged so that they’re compatible with your machine — and we dare not replace it with too many new things from here, or that might interfere with your safe passage home.”

The visiting inventor nodded in agreement. Marty groaned. “Oh, man! We’ll be dead in a few days!”

“Not if you take the quick time jumps,” Emmett assured him. “And at least we know about the problems to expect, now. We didn’t last time, and it caused considerable discomfort for my visiting counterpart.”

The musician couldn’t argue with that. He collected his bag to haul back as the pair of Docs took what they could carry from the train. The three of them headed back to the mansion to start the process of retrieving the train from the canyon and begin the time consuming and essential repairs.



## Chapter Ten

On the hike back to the house, the two Docs discussed all that they had seen of the train's situation, and though visiting Doc was not very optimistic about their chances of pulling it off, his local counterpart was considerably more positive. "I suspect that once we find a way to connect your systems to a more comprehensive diagnostic computer, we'll find that some of the things that look nearly impossible to repair on a cursory inspection will turn out to be considerably more salvageable. And the flux capacitor itself is really the least of your troubles."

Marty, who had been listening rather than brood about his married life, snorted. "Really? I'd think it'd be the worst...."

But Emmett shook his head. "A year ago, it might've been, but early last July, I did a major overhaul of all the electronic systems in both my time machines, upgrading from the older semi-conductor technology to the newer, more compact, and considerably more efficient version I accidentally stumbled across while doing some other work on both the Jag and for my company."

Doc blinked after a moment, the last phrase taking a second to register. "You have a job outside the home?" He sounded genuinely surprised.

"Ah... not exactly," Emmett replied, sensing that they were coming upon another major difference — perhaps *the* most major difference — between them. "I don't work for EPB Technologies. I *own* it."

His counterpart thought he understood. "A company you inherited from your parents or some other relative?" That would have explained a number of things, especially if it had come down through a member of the family who had died only after Emmett had invented his time machine and blown his original family fortune.

But Emmett shook his head. "No. Not a bad guess, though. My mother was a nurse, like yours, came from a *long* line of people in the medical profession, which is why she wanted me to be a doctor, at first — and *her* mother was Agnes Sarah Lathrop, by the way, so it seems that what we might have here is a case of certain things happening in much the same way but at different times. My father, Everett — who was a Von Braun, too, until he changed the name in 1917, after the US entered World War I — was into investment banking and real estate. His family lived in Milwaukee, but they were actually rather more forward-thinking than the stereotypes most people imagine when they envision people from that part of the country. He and his brother Oliver were both sent out East to college; Uncle Oliver went into chemistry, and Pop went into business. He met Mom during an alumni reunion or something. Anyway, shortly after he graduated, my father got a job with the biggest bank back home in Milwaukee, and he heard through a professional friend in Chicago that there were some very good deals to be had in land speculation in parts of northern California, in the more rugged country along the paths of major railroads. Pop decided it would be a good investment for himself, and he bought quite a bit of land out here — almost half of Hill County, in fact. He sold off bits and pieces as other people became interested in them, and he wound up making a very respectable amount of money. He and Mom moved out here about four years after they were married, 'cause they wanted a family but Mom had been having troubles, and all her medical relatives thought it would help if she got away from the cities and out into open country with fresh air." He chuckled. "If it worked, it sure took its good-natured time, 'cause I wasn't born until twelve years after they arrived."

"So you don't have any brothers or sisters, either?" Marty asked, both curious and wanting not to feel left out of the conversation. It was rather astonishing to him to hear how different were the backgrounds of the two Docs, since outwardly, they looked and acted very much alike.

Emmett's shrug was vague. "Not living, no. I was the last of eight babies my mother had, five boys and three girls. All the others were either very premature and stillborn, or somewhat less premature and died within a day or two of birth. I was supposedly full-term, but it's possible I was actually a little early, and was just healthy and strong enough to survive without any trouble. That might explain why we weren't born on the same date," he told his counterpart. "Though all things considered, it's more likely just an example of the differences between our respective universes."

"Yes, I suspect so," Doc agreed, trying to absorb all he'd been told. "Then you did the same thing I did with my inheritance: used all of it to develop a functional time machine."

His double nodded. "That appears to be one part of our lives that was identical, down to all the accidents and adventures that happened during the life of the DeLorean. Afterward.... I don't think I came back from the 1800s much better off than you, financially speaking. I sold the garage and the nearby property I still owned for a decent amount of money and socked it into secure investments for a few years to make the most of it before I bought the old Morris place, but a lot of that went into the new house and the expenses of making sure my family could live here without arousing suspicion."

Marty caught that implication faster than his Doc. "You paid bribes to cover up where your family came from?"

He was rather amazed by how casually the local inventor admitted it. "Yes, because I couldn't think of any better or safer way to make sure *everything* was taken care of. It wasn't just a matter of putting birth certificates in the right places; I needed to make sure they were appropriately accounted for in all the other government agencies and records, like Social Security and the IRS. You can't just sneak things in there, you need to find a way inside, someone who's willing to do the work for you, to make sure all your bases are covered."

He laughed ruefully. "If I'd only known then what I knew a few years later, I wouldn't've bothered; I could've kept the Feds at bay long enough on my own. It turned out that Clara has a great-grandnephew, a descendant of her brother, who's a government agent in *exactly* the sort of position to do, or have done, all the things I needed without anyone ever being the wiser for it. He was eventually able to not only plug any holes that needed plugging, but he was able to convince his superiors that certain discoveries of mine need to be protected like state secrets, for the good of national, even global, security. Of course, that meant telling him the truth, all of it, which caused its own problems at first, and I didn't know he even existed until 1995. Seems that after I hit the news with my announcement of the fusion reactor, someone in his agency noticed that my wife was using the same name and general background as his supposedly long-dead great-aunt. Since some criminals have a fondness for using the identities of dead people as aliases and other people were accusing me of having stolen my work on the fusion reactor from them, he decided to take the assignment and come check us out as a matter of personal and family pride."

It took a second longer, this time, before the important part of his last sentences registered in Doc's consciousness. When it did, it was like a match thrown into dry kindling. "Wait a second — *your* work on the fusion reactor? Do you mean fusion power is being used all over the place here, and *you* were the one who invented it?" When Emmett confirmed it, his counterpart was appalled. "How could you *do* that? If everything you have now is based on a device you stole from the future...!" He felt as if he would either faint or explode from outrage.

"But I didn't steal it," Emmett answered calmly, having prepared himself for this ever since his earlier conversation with Marty. "It always was my invention, even the very first time I saw it in 2015. I just didn't know it for sure until desperation forced me to look at my own future so that I could make some kind of decision about what to do with my present when I was going bankrupt in 1994. You told me you have a system in your time machines for projecting temporal influences, to know when you've disrupted history?" When Doc nodded, not quite feeling up to an actual verbal response, he continued. "I have something similar in my time machines, the Comparative Temporal Flow Monitor. My system's a little different, though. Before it was first activated, I was able to get what you might call a sort of data snapshot of how the continuum — history as we know it — developed during a very large window extending both into the past and the future. That record is buffered against changes from temporal influences — it can't be overwritten by revised history if a time traveler does something to alter it," he added for Marty's benefit. "It's always going to show exactly the same thing, and by comparing that record to changes in the continuum made by time travelers, it can warn you not only of mistakes you might've made, but how seriously they're going to affect the whole of history beyond the point of change."

"That sounds very useful," Doc had to admit. "Difficult to pull off, too."

"Oh, definitely. If it weren't for equipment I borrowed from the future, I couldn't've done it. And no, none of what I borrowed for that had anything to do with developing the fusion reactor. When I first started working on the time machine, I knew I was going to need an extremely powerful, extremely compact, and extremely *clean* source of energy. You can't throw used reactor rods in any garbage can, after all. I started working out theories of cold fusion at the same time I started work on developing the flux capacitor, and though I eventually came up with one theory that looked viable, I had neither the money nor the time to complete the project, not if I wanted to finish the time machine before the deadline in 1985. It had to be either fusion or the time machine, not both. Instead, I came up with a way for the energy collection systems in the DeLorean's fission reactor to do such a complete job of it, all that would be left of the plutonium rods were lead clinkers and not radioactive waste. When I was stranded back in the 1800s, I spent part of the time working out the rest of my fusion theory, and I found that it could work, just as I'd seen in 2015,

though I didn't have the right materials to construct the apparatus. A few months after I finished the train but before I came back home to stay, I designed and installed the CTFM. Knowing that there was no way I was going to be able to give up time traveling for good, I wanted to make it as safe as possible. It worked — almost immediately, in fact, but that's another *very* long story. Before the system was brought up, I installed that buffered record. This was years before I even *thought* of patenting my fusion system. When I finally was pushed into looking at the CTFM's record of where fusion had come from, I found that only a month or so into my future, I was supposed to announce its discovery to the world, and start marketing it about a year later."

Doc's mind was still reeling from all these revelations. "And how do you know that this wasn't a record tainted by the fact that you'd already been to the future and had seen how fusion worked?"

Emmett smiled faintly. "Because the record said that my design was preferred over others developed a short time later because it used energy collection systems that did such a thorough job, it completely eliminated the problem of radioactive waste, even in the disposal of used parts. That system was in the very first Mr. Fusion unit I bought, and it was my system. I remember thinking at the time how remarkable it was that someone came up with exactly the same way of avoiding those very problems. It never even occurred to me until I looked at the CTFM's record that the 'someone' might be me. After all, this was a discovery of *major* importance, not like inventing a better dishwasher or even an improved semi-conductor. It could — and did — change the energy outlook for the entire world, and not in a million years would I have ever thought that I'd be the person to discover it, in the best way possible. My Marty saw other versions of reality in which my counterparts didn't invent fusion, and all of them were somehow slightly off. The reactors didn't work as well, they weren't as clean, they couldn't be made as cheaply, they needed less environmentally friendly fuels...."

He shrugged. "Maybe this isn't the way things are meant to go in your dimension, but they were in mine. I was uncomfortable with all the attention — and even the fortune — that came with this, but I don't regret having done it. I don't believe we're locked into inescapable destinies, but I do believe that some things were *meant* to be, that we all have greater reasons to live that we only need to look hard enough to find. After I found this one, I knew I couldn't just toss the reactor out to the world and let anyone who wanted do with it as they would; that could be disastrous. In fact, Marty saw at least one dimension where that was precisely the case. I was lucky enough to find an excellent attorney who later became my business partner, and we founded a company called EPB Technologies — a combination of both of our initials, nothing more, by the way. The purpose was both to market, refine, and develop new and better ways of using fusion power, and, as the company grew more profitable, to channel some of that into general research and development and some manufacture of new technologies. I'm not exactly 'the boss'; Peter has much better business acumen, and he's the company CEO. I'm the senior partner and primary owner, I have certain prerogatives that go with it, like choosing some of the projects we take on, and vetoing others I think are a waste of effort, but I don't actually work there. Don't tell *that* to Clara and the kids, though. They think I've been spending far too much time there, lately. Our headquarters are only a few miles south of here, in a little town called Elmdale."

"Really?" Marty said, mildly surprised. "I've been there. Little bump in the road town along the railroad that goes over the Eastwood Ravine. Mostly rusted out old factory buildings, falling down barns, and a couple of old farmhouses that were probably abandoned years ago, before I was born. I think there may be a bar and a gas station still in business out that way, but that's it."

"Sounds just like our Elmdale — or at least the way it was four years ago. We bought a big parcel of land out there when we decided we wanted to move our company out of the Bay area and stop paying outrageous rent for facilities. The whole place is a lot different, now. If we have time, I'll show it to you — in fact, we may be able to make use of one of the labs there, if we need something done that I don't have the equipment to do quickly or accurately enough. What I do for the company, I do mostly here, in my lab out in the barn or in my study. Trying to work there with a bunch of nosy engineers and techs hanging around can be a nightmare, especially when it's something I want to keep to myself until I'm ready to let others in on it. That's what I was doing for the last few years. I've been working here at home on developing a fusion powered engine for vehicles and major industry. Just when I thought I had the damned thing perfected and finally showed it to our engineering staff, one of our newest employees took one look at the schematics and found a problem I just can't seem to find a way to make work the way I want...." He lapsed into silence, his thoughts once again focusing on that knotty problem.

Marty grinned, seeing in him the same single-mindedness his own Doc often had when doing battle with a vexing problem. "Then maybe it's a good thing we dropped in when we did," he drawled, lightly teasing. "Get your mind off it for a while, find a new perspective...."

Visiting Doc coughed, recognizing some of the same phrases he'd used to persuade the bickering McFlys to come along on their horrible excuse for a vacation. "Perhaps," was all he said on the subject. "This all seems rather incredible to me. My family's been pestering me to enter a contest for local inventors, just to prove to the town that I *can* come up with something that works. It seems like a rather petty reason to me, just showing off, and even though I'm quite certain the devices they want me to enter are my own basic concepts, not borrowed from the future, I'm still concerned that I might've forgotten some part that *isn't* mine, and accidentally ruin another person's life."

Emmett understood the general concern, but not the persistence of it. He shook his thoughts free of the engine problem and returned to more immediate matters. "So what's stopping you from looking into the future to see how things turn out *before* you enter the contest? If you go, you'll know the outcome that resulted when you didn't enter. Then if you enter the contest and win, take another look at what happens afterward, and if it turns out that what you did had a serious negative effect on other peoples' lives, you can always go back and sabotage your own work to guarantee that you can't win. Rather draconian measures, perhaps, but you can't live your life in fear of using your own talents because something bad *might* happen because of something you *might* have seen. If I'd kept doing that, something bad *would've* happened — both to the rest of the world, and to my own life. I would've lived out the rest of my days in unpleasant obscurity — and probably poverty, for my entire family — just because I was afraid to admit that I *could* invent something important, something that would make peoples' lives better, and give my family a sense of pride in me. That would've been the worst thing of all, I think, failing them. They deserve better than having the town crackpot as a husband and father. And I've come to realize that *I* deserve something better than that, too."

"Sure looks to me like some other people thought so, too," Marty agreed. "Not just you having all this money and your own company, but that Nobel Prize we saw in the hallway. Jules told me you got it a *lot* faster than people usually do."

Doc paled, as if the thought of winning such a thing himself was so remote a possibility, it could never be anything but pure fantasy. But if his counterpart *had* discovered viable and clean cold fusion, it really wasn't a surprise that he'd been awarded the prize. Something like that was indeed a major find, capable of impacting the entire world very quickly, and even the notoriously slow Nobel Committee would have been able to understand that without needing a decade or three to view the results and weigh their importance. "I always dreamed of doing that," he admitted quietly when he found enough breath to speak. "But I never thought it would be anything *but* a dream."

There was wry mischief in Emmett's smile. "If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything," he told his counterpart, then laughed at the scolding grimace he was given in return. "Well, it's true," he said in his own defense. "And if it's true for everyone else, it's true for you, too. If you *want* to find a way to do this — not necessarily win a Nobel Prize, but actually *be* an inventor in ways the rest of the world can accept and acknowledge — then you'll do it. The only person stopping you is *you*."

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They returned to the house shortly before noon, not long after Clara and Jennifer returned from the market. Both Juleses and other Verne had been conscripted into carrying bags from the car, Verne grumbling that he would almost rather have switched places with his counterpart to take his exams, until someone mentioned that these last two were the hardest, being in calculus and advanced physics. The visiting blond decided right then that his double had to be crazy to take things like that of his own volition, but local Jules idly mentioned that his brother had aspirations of following their father's footsteps in attending Princeton after graduation, and wanted to do it on his own scholarships, not because their parents were footing the bill.

"That's more Jules' kind of crazy idea, not mine," Verne swore as he and the Juleses returned to the van to collect another load of sacks. "No way I'm gonna waste my time in science and pre-med and boring crap like that, not any more'n I have to. And why bother to work your butt off for scholarships when your folks can afford it?"

"Because it's their money, not ours," local Jules told him, "and when your folks have as much money as ours do, sometimes, you don't *want* them to be paying your way for everything. Yeah, my folks gave me a new car for my last birthday, but that was partly 'cause my old one was really turning into a deathtrap and Mom worried every time I got into it, partly 'cause I turned eighteen, and partly 'cause I got perfect grades during my first year in college. Getting stuff like that can be more of a hassle than a help. Other kids see it, and they start thinking that all you have to do is whistle to Mom and Dad for money whenever you want it, and they hang on you like leeches, expecting you to show 'em a good time. And it's worst with girls, 'cause you never know if they really like you or just like that inheritance you might get someday. It's pretty freaky, and a pain in the neck. The last place I'd ever want to go to school is here in

California, especially in Hill Valley. Too many people know about Dad, some of 'em still think he's nuts, and the rest of 'em just think 'money.' At least at Harvard, only a few people really know about my family. Brown's a common enough name, and I can be just a face in the crowd — not like it was during high school." He shuddered expressively, a sufficiently eloquent explanation.

His counterpart nodded. "It wasn't a very pleasant experience, especially not when so many people think Dad's insane and gave us a hard time because of it. College hasn't been so bad, though it would've been nice to go somewhere like Harvard. They have an excellent medical school. Is that what you're there for?"

Jules shook his head. "English, primarily. They don't offer a specific journalism degree, but I'm planning to write, so I know my actual degree won't matter if I can show a good portfolio."

It was just as well he was facing in a different direction when he spoke. The look other Jules gave him clearly said that he considered the Harvard education wasted on such a pedestrian pursuit. Verne snickered. "Too bad you can't trade places, eh, Jules?" he taunted his brother. "Best grad school you're gonna get is UCLA, if you can pull the grades to win a scholarship."

The elder sibling wrinkled his nose. "Grow up, Verne. UCLA's medical school is every bit as good, and I don't see any reason to put a strain on the family budget or bury myself in debts I'll spend the rest of my working life paying off, just to go to an Ivy League school. Especially not now, with Mom pregnant again."

Local Jules blinked at his double. "Your mom's gonna have a baby? Is that what the trip to the clinic last night was all about?"

Verne sighed expansively. "Yeah, and what great timing. Bad enough we've been jumping from one time to another, now your dad tells us that just *being* in another dimension can kill you... how come you guys didn't tell us about that sooner? Didn't you know?"

"We knew, but we didn't think there was any point in giving you bad news until it was necessary. For all we knew, the damage to your time machine wasn't as serious as it looked, and you could've gone back home before there were any problems. I hope this'll be okay for your mom and the baby, though. Dad's never been able to figure out if time travel can hurt developing fetuses."

"Neither has our dad," other Jules confirmed. "I tend to think it doesn't, since we've never seen anyone have physical problems directly related to time travel, and Dad was stranded in the past for eleven years without any trouble. Cross-dimensional travel, though...."

His counterpart nodded, his expression dark. "It can be bad. Though Dad probably told you all it takes to sort of reset your body is jumping from one time to another. If that'll do it and time travel isn't dangerous to pregnant women, then your mom and the baby should be okay."

"Yeah, I hope so," Verne agreed. "But I've gotta tell you, the two of them really should've learned how to space out their kids better. It's bad enough, thinking that by the time Emmy's ready to graduate from college, I'll probably be married with three kids and off working somewhere. Thinking that by the time *this* kid's that old, I'll be pushing forty...!" That thought being unthinkable, he pushed it aside, grabbed another bag, and followed the others back into the house.

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When he saw that the van which Clara and Jennifer had taken shopping was back in the drive near the mansion's side entrance, Marty decided to join the two Docs as they headed out to the barn, where Emmett stored both of his time machines on the upper level. They entered through the half-underground lower level, which Marty noted had been converted into a more utilitarian lab than the one in the house local Doc had called his study. There were at least half a dozen computers around the big room, all with the flat LCD monitors that were just beginning to appear on the market in 1994, at hideously expensive cost. Although the layout was different as well as some of the equipment, in many ways, it reminded Marty of something his Doc would have done in his own barn, given the same set-up. There was something vaguely comforting about that, a reassurance that no matter how different things seemed, there were still certain major aspects of this world and his own that were the same. The oddest thing about the place, to Marty's mind, were the strangely thick floor-to-ceiling posts positioned at regular intervals around the

room. There weren't so many of them that they got in the way, but if he'd been the one using the room, the musician would've gotten rid of the obstacles.

When they went upstairs, however, using a staircase along the left-hand wall of the lab, he realized why the things were there. They were the posts supporting the main floor of the barn, which in turn was supporting the weight of this Doc's train. Anyone with sense would have reinforced things to make sure the locomotive didn't literally come crashing down around their ears — though Marty was puzzled when he glanced about and saw no vehicle doors in either of the walls before or behind the train, only to its sides. He scratched his head.

"How the heck do you get this thing out of here?" he wanted to know. "Or don't you?"

"I do," Emmett assured him. "But maneuvering something that big through ordinary barn doors would've been ridiculously difficult. So I take it out through the roof."

Marty looked up. "You mean, it opens up like those fancy stadiums do?"

"Something like that. As a matter of fact, I had the work done by people who do just that kind of thing. They thought I was planning to buy a helicopter or build my own little observatory, though. I think it would be a good idea if we moved your train out of the canyon and brought it here," he added in one of Doc's typical lightning subject changes. "For one thing, it's a long hike, none of you are in shape for riding out on horses — you'd probably all be saddle sore after a day. For another, we get entirely too much rain at this time of year, and if we had a heavier storm than yesterday's suddenly blow up — all too strong a possibility — the flooding in the canyon could be much more serious. It wouldn't wash away the train, but it could flood high enough to cause even more damage to the exposed or broken areas, or even wash away people attempting to work on it. And while the nature preserve you came down in is barricaded to prevent people from bringing in things like dirt bikes and SUVs, I don't bar hikers and backpackers from going through, and I don't think either of us want to take the risk of being accidentally discovered, even with holographic projections to disguise the machine."

"Definitely not," Doc agreed. "And having a real lab and all the equipment and supplies right on hand would be much more practical than having to run back and forth when we need things. But how do we get it here?"

"Possibly without too much difficulty. Did you notice any damage to the hover systems?"

The visiting inventor thought about it for a bit, then shook his head. "Not the general operating equipment. The wheels were locked into the flight position when we landed, though, so getting it into the air is probably out of the question."

"Not necessarily. If we hitched my train to yours with industrial hooks and chains so that it could fly above it and pull up, we'd only need to actually raise it high enough to allow the hover system's initial lift cushion to generate under your train. Once it's able to generate its own lift, my train can move it about quite easily, since it'll only be providing direction and propulsion, if necessary. And once it's airborne, the wheels can be unlocked and returned to their proper landing position before we settle it here in the barn."

Doc listened to the suggestion with thoughtful intensity, nodding his understanding and approval. "Yes, that would work very well, so long as there's no serious damage to those systems. And if your train has a similar lifting capacity as mine, it *should* be able to handle the weight of mine enough to get adequate clearance before the hover system kicks in. But do you have enough of the right kind of chains and hooks for the job? Everything I own at home is meant to tow cars or light trucks, not lift several tons of locomotive."

Emmett wasn't worried. "If I don't, I can get them easily enough. There're plenty of those things in the manufacturing wing of my company, and no one's going to complain if I borrow some." That wasn't entirely true; he knew quite well that a number of people would complain about him being back on the grounds when he'd been ordered away for a while, but he also knew there were ways he could get in and out without being seen, long enough to get what was needed. If not, he was sure Peter would give him a temporary reprieve, once he explained the situation. At least he was *fairly* sure.

"It looks pretty much the same as Doc's train," Marty admitted after looking it over. "Without the lightning scars and the busted flux capacitor and slagged wind-thingie. But you changed the stuff inside?"

“A fair amount of it. Not because I didn’t like the way it looked, but because some of the systems I added had requirements the original equipment couldn’t handle adequately. The display for a physical location, for instance, which wasn’t added until we’d been back several years. And the CTFM requires a computer screen to show its data in any detail. It got to the point where I was adding and overhauling and patching in so many different things, the cab was turning into a wiring nightmare, so I decided it made more sense to just pull things out and do it right. I do regret removing a few of the more period devices, though. When I think of all the mental gymnastics I went through, just trying to come up with ways to make ordinary typewriters and display wheels work as an input system for a rather primitive computer....” He smiled nostalgically, an expression wistfully mirrored by his counterpart.

While he spoke, they came around to the opposite side of the train, where its entrance was located. Only then did the other, much smaller time machine come into view. When it did, Marty had an immediate reaction. “Whoa, that’s bitchin’! Is that your other time machine? Well, yeah, I guess it must be, you said it was a Jaguar and you had ‘em both parked in here. But I’ve never seen a gold Jag before — not gold like *that!* Is that real?”

Both scientists chuckled softly at the young man’s awed reaction. “Yes, it’s real,” Emmett confirmed as his guests went to inspect the smaller machine first. “Just plating, though, not solid. But that’s why it almost never leaves this barn without being under some kind of holographic disguise. Bad enough that Jaguars are popular targets for thieves and joyriders, without attracting them with the mistaken notion that it’s made of solid gold.”

“Then why bother?” the musician wanted to know.

“Because gold is one of the best electrical conductors around,” his own Doc provided. “As well as being very resistant to corrosion and extremely malleable. Remember when we converted the Aerovette into a time machine? We needed to take it to a shop to have it repainted with a conductive coating that wasn’t available in our own time, because I still needed that particular quality for proper flux dispersal.” He glanced at his counterpart, who was moving to the driver’s side to open up the car. “I take it when you built this, plating was the most cost-effective way of achieving that.”

Emmett nodded. “I could’ve had the car stripped to bare metal, but by the mid-’90s, they were building cars with so much plastic in ‘em, gold plating was the best way to get the conductive finish in a way that would also be flexible enough to stand up to the bending most plastic panels are subjected to. By then, money wasn’t as much of an issue, anymore.”

Once inside, he unlocked the passenger’s door to let his guests look around. When they’d all climbed inside so he could show them the extensive dashboard displays that told one anything one wanted to know about the machine’s various systems — with Marty sitting in back and leaning between the two front seats to get a good view — Doc was asking something about the CTFM display when Emmett heard an odd noise from outside the car. He strained his hearing for a moment, still couldn’t focus on it, then gestured for the others to be quiet a moment. In the silence, they all heard what first sounded like scratching noises, then small, high-pitched voices whispering to each other.

“...don’t think Dad knows that the woodchucks chewed a hole there, yet — an’ I’m not gonna say anything about it, either. Nobody else knows about this — ‘cept you, now. An’ you gotta promise not t’ tell anyone.”

“Of *course* I won’t tell. My Daddy’s got his barn all locked up tight, too, an’ I don’t even *know* where he’s hidin’ the train when we aren’t usin’ it. We don’t go places a whole lot, an’ when we do, we’re never inside long enough so I can see everythin’. I just wanna *look*, but Daddy thinks I wanna play with the c’mputers.”

“Don’tcha?”

“Well... yeah, I guess, but just so I can see what they *do*. You do the same things, you told me.”

“Yeah, but / know better’n to mess with changin’ passwords an’ codes. You really scared everyone good, y’know.”

“I know, but it really *was* an accident. Wow, your Daddy’s train looks just like my Daddy’s! Can you get inside, or does he got it all locked up, too?”

“Prob’ly, but I know how t’ get in. Hang on a sec....”

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

At the sound of an adult voice, Chris and little Emily, who had somehow managed to get into the security-tight barn without setting off its alarms, froze, then panicked, and tried to run for it.

"Emmett Christopher Brown, if you take one more step, you're going to be in such big trouble, you won't see the outside of your room until you're old enough to graduate from high school!"

Chris knew his father meant business when he heard him use his full name, which, as far as he knew, the inventor preferred to forget most of the time. Emily wasn't deterred, since the threat hadn't been lowered against her. She kept running and had almost made it back to the raised platform on the north end of the barn before her own father's voice chimed in. "That goes for you, too, Emily. I can't believe you'd misbehave like this twice in one day! You know our barn, and the time machines, are off-limits. What in the name of Isaac Newton made you think the rules are any different here?"

Both kids were squirming where they stood when they turned to face the music. "Well..." Emily said first, since she'd been asked a direct question. "Chris said he knew a way in, an' we weren't gonna do anythin' to mess with the c'mputers or nothin'. We just wanted to look."

"And just what *is* this way in that nobody else knows about?" Emmett asked his son, his stern tone of voice and his frown telling the boy that lying would be a very, very bad decision.

Chris hemmed and hawed for a bit, then finally pointed to the platform. It was a raised area about two feet off the main floor, where once upon a time certain farm implements and other things had been stored. Other than the supports, the area beneath was completely open to allow air to circulate. On the west end, three wooden steps had been built to allow easier access. "It's under there," he told his father, indicating the tiny flight of stairs. "Behind the steps. Some woodchuck or something musta burrowed into the ground there, an' chewed a hole in some of the old boards to get inside the wall an' make a warm nest during the winter. I saw it a coupla months ago, after the snow melted, an' there weren't no woodchucks there anymore, but the hole's just big enough for me to crawl through."

"And just how often *have* you crawled through it?"

"I dunno," Chris admitted, knowing that he'd made a big mistake, keeping this to himself. "A buncha times, I guess. But I didn't do anything when I came in, Dad, I promise, I just looked around. That's all we were gonna do. I know what happened when Jules an' Verne tried to take one of the machines. I'm not *that* dumb."

"No," his father agreed with a sigh, "but you're too smart for your own good, sometimes."

"Something they have in common," Doc added, favoring his daughter with a similar look of displeasure. "Would you mind telling me why you decided now would be a good time to pull something like this? Wasn't playing with computers without permission enough trouble to get into for one day?"

"We weren't gonna get in trouble, Daddy, we were just gonna *look!*" she insisted. "We were gettin' bored 'cause it's not rainin' or anythin', but Emily wouldn't let us leave the room with Chris' videogames."

"So how'd you manage to get out?" Marty wondered, amused by how much these two kids seemed to have in common, even though they were from different dimensions and weren't at all the same person.

Chris shrugged. "Mom an' Jennifer came back from the store, an' Mom wanted some help puttin' things away, 'cause Jennifer didn't know where things go. When Emmy went into the kitchen, we snuck out through the TV room and came out the front door. It really *is* too nice to stay inside, Dad," he told his father, as if that should mitigate their crimes.

Emily nodded vigorously. "Yeah, that place where we was campin' really sucked big time, rainin' e'v'ry day...."

Doc groaned softly at his daughter's choice of words. "All right, you have a point, there," he allowed. "I can't blame you for wanting to enjoy nice weather after all that cold rain. But you should've asked if it was all right to go outside — and no matter what, you *shouldn't* have come in here without permission."



She hung her head, grateful for even a partial reprieve, since she knew perfectly well that under any other circumstances, she'd be facing some fairly stiff punishment.

Chris, who was aware that his would wind up being a more serious infraction in the eyes of his own father, took his best shot at proper abject contrition. Given his excellent acting abilities, it came off quite convincingly. "I'm sorry, Dad, I guess I shoulda told you about the hole when I found it. But Emmy's being a real stiff, an' you an' Mom keep tellin' us we shouldn't sit inside playin' games an' watchin' TV all day. Can't we do *somethin'* that's not so boring?"

Emmett glanced at his counterpart and understood perfectly well what was going through his head. Energetic six-year-olds couldn't be contained in one room for an entire day, especially not six-year-olds who came by their legacy of excess energy from a legitimate source, having inherited it from their fathers. "We'll see," was all he said. "You *should* spend the rest of the day in your room without any computer privileges, just for sneaking in here, and worse than that for bringing someone else along when you know it's wrong to begin with. For now, I want you to show me exactly where this hole you've been using is. And I promise you, the next time you go looking for it, it won't be there."

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When a call from Clara came over the intercom, warning them that lunch was ready, Marty was relieved when Emmett asked if she could send stuff for them along with Emily, so that she could retrieve her errant charges. When the almost-teen arrived with the basket full of food, she was already contrite, having realized that the two kids had somehow given her the slip even before the call was made. She was relieved to find them unharmed, but furious with her brother for choosing to be disobedient in such a flagrant manner. She was all for punishing the youngsters, but instead, Emmett decided that after lunch, she should take them on a hike through the woods near the house, something to work off their restlessness and give her a small punishment of her own for not making sure the kids would be supervised before she went to help her mother. She was rather disgruntled, having hoped that Jennifer might be able to spell her for a little while, since the visiting journalist seemed to want to do as much as possible to avoid any chance of running into her husband, but at least her father wasn't sending her back to school to hang out in those incredibly boring end-of-the-year pseudo-classes.

When they were almost finished eating, having discussed the order in which they should approach the major tasks of moving and repairing the damaged train, the twin Juleses and Vernes came out to join them. Local Verne had finished his exams just before lunch, and was eager to do anything to get his mind off how he'd done on the tests. The boys were all ready to head back on out to the canyon when they heard of the plans to move the downed train, but Emmett didn't want to start off until local Marty arrived.

"Unless we bring my Clara along," he explained, "the only other person who's authorized to fly the Jag is Marty, and I'd like to bring both it and the train along, the train to do the lifting, and the Jag to provide aerial observation and, if necessary, maneuvering instructions. You had the bad luck of coming down in one of the tightest parts of Silver Creek Canyon — which is another reason I'd rather not work on things there. Too much danger of accidental discovery or deadly flooding, should it rain again, and they're predicting afternoon storms all week."

"Couldn't Doc or me do it?" visiting Marty wondered. "I've flown hovercars before, and so has he."

"Yes, but the authorization systems in both vehicles require a palm- and voice-print and DNA match. Given what we've seen of the physical differences between us, there's a possibility — I'd even say a probability — that we don't match on that basic a level. Besides, someone will have to be in your train to activate certain systems, if possible, at the right time. My Marty really has no experience handling our train for more than a minute or two, and if I ask my Clara to come along, we can all but guarantee that *your* Clara will want to come, too."

"Which is out of the question," Doc stated flatly. "You're right, it's best if they both stay here, if for no other reason than to have adults around when the kids come back from their hike. But in the meantime, we should see if you've got the equipment we'll need to do the move without damaging the train any more than it is."

"If I don't have it, I know just where to get it," Emmett assured him. "It won't be a problem, not at all."

Somehow, Marty thought that sounded like the proverbial famous last words. Unfortunately, he was right.

## Chapter Eleven

The visiting Jennifer had been fairly well distracted since waking that morning from the ungodly sound of what turned out to be the home's security alarm. She had been one of the first downstairs, however, having spent more of the night tormented by the fight she and Marty had had than sleeping peacefully. Once the excitement of that had passed, there had been breakfast, then preparing for the day, and, finally, a trip to the grocery store that had been rather... interesting.

Aside from wanting to do something — *anything* — that wouldn't allow her the time to dwell on the crummy developments in her marriage, and to help the Clara whose home they had invaded, Jennifer had gone on the outing drawn by the curiosity that had made her finally settle on journalism as a major in college. She had picked up enough from the conversations around her since their arrival to know that this world was distinctly different from the Hill Valley she considered home. There was the fact, of course, that they were in the future eight years ahead of their time, but more significant was that they were in an entirely different dimension, something that she had experienced only once firsthand, back in 1986. Jennifer had been as horrified as everyone else in their party to hear that such a thing was a danger to their health, especially since the idea of visiting different dimensions was terribly appealing. She had often wondered about "the path not taken" and the idea that there were entire worlds out there that had developed in those directions was rather intriguing.

So, knowing that the stay here was, in all likelihood, a once in a lifetime shot, Jennifer was quite eager to see the world beyond the Brown's property before they left. She had watched the scenery pass, wide-eyed, through the windows on the drive to the supermarket, and, after a bit of disorientation, had recognized where they were, sort of, in proximity to her Hill Valley. The store they had finally stopped at was one Jennifer had occasionally run to if she happened to be doing her shopping on the way home from the station, and she was rather surprised to find it looking pretty much the same as she remembered it being at home, aside from obvious improvements that had been done as a result of the passage of time and newer technologies, *not* different dimensions.

Once she realized that she wouldn't get lost, she had taken half the list from Clara to cut their marketing time in half, and also allow herself the chance to investigate things without slowing down the older woman. She had found most of the groceries pretty quickly, and was lingering over the magazine and newspaper display, curious to see what was going on in the world here, when she noticed a tall, dark-haired man to her left, leafing through a copy of *Newsweek*. She studied him for a moment, haunted by a certain familiarity, and after a moment of puzzling it out she placed the face.

"Ben!"

The man turned to look at her at the sound of his name. Jennifer smiled at the sight of her co-anchor's familiar face, surprised to find that he didn't look too different. The smile lines around Ben Foster's eyes were a little deeper, perhaps, but his hair was without a thread of grey in it, his posture was still as straight as ever, and his body was still toned and athletic. He gave her a smile that she knew from experience was one of his "newscaster" smiles, not quite genuine but a pleasant expression nonetheless.

"Yes?" he said, as if answering a question. His reply was so casual that it took Jennifer aback. Did he know her, here? Was such a thing possible, in spite of the physical differences between her and her counterpart?

"Do you know who I am?" she asked curiously.

"No," Ben said flatly. "But you're kinda cute, so I wouldn't mind getting to know you better." He winked at her as Jennifer stared at him in disbelief, rather appalled at his obviously massive ego. Not that it was much better in 1994, but from the moment they had met, she'd made it clear that such a thing did not impress her, and Ben had somehow managed to keep it in check in her presence, possibly because he did like her, though he hadn't come right out and said it. Everyone knew she was married to Marty.

But, of course, how would he know that now, here?

Somehow, she was able to summon that slight bit of acting being a broadcast reporter required and gave him a wan, polite smile. "I'm married," she explained, holding up the hand with the ring on it.

“So?” Ben asked, lowering his voice. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Even with the feud she was having with her husband, Jennifer’s reaction was angry and immediate. “*Excuse me?! What kind of jerk are you to think that way? Not all women are itching to go out with someone on television, especially ones with egos the size of Alaska!*”

Jennifer would’ve said a lot more — and maybe smacked the creep with some of the periodicals on the shelf nearby — if Clara hadn’t come up, then, her cart filled and ready for checkout. She glanced at the male reporter and gave him a polite smile. “Hello, Mister Foster,” she said.

“Mrs. Brown,” Ben said, nodding at her with his reporter smile and apparently unaffected by Jennifer’s sharp tone and words. “How is your husband doing?”

“Well, thank you.” She glanced at Jennifer. “Are you ready to go?”

Jennifer nodded vigorously. She allowed herself one last, cool, glare at Ben, then followed the older woman to the checkout line. Clara looked at her curiously as they waited. “I didn’t realize you knew Ben Foster,” she said.

“I guess I don’t, here,” she said softly. “But he’s my co-anchor at home. Marty can’t stand the guy, and he definitely thinks of himself way too much — Ben, I mean, not Marty — but I don’t remember him being as obnoxious to me as he is now. I told him the first day that if he tried anything like that, he’d get a swift kick under the desk, on the air.”

“Perhaps his life has evolved differently here,” Clara said. “Or else he was paired with a newscaster who didn’t set such limits.” She looked at the reporter, still hovering at the periodical shelves and now talking to a pretty blonde who was clearly enamored. “Personally, I find him far too reminiscent of a gentleman — actually, just a man, he certainly wasn’t a gentleman, though *he* thought so — Emmett and I knew around the time we were engaged. When Mister Foster interviewed Emmett during the days of the company’s opening, he couldn’t gush enough while the cameras were on — but the moment they weren’t, he was on his cell phone ignoring Emmett and ordering his assistants around to fix his hair and bring him coffee and the like. People like that *do* give the press a bad name.”

Jennifer nodded, knowing that entirely too well. As the two women waited for their turn in line, the reporter was aware of an odd sort of thing — no one was looking at her. The sensation caught Jennifer completely by surprise, and she hadn’t realized until then how much she was used to being watched or creating double-takes when she was out and about in Hill Valley. It wasn’t unpleasant, necessarily, just... different. Nevertheless, Marty’s words last night — about how people would approach her when she left the house, now, wanting an autograph or to share whatever newsworthy cause they felt needed coverage — came back to her, and nagged at her badly as she helped Clara check out the groceries out, take them out to the van, drive back to the house, and sort them away. Throughout the preparations for lunch, she was silent, mulling them over as well as the sleazy version of Ben she had encountered. Was that how Marty thought she was, now? Someone like *him*? Just because she wanted to use a work name? The thought made her want to weep in frustration.

Once lunch had been cleaned up, the older Emily had taken her younger namesake and her brother out for their hike, and the Clara she knew had returned back to the library to dig around in the family history books she had stumbled upon. Jennifer sat down at the table in the kitchen, ready to start seriously wallowing in depression. The Clara native to this world joined her at the table with a warm smile and a cup of newly brewed coffee for the reporter. “How are you doing, Jennifer?”

The young woman lifted her shoulders in a half shrug. “I’ve been better,” she admitted, accepting the coffee from her host and taking a sip of it. A strong and bitter black, as she liked it. Coffee was practically one of her food groups now, since she had started working at the morning desk, meaning she had to get up at four-thirty A.M. to get there on time for the seven A.M. air time. Her next question came out without much forethought. “Am I very different from the Jennifer here? Aside from the way we look?”

Clara considered the question a moment as she stirred her mug of tea. “I don’t know you very well, but you appear to be,” she said carefully. “It’s not necessarily a *bad* thing, mind you.”

“She’s in print journalism?” At Clara’s nod, Jennifer couldn’t help smiling, albeit a little crookedly. “That’s interesting. I never would’ve thought I’d be a journalist, for sure. How’d she get into it?”

“She interned with the Hill Valley *Telegraph* during her final year of college and ended up enjoying it a lot. So she stayed on as a regular reporter after graduation, until around the time Marlene was born, when she started a column that’s nationally syndicated, now.”

“Huh. Well, she’d probably hate me, then. Seems like all the print journalists peg the broadcast ones as egomaniacs or wannabe actors.”

Clara studied the younger woman from across the table. “I take it that you didn’t select your area for those reasons,” she said.

Jennifer shook her head, hard. “No way! I had no idea what I wanted to major in with college *forever* — and I graduated late because of that, too, six months after Marty did — but in November of ‘88, I had to sub for Marty on the campus radio station and I really liked that. It gave me the chance to talk with people, to let them know what was going on, and to entertain them. So I went for broadcast journalism, since I liked the idea of maybe making a positive difference in someone’s life, and telling people what was going on in the world. It also gave me an excuse to be nosy,” she added, half-joking. “Took six months after graduation before I finally got an entry level position at the station. The pay was lame, the job assignments were worse, but I *finally* got a break last year and got to sub in at the anchor desk when the regulars were gone. And then when Debbie left to have her baby and the job I have now opened up, I lobbied *hard* for that. I couldn’t believe I actually got it; I *still* can’t. And then Marty took a great moment and step in my career and turned it into this nightmare for our marriage!”

“Was he upset that you got the promotion itself?” Clara asked.

“No — he was great. He had just started freelancing his music full time a month earlier and the raise I got was really going to help us out, since he wasn’t bringing in very much money, yet. But as soon as I mentioned that I wanted to use my maiden name at work, he got all weird and mad.”

“Did he explain why?”

Jennifer shrugged vaguely. “Not really. I know he’s already feeling funny about me making more money than him and having a lot of success and local fame, now, since he isn’t — at least not in the same way.”

Clara looked like she wanted to say something, but took a sip of her tea instead. “Why do you want to use your maiden name, now?” she asked instead.

“It’s something that’s *mine*, that’s part of me,” Jennifer said. “Don’t get me wrong, I love being a Mrs. McFly, but this is my *career*, not my personal life. I like the idea of having two separate identities and personas.”

Clara mulled that over a moment. “I really think you and Marty might want to talk about this together — rationally *and* calmly,” she emphasized.

“We’ve tried,” Jennifer grumbled. “But every time it’s brought up, he goes on about how he hates the idea and that I’m being a jerk for bringing it up and that he won’t support it at all, and why do I want to do it? Then I tell him what I just told you, and he’s *still* mad, asking me why I want two different names and if I’m ashamed of him! Which makes me kind of annoyed, then, because he’s acting so childish about the whole thing, so narrowminded, and that’s not the guy I thought I married. A lot of women nowadays use their maiden names at work. Why should it be so different if I do that?”

Once more, the older woman of this world looked like she wanted to say something on the matter, but didn’t. “Speak with Marty,” she said again. “If you’d like, perhaps someone can sit down with you both and be a mediator so it doesn’t turn too emotional or angry, but I think the only way this will be resolved is if you talk it out.”

“Maybe,” Jennifer said flatly, without much hope. She felt tears burning the back of her throat and bravely swallowed them, not wanting to let her mind stray to the dark possibilities that could so easily be reality if this wasn’t worked out with her husband. She didn’t want to back down on the name thing, especially since Marty wasn’t really being specific about how this was hurting him, beyond the question of why she needed to separate her “lives” and, frankly, she really didn’t think her request or wishes were asking for a lot. She knew she still loved Marty, even now when she was so angry and hurt by his behavior and they weren’t going more than two minutes before snapping at one another.

“It might be a good idea to *not* speak about it with Marty until you’re really ready to work things out,” Clara went on, looking a little uncomfortable. “I don’t know if you were aware of this, but the bedroom you and Marty were in last night is very...audible from most anywhere in the upstairs.”

Jennifer didn’t understand for a moment — then the memory of their stupid argument last night came flooding back and her cheeks burned scarlet. “Oh my God!” she moaned, burying her face in her hands, mortified. “I am so sorry....”

“It’s all right, dear — you didn’t know. But I think you also might want to watch what you say before your Emily. She’s quite an intelligent little girl and apparently shared your marital problems with little Marlene last night — and Marlene thought she was speaking about *her* parents, not you and your Marty.”

Jennifer grimaced, feeling even worse with this revelation. “Oh, *great*....”

She would’ve said more on the matter — and offered another apology — had a door not opened at the other end of the house and a familiar voice called out, “Hello?” Jennifer recognized the voice immediately and wanted to go hide after what Clara had told her, but not really knowing the house well enough to do that — and not liking the idea of running away, either — she stayed put as her host got to her feet to meet the visitor in the hallway.

“Hey, Clara. Where’re the others? Out in the lab?”

“Last I checked. Do you want me to call out there and let them know you’re here?”

“Naw, that’s okay, I’ll just go, now...” A moment later, the Marty of this world stepped into the kitchen, followed closely by Clara. He stopped quickly at the sight of Jennifer sitting nearby, staring at him, and frowned faintly, obviously irritated.

“Hey, what’s the deal with airing your dirty laundry in front of little kids?” he demanded, the anger in his voice causing Jennifer to shrink back a little, *very* uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry?” she essayed tentatively as Clara tried to calm her Marty.

“It wasn’t her fault, Marty. I don’t think she knew that Emily was so aware of the situation between her and Marty.”

“Even so, you shouldn’t be arguing like that in front of little kids,” Marty said to her, rather sternly. “They’re a lot smarter than you give ‘em credit for. Marlie was up half the night with nightmares about what Emily told her.”

Jennifer bit back a smart response — an urge prompted, perhaps, by the almost identical resemblance between this Marty and her own and being on the receiving end of angry words, again — and instead summoned every ounce of sincerity she could muster to apologize once again. “I’m very sorry... Marty,” she finished, feeling a little odd using his name. “Neither of us really thought about it, I guess.... I suppose we consider the Browns almost like our own family, now.”

Marty snorted softly. “We do, too, but there’s no way Jen and I would act like that in front of them.”

Jennifer was more than relieved by the beeping that sounded from nearby, interrupting the lecture from her counterpart’s husband. Clara went to take care of it — it seemed to be coming from the same direction that the alarm had been, that morning — as Marty continued to frown at her, still peeved. The reporter had a hard time understanding his irritation, entirely; it wasn’t as if she and her Marty had planned ahead of time where and when to fight, or had even stopped to think that it might be picked up on by Emily. She supposed part of her lack of understanding might have been because she wasn’t a parent, yet, and didn’t plan on stepping into that role up for a few years, at least. Having seen the future once, briefly, she also knew that the children she had seen that had belonged to her and Marty had to be in their middle to late teens by 2015, meaning they wouldn’t be born until the late 1990’s — which was fine with her. With her and Marty’s jobs being the way they were now, even if their marriage had been totally blissful, having kids anytime soon would be rather unfair to them and pinch them financially more than she was ready for, yet.

“Is Marty there?” she heard one of the Docs say from nearby — and Jennifer realized it was an intercom Clara had to have answered, from just outside the room.

“Yes, he’s here now and on his way.” Clara came back as Marty headed for the door they’d recently used when unloading the van. He left without another word to Jennifer and the young woman exhaled at his departure, not realizing how tense she had been until then. Clara smiled at her almost apologetically as she returned and took her seat with the reporter again.

“That wasn’t very nice of Marty to say those things to you,” she said. “I suspect he wouldn’t be so quick with his temper and mouth if it didn’t involve Marlene, and if he hadn’t been up half the night with her, either.”

“Maybe,” Jennifer agreed. “I guess mine wouldn’t be much different, there, when we have kids or if someone hurt me or one of his friends....” Something occurred to her and she winced a little. “I wonder if he’ll read the riot act to his other self out there?”

Clara’s expression echoed Jennifer’s. “Maybe he’ll go easier on himself,” she said. “Do you think we ought to call ahead and warn your husband about this?”

Jennifer smiled, a sudden hint of delicious vengeance touching the corners of her mouth. “Why? I had to hear it without knowing it was coming, and after all, it takes two to have a fight.”

## Chapter Twelve

Had she been aware of how local Marty's mood was actually blacker when it came to thinking of his counterpart's involvement with his daughter's distress, Clara might not have let that comment slide without taking action. Visiting Marty was with the various incarnations of Doc's elder sons, helping them sort through a mess of tools and equipment and supplies that would probably be needed to make the upcoming repairs while the two Docs were upstairs, working on setting up one of the local scientist's many computers to perform diagnostic functions on the damaged train's many systems. The boys were idly discussing things like their personal interests after their earlier conversation had revealed some rather profound — indeed, almost completely opposite — differences. The talk prompted local Verne to dub his brother and his counterpart “Dumb Jules” and “Smart Jules.” When visiting Verne got a good laugh out of that, his brother responded by noting that one could use the same descriptions to designate him and his local counterpart as “Dumb Verne” and “Smart Verne.” Visiting Marty noted that the whole conversation gave him the impression that all four of them were acting pretty dumb, and they decided it would be better to drop it. At about that time, local Marty arrived, his entrance having already been cleared in the complex security systems sealing the lab door.

“Think we can call one of you Dumb Marty and the other Smart Marty?” visiting Verne quipped when he saw who was coming in. The others chuckled.

So did local Marty, though no one noticed the lethal look on his face. “Sounds perfect to me,” he said flippantly, then promptly hauled off and decked his counterpart.

The other-dimension musician was so startled by the completely unexpected attack, he couldn't do anything but blink, try to make his eyes focus, and wonder what the hell had happened. Both local Verne and visiting Jules grabbed the irate Marty by the arms to stop him.

“Whoa, chill, Marty!” Verne said, astonished by this unusually belligerent behavior in their family friend. He knew that Marty had once had a terrible temper and could easily be goaded into a fight, but that had been years ago, before they'd moved back to 1990. Even then, he usually hadn't been the one to actually start it.

“That was completely uncalled for,” other side Jules agreed. “What happened?”

Marty didn't struggle to press his attack, but he did shrug off the boys — both of whom were markedly taller than him — still scowling down at his counterpart. “Oh, nothing, I just spent half the damned night trying to convince Marlene that me and Jen aren't getting divorced 'cause *this* butthead and his wife don't have the brains not to argue in front of little kids!”

He glared at his counterpart, who was still on the floor, making sure his nose or jaw hadn't been broken. “You've got exactly one minute to give me some kind of good explanation for how you can be so damned stupid!”

Other Marty looked up at him, his own temper beginning to rise now that he was sure he was still in one piece. “What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded, tired of being irrationally accused of things he hadn't done. “You were there last night. Jen and I hardly spoke two words to each other when your kids were around. What the hell makes you think I'm responsible for your daughter having nightmares?”

“She sure didn't get the idea from *us*,” local Marty snarled back. “We're not perfect, but we *don't* fight in front of our kids, or anyone else's, for exactly this reason. These days, all it takes is hearing a couple of squabbles before they start thinking there's a divorce coming, and from what I heard, you guys've been going at it like you're planning to hop down to Mexico and get a quickie divorce next week!”

Other Marty finally started climbing to his feet, more annoyed than ever. “And I'm telling you, we had nothing to do with it! Yeah, okay, so me and my Jen aren't exactly living in paradise these days, and maybe we don't have everything all settled and sorted out between us, but we *never* yelled at each other in front of your kids!”

“Then tell me who the hell did!”

“Well, did you ever stop to think that maybe *you* aren't as perfect as you obviously seem to think? Jesus Christ, you're sounding like you've got as bad a case of swelled head as Jennifer!”

Local Marty might've hauled off and clobbered his double again, and other Marty would have been perfectly ready to defend himself, had not the boys acted quickly to hold them apart. The steadily rising volume of their argument had caught the attention of the scientists upstairs, who came down to see the pair struggling to get away from the youths restraining them. It wasn't an easy task, since both musicians were wiry and very determined to vent their anger.

"Hey, Dad, give us a hand, here!" other Verne said, not caring which one of the two inventors responded. "They're gonna kill each other!"

"Oh, quit exaggerating!" was his brother's response. "They're — urrk!" Whatever he'd been about to say was cut short when the arm he was attempting to restrain slipped free and accidentally whacked him in the nose.

Other Marty snorted rather unkind amusement. "Yeah, that's it, go beating up on kids instead...."

Local Marty growled back. "Sure, blame your problems on other people — that's what Marlie said you two were doing, bickering at each other over really immature crap!"

"I'm not the one who walked in and started swinging...."

"And I'm not the one who doesn't have the brains to keep his mouth shut around children!"

Both Docs looked at one another, now understanding what had been going on. They stepped forward, gestured their sons away, then deliberately took up positions between the two combatants. Emmett crossed his arms in a posture that his Marty had learned long ago meant the normally pleasant-tempered scientist meant business. "Calm down," he told his friend, his expression promising more direct enforcement of the order if it wasn't obeyed. "I know you're upset about what happened with Marlene, but it's a misunderstanding."

"The hell it is!" the musician countered, his volume only moderately lowered, though he was no longer attempting to take another swing at his double. "Yeah, I know, you and your Clara and his Jennifer already told me that it was because of their Emily repeating things she heard to Marlie. But that's not an excuse, Doc! Oh, yeah, Marlie told us all about how Emily's got a big crush on him, and she's got it into her head that if he and his Jen break up, that means the field's clear for her — but for cryin' out loud, she's just a six-year-old kid! Maybe she didn't know that she was messing with Marlie's head by telling her shit like that, but what's it doing to *her* head, hearing it in the first place?! How would *you* like it if you were in *their* shoes? What if it was your Emmy who had all these weird notions that divorce is okay if it gets you what you want? Would you like it if she went around telling that to other kids, and making 'em afraid that it's gonna happen to their parents, too?"

Other Marty, who had been itching to get just one return shot at his local avatar, was being prevented from it by his Doc, who had him pinned in place with two firmly planted hands on his shoulders. While his counterpart railed at Emmett, something inside him suddenly snapped, cooling his temper like a wind off the ocean on a sweltering summer day. "Jesus," he breathed as understanding dawned. "I didn't know Emmy was *that* far gone on me! Oh, yeah, I knew she *liked* me, but... jeeze, I'm sorry," he said, peering around his Doc so that his double could see him. "I'm sorry about this whole damned mess. If it wasn't for all these problems with me and Jen, we wouldn't even be here. I'm so sorry."

"So am I," Doc sighed. "Even if we hadn't been stranded here, the situation with Emily's crush is getting seriously out of hand if she's viewing the possibility of divorce as a stroke of luck for her. I can see we're going to have to sit down and have a *very* serious talk with her about this. I'm just sorry no one realized things had gone this far before your daughter got frightened."

Their obvious sincerity was finally able to calm local Marty's temper. "She'll be okay," he told them, since it was plain they were both concerned that what should have been a private matter had gotten so nastily out of hand. "But I think we're gonna have to keep her and Junior away from here until you guys have gone home. She was confused enough, just seeing two of us in the same place. Seeing someone who looks like me with someone who doesn't really look like her mom is only making the whole idea of us breaking up more believable to her. This is all way too heavy for a kid her age to understand."

Other Verne snorted. "It's way too heavy for a kid *my* age to understand," he admitted, "and I'm not the one seeing what looks like my parents biting off each other's head when they bother to say two words to each other."



"I think keeping the kids at home until we've resolved the situation is an excellent idea," Emmett agreed. "That way, in a few days, after seeing her home life is perfectly normal and you two aren't fighting with each other, Marlene might start believing the whole thing was a nightmare. She doesn't know about the existence of time travel yet, and I'd prefer her to stay that way for as long as possible."

"Good idea," his Marty agreed, his temper now back under control. "Sorry I slugged you," he told his counterpart, meaning it, "but she really was confused and scared that Jen and I were gonna break up and leave her all alone. She's just too darned impressionable..."

His double shook his head. "She's a little kid. It goes with the turf. Besides, I think maybe I needed something like that to remind me that this is a private problem, and that's where it should stay: in private." He held out one hand as an offer of truce, and his local self took it without hesitation. He smiled crookedly. "Think you can get your Jen worked up enough to come over and give mine a kick in the butt, too? We sure need *something* to get this thing straightened out one way or another."

"I doubt that would be a very workable solution," Doc chided him, though not too seriously. "And being in a place where we don't belong with the clock ticking on our very lives isn't helping the tensions, I'm sure. Right now, I believe the best answer for all of us would be to fix our time machine and go home."

"Definitely," his counterpart agreed. "And if the fireworks are over, we should get back to work. I'd like to have their train back here and settled in the barn before five — sooner, if possible. They're saying the rain should hold off until suppertime today, but I never trust the local weather service, and I'd rather not take any chances of people heading home from work along Fairy Chasm Road hearing things they shouldn't be hearing. Marty, since I want you to pilot the Jag, there're a few things I need to show you before we go." He turned to the other young men. "If you three can manage to continue this job without them for a few minutes, I'd like to show my Jules and Verne what I'm going to need them to do with our train once we're out there. Is that a problem?"

The trio of young visitors shook their heads as one. "No," other Jules said confidently. "But I hope we'll be able to contribute something more significant than just sorting through tools and supplies."

"Oh, you will," his father assured him. "If we want to get back home before your brother or sister is born, we're going to need as much help as we can get."

As he and the locals headed back upstairs, those left behind heard Verne asking, most incredulously, "What was that about a brother or sister...?"

Both visiting Jules and Verne chuckled. "I forgot he wasn't around when we were talking about that," the blond youth admitted. "It still feels kinda weird, thinking about it. I know I'm gonna wait a while before settling down with a family, but not *that* long!"

Marty made a deeply disgruntled sound as he settled back on the stool he'd been using before his counterpart had decked him. He was sure nothing was broken, but he was fairly sure there'd be a bruise on his jaw by morning. Bad enough that in a sense, he'd given it to himself, but the implication that his local avatar had talked to Jennifer before coming out to join them was disturbing. If she'd known he was angry, why hadn't she tried to warn her husband so he could at least be prepared for the confrontation? He couldn't understand why she was being so stubborn and narrowminded about... everything. This wasn't the woman he'd married, not at all. That person had been loving and considerate and a hell of a lot more flexible than this... celebrity she was turning into. And she wasn't even trying to see his point of view. She was viewing him as some sort of obstacle, and he had no idea why. "At least you'll probably *have* a family," he muttered ruefully. "At the rate I'm going, I'm not gonna have a marriage long enough to even get that far."

Both boys were sympathetic. "It seems to me that your biggest problem is communication," was Jules' opinion. "If you can't talk without fighting, you won't ever be able to settle your differences."

"I guess, and if we could talk without opening our mouths, maybe we'd be able to do that."

"Too bad Dad's dream-reader thing isn't a mind-reader thing," Verne observed as he went back to picking through a box of mixed up parts to sort them. "That way you *could* talk without opening your mouths."

“Yeah,” Marty sighed wistfully, wishing it could be that easy. “But your Dad never could get his mind-reader gizmo to work. That had to be one of the wildest things he ever dreamed up. But even he figured out it really couldn’t work. Too bad.”

They all agreed on that and went back to their tasks, blissfully oblivious to the presence of the very device they were thinking of, realized in a very different form than the one Marty knew, stored in a box on shelf only a few feet away.

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It was almost two by the time both Docs felt everything was as organized and ready to go as it was going to get on this end of things. All that was left was collecting the grapples and chains to make the lift of the damaged train possible, and even though Emmett found he didn’t have quite what they needed on hand, he continued to insist that getting it from EPB wouldn’t be a problem.

“I dunno, Doc,” Marty told his friend with wry amusement. “Sounds to me like it’s a bigger problem than you think. Aren’t you kinda... what do they call it? *Persona non grata* around there, right now? Show your face at the gate, and they’ll tell you to get lost.”

When his counterpart looked at him with a thoroughly startled expression, Emmett frowned at the musician for making such a deliberately loaded statement. “That’s only because Clara somehow talked Peter into invoking a clause in our partnership agreement that we put in there because he’s a recovering workaholic...”

“And because you sometimes don’t know when to quit, either, Dad,” Verne chimed in. “If Mom got Peter to do that, no way anyone’s gonna let you get back onto the grounds, whether he’s there or not. He may not be the boss from hell, but when he does whack people back into line, they know it.”

“I’m still sure there won’t be a problem,” his father insisted. “I know they have exactly the things we need on hand in the manufacturing and shipping divisions — I called right after lunch to make sure. If there’s any trouble, I’ll tell Peter what’s happened. He won’t be so inflexible if he knows there are lives at stake.”

“Your business partner knows about your time machine?” Doc said, even more astonished than before. “Why did you tell him? The more people who know about the existence of time travel, the more dangerous it can be...” He couldn’t help but recall times in which unscrupulous persons who had stumbled across knowledge of his time machine’s existence had stolen it for their own gain, and the detriment of others.

“When the *wrong* people know, yes,” Emmett agreed, “like old Biff. But I had good reasons to trust Peter, and he’s no fool, or an idiot. Sooner or later, he would’ve figured it out on his own — he pretty much had, by the time I told him — and if I’m going to trust him to handle other very important inventions of mine, I figured it was only fair that I let him know the entire story. It’s not like I just up and told him ten minutes after we met, anyway; that didn’t happen until we’d been working together for almost three years. Besides, I hate living with dangerous secrets that no one else can know about. Drives me crazy.”

To a certain extent, Doc had to admit that it was true — he wasn’t all that fond of sitting on such secrets himself — but he still had doubts about the wisdom of telling a mere lawyer or a business executive about extremely scientific things they couldn’t properly understand. “So what are you going to do?” he wondered, still a little uncomfortable with the thought that another him might have used his knowledge of future technology for his own benefit, with such extreme results. “Break into your own place of business?”

Emmett scratched his chin as he contemplated this angle. “I could, if it was necessary. The holographic projections can make the time machines appear completely invisible, and if I needed to, I could fly the Jag into the compound, get the equipment we need, and get out again without being seen.”

There was thick skepticism in the sound Verne made. “Oh, right, Dad, like the Jag’s got the space to carry enough industrial tow chains and grapples to lift the train. You’d need a truck or our train to do it, and you know darned well that even invisible, that locomotive still makes way the hell too much noise. You’d attract attention for sure.”

His father refused to be deterred. “Then I’ll use the van, and be straightforward about it. I’m *not* a criminal under restraining orders, and I’m not going there to work. If I have to go under escort just to make Peter and your mother happy, I will. But we need that equipment, and that’s the easiest and fastest way to get it.”

He headed off. The others considered staying behind to help those still down in the lab, but curiosity prompted them to follow. As he trailed several paces behind his father, Jules weighed in with his opinion. “I dunno, Dad, this sounds like the easiest and fastest way to get Mom *majorly* torqued with you. If she told Peter to keep you away from EPB, she meant business....”

Emmett made a very skeptical sound. “And the reason for that was because she wants me to let someone else try to take care of the fusion engine problem. Fine, I’ve agreed to that and already assigned other people to the project. I won’t be going anywhere near the labs — and if no one tells her where I got the equipment, there won’t be any trouble. What is this, a conspiracy to get us into a ridiculous fight?”

Given how the constant arguing between visiting Marty and Jennifer was already adding to the tensions of the current situation, his sons backed off on the issue. When they reached the garage, the discussion was made academic when the doors refused to open.

“This shouldn’t be happening,” the inventor muttered to himself, checking to make sure he was using the correct key. He was, and though it was popping the lock in the doorknob, the door itself refused to budge.

“That’s weird,” was Marty’s observation. “Is it stuck?”

After peering carefully around the jamb, Emmett shook his head. “It’s the security system. It’s locked into place, and it’s not releasing.”

Visiting Doc, who had come with the others to head on into the house and see how his Clara was doing, had a sudden awful suspicion. “This isn’t something Emily might’ve done when she invaded the system this morning, is it?”

“Possibly,” his counterpart said, though he didn’t sound convinced of it. He moved to the front of the building and tapped a code into a keypad to open the vehicle doors. None of them worked. He then had a theory. “It could be that in attempting to play the game she thought she’d found, she changed more than one code. I’ll have to run a diagnostic on the entire system and reset things, just to be sure. But it’s not a big problem. It’ll only take a minute to make the adjustment.”

He headed into the house and went straight to the security panel in the hall near the kitchen. When he attempted to check the status of the garage, it did not respond; when he input the master password to access the full system, the entire board shut down. “What the...?” he began, shocked by the computer’s response. He tried several ways of bringing it back up, but it stayed down.

“Is there something wrong with the power?” Marty wondered, though that was a problem endemic to his neighborhood, not here.

“More likely something wrong with the system,” Doc said, all but sure of it. His counterpart looked at him with a puzzled frown, wondering how he had reached his conclusion; he explained. “If Emily did more than we realize, she might’ve corrupted the entire program. It’s constantly running isn’t it?”

Emmett now saw where he was coming from. “It’s possible. Some virus-type programs are absurdly simple to create but very pernicious in undermining a system once introduced. It’s not a major problem,” he assured his visiting avatar, who was obviously disturbed by how much trouble his daughter had managed to create in half of one day. “I can link to the security system from one of the computers in my study and have it do a clean reboot from the protected backup. It won’t take long—”

“Don’t bother, dear,” Clara suggested ever so politely as she and her double came in through the door to the children’s study. “Emily didn’t do this. *I* did.”

Her husband blinked at her, incredulous. “*You* did?” he echoed after checking to make sure he wasn’t hearing things. “What exactly did you do?”

“Made sure you couldn’t get into the garage, and set the board here to shut itself down if you put in any of your passwords to try to use it. Oh, don’t look at me that way, you know I’ve had enough experience with these things by now to do that, it’s not that difficult.”

“But *why*?”

She sighed. “Because I had a feeling you might’ve taken it into your head to go back to Elmdale, even after you promised you wouldn’t. That *is* where you intended to go, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but *not* for the reasons you’re thinking! They have things we need that I don’t have here....”

“So you have to go get them yourself? You couldn’t call ahead and tell them what you want, and send Jules or Verne or Marty to go get it, or have someone from there bring it here?”

“I suppose I could, but—“

“But nothing. Emmett, haven’t you realized yet that this is what we’ve all been pestering you about, these past few months? You just won’t let go and let other people do whatever you get into your head is something only you can do. Yes, I suppose that after years of hard work, it was annoying to discover that you’d missed a detail in getting the fusion engine just the way you’d planned, but it’s only that: a *detail*. It won’t stop it from working, it won’t stop it from going into production, it’s just another excuse for you to hang on and not let go.”

“But I *did*,” he insisted.

She sniffed indelicately. “Yes, yesterday, after you’d spent nearly five *months* fretting over it and not getting any closer to an answer, and then only after Peter *made* you do it. I’m not complaining that it took too long, even though I certainly have every right, but you *promised* you’d abide by your agreement and not go back until the end of summer. I know,” she forestalled before he had a chance to say it, “what you’re doing now is very important, but I won’t let you break that promise when there are perfectly viable alternatives. We both agreed on that.”

A puzzled frown crinkled the inventor’s face. “Both?” he asked, at a loss.

“She and I,” other Clara said, stepping forward. “After Marty arrived, Jennifer went to rest for a while, since she didn’t sleep very well last night. I’d been looking at the very interesting family history your wife’s assembled — which you ought to spare a moment to look at if you can, Emmett,” she said as an aside to her own husband, “the differences and similarities are fascinating. We got to talking, she told me about the situation with you and your business, and even though I’m concerned for our well-being if we stay here too long, I think she acted completely properly. She told me it’s been almost three years since you and your family had a proper vacation, and that if you didn’t go now, the six of you may never have a chance to do it again, as a family. The timing of our arrival was entirely too convenient in providing an excuse to keep you from going with them in three weeks, and if you use this as leverage to make your partner lift the ban keeping you from your company’s property, you might simply forget about silly little things like vacations and go back to whatever you were working on that caused this trouble in the first place. I won’t be a party to that. Everyone occasionally needs to rest and get away from the stresses in their lives. No one is *that* indispensable.”

“She has a point,” visiting Doc had to admit, saying no more when Emmett glared at him.

“No, she doesn’t!” he insisted. “Yes, I promised I’d let someone else deal with the fusion engine problem, and I even implied that I wouldn’t let myself get sucked into working on any new projects until the end of summer. I agreed that I’d go on vacation with the rest of the family when I could — but this *isn’t* a work project, it’s not going to drag me into anything of the sort, nobody planned for this to happen, it’s not something I can just turn over to the other techs and engineers at EPB and say, ‘Here, take care of this for me’ — and it can’t wait! *You* agreed that this had to take precedence over anything, vacations included,” he added, turning back to Clara his wife. “I’m not trying to cheat my way out of an agreement, I’m just trying to do this as efficiently and as quickly as possible. Don’t you trust me to keep my word?”

Clara, however, wasn’t backing down. “Of course I do, you know that. But I also know that as hard as you might try, you sometimes forget yourself when you’re distracted.”

“Not with something this important. I don’t have time to fret over anything going on at the company, not with a problem that could be a matter of life and death right here. And how did you know I was even thinking about going there, anyway? Did you set the intercom to listen in on everything going on out in the barn?”

The teacher lifted her chin, miffed. “Certainly not! I should think you’d know by now that I don’t pry into your business, whether or not you’ve said you want to keep a matter secret. Why should I?”

“Because you’ve been trying to get me to go on vacation for months, and you pried into my business enough to talk Peter into kicking me out of my own company!”

“I did not! I told him that I had a vacation planned, and that I wanted you to come with us since this may be one of the last times we’ll all be able to go as a family, but I did *not* tell him to kick you out, or to pressure you into coming with us. Whatever he did, he did of his own volition.”

Emmett was skeptical. “And I suppose you didn’t even *ask* if there’s a way he could force me out of the engine project.”

“I asked,” she admitted without a hint of guilt for it, “but he didn’t say yes or no, and I didn’t push it. Honestly, Emmett, you’re acting as if I just committed high treason!”

“That’s just about what it *feels* like! I can’t believe you don’t trust me!”

“And I can’t believe you’d deliberately go behind my back and break your word!”

“But I *didn’t*...!”

The sound of a sharply clearing throat interrupted, drawing both combatants’ attention away from one another and toward the back door at which their guests had arrived the day before. Chris and the two Emilys were there, the eldest of the trio the one who had made the disruptive sound. Although Chris and his sister appeared a little uncomfortable to have walked in on this, visiting Emily appeared rather more intensely disturbed. “I needed to get a new comclip before we go up to the meadow and the woods past the bluff,” she explained, referring to the little devices the local inventor had come up with as a way for the kids to keep in touch with home while wandering about the more wild parts of the surrounding lands. “The battery on this one’s almost shot. I’ll just get it and go,” she added, heading for the cabinet in which the things were stored.

Now suddenly made much more aware of the presence of other witnesses to their quarrel, Emmett uneasily glanced at the others, and noticed that the visiting Marty, Jules, and Verne had decided to follow them when they’d left the barn. Visiting Jennifer had also put in an appearance, her rest doubtless disturbed by the sounds of what he had to admit was becoming irrational bickering. Both Jennifer and her husband had the oddest looks on their faces, as if they had never seen anything like this before, and perhaps weren’t liking what they were seeing. He didn’t know for sure, and to be honest, it didn’t really matter. He winced.

“I’m sorry,” he said more quietly, to everyone in general and to Clara in particular. “That was uncalled for.”

“Not entirely,” his wife admitted graciously, her own tone gentled and also apologetic. “I know you’ve been under a considerable amount of stress, dear, which is why I think a vacation is very important — as soon as *possible*,” she added, also admitting that she understood the seriousness of their current situation. “I’m sorry I acted so underhandedly, but it seemed the easiest way to go about it, and perhaps get your attention.”

He grunted softly. “You certainly managed *that*. How *did* you know to lock down the garage?”

“Very simple: *I* told her,” another voice announced cheerfully. It came from the direction of the corridor to the front door, and momentarily was followed by its owner. Peter almost literally stepped into the midst of what had been a fight, smiling a pleasant greeting at his partner and his wife. He was in the remains of a business suit, having discarded the coat and tie, yet somehow managed to seem quite casual despite the lingering formality of his dress. Though the locals all knew him well, the visitors, with the exception of Emily, had varying reactions of surprise, ranging from Doc’s — which communicated concern at the presence of a stranger in the midst of this convention of doubles — to Verne’s, which sounded for all the world like astonished recognition. The attorney’s blue eyes and bright smile quickly took in the presence of the visitors, then turned back to his business partner.

Emmett's own expression was uninterpretable. "And how did you know to tell her to do it?" he wondered, more curious than irritated.

"Simple," Peter said with a wave of one hand. "You called Linus Briggs in industrial shipping and asked him about the availability of certain kinds of heavy moving equipment. This morning, all the supervisors and foremen were told that you would be out on sabbatical for the next few months. I didn't think there was any point in telling them the whole truth, but I did mention that I wanted to be notified if you came onto the grounds or contacted anyone on business."

The inventor made a sound that was somewhere between annoyance and disgruntled gratitude. "I suppose I should thank you for not treating me like a criminal on a restraining order, and block all calls from my private numbers."

"I thought about it," the lawyer admitted, "but I'm trying to help, not permanently undermine our friendship and business relationship. I asked Linus what you'd called about, he told me, it sounded very peculiar, so I called Clara and asked if she knew what was going on. She told me the whole story, about the accident and how you need to help your other-dimensional counterparts get back home again before... well, you know what. I remember the last time this happened, and I certainly wasn't going to get in the way. I also certainly wasn't going to let you waste time and take the risk of breaking promises by coming over to EPB, so I had Linus load up a truck and a van with all the things you asked about, and had him pick a couple of reliable workers to drive 'em over. They're parked out front. They'll leave as soon as they've taken the stuff from the van and moved it into the truck; the truck'll stay here until you're finished with it. Isn't that a lot faster — and much less of a hassle — than driving down to Elmdale, sneaking your way past security, and then sneaking back out again?"

"It certainly is," local Clara agreed, turning to her husband, "which is why I told Peter to do it, and cleared them to get through the gate as soon as they arrived. I didn't do it because I don't trust you, Emmett. I did it because I thought it would be most helpful, all the way around, getting the things you need as quickly as possible, and not placing temptation in your path. Do you really believe I did this to betray you?"

He shook his head, his annoyance finally gone, and hugged her in apology. "No. It makes perfect sense, I agree. But you could've just told me. I wouldn't've objected to it."

"Possibly not, but if you'd come to tell me where you were going and hadn't tried to leave first, I would've explained everything, and none of this misunderstanding would've happened."

"I suppose not," Emmett sighed. He glanced again at their guests. "I think you can figure out who everyone is, Peter," he told the attorney before addressing the others. "This is my lawyer and business partner, Peter Banning. I mentioned him to you before."

"Yeah," visiting Verne said, glad to have an opportunity to say what he'd been itching to say since the attorney arrived, "but you didn't tell us he looks like Robin Williams!"

Peter made a face of perfect distaste. "The actor?" he asked, and when Verne and several of the other visitors nodded, he rolled his eyes and wrinkled his nose. "Oh, please, I don't think so, not any more than Marty looks like Michael J. Fox! We're both short and have blue eyes, and that's about all the resemblance I see!"

Visiting Clara chuckled softly. "It would seem that Jennifer and Emily aren't the only ones who have different appearances in different dimensions."

"At least in some of them," Emmett agreed. "Did you come over just to gawk at them, Peter, or did you have some better ulterior motive?"

The lawyer laughed brightly, adjusting his glasses as he took a closer second look at the visitors. "I'll admit, I was curious. You do have the most interesting 'accidents' around here. But I didn't want to send people here unsupervised under these circumstances. They might've blundered about and stumbled into something — or someone — you didn't want seen."

"Excellent precaution," Doc approved. "This place seems so remote from everything else, it's easy to forget that being seen by the wrong people could cause serious problems."

“My thinking exactly,” Peter said with a nod. “Besides, I’m done with my meetings, they were painfully boring, I felt like I could use a little excitement, and this whole interdimensional travel notion fascinates me. You know, I’ve—“

“Don’t you dare,” Emmett interrupted him sternly, knowing somehow exactly what his partner had been about to say. “That is *not* a subject for general discussion, even with our counterparts from another reality — *especially* not with our counterparts from another reality.” The look he gave the shorter man was meaningful, and Peter had no trouble interpreting it.

He sighed wistfully. “I suppose you’re right, not if they think I look like Robin Williams. I don’t exist in your world, do I?” he asked visiting Doc.

The otherside inventor shrugged. “Not unless there, you *are* Robin Williams, or an attorney I’ve never met. We’ve been finding a number of peculiar discrepancies between our realities, and that could be another manifestation of the same thing.”

Peter sighed again. “I’m almost sorry to hear that. So far, it seems that in all the realities Emmett and Marty have seen, just about everyone else has a distinct counterpart of themselves, but I don’t. I don’t even appear to exist, in those worlds. I wonder why....”

“Some other time,” Emmett suggested. “If you really *did* come to help and not just to gawk, we should get to it. The sooner everything’s fixed and everyone’s back where they belong, the sooner *all* of us will have a chance to relax and stop worrying.” And to that, not a single person raised so much as a peep of objection.

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While the locals headed for the front door to see what Peter had brought, the visitors wisely remained inside. Emily got the device she’d mentioned from the cupboard and hustled Chris and her younger counterpart out the back door, figuring that the quicker they were out from underfoot, the better. Visiting Marty, though, had seen the look on the younger Emily’s face, the distress she felt at seeing what appeared to be her parents having an argument when the subject of such divisive bickering had been very much on her mind of late. He wondered if Emmy was having second thoughts about the nature of such fights; he knew he was. He’d never really heard his own Doc and Clara fight before, not this seriously, and while he supposed they probably did from time to time — no marriage was perfect, after all — seeing such a scenario, even a comparatively mild one, played out right before him and so unexpectedly had had a definite effect on *him*. Somehow, watching them, he’d seen himself and Jennifer doing the same sort of thing, and he didn’t like what he’d seen one bit.

This was getting out of hand, this war between himself and his wife, and it had to stop. They *had* to find a way to sit down and talk to each other and reach an understanding that wouldn’t conclude with the end of their marriage. It was too important to him. He loved Jennifer, in spite of all the hurtful things she’d done and said lately, and he was willing to apologize for almost anything he’d done in return if it could somehow help them make peace with each other.

Though it wasn’t going to happen soon; he could see it just by glancing at his wife. The appalled expression she’d worn while watching their hosts argue had given him hope that maybe she’d reached the same conclusions he had, and was ready to work things out. But when he looked at her now, she looked away, her face guarded and tense, not guilty. This incident had made her feel something, but he didn’t know what. It might be even greater stubbornness and determination to do things her way, for all he knew.

When he turned to her and said, “Jen,” hoping to begin some kind of dialogue between them, she turned away, and left the room. No, she wasn’t ready to talk, calmly or irrationally or any other way. He’d have to wait, and hope to God that *something* could break this impasse between them before they broke apart, completely and forever.

## Chapter Thirteen

Once the proper equipment had been moved from the vehicle that it had arrived in, those whose assistance was needed in the moving of the time vehicle were able to execute their plan. While the local Marty took over operating the Jag — with his very curious counterpart and the visiting Jules and Verne volunteering immediately as passengers — the two Docs took the other Jules and Verne with them in the working train of that dimension, along with the grapples, chains and other needed equipment that couldn't fit in the smaller time machine's trunk. Peter, as curious as he was to stay and see how the groups intended to carry out their plan, was denied the chance by a phone call from EPB and an apparent minor crisis at the business that he assured Emmett was of no concern to him, especially while he was supposed to be on a break. As much as Emmett was annoyed by this, he wasn't provided a chance to complain or pressure his partner into sharing more information; by the time they were good to go, it was almost three, and storm clouds were beginning to build threateningly in the distant western sky. The native scientist estimated they had two or three hours before the weather would really hit, enough time to hopefully take care of everything they needed, and return back home.

As it turned out, Emmett's guess was a little off and the moving of a large time machine a little more complex than he had anticipated. After emptying the stranded train of all the unnecessary weight possible, collecting all the broken bits of machine from the ground, and tethering anything remotely mobile inside the cab and tender, the other Doc had gone inside his train with his Marty and attempted to start the system, enough to activate the hover conversion. Unfortunately, the machine remained stubbornly dead, causing a need to essentially jump it via a cable from the hovering train above. Once that was taken care of, the train slowly rose in the air a few feet, clearing the poor bushes that had sacrificed themselves in order to prevent the time machine from taking a harder landing and possibly causing more damage to the underside of the vehicle, not to mention its occupants.

With the wounded train now hovering, albeit with a bit of a list to one side, teamwork and the more maneuverable Jag were used to secure the chains and cables about the train to the one above it. The wind began to pick up this point, bringing with it the smell of rain and ozone, but all knew that it was better to finish the job now than abandon it for tomorrow. After making certain all the connections were secure, Emmett tentatively took his train higher up — concealed under an illusion of invisibility — and drew the chains taut, then eased the machine upward. The damaged train rose with it, amid metallic groans of protest, and there were relieved cheers from all around.

Guiding the heavy piece of time travel equipment was challenging and slow going, especially with the winds buffeting it and causing it to swing a little, dangerously, and much to Doc's discomfort in the cab. By the time all the machines had returned to the Morris mansion and barn, rumbles of thunder were audible and lighting had begun to snake across the horizon. The hooks and chains were detached as quickly as possible, once the other train had been settled in the upper portion of the barn, then Emmett landed his machine on the lawn next to the large outbuilding still under an invisible illusion. The rain started to come down almost as soon as he had done so, and not a moment too soon.

By the time things were put away again, the storm was unleashing its full fury. Fortunately, this was right around the time dinner was ready and, not wanting to drive home in the nasty downpour, Marty put in a call to Jennifer to let her know that he was going to be staying a while longer and joined the others at the dining table. The visiting Marty spent most of the meal picking at his food — although he should have been, by all means, starving after the events of the afternoon — and staying out of the conversations that hummed around his ears. Most of his attention was directed to the opposite, far end of the table, where his Jennifer sat. She was going out of her way not to look at him, as much as Marty tried to catch her eye. The argument he had seen between this dimension's Doc and Clara continued to bother him, more than he felt it should, and there was really only one reason that he came up with: It reminded him too much of what he and his wife had been doing and, most disturbingly, that they hadn't yet reached a truce — unless one considered *not* speaking a truce.

After supper, the Clara's and Jennifer cleaned things up while older Emily, in spite of some complaints, continued to supervise Chris and Emily, managing to contain them in the rec room with video games now that the weather had turned dank and stormy. The pairs of Docs, Martys, Juleses, and Vernes returned to the barn to begin the repair work on the train. Emmett wanted to run a computer diagnostics test on the machine, first, which was a lengthy process, considering that most of the wiring and circuits in the train had been fried. While they waited for that, the Jules and Verne of this world demonstrated the Internet to their counterparts' fascination on the computers in the lower lab while Marty poked around a bit, both out of curiosity and a need for distraction. After a few minutes, the other



Marty came down from the upper level, where the Docs were, and caught his counterpart peeking into one of the storage chambers.

“Looking for something?” he drawled from right behind him.

Marty jumped at the sound of his own voice, stumbling back and slamming the door shut rather guiltily. “Not really,” he said, turning around to face the slightly older dimensional incarnation. “I’m just kind a....”

“Bored?” the other musician guessed. “I can see why. There’s not really much to do now while the computer’s figuring out all the damage, and if you’re anything like me, I can’t see that you’d be really interested in what *they’re* doing.” Marty nodded to the four teenage boys clustered tightly around the computer screen at the main desk in the room.

“Yeah,” his counterpart agreed with a half smile. “That’s not really my thing. But I’ve already seen the Internet before, when Doc and I got stuck in the future for a month....”

Local Marty’s eyes widened. “You were in the future for a *month*?” he asked incredulously. “When did *that* happen?”

“A week before my wedding to Jennifer, in May of ‘91. I—”

“Wait a sec — you got married in May?”

“Yeah. May 18, 1991. Why? You didn’t?”

Local Marty shook his head. “Jen and I married on August 17, 1991.”

“Weird,” was Marty’s opinion. “A day and three months apart. I guess we’re as alike as the Docs are, in terms of dates and stuff. When’s your birthday?”

“June 8, 1968.”

The news, for some reason, startled the visiting musician. “Really? Mine’s just the day before that! Bizarre! The Docs are a month and a day apart.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard there are a lot of strange differences between things here and your home. When I was bouncing around in dimensional purgatory a few years ago, things like Doc’s birthdate were one of the few constants. It’s... interesting that you guys came from a place that’s so different in a lot of ways, yet is still kinda the same, too.”

“Except with Jennifer and Emily,” Marty said as he and his counterpart took seats at one of the worktables, the same one that the visiting young man had been sitting at when the other Marty had decked him. His jaw still ached a little from that encounter. “I can’t believe they look so different, especially Jennifer....” He sighed heavily, thinking about his own wife, closing his eyes and rubbing his forehead. “God, that’s such a *mess*.”

Other Marty was silent for a moment. “What *is* the deal with you two?” he asked finally, perhaps deciding that it was all right to pry, under the circumstances. “Marlie — and Emily, I guess — was a little vague on details.”

Marty hesitated a moment, wondering if he really wanted a slightly older and altogether different version of himself to know the entire sorry state of his marriage, then figured why the hell not; everyone else already seemed privy to the dirty details. He summed it up fairly quickly and was surprised by the odd look that was on the face of the other Marty when he finished.

“Jen and I had something like that happen, but it was *really* different, too,” he said. “She was thinking of using a pen name — but a completely made up one, not her maiden name.”

“Really?” Marty asked, almost hopefully. If this version of him had lived thorough something like this, maybe it was possible he could offer the visiting musician some words of wisdom. “So she wanted to have a separate professional and personal life, too?”

The local Marty shrugged halfway. "Sort of," he hedged. "My wife was more concerned about being recognized and bugged if she used her real name. I didn't want her to use a pseudonym because I thought she should get some kinda recognition for her talents, but we never had a knock-down drag-out fight over it. Jen finally decided to use her real name, but for her own reasons and not because of my two cents' on the matter."

"Yeah," Marty said. "But *my* Jen wants to use her *maiden* name and she's being dodgy on specifics about why. It wouldn't be bugging me so much if she'd decided to do this from the start, but the fact that she's wanting to do it now, when she's getting locally famous...."

"If it helps, I can sort of see why that's bothering you," local Marty said, slightly sympathetic. "But you two really gotta sit down and talk."

"I know that," Marty said, exasperated by this point from the advice he had heard far too often, recently. "But we can't do it without yelling at each other, and even if we had someone there with us—" He stopped as something occurred to him, and looked his counterpart square in the face. "Hey! Maybe you and your Jennifer could be there when we try to talk it out. You guys might be able to keep us in line better than anyone else, and could maybe offer some good advice, too."

A brief expression flickered across the local musician's face, one that the other Marty couldn't read, entirely, even if the face before his was so close to identical. He was left with a vague sense that this Marty wasn't too excited about the idea. "Maybe," the local one hedged. "I'd have to ask Jen what she thinks about it first, and you might want to talk to your wife about it, too, especially since she kept sending eyeball daggers in the direction of mine, all yesterday evening."

"If she'll even give me a chance to say two words," Marty said with a rather depressed sigh. "I tried to talk to her earlier today, after the argument between your Doc and Clara, but she just brushed me off."

"I'd say give it time, but you've probably given it more than enough, if this thing's been dragging on more than a week already. I'll see what Jennifer says about the idea and get back to you."

Marty supposed that was the best he could expect, then. "Thanks," he said. "I know you guys must think we're complete screw ups compared to you both...."

Local Marty chuckled unexpectedly. "Trust me, I've seen a *lot* worse," he said, something in his tone piquing the curiosity of the visitor.

"Like what?"

The almost thirty-four-year-old hesitated a moment, then began to detail some of his dimensional misadventures. "Well, first, there was the asshole has-been rock star...."

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Over at the computer terminal, while the Martys were talking, the visiting Juleses and Verne were, for once, equally fascinated by what their counterparts were showing them. Jules was impressed by how far computers had come in the past eight years — though he had known as much, having seen the future a few times — and Verne was astonished by how much stuff could be found so quickly at the touch of a few keys, now.

"This Internet sounds pretty bitchin'," he said to the other Jules and Verne. "I know I've heard Dad mention how computers and the Internet are gonna be way big in a few years from our time, but I never really got to mess with it firsthand."

"It's nice 'cause you don't gotta hit the library to do research for school projects," local Verne said.

"Like we needed to do that before, with Dad's library," his brother said, rolling his eyes. "But it does make it way convenient, definitely. We've got a good connection here that's actually faster than the one at my school."

"Even at Harvard?" visiting Jules asked, skeptical. "I thought they had the best of everything."

"It's nothing to sneeze at," his counterpart assured him. "And since I think you guys still have modems, mostly, you'd still be pretty impressed with the speed."

Visiting Verne watched as his counterpart brought up the website for the city of Hill Valley, which loaded onto the computer at warp speed. "Did you guys ever get away with one of the time machines?" he wondered, almost out of the blue, that matter one that hadn't been discussed, quite yet. He had previously been amazed that the other him and Jules hadn't moved to the future until 1990, that they had been a little younger upon arriving there, having left the past sooner, and that their interests seemed to be worlds apart. It was kinda weird, Verne thought, how he and the other Jules were into more creative things while the other him and his Jules were drawn more to scientific areas. Yet there were parts of their personalities — similar senses of humor or ways of speaking, tastes in clothes or favorite colors and foods — that were the same. It was almost like discovering a long lost twin.

"Naw," the local Verne said, clicking on a link to the HVT. "We tried twice — once a year after we moved back here, but Dad had heard us plotting it all out in the guest room that Marty and Jennifer were in last night, so it never got anywhere. Then, again, two years after that, but that was a *major* disaster. Dad didn't have the Jag, yet, and we had to try to take the train. Ended up wrecking part of the barn trying to take it out and got grounded the entire summer without our allowances, *and* we had to help fix the barn. It really sucked."

"Wow," visiting Jules said softly. "Our parents weren't that harsh when Verne and I pulled those stunts."

His counterpart looked at him, a little skeptical. "You mean you tried the same thing we did?"

"A few times," Verne confirmed cheerfully. "And we got away with it — well, we got away with it in that we got the time machine out of the present, but we got caught both times we did it alone, and the time we did it with Emily. And I guess we got caught the times when we'd talked Marty into helping us out. But our Dad didn't really go heavy on security until a few years after we'd been in the 80's, and he had the DeLorean built by January of '86, so we didn't need to go in the train."

The local Jules and Verne looked almost envious as they stared at their counterparts. "Where did you go?" local Jules asked. "What happened?"

"The first time Verne and I got away alone — without dragging Marty with us — we went to the dinosaur era," Jules said. "Sixty-seven million years B.C. Would've worked out fine, except that the time machine was a little roughed up by a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Dad and Marty ended up coming after us in the train because we never came home. If the dinosaur hadn't attacked the DeLorean, we might've gotten away with it."

His brother was more skeptical. "I dunno, Jules, we were only eight and ten, then. There's probably a lotta stuff that we overlooked. When we broke into the barn the day Emmy was born to take the machine back to '82, we would've been way caught even if we hadn't fessed up to Dad."

"You're the one who blew our cover, then," Jules reminded him.

Verne wasn't about to be the one blamed for that five-and-a-half year ago incident. "Well, come on, what did you expect? That was freaky as hell what happened and seeing Mom and Dad dead — and do you really think Dad wouldn't've noticed what you did to the barn to get into it?"

The local brothers watched their sibling counterparts' bickering with clear amusement, perhaps reminded of their own good natured arguing. "What did happen when you were caught?" the Verne of that dimension asked.

His double answered. "We were grounded for a month — which was the rest of summer break and then some — had to do all the chores without allowance until Christmas, and couldn't go on any trips through time until... well, the next time we broke the rules and got Marty to help us out. The other time we just got grounded for a week. Dad went easy on us 'cause he didn't want Mom to find out — she'd just had Emily — and he knew Jules and I were way traumatized. I didn't want to *touch* one of the machines for a couple years afterwards, and I only came around 'cause Jules tricked me. When we did it with Emily, we didn't really get any punishment 'cause we had to deal with seeing our dog, Einstein, die about three different times, and the only reason we'd gotten at the machine was because of a mistake Dad had made."

Local Jules shook his head. “Your parents sound a lot more understanding than ours,” he said. “Though it doesn’t sound like you two ever trashed a barn and part of the time machine in the process. I *really* doubt Verne and I would’ve gotten off any easier if we’d succeeded getting the machine back where we wanted to go. Musta been kinda neat to go off without Dad, though....”

The visiting siblings glanced at each other and shrugged a little. “It was... stressful,” visiting Jules said. “Things went pretty wrong every time, and on the trips with Marty we had to deal with the fun of psycho Tannen ancestors, him getting *really* sick, and the pirate captain from hell that Verne got all buddy-buddy with.”

“Yeah, well, at least you didn’t break your arm during that trip,” Verne returned. “It *still* aches a little when there’s a storm coming, like today.”

The local brothers looked at one another a moment. “Sounds like you guys have seen a lot more of history than us,” the brown-eyed Verne said, almost wistfully.

“Still not as much as I’d like,” his blue-eyed counterpart said. “There’s no way Jules or Emmy or I could make off with one of the machines, anymore, and I really think I’d get more out of the experience now than I did as a kid. Hopefully after we get home in one piece, Dad won’t be super paranoid about using the machines again.” Verne looked at his dimensional almost-twin. “Where’d you guys wanna go when you were after the machines?”

“Back home, to 1894,” Jules said. “The first time. The future wasn’t all it was cracked up to be and Verne and I missed our friends. The second time we just wanted to go somewhere, anywhere, and we hadn’t really thought that far ahead. We thought we might just jump around to a bunch of different times until we got bored enough to go back home and face the music.”

“We always had a plan of action,” the other Jules said. “There wasn’t any way we were going to risk getting in huge trouble without a good justification for it.” He lowered his voice, glancing at the stairs to the upper lab, still empty. “Have you thought about trying again?”

“Not really,” local Verne said. “The machine got hit by lightning when the group of us went out in it in ‘94 — kinda weird, actually, that the same people have the same problem the same year in a different dimension, I think — and then a few months later, Emmy accidentally hitched a ride with Mom and Dad to 1960 and got stranded back in Dad’s old house for a day — with Dad. After those things happened, Jules and I kinda realized that maybe we were better off just staying put in the present. I would *not* want to handle problems like that alone!”

“Tell me about it,” visiting Verne moaned. “I can’t believe Jules and I didn’t cause the end of the world. I mean, we were *kids* dealing with that kinda stuff alone!”

“I think we handled things quite well, under the circumstances,” his brother said, frowning a little at the blond. “Just as well I’ve decided to pursue medicine rather than the same fields Dad studied, though. I don’t think I want my kids getting away with a time machine if I’d made one. Knowing what I know now, I can’t believe we were as naive as we once were.”

“Wow, I can’t believe you just admitted you were naive,” Verne teased. “Can you say it again so I can get it on tape?”

The frown on the eighteen-year-old’s face deepened at this remark. The other Verne spoke up. “At least your life wasn’t boring,” he said. “And neither was ours, not really. Can you imagine what it’d be like, growing up in a *normal* family?”

There was no real argument there, though visiting Jules did shrug a little. “At least then, we might’ve gotten away without getting bugged so much at school,” he said. “Even when kids started liking me more, after I found out I could play baseball pretty well, I still heard too much about Dad’s reputation. Would’ve been a little nice to have had normal parents in that way.”

“Oh, whatever, Jules,” his brother said. “I say you brought a buncha that on yourself, skipping grades twice and acting like a walking know-it-all the first year we were back. Things weren’t better for you back in the past and you know it.” Before his older brother could give him a sizzling rebuttal, Verne altered the subject a little. “I just hope

Dad might wise up after this trip and do something about his inventions. I mean, I'd think seeing how your Dad's been so successful might be a wake up call for ours."

"Took something like that for our Dad to smell the coffee," local Jules said, startling the visitors. "One of his ancestors read him the riot act during that trip we took in our '94, and after, that he checked ahead and found out he'd been the one to invent fusion the entire time." The dark haired teen looked thoughtful. "Maybe this is sorta the same situation with your dad. Maybe the things happening in your 1994 are sort of mirroring ours to put out some of the same results...."

"Except that our father *didn't* invent fusion," Jules said, rather decisively. "If it gets the same result that you apparently had, though, I won't be complaining. It's past time that Dad got some credit and recognition for his intelligence, and at this point I really don't care how it happens, so long as he lets the world know he isn't some weirdo crackpot with a Rube Goldberg complex."

And in spite of the differences in their backgrounds and personalities, they all were in agreement with that.

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By the time the computer had finished its assessment on the damaged machine, it was nearly eleven at night. Doc and Emmett shuttled their offspring in to bed, amid complaints that they wanted to stay out and help, but the visiting Marty refused such orders, arguing that there was no way he'd be able to sleep, anyway, with the Jennifer thing nagging at him. Figuring he had a point in spite of his tired appearance, Doc agreed and allowed him to stay. Marty's counterpart also stayed on, curious and eager to help as much as he could before the scientists called it a night.

The computer's findings were about as bad as Doc had figured. Ninety-one percent of the wiring in the train was shorted out. The damage to the circuit boards for the time and destination circuits were so severe — ninety-eight percent — that it was more prudent, in Doc's opinion, to rebuild them entirely, though Emmett suggested they salvage as much as possible, and use any supplies the visitors had brought along in the rebuilding process. The flux capacitor, of course, was damaged beyond repair. The holographic system wasn't critical to returning home, but Doc was quite vocal about wanting to get it up and running before they left to at least create an invisible illusion, not liking the idea of people witnessing a flying train in the skies above this dimension or his own. Emmett agreed to that point, but thought it might wait to be one of the last things done, just in case they needed to leave sooner due to the incompatibility issues.

After some discussion about what to attend to first, Doc set his Marty to the necessary but mundane task of measuring and clipping out lengths of wire from a spool, and Emmett put his assistant to work sorting through the boxes of chips and circuits from both his dimension and the ones his counterpart had brought along, instructing him to take care in keeping them separate. The scientists, meanwhile, went to work in removing the damaged parts in the train, beginning first with the circuit boards under the time circuit input keys. Once they had removed all of them, the boards were carried down to the lower level of the lab, where the Martys were working, and set down on one of the empty work tables for a closer look with better lighting and magnification devices.

Around midnight, when the visiting Doc had gone upstairs to retrieve something from his train's storage and taken his Marty with him for help, Emmett pulled his Marty aside for a quick word. "I really appreciate you staying here to lend a hand," he said softly.

"No problem, Doc," the musician said, easing apart two circuits that had gotten tangled together. "I know how important it is to get 'em back ASAP."

"Yes, that's another thing," Emmett said, careful to keep his voice low on the chance that either of their counterparts might make a sudden appearance. "I'm going to need your help in keeping an eye on them while we're out here — for just a couple hours more, at most, I think — and let me know if you see any of the symptoms begin to make an appearance. They've been here about thirty-two hours, now, meaning that it wouldn't be entirely unexpected or unrealistic to believe that they might begin to show difficulty in concentration or sleeping. Clara and the kids were put on the alert earlier to let me know if they find anyone up and about in the middle of the night. With my counterpart's wife pregnant, I'm not willing to take any chances of having them stay a moment longer than can be helped."

"I can see why. That's pretty far out they're having another baby, now. Think it's going to be Chris?"

Emmett shrugged as he returned to his table and the task of examining the charred connections on the circuit boards and drafting tentative schematics for replacements. "It's hard to say. This child is arriving at an entirely different point in their lives than Chris did in ours, the circumstances around the arrival aren't the same — and even if they *do* have a son, they might not name him Christopher. My counterpart told me that the reason their Emily is named that was because his Verne selected the name for the baby — and that did *not* happen with ours."

"Yeah, and unless the other Doc misses that kid's birth, I can't see him approving the name Emmett, either," Marty said. "You guys seem a little alike in that respect."

A loud crash of something hitting the floor above distracted them both from further discussion. Fearing that one or both of the visitors had suffered their first brush with the problems of being in a foreign dimension, Emmett and Marty both dropped what they were doing and took off for the stairs in a hurry. Halfway to the second level, Emmett heard voices that sounded remarkably well focused, and a little peeved.

"Marty, I thought you had a hold on that!"

"I did, Doc! I just wasn't expecting it to be so heavy. Chill, okay, I don't think anything broke."

"Well, even so, you have to be careful... the time machine has enough damage to it already."

"Like I don't know that..."

Emmett arrived on the scene first to find the other Marty kneeling next to Doc, helping the scientist pick up a number of screws and other tiny components that had apparently spilled from a small cardboard box, lying on its side on the floor. "What happened?" he asked needlessly, quickly stepping over to help the visitors.

"Nothing problematic — Marty just dropped the box I was passing him," Doc said, righting said box and dumping a handful of parts back into it.

"Yeah, well, I wasn't expecting it to be so heavy," the young man repeated, pausing for a moment to yawn hugely behind his hand.

Emmett saw it immediately and called him on it. "If you're tired, Marty, by all means go to bed," he said. "We're not going to be out here much longer."

"I'm fine," the visiting Marty insisted, scraping up a handful of the spilled contents.

Doc looked up and studied him a moment through narrowed eyes, frowning a little. "No, you're not," he decided, and when Marty opened his mouth to protest, he was cut off before he could begin by his friend. "We are *not* going to have another repeat of what happened when we were modifying the Aerovette. Go to bed, Marty."

Marty clearly did not like being told what to do. He got out a single, "But Doc—" before Emmett intervened, quickly.

"He has a point, Marty," he said. "We don't want to have any delays in repairs or mistakes made because we're pushing things too hard. I've had experience with that, as much as it sounds like your Doc has. If you really don't want to go to bed yet, there's a room set up with a bed downstairs where you can just lie down for an hour, or until we're finished — whichever comes first."

Doc glanced at Emmett, clearly grateful for the suggestion. "I think that sounds like a reasonable compromise," he said to his assistant, who was looking quite annoyed with the suggestions.

The visiting musician was plainly fighting an internal battle, but at length, he nodded stiffly. "Fine," he said, dropping his handfuls of parts into the box with a note of finality. "Where is it?"

"I'll show you," his counterpart offered, having hung back during the discussion.

Doc waited until the footsteps of the Martys had faded before loosing a sigh as he crawled after a few far-flung screws and transistors. "Thank you," he told Emmett. "I know he's more tired than he'll admit."

"I could see that. How are *you* doing, though? You were up early this morning, too."

Doc shrugged. "I'm fine," he said. "Honestly. But I'm quite used to long days and late nights as well, and when there's a problem like this... well, I won't rest well, either."

"I understand," Emmett said. "But you haven't been having any trouble concentrating, have you? I wouldn't be surprised if some of the symptoms begin to show up, soon."

The visiting inventor shook his head without hesitation. "Nothing of the sort," he promised. "Not as you've described to me, anyway. I've been a little preoccupied with a number of things, including Clara's pregnancy, but I haven't had trouble thinking at all or pulling my mind back to what I'm trying to do."

"Good." They finished collecting the rest of the spilled parts then brought the box and several other tools from the train's tender, downstairs. The local Marty was back to working on his sorting task, and the door to the sleeping room was now closed.

"Is my Marty in there?" Doc asked as they set their armloads of equipment onto the gridded work table, tilting his head towards the closed door.

The musician's counterpart nodded as he glanced up. "Yeah, but he's not too happy about it. I think he's feeling like the entire world is against him now, what with the stuff going on with his Jennifer."

Doc snorted softly. "That's something *both* of them are contributing to, not just Marty," he said. "Anyway, I'm not trying to single him out. Marty knows as well as I do that working with diminished mental capabilities due to exhaustion is *highly* unsafe. Especially when dealing with sensitive equipment."

"Exactly," Emmett agreed. "Which is why I don't think we want to be working much past one. My counterpart who came to visit from another dimension tried to hurry his way home, and I did the same when I was in his world, but that rush almost caused us to lose more ground than we gained."

"The same thing happened to Marty and I before, when we were trying to modify the Aerovette in the future as soon as possible," Doc said, picking up one of the fried circuit boards and giving it a rather irritated look.

"Yeah, I heard about that," local Marty said, clearly startling the visiting scientist. "He said you guys were stuck in the future for a month." He shook his head, clearly awed and disturbed by the idea. "It's kinda weird how different his life was from mine in a lot of ways — but at least we had the same parents and all. He told me you guys had different family histories!"

"It would appear so," Emmett confirmed as he picked up the project he had been working on, prior to the upstairs crash. "Different parents, definitely."

"Then why do you guys look alike? You'd think with different parents there'd be different genes or something that would give you different appearances."

"In some ways, things like that *have* shown up," Doc answered. "That's why my Verne and Emily have blue eyes. My mother did. His didn't."

Marty looked intrigued. "Were you an only child, too?"

Doc nodded. "My parents were told early on that they couldn't have children, even though they wanted them. So they threw themselves into their work instead, and then I suddenly came along years later, a great surprise. My mother was thirty-six when she had me, not terribly old by today's standards, and my father was forty. If it was impossible for them to conceive before me, it certainly wasn't any easier afterwards."

"Interesting," Emmett said. "My mother was forty-one and my father was forty-seven when I was born."

Doc smiled faintly at the news. "More differences," he said. "My father came out here in 1908 from Connecticut, when he was twenty-eight, because Hill Valley needed a new physician and he'd wanted to move out West. My mother's family, the Lathrops, had settled here in 1876 and I kept a *very* careful distance from them during

the eleven years I was living in the past. Thank God my grandparents, Rebecca and Lloyd, lived several miles outside of town. Mom had taken up nursing and that's how she met my father — they'd had to work together. They were very successful, professionally, and after I was born neither saw a need to give up their work. My mother was a woman ahead of her times in many ways, very strong-willed and stubborn and vocal about women's rights—"

"No kidding?" Marty interrupted, looking quite amused. "That's kinda cool...."

"Yes and no," Doc said with a rather crooked smile. "I'm proud of my mother, yes, but in her attempt to be one of the first career-track women, I didn't see her much. Or my father, for that matter. My parents hired a number of nannies and help to watch over me, instead. I ran through 'em pretty quickly, too, I must say...."

Emmett was astonished at this news. "That never happened to me," he said. "But you said your parents wanted children...?"

"Oh, yes. I wasn't unloved, not really. And I suspect that if I'd arrived earlier than I did, things would've been considerably different. My parents had no reason to expect they would actually conceive a child, not after the numerous medical exams and second opinions they had gotten. They shifted that time and energy into their work, and it wasn't a habit that could be broken overnight. I don't resent them for what they did — and since I seemed to be doing just fine without them being so hands on, they had no reason to think it wasn't the best thing. But I just wish things might've happened differently."

"Did you ever talk to them about it?" Emmett asked, having had regrets of his own when it came to his parents. He'd always be grateful to the other dimensional him who had helped persuade him to finally do something about it.

Doc's expression grew wistful and sad. "I wasn't given the chance. They were killed in a car accident in 1948."

"I'm sorry," Emmett said immediately.

"I finished mourning them long ago," Doc said, brushing aside the half-apology from his counterpart. "I suppose you can gather the rest. I inherited everything, being their only son, and used almost all of the inheritance to finance the construction of the first time machine." He paused thoughtfully, leaning back from the circuit board. "An upbringing like mine did make me a little leery about my own techniques at fathering, but thank God I didn't make the same mistakes they did. No one can say I wasn't there for my own children."

Emmett rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he considered what he had just been told. "I'm frankly astonished we have as much in common in our appearances and our lives as we do," he said. "Did your parents have any other children like mine, ones who didn't survive?"

Doc shook his head. "If they did, it was a deeply hidden family secret that I've never heard," he said. "And I really don't think they would've done that. My mother said more than once that I was their miracle child, made all the more so, in their eyes, by the intelligence I had. My father was really disappointed that I didn't want to use my talents in medicine and follow in his footsteps, but I just never had the stomach for it and it seemed like a rather depressing field, with too much death and sickness. Anyway, after reading Jules Verne for the first time when I was eleven, I knew there wasn't anything else I'd rather do than pursue science, not medicine."

Marty chuckled. "That sounds a little familiar," he said, glancing sidelong at Emmett.

The local inventor nodded once, with a smile of his own. "I had quite the same experience," he said. "Though I suspect the circumstances around it were different from yours. It's so fascinating — I wonder why we ended up in similar places with life, given that our childhoods and parents were so vastly different from one another?"

"I'd like to see photos of 'em," Marty said. "You know, maybe they look like each other — your parents and his," he added quickly, gesturing between Emmett and Doc. "That could be why you guys look just like each other and why you might have the same kinda mannerisms and stuff."

"Maybe," Doc allowed. "I don't have any photographs with me, however; in fact, most of them were lost when the mansion was burned down. I'd be happy to look at any you have, though, and see if there are any similarities," he added to Emmett.



“If we have the chance and if I can find them,” Emmett said. “We should probably take care of more pressing matters, first.”

With the reminder that they weren't there entirely for a pleasure trip and didn't have all the time in the world to sit and compare notes, Doc agreed and busied himself with the task at hand.

At a quarter to one, Emmett announced that they might as well call it a night. Since Doc had reached a good stopping point, and was growing tired, he agreed, and Marty saw no reason to argue against it, looking forward to finally going home himself. While Doc went upstairs to close up his machine and make sure nothing was left out or turned on that shouldn't be, Marty shut down the computers and Emmett took it upon himself to check on the other Marty. He eased open the door into the room without a sound, peering around the edge of it before stepping inside. Marty was sprawled on top of the bed on his stomach, his face clearly visible to Emmett in the shaft of light that spilled in from the main room through the doorway. He was quite obviously sound asleep, and Emmett hesitated as he reached out to shake him awake, wondering if it might be more kind to leave him be for the night, especially since it seemed the visiting musician had been having so many problems resting since the battle between him and his wife had begun.

The matter was rendered academic before Emmett could reach a decision when Marty's eyes quite suddenly snapped open, as if he'd been startled awake by a noise. Emmett watched him a moment, waiting to let him know that they were going to be retiring for the night, but when the young man didn't move or blink immediately, he got a very cold, unwelcome chill at the back of his neck.

“Marty?” he murmured softly. No response. Emmett reached out and touched his shoulder, about to shake him. “Marty!”

Marty blinked the second time his name was uttered, looking a little startled. “Doc?” he mumbled, squinting against the bit of light sliding into the room and trying to shield his eyes from it. “What's going on?”

“We're going up to the house to go to bed, now,” Emmett said softly, still concerned. “How do you feel?”

There was an odd sort of pause. “A little cold,” Marty said, finally, sounding groggy. “And kind of... I dunno. Weird. Did you wake me up, or did I wake on my own?”

Emmett sighed heavily, leaning against the edge of the door. “On your own, I suspect,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “I think you'd better get up and come with me. I suspect you've just had your first experience with dimensional incompatibility.”

## Chapter Fourteen

"Do we really need to do this now?" Jennifer asked when those out in the barn had gone up to the house and roused the other visitors. It hadn't taken much to determine that Marty's condition was indeed a sign of the disruption effects. During the incident with Emmett's physician counterpart back in '99, they had noticed that solid non-living objects, especially certain types of metals, showed the instability much less quickly, being far less reliant on the complex and subtle electrical impulses which controlled much of the human body. Equipment that had been constructed to help in that situation had been packed away into storage, and, along with other sophisticated medical sensor devices Emmett had gotten from the future to add to the time machines' emergency supplies after that same awful incident, he was now able to do a quick comparison between readings from visiting Marty and any piece of metal from his dimension to confirm what had happened. Though Emmett had explained this to their guests after they had been awakened, Jennifer seemed inclined to blame it all on her Marty for having had the problem in the first place.

The local inventor, however, had no time for pettiness. "Unless you want to find out firsthand what it feels like to have your brain and body gradually stop working properly, and then die, yes," he said bluntly. "I should've remembered that equipment earlier and used it to get baseline readings on all of you, but then, I suppose I was hoping we'd be able to send you back before this happened. When we've taken you through the jump and 'reset' your systems, I'd like to get those readings. That way, we'll be able to monitor your conditions, track the rate of decay, and hopefully know when it's time to make another jump to forestall any of the potentially damaging incompatibility reactions."

"Then why didn't we do this with Doctor Doc?" local Verne wanted to know. He and his counterpart had still been awake, exchanging stories of their own lives; Verne had been telling his visiting double about the creepy history of his bedroom, how one of the original owner's daughters had jumped to her death from its window in a rather bizarrely insane suicide, and how the place supposedly was haunted now, both by her and by the ghost of the Judge's irascible mother-in-law, who had been killed when she and her carriage had been struck by lightning. "The poor guy was practically dying from seizures...."

Both his double and other Jules winced at the remark. The latter looked at Emmett, wondering if they had perhaps misjudged him. "You wouldn't deliberately make someone suffer like that...."

His not-father shook his head. "Of course I wouldn't. At the time, we didn't know that a simple passage through n-dimensional space would realign the traveler's system on a subatomic level and restore them to health. We didn't discover that until just before we were able to take him home. And though we were monitoring his condition, trying to find ways to protect him, we weren't able to find anything adequate, or as effective as a brief jump through time. I know this is inconvenient," he told them all when the remainder of the sleepy visitors joined them at the bottom of the stairs that led up to his study. "But I've lived through this myself, and I know how vital it is for your safety. If I knew of any other way, I'd use it, especially in light of your condition," he added to visiting Clara. "I still don't know if time travel is harmful to a developing infant, but I *know* this incompatibility is harmful to *all* life that's exposed to it for too long. Better to take an uncertain risk, I think, than to face certain death."

Visiting Clara shivered, but she also nodded her understanding. "If you're able to monitor our conditions in that respect, will you be able to make sure the baby and I make as few time trips as possible?"

"That's part of the idea," Emmett confirmed. "It shouldn't take more than ten minutes to get everyone into the time machines and make the jump. Afterward, I can use the devices I just used on Marty to get a cleaner reading of your conditions when fully stable, and then take comparative readings at regular intervals to see if anyone's moving into the danger zone. That won't take more than a few minutes for each of you, and after that, you can — and should — go back to bed. No matter how urgent the situation feels, exhaustion can be every bit as dangerous to your safety as staying here for too long."

They headed out. Emily was still largely asleep, having worn herself out in all the hiking and playing and excitement of the day, so Doc carried her, half-wishing he could carry his wife as well, since she looked as tired as he felt. She hadn't done as much physical labor as the others, but the stresses and strains of worrying about their situation and her own condition and the welfare of the baby clearly were taking their toll.

Rather than wake his Clara to have her help, Emmett enlisted his Marty to fly the Jag for the short trip. The musician was more than happy to help, remembering only too well the strange feelings he'd had in Dr. Doc's

dimension that he'd chalked up to nervousness and stress, only to later discover that they were in fact the first signs of this same deadly disorder. Visiting Doc and Clara and Emily rode with him, so that the sleeping little girl would not be uncomfortably jostled about, and to ease Doc's mind about the comfort of his expecting wife. "Do you think she's so still because of this... condition?" Clara whispered to her husband when he settled the child into the back seat, behind the front passenger.

The scientist shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think I've experienced any of the symptoms yet, and I'm not sure what someone suffering from it would look like...."

"Not like that," local Marty assured them both, having overheard them as he approached the car. "Have you ever seen anyone have the kind of seizure where they just space out and stare and don't move at all? That's what this is like, only even more frozen. It's really creepy. I never got that bad, only got the tired and distracted and jittery chills part of it, but I saw it when I was helping do the work to get Doctor Doc back home."

Clara's eyes widened. "Do you mean... do you mean that feeling chilled and restless is a part of this same condition?"

When Marty nodded and she paled, having obviously experienced similar sensations before she'd been summoned, her husband put an arm around her shoulders. "That's the earliest symptom," he reminded her gently, "and it doesn't mean you or the baby are in any danger of dying. Everything's going to be fine, and the sooner we take care of this, the better."

"That's right, ma'am," Marty assured her. "I lived through it, and it didn't hurt me at all. I'm sure Doc's right when he says you and the baby will be okay."

"I hope so," she said fervently as she let her husband help her into the passenger's seat and make sure her seatbelt was secure before closing the door and moving around to the driver's side to climb into the back.

"Is there room for one more?" visiting Marty asked before his counterpart slipped in behind the wheel. "Jennifer's already headed into the train — I don't think she wants to be around me or anyone who looks like me, right now."

"Just barely," Doc told him, scooting as close to Emily as he could get without crushing her. "These cars don't have the roomiest back seats in the world, but at least they do have one. I must admit, there's a certain practicality to it — though given how often you and the kids have managed to sneak off without my permission, it's probably just as well I never built one with this sort of convenience."

"Whatever," the younger musician said around a yawn as he took the place behind the driver's seat and his double climbed in, taking great care to make sure the door was securely closed. "Just so long as I don't have to watch Jen try to kill me with her eyes, and this'll take care of these weird spacey feelings I'm getting."

"It will," local Marty said confidently as he started the car. Both Clara and Doc were startled by the almost total silence of its engine, but had no chance to ask about it before a voice was heard, quite clearly, from the sound system.

"Marty," Emmett said via some intercom, "given the late hour, I think it would be a good idea if we kept away from any of the neighboring properties and headed toward the nature preserve. The more often we do this, the more we're likely to start up those ridiculous UFO or secret government base rumors again."

Local Marty chuckled. "Yeah, that's not the kind of publicity you need, especially when people hear the booms and see weird flashes in the middle of the night. Want me to head straight southwest, then?"

"If you would. Start your acceleration when you've cleared Fairy Chasm Road. I'll be right behind you. I want to time this so that we'll make the transition as close to simultaneously as possible. That'll make the sonic booms a bit louder, but there'll be fewer. It's 1:11 a.m., Thursday, June 6, 2002. Set your destination for the same date, 1:13 a.m."

Marty blinked even as he did so. "Isn't that cutting it a little fine, Doc?"

“Not if you start moving right now. The closer together we can time our departure and our arrival, the less disturbance we’ll make, and the less disturbance we make, the more likely anyone who hears or sees it will just shrug it off as distant thunder. Thank God we’ve had such stormy weather lately, and the sky’s cloudy tonight.”

“As long as we don’t get one of the real things, and get hit by lightning,” Marty pointed out, disliking even the thought.

“Unlikely,” Emmett assured him as both machines started to move, under their cloaks of invisibility. “There’s nothing on the local weather radar. I’ve temporarily deactivated the physical displacement circuits, so you’ll come out of transition where you left, just as the machines did before I added the teleportation ability. Once you’ve completed the jump, don’t brake, just bank to the right and come back and land where you started. And make sure it’s *right*, since I’ll be turning left, and we don’t want a midair collision crippling both machines.”

The very thought made everyone in the Jag shudder. “No, that’d be bad,” Marty agreed. “I’ve got it, Doc. We’re on our way. See you in a couple minutes.”

The airborne Jag accelerated so smoothly and quickly, it took more time for them to reach and pass Fairy Chasm Road than it took for the entire jump. Marty almost hit the brakes without meaning to, then, remembering Emmett’s instructions, kept his foot away from it but instead allowed the Jag to coast through the turn, drifting ever so slowly back from eighty-eight. As he calmly began the turn, giving the passengers a thumb’s-up, a brief blast of a steam whistle warned him that he was heading in the wrong direction. Rattled, he hauled on the wheel to turn the Jag to the right, then offered the others a sheepishly nervous smile when they were on the correct course.

“Sorry,” he apologized, knowing that they’d jumped as much as he had when the whistle had blasted its warning. “Maybe my fourth dimensional thinking’d be better if I could remember right from left all the time.”

“No harm done,” Doc assured him, even though Marty could hear his double breathing a little heavily right behind him. “Emily didn’t even bat an eye. Are you all right, Clara?”

“Fine,” she replied after a brief assessment of her condition. “Are you certain that was enough to correct the situation?”

“For now, it should be,” local Marty felt confident. “It worked so well for me, I never really noticed that traveling between dimensions *could* cause problems, until I met Doctor Doc and stayed there so he could help me figure out how to get back home. Even he didn’t have any troubles when he came back with me, not until we’d stopped jumping around between Fiji and 2050 and settled down in 1999 to try and find a way to get *him* back where he belonged. Just before we left his dimension, I was feeling tired and stressed out and jumpy and cold as hell, but a lot of it went away almost as soon as I came back here. Not the tired and stressed part, that was mostly ‘cause I was still worried about Doc and pushing myself until I’d found a way to get help for him, but the cold and the jitters disappeared real quick. Back then, I thought it was because I was home and didn’t have to worry about *getting* there anymore, and ‘cause our first jump was to Fiji, where it was warm and sunny. So was Hill Valley when we left it, even hotter, so that should’ve tipped me off, but I didn’t know about this incompatibility stuff then.”

“Yeah, you’ve got that right,” visiting Marty said, having been thinking about his own condition while his local avatar spoke. “I still feel like I could sleep for a week, but that sick kinda cold is gone. So’re the spacey feelings.” He breathed a sigh of relief. “If I start feeling any of *that* again, I’m not gonna just ignore it. Bad enough feeling wound up because of everything else that’s going on. I don’t ever want to have another blank-out like that again!”

“And I don’t want to have one, ever,” Clara sympathized. “But you’re both right, those feelings are gone, now. And while I can’t be sure, I don’t believe the trip caused me or the baby any harm.”

“Perhaps not, but I still don’t want to take any unnecessary chances,” Doc reminded her. “Once my counterpart’s gotten the information he needs to track our conditions, I want you to go straight back to bed.”

She smiled crookedly. “And will you be coming with me, dear, or sitting up all night? I seem to recall both of you saying proper rest is essential if we’re to do this without risking all our lives.”

“Yes, yes, I know. And I’ll try, but I must confess, it won’t be easy. Until we’re back home safe and sound, I’m going to worry about you and the baby....”

Visiting Marty chuckled at both his comment and his faintly testy attitude. “Don’t snow us, Doc, I know you, and you’re gonna worry even *after* we get back.”

“But not, I hope, to the extent he did with the other children,” Clara said sternly, more of a reminder for her husband than an expression of her wishes on the matter.

Local Marty laughed. “I think I’ve heard this conversation before,” he told them as he guided the Jag back to its temporary landing place on the vehicle ramp outside the east wall of the barn. “As I matter of fact, I think I kinda lived through it myself. My Doc just about drove himself — and Clara — nuts during the months he was restoring this place, just before he brought his family to live here in 1990. That was one weird experience for me, let me tell you, watching him make a basket case of himself, worrying about his Clara and the baby for almost six months, and that was nearly two years after I first heard she was pregnant! Time travel can really mess with your mind, big time.”

When the Jag was back on solid ground, he tapped one of the controls on the dash while everyone else was unbuckling themselves, preparing to leave. “Hey, Doc, do you need me around for whatever you’ve got planned, now? If I don’t get home soon and get some sleep, I’m gonna drive into a ditch, or get Marlie to thinking I really *have* left the family when I’m not there in the morning.”

The visiting musician winced at this reminder of his personal troubles and how they had unwittingly affected his double’s daughter, but there was no sound of condemnation in local Marty’s voice, only a statement of whimsical fact. “You can head home whenever you’re ready,” Emmett answered after a moment. “And thanks for your help. Get a good night’s sleep, and if you’re free at all tomorrow, call. We’ll need all the help we can get — and I’ll need to see the others down in the lab as soon as possible.”

Marty acknowledged the request, then shut down the machine. While the upper barn was being used to house and repair the damaged train from another dimension, the two time machines normally berthed there had been parked, one on either side of the barn, hidden under cloaks of invisibility. The stairs that led down from the vehicle ramp where the Jag was parked were steep, so Marty made sure the others safely reached the lower level and the entrance to the lab before bidding them goodnight and heading for his car.

The door opened to admit them without hesitation. The others were already inside, Jules fascinated by parts of the equipment Emmett was already using on Jennifer. “They don’t have medical scanners this sophisticated back home,” he told his father’s double while he watched him take one set of readings that would be used to monitor their conditions for the remainder of their stay. “Is this an example of your contemporary medical technology, or something you brought back from the future?”

“A little of both,” Emmett replied, not taking his attention from the more important task at hand. “After I was badly injured in the middle of nowhere in 1955 Fiji, I realized that it was foolish to presume no one would ever be seriously hurt during a trip to a time or place where adequate medical help wouldn’t be available. I made sure both time machines were stocked with simple to use but highly advanced emergency supplies that would, at the very least, make it possible to prevent someone from dying or being crippled in the attempt to move them and return them to a time and place where help could be found. I suppose being the first person to suffer from such an accident made me a little more inclined to actually do something about it right away and not merely intend to do it and keep putting it off.”

“What happened to you?” Verne asked curiously, thinking of his own injury received during a time trip. “Break a leg or get bitten by a shark?”

“I wish,” Emmett sighed, finishing the first scan and moving on to the second. “I accidentally kicked an old hand grenade left behind during World War II, it hit something, exploded, and threw me... well, I’m not sure exactly how far, I was pretty well out of it. Marty thinks it was at least fifty feet, from the size of the blast circle. I took a piece of shrapnel in the spine, severed it completely just above my lower back. If Marty hadn’t accidentally wound up slipping from one dimension to the next and happened to meet a version of me who not only could help him get home but was actually a neurosurgeon, I might be in a wheelchair, now. Marty was too rattled by the whole experience to think of taking me anywhere but to a doctor or hospital at home; it was my counterpart who suggested he take me to medical facilities in the future, where they knew how to repair such things. It was the most incredible stroke of good luck — or perhaps even destiny — that things turned out the way they did. If I learned nothing else from the experience, I learned not to ever presume that even the most innocent trip through time can’t end in disaster.”

“Very true,” Jules agreed, recalling not only the incident in which his brother had been hurt, but the time when they’d “borrowed” the DeLorean simply to see a movie, and had nearly wound up destroying their entire family. “You seem to know exactly what to do with this medical scanner. Is it just experience with the equipment, or actual medical training? Yesterday, you said something about being in med school ....”

The local inventor confirmed it. “I started out studying biology with the intent of entering medical school when I’d finished my undergraduate degree. It... didn’t work out. Not because I flunked out, as my Verne implied, but because it just wasn’t what I was meant to do. I was much too young and rather squeamish, and fainting time and again, right in the middle of lab sessions was incredibly embarrassing. My parents agreed that perhaps it would be a good idea if I waited with the med school idea and followed some other area of study first. I knew from the start that I wanted to devote my life to science, but being a kid, I hadn’t bothered to narrow it down to any specific area by the time I started college. I spent two years studying general science and education in a junior college in Connecticut before going to Princeton, and less than a month after I started there, I attended a lecture given by Albert Einstein. I knew right then exactly what I wanted to do with my life, and went into physics and engineering. I never did enter medical school, though I do have an advanced degree in biochemistry.”

Jennifer, who had been standing still with a sour look on her face, was mildly startled, an expression echoed by the others. “You actually saw Einstein, in person?”

Emmett smiled faintly, having heard this reaction before. “Quite often. He was part of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton when I was a student there, and he was one of my advisors when I was working on my doctorate in physics. A very inspiring individual. He tended to consider me damaged but interesting, but I was never offended by it. I think he meant it as a joke. Thank you, Jennifer, that’s all I need from you.”

She blinked, more than once. “Are you sure? This’ll be enough to help us know when it’s time for another quick trip?”

“If we check on a regular schedule, yes, I believe it should help prevent any more unpleasant incidents.”

She was relieved, since the description of how this condition felt didn’t sound at all like something she wanted to experience in person. “Can I go back to the house, then?” she asked, trying to conceal a yawn. When she noticed that Marty was inadvertently doing the same thing, she frowned and deliberately stifled the rest of it.

Emmett, busy resetting the equipment, was oblivious to it. “Yes, and sleep well.” He paid no attention to her departure, nor to the way she deliberately refused to look in her husband’s direction as she moved past him.

Marty, however, noticed it entirely too well. “This is getting ridiculous,” he sighed when she was gone.

“You should just sit down and talk about it,” Jules suggested sagely, volunteering to be the next person scanned, because he wanted to know if it caused any unusual sensations in the subject.

Verne snorted. “Oh, yeah, right, like you’re Mister Experience when it comes to relationships.”

“It doesn’t take experience to know that when two people are upset about something and they supposedly love each other, they can’t ignore it and wait for it to go away,” the older boy answered crisply before either of their parents could react. “You don’t get better by ignoring the fact you’re sick or have a broken bone; you do something to help the healing process begin.”

“It’s a reasonable point, Jules,” Clara told her elder son, “but it’s not your business. I’m sure Marty doesn’t appreciate anyone meddling in his personal life.”

Marty grunted. “Right now, Marty would appreciate *anything* that could settle things between me and Jen without us killing each other or ending in divorce. But right now, I’m too tired to think about it, and Jen’s obviously too tired to listen.”

There was no argument the others could offer to that decision. The scans went fairly quickly, each taking less than two minutes. When Marty, both boys, and Emily had been finished — the little girl remained soundly asleep through the entire process — Doc suggested they head back to the house and try to sleep, his emphasis on the last word meant for Verne, who might’ve been inclined to sit up all night comparing notes with his double instead. Neither

he nor any of the others protested, not even when Clara asked if they might take Emily with them and put her back to bed. She watched them as they left, then sighed softly.

“I’m glad to know they’re all fine now,” she told their host when he began his scans of her, “but I wish there was some way to be as sure of the baby’s health, too. If I could know that much, I think I’d worry less about our time here.”

“Actually, I believe there is,” Emmett said reflectively while the first device collected the required information. He tapped it. “This *is* a medical scanner — vintage 2100 — and though at the moment, I have it calibrated to read a very specific kind of data, it still has all the standard programming it was originally designed to use. When I’m finished with the two of you, I can reset it to run the prenatal diagnostics, which, I believe, were intended to monitor a developing infant and the mother and provide status reports and warnings, if needed.”

Both Doc and Clara looked at the thing with hope. “That would be very helpful,” the former admitted, not without relief. “But it can’t give exact data concerning the effects of time travel on the baby, can it?”

Emmett wagged one hand in an indecisive gesture while he kept his eyes on the monitor screen. “It might, but we’d really have no way of knowing if that’s what we’re seeing, not yet. You’d need to expose living subjects to those conditions, repeatedly, in order to collect enough information for conclusive evaluation, and I’m *not* inclined to perform that kind of experimentation on any living thing, not even an animal. Since you may not be able to avoid the need for multiple fourth-dimensional trips before we’re able to repair your time machine, any data we gather might provide a solid baseline for future study, and form the basis for a genuine answer to the question. But that’s about as much as I’d care to take advantage of the situation.”

“I agree,” was Doc’s opinion. “And you’re sure there isn’t any way to protect a person from being adversely affected by this incompatibility while they’re in another dimension?”

“Not that doesn’t present its own more immediate dangers. I’m reasonably sure there *is* a way to do it, but I never had the time — or the opportunity — to investigate beyond the magnetic field tests we did when my counterpart was here in 1999. To do the research alone would require extensive computer models that’d quite likely exceed the computing capacity of every PC I have here and in the house, and to run actual live tests would require the presence of someone from another dimension. Though I could get around the computer problem by using facilities at EPB, I can’t go and bring someone here from a completely separate dimension any time I want. Selecting a specific target and reaching it can be a prohibitively lengthy process — it took me and my physician counterpart almost three *years* in *n*-dimensional space to reach his home, a trip we survived only because of stasis technology we borrowed from my more distant future. Choosing a dimension at random and then snatching someone from it to be a test subject would be totally unethical, and such interference potentially harmful to their world. Even running computer simulations would be difficult, since it would be very nearly impossible for me to use my company’s most sophisticated systems for as long as I’d need without arousing suspicion among the other scientists who work there.”

“It sounds like it would be much more bother than it’s worth,” Clara said when her husband opened his mouth to speak. He favored her with a sharp look, and she shook her head. “No, Emmett, really, it does. What he just said about interference possibly harming another world holds true for us, too. You’ve told me so often that time travel’s greatest danger happens when a traveler interferes with the places and people they visit. The same, I should think, holds true for visiting other dimensions. Perhaps our arrival wasn’t as inconveniently timed as it might have been — but what if we’d come here at a very inopportune moment and somehow changed the course of their future? We still might do that, you know, and simply because we won’t be changing *our* world and won’t have to live with the results of what we do here doesn’t make it acceptable.”

She turned to their host as he finished with her and began the scans on her husband. “We’re grateful for all the help you’ve given us, you and your family and Marty’s, and your friend Peter as well. None of us asked for this, and I thank God that of all the places in the universe we might’ve been stranded, we came to one where someone understood our problem and *could* help before we died from ignorance of what was happening to us. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And even though it seems like it might be inconvenient, I’m glad you did show up here, and not in a world or a time where you couldn’t find help before it was too late. It’s accidents like this that’ve made me very leery of using time travel as a means of taking a vacation. It can be terribly convenient, but also terribly dangerous, too dangerous to be taken lightly.”

Wryness twitched across Doc's face. "Are you saying I've been a little too frivolous in my attitude toward time travel?"

Again, Emmett shook his head without looking up, completing the last steps of his double's second scan. "Not at all. I don't know everything you've done with your time machines, or that you've allowed to be done with them. For all I know, you've been more responsible with them than I have. And this is something we *both* did, in our own ways: took our friends and family on what was supposed to be a vacation, flew the train smack into a storm, got hit by lightning, and were nearly stranded. After it happened to me, I thought long and hard before I ever did it again. Won't you?"

"Definitely," the visiting scientist had to admit. When he saw his counterpart finish the second scan and start fiddling with some of the controls, he was curious. "Was that one-minute trip enough to do what you said it would?"

"Oh, yes," he was assured while Emmett continued to adjust things. "In trying to develop an electromagnetic field to protect our last interdimensional visitor, I was able to see the signature patterns of both a stable and a decaying subatomic harmonic field. All of yours are perfectly fine, no signs of instability. Given the records I have of your Marty's condition before and after he took the jump, I'll know what signs to look for to know when it's time to do it again."

He paused for a few moments, studying something on the display screen of the medical scanner, which he had readjusted to perform a prenatal evaluation. "You'll be happy to know there's no detectable sign of any problem whatsoever with the baby," he announced, winning very relieved sighs from the parents. "He... or she," he amended quickly, "is showing perfect health and development for this stage of gestation — which appears to be precisely forty-one days."

He could feel both of his guests staring at him. He looked up, doing his best to appear completely innocent. "He?" Clara echoed, having caught the slip and the inexperienced attempt to cover it. "Can that thing tell if it's a boy or a girl? So soon?"

"Undoubtedly, if it can assess things like cellular and developmental damage," Doc said with a crooked smile. "Gender's largely determined at birth by the particular combination of chromosomes resulting from conception, and since at this early stage, some of the most serious damage could be genetic, it would need to be sufficiently sensitive to look for such things. It does say it's a boy, doesn't it?" he asked his counterpart.

Emmett surrendered and nodded. "I've never used it for something like this before, so I didn't know it'd provide that specific information. I'm sorry if I told you something you'd rather not have known...."

"I might've preferred to be surprised," Clara admitted, "but there's really no harm done. Finding out was a small price to pay for knowing the baby — our son — hasn't been harmed. You *will* keep checking to make sure he's all right, too, won't you?"

"I'll do everything I can," Emmett promised. "And if you'd like my personal advice on the subject, I'd say go back to the house and get some sleep, both of you — or I should say, all three of you. Being rested when we go back to work will help make sure nothing avoidable goes wrong."

Though Doc would have liked to make as much use as possible of the time they had before the problems of being in another dimension began to return, he also knew, from bitter experience, how pointless it was to push too hard when he knew he was physically exhausted. "That applies to you, too, you know," he reminded his double.

The local inventor didn't refute it. "It does, but I want to make sure I have all the data properly saved and backed up before I turn in. Shouldn't take more than ten minutes."

Too tired to debate what sounded like a perfectly reasonable concern, the visiting couple bid their host goodnight and headed back to the house. Even before they were gone, Emmett started the save and back-up, double-checking both to make sure the information wouldn't accidentally be lost. He was about to shut down when he saw the medical scanner out of the corner of one eye and paused to look at it directly. He really hadn't meant to say anything about the baby being male, but at least he knew it was an honest slip, and they didn't appear to mind, any more than he and his Clara had minded the news that their last child would be a son after she'd gone through an amniocentesis at the behest of their family doctor. He was actually less worried about harm coming to visiting Clara's



unborn child because of these brief temporal hops than he was concerned about the possibly deadly effects simply being in another dimension might wreak upon an embryo in such an early stage of development. Damage done now could have disproportionately extreme results later, and he wished there was some way to protect her, at least, from these dangerously deleterious incompatibilities.

As he studied the deactivated scanner, the more he began to think that perhaps there was something more that could be done. Repairing their time machine was the most obvious and most certain thing, to be sure, but after seeing the full extent of its damage, he knew for a fact that their guests would be here for another week, perhaps more. The equipment they'd tried to use to shield his physician counterpart hadn't been as effective as Emmett would've liked, but he'd always been certain that, given just a little more time, a few more hours in which to work, the problems could've been solved. If the problem had only been understood and brought to his attention sooner, a solution could've been found without needing to rush the necessary work of returning the physician to his home dimension. He hated watching anyone suffer, if only with worry, especially other incarnations of himself, and even more especially other avatars of his wife. Computer technology had improved so much over the past three years. Perhaps....

Certain that he'd be unable to sleep until he'd checked to see if it could or could n't be done, Emmett shut down the devices he'd been using to scan their guests and went to find the things they'd used in their attempts to protect Dr. Doc during his stay in this dimension. He'd be able to tell very quickly if anything more could be done, now, and even if it couldn't, he'd sleep better, knowing he'd at least tried.

*THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 2002*  
*8:45 A.M. PDT*

When Doc woke the next morning, notably later than usual, the first thing he noticed was Clara still peacefully asleep beside him, both of them still in this strange but gradually more familiar new world. The second thing he noticed after quietly creeping out of bed on his way to the bathroom, was that once again, Emily was nowhere to be seen.

Fearing a repeat of the previous morning's computer mishap, the inventor hurried off in search of his daughter before she could get in trouble yet again. He hoped his counterpart's family wasn't scandalized by the sight of him running about the house in his pajamas, but he wasn't about to run the risk of Emily waking the entire household and the dead in the next county two days in a row. This morning, the kitchen and its surrounding areas were empty, though there were several boxes of cereal, a container of milk, an assortment of white and orange liquid splashes, and a scattering of crushed or soggy cereal bits on the counter nearest the refrigerator. Some of the mess extended onto the floor, and Doc was able to follow a trail of it in the direction of the rec room. The room was unoccupied, but the trail of breakfast foods led to the closed doors on the wall opposite the entrance. As he approached them, he heard the sounds of what had to be a juvenile television program or videotape, interspersed with childish laughter.

He opened the door and found his daughter and Chris seated on the floor in front of a large home entertainment center, their mostly-emptied breakfast dishes left on a nearby coffee table while they watched some colorful Disney-like cartoon Doc couldn't recall having ever seen before. He was trying to decide whether or not this warranted any reaction at all on his part when Emily happened to glance in his direction.

"Chris has the neatest stuff, Daddy!" she declared with the sunny smile that could melt just about any stern adult resolve. "We should get stuff like this at home. They don't even need tapes t'play movies, just CDs, an' they're *really* cool! They got special games on 'em an' *everythin*! Can we get 'em, too?"

"I don't know," her father admitted quite honestly, reasonably sure she was referring to a cutting-edge video and data system called a DVD that was just beginning to enter serious development in 1994, and, if he recalled what he knew of future history correctly, wouldn't really take off as a medium for several years. "They may not be around yet, where we come from."

Emily made a perfectly disgruntled face. "Bummer! Then I wanna move here, Daddy. It's got lots more neat stuff'n home."

"At the moment," was all Doc said, knowing that in time, their own world would reach a similar stage of development, without any need for relocation, temporal or otherwise. "Have you been behaving yourself?"

"Yeah," Chris provided for her. "Dad locked down all the computers 'cept the ones in our rooms, so there won't be any more accidents. The police get hacked sometimes when the security alarms go off an' they hafta come look around, even if Dad calls an' tells 'em nothin' happened."

"I suppose they might find it annoying," Doc had to admit, recalling similar instances back when he'd still lived in the old garage and the smoke from minor accidents in the lab had prompted worried neighbors to call in the fire department when it wasn't necessary. He smiled at the boy, wondering if his own unborn son would look anything like him. It was possible, since the other boys certainly more than resembled their local counterparts, and that could explain why Chris had looked so inexplicably familiar from the first moment he'd seen him. "You two left quite a mess between here and the kitchen," he added, schooling his thoughts away from the beginnings of renewed worry about Clara and the baby.

Emily poked Chris in the ribs. "I *told* ya someone'd see it," she accused.

Chris, however, shrugged. "Nemo an' Tink usually clean it up. I think they're both kinda spooked 'cause we've got too many same people around." That was quite possibly true; Doc had seen precious little of the two local pets since their arrival, only occasional glimpses of them during feeding times and when the dog wanted to be walked or the cat was asleep in a sunny window. Chris picked up a remote from the table and pushed a button, pausing the movie they'd been watching. "C'mon," he told Emily, "we'd better clean it up b'fore Mom sees it an' gets cranky."

"Excellent idea," Doc commended. "And in the future, if there are standing house rules about not eating outside the kitchen or dining room, don't let Emmy talk you into breaking them."

She loosed a tremendous sigh of exasperation as she collected her bowl and juice glass to return them to the kitchen. "Okay, Daddy, I'll be good. But can't we do somethin' more excitin' today? Hikin' was okay, an' so's watchin' movies an' playin' games, but I'm gettin' *bored*...!"

"We'll see," was all he would promise, since he knew it was vital for her to stay where she could be watched, for the sake of her very life. "Can I trust the two of you to take care of this by yourselves while I go up and get dressed?"

"Yeah," Chris said with breezy assurance, "we'll be okay. C'mon, Emmy, you gotta see the rad dishwasher my Dad made for Mom...."

Doc lingered within sight of the pair until he saw that they were not about to get into trouble, using the kitchen appliance. He hadn't had a chance to observe the device in action before, but this dishwasher was literally child's play, and the way in which it appeared to swallow the dirty dishes in the wink of an eye was quite entertaining to Emily, at least for the moment.

Clara was just waking when he finished preparing for the day. She was still in bed, staring up at the ceiling. She was so still, for a moment, Doc worried that she might be showing signs of what they had gone through time to avoid the night before, but after a moment, she blinked, shifted position, and sighed prodigiously. He breathed a silent sigh of his own, then sat on a bench under the wide window near the bed to put on his shoes and socks.

"That sounded heavy, as Marty would put it," he said, keeping his tone deliberately light. "Are you worried about something?"

She shook her head. "No, just thinking what to name the baby. I've more ideas for girls than for boys, and I was hoping this might be a sister for Emily."

"It still might be; no medical test is one hundred percent accurate."

She dismissed that possibility. "Not now, perhaps, but you were right when you pointed out that any equipment that can spot minute troubles in the baby this early in its life could certainly determine its gender. I'd prefer to have confidence when it tells us the baby's safe, for my own peace of mind, so I accept its pronouncement that he's a boy, too."

He bowed to her logic, since he'd already reached that conclusion on his own. "So what were you thinking? Christopher, by any chance?"

Again, she shook her head as she sat up. “No. It’s a perfectly charming name, but it doesn’t have quite as many strong positive family connections for us as it does for our counterparts, from what I’ve seen of their family history. It’s really quite amazing, Emmett. There *are* many differences, but there are also an astonishing number of similarities. Our parents, for instance. Mine look and have exactly the same names, here and at home, though some of the events in their lives were different. And aside from some minor matters of eye color and such, yours look the same, too, even though their names and your fathers’ occupations were different. My counterpart’s middle name is Louise, not Elizabeth, and while we both have an older brother and a younger sister, they have different names and apparently met with different fates. We’re not as unlike as we would appear to be, on the surface, for all that we haven’t had all the same experiences. I thought for a moment, after hearing that the baby’s going to be a boy, that I should consider doing what my counterpart did in naming him, but she told me all her reasons for doing what she did. They’d both agreed on the name Christopher before he was born, but when her husband couldn’t be here for his birth — and they had some rather... lively discussions on the subject — she decided to make that his middle name and deliberately name him after his father, even though she knew very well it wasn’t what he wanted at all.”

Doc chuckled. “Getting the last word, so to speak?”

“After a fashion. More her way of reminding him that nothing is more important than family, that he’s a father to his children before he’s an inventor or a scientist. I must admit that given similar circumstances, I might’ve been inclined to do the same thing. But our situations *are* different, and I know I needn’t feel doomed to choose the same name because of what she did. With the exception of Verne, none of the other children have precisely the same name, you know.”

“No, I didn’t,” Doc admitted. “How are they different?”

“Emily’s middle name here is Ann, not Marie — not chosen for any real significance, my counterpart told me, just because the names went well together — and their Jules’ middle name is Martin.”

Doc blinked with surprise at the remarkable simplicity — and appropriateness — of the choice. “I have to admit, it sounds much less pretentious than Erasthenes, and much more suitable. Sometimes, I’ve wondered what we were thinking of when we gave Jules a middle name like that. Even if we’d wanted to stick with scientists and inventors and such, there are dozens of... less cumbersome names than that. Thomas, Albert, Benjamin, Isaac, Edison....”

She smiled. “I’ve wondered the same thing. And given how important Marty has been in your life, and mine, I think it really was an appropriate choice, one we should’ve considered ourselves. I’m sure Jules would’ve been much happier with a name like that. It would’ve spared him all that teasing he got when the other children at school found out what an impossible mouthful of a middle name we’d given him. I’ll never really understand what possessed us.”

“That might be the only explanation, possession,” Doc agreed. He finished tying his shoes, then stood up. “You’ll forgive me if I leave this particular question in your hands, for the time being. There’s so much that needs to be done to get us back home....”

“I know. And to be honest, I’d rather think about it on my own, for now. There’s plenty of time to get your input later, and it’ll give me something pleasant rather than worrisome to focus on.”

“Then think to your heart’s content,” he said, bending to kiss her lightly, then headed off to resume the task of repairing their time machine.

Once back in the corridor outside the guest suite, he caught the scents of a real breakfast being prepared downstairs, and knew that others were now awake. He was mildly surprised when he almost literally ran into local Clara, who was also headed for the same staircase.

“Don’t tell me your husband actually knows how to cook,” he said by way of a good morning, presuming that he was in charge of the kitchen right now, since she was upstairs.

A small smile touched the teacher’s face, which Doc only now noticed was furrowed by a myriad of tiny worry lines. “Actually,” she said, her voice showing some of the same signs of stress, “he does, provided it’s nothing extraordinarily complicated and he isn’t distracted, thinking about some project he’s working on. Jules and Verne do remarkably well, too — Jules says he had to learn these last two years, out of self defense, since dormitory food is

notoriously inedible, and Verne picked up the skills quite easily, once he realized that cooking could be viewed as another form of chemistry. They're in charge downstairs, right now. I can't find Emmett anywhere."

Doc understood now why she was concerned. "You're not thinking he went back to work...?"

But she shook her head. "At a time like this, no, I couldn't think he would, and Peter would let me know if he went to EPB to use their facilities. But Peter had to return home to San Francisco last night, Emmett's not in his study, and if he's out in the barn, he's not answering the intercom. Sometimes, he gets so involved, he doesn't hear it; other times, he shuts it off rather than risk interruption and forgets to turn it back on. But..." She fell silent for a moment. "Your Jules told me there'd been some trouble last night, that all of you needed to make a time jump to keep things from getting worse, and afterwards, Emmett used some of the specialized equipment he has to take readings from you to monitor your conditions so that you'll know when another jump will be needed."

The visiting scientist confirmed it. "Yes, and it all went very well. The medical scanner you have that came from 2100 was even able to assure us that neither Clara nor the baby were harmed."

"That's a relief. But Emmett didn't come back to the house with you, did he?"

It sounded very much as if she already knew this for a fact. "No, not immediately. He needed to make sure all the data had been saved and back-ups made. Are you thinking he stayed out there all night just to do that?"

"Not precisely. But none of the cars are missing, and if he felt the situation was becoming more urgent and there was anything he could do to speed things along..." She sighed. "Perhaps I'm just over-reacting because of how he's over-dedicated himself to work, these last three years. It may be that the back-ups didn't go well or took longer than he expected, and he decided to sleep out there while he was waiting for the computers to finish what they're doing, so he shut off the intercom to make sure he wasn't disturbed. I just wish he'd remember to let me know when he's doing these things."

"If it's any consolation, my Clara has had similar complaints," Doc told her with a wistful smile. "If you'd rather stay here and supervise your sons to make sure they don't burn down the house, I'll go out and check."

"Would you mind terribly? I have to admit, after our little... disagreement yesterday, I'm afraid Emmett might be apt to think I'm checking up on him to make sure he's keeping his promise. I suppose it's not entirely untrue; I *am* checking up on him, but because I'm worried he'll work himself to death, not because I don't trust him." A very soft, very sad sigh whispered past her lips. "Ever since we went to visit his parents after that business with other dimensions back in 1999, he's been different, somehow. Nothing I can put my finger on, but..."

Doc was still stuck back on her previous sentence. "You actually went to visit his parents? Deliberately? Without hiding who you were or where you came from?"

"Yes, just once, but the circumstances were very carefully selected. Emmett's always said it was probably the biggest risk we've ever taken when time traveling, but it really was something he had to do. And I'm glad we did. I got a chance to meet his family, our children got a chance to meet their grandparents, and Emmett was finally able to get rid of the silly notion that he'd disappointed his parents because he became a scientist instead of a doctor. Nothing bad ever came of it, and it was worth the risk if only for the sake of the children. We've asked so much of them, deprived them of so many things other children take for granted by bringing them here into Emmett's time so that none of us would endanger the world by simply being where we don't belong. Letting them spend one day with people who died long before — or long after — they were born, people who are a part of what they are.... I can't regret it. I only wish I knew what happened there that made Emmett start focusing so intensely on his work."

"I couldn't say," Doc admitted. "I know there've been times I've felt that my parents didn't quite approve of the life I'd chosen, but I'm not sure going back to tell them how my life has turned out would be worth the risk, not even for the sake of the kids. Not that I'm condemning your choice, it's just not one I would've made. I'll see what's up out in the barn. If he's going to blame someone for prying, better me than you. Hopefully in a few days, I won't have to live with it."

Clara gratefully accepted the offer. As he headed off for the lab, Doc reflected on the things his wife's counterpart had just told him. Thus far, it had seemed to him that his own double was much more reluctant to use his time machines, but now it seemed that when he did, he was willing to take chances Doc would never have considered.

Like looking into specifics of the future and somehow deciding that a discovery as momentous as fusion power was indeed his own invention. If he would take the unthinkable risk of allowing his parents to meet his family and know what would become of him — an incredibly dangerous proposition, to Doc's thinking, no matter how carefully the meeting was arranged — mightn't he also make the presumptuous leap of believing that he was destined to invent something so significant when in fact he wasn't?

Granted, the evidence his local counterpart had cited was convincing, but since he had only heard of it in reference and hadn't actually *seen* any of it, Doc couldn't help but have his doubts. Some people were propelled into becoming workaholics through greed, others through guilt. And while he was reasonably certain Emmett wasn't one of the former, the fact that he'd begun to display these unhappy habits only after that meeting with his parents in the past made him suspect the latter. What if....

He wasn't liking the trend his thoughts were taking by the time he reached the lab door. Fortunately, it opened for him without delay, since his counterpart appeared completely engrossed with something in one of the little protected cubicles on the east side of the room, his back to the door. He wasn't working on anything connected with repairing the damaged time machine, Doc could see that much. Whatever it was, its parts were scattered across a work table, with connections running into two separate computers, one a compact laptop and the other a desk model with a remarkably large plasma display screen mounted on the wall above the table. The big screen showed diagrams and visible data readouts that meant precious little to the visiting scientist, only that something involving various types of energy fields was involved. Some kind of audible information was clearly part of whatever was being done, since Emmett was wearing a set of sealed headphones and didn't hear his counterpart enter, or come to stand very close behind him. Doc was quite sure he would've continued working if nothing broke his concentration, so he touched his shoulder to get his attention.

Emmett started rather comically, coming very close to falling out of his chair in surprise. Seeing who had interrupted, he tapped several of the computer keys to pause and lock what he'd been working on, then pulled off the headphones. "Is something wrong?" he wanted to know, plainly puzzled by his counterpart's presence. "More trouble? There shouldn't be...."

"There isn't," Doc assured him. "Everyone's fine. But your wife is wondering where you've been all night."

"All night?" the local inventor echoed. He glanced toward the windows on the west wall, and only then noticed that day had broken long ago, and gone unnoticed by him in the dark of the little cubicle. "I didn't actually intend to stay up all night," he confessed a bit sheepishly. "I thought I might've found the answer to make the electromagnetic interference field actually work as a means of protecting visitors from another dimension. If it worked, it would provide the perfect solution to protect your wife and the baby from harm without requiring her to make regular transitions through n-dimensional space. It couldn't protect all of you — the equipment simply can't generate a field that big, not unless you want to cram into a small room and stay there until your machine's fixed — but I'm sure it would give both of you some extra peace of mind."

Doc saw his point, and couldn't entirely fault him the effort he'd made. "It would, though repairing the train does have to be our first priority. We can't live here forever, not even crammed into a small protected room, and I thought we'd agreed that everyone needs to rest and eat properly to ensure there won't be any fatal mistakes."

"Of course," Emmett replied a shade too easily, setting aside the headphones to stretch for a moment before heading to fetch something from the storage shelves on the opposite side of the lab. "I take it Clara told you I didn't come to bed last night."

"More or less. She couldn't find you anywhere in the house, she wasn't getting an answer on the intercom, and after your... discussion yesterday afternoon, she was concerned that you wouldn't take it well if she came out looking for you."

Emmett grunted softly as he removed a heavy box from one shelf, set it on the nearest table, and began to sift through its contents. "Can't hear a thing through those headphones," he admitted, "not when they're set to cancel all interference from outside noise. So did she ask you to come instead, or did you volunteer?"

"I volunteered. I figured that even if you objected to my interruption, I wouldn't have to live with the results as long as she might. I take it you're not any closer to finding an answer than you were when we left last night."

“Somewhat, but not as close as I'd like to be. Some vital piece of the puzzle is missing, and I can't quite figure it out.”

“Then save it for some other time. Getting the train fixed and us home is more important, and you've possibly delayed that by staying up all night. You won't function any better than the rest of us without at least a few hours of decent sleep.”

Emmett considered his visiting avatar with a brief sidelong glance. “And you've never pulled an accidental all-nighter, working on a project?”

“Of course I have, and I'm not blaming you for this. I'm just saying it might be best to skip this project and concentrate on what we know *must* be done. The sooner we can return home, the better, for all of us — and there's no point in doing things that'll only increase tensions, especially when everyone's already tired and under stress.”

The local inventor had to admit that was true. There was a headache building behind his eyes, and the fact that its cause might be exhaustion, tension, hunger, or all three wasn't reassuring. “Yes, yes, I know, but I had to try.”

“And I do appreciate the effort, though I hope it won't wind up costing too much in terms of potential delays.” He glanced back at the cubicle, wondering if he might understand more of what his double had been doing, now that he knew what he'd been working on. Most of it was still a mystery. “Is all of this based on technology borrowed from the future?” he wondered, gesturing toward the unfinished project.

“Some, but not all of it,” Emmett replied as he continued to search the box. “Mostly the sensors. Dealing with things like subatomic harmonic vibrations is considerably beyond any currently available technology, at least when you're talking about the degrees of specificity a device like this would require. I'm sure you've made use of similar things to help make some of the things you envision a reality.”

“Yes,” Doc confirmed, “which is why I don't dare attempt to patent anything significant. When you design something, how can you be sure you didn't borrow something you shouldn't from what you know of discoveries made in the future?”

“How can you be so sure you *did*?” his double countered. “I know, it took me years before I came to terms with the idea of looking into my own future and accepting the reality that something I'd done would be an important part of it, but really, how is that any different than looking into Marty's future, or the future of anyone else? There's the fear factor, of course, being afraid of finding out that you'll fail completely, which was a large part of what kept me from looking at what I might become in the future, but ultimately, it's just an excuse to do nothing.”

Doc disagreed. “It's better than taking the chance of stealing an idea or an invention that might not really be your own.”

“And stealing money and investments that might not have been your own if you hadn't known they'd be profitable is any better?” When his counterpart turned to glare at him, shocked, he explained. “Your Clara told me you've been largely supporting your family through investments you made in companies you felt would become more profitable in the future. She didn't quite understand all the technicalities of it, but I *do*.”

“Yes, I did,” the visiting scientist countered defensively, “but they weren't large investments. You told me yourself that you helped finance the train by investing in companies you knew had been successful in the 1890s....”

“True enough, but they were already established companies; I wasn't getting in on the ground floor and then getting out before the bubble burst. All the investments were *very* small, made in a lot of different companies, and they were all extremely short-term, so there would be no lasting effect if the few dollars I made off each one didn't go into someone else's pocket. It was a calculated risk, certainly. But if you've been supporting your entire family through the profits off more significant investments for almost ten years, there's a much higher probability that the money you're making is depriving someone else of the opportunity to invest, someone who doesn't have your particular ‘inside information.’”

He made a remarkably disgruntled sound. “How is that any better than Marty wanting to use the information in the almanac to fix what he thought was going to be a bad future for himself? How is it any less deplorable than Biff taking the same information and building himself a corrupt empire with it? How do you know you aren't insuring *your*

present and *your* future through another person's loss? Did you look to see if someone else might've bought the stock you picked, without having your certain knowledge that it would be a good investment, and with it made enough money to fund a child's college education, which in turn would allow that child to discover the cure for cancer? What I did by looking into my future was only to see a possibility that could happen if I acted on the potential of *my* abilities, *my* knowledge, *my* work, not anyone else's. From what I've been told, your family and friends seem to think you're afraid to take the chance of using your own gifts."

"I have my reasons," Doc insisted, nonetheless uncomfortable with the truths he knew lay beneath everything his counterpart was saying.

"Then why did you become an inventor?" Emmett wanted to know. "That's what I don't understand. Why did you decide you wanted to devote your life to science? Just because you read a book that gave you an idea at a time when you didn't want to be what your parents wanted you to be? Was it only a way to avoid being a medical doctor?"

"No. I told you, I always knew that wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. You never had to make that choice...."

A wry and somehow unamused smile twitched across the local scientist's expression. "Guess again. I told you, my mother was a nurse, too, came from a long line of people in the medical profession, and she wanted me to be a doctor, very badly, so I tried. I was only thirteen years old, but I gave it my best shot, because I knew she wanted me to find a cure for my father's emphysema, help save his life before it was too late."

This particular variation in their pasts disturbed other Doc. "My father never had emphysema," he said quietly. "He and my mother were killed in a car crash in 1948."

"Then you were lucky," his counterpart said grimly. "You didn't have to stand there and watch them die, one at a time, and feel totally helpless because there wasn't a damn thing you could do to save them, to cure the disease that was stealing your father's breath, or help fix your mother's heart before it grew so weak it stopped. I tried to be what Mom wanted me to be, but I couldn't do it. I was too young, I couldn't stand the thought of cutting into things, just... couldn't. For a long time, I thought they were terribly disappointed in me, but now, I know they weren't. Even though they never had a chance to see me succeed with a single invention, they had faith that someday, I would, and would make them proud."

"And does it change anything, knowing you succeeded publicly, but only decades after they died?"

"Yes, because I went back and told them."

Doc grimaced, recalling what local Clara had said earlier. "Your wife told me about that. I can't believe you actually went through with it. That's unbelievably irresponsible...!"

Emmett disagreed. "Why? They promised never to tell anyone, not even me, they never did, and they got a chance to meet Clara and their grandchildren. Everything was very carefully timed so that the possibility of either of them forgetting their promise and accidentally letting something slip would be most unlikely."

"But the consequences could've been disastrous!"

"But they weren't. And because the risk was taken, they had a chance to know of a future that made them very happy, and I finally stopped clinging to the mistaken notion that I'd somehow failed them. *All* time travel entails risk — you know that as well as I do. *All of life* entails risk, but should we not take a single step because we might slip and fall, or not eat because we might choke? I became an inventor because I wanted to *help* other people, which is why my mother wanted me to be a doctor. I just did it in different ways, and what I've been able to do since I stopped being afraid of succeeding has made so much of a difference....!"

He shook his head. "Don't you understand this? Didn't science capture your imagination because of the limitless possibilities it had to offer? Haven't you ever felt your mind fill with ideas of things that could be done, could be made, could change the entire world, if only you sat down and thought of how to make the dream a reality?"

"Of course I have! But when the only thing of any significance you can get to work is something you don't dare show to the rest of the world...." He frowned. "You can't change the world with concepts stolen from the future, or with

thousands of ideas that can't ever work the way you want. Look at the mind-reading device. The best that could ever be done with it is reading dreams...."

Emmett disagreed yet again. "If you got that far, then you quit too soon. It *can* work, but not with 1955, or even 1994, components. You need faster and more powerful computers, and vastly more sensitive detection devices — all of which *will* exist before 2025. Once those supporting technologies catch up to the vision of the original idea, it *will* work. In fact, it already has."

He glanced at a shelf not far away, reached over, picked up a box, and plopped it on the table. "To save my life and the very existence of my family, I had to make it work, over ten years ago. There wasn't any other choice. I'd never reveal this to the contemporary scientific community since it needs that future technology to work, but the basic idea was accurate. When the rest of technology catches up, there's no reason I can't reveal this. Not for use as an everyday home device or a novelty, but as a tool for psychiatric work, criminal investigation, and the study of the human mind, it would be invaluable. Which is what I wanted in the first place."

Unable to restrain his curiosity, Doc peered into the box, though he did not touch it. "That was what I'd wanted, too," he admitted. "But it's just another time machine, another invention you can't publicize. You *did* take part of it from the future...."

"But not the heart of it. I can't say anything about it until someone else invents the parts I used to make it work, but someday, I *can*. The idea for how to use those things in this particular way is still mine. And the fusion reactor always *was*, just like all of the things I've invented in the last eight years. I don't regret anything I've done to get where I am, and I won't, no matter what you think. Because when I decided I wanted to be an inventor, I wanted to *be* an inventor. I didn't want to spend my whole life tinkering in the garage, making basically useless things for my own convenience or toying with ideas I was afraid to make public. I *did* want to change the world, like Edison and Einstein and Newton and Franklin and all the others who've ever pursued their ideas until they became realities. Oh, I paid the price for opening my mouth about what other people thought were wild, impossible ideas back when I couldn't make anything worthwhile work to save my soul. By the time I finally worked up the nerve to actually be what I'd been calling myself for fifty years, I was damned sick and tired of being the town crackpot, a nutcase, a lunatic, a ne'er-do-well whose only footprints in history would be a pathetic footnote at best, the local basket-case who burned down houses, blew up labs, dithered about things that just couldn't be done, and went bankrupt not once but twice. The time machine proved I *could* do it, but it was only proof to me. I *needed* to prove it to everyone else, just once. Haven't you felt that, too — or are we truly so different?"

"I don't know," Doc said after a moment's thought. "I don't think so. I've felt the same things, but I can't be irresponsible with what I know...."

"And supporting your family off future knowledge is responsible?" He snorted derisively. "Only if you believe the end justifies the means, and I don't."

"Neither do I! But—"

Emmett shook his head, decisive. "There's no 'but' about it. Whether you use your knowledge of the future to invest in sure things or use it to 'invent' things *you* never dreamed of, it's the same thing. It's hypocrisy, at least in my book. I could never do it. The closest I ever came was when I invested the money I made from the sale of the garage and the remaining property from my parents' estate. I knew that certain very general *types* of companies were likely to become profitable in the future, and I specifically chose to put the money into companies of those kinds, but based only on whatever I could find out about them, legally, at the time I made the investments. I didn't go into the future and check out their profitability, or even if they'd still exist in a year's time."

Doc frowned. "Neither did I. That's the same thing I did, more or less...."

"And the operative term is *more*. You used more of what you knew about the future than I did, you made much more extensive investments, and ultimately for what? Not to provide for your family, but to protect your ego!"

The visiting scientist was becoming incensed. "I beg your pardon!" he began, wanting to say something a little more biting, but trying his best not to lose his temper.



Emmett, on the other hand, was tired, feeling very stressed, and had had more than enough of tiptoeing around sensitive issues of late. “If you’d bother to make use of all that education you supposedly have, there wouldn’t be any reason for you to be dancing on an ethical tightrope like this. You’d be contributing something of your own to the world instead of living off the success of a single invention that you yourself have insisted shouldn’t be used for personal gain. Don’t deny it. We may not be exactly alike in many of our life experiences, but I know enough of what you’ve lived through to know that no matter how often you say it shouldn’t be done, virtually every single thing that’s been accomplished through our use of the time machine has been for nothing *but* personal gain, even if it wasn’t the original intention of the trip. I’ve already had to face up to that truth and swallow it, cold and raw. That’s why I thank God that eight years ago, I finally worked up the courage to quit pretending that I was trying to protect the rest of the world when I was really only trying to protect myself from being hurt if I failed yet again. It was easier when it was only me, and I only had to think of what I’d lose; it was almost impossible, thinking of what Clara and the kids would face if I failed again when just once, I needed to succeed. But I did it.”

“And you’ve just carried it to the opposite extreme,” Doc rebutted, more tartly than he’d intended when he opened his mouth, but he did not apologize for it. There was some truth to all of what his counterpart was saying — more than some, and he knew it — but he wasn’t ready to accept it or even acknowledge it properly, not yet. In fact, he had to work very hard to keep his temper in check, because everything he was hearing was pushing all the wrong buttons to increase his sense of moral outrage and anger. Thank God he at least had had a decent night’s sleep! “When your own wife and your business partner conspire to ban you from setting foot on the property of your own company because you’ve been spending too much time there, don’t you think that’s a sign of an unhealthy obsession? What’s the point of even having a family if you work so hard to support them, you never spend any time with them?”

“That isn’t true,” Emmett said, gritting his teeth. “All right, these past few months, I’ll admit, I *have* been spending too much time with it, but that’s not what I’ve been doing for the past eight years....”

“No, only for the past three, according to your wife. Was becoming ridiculously wealthy and successful not enough? Did you have to sacrifice your family, trying to take over the entire economic world?”

If he had been a more violent type of man, Emmett might’ve given more than a moment’s consideration to clobbering his double with the box containing the mind-reader. Instead, he roughly shoved it into its place on the shelf, and stalked back to the cubicle. “You don’t understand the situation, so I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. I don’t give a damn about the money or success or fame or any of that, no matter what other people might be telling you or what you think you’re seeing. I’m not home twenty-four hours a day, no, because EPB *is* my business and I *do* care about how it’s run and what kinds of things are being done with it — *not* for the money, but because I want to make absolutely sure nothing that ever comes from it hurts anyone in any way. That is *not* an unreasonable concern!”

Doc was only partially convinced, at best. “Perhaps not, but hanging over your employees’ shoulders and breathing down their necks and being a control freak because you don’t trust them to do their work isn’t the kind of behavior I’ve heard makes for a good employer. Especially not when it slops over into your personal life and makes you start distrusting your own family!”

The local inventor scowled angrily. “I *never* said I distrust my family!”

Doc snorted. “You didn’t need to say it, you showed it by trying to do things behind their backs when there should’ve been no reason you couldn’t be up front about it!”

It was a low blow — accurate perhaps, but still low — and Emmett had to exert considerable effort to keep his anger under some semblance of control. When he spoke, his voice was as tight as an overwound clock-spring. “I was only trying to avoid unnecessary quarreling because someone was certain to misinterpret my intentions — which it seems to me is *exactly* what you’re doing right now. That part of my life is none of your business, you know. I’m doing everything I can to get you and the others home as quickly and safely as possible. Above and beyond that, I don’t think you’re in the position to question any part of my motives, or pass judgment on what I’ve done with my life. At least I’ve had the sense to *live* it, and not hide behind lame excuses because I’m afraid of the past, uncomfortable with the present, and terrified of the future!”

That last crack was deadly accurate in striking yet another sore spot, and the visiting scientist responded out of sheer defensive instinct. “I’d rather be terrified of it than *steal* from it!”

And that was the last straw, as far as Emmett's overtired and overstressed temper was concerned. "Fine!" he snapped back, turning on his counterpart so abruptly, for a moment, neither of them were quite sure if he was going to lash out physically. He didn't, but he kicked aside the desk chair in the cubicle as he headed toward the exit. "If you think what I have here and what I've done is wrong, then do things whatever way *you* think'll get you back home in one piece. Far be it from me to let my obviously unethical circumstances taint the purity of your actions. But if you *do* manage to get back where you belong before nature catches up with you and ends your existence, I suggest you forget about being an inventor and take up fixing cars or unclogging toilets for a living. At least those are more honest ways of making money than fooling yourself in to thinking that it's all right to play the market with future knowledge just like Biff used it to play the horses!"

On that stinging note, he left, headed back to the house. Doc briefly considered going after him, but he was shaking so badly from a combination of anger, outrage, and the shock of hearing things he hadn't wanted to ever think about that his legs wouldn't carry him. He dropped into the cubicle's chair, closing his eyes and breathing deeply to try to calm himself. When he had managed some degree of it, he again thought of following his counterpart, but decided against it. At the moment, he didn't think he was capable of having a rational conversation with him, not after so many irrational — and all *too* rational — things had been said between them. Instead, he decided that perhaps it would be better if he did what his double had suggested, and tried continuing on his own. There was still a lot of work to be done, and since what was required was the repair of his own time machine, he knew he should be perfectly capable of directing the work on his own.

In fact, for the time being, he definitely preferred it that way.

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Up at the house, visiting Clara had come down to join her counterpart and their children for breakfast in the informal dining room when Emmett came in, none too quietly. The slam of the breezeway door behind him tipped off those sharing the meal to the possibility that something was wrong. When he hurried up the stairs to the second floor without so much as pausing to say good morning, that proved it.

"Emmett," local Clara called after him, more than a little suspicious that his neglect was deliberate and not the result of preoccupation, "would you like some br—"

The slam of another door followed by the distinctive ringing noises of deadbolts as they locked into place gave all the answer she needed.

Local Verne winced, shook his head, and sighed heavily. "Oh, shit," he breathed unhappily. The fact that no one bothered to scold him for using such language silently proclaimed the general understanding that their situation had just gone from bad to worse.

## Chapter Fifteen

*THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 2002*

*10:07 A.M. PDT*

Although the sharp and angry sound of a door slamming had jarred him awake from a rather unpleasant dream involving Jennifer and a stint on Divorce Court, Marty didn't bother to get up immediately. The nap room that he had spent the night in was without any windows, and in his half-awake state he erroneously assumed it was still sometime in the middle of the night. He was still tired, too, and, although he had indeed slept during the night, dreams like the one with him and Jennifer on the road to Splitsville had constantly rerun in different variations throughout the night. He had just managed to doze off again when the door to his room opened and the overhead light snapped on, rudely, prompting him to immediately pull the covers over his head.

"Marty?"

The voice prodding him wasn't Jennifer's, surprisingly enough. It was Verne's. That didn't put him in a better mood, however. He half-grunted and half-groaned, hoping the teen would take the hint and leave him alone. Verne did not.

"Marty, we got a problem. I think you'd better get up, now."

Another problem. Wonderful. The mere thought made him clutch the blankets around him more tightly, not wanting to deal with whatever it was that had Verne so obviously concerned. He had more than enough problems already, between the mess with him and Jennifer, being stranded in a different dimension, and having had the unquestionably unpleasant opportunity to experience, firsthand, the problems of dimensional discrepancies that such a situation was causing. Verne could deal with it on his own, as far as he was concerned.

The sixteen-year-old seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. "I'm not gonna leave you alone, Marty," he said when the musician made no move to get up, continuing to hide under the covers from the world and the overhead light. "This is important. Mom asked me to wake you up."

That Clara had wanted him wakened brought no comfort to Marty. Instead, it made him realize that the situation was probably pretty damned serious. "Did someone else have a reaction?" he asked from under the blankets, his voice slightly muffled.

"No, nothing like that. It's... well... we think Dad and his twin had some kinda fight..."

That was probably one of the last things Marty had expected to hear. Curiosity and surprise prompted him to poke his head out and look at Verne for the first time, albeit squinting heavily from the too-bright light above. "Doc an' Doc had a fight?" he asked.

"We think so," Verne said, looking rather troubled. "The one from here stormed in about fifteen minutes ago, super peeved, and locked himself up in his study. He's not saying anything, not even to his wife. And our dad isn't answering any of the intercom calls or saying much, either. Mom thought you might be able to talk to ours, and the other Clara is calling the other Marty."

Doc getting into any kind of serious argument with anyone close to him happened about as often as... well, almost never. Marty could only recall one instance where he and the inventor had had a genuine, serious difference of opinion that had ended with them not speaking to one another. That had been a while back, eight years, almost, and might've dragged on longer than the two weeks it had, had Clara and Jennifer not gone behind their backs and dumped them in the past to try to work out their differences. The young man shuddered inwardly, knowing that an argument like that wasn't really very practical, now. It was a sad truth that the ability to argue and fight was somewhat of a luxury, one that couldn't be spared during situations where there was a life and death deadline hovering about. He and Jennifer were only getting away with it because they didn't need to directly interact with one another to get back home, but there was just no way either of the Docs could do that for very long.

"Does she really think I'll be able to pry something outta him?" Marty asked, a little doubtful.

Verne shrugged. "More than Jules an' Emmy an' I. And I don't think he wants to lay anything heavy on Mom 'cause of her pregnancy and all that. And, you know, he's been more your friend than Jennifer's."

The teen had very good points. Nodding, Marty threw the blankets aside and sat up, figuring it was probably a good thing he'd just crawled into bed the night before without changing out of his clothes. At the time, it had just seemed easier, especially if there was a reason to be jumping out of bed again for another hop through time, as unrealistic as that might've been. Jennifer, of course, would have taken great pleasure in complaining about that old habit if she had known, but at least he didn't need to spend time changing, not yet.

"Where is he? Out in the lab?"

Verne shrugged vaguely as Marty followed him out of the room and into the hallway. "We think so," he said. "That's where he was going earlier, to talk to his other self, and since that guy stormed in here majorly pissed, we're assuming Dad's still out there."

"Great..." Although the closest door to the lab was on his left, Marty veered right, toward the informal dining room, first, the delicious scents of breakfast drawing him on. He found a table full of people picking at the food on their plates, though, clearly worried. The local Clara was missing, as was his Jennifer, but all the kids and the visiting Clara were there. The two Jules and local Verne and Emily wore rather sober expressions but Chris and the younger Emily appeared well distracted with playing with the food on their plates, though they seemed rather quiet themselves. Clara looked up as Marty entered and gave him a rather wan, apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry I had Verne wake you, Marty," she said immediately. "I just thought it might be good to nip this problem in the bud, as soon as possible, and I know Emmett doesn't want to speak with me about it."

"It's all right," Marty assured her, grabbing a couple of pieces of toast and bacon to munch on during the walk out to the lab. "I can't promise that I'll be able to find anything out, though."

"Anything is better than nothing," Clara assured him immediately. "Thank you, Marty."

Trying to look confident, he left the dining area with his food in hand and went out the breezeway door, heading for the lab. By the time he reached the outbuilding, he had finished his quick breakfast and was feeling considerably more apprehensive about the situation. Marty hesitated for a minute outside the door to the lab, not sure if he wanted to go in and face Doc's perhaps irritated state of mind. He finally took a deep breath and went inside, his identity still cleared by the computers to allow him entry without a problem.

The lab, he saw immediately, was empty, and the sounds of footsteps and mutterings from above drew his attention, and feet, towards the stairs. Marty found Doc up there, pacing rapidly around the floor, looking very annoyed and angry. The young man hadn't seen such a dark expression on his friend's face in a long while, and he was about to turn around and go back down the stairs, let Doc cool down on his own, but the scientist spotted him before he had the chance.

"Did my counterpart send you out here to check up on me?" he asked, almost growling. Marty jumped at the tone in Doc's voice, and forced a smile on his face.

"No," he said honestly. "Clara — your wife — did. She got a little concerned when the other Doc stormed in to the house, and then you didn't answer the intercom out here. What happened?"

Doc shrugged. "We had words," was all he said.

"Well, they must've been doozies, then. What was it? Are you guys too much alike, after all, to get along?"

"No."

The tone was sharp and the answer quick. Marty once more had the urge to leave his friend alone, since it was clear that Doc didn't want to talk, right now, and was still very worked up over whatever had been said between himself and Emmett. But something kept him rooted to the spot. Curiosity might've been part of it, since he knew it took a lot to make his friend so angry, but there was also the responsibility he felt to the others in the house, who were as baffled as he on what had happened.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked instead, speaking about the situation itself. Doc, however, took the question in a different way.

“Yes,” he said, still pacing. “Since it appears that Emmett has decided to end his assistance on the project, I’ll need every available hand if we’re going to finish this before we run out of time.”

“Okay,” Marty said, rather dubiously. He didn’t think he liked the idea that one of the people who seemed to know the most about their situation was now MIA. His unease over that was proved a few moments later downstairs when, as Doc tried to demonstrate to him how to test a circuit board to determine if it was really dead or not, the computer refused to cooperate — and, in fact, refused to do anything, no matter how many different things the inventor tried.

“Damn!” he spat out, pushing the keyboard away in frustration and scowling. “He must’ve locked things up!”

“So does that mean we can’t do anything?” Marty asked, eyeing his friend warily.

“No,” Doc said, launching himself back to his feet and heading for the stairs at a fast pace. “We can get around using the computers for the most part. It’ll take longer, but that shouldn’t stop us.”

Marty followed his friend back to the second level, where the train was resting. “Doc, why don’t you guys just sit down and work this out? It can’t be that bad....”

The inventor stopped and turned to look at him so abruptly that, for a moment, Marty thought that the suggestion he had just made was one so obvious that hadn’t occurred to his friend. Then Doc’s eyes narrowed darkly. “Yes,” he said. “One might take their own advice before dishing it out to others.”

Marty just blinked, so stunned was he by the rather mean-spirited comment. “Low blow, Doc,” he said, more hurt than angry. “You know Jen and I are trying to work things out...”

“How? By ignoring one another and going out of your way to not spend more than a minute in the same room with each other? If you keep doing that, you’ll end up in court getting a divorce before you know it.”

The musician stood rooted to the spot, numbed by the words that, before, had been vague and misty concepts in just his own head. The scientist’s choice of words couldn’t have been worse, either, and the nightmares that had kept him tossing and turning all night long popped back into his head. “Doc...!” he murmured, appalled.

The inventor wasn’t apologetic in the least. “What’s going on between me and Emmett is none of your business,” he said, bluntly. “Unlike you, I prefer to keep my personal problems to myself and not solicit advice from almost everyone in Hill County. And before you go giving out unsolicited advice, I suggest you take a long, hard look at your own life and apply the words there, first. Maybe then you’ll gain the proper authority to speak about what you know and not merely parrot back cliches and advice that you yourself don’t even bother to take.”

Doc turned around and went into the cab, leaving Marty still standing, frozen, where he had stopped. The young man wasn’t sure if he wanted to cry or scream. He did neither; instead he turned around and, without a word more to Doc, headed for the stairs, and the door at the bottom of them.

Leaving the lab and crossing the lawn was a bit of a blur to him. He remembered almost running over young Emily in the hallway when he came in, and the confused and concerned look that crossed the girl’s face as he passed her and made a beeline for the room he had adopted as his own since the argument with Jennifer. He shut the door before she could follow him and leaned against it, sliding down until he was sitting on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest. The darkness was thick around him, but he didn’t bother to turn on the lights. It suited both his mood and the thoughts about the state of his marriage crowding into his head, demanding to be considered, now.

*Thanks, Doc, he thought, bitterly. See if I try to help you out again!*

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The local Marty wasn’t sure, exactly, what to expect when he arrived at the Browns’. Clara had been rather vague on the phone, but that wasn’t because there was anything to hide; there was just little she knew. From what

she had gathered and relayed to the musician, her husband and the visiting Doc had apparently had some sort of disagreement that had turned quite ugly. Emmett had sequestered himself in his study and was responding to none of her calls or knocks; Doc was behaving similarly in the lab, though they had sent his Marty out to check on him. By the time the musician arrived at the house, however, things had taken another turn.

“Little Emily saw Marty come in,” Clara told him as she led him through the house. “She thought he looked upset, and he’s shut himself in his room, now, and isn’t inclined to come out.”

Marty sighed explosively, rolling his eyes. “Man, when things hit the fan, they really hit the fan,” he said. “Do you think the other Doc said something to him?”

Clara lifted her slender shoulders in a shrug. “None of us are sure, but it’s a fair assumption,” she said. “I still haven’t been able to summon Emmett from the study. Do you want to see if Marty will talk to you, and then try speaking with Emmett?”

It was the musician’s turn to shrug. “Sure,” he said. “Where is he?”

“In the nap room. He’s been staying there since the argument with Jennifer.”

Wondering if that had anything to do with his counterpart’s apparently grim mood, Marty set off in the direction of the room, finding the door firmly closed. He tilted one ear to the wood and, not hearing any sound from within, knocked on it, softly.

There was a reaction from inside a moment later. “What?” came the other Marty’s voice, sounding rather depressed.

“It’s Marty. Can I talk to you?”

There was a long silence from the other side of the door — then, finally, it cracked open a couple inches and the local Marty found himself face to face with his double. The visiting Marty’s expression was rather guarded and a touch suspicious. There were subtle signs that the older Marty caught in his counterpart’s face that something seriously upsetting had happened. Maybe it was the faint twitch to the mouth; maybe it was the eyes that looked a little red, as if he’d been crying or wanting to; maybe it was the lack of any light whatsoever in the room at his back, meaning that he’d been sitting around in the dark. Whatever it was, the words “What’s wrong?” were out before he could stop them.

Visiting Marty shrugged. “Doc said a few things to me,” he said, vaguely.

“I could’ve guessed.... Do you know what happened between him and our Doc?”

Another shrug. “No,” Marty said. “And I’d stay away from him if I were you — our Doc, I mean. He’s in a sour mood, now, and likes to share the wealth.”

The younger Marty wasn’t being entirely truthful. There was something he wasn’t saying. He certainly couldn’t know exactly what his counterpart was feeling or thinking, especially since they appeared to have had different life experiences that had shaped who they were and who they would be, but the local Marty was willing to bet his life savings that something Doc had said had badly rattled the other Marty if he had retreated to a dark room in the house. It wasn’t typical behavior for *him*, that was for sure!

“What happened?” he asked.

The visiting musician smiled humorlessly. “Don’t ask if you don’t want to know,” he said. “I’ve apparently overstepped any advice I was entitled to give, according to Doc....”

“I want to know,” Marty said without hesitation.

The young man eyed him a moment, uncertain, then stepped aside and switched on the lights in the windowless room. He waited only until the local Marty had come in and shut the door before spilling the beans. “I

don't know what's bugging Doc, but I don't think I've seen him that angry in years," he said. "Whatever happened between him and your Doc was some serious shit. I tried to draw it outta him but... man, he said some things to me...."

"What?" Marty asked. He'd seen his own Doc lose it once or twice before. His friend's fuse might've been patiently long, but when he'd had it, he could be every bit as angry and spontaneous as Marty was when he lost his own temper. It was a side he was glad he didn't see often.

"Nothing that I didn't deserve, I guess. Just said some stuff about Jen and I... nothing I hadn't thought about myself but hearing it spoken...." His voice broke and he shuddered. "I just... well, hearing it that way from Doc was kinda... disturbing."

Having never been in the same situation with his wife as his counterpart was, Marty wasn't sure of exactly what to say. "Well," he finally settled on, after a moment of silence between them, "if it helps, I *did* talk to my Jen today and she's willing to do the mediation thing with you guys — as long as yours knows about it and is okay with her being there."

Visiting Marty managed a half smile that looked more like a grimace. "If she'll stay put to even let me say that much to her," he said. "I don't even know where she is right now... I haven't seen her since last night."

"Are you gonna suggest that I ask her about that?" Marty asked.

"Well, since you're offering...."

Now it was local Marty's turn to grimace. "She hasn't exactly been trying to talk to me, either," he said.

"I know, but at least you don't have the history I've got with her. And she might let you get a word in."

"Or she might get ticked at me, thinking I'm meddling where I shouldn't," Marty said, realistically. "It'll be better coming from you, I think. I really don't want to get stuck in the middle of this; I'm getting involved enough already, and it's super weird, dealing with the marital problems of someone else who's... you."

His counterpart considered the words for a moment, then nodded, though he didn't look happy about it. "Yeah, I guess," he allowed. "Okay, I might as well try to track her down and see if she'll give me the time of day — or at least a time when we can do this. When were you thinking? This evening?"

"That'd probably be best. Mom and Dad wanted to take the kids out to dinner tonight anyway, so we wouldn't have to deal with sitter hassles and it would keep 'em away from the dupes wandering around here. I'd better go after my Doc, now, and see if I can pry anything from him...."

"Be careful," visiting Marty warned him as he left the room. "If yours is in a mood anything like mine, it could get ugly."

Not doubting the words of his counterpart, Marty thanked him for the tip and left him to search for his wife while he headed for the upstairs and the study door. He found a small crowd gathered there, consisting of the teenaged sons of both Docs and Claras. They seemed to be trying to listen into the room and, at the sight of Marty, quickly backed away, nearly tripping over one another in their haste. He smiled, amused.

"I won't tell if you won't," he assured them in a soft voice, on the chance that they could be overheard through the door. Not very likely, but if Emmett was already in a black mood, he wouldn't take very kindly to attempted eavesdropping.

"We can't hear anything, anyway," local Verne griped. "Dad has the room soundproofed."

"Have you tried knocking?"

The heads of the local teens nodded. "He's ignoring us," Jules said. "It's not surprising, I guess, since even Mom's not getting through."

"Then I probably won't have better odds," Marty half-muttered as he stepped up to the door and knocked. Silence greeted his attempt. He tried again, getting the same result.

"Something bad *really* must've gone down between him and our Dad," visiting Verne said from a few feet away as the boys watched him. Having reached that conclusion while speaking with his counterpart, Marty knocked a third time, fairly pounding on the door just on the chance that Emmett wasn't hearing him.

"Go away!" came his friend's voice immediately, threatening dire consequences if his demand wasn't met.

"It's Marty, Doc — the one you know."

Emmett apparently didn't care who was knocking. "Read the sign," he said flatly, indicating the permanently mounted message on the door that told visitors "Do Not Disturb" in different languages.

"I saw it. But I thought, you know, it might help if you tell someone what happened."

There was no answer. It didn't take a genius to realize he was being deliberately ignored. Marty supposed he was getting off easy, compared with his counterpart's attempt on prying out the matter. "All right," he said through the door, keeping his tone deliberately light. "I'll be out in the lab if you want to talk."

He looked at the group a few feet away. "Sorry," he said. "I tried."

"It's okay, Marty," local Verne assured him. "If Mom couldn't even get 'im to talk, it's not so strange that you can't, either."

"Probably," Marty agreed. "But it'd still be nice to know what the hell is going on. Too bad there weren't any witnesses around."

"Maybe you can get something out of our dad," visiting Jules said. "Our Marty tried, apparently, but he didn't say if he succeeded...."

"He didn't," the musician said. "From what he told me, Doc turned on him."

The visiting teens winced. "Wow," Verne said. "That's not like him at *all*."

"I gathered, 'cause it's not something this one would do, either," Marty said, jerking a thumb at the closed door. He made a face. "I'm really not too keen on the idea of going out there to speak with the other Doc, but since that one's actually *talking*...."

"I don't envy your position," visiting Jules told him. "If he's lashing out at Marty, then he must really be upset. Be careful."

Marty wasn't feeling much better from the almost identical advice he'd already heard once from his counterpart. "I will," he said. "I've dealt with Doc in this kinda state of mind before."

Ten minutes later, though, out in the lab, he was wondering what in the hell he'd gotten himself into. Emmett's counterpart was perfectly willing to have him around and use him for assistance, but the moment he brought up the issue, he ran into a wall constructed as fiercely as the physical ones Emmett was hiding behind in the house.

"It's none of your business," he said bluntly as he bent under the time display mounted at the front of his train's cab, trying to remove the burned out wiring.

"Maybe not, but it's clearly something bothering you and Doc, and you guys are gonna need to work together if you want to get home fast."

There was a snort at those words. "Am I going to have to listen to the same tired and oft-said advice from you as I did from my Marty?"



“Is that what happened? He tried to tell you what to do and you blew up at him?” It made sense, the musician had to admit.

“I didn’t ‘blow up’ at him, I merely told him the cold, hard facts about his situation with Jennifer. It was about time someone did.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think you did it very well. He was hiding in a dark room when I got here.”

The visiting inventor grunted. “If he can’t even take his own advice, I don’t see why he should even be telling it to others.”

The local Marty disagreed. “Just because he’s not smart enough to take his own advice doesn’t mean you have to sink to that level. He’s still young, and even though I wasn’t quite like him when I was that age, I can see where he’s coming from on this point. You and Doc are old enough to know better than to be bickering like little kids and refusing to try and solve it. Especially now, when so much is at stake.”

Doc removed his head from under the display, emerging with a handful of blackened and melted wire, to look at his best friend’s local counterpart with clear annoyance. “And you think you’ve earned the right to give out such advice?”

“Yes,” Marty said, not backing down. “I don’t know if you realize how serious your situation is—”

“Of *course* I do!” the scientist exclaimed, throwing the wires out through the cab door, narrowly missing Marty. “I’m not naive! I’ve been thinking of nothing *but* that ever since I learned of the problems!”

“Then you should know that if you let this thing drag on with Doc, it’s just gonna delay you guys getting home. Neither of you are gonna win, especially not you!”

Doc visibly ground his teeth as he came down the steps from the cab. “I know that, Marty,” he said, pushing his way past the musician to grab something from his toolbox on the floor. “I don’t need to be reminded of the obvious.”

“I think maybe you do,” Marty said. “I know you and Doc don’t want to talk about whatever it was that happened between you guys, but I think the sooner you do, the sooner you can put this behind you and do what you gotta to get back home.”

“I have nothing to say to him, now,” Doc said, nosily rummaging through his tools. “And that goes to you, too, if all you came out here to do is nag me on the matter.”

“I’m trying to help,” Marty said. “I know this is affecting everyone, though. Even Chris and Emily know something’s up.”

“Then let them speculate. It’s none of their damned business and I’m not discussing this anymore. Period. Now if you’ve come to actually help out with the *machine*, why don’t you grab those wire clippers and help me remove some of the fried wiring from the train?”

The musician was tempted to pursue the subject matter, but if this version of Doc was anything like his own — and from what he could see, so far, he was — getting anything more out of him would be impossible. So, with a sigh, he picked up the suggested tool and went to work.

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While his counterpart was trying his best to get through to the visiting Doc in the lab, Marty was doing his damndest to get through to his wife — or at least find her. His first thought was to check the bedroom that she had taken over as her own, but it was empty, as was the connecting bathroom. None of the kids had spotted her, nor either of the Claras. He was just starting to get seriously worried that something bad had happened — or maybe she had decided to run away, despite the risks this world posed to her health — when, while walking through the parlor for about the fifth time, he heard a cough from nearby. Looking around, he spotted Jennifer on the balcony up there, seated in one of the chairs, her eyes aimed through the large windows.

“Jennifer?” he said. She ignored him, keeping her eyes focused through the windows. Marty looked around, trying to figure out how the heck she had gotten up there — and spotted a partially ajar door in the wall, near the entrance to the foyer. He went over to investigate and, sure enough, saw stairs leading up. A moment later he was on the interior balcony with her, and blocking the only way down.

“Jennifer?” he tried again.

“What do you want, Marty?” Jennifer finally said, continuing to stare straight ahead, when it was clear he wasn’t going to leave her alone. Her tone was so frosty, he almost shivered.

“I just want to talk to you for a minute. Sheesh. Since when was that a crime?”

“It depends on what you want to talk about,” she said suspiciously.

“Us,” he said immediately. “Listen, be straight with me — do you want to try and fix this problem?”

There was a long, uncomfortable pause — *too* long, in Marty’s eyes. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “I suppose so... but... what are you suggesting? That we have it out here, right now?” She snorted softly. “Wonderful place to do it, with a balcony....”

“No,” Marty said. “Listen, the other me said that he and his Jennifer could help us out, be there to make sure we don’t rip each other’s throats out trying to talk this out.”

“Really? And since when are our personal problems any of their business?”

“Since I got slugged in the jaw by Marty ‘cause his daughter got wind we were fighting and thought it was her own parents.” At this news she turned to look at him, clearly surprised, but he wasn’t about to buy that. “Aw, c’mon, you knew that was gonna happen. He said he ran into you on the way out to the lab yesterday — and thanks for the heads up about that, Jen.”

“I didn’t realize he was that ticked off,” Jennifer said, the closest she might get to apologizing, then.

“Yeah, right. Anyway, I want to do this, Jen. We gotta figure out some way to solve this — one way or another. We should try it.”

“So why are you even bothering to ask me about it? It’s clear you think you’ve got it all figured out without my help.”

Marty took a deep breath and told himself not to snap back. “Because the other Jen said she’ll do it only if you’re cool with her being there. It didn’t take a psychic to know you didn’t like her.”

“And even a blind person could tell you were interested in her,” Jennifer said, frowning hard. “Your eyes were practically falling out of your head. Maybe that’s why your counterpart slugged you, ‘cause you were checking out his wife!”

“Oh, great, so we’re gonna go through *that* again! Well at least she didn’t want to change her name to something more *professional* because she was embarrassed to be married to someone who wasn’t as successful as she was!”

Jennifer’s eyes flashed as she stood. “Let me through,” she said through clenched teeth, her husband still standing and blocking the exit.

“Why? So you can run away and not deal with this again? I’m sick of that game, Jen! Something’s gotta give, and... I just hope it’s not our marriage.”

She stared at him hard for a long moment, biting her lower lip and clearly dealing with some sort of inner turmoil. “Fine,” she said, in a rather flat, dead voice. “Fine, tell the other Marty fine, I don’t care if he brings his Jennifer along to mediate or whatever you had in mind. I just don’t care. Now let me through, okay? You got what you wanted!”

Marty stepped aside and she brushed past him, still clearly very angry. He sighed as he both saw and heard her slam the door at the bottom of the stairs and then stalk off. "Oh man, oh man," he murmured miserably. His other self and his wife were going to have their hands full, definitely, when it came time to really talk out the problems that were still so clearly prevalent. He knew it was going to get worse before it got better — and that was going to be pretty damned bad.

"I don't need any more problems," Marty muttered as he headed for the stairs. "Doc, you're on your own."

## Chapter Sixteen

Since things appeared to be working out so spectacularly poorly on all fronts — visiting Jules and Verne had decided that, despite circumstances, there was no way in hell they were going to go out to the barn to try to help their father, knowing that when his mood was black, he could be a very unsympathetic taskmaster — shortly after the younger Marty reported his failure to get through to Doc, local Emily came up with an intriguing idea. If their fathers both knew that the repair of the broken train was imperative, and that they were both needed to do it in as timely a fashion as possible, maybe the best way of getting them to at least start working together again would be for everyone else to essentially disappear.

“We could all go to the movies or something,” she suggested to her older brothers, both versions of them. “That way, we’d be out of the house for a few hours, and if no one else helps out with fixing the machine, one of ‘em will *have* to give so at least the two of ‘em can go back to working on it again.”

Her eldest brother snorted. “And how the heck are we supposed to get away with that?” he wanted to know. “Are we supposed to tell people Verne and I have long lost twins? They’re not gonna buy that, and it might just make trouble for Dad....”

“Maybe Dad *needs* a little trouble,” his brother remarked drolly. “Serve him right after the mess he’s made....”

Jules elbowed him soundly, but Verne’s extradimensional avatar liked the idea. “It shouldn’t be that tough,” he said, his mind racing through the interesting possibilities. “We studied a lot of really cool costume and make-up techniques in my drama class this last year, and it wouldn’t take that much to make us look just enough different so we could tell people we’re cousins or something. There’re tons of things you can buy at any drug store to do it — bronzing powders, spray-in haircolors, stuff like that, and just making sure we dress different will go a long way toward making people think they’re seeing someone else. I think it’d be kinda fun. I’d be willing to do it, if it’ll push our dads into settling things enough so we can go home again.”

His Jules looked at his brother with a sudden surge of respect, seeing for the first time that he was indeed serious about his interest in the theater, and that it could be useful in unexpected ways. “I’d be willing to play along, if it’ll help resolve the situation. And the idea of going to a movie isn’t bad, since we’d be sitting in the dark for several hours, where no one would see us. But if we’re going to take Emmy and your little brother along, it shouldn’t be anything too intense, and I don’t think I could stomach sitting through some Disney pabulum....”

His double grinned. “They’re getting a little less saccharine, these days,” he had to admit, “though I’ve got a better idea: How would you guys like to see *Star Wars: Episode II* eight years before anyone else in your world...?”

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When the older kids took their plan to their mothers — Chris and little Emily were back in the rec room, this time making artistic masterpieces with supplies Clara had provided; Jennifer had disappeared again, and her husband had, supposedly, gone back sleep — both of them saw merit to the idea. “It might just work,” local Clara agreed, “especially if we can deprive the Emmett out in the barn of our Marty’s assistance. From what I saw of the train, he *has* to know it’s not possible for him to fix it on his own, no matter how angry he might be.”

“But how can we do that without making it obvious to Emmett that that’s what we’re doing?” her double wondered. “It’s not going to improve his mood if we simply *tell* Marty to stop helping him.”

“No, I doubt it will — but I’ve heard both of our husbands insist that proper rest and nutrition are essential if this project is to be done quickly and without mistakes. Unless he wants to contradict himself, he won’t be able to argue with it if we tell Marty to come into the house for lunch.”

“True, and I’m almost willing to guarantee that Emmett won’t come with him. If your Marty has some emergency come up at home and all the children leave, that might provide us with an opportunity to confront both of them without anyone else around to listen or interfere.”

“Yes, although this time, I think it might be best if we took an... indirect approach. It’s an excellent idea,” she told their gathered children. “Let’s get to work on it right away.”

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While visiting Jules perused the morning newspaper to find the most convenient show times for the suggested movie, his counterpart took visiting Verne to a couple of stores only a few miles up the highway, where he could find the various items needed to facilitate their disguises. Local Verne and his mother went rooting around the boxes full of castoff clothes that were waiting for delivery to some local charity, in search of things that would help casual observers believe that the other dimensional “twins” were not who they seemed to be. The other Clara and older Emily helped the kids clean up the mess they were making with watercolors and then had them clean up themselves and get changed and ready to go to the movies. Little Emily was excited by the prospect of seeing yet another new Star Wars movie, since one of the DVDs she and Chris had watched that morning had been Episode I, which was completely new to her. When those gone to the store returned, the four older boys went off to take care of the “disguises” while their mothers set about preparing lunch and local Emily got the somewhat annoying task of watching the kids again, to make sure they didn’t get messed up before their outing to the theater.

When the boys came down just before lunch was ready, it was almost impossible to tell that they were two sets of near-identical “twins” and not four different people. The essence of disguise, visiting Verne had told the others, was in misdirection, making people look at things to guide them away from noticing the usual clues that revealed a person’s identity. To that end, he’d temporarily darkened and restyled his hair, put on fake clear-lensed glasses, and selected clothes that would produce the image of a very preppie teenager — courtesy of some cast-offs tossed aside after local Jules had taken tennis lessons three years before, wanting to improve his coordination, which had gotten a bit messed up following a sudden and serious growth spurt. His brother was even more remarkably unlike his normal self, his buttoned-down clothes exchanged for beach-bum attire — achieved through a combination of cut-off shorts, sandals, and one of local Emmett’s old colorful shirts that was slightly too big on him. Temporary spray-in hair color had given him the proper blond streaks of someone who spends their summer on the beach, as skillfully applied skin bronzer gave him a perfect, if fake, tan. Sunglasses perched atop his head provided the appropriate finishing touch, and even their mothers had to agree they were quite adequate disguises.

“If we weren’t doing this to help Dad, I might’ve had second thoughts,” beach-bum Jules admitted, “but I think it might actually be an interesting experience.”

“Sure makes you look a lot more human,” his brother teased, not at all surprised when the remark was thrown back at him. “Wait until you get a look at what’s in town, though,” he added, not responding to the counter-dig. “I was beginning to think this place isn’t like our Hill Valley at all, but I was wrong. Once you get back inside the city limits, it’s almost exactly the same, just changed the way places change over eight years. I knew where everything was in the stores we went to, ‘cause I’ve been there before. I even knew a couple of the clerks. Kinda cool.”

“Just remember to be careful,” his mother warned him. “Things like this may be fun, but it’s still a serious situation, and we don’t want to jeopardize any part of this world through carelessness.”

“We’ll be careful, Mom,” her Jules vowed solemnly. “Do you think you’ll be able to get Dad and his double talking again?”

She sighed. “I hope so.” She turned to her own counterpart. “Well, I suppose it’s time to get things started. Call the others for lunch, and I’ll fetch Emily and Chris. Better that they not be tempted to stuff themselves on junk food at the movies.”

Much to everyone’s surprise, both Docs actually responded to the summons, doubtless because neither of them had eaten breakfast and were finally beginning to feel the lack of nourishment. When they arrived at almost the same moment, nearly colliding as one entered from the side door and the other from the stairs to the upper level, they noted each other’s presence with withering glares, then went out of their way to keep their distance from one another. They said nothing to each other, and when they did speak to anyone, it was terse to the point of near rudeness. That they were both still tremendously angry could not be missed; even Chris and Emily picked up on it, and were concerned.

As the uncomfortable meal neared its end, local Clara finally decided it was time to speak up. “Oh, by the way, Emmett, all the children are going off to a movie this afternoon. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve given Jules permission to use the van to drive them.”

Emmett, oddly, was not the one to respond; Doc spoke first. “You can’t send all of them some place as public as that, together. Someone will notice....”

“Not very likely, dear,” his own wife pointed out, “since you obviously haven’t noticed a thing, sitting at the same table with them, and you’re their own father.”

Only then did those who had not been in on the plot really see how the appearances of the two visiting teenagers had been changed. Both Marty’s smiled crookedly. “Not bad,” the visiting musician approved. “Looks like those theater classes paid off, huh, Verne?”

“It’s pretty cool,” his counterpart agreed. “Had me fooled. I was gonna ask which of your friends had come to visit.” His eyes slipped back to the otherside inventor. “Guess it’s just you and me out workin’ on the railroad, then, Doc....”

“I’m afraid not, Marty,” local Clara said with an apologetic sigh. “Jennifer called while you were out, and when I mentioned your plans to help mediate your counterparts’ difficulties this evening, she reminded me that there was an ulterior motive behind your parents’ invitation to take the children to dinner. Your mother was planning to spring it on you as a surprise, but she’d arranged to take you and Jennifer as well, as a special birthday dinner for you, since she and George won’t be in town this weekend.”

That was the truth, not a conveniently made-up excuse. Marty grimaced. “I should’ve known she’d pull something like that. Mom loves surprises, and Jen loves helping her pull ‘em off. But I think this is more important....”

“No, Marty,” Jennifer said, her reaction something of a surprise even to herself. “Don’t disappoint your mother. I know how much she loves to do this kind of thing, too. We’ll still be here tomorrow, and there’s time enough for it then.”

“That’s very gracious of you, Jennifer,” their hostess approved. She turned back to her own Marty. “Your Jennifer actually called to ask if I could send you home after lunch. Something about a frantic call from one of your clients in Los Angeles, problems with studio arrangements for a recording session next week. She has all the details, and told them you’d call back this afternoon.”

Marty sighed, nodding. “Yeah, and if it’s who I think it is, I’ll be on the phone all afternoon, too. Thanks for taking the message.”

“So we’re just abandoning the project to get back home?” Doc asked, both his expression and his tone of voice showing suppressed irritation.

His counterpart was very deliberately — and even more irritatingly — placid. “No, you’ll just have to take care of it yourself for a while. Marty has a life of his own to deal with, after all.”

If looks could’ve melted steel, Emmett might’ve been a puddle after being assaulted by the glare his counterpart turned on him, but at the moment, his own stubbornness exceeded even the hardness of tempered metal. “That’s a totally irresponsible attitude...!”

Emmett shrugged diffidently, his calm demeanor clearly intended to be aggravating. “Just another part of my totally irresponsible life, I guess.”

“This isn’t a joke,” his counterpart snapped back. “Lives are at stake!”

“Not mine, and since you made it very plain that you don’t approve of it, I don’t see any particular reason why I need to be involved with this. You don’t like my methods, you don’t like what I’ve done with my life, so I’m bowing out and letting you do things your way.”

“But it’ll take *months* for me to finish this on my own...!”

He shrugged again. “Then it takes months. Be glad I’m letting you use my supplies and equipment and facilities. You know what needs to be done — and by the reasoning you gave me earlier, I should’ve slammed the door in your faces, told you to go away, and left you to your own devices the minute you showed up on my back porch.

Don't know too much about the future, don't interfere, don't *do* anything. So I'm letting you handle things by *your* rules. I'm not doing anything."

Doc fumed. "Talk about being a hypocrite! I thought *you're* the out-of-control workaholic, can't tear himself away from the lab..."

Emmett's answering glare was more deadly than the one he'd shrugged off earlier. "Don't push it," he warned in a low and lethal voice, "or I may change my mind about letting you use *my* time machines when you need them."

The comment shocked everyone around the table who understood the greater implications; it even shocked Chris and Emily, who didn't quite, but knew that this meant things were going *very* badly between their fathers. "Emmett, you know you wouldn't do that!" local Clara said sternly, chastising her husband for even thinking such a thing.

"Don't be so sure of it," he answered, then pushed away from the table and stood up. "I have other things to take care of upstairs. Let me know if he burns down the barn."

Before anyone could say a word, he was gone. Visiting Clara turned to her own husband and would've said something, had he not also risen. "There's a lot of work to be done," he said flatly, disdaining the half-eaten remains of his meal. "If he decides to grow up and stop behaving like a child, tell him to come and unlock the lab's computers. At least with them, if I have to work alone, I'll be able to get things done more quickly."

When he was gone, everyone looked at each other, then unleashed a collective sigh. Before any of the elder folk said a word, Clara sent Chris and little Emily into the rec room to play games until it was time to go. The uneasy kids were more than happy to comply.

"Okay, now I think I can see what happened," visiting Marty said once the youngsters were out of the room, his own sigh almost a moan. "After hearing them talk about their lives and everything that's different in 'em, there's gotta be a *huge* sticking point over being an inventor. Our Doc doesn't like the idea of people knowing too much about the future and using it for personal gain...."

"Neither does ours," his counterpart interrupted in his mentor's defense.

"I never said he did. But there've been times I think our Doc's kinda stuck in place with his life 'cause he *does* know about the future, and he's gotten afraid of doing anything that *might* be influenced by it, when it comes to being a scientist and an inventor."

"Dad used to be like that," the undisguised Verne said, "but that was a long time ago. Back in 1994, he had to do *something* or we would've lost the house and everything else, but he *still* was afraid to look into the future to see if something that might pay off really *was* his idea, not something he accidentally stole. When he didn't really have any other choice, he looked, and when he found out there *was* something he could do, something that'd save us from being tossed out onto the streets, he went and did it. Dad says that just because you saw something in future doesn't mean it's set in stone and can't be changed, but it also doesn't mean that if you see something good that can happen, you have to ignore it just because it's big and important, like him discovering how to make fusion work. It'd be worse to rip off things the way Biff did when he stole that almanac, using information about the future to make money without taking any personal chances."

Visiting Clara's intake of breath was sharp. "Which is almost exactly what my Emmett's been doing to support our family." She closed her eyes and winced. "Yes, suddenly the whole thing is very clear. I've tried to broach the question of how ethical this is with Emmett before, and he's always put me off by saying he's not doing this for personal gain, he's doing it for us, for me and the children. But it's still the same thing, when all's said and done, we're the ones benefitting from it and no one else. I've suspected for a long time that it weighs rather heavily on his conscience — or would, if he'd admit it to himself. If his counterpart made that point all too plainly, it wouldn't sit well with him, not at all. It's easier to live with something you know in your heart is wrong if you simply never think about it."

"And I'm sure my Emmett didn't care one bit for having his recent over-occupation with work pointed out to him rather bluntly by another version of himself," local Clara added with her own deep sigh. "I suppose this just proves

that the person who knows how to hurt you the most is yourself, because you can't escape the truth when it's coming from your own lips."

"So what do we do now?" local Marty wondered. "Stick with the plan?"

The Claras glanced at each other, then nodded as one. "Yes, I think so," the Clara of this dimension said. "An afternoon away from the pressures of all these ugly situations would do everyone a world of good. And I may have a way for us to handle our pigheaded husbands, but I believe it'll work best if there's no possibility of interruption from other people."

"So do you want Marty and me to leave, too?" Jennifer asked, uncomfortable with the idea.

"We don't have to go anywhere alone, Jen," her spouse pointed out as inoffensively as he knew how. "We can go to the movies with the kids. We don't have to talk, don't even have to sit together — but maybe it'd help. We went to see *Return of the Jedi* on one of our first dates, remember?"

She did, and couldn't stop the fond memories that welled up at the reminder. There hadn't been any problems, back then, no egos and work strains and other stresses coming between them, only affection and laughter and the sense that they belonged together, even though they weren't officially going steady at the time. Perhaps something to remind them both of how wonderful they could be together wouldn't be such a bad thing.... "I guess that'd be all right, then, as long as you promise not to say or do anything to start us fighting again."

Marty was relieved to have gotten even that small concession. "I will if you will. Truce?"

She hesitated, but after a few moments of internal battle, she nodded. "Truce."

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While their elders were talking about what had just happened over lunch, Chris and Emily started up the game computer, but didn't actually play. "This ain't good," Emily finally said after they'd just sat there on the couch with the controllers in hand, doing nothing for the better part of a minute. "I've never seen Daddy so mad...."

"Me, neither," Chris said with a nod. "He gets ticked sometimes when we do stupid things, or when dumb people treat him or us bad, but not really *mad* like this. What'd your Dad do t'get him so mad?"

She frowned. "My Dad didn't do anythin'!" she insisted. "Daddy doesn't do things t'get people mad!"

"Well, neither does my Dad! But they're *both* mad, an' it ain't at us! They're yellin' at each other!"

That was very true; Emily had just seen it with her own eyes. She frowned, troubled. "I know. I guess somethin' bad musta happened that we didn't see. My Daddy really only gets cranky like this when he's real tired an' upset 'bout somethin'. Maybe crashin' the train an' gettin' it stuck down in that canyon's what did it."

"Yeah, that sounds pretty bad. If it's too busted up to fix, maybe they gotta build a new one."

The blue eyes went round. "That *could* take a long time, if Daddy's gotta do it alone. Mommy says it took ten *years* for him to make the train. That's older'n me!"

Chris nodded sagely, aware of his own similar family history. "Yeah, I wouldn't wanna get stuck anywhere for that long. I'd wanna go home a lot sooner."

"Doesn't your Daddy have a train, too?" she wondered, seeming to recall some mention of this in their earlier conversations. "Can't he just give it to my Daddy an' let us borrow it to go home?"

But Chris shook his head. "Nope, doesn't work that way, 'cause you come from 'nother d'mension."

"What's that?"



“A place that’s kinda the same as home, but not — like here. Your family looks like mine — most of ‘em, anyway — but they’re not the same. An’ we don’t live in the same house, an’ you don’t got a brother like me.”

“I’m gonna,” she said confidently. “Mommy’s gonna have a baby.”

“But he might not be exactly like me. That’s diff’rent d’mensions. You gotta have your *own* machine to get back where you belong. Marty found that out a couple years ago.”

“Oh.” She thought hard, her little face screwing up in the most intense look of concentration a six-year-old can muster. “So if your Daddy an’ my Daddy are yellin’ at each other, it’s ‘cause they’re all worried an’ upset, right?”

“I think so,” Chris confirmed, having been pondering that matter himself. “That’s when my Dad usually gets most upset, when he’s worried, or when we did somethin’ really bad. Since nobody did anythin’ really bad, it’s gotta be ‘cause he’s all worried that they can’t build a new machine fast enough.”

Emily digested that bit of information. “Then they need help,” she said logically.

Chris nodded. “Yeah, they need help, lots of help.”

“But they’re not helpin’ each other ‘cause they’re mad.”

“Nope.”

“So we gotta make ‘em unmad.”

“Yeah. But how?”

They sat together, thinking furiously, until Emily came up with an idea. “Hey, I know! I know a lotta stuff ‘bout c’mputers. You do, too, don’tcha?”

“Oh, yeah, I usedta get in trouble all the time ‘cause I was messin’ things up in everyone else’s, until Dad found ways of encryptin’ stuff so I couldn’t hack my way in. I’ve almost got that figured out, too, but it’s a lot tougher’n the stuff he usedta use.”

“Did your dad ever let you play around with the parts for makin’ c’mputers? Mine usedta let me play with old chips an’ boards an’ things, let me see how they look inside, an’ what everythin’ is.”

Again, Chris nodded. “Sure, he told me if I couldn’t keep my hands off ‘em, I should learn how they really work. But how’s this gonna help make it easier for our dads to build a new machine to get you guys back home?”

“Well, if our train got all busted up an’ can’t fly anymore, that doesn’t mean it’s *all* broken, does it? Daddy has lotsa old c’mputers an’ things that he keeps around so he c’n take ‘em apart an’ use the pieces that’re still good. What if we went out to the busted train an’ got all the c’mputer parts we could find that aren’t broken an’ brought ‘em back? If they don’t hafta make new ones, that’d make buildin’ a new M’chine easier, wouldn’t it?”

Chris considered the idea, and liked what he saw. “Yeah, it would. An’ even if they went an’ got some things already, I’ll betcha they didn’t find ‘em all. Maybe if we find more, that’ll make our dads stop worryin’ so much, an’ they won’t be so cranky with each other.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinkin’. I’m pretty sure I r’member where the train came down, in that canyon we hiked near yesterday. I can hike out that far an’ carry lotsa stuff back,” she added confidently.

“So can I,” he agreed, “an’ I know the whole place real well. But we gotta go by ourselves, an’ we can’t go now. We’re s’posedta go to the movies with everyone else, an’ if we don’t go, Mom’ll want to keep an eye on us, an’ we won’t be able t’sneak off.”

That reality caused Emily’s hopes to deflate a little. “No, I guess not, an’ I really do wanna see the movie. If they’re still mad when we get back, can we do it tonight?”

“Not if it’s rainin’. The canyon gets bad floods when it rains, an’ I don’t wanna get drowned or anythin’.”

The girl shivered at the very thought. “Me neither. Then maybe we can sneak off tomorrow mornin’, if it’s not rainin’. We’ve been up b’fore everyone else, anyway, an’ we could go real quick an’ come back with the stuff an’ make my Daddy and your Daddy stop worryin’ an’ bein’ mad b’fore anyone else even gets up.”

Chris liked the plan. “So if our dads’re still mad when we get home, tomorrow mornin’, we’ll go find your busted train, get lotsa stuff from it to help ‘em build a new machine real fast, an’ make everybody happy. Okay?”

“Okay,” Emily agreed readily, and the pact was sealed.

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After Marty had headed home and all the others piled into the van for the trip to the movies, the two Claras stood on the front porch, watching the van disappear into the wooded area of the private drive, then sighed. “Well, it looks like we have our work cut out for us,” the local teacher declared. “Do you think they’ll be ready to listen to us?”

Her visiting counterpart shrugged. “If they aren’t, we do have the big gun to pull out: the baby. I can’t imagine either of them will be obstinate enough to ignore that kind of a risk, no matter how childish they want to behave.”

“Very true. Good luck, then.”

“And to you.”

With that, they headed off — but in what might have been unexpected directions. Local Clara started toward the barn, intent on speaking with her husband’s visiting avatar, while her counterpart went inside and upstairs, prepared to confront this world’s version of her spouse. The latter had less distance to cover, but had already considered her plan of attack. Her counterpart had told her about the unusual door to the study and the various security and communications systems around it. Quite certain the thumbpad door lock would not respond to her touch, she went straight for the intercom button.

“Doctor Brown, might I have a word with you?” she asked, politely but firmly. It was a tone of voice that could either be cajoling or demanding, depending on how the person being addressed chose to take it.

For a moment or three, it appeared that Emmett was not willing to take it all, since the immediate response was silence. Just as she was about to repeat the request, however, an answer came from the intercom’s tiny speaker. “About what?” he asked, which, at the very least was a step in the right direction, an improvement over, “Go away.”

She took a deep breath. “I think you know the answer to that,” she replied as neutrally as possible. “You’re much more familiar with our predicament than any of us, my Emmett included, and for the sake of my family’s lives — both born and unborn — I’d like to talk with you for a few minutes. But not through a closed door.”

This time, the delay in response was much longer. Clara was all but certain that the lack was her answer, and was beginning to contemplate more drastic means — such as blowing the door off its hinges — when she heard soft clinking and pinging sounds within the wall. After a final decisive *click!*, the door unlatched and swung open, ever so slightly. Cautiously, she pushed it to open more widely and peered inside.

When they’d rushed through this room yesterday morning, on their way to hide in the attic, she’d been too tired and harried and worried to take a closer look at the place. Now that she had an opportunity, her mouth opened slightly in wonder. It was an immense room, possibly the largest in the house, though it didn’t have the high ceilings and layered floors of the library directly below. And there was something so distinctly Emmett about it, she would have known it was his *sanctum sanctorum* without any explanation. Her husband’s fondness for vivid color was reflected in the dark red tile of the floor and the sunny yellow paint on the walls — gauche, to some people, but an atmosphere that she felt reflected the energy and life of the person who worked here. The place was crammed with all the things her own husband’s study boasted, and more: computers, shelves full of books and equipment and tools and components and disks and everything else an inventor/scientist would want close at hand. There was an intriguing arrangement of drafting tables near the center of the room and a large worktable between it and the corner alcove where the spiral stairs from the library emerged. Desks and more shelves and an assortment of storage cabinets lined several walls and were tucked between doors and windows. On the left hand wall was a fireplace, though it appeared

seldom-used; near it, a television and various media players had been set up, along with a sofa and a couple of comfortable chairs.

There was an angled wall between the door to the attic and another, shorter wall that held a secured connecting door to local Clara's sewing room. Along it was a large u-shaped arrangement of desks with at least two computers and a big, flat LCD monitor screen mounted on the wall over the bottom portion of the U. Around the monitor, an assortment of framed things had been hung, pictures and diplomas and academic certificates. Some of the photos were quite familiar to Clara, mementoes of their life together in the past; those she didn't immediately recognize nonetheless felt right to her, as if they were a part of life she could have lived, but had experienced a bit differently. The sheer number of diplomas and academic certificates rather startled her. She knew her husband's education was extensive, but it seemed that either his counterpart in this world had spent a much greater portion of his life amassing knowledge, or had done so much more easily than her spouse. Emmett was seated at the desk, trying to work out something on the smaller of the two computers; the surroundings gave her a perfect opening to speak.

"Are you smarter than my husband?" she wondered, looking up at the things on the walls.

Emmett was startled by the question, a reaction she counted on, preferring it to annoyance or anger. When he looked up at her, she could see some of those feelings still strongly written in his face, overlaid with puzzlement. But most strongly, she saw stress and exhaustion, someone who has been pushing himself too hard for too long, only to have another crisis flung upon him just when he was about to surrender to his need for rest. "What makes you think that?" he asked, his words clipped but more perplexed than irritated.

Despite what she had heard during lunch, she felt a strong sympathy for him, knowing she was reacting to him as she might to her own husband. In hopes that this talk might go where she wanted and not end too soon, she tried not to let that show too much, and shrugged. "Well, for one thing, my Emmett apparently hasn't devoted quite as much of his life to advanced education, and there *is* the matter of your discovery of fusion. Marty — ours, primarily — thinks it might be a sore spot between the two of you, and since so many other things about us are different, if this were, too, it would explain very neatly why you were able to unlock the secrets of fusion as a power source and my husband wasn't."

Emmett grimaced faintly, leaning back from the computer to look up at the documents on the wall, which he hardly ever paid any mind. "I don't think so," he admitted, "but that's just an opinion, not anything based on factual evidence. Maybe we are different, that way. Maybe it's just easier for me than it is for him. I don't know. But whatever he says and thinks, I did *not* steal my design for a fusion reactor from the future! If there was time for me to sit down and show him, I *can* prove it. In fact, I *had* to prove it in the courts, because other scientists who'd been working on the same thing and were close to finding another method of achieving it accused me of stealing from them, because I came in out of the blue with research they'd never heard of, while a fair amount of their work had been publicized right along. It really *is* my invention, and though it was nice to go to the future and see proof that it could work before I revealed my findings, it was only verification. It didn't influence me at all."

Clara nodded her comprehension while he spoke, wanting to appear accepting, not doubtful. "I believe you," she said, truly meaning it. "I've always known my Emmett has it in him to do whatever he wants, if he'll only apply himself to it. I don't know why he's so frightened when it comes to confronting his own future, but I do know he *is* frightened of it."

Emmett snorted. "Probably for the same reasons I was: fear of finding out you're going to be a complete failure."

"Perhaps so. He may not want to see the evidence you have, but would you mind showing it to me? It may not help right at the moment, given his current state of mind, but sooner or later, he'll calm down and listen to reason, and when he's ready to listen, I want to be able to tell him as much of the truth as possible. Even if I can't tell him everything, he'll take hearing it first from me better, I should think."

The local inventor had somewhat mixed feelings, but he couldn't argue with her final statement. He got up and went to a shelf near the fireplace, from which he extracted a large scrapbook full of news clippings. He brought it back to the desk, gestured for her to take the seat he had just vacated as he pushed aside some of the clutter on one part of the work surface, then opened the heavy book to a specific section. "There are other proofs beside this," he explained, "all the full-scale research documentation, and records from my time machine's shielded data files that

show even more solid evidence that I didn't tamper with the time line when I did what I was supposed to do. I couldn't show *that* in court, of course, but this is as good a place as any to start."

Clara agreed. What the book contained was the recorded history of Emmett's involvement with the discovery and implementation of fusion power, beginning with his early theoretical drafts, scribbled and typed and drawn and written on age-yellowed paper clearly older than eight years, his initial presentation of the concept to the man who would later become his business partner, its first announcement to the world as a whole, the beginnings of production, and the various suits and legal troubles aimed against him by others angered by the fact he beat them to it, and did a better job of it. While she skimmed through several of the more legalistically complex articles, she sighed softly, but didn't look up. "Yes, I can see this wasn't as simple as taking the idea away from someone else. You would've needed to reveal the discovery to the world fifty years ago in order to avoid such complications. And if you were going to do that, why not do it much earlier, when it wouldn't've presented so many difficulties?"

"Precisely!" Emmett said, pleased that she understood. "If I'd wanted to steal the idea and make it look as if it had been mine when it wasn't, I would've gone back and somehow given it to myself in... oh, the early '60s. It certainly would've made finishing the time machine easier, though it would've done disastrous things to history as I knew it, and quite possibly destroyed the continuum. This wasn't a casual theft — it couldn't be, or I would never have been able to get away with. I'm glad you understand that."

"I do, and I'll do my best to make sure my Emmett does, too — once he's cooled off a bit." She calmly flipped to another page in the book. "I also understand that disagreements as intense as what we saw of the bickering between you isn't completely one-sided. By any chance, did you imply that he was being unethical, supporting our family with income gained off of investments he made in companies he chose because he knew from future knowledge that they'd be profitable?"

The inventor cleared his throat, rather uneasily. "Ah... no," he confessed. "I didn't imply it. I said it, straight out."

"I thought as much." She closed the book and looked up at their host. "Doctor Brown — Emmett, if I may — I understand that your life and my husband's life have many similarities and many differences, more than he actually realizes, at the moment. Since I'm not allowed to participate in helping repair the time machine, I've spent a good deal of time looking at all the detailed records your wife's collected concerning your family history, both recent and ancestral. Even though my Emmett is actually a few years older than you, you've had some very life-altering experiences he hasn't. That may be what makes you... if not more intelligent, more wise in some ways than he is. Not that you're behaving that way right now," she added with a small sniff. "Marty told us you'd locked down all the computers in your lab before coming back to the house and leaving my husband to fend for himself. If that was deliberate, it was quite childish."

Emmett winced. "It wasn't deliberate, not at the time I did it," he said apologetically. "Just force of habit. I've had some problems with people trying to steal my ideas, and when I leave a terminal for a few minutes, I lock it down to make sure no one can get into it while I'm away. I wasn't expecting to leave when I did that. And the way I have things set up out in the lab, when I'm working alone, all the computers are linked to a master password. Lock one, and you lock 'em all. I only turn that off when I know I'm going to be working with other people — which I wasn't, last night."

She nodded. "Yes, I see. But did you realize you'd left him locked out *after* you came here?"

He hesitated before confirming it. "Yes. After I'd calmed down enough to concentrate on something besides being angry, I went back to work on the project that kept me up all night. That computer—" He indicated the one with the wall-mounted monitor at the main desk. "—is the master for the entire system, both here in the house and out in the lab. I can read the status of any other computer on the network from here, and operate any of 'em remotely, too. I noticed I'd locked down every computer in the barn when I linked to the one I'd been using in my lab. Didn't stop me from getting the data I needed, and I suppose I was feeling immature enough to leave things that way."

She clicked her tongue. "Immature is certainly the correct word. If you can't bring yourself to work with my husband right now, I'll understand it, but is it necessary to make things more difficult for him? It's only bound to make him more angry and impossible to live with."

The inventor appeared genuinely contrite. "I suppose it would. I know how I react when I'm faced with frustrations like that and I'm in the middle of doing something very important. I'll correct the situation, of course."

"Thank you," she said graciously, moving away from the desk to allow him access to the larger computer. While he began networking to the lab computers to unlock them, Clara watched him, again struck by how very tired he looked. "I was going to ask if you're willing to go back to helping my husband work on the repairs, but for now, I suspect getting some rest might be a better idea. You didn't sleep at all last night, did you?"

He shook his head, pausing in his task to rub his eyes. "No, but that was a mistake, not intentional. I don't know what, if anything, he told you, but I was trying to find a way to protect at least you from the harmful effects of being in another dimension, so you and the baby would be safe without needing to risk multiple jumps through n-dimensional space. I just lost track of the time."

"Did it work?" she asked, curious in spite of herself.

"No," he sighed. "I'm closer than I was before, but not close enough. It's frustrating, knowing the answer is somehow sitting right in front of you, but you can't see it. Between that and losing track of the time, I guess my temper was getting a lot shorter than I realized. I know your husband doesn't understand my situation, but I went through over a year of needing to prove that I hadn't stolen the idea for the fusion reactor to people whose only motivations were wounded pride and greed. I never expected I'd need to justify it to another version of myself. The one Marty brought home from another dimension hadn't invented fusion either, but he at least seemed pleased by the notion he could have done it. I'm afraid I don't understand your husband's obstinacy on the subject."

Clara's sigh was wistfully sad. "Possibly because of things you don't completely understand about his situation. Emmett's very determined that none of us should suffer for his mistakes, and I believe he's dreadfully afraid that if he were to somehow achieve any degree of notoriety because of something he invented, it would bring attention and scrutiny and busybodies who would eventually discover his creation of a time machine, and bring ruin on us all. It's happened at least once that I know of, and as far as I'm aware, in that particular circumstance, Emmett never did achieve any significant professional success or public fame."

The local inventor made a soft sound that was uninterpretable. "I suppose that might make someone unwilling to even attempt it. But I did, and it didn't destroy the world, or my family."

"No indeed," she agreed. "And that's part of the problem, I think. If we'd come to another dimension where our counterparts were much the same as us or even less successful, that would have been easier to accept. I don't believe any of us ever expected that a place like this might exist, even in another dimension."

Emmett looked up at her, his expression skeptical, his purpose for being at the computer temporarily forgotten. "It's not *that* different," he pointed out. "Yes, I own a big house and have money and my own company, but we're still the same people — rather remarkably so, given how much of our past and even our ancestors appear to be different."

"And I believe that might be an even larger part of the problem. You're very much alike at heart, yet you did all this on your own, without depending on certain knowledge of the future to do it. What we have at home *relies* on it, because Emmett's afraid to claim any idea as being his own, simply because he saw the future. So he's trapped himself in an ethical... what's the phrase? Catch-22. On one hand, he won't risk *being* an inventor because of what he *might* have seen or learned in the future, and on the other hand, he's using *definite* knowledge of the future to support our family. He's caught himself between a rock and a hard place, and I know he's been aware of it for some time. When we recently encouraged him to enter a local inventor's competition, we were all rather surprised by how adamantly he's refused to participate. Whenever someone brings it up, he gets quite churlish and says he doesn't want to do it and doesn't want to talk about it — and now, I believe I can see why. Every time he tells us that he can't do it because he won't risk stealing from the future, his conscience has probably been reminding him that he's been doing that very thing for almost ten years, hiding it under the justification that doing it to support his wife and children somehow makes it acceptable. But it doesn't, and he knows it. And if you said as much to him, point-blank, it must've pushed some kind of panic button inside him. He can't lie about it to himself, anymore. He's expressing it by being mad at you and everyone else, but I have a feeling that not so deep down, it's himself he's angriest with. He's reached the end of that very narrow road he's been walking on, and he may not know which way to turn to avoid the precipice straight ahead."

Emmett listened quietly, able to understand how this might've happened to his counterpart. He'd been in plenty of similar situations ever since his discovery of time travel, and had walked a few ethical tightropes of his own, but he'd been lucky enough to get off before the rope ended or broke. The events he'd needed to live through in order to avoid those uncomfortable disasters had often been unpleasant, but they had been educational. Lacking them... well, he knew what might've happened. "There but for the grace of God go I," he said softly, to himself rather than his guest.

But Clara heard, and nodded. "Yes, I think so. And I suspect that's why he's overreacting so dreadfully. It's not seeing all the physical and monetary aspects of success that would be bothersome, but the fact that by taking the chance he's refused to take, you found one thing that he's wanted very much but has eluded him for so long: acceptance. Not just by family and a few friends, but professional acceptance. He wants it as much as we want it for him, but somewhere along the line, he must've convinced himself that it could never happen for him in more than very minor ways. Seeing all of this — especially your partner and the evidence that you've been accepted in ways he hasn't imagined — has undoubtedly been a wake-up call to him, only one as sudden and harsh as the alarms Emily accidentally set off yesterday morning. I think it's been too much for him to assimilate so quickly, and when you throw in stress and exhaustion and all the worries about the baby and the potentially deadly effects of simply *being* here...."

"A perfect recipe for a very unpleasant explosion," Emmett concluded. "I see what you mean. I think you understand your husband very well — possibly even better than he understands himself. Sometimes, I know my Clara does."

She smiled. "Yes, well, when you have husbands as... interesting as we do, the attempt to comprehend what makes them tick can be a full-time occupation — and a necessary self-defense. Now, if you don't mind, there's one question I'd like to ask *you*, since most of what I know of you thus far has been second-hand, things I've heard from your family and seen in your wife's journals."

"I suppose that's only fair, since I was partially responsible for causing the situation we're in right at the moment."

"I can understand why my Emmett went ballistic, as the children and Marty like to put it. I can also understand your frustration over his refusal to accept that what you've done with your life has been your own honest effort. And if he tried to defend his own indefensible position by pointing out your recent over-dedication to work as a counter-flaw, I can even see why you might feel as if you'd rather not have to work with him, until cooler heads prevail. But you've dealt with that same disbelief before, have absolute proof that the work is yours, honest and above board, and your wife tells me that she and your family have been trying to break you of your work obsession for some time, now. Was hearing it from another version of yourself the straw that broke the camel's back, or was there something more that my husband did that made you so angry?"

Emmett was quiet for a long time, looking down at the computer keyboard on which his hands were resting, scrutinizing every letter and symbol before he finally answered. "It was really just the straw that broke the camel's back, I guess, though when he said what he said and I came back here to sulk, I finally started to realize *why* this has been such a problem for so long. I really hadn't made the connection before, but something in the way our... discussion evolved made me see what the real problem is — has been, ever since we went back to visit my parents."

Clara nodded, studying the pictures on the wall over the desk. One was a photo that was certainly no more than three years old, given the ages of the Brown children, gathered with their parents and this Emmett's parents on what seemed to be a happy occasion, taken in the now long-gone mansion that had been their family home. Though their names and backgrounds were different, Everett and Eleanor were nearly identical in appearance to her Emmett's parents, a remarkable coincidence that Clara was quite sure was less coincidental than surface resemblances belied. "Your wife told me about that trip, and I must admit, I do envy her. I've never met any of Emmett's family, and I wish I'd had the chance, for both myself and the children. But from what she told me of them, your relationship with them was rather different than the one my Emmett shared with his parents. What he's told me about them seems... not cold or uncaring, but much too distant for my liking. He says it hasn't affected him badly, but I can't help but think he's fibbing, at the very least. Every child wants to be close to their parents, and there's more to loving a child than providing for them and praising them and occasionally showing affection."

"True, but you can carry it to the opposite extreme as well. My parents almost wanted children *too* badly, and they had so many disappointments, by the time I came along, they came dangerously close to smothering me with attention." He got up and started to pace the open floor between the main desk and the drafting tables. "What saved

me from being a spoiled brat was a combination of having too much energy for them to keep up with me, and being so bright, I ran them ragged, always wanting to know why and what and how, and switching from one interest to another and driving the teachers in school crazy. That's part of why they let me start college so young, I think. If they hadn't, I would've driven both of them to an early grave. Mom wanted me to be a doctor; Pop never came right out and said it, but he wanted me to follow in his footsteps, like a lot of fathers did back then."

The visiting teacher looked at the face of the inventor's father, and saw a combination of affability and tenacity. "Understandable. I believe Emmett's father was the same way."

"Only my father was a businessman, not a doctor. He didn't push the same way Mom did because I think he knew there wasn't much a person with my peculiar gifts could do in the business world, but that didn't stop him from having secret wishes. When we went back to visit them, it was two years after Peter and I founded EPB, and a couple of months after we opened the facilities here in Elmdale. Since the whole point of the trip was to tell my folks what would become of me so I could get over the notion that they considered me a failure, I told 'em about the company and how it would be successful. Pop was tickled pink, but I didn't realize *how* happy that made him until just before we left. He took me aside to talk with me, and admit that though he would've been proud of me no matter what, finding out that I'd managed to do what I wanted with my life and still wound up starting a successful business of my own that suited my abilities and interests better than real estate and investment.... it was like a dream come true for him. Since he knew he'd never have a chance to sit down and talk with me about this again — and he didn't; he died only a few months later — he wanted to give me all the advice he could about how he'd been a success in life, tell me what things to avoid, what things to make sure to do — all stuff he'd never be able to tell my younger self because I wouldn't pay attention and would forget everything ten minutes later unless it was one of my personal interests."

He took a deep breath, then let it out in a long, slow sigh. "One of the things Pop said was that a good employer makes sure to always hire good employees, because they're ultimately extensions of him, but that he has to watch them carefully, too, because if they fail, it's his failure, too. When he said that, I didn't really think anything of it, but after we went back home and I went back to work on the fusion engine and some other projects, it started to get very hard to let go of any of it and let other people do the work. I *thought* I was just being responsible. I started it, so I should be the one to finish it. But the more time went by, the more I carried it way too far. I didn't think I was doing anything wrong; it's not a crime to be responsible, especially not in this day and age."

Clara sniffed softly, understanding both sides of this issue. "But when you start forgetting your responsibility to your own family...."

He nodded. "That was the problem. I wasn't seeing that. Like your husband and his investments, I was doing it for my family, so that justified everything. But it didn't. Because I *wasn't* doing it for them. I know darned well that Peter and I hired competent people; I picked a lot of 'em myself, and I picked 'em because I knew they were good at their jobs and trustworthy individuals. I was doing it because I was still being a fool, hanging onto the notion that I needed to prove myself to my parents, to not disappoint them or ignore the advice Pop had given me — even though he'd been dead for more than fifty years. I've been acting like a child, still looking for mom and dad's approval, not listening to the advice and the feelings of the other people in my life because I still couldn't deal with the idea of failing my parents. It's ridiculous, because I *know* I haven't — and I feel like a complete idiot for letting it go on for nearly three years, to the point of hurting my family and friends."

Now Clara saw his point. "And somehow, whatever was said between you and my husband made you realize that, much too clearly, just as it forced him to confront his own ethical issues."

"Yes," he said, chagrined. "I've been spending most of the last few hours kicking myself for not realizing all of this sooner, being mad at myself and mad at him and mad at life in general for throwing us curves like this when we don't even know it!"

"It happens to all of us, from time to time," she told him sympathetically. "Are you still angry enough that you'd rather not offer any more help in fixing our time machine?"

He stopped pacing and shrugged. "I don't think so. I want to help — that's why I sat up all night in the first place — but right at the moment, I don't think going back to work with him would be a good idea. I don't know what he's feeling, and I know I'm still sufficiently twitchy to take things the wrong way without meaning to, especially if he's still upset with me. I know I said some rather harsh things, and I did mean some of them. I still don't understand how

he can justify investing off knowledge of the future, yet refuse to use his own abilities as an inventor. It doesn't make sense to me."

A small smile tugged at the corners of Clara's lips. "For what it's worth, I suspect it doesn't make sense to him, either — which is why he's so upset. It should, but it doesn't, and he knows very well *why* it doesn't, but he hasn't wanted to admit it. If your wife's able to succeed in her mission as well as I was in mine, I think that by morning, the two of you should be able to have a rational conversation again. But spending the rest of the day apart would probably be an excellent idea — provided you make the peace offering of unlocking the computers in your lab."

Emmett's own smile was crooked, a wry acknowledgment of the fact that, no matter what differences in names and history and other things lay between their two dimensions, in heart and spirit, both Claras were very, very much alike. He leaned across the desk and pressed three keys in quick succession, finishing the job that had been interrupted. "Done. Do you want me to call and tell him things are open, now?"

She considered it, then shook her head. "No, if he hasn't discovered it on his own by the time I see him, I'll tell him. In the meantime, I suggest that what *you* need more than work or finding answers to a problem that may not *have* answers is rest. Perhaps if you'd come back to the house ten minutes after we left the barn last night, as you said you would, none of this would've happened."

The inventor winced, flushing faintly from embarrassment, but he did not deny what he knew to be the truth.

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Local Clara had absolutely no difficulty gaining entrance to the barn, since all the security systems were set to admit her without delay. She was glad that she wouldn't need to force or cajole her way inside to confront her husband's counterpart, but that in itself was a problem all its own. Visiting Doc was decidedly annoyed by the interruptions and the fact that he could do nothing to prevent them. What magnified his irritation, Clara was sure, was the fact that there was really no way he could tell for certain which version of his wife had come to confront him.

"Did you come to nag, too?" he wanted to know before she had a chance to say a word. He was in the upper barn, removing destroyed bits of wiring and other components from the exterior of the train's boiler, leading up to the devastated flux capacitor. "I've really had more than enough of that for one day...."

"From your point of view, no doubt," Clara agreed. "Though I think you might've done better to behave more like my husband and simply lock yourself in a bathroom — or your time machine, if you prefer — to sulk. I'm given to understand that you treated your Marty quite badly when all he wanted to do was help."

The scientist snorted. "He was meddling in matters that are none of his business — the same of which could be said of you."

His attitude did not deter the teacher. "Perhaps in Marty's case, that's true to a certain extent, but I'm sure you know perfectly well his heart was in the right place — and in my case, it *is* my business. Whatever happened between you and my husband has put both of you in an utterly deplorable state of mind that's affecting everyone around you — especially myself and your wife, whose condition isn't being helped one whit by your behavior. That makes it very much my business, whether you like it or not. If you can't set aside whatever grievances the two of you might have long enough to get her and your unborn child back where they belong as quickly as possible, then I'd say you're acting even more childish than Marty and Jennifer. You have no more right to give out advice than he does, if you insist on such behavior."

"And your husband's acting any better? You heard some of the things he said over lunch...."

"Yes, I did — but I don't believe two wrongs make a right. If that's your preferred way of settling arguments, then I must say I'm quite glad I'm not the Clara from your dimension. That's an appalling attitude, especially under such dire circumstances. I'm not making excuses for Emmett's behavior — he and I will discuss this later, I assure you, in private — and I'm not making any excuses for your behavior, either." She clicked her tongue in perfect schoolteacher scolding. "All of this reminds me of children quarreling in the schoolyard, flinging accusations and blame at one another. Honestly, why don't you just threaten to hold your breath until you get things your way?"



Doc frowned down at her, even though she knew there was some truth to what she was saying. And the way she was looking up at him — standing her ground, arms crossed, her entire demeanor not brooking nonsense of any kind — reminded him very much of his own wife, and the plucky spirit for which he'd always admired her. "Then what do you want me to do?" he asked, turning his attention back to the part he was removing. "Pretend nothing happened?"

"That would be preferable to *this*, if it'll hurry you and your family and friends home. But I know you're only human, not an automaton, and things like this hurt and take time to be put behind us. Emotions don't wait for convenient times to interfere with our lives. I'm not asking you to forgive Emmett, but I do believe you both need to resolve this situation — and going into your respective corners to sulk is *not* a resolution. I believe I know what must've happened...."

The visiting inventor shook his head. "I doubt it. We're not at all alike...."

She sniffed. "You're more alike than either of you would care to admit, which is undoubtedly a large part of the problem. Let me take a wild guess: You essentially accused him of being a time traveling thief, stealing the invention of a fusion reactor from the future and claiming it as his own, and he basically called you a coward and a hypocrite for using knowledge of the future to make safe and profitable investments while never taking the personal risk of patenting your own inventions, with the excuse that anything you create might be something stolen from the future, while making investments was excusable as being for the good of your family. Is that anywhere near the mark?"

Doc said nothing while he removed a large piece of charred conduit from the skin of the boiler and threw it to the barn floor. It hit with a loud and echoing *thunk!* that shook the wooden planks. When the reverberations faded, he said, not quite as petulantly as before, "Bullseye. How did you know?"

She sighed, relieved to hear some of the stubborn irritation leave his voice. "As I said, you and my Emmett are more alike than I think either of you can see. Too close to the forest for the trees, as it were. And your wife and I haven't simply been sitting around, making meals, changing beds, and seeing to everyone's comfort. Opportunities to compare notes like this don't come along very often. She's of the opinion that you've never felt quite right about the way in which you've been supporting your family once you moved back to your present, and that as time goes on and the situation continues, you've felt less and less pleased with this solution, and more and more trapped because you don't see another way out. Is she right?"

The scientist said nothing for a minute while he worked on removing the next piece of charred time machine. "Yes," he finally said, his level of annoyance dropping even lower. "I didn't think she knew the actual source of our income...."

Clara's snort was a bit unladylike. "Then you've been underestimating her. I wasn't directly involved with the ways my Emmett attempted to support our family during our first few years here, but I certainly would've gone out of my way to find out if he had no job, we had no other visible means of support, yet the bills were all paid and he even managed to build another time machine. She's not blind, you know."

He winced. "No, I know. I just didn't want her involved with it."

"Yes, which is precisely why she made a point of finding out on her own. It would seem that both you and my husband are rather transparent when it comes to certain things, and she's known you've been concerned about supporting your family from the day you returned to 1985, just as I knew something had gone wrong with Emmett's attempts to keep us financially solvent even before he started discussing the situation with accountants and attorneys in 1994. She cares about you, so she pays attention. Which is why both of us decided this... disagreement needed to be nipped in the bud before it blossomed into something that would hurt all of you."

This time, he grunted softly. "It's already hurt me," he admitted, something he couldn't have told Marty and might not have been willing to tell even his own Clara. "I don't understand why he suddenly went from helping us to actively hindering us. Locking down all the lab computers...!"

She sighed. "You may not believe me, but I suspect that part wasn't intentional. Emmett's had several serious problems with people attempting to break in and steal projects and ideas from him, and ever since he and Peter started the company and he occasionally works around other people, he's gotten into the habit of locking terminals

whenever he walks away from them. I'm given to understand you're rather security conscious as well. Wouldn't you do the same thing?"

Doc saw her point. "I suppose so, though if I was letting someone else use my facilities for an important project, I'd at least make sure they *could*. Or didn't anyone mention this to him?"

"I don't know, to be honest, but it will be. My husband isn't that unreasonable."

"No? Then why did he turn on me without provocation?"

"And are you so certain it was unprovoked?"

"Yes! He said that he'd been working on trying to refine the system for protecting persons visiting from other dimensions, and when I saw the equipment, I asked if he'd borrowed any of the parts from the future. He admitted it...."

Clara tapped one foot while she listened. Her eyes narrowed as she looked up at her not-husband. "And is that *all* you said? You didn't, by any chance, happen to question whether or not he'd 'borrowed' the idea for the fusion reactor as well?"

"No! I did ask how he could be so certain that he wasn't accidentally using things from the future that were never his in his inventions...."

"And you don't consider that provocation?"

Doc tried not to squirm. "Well... that's not how it was *intended*. I honestly don't understand how he knows."

The teacher sighed yet again, leaning back against a worktable that had been set up near the damaged train to hold parts while they were being worked upon. "He knows because he double-checks. Yes," she said firmly when it was clear the visiting inventor was uneasy with the notion, "he looks into the future — his future, if necessary. But through the shielded records he made of it before he'd ever worked up the nerve to so much as peek at what might become of him. Not long after we first met, when he told me all about himself and where he came from, he admitted that though he'd always wanted to see the future and had even had the temerity to look up Marty and his family when he visited 2015, he was terrified of knowing anything about himself. Partly because he felt he shouldn't know too much about his destiny, but mostly because he was afraid he'd look, and find out that he was a complete failure, had never succeeded in anything but building a time machine he didn't dare reveal to the rest of the world."

Doc had been attempting to remove a scorched bolt that was securing the charred flux capacitor in place; he stopped, his shoulders sagging ever so slightly. "I know how that feels," he confessed, quietly. "I've felt all of those things. I *did* look, when I went to 2015, and found that I just wasn't there. No records of death or disappearance — nothing. I don't know why. Ever since then, I've thought perhaps it was some kind of warning, that I shouldn't meddle with the future, especially mine. It doesn't really serve any purpose, except perhaps to show you things that can scare you so badly you're afraid to do anything."

"But isn't that the problem right now?" Clara wondered. "You're uneasy with the thought that you're supporting your family by taking unfair advantage of your knowledge of the future, and you're so frightened of what you've already seen, you're running in place. You're letting your life stagnate, and in the process, you're cheating your family out of their right to be proud of you, and denying yourself the right every person has to be proud of their own achievements."

"But they're *not* mine!" he insisted with a passion that surprised his not-wife. "Before I finished the first time machine, I'd *never* invented anything that worked, nothing that was anything more important than Rube Goldberg-type gadgets I used around the house. But after that, almost *everything* I tried, almost every idea I came up with worked. It took time, and there were a lot of mistakes along the way, but eventually, I found ways to do it. That can't be coincidence. The only logical explanation is that I'd been to the future, repeatedly, and saw ways to do things that I incorporated into my own designs. Sometimes intentionally, because the device needed the more sophisticated parts available in the future, but sometimes unintentionally. People just don't go from failure to success overnight...."

"Of course they don't," Clara agreed. "But since when does thirty years of effort constitute overnight?"

He shook his head emphatically. "You don't understand...."

"No, I understand perfectly. My Emmett wondered all the same things, you know, and for a while, he was sure of the same thing: The only invention that was ever truly his was the time machine, everything else was somehow tainted by what he'd seen in the future. But he was wrong. When we were on the verge of bankruptcy and something drastic had to be done, he finally worked up the nerve to see what the CTFM had to say about the way future history had gone, and there was the proof he'd been looking for, that *he* was the person who'd discovered how to make fusion as a power source work, and how to make it work in ways that would be best for the entire world. That was what convinced him, seeing that a major part of what made the fusion reactor work and be successful was something he knew for a fact he'd designed long before finishing the first time machine. It was his idea, his invention, and no one else's. Certainly, seeing that it could work at all was a considerable help, and cut down on the frustration factor immensely, but it was only confirmation, nothing more. Ever since then, if he has any doubts that something he comes up with was influenced by or accidentally lifted from the future, he checks. Better to know that he'll fail with something than find out, too late, that he unwittingly took something that should've been the creation of someone else."

Doc was still unconvinced. "But how does he explain going from being a complete failure to being a complete success?"

"Because neither ever *were* complete," Clara replied easily. "Some of the ideas he had when he was young were utterly impossible, the fanciful flights of youth, and even he admits it now, but many of them weren't. They were just too far ahead of their time, couldn't be made to work with the technology he had available to him. Even the time machine itself had some problems that way; it's why it took thirty years for him to complete it."

The inventor didn't argue with that. "Yes, there were some things that just couldn't be done until some other things — computer technology in particular — improved enough to make the whole concept come together."

"Exactly. And it was also an astonishingly complex thing to design and build — you certainly must know that."

"Oh, yes, I know it only too well, especially doing it the first time. There were a lot of those thirty years that I spent wondering if I'd ever be able to pull it off."

"But you did, just as my Emmett did, and when he was faced with a similar problem only a year later — the need to build a wholly new time machine using even more primitive technology — he found a way. It took eight years, but he did it."

"It took me nine," Doc admitted. "Though I suppose different circumstances in our lives might've been responsible for that."

"Quite possible," Clara agreed. "For a while after we returned, Emmett refused to attempt inventing anything marketable, afraid of the same things you were — yet in that time, he discovered a way to take what he'd already done with the fourth dimensional technology he'd invented for the time machine and adapt it into a means of moving matter through the normal three dimensions, inventing, in essence, a teleportation device. From what I've heard of your family's adventures, I presume you did the same thing." When Doc nodded, she favored him with a curious expression. "Then how can you say you've only had one success as an inventor? I'd call that three — and in my experience as a teacher, when you take a student who's been struggling to learn and finally help him find the ways in which he can achieve his goals, he becomes able to take that success and build on it. The more he succeeds, the better his self-confidence, the better his self-confidence, the more he succeeds. Success breeds success. If you put your mind to it you can accomplish anything — but you won't if you'll never accept that you *can*."

There was so much truth in her conclusions, Doc couldn't have refuted them had he tried. He remained atop the boiler for a minute or so, thoughtfully silent, then climbed down. "Did my Clara tell you to say this?" he wondered, though he was sure he knew the answer.

Local Clara shook her head. "I told you, I lived through much the same things with my Emmett, years ago. He's still afraid that someday, he'll have a reversal of fortune and go back to failing again — that's probably somehow at the root of all this excess work he's been doing the last few years, and why he's so leery of delegating authority to people he knows can carry on quite competently. That's probably the hardest part of becoming a success after failing for so long, the fear that if you could change in one direction, you could always change right back again. But it's done so much good, not just for him, but for the rest of the world, and most especially for the children. Only Chris doesn't

know what it's like to have a father who's considered the local crackpot by most of his own hometown. By the time he was old enough to notice such things, the attitudes toward Emmett were finally beginning to change for the better. When he and Peter opened EPB's main facilities here in '99, it made a lot of the people who used to ridicule Emmett change their tunes very quickly. What he'd done not only provided for our family, but it was providing good jobs and opportunities for a lot of people who otherwise might not have done so well. He's still Hill Valley's resident eccentric, and I don't think that will ever change, but there's more... good-naturedness to it than there was before. He's finally earned respect, even though it wasn't easy."

Doc took the tools from his pockets and returned them to a box on the worktable. "And I'd imagine hearing another version of yourself question the whole situation over and over again didn't help."

"I suspect not. I'm sure he said some things he'll regret later, if he doesn't already, because he was foolish and sat up all night when he was already exhausted and under stress, and he certainly should apologize for it. But you must admit, there was blame on both sides."

Doc didn't want to agree, but he also couldn't deny it. "Yes, there was. He *is* right, you know. I *have* been something of a hypocrite about this whole business of using knowledge about the future. The excuse that I was doing things to help my family was still just an excuse, and I always knew it. I just couldn't bring myself to admit it because if I had, I'd never be able to sleep at night. I'm responsible for Clara and the kids, I don't want them to suffer because of me, but they have, just by being my family...."

"I know. That's not your fault, though, and I also know that since they love you, how it affects them isn't as important to them as how it affects *you*. They know you better than the people who belittle you; they know you have skills you should be proud of, not hiding out of misguided fear."

"I'm not so certain it's misguided...."

"Of course it is. You've been saying that your personal life is no one's business but your own, yet you've looked into the future to pry into *their* business, and see how they've fared, for good or ill. But if there's anyone whose future you have a *right* to see, isn't it your own?"

It was a telling point, though Doc couldn't quite bring himself to admit it out loud. He looked into the toolbox, trying to remember what implement he'd come down to fetch, but couldn't recall. He sighed. "How much of all this do the others know?" he wondered. "It doesn't surprise me that you and Clara figured it out, but...."

"All of it," the local teacher admitted quite casually. "Your Marty provided some of the clues; your argument over lunch provided the rest."

He winced. "Then they must think I'm some sort of pitiful hypocrite."

She shook her head. "Not at all. Well, perhaps that's not entirely true. It *is* rather difficult to reconcile what you've been doing to support your family with your attitude toward my Emmett's inventions. But no one has any doubt that you've done what you've done with any intentions but the very best. If there's any shame or blame in that matter, you're bringing it on yourself."

The sound Doc made was quite skeptical. "Your husband seemed more than willing to help with that...."

"Which only proves my point. The two of you really are very much alike; you just happen to be on different points in your life's course. For whatever cosmic reasons there may be, my Emmett has already been forced to confront certain very personal issues you're only now finding it necessary to face. If he'd seen another choice, I think he might have put it off for as long as possible, but other choices he'd already made didn't give him that option. It doesn't really make him right and you wrong; it only means that he's had more experience, this way, and has more or less come to terms with how his decisions have changed our lives, and our world."

"So are you trying to say I should do exactly what he did?"

"You mean, invent a fusion reactor, go into business and all that? No. That may not be what's right for you, or what's meant for you. You have to find your own paths, just as you have all your life. That's the danger of seeing the future or these alternate realities, you know, glimpsing what could be or what might have been, and thinking that

somehow, it's what *must* be or what *should* have been. As I said, he's not right, and you're not wrong. You just *are*, two different versions of the same man whose life somehow has been very much the same and yet very different. But one of the things I'm sure you have in common is the love of invention, of creation, of imagination. By not letting yourself *be* that person you are in your heart, you're throwing away your God-given gifts. That's a greater crime than any risk of accidentally borrowing from things you saw in the future. No one ever said the past and the present have a monopoly on inspiration. But there's only one you in your world, and anything you refuse to do out of fear may cheat everyone out of some wonderful good you might be able to do."

"And if I *do* go ahead and... oh, let's say I enter this contest my family wants me to be a part of. What if I lose to some kid less than a quarter my age? That'll do wonders for my reputation in town, won't it? Or what if I do win, sell the systems to some company, and they flop in the marketplace? What will that prove?"

"That you at least tried," Clara said simply. "That's all your family's asking you to do, Emmett. They're not asking you to succeed in a spectacular way — although after visiting here, they may have some pipe dreams of that sort for a while. They're only asking you to try. Is that truly such a terrible thing?"

Doc thought about it for what felt to him like a very long time. In spite of all his fears, in his heart, he knew that was indeed the truth. His family wasn't asking him to be something he wasn't or do things he found unethical for their own gain or even for bragging rights. They were simply asking him to try something he knew quite well was a thing he *wanted* to do, very much. It was fear — and pride — that was stopping him, just as they had apparently come close to doing the same to his local counterpart. And really, from what he'd seen of the man, he knew, somehow, that he wasn't ethically inferior. He'd merely found a way not to justify his inaction, but to prove he had the sweet right to *take* action on his own behalf. If he could find a way in this world, then didn't that imply such a way might also exist in another?

"No, it's not terrible," he finally said. "In fact, you've given me quite a bit to think about. Thank you. But I hope you're not going to ask that we sit down and settle all of these issues right away. I do need some time to digest all of this...."

"I'm sure my Emmett does, too," Clara assured him. "He may have hurt you, but I'm sure you reciprocated better than you know. And even when you've admitted you're both wrong and both right, it does take a bit for tempers to cool and reason to reign again. My Emmett's no different that way. Your wife and I have already agreed that a day apart might be best for both of you, and he really does need to catch up on his sleep if he's going to be a civilized gentleman when you do talk again."

A wry expression flickered across the inventor's face. "I know, I'm always at my worst when I'm tired and under stress — and that's when I'm hardest on myself, too. I think there're plenty of things I can work on alone for the rest of the day so we'll still be making headway."

Clara smiled her approval. "Wonderful idea. It's always more frustrating when you think you're losing ground and not making progress. I'm sure your wife will be happy to hear that. And that she can come out and talk with you without getting her head snapped off."

His answering smile was crooked. "I didn't say that — but it's true. Just don't send the whole mob out when they come home. Thinking up a way to apologize to everyone isn't going to be easy."

"I won't — but I'm sure you'll do fine," she felt confident, and left him to resume his work.

As his glance passed over the injured train, Doc suddenly remembered what he'd been looking for, and recalled that it had been left down in the lab. He found the device — an old hand-held meter used for testing circuitry that was all they had available after the computers had gone down — on the workspace near one of computers, where local Marty had lent a hand by running tests Doc had asked him to do. When he reached for it, he saw the monitor screen, and realized it was back to normal, no longer displaying the message that the system had been locked down and the correct password was required for entry. The screen wasn't quite blank; a single word appeared against the blue background where the password request had been displayed.

Sorry.

Doc smiled to himself. That said more than all the lengthy apologies and explanations in the world, because he knew how difficult it was, sometimes, to say that simple word, even across electronic ether. It wasn't quite the last word needed to resolve what had happened, but it was the most important. He knew then that things would be all right, even if it took until tomorrow, and went back to work on his crippled machine with a much-eased heart.

## Chapter Seventeen

Although Emmett and Doc were on the road to settling the differences between them that had sparked their untimely and rather passionate feud, Marty wasn't faring so well with Jennifer on the outing with the kids. Encouraged by her agreement for a truce, he had dared to hope that maybe they could work things out on their own and she was finally ready to give him a chance and really listen to why he had gotten so upset over her wanting to use a "professional" name. When they had arrived in the theater for the film, they'd had to split up their group of nine, since a row with that many vacant seats together was not available for a very new release during the middle of a summer afternoon. Jennifer had sat with the two Emilys and Chris, while the older boys had staked out seats elsewhere. Marty had decided to join the younger kids and his wife, sitting next to Jennifer in spite of the rather suspicious looks she gave him. The younger Emily was delighted by his presence and immediately switched seats with Chris so she could sit next to the musician, grinning widely up at him and virtually ignoring the box of candy she'd gotten at the refreshment counter until the movie finally started and took her attention elsewhere.

The film was fascinating, and not just because it was something that no one at home would see for another eight years. The special effects, frankly, made the jaws of all the visitors drop. Marty and Jennifer had both gone to see *Jurassic Park* when it had opened the previous summer and found the computer generated dinosaurs as impressive as everyone else at the time. In the years since that film, it was obvious things had taken enormous leaps and bounds, and the computer generated effects blended so seamlessly with the live action shots — or what Marty could only assume were the live action shots — that it was impossible to tell which was which.

More than once during the course of the film, Marty tried to put his arm around Jennifer or take her hand. And with each attempt, she would stiffen up or draw away, flashing him looks that clearly told him he was pushing it. Finally, after returning from taking Emily to use the restroom, she took a seat on the opposite end away from Marty, beside the older Emily, putting an end to the attempts and leaving her husband feeling frustrated on more than one level.

When the movie had concluded and their group had rendezvoused in the lobby, local Jules put in a call to the house to see how things had progressed with the plan, and to see if they would need to stay away longer. Happily, his mother reported that things seemed to be on the mend between their fathers, and though neither had actually spoken to the other face to face, it was clear that they were ready and willing to mend their fences after spending the rest of the day working on solo projects. With that news, the group left the theater and found the rumble of thunder and dark clouds threatening in the distance outside. By the time they returned to the house, thick drops of rain were beginning to fall, and it was more than obvious they were in for another storm.

While the visiting Jules and Verne went upstairs to remove their costumes and wash the temporary colorings out of their hair, and local Emily was corralled into grumpily accepting the task of keeping an eye on her brother and younger counterpart, the local Clara enlisted her sons and Jennifer to help her with dinner preparations, and sent Marty out to the lab to assist Doc. The young man immediately balked at the idea, not wanting to experience another one of his friend's lectures about his problems and hypocrisy, but the local woman assured him that he had nothing of the sort planned.

"I think he's feeling bad and hoping to make amends," she said. "He's in a much better state of mind than when you last saw him, Marty, and I wouldn't fear anything he has to say."

Armed with that promise, Marty went out to the lab and found Doc up in the hangar with the train, busy with what looked to be gutting the insides of some of the computers and banks of circuits in the cab. He looked up at the sound of footsteps approaching and gave Marty a tentative, if rather frazzled, smile.

"Did you enjoy your outing?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Marty said. "The movie was pretty cool, and seeing the Hill Valley here was even more interesting. It'd be nice if we could go out and see more of it before we leave. The theater was at the mall, and we didn't get a chance to see anything but that, really."

"We'll see," Doc said, dumping a handful of burnt wiring and melted circuits out of the cab door and onto the floor, where a substantial mess was already scattered. The entire hangar of the barn reeked strongly of melted electronics and plastics, and the musician had to wonder how Doc was able to stand it; the smell was already giving

him a headache. "I owe you an apology, Marty," the scientist said abruptly, giving him his full attention, now. "I said some very harsh things to you this morning, and I really had no right to do so. I was very angry and upset, but that was no excuse for taking it out on you."

Marty managed a faint smile. "It's okay, Doc," he said. "I knew you weren't in the best state of mind this morning. And maybe I deserved what you said."

"Not necessarily in the manner in which it was phrased." Doc left the cab, stepping over the clutter on the floor and over to a table scattered with a wide variety of tools. "That wasn't very kind of me."

Rather than argue against something he sort of agreed with, Marty changed the subject. "Are you gonna bite my head off if I ask what really went on between the two of you? I kinda already know... I think."

"I heard. And it was a very accurate guess."

Marty studied the scientist a moment as he sorted through the tools. "You wanna talk about it?" he asked, tentative.

Doc shook his head without hesitation. "Not particularly," he said. "I've got a lot to work through on my own before I can pull others into it. And I'd prefer it that way, personally. That's why Emmett and I are still spending time apart."

The musician was a little skeptical. "Really? So it's not 'cause you wanna rip out each other's throats, anymore?"

"Unless Clara was lying to me about his state of mind, no. We haven't had a chance to talk over things, yet, but our spouses suggested we spend the remainder of today apart, to let our feelings settle, and I think it's a good idea. I may be feeling a little better, but I'm certainly far from normal. I suspect we might work things out between us tomorrow, but until then, I've been doing things on my own. It's been good, though, giving me a lot of time to think."

"Well, that's cool, then. I'd like to say things were on the road to recovery with Jennifer and me, but not yet. She spent half the movie giving me the slip before finally moving seats." Marty sighed deeply. "I wish the other Marty hadn't had that birthday dinner tonight..."

"Ah," Doc said, looking up. "That reminds me. Tomorrow is June seventh..."

"So? Didn't I already technically have my birthday, a few days ago?"

"Technically? No. You're probably several months off, at least, if one was to take into account all the time you've spent in other times."

Although he had thought of such things before, it never failed to creep Marty out a little. "Oh, yeah, great. Is that why you keep going into the future for rejuvs? To reset your body clock so it's not way off?"

"That's one reason, but not the most important one. I wouldn't worry much about it if I were you, though. It might be worse if you were going through an extreme growth spurt at the time — during, say, puberty, which is why I didn't want Jules and Verne to take any trips during those months of extreme change — but otherwise, I doubt you're aging rapidly enough to be noticed by anyone else."

"No kidding," Marty said. "I *still* get carded anytime I go near a bar, and the bouncers always give me the third degree about my birth date, like they think I got a fake ID. Jen doesn't get that half as much."

Doc smiled at the complaints, amused. "Enjoy it while it lasts because it certainly won't forever." He changed the subject as he headed back to the cab, tools in hand. "I don't suppose there's anything you'd like for your birthday...?"

Marty smiled wistfully. "Aside from getting home in one piece and fixing things with Jennifer? Not really. Maybe the local Marty and Jennifer can help us out tomorrow."



“Perhaps, but don’t necessarily count on it. They do have lives of their own, and we’ll be here for several days more, at least, any way you look at it. If they promised to do that, I don’t doubt they will, before we leave.”

“I guess. Do you need me to do anything out here? I don’t really wanna help cook dinner or chase after the younger kids in the house.”

“Any assistance is better than none at all. Let’s see, why don’t you start by picking up that light and coming in here so I can see what I’m doing....”

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After dinner, Emily and Chris went to the rec room without protest, eager to discuss their rescue project now that it was certain they wouldn’t be able to pull it off tonight — the storm outside made that impossible — and that their fathers weren’t back to speaking to one another yet. The dinner had been a little tense from the perspective of the youngest kids, with their dads seated on opposite ends of the table and saying not a word to one another. Although Emily had heard that things were supposed to be better between them, she was all but positive that had to be a lie from her mother and Chris’. There was no reason she could find, aside from them still being upset and angry, for not talking to one another, and Chris agreed with her reasoning. While the older Emily was helping her mother, Jennifer, and the visiting Clara clean up after the meal, Emmett went back to his study, and the teenage boys joined Doc and Marty back out in the barn. The six-year-olds took advantage of their lapse in supervision to put their heads together and discuss the matter, pretending to be occupied with a video game.

“So we’re definitely gonna go tomorrow, right?” Emily said softly once the older girl had left the room.

Chris nodded. “Don’t see why not, unless the weather’s still like this, an’ it’s usually not.”

“Good. What time does everyone usually get up? At home Mommy and Daddy usually sleep in until seven, sometimes eight, if they can, and Jules an’ Verne lots later than that.”

“It’s about the same here, though Dad sometimes gets up earlier when he’s workin’ on some project. So we’d probably wanna get moving at maybe five, if we wanna try and be back before they’re up.” The boy frowned faintly. “How’re you gonna get outta their room without them knowing?”

“I’ve done it every day, so far, so that’s not a problem.”

“Yeah, but if they get up an’ see you’re gone, they’re probably gonna come after you before we have a chance to be back.”

Emily frowned now, not having thought about that. “Well, maybe I don’t hafta sleep there tonight,” she said after a moment. “Mommy asked me if I wanted a room of my own the day we got here an’ I didn’t want one, then. I could get one now, though, I betcha.”

“Yeah,” Chris agreed. “They’d probably put you in the playroom, ‘cause there’s no one in there now. That’d be good, ‘cause it’s *right* next to my room, too.”

Indeed, when Emily asked her mother a short time later if she could move to her own room now, because she was ready, the local Clara passed on her request to her counterpart and it was immediately granted, and to the playroom, too. Emily was even more delighted by the arrangement when she saw what was in the playroom. Aside from the futon on which she would sleep, the room contained a computer, TV, a VCR, and DVD player. She noticed immediately that there was also a door leading out to the upstairs balcony, providing a way out that wouldn’t immediately alert the adults that they had left.

Once her bags and belongings had been moved to her new room, Emily used the excuse of wanting to unpack with Chris helping her to provide them some time alone. She had expected an argument over this from her parents, at least, but neither her parents nor Chris’ seemed to object. Keeping the TV on to drown out the sound of their voices and to provide the adults the illusion that the kids were watching a movie, they outlined their surprise.

“Are you sure you know where your train went down?” Chris asked as Emily sorted through her clothes to find something suitable to wear tomorrow.

“Uh-huh. If you had a map, I betcha I could point it out an’ all.”

Chris considered her words a moment, then headed for the room’s computer. “I can find one on the ‘net,” he said confidently as he started the machine up. “They got tons of things like that, super easy to find if you know how.”

“Okay. What else’re we gonna need? Breakfast?”

Chris shrugged as he tapped something on the keyboard. “We could eat b’fore we leave, or else take somethin’ with us.” He turned away from the monitor sharply, as if something important had just occurred to him. “We’re gonna need to make it look like we’re staying outta trouble if anyone gets up before we get back, though.”

Emily thought she understood. “You mean like puttin’ pillows under the covers an’ that stuff? I’ve seen that in movies.”

The boy pondered the words a moment, then shook his head. “I don’t think they’ll go for it. I don’t sleep in real late and if I didn’t get up, Mom or Dad might come in and make sure I wasn’t sick or somethin’.”

“Yeah,” Emily understood, frowning as she thought. “You’re prob’bly right.” She scrunched her face up in an look of intense concentration. “Maybe we could leave the TV an’ stuff on downstairs an’ in here and they might not look in ‘cause they’ll think we’re busy doing that?”

Chris examined her idea a moment as he turned back to the computer, which had finished warming up. “That could work,” he said. “Specially if we leave a mess in the kitchen an’ make ‘em think we were already there.”

Emily nodded solemnly. “Even if we don’t get back on time, they shouldn’t be mad,” she said confidently, unpadding her backpack on the round table in the room and spilling out a stack of coloring books, markers, some snacks, and a couple of handheld video games. “Not when they see what we brought back to make our daddies stop bein’ mad.”

Chris nodded, distracted, and a moment later he let out a small sound of triumph. “Got it,” he said as the sound of a nearby printer whirred to life. “I’m gonna print out a few copies for us,” he added.

“Cool.” The printouts came quickly — in color, Emily noticed, impressed — and after a few moments of quiet study of the map, she used a marker to put a big blue X on where she thought they had crashed.

“That’s it?” Chris asked, looking over her shoulder as she sat at the table in the playroom.

“Uh-huh, I think so. I ‘member that we passed rocks in that kinda shape on the walk over here.” She drew a line from the X and, in the margin, carefully printed in childish letters “tran crash cite.” Chris copied the information down on the second map print out, then leaned forward to look at it carefully, with a ruler.

“I think that’s gonna be a couple miles away.” He frowned. “I wonder if we could take the horses out...”

“You got horses?” Emily interrupted, her eyes going round. “Real live horses?”

“Uh-huh. D’you know how to ride ‘em?”

Alas, she did not, and shook her head. “I wanna, though,” she said. “Mommy said maybe when I’m older I can take lessons, since Jules an’ Verne know how ‘cause they lived back in the past when they were my age.”

“That’s no good, then,” Chris said. “I don’t want you to get hurt if you fall off or somethin’ ‘cause you won’t know how to ride. We’re gonna have to walk.”

Emily resigned herself to the news with a sigh and opened her mouth to suggest something else when there was a knock on the closed door. Quickly, both kids hid their maps under some of the coloring books on the table, managing to get them out of sight before the door opened and Chris’ mother poked her head in. “Time to start getting ready for bed,” she announced, provoking a disappointed mutter from her son. “Are you all right in here, Emily?” she added to their guest. “Did you need anything else?”

Emily shook her head hard. "I like this room," she said, honestly. "It's real neat. I don't even got a TV in my room at home!"

"Well, good, then. Your mother asked me to pass along the message for you to get ready for bed, now, too."

"I don't know why we gotta," Chris said, frowning as he slid out of the chair and headed for the door. "Not like we need our rest for anything important tomorrow, unless we get to go to the movies again...."

"No, not the movies, but I think you'll both be pleased to know that we are having a small party tomorrow night. It's a surprise, however, so I'd ask that you both keep quiet on the matter."

"A party?" Emily asked, perplexed. "How come?" A reason occurred to her. "Are you gonna throw Mommy a baby shower?"

Clara shook her head, smiling. "No, this has to do with Marty — both of them," she clarified. "Yours has his birthday tomorrow, and ours the day after that. Clara and I thought it would be nice if we had a small celebration for them both, since we could all use a break from everything the last few days. But you can't let either of them know," she added, mildly stern. "It's supposed to be a surprise."

Chris and Emily nodded and gave verbal promises on the matter. Chris was ushered away by his mother before he and Emily could finish their plans, but when they met again in the bathroom to brush their teeth, he made sure the adults weren't around then said, in a half-whisper, "I'll wake you tomorrow, early, and we'll go then. Be ready."

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Work with the time machine didn't go nearly as late as the night before. Around eleven, Doc called it a night and sent his assistants — his sons, their counterparts, and Marty — into the house and presumably to bed ahead of him as he secured things as best he could without Emmett's help. By the time he had finished that and made it up to his room, it was almost eleven-thirty. His Clara was in the parlor of their guest suite, curled up on the sofa with a pad of paper and pen in hand. The sight startled the scientist, not because his wife was there, but because their daughter most decidedly was not.

"Where's Emily?" he asked immediately as he closed the door at his back.

Clara looked up from the list she appeared to be making. "She decided that she was comfortable sleeping away from us, now, and wanted her own room like the others, so we settled her in the playroom, near Chris' room."

"Oh. Well, that's good, then, provided she stays out of trouble."

"I imagine she will. The playroom is designed for the kids to be in. Better she's there than in the room they've given to our Verne. There's a great deal of expensive stereo and electronic equipment in that one."

"Definitely." He studied her as he took his shoes off. "What are you doing? Making a list of baby names?"

Clara smiled as she glanced up at him. "Not right now, although I'll confess I was earlier, while spending some time in the library. I think it might be appropriate if we gave this one a family name of some sort, though I haven't found any male names that have immediately appealed to me, yet. I *know* you're dead set against Emmett, Robert and Daniel don't seem quite right, I never cared for your uncle's name, Abraham, and there are far too many Alexanders running around now to make me feel comfortable giving him my uncle's name."

"What about Christopher? That was your brother's name, after all."

Clara frowned. "I know, but I associate the name too strongly with him to feel comfortable about using it for our son, even if our counterparts used the same name for different reasons. I feel that there's something I haven't considered yet, something that will be right, but I haven't quite put my finger on it, yet."

"Well, as I said this morning, think on. So, if you aren't working on names, what *are* you doing with that pad of paper?"

“Collecting a list of what we’ll need for tomorrow night. Clara and I were discussing things after dinner and thought it might be nice to throw a small birthday party for the Martys tomorrow evening, since they’re so close together. Fancy them being born on two different days, but really only an hour or so apart! I think it would provide a wonderful break from the work and give those of us not able to assist out in the barn something to do to keep busy.”

“Not *too* busy, Clara....”

Clara brushed away the warning in his voice. “Light housekeeping and cooking is *not* going to hurt me in the least, Emmett. I dare say this battle between you and your counterpart was more troublesome.”

The inventor cleared his throat lightly, not able to think of a proper comeback. “Well,” he said as he headed for the connecting bathroom, “we’ve almost settled that. By tomorrow, we will have, hopefully.”

“Perhaps so,” Clara agreed, getting up to follow him. “But I think there are a few things we should talk about — in fact, I think there are a few things that we should’ve talked about a *long* time ago.”

“What’s that?” Doc asked, feigning innocence as he searched out his toothbrush.

Clara leaned in the doorway, her arms crossed. “Our financial situation,” she said. “Emmett, I know where our money has been coming from. I knew long before today, in fact.”

Doc winced, the mirror reflecting the expression clearly to his wife. Although she had come out shortly after her counterpart had left him alone in the lab that afternoon to see how he was doing, they hadn’t had an opportunity to discuss the deeper matters of the argument between him and Emmett. “I didn’t want you to,” he said softly.

“Maybe so, but did you really think you could keep it from me? I’m no fool, Emmett. I’ve known what you were up to for years, and if I’d known how much it was bothering you, I would’ve said something much sooner. I *should’ve* said something much sooner,” she corrected herself. “It’s not right, and I know you know that.”

Doc sighed, setting the found toothbrush down. “Clara, I didn’t do it for selfish reasons. I just wanted to provide you and the kids what was needed for a comfortable life. The money from the land on JFK Drive went far too quickly into the home renovations....”

“There are more honest ways to earn money than what you did.” At the grimace that crossed her husband’s face at the words, Clara rushed ahead quickly. “I’m not saying that I’m ungrateful for what you did. I know it was an awful sacrifice on your part — more than I think you know.”

Doc shook his head as he turned to face her, rather than her reflection. “I know,” he said. “I was reminded of such things by your counterpart, but I knew them even before she — and, for that matter, Emmett — mentioned them today.”

Clara studied him a moment, her dark eyes filled with sympathy and concern. “You *do* know you can’t let things continue on as they’ve been,” she said quietly. “I’d rather go work than have you suffering over things you know better than to be doing. And I won’t let you write it off as something you’re doing for the children or me. Not anymore.”

The inventor sighed deeply, leaning against the bathroom counter. “I know,” he said again. “I suppose it’s my own fault. Too damn optimistic something would change in the last nine years when I wasn’t doing anything to provoke just that....”

Clara moved from the doorway to his side, putting a warm hand on his arm. “I know it’s been a very long day for you,” she said. “And you’ve got a lot to work over in your mind, still. But, Emmett, I want to help. I want this decision, whatever it may be, to be both of ours. I know you may doubt my concept of contemporary finances and the like, but they — and I — are not what they were when we moved to the future nine years ago. If you need to get a job outside the home to make ends meet, you can do that. If I need to do that, I will. I know you don’t like it,” she added, seeing a frown cross her husband’s face at her suggestions, “but the time you’ve bought us and yourself with your investments has run out. They were to be a temporary solution to a temporary problem — not a permanent solution to a permanent problem.”

Doc didn't deny her words. "I won't let it come to that," he said. "I'm not having you work — I know it would tear you up to have Emmy and the baby in day care, being raised by strangers." He let out another deep, exhausted sigh. "There are a few options I can take, but I need to think them over, Clara, and work them out myself, first."

His wife accepted that. "All right," she said. "I won't bring it up again — on one condition."

"What's that?"

"I'd like you to reach a decision before we leave here. I know you have a lot to do," she explained as he opened his mouth to argue against her request, "but you'll also have a lot of help here, with the machine. No need to take it all on yourself. Let your mind work over what you need it to do — it's certainly a better distraction than worrying over the health of me and the baby. You'll have a week or so, Emmett, and I think that should give you plenty of time. Any more, and you'll be simply procrastinating. You've done more than enough of that already."

Doc was silent as he wrestled with the restrictions Clara had given him. "And if I don't?" he asked, a little surly.

"Then I'll take matters into my own hands," Clara said, her gaze steady as she looked at him. "I'll go out and get a job, if need be, and if you want to continue to do nothing, *you* can watch Emily and the baby full time. I know it's not unusual in this day and age for the father to assume the parenting role. And while Emmy's at school and the baby is napping, you can tinker all you want in your lab with the things you feel so strongly about not showing to people." Her voice softened. "I'm not trying to threaten you, Emmett, and I know you'll reach a suitable decision, in the end. But I don't intend to let you put it off any longer. One week is more than enough time for you to reach a decision."

Her part now said, she kissed him gently and left the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

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"Emily? Get up, it's time."

The girl's eyes popped open at the whispered voice close by. She sat up, blinking quickly in the darkness. "Chris?" she murmured.

"Yeah. C'mon, get up. It's five."

Emily threw back the blankets and rolled out of the futon, nearly tripping over her empty backpack on the floor. "Turn on the lights," she ordered. "I can't see a thing..."

Chris obliged a second later, and the sudden, bright light caused the girl to cover her eyes, immediately. "Oh, man, you blinded me," she moaned softly.

"Sorry. Maybe we should think about bringin' some flashlights with us. The sun'll be up pretty soon, but not down in the canyons, an' the mountains kinda get in the way so it doesn't really get as bright around here real early."

"Yeah." Emily risked another look at the illuminated room around her, squinting and blinking quickly to let her eyes adjust as quickly as possible. "You think we should turn on the TV in here?" she asked, doubtful, remembering their plan from the night before. "Won't the noise wake people up?"

Chris shook his head as he headed for the television. "Naw. Emily's room is next to this one an' she sleeps *hard*. If we keep the door closed, I don't think anyone else'll hear it." He looked at Emily for the first time, clad not in pajamas but in jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt. "Didja wear your clothes to bed?"

Emily nodded as she found her shoes and started to put them on. "I figured it'd help us leave faster. I just told Mommy that I wanted to in case there was a fire in the middle of the night, an' she let me. I really did do that for a while last year when we learned 'bout fire safety and I was scared our house might burn down. My daddy's old house did way b'fore I was born."

"Mine, too," Chris said, turning on the TV and changing it to a channel that showed nothing but cartoons, every day and all day. "I'll meet you downstairs, 'kay?"

“Kay,” Emily agreed. She collected her map from the table, slipped it into her pocket, then took her empty backpack and left the room, closing the door behind her. After a stop at the bathroom, she went downstairs and found Chris in the kitchen getting together something for them to eat. Emily helped him make a purposeful mess in the kitchen with spilled cereal and milk, working hard to stifle her giggles as they did something she usually tried to avoid. Once they had their food, they went into the TV room to watch cartoons and go over the plan once more. After they’d eaten — a difficult task, since Emily’s stomach was so filled with jumpy butterflies — they’d quickly messed up the rec room to make it look like they’d spent time there and left their empty glasses and bowls on the floor.

Chris had gone upstairs to fetch his own backpack and some things he thought might come in handy when Emily remembered that she’d forgotten a flashlight. Although she had brought one camping, it wasn’t in with her stuff, now; she was almost certain her parents had it with their gear, if it hadn’t been left behind in the train. She didn’t want to try to find it now, not at the risk of waking them up while going through their stuff. She frowned as she mulled over the problem, wandering down the hall to the breezeway door — then, she remembered something. Marty’d had a really neat flashlight on the trip — a Mag light, he called it — and his room was just a few feet away. He wouldn’t mind if she borrowed it, she was sure, and she doubted he’d ask many questions if he caught her.

Pleased with the idea and smiling to herself, now, Emily quietly went down to the door she’d see him go into the morning before, after coming back from the lab, and put an ear to the wood. It was silent inside. She tried the knob and it turned without hindrance in her hand. Unlocked. She took a breath, then opened the door as quietly as she could, looking inside. The room was completely pitch black inside — not even a nightlight or streetlight glow through a window. Rats.

*I’ll need a flashlight to get the flashlight!* she thought, annoyed. But, after a moment of hovering in the doorway, staring at the inside of the room, her eyes started to adjust and she could see the faint outlines of furniture inside. Emily pushed the door open wider, until it was fully ajar, allowing some of the distant light to slide in at her back, from the informal dining room down the hall and around the corner. There was a faint *thud* as the knob of the door struck the wall behind it, but in the quiet of the room it sounded as loud as a bomb going off. Panicked, Emily tracked faint movement in the room. Bedsprings squeaked and there was a soft mutter, then things were still and quiet again. The little girl let out a silent but deep sigh and relaxed a little, relieved.

Emily remained standing in the doorway for another minute, until her eyes had gotten used to the dark interior enough so that she could distinguish things in the darkness. She could see the furniture, now more than vague shapes, and Marty lying in the bed. She smiled as she stepped into the room, taking care to move in wide, exaggerated steps lest her sneakers make noise. The floor let out a faint creak as she stepped across it, but the noise was so quiet that the room’s sleeping occupant didn’t stir. Drawing closer to the bed, she caught sight of a few bags of Marty’s belongings on the floor near it, open, with part of their contents spilled onto the floor. She crouched down into a crawl and made her way over, going through them as quietly as she could in search of the flashlight. There were a lot of clothes — and she had a very nasty moment when she came across some underwear and almost started to cry from keeping in her giggles — some papers with writing and music on it, some camping stuff, food....

She might’ve missed the flashlight had her hand not bumped against it as she was trying to put back a bag of chips without making too much noise. Each crackle of the wrapper made her jump, and she prayed that Marty wasn’t lying awake in the dark, listening to her. At the feel of the cold, hard metal on the back of her hand, she immediately let go of the chips and searched for it, wrapping her hand around the object a moment later. Emily grinned as she pulled it out from the bag and confirmed visually that it was the flashlight she’d been looking for. Prize now in hand, she stood and started for the door.

And stopped as she glanced at Marty, her someday boyfriend. Curious, now, she tiptoed over to the side of the bed to look at him, telling herself that she wanted to just make sure he wasn’t awake from the little noises she had made. Really, though, it was a chance for her to stare at him without him seeing her. It wasn’t *spying*, since she was standing in plain sight, next to the bed, and it wasn’t his fault he was asleep at the time. Marty lay on his side, facing where she stood, half his face buried in the pillow under his head. Emily’s eyes focused on his face as he slept, his slow breathing the loudest and only sound in the room. She was tempted to plant a princess-like kiss on the cheek of her Prince Charming, if she wasn’t so afraid that would wake him.

She didn’t know how long she had stood there, or would’ve stood there, perfectly content to watch him, before she heard her name hissed in a whisper from behind. She turned around to see Chris standing in the doorway. His face was in shadow, but by his tone, he was annoyed.

“Emily! Whatcha doin’?”

“Gettin’ a flashlight,” Emily whispered back, holding up the said object — and it was then that she fumbled it and it fell to the floor. It hit with a loud clatter that shook the ground under her feet. Marty jumped in his sleep at the sound, his eyes flying open. Chris ducked out of sight in the hall, but Emily froze, almost as she had done when setting the alarm off, thinking if she didn’t move, she might be able to salvage the situation by not being noticed.

Marty blinked once, saw someone standing next to him, and frowned. “Jennifer?” he half-mumbled, lifting his head from the pillow.

Emily’s mind whirled. “No,” she whispered, honest. “It’s me, Emily.”

Marty blinked again, trying to focus his sleepy eyes on her. “Emily? What’re you doing?”

Emily licked her lips, bending down to retrieve the flashlight. “I — I just came in to borrow your flashlight. Sorry I woke you. Go back t’sleep.”

Marty studied her for a moment as she backed away quickly from his bed, toward the door, but said nothing else, instead settling down again under the covers. She dosed the door quickly, sighing, glad that was over with.

“Why’d you go in there?” Chris hissed in a whisper from beside the door, startling Emily all over again.

“I couldn’t find my flashlight an’ I knew Marty had one,” Emily said in a similarly pitched voice as the kids headed away from the door and the corridor, lest Marty hear them.

“Well, you didn’t need to borrow his — we got some you could use — and now he knows we’re up....”

“Maybe, but I don’t think he cares that much or he’d’ve gotten up. I don’t even think he was all the way awake, so he prob’ly won’t remember it later.” Feeling a little more confident now, Emily clicked her tongue at the boy. “Don’t worry, we can still pull things off.”

Chris looked a little uneasy. “Maybe, but why don’t we go out the door from the playroom? That way, if he’s still awake, he won’t hear us leavin’.”

It sounded reasonable to Emily. She followed Chris back upstairs and to her temporary bedroom, which was still undisturbed in the state they had left it, before breakfast. “We gotta be quiet outside ‘til we get away from the house,” he said softly. “Emmy probably won’t wake up, but I don’t know if anyone else would if they heard us.”

“Gotcha,” Emily said. Chris opened the door to the balcony and let her out first before shutting it quietly at his back, then stepping before her to lead her to the stairs that went down to the yard below. The morning air was cool and damp and the sky was clear of any of the storm clouds that had been around twelve hours before. When they made it to the back of the yard without anyone in the house stirring, Emily smiled, certain in their success. Getting out of the house had to have been the hardest part, and now that they’d made it, the rest would be a piece of cake.

“Let’s go before we run out of time,” she said as they paused to study the sleeping house.

And they went.