

Waiting

A *Back to the Future* Novella by

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for Lana, for doing her homework

Half the agony of living is waiting.

Alexander Rose

MONDAY, OCTOBER 28, 1985
5:30 P.M. PACIFIC STANDARD TIME
HILL VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

By comparison to the weekend through which he had just lived, the everyday routine of school and home life seemed incredibly boring to Marty McFly. Granted, his first full day back in the present hadn't been a stroll through the park, but its headaches had been considerably less exciting than his week in 1955, his day in 2015, and his half-a-week in 1885. He'd started out the day on an inauspicious note, oversleeping almost to the point of being late for his first class. If he'd had to rely on his own two feet and a skateboard as he had only a few days before — at least as far as his clearer recollection of the past was concerned — he would never have made it in time. Fortunately, his new truck could get him there much more quickly, even though he'd gunned it through a few yellow lights and had taken the risk of speeding terribly through several residential neighborhoods.

Keeping his mind on his classes had been the hard part all day long, for two reasons. One, he was still exhausted from everything that had happened during his travels through time, and two, his thoughts kept wandering back to those events and all their repercussions.

For instance, he was still getting used to the totally weird sensation of having more than one set of memories in his head. He remembered the old past, the one he thought of as the real past, very clearly. How could one forget growing up in a house full of losers, with a father who was so spineless, he let himself be a doormat for overgrown bullies like Biff Tannen, a mother who chose to retreat into the bottle rather than even try to change the status quo, a brother who was doing his best to follow in his father's gutless footsteps, and a sister who was likely to wind up working the streets in defiance of their mother's prudish restrictions? Marty knew he would never be able to forget that past, because in many ways, it was all those things that had planted the seeds of a hair-trigger temper in him, something he was finally learning to overcome. But it was also unforgettable because in many more ways, that life at home had led him to seek out some other, more positive role model, which had ultimately led him to become friends with Emmett Brown. In reflecting on how his family had changed because of what he had done in 1955, it had occurred to Marty that he could have accidentally changed things so much, he would never become friends with Doc, and thus might never have had that opportunity to travel through time.

Obviously, that hadn't happened, and Marty was grateful. Only a few minutes of contemplating the cascading paradoxical effects of such an occurrence had started to give him a headache, and today, he didn't need that on top of everything else. The memories of his "new" family had caught up with him by Sunday evening, and while it startled him, he eventually realized that this was a positive thing. All day long, before the new memories had settled in, he'd found himself shocked left and right by these people who looked sort of like the relatives he knew, but didn't act like them at all, and even by all the changes to their house. He saw them returning his glances, weirdly, whenever he reacted with surprise to something, and whenever they discussed past events and present situations about which Marty didn't have a clue, he could even see them thinking that a trip to the doctor might be in order for him. Getting used to the double images in his head hadn't been easy, especially since a part of him kept resisting the change, but once he figured out that this would be more helpful than harmful and stopped fighting it, his family relaxed, and he started to grow more comfortable with what had happened.

In doing so, he was tremendously relieved to find that the altered past hadn't erased Doc from his life. There were a few minor differences in some events, but for the most part, they'd met at the same time, for the same reasons, and with the same ultimate results. The biggest change Marty could see, in fact, was a positive one. Having at least known of him as more than the town crackpot because of his involvement with "Calvin Klein" back in 1955, the new George and Lorraine had showed more approval when their eight-year-old son had decided to become the scientist's friend. Originally, George the Wimp had been completely indifferent to it, not even noticing or caring that Marty *had* any friends, while Drunken and Bitter Lorraine had disapproved, declaring that nothing good would ever come of spending time with a person the whole town knew was crazy and dangerous.

But back then, neither of them had done anything to actually stop him, so Marty had defiantly gone his own way, figuring that his parents obviously didn't know much about anything, since they'd made so many bad choices of their own. In his new memories, he saw a much kinder and more compassionate past in that regard, and though his reasons for seeking out an elder friend and role model had shifted, the ultimate results had not. If anything, he and Doc had been better friends in this new world because the aura of parental defiance was gone, along with much of Marty's need to sneak around behind their backs so his mom wouldn't throw a fit.

During his afternoon history class, it had been Doc rather than the lecture or even his new and improved family that had preoccupied Marty's thoughts. Yesterday, he'd been relieved to know that things had turned out all right for his friend, that he'd managed to find happiness back in old Hill Valley, and had even figured out a way to invent another time machine. But the more he thought about that brief visit and all the things it left unexplained, the more it began to bother him. He hadn't had time to dwell on it very much yesterday afternoon; he and Jen had been too busy clearing away the wreckage of the DeLorean, especially the parts Marty felt certain Doc would not want anyone else to see. Now, with the teacher droning on about some dull aspect of the Spanish-American War, he had plenty of time, and his reflections were not happy ones.

Doc had said he didn't want Marty to worry, true, but after spending only a couple of minutes to introduce his family and drop off the festival photo, the inventor had gone off again, without a word about where or when he was going — and more importantly, whether or not he would ever come back. The more he thought about it, the more Marty couldn't help but suspect that this had been their last goodbye, and that Doc had taken his family back to the past to stay there, permanently.

Trying not to think about how much that hurt — how could he just pop in, say, "I'm okay, don't worry," then pop right back out again without a word about where he was going or even if he would ever return? — the musician had decided to take his study period in the school library, looking up things about Hill Valley's history to see if there were any accounts of an Emmett Brown in the Nineteenth Century. But he found nothing save some very general texts concerning the city's political and financial past, and notes that additional materials could be found in the archives of the Public Library.

When school was over — on time, for a change; Marty hadn't crossed paths with Strickland once that day, and thus had not been sent to detention as a matter of course — he decided to check out the local branch of the library, but to no avail. The only records he could find of Doc or Clara were nothing really significant. Mentions of her being hired as the new schoolteacher, a brief notice of their marriage, the birth of two sons, a couple of articles about astronomy Clara wrote for the *Telegraph* — that was all. Marty was sure this was deliberate; Doc would have done everything he could to keep any mention of himself out of the records for fear that it might damage history. The musician was actually surprised to find as much as he had.

In fact, the only thing he found really startling about his visit to the library was that the place itself was called Hill Valley West. Back in '79, according to his old memories, it had been renamed the Edna Keehoffer Memorial Library, in remembrance of the woman who had been its head librarian, after her death at age 84. Why this had changed, Marty didn't know, but someday, he intended to find out.

Depressed, he finally headed home when he noticed that it was getting close to suppertime. This revised version of his mom probably wouldn't lecture him for being late, but until he was more comfortable with this strange new world, Marty decided it wouldn't pay to rock the boat any more than was necessary. When he did finally arrive, Lorraine, who was setting the table for the meal, looked up at him with a disappointed expression. "Not detention again?" she asked with only a sigh, not a whine or a rebuke that would inevitably lead to an endless diatribe about how she had been a model student.

Her son was happy to disabuse her of the notion. "No, I was at the library, looking up historical stuff," he explained, glad that for once he really wasn't lying. It might not have been for schoolwork, but at least it was the truth.

His mother's disappointment melted to pleasure. "That's wonderful, honey, I'm glad to see you're taking your classes more seriously this semester. But next time, remember to call if you're going to be home late. I worry about you out in that new truck. Why, just yesterday, I heard that awful Needles boy and his gang nearly drove right into one your father's friends out near Hilldale!"

Marty did his best to disguise an involuntary wince, knowing that *he* had almost been a part of that incident. "I'm being real careful, Mom, I promise. The *last* thing I want is to get the truck ruined by an idiot like Needles."

Lorraine smiled her motherly relief as she finished with the table and headed back into the kitchen. "That's good to hear. We'll be eating in about half an hour, so you should have enough time to wash up. Oh, and there was a letter for you in today's mail," she added, remembering as she spied the envelope on a corner of the open counter between the dining room and the kitchen. "Have you sent copies of your music to a publisher out East?"

"Um..." Marty had intended to do so on Saturday morning, but events of the day had completely driven it from his mind. Even if someone else had found his package and mailed it, there was no way he could have gotten a response so soon. But he didn't want to say yes or no until he saw the letter. When his mother handed it over, he gave it a quick once-over. There was no return address, either on the front or the back, but the cancellation mark was stamped for Princeton, New Jersey, dated October nineteenth. And the address was hand-written, not typed, in a familiar script.

He suddenly had a very good idea who had sent the letter. He cleared his throat. "Uh... I've been making some inquiries, but I haven't sent out any tapes, yet."

"Well, I hope this is one of them saying yes."

"That would be nice," he agreed, even though he knew it was nothing of the sort. He retreated to his room as Lorraine turned to the final preparations for supper.

Once inside with the door shut behind him, Marty ripped open the envelope, giving himself a small paper cut in his haste. The contents were about half a dozen sheets of paper, all of modern origin, and topmost among them was a letter, written on plain white bond with a fine-tipped felt marker. Even so, Marty recognized the clear handwriting as Doc's; no one else he knew wrote quite so legibly, except maybe the school librarians. Eager to read it, he sat on the edge of the bed and turned on the reading lamp. If he had had any doubt that this letter was from Doc, the first thing that fell under his eye confirmed it.

October 18, 1985
July 1, 1893

Only Doc could have written a letter from two different centuries, and only Doc would have bothered to make note of it on the letter itself. Marty smiled to himself as he reflected on this, noting as he did so how many years had passed for his best friend. Had he written this yesterday, in a manner of speaking, just after he'd visited Marty on the train tracks? There was nothing in the date itself to provide an answer, so he sought one in the message itself.

Dear Marty,

If the Post Office remains true to its usual form, you should be receiving this letter early in the last week of October, shortly after your return from 1885. Although it would have been safer and more reliable to mail it within Hill Valley itself, I am sending it from New Jersey so that if necessary, you will have concrete evidence to support the story I am about to tell you. If you haven't already been visited by the authorities concerning the matter of the Libyan terrorists, you will be by mid-week. I'm sure you have no more desire to become involved in a lengthy investigation than I, and I believe I have come up with a cover story that will protect both of us, and facilitate plans I have for my future, and that of my family. In a way, you have already helped me with this, by telling me that you told the police I had gone traveling out of the country in order to explain my absence at this time. You, of course, don't remember doing this, since it hasn't happened yet from your point of view. Perhaps I'm gambling with my future by telling you even this much detail about coming events. But after considering the potential repercussions, I've decided that the risk is minimal, and is far outweighed by the potential benefits.

As you may have already concluded, there is no way I will be able to return directly to 1885. Too much time has passed for me, and although if I were alone, I could come home without arousing suspicion, I cannot suddenly appear with Clara and the boys and hope that no one will wonder where I acquired a wife and family. Although we considered the idea of telling people she is a widow and the boys her sons from that previous marriage, I'm afraid both Jules and Verne are beginning to resemble me too strongly, and they are too young to understand why they would have to lie about their parentage. To keep any possible difficulties to a minimum, it would be better if I returned at a more convenient time several years from now.

The plan Clara and I have devised will kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, providing a cover story not only for my coming absence but also for where I was the night the Libyans will claim I was involved in their illegal activities. Enclosed in this envelope you will find certificates — falsified, of course, but remarkably convincing, I think — documenting my marriage to Clara in 1982 and Jules' birth in September of 1983. There is as yet no certificate for Verne because, according to this carefully constructed (false) timeline, he was born in the early hours of the morning on October 27, 1985, at Clara's home in New Jersey.

On a separate sheet, you will find all the details of the story we constructed concerning our relationship and why we have been living apart these past three years. The cover letter, which you may show to anyone you deem necessary, should provide enough information to satisfy the police and, hopefully, any other government types who might come around asking questions. It was difficult, but I have managed to plant enough false records to establish my whereabouts as well as those of Clara and Jules, should the authorities attempt to trace me to verify the story. If anyone should ask where I am now, tell them I went to visit my family in New Jersey at the address on the cover letter. This will lead them to the false trail I've already planted. If everything works as planned, they should eventually reach the conclusion that I've taken my family into hiding somewhere in Canada to protect them from the threats of obviously irrational terrorists.

After this, I'm afraid that unless an emergency requires it, you won't hear from me again for several years. I'm sorry it must be this way, but the more often I contact you, the more danger there is that someone will accidentally uncover the truth. I know this might be somewhat difficult for you; it was certainly difficult for me, spending these last eight and a half years in exile from my own time. There are so many things I have wanted to tell you about, so many times I wish I could have shared what was happening in my life with the few true friends I've had. Of course, between your own friends and family and Jennifer and schoolwork, I'm sure you won't have much time to miss one eccentric old man, but if you can find a few minutes to keep an eye on my home so it isn't destroyed by vandals (or condemned as abandoned), I would greatly appreciate it.

Thank you in advance for all your assistance. Rest assured that I will check to make sure everything went smoothly, although I won't contact you directly unless I must, not until the time is right. I promise, you will see me in the future.

Your friend in time,

Doc

For a while, Marty sat staring at the letter, not moving while he reflected upon it. All the things he had been thinking all day about the inventor taking off without a decent goodbye had been churning through his head while he read the stuff that was essentially long-distance instructions, offered without so much as a "would you please." He'd felt himself becoming annoyed, even though this was as for his own good as much as Doc's, forewarning him of events he might not have handled quite so well without any help. But when he reached the second to the last paragraph, all the irritation melted away. His own upset had come from a lot of anticipated angst, nothing real. After

all, he'd seen his friend only yesterday, and deep down, he did know that having returned once, Doc would certainly show up again, unable to resist using the new Time Machine he had built.

But what he'd been anticipating, Doc had already lived through for real, stuck for over eight years in a time where he had no friends, and dared not become too close to his own neighbors for fear of destroying the future. He had Clara and his kids, but Marty realized that was probably it, and to no one else could he reveal the truth of his origins. What would it be like, he wondered, to live trapped in such a backward time for so many years with no one to talk to who truly understood what kind of world had made you? And how much worse must it feel to be stuck there with no certain knowledge that you would someday be able to return to the time where you belonged? All in all, Marty realized, he'd been feeling sorry for himself, more than was warranted. Doc was coming back, even if it might take a while before it could happen. That was what he'd wanted to know all afternoon, and now, he had his answer.

Suddenly seized by a powerful remorse and wanting to make amends for his behavior, the musician shuffled through the papers and found the one with the details of the story Doc and Clara had put together to explain the situation and hopefully sidetrack any investigators who would come asking uncomfortable questions. He couldn't change the past, but he could do something about making sure the future turned out all right by memorizing these falsified facts until he could talk about them as calmly as if they were real. Though the knowledge that soon, he *would* need to discuss this with the police and maybe other authority types was a little scary, the idea of pulling the wool over their eyes was kind of exciting — and the more Marty read, the more he knew he could do it.

As always, when the Doc came up with a plan, it was a good one, and this had to be one of his best yet. Marty had no idea how long the inventor had spent working on this set-up, but if he'd missed a trick, it was almost impossible to spot. Not only was the cover story quite elaborate, taking into account virtually any question a prying mind might devise, but the certificates were indeed very convincing, and with the package came an assortment of slightly worn but typical family-type snapshots that looked as if they'd been sent by relatives who wanted to keep a distant loved one completely up to date. The notations of time, place, and who was in the picture were exactly like ones Marty had seen on the backs of photos Doc had taken over the years, which further added to their apparent authenticity. If all this wasn't enough to start convincing people that the story about where Doc was and why was real, nothing would.

After reading through the notes and the letter enough to make sure he had everything perfectly straight, Marty spent a moment studying the pictures, more out of curiosity than a need to know who was who. Where the pictures of Jules had come from, Marty didn't know; he honestly suspected they were images of some other kid Doc had found somewhere, since the boy he'd seen the day before was obviously too old to be at most two, and photography of the 1880s wasn't up to the full-color images the inventor had sent. Then again, if it was Doc taking the pictures, he'd probably found a way to do what supposedly couldn't be done. It was the wedding picture he actually found most interesting, again obviously taken in the late Twentieth Century. Squinting at the background, he saw glimpses of the ocean through what looked to be the window of a small chapel of some sort, and made a bet with himself that it had been taken in one of the seaside towns in Maryland or whichever one of the East Coast states it was that, rather like parts of Nevada, specialized in short-notice weddings because the state's marriage laws were more relaxed than usual. He was happy to find that he was right, but a little sad to realize that his friend had gotten married in both this century and the last, and he had missed the occasion both times.

He knew that Doc had done the right thing, that everything had to be timed just right if people were going to buy this story, but it would have been nice to be there, just once. Of course, Doc could scarcely have come up to him three years ago and said, "Come on, Marty, we're going to New Jersey so I can get married." And he had to admit, he was so exhausted from this impossibly long weekend, if the inventor had showed up last night and asked him to come with him so he could get married three years ago in New Jersey, there was a good chance the youth would've said no. After everything he'd been through during his recent travels through time, he just wanted to stay put in the present for a while, and catch his breath. He'd probably give Doc a hard time about not asking, though, whenever he saw him next. He just hoped it wouldn't be in the next century.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1985

5:45 P.M. PST

The police, it turned out, were easily convinced that the Libyans had simply picked a convenient scapegoat when they'd named Doc as an accessory in whatever activities had demolished the Fox Foto at the Lone Pine Mall. For years, the inventor had been a favorite target for people attempting to wheedle out of fines and citations when the circumstances looked like something he might have done. But even the police knew that though Brown had a reputation for blowing up and burning down and otherwise decimating his own property, not once had he caused harm to that of others. And since they hadn't had a single complaint about noise or other annoying activities from Doc's neighbors for well over two weeks, they were happy to accept the letter and the explanation of the scientist's whereabouts as proof that he was far from town, and the terrorists were lying. It was the Feds who were harder to convince.

The following Thursday was Hallowe'en, and somehow, Marty had gotten stuck dealing with the endless stream of trick-or-treaters. His parents were at some big book-signing party for George's new novel, Dave was working late, as usual, Linda was stuck at the boutique until nine, and the high school dance for the holiday wasn't until Saturday night. Had it been a weekend, Marty might've been grumpy about being given the job, but on a school night, it gave him an excuse to put off doing his homework, especially the algebra assignment. The rest of the day's load had actually been pretty easy, but his head just refused to click on higher math, no matter how hard he tried to understand it. Doc had helped him make a little progress in that area, but with the inventor gone — probably for the rest of his senior year — Marty would have to find a way to manage a passing grade on his own.

Feeling a little sorry for himself and wishing that there was some way he could contact his friend whenever he was, just to get a few minutes' tutoring help now and then, Marty didn't spring up to get the doorbell on the first ring. When whoever it was leaned into it a second time, as if there were no tomorrow, he threw down his pencil and stalked over to answer, fighting a strong impulse to snap, "Trick!" into the face of whichever brat was so impatient.

When whoever it was leaned even more heavily against the doorbell just as Marty arrived, the youth yanked open the door with considerable annoyance. "All right, all right, keep your mask or hood or whatever on!" he exclaimed, exasperated, as he reached for the bowl of candy with one hand and pulled open the front door with the other. "What's matter, did somebody spread the word that we're giving away solid gold candy b—whoa!"

Marty's surprise came not from the shock of seeing someone in a particularly horrifying costume, nor from finding a horde of kids too big for the amount of candy he had left in the bowl. It didn't even come from discovering some of the overgrown local hoods — such as Dirk Tannen — who, though far beyond the age for even the oldest trick or treaters, occasionally took it into their heads to go around town causing trouble on Halloween. Having done it for so many years as kids, they apparently felt it was now an established tradition, something that should be faithfully observed and preserved for future generations. Just knowing who the next generation of the Tannen family was going to be — Griff, not yet Dirk's son, but destined to be sometime in the future, since Dirk was the only child of an only child — Marty hoped that between now and 2015, something would happen to change that future and spare the world the aggravation of yet another Tannen bully.

His impatient guest, however, was neither a child nor a Tannen nor any of the other varieties of punks who currently haunted Hill Valley. It was a man of about Doc's height, though otherwise not at all like the inventor in appearance. Sandy haired, hazel eyed, handsome in a classic sense, the fellow looked to be somewhere in his thirties, if Marty was any judge, maybe ten years older than his brother Dave, maybe a little less. And though he was wearing a suit, he in no way resembled the stiff Marty's brother had become in this rewritten reality. For one thing, he had a much better barber, an impeccable sense of fashion, and a lot better taste in clothes — more expensive, too, Marty wagered. Although he had no concept of such things via his original memories, the ones that had been settling into his brain in fits and starts over the past week included ones in which the McFly house was occasionally littered with fashion magazines, the detritus of his sister Linda's course work in design and decorating at Hill Valley Community College. She was still a year away from graduating from the technical school, and when she wasn't in school or off with one of her half-dozen boyfriends, she was either working a part time job at a small but very chic clothing boutique, or was reading an endless parade of things like *Vogue* and *GQ*. Once in a while, in fits of boredom, Marty picked up the things and leafed through them, and thus had begun to develop some sense of what was considered stylish, what was the height of good taste, what was just a passing trend, and suchlike. If this guy didn't have his finger on the pulse of the world of men's fashion, he sure knew someone who did.

Which led the younger man to several possible conclusions. "If you're looking for Linda, she's working tonight and won't be back until ten. If you're after Dave, he's still at the office and God only knows when he'll be back. And if you're trying to find my folks, the book signing bash is at the mall, not here."

The stranger smiled pleasantly, but there was something about it that made Marty feel uneasy. It might've been because the man now realized he had come to the wrong address and was looking for a graceful way to back out, but the youth couldn't help but feel the guy was now taking a similar inventory of Marty, checking him out for reasons the musician didn't really want to know. "No, actually, I'm looking for you," he said, his light baritone voice as pleasant as his smile. "You're Marty McFly, right?"

The fact that he knew this and seemed to have no trace of doubt that he was in the right place speaking to the right person definitely stirred the teen's suspicions. Granted, if the man knew that this was the McFly residence — something that could easily be confirmed by looking it up in any Hill Valley phone book — and if he knew the names of the family's five members, deducing that he was Marty would be simple, especially after the rundown of everyone else's whereabouts Marty himself had just given him. Still, the man looked totally unfamiliar. Marty was not acquainted with him, he was (probably) too old to be one of Linda's boyfriends, didn't look stuffy enough to be one of Dave's co-workers, and wasn't anyone he'd ever seen hanging around with his folks. Besides, he'd said he was looking for Marty, specifically, and that was enough to put him on the defensive.

"That depends," the musician said, knowing it was a tired old cliché that anyone who planned to lie about their identity supposedly used and was thus as good as an admission of who he was. "Who the hell are you?"

The man reached into an inner pocket of his suitcoat; for a brief moment, Marty had an equally clichéd image of him hauling out a gun and blowing him dead, right there on the doorstep. This wasn't, he realized, an entirely inappropriate reaction. For all he knew, something he'd done in dealing with the cops had changed the future of which Doc had warned him. He might very well be looking at some real accomplice of the Libyans out to gain revenge on him for simply being involved in a plan that had fallen apart. When he saw the guy lift up one lapel of his jacket to reach inside, he noticed a suspicious shadow that might have been the outline of a concealed weapon, revealed for the briefest fraction of an instant. Now definitely nervous, he stepped back, preparing to slam the door and hit the floor the moment he saw anything less innocent than a business card pulled out.

But the man didn't reach for the whatever it was; instead, he brought forth a black leather object about the size of a billfold and flipped it open for Marty's inspection.

"I'm Lee Stetson, an agent for the federal government," he explained, allowing the younger man to check out the identification badge as thoroughly as he felt was necessary. "Ordinarily, we don't get involved in police business, but there's a growing concern with foreign terrorism within the US, and we were notified of the incident that happened last weekend at the Lone Pine Mall."

"You mean the wackos who totaled the Fox Foto?" Marty said innocently, not quite sure if he'd ever heard of the particular government agency for whom this Stetson person worked. Other than that, the badge certainly looked official, and Doc had warned him that he might have some hard explaining to do. Since the Hill Valley cops certainly hadn't qualified in that regard, it only stood to reason that the difficulties might come from the Feds. "Yeah, I heard about that, but I wasn't there."

"Are you sure?"

The youth scowled. He didn't like having his honesty questioned, especially when he knew he was being dishonest. "Yes, I'm sure about that. You think I can't remember where I was only a week ago?"

"I don't know," the agent admitted. "I'll admit, your record doesn't exactly say you're the kind of kid who'd get involved with terrorists, but you might be the kind of kid who could get suckered into something by a friend who didn't tell you the whole story."

The scowl darkened. "Oh, so you're looking for me to nail Doc, is that it?"

Stetson shrugged. "No, I'm just looking for the truth. But you have to admit, it's a little strange that those Libyans didn't have any trouble describing you if they supposedly never met you."

Marty had no ready answer for that unfortunately very astute observation; luckily, a group of costumed kids came loping up the driveway at that moment, chattering away noisily and giving him both an excuse not to answer and to think as fast and as hard as he could. When the kids left, Stetson waited until they were out of earshot before speaking.

"Can we take this inside?" he suggested. "I don't think you want to be talking about this right out in the open any more than I do."

"If you're gonna insist," Marty answered, having come up with a suitable response. "But I don't really see any reason to drag this out. Everybody in town thinks Doc is some kind of dangerous lunatic; that's why those jerks must've picked him as a scapegoat to hide behind when whatever they were really up to got screwed up. If they know Doc, they know I'm his friend; I've never bothered to hide it. And if they want to make their story sound convincing, they probably went out of their way to find out what I look like and where I live and how many times I get kept after school for detention. Isn't that what you'd do?"

The agent made a gesture of surrender. "Probably. But can you prove where you were that night?"

Marty rolled his eyes and made a sound of pure exasperation. "Yeah, I've gone through all this with the cops. My mom's already given a statement that she knew for a fact that I was home and in bed when that mess at the mall came down. And as far as Doc goes, I've got plenty of proof that he wasn't even in California for over a week before the Libyans came to town. Didn't the police show you that stuff?"

"They showed me your mother's affidavit and their copies of the letters from Doctor Brown, but I'd like to see the real things, if you don't mind. And I'd like to get a closer look at his house. You told the police you're taking care of it for him while he's out of town, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but what do you think you're gonna find there that they already didn't? Coded messages from the head terrorists?"

Stetson smiled. It wasn't really a condescending expression, but Marty wasn't quite willing to allow that it might be genuinely friendly. "No, that would make my job too easy. What I'm actually looking for is some stolen plutonium. There was a break-in at a nuclear research facility a couple weeks ago, and these Libyans are part of the same bunch who claimed responsibility for the theft. They say they gave it to Doctor Brown to build them a bomb, and if there's any trace of it there, this could be a more dangerous and complicated situation than I think either of us would like."

"Doc would never do that," Marty insisted, able to be utterly honest because, though he knew what the terrorists had indeed done with the plutonium, he also knew Doc, and knew that the scientist was an honest, decent person, no matter what rumor said of him.

The agent shrugged. "I'd like to believe that — it'd sure make my job here one hell of a lot easier. But I don't know him, I don't know you, and frankly, some of the things we've turned up about your friend have been enough to make some of the more paranoid minds in national security a little nervous."

"Why, because he burned down his house twenty-five years ago?"

"In a sense. I don't know if you realize just how much money Brown's burned through since 1950..."

Marty knew exactly where this was headed. "Yeah, I know he's lost a lot of money over the years. But it's not like he's got a gambling obsession or drug habit and is desperate for more money to keep 'em going. He's a scientist, and he's spent most of it on experiments."

"His own money?" Stetson sounded doubtful.

It was Marty's turn to shrug. "He likes being his own boss, and some of his ideas've been a little... well, out there. No lab was gonna fund 'em, and he really thought they were worth trying." It was the truth — most of it, at least; Marty wasn't about to tell this guy that Doc never even considered taking his ideas for time travel to an outside lab. Though they undoubtedly could have afforded it much more easily, he knew now just how much Doc would have worried over the possible misuse of something he had invented, especially something with such far-reaching potential

for destruction. Even though it was an honest answer, Marty didn't like admitting anything that made it sound as if he, too, believed that Doc was crazy.

In this case, however, he suddenly realized that this might work very well to his advantage. Stetson was nodding, like someone who understood the idea of having a lovable relative you didn't quite want to acknowledge should be in a home. "That's what I heard from the police. But I still need to see the place for myself. If there's nothing to hide, I'll check it out and be on my way."

"And what if you see something you don't like?"

The agent was also honest. "Depends on what I see. What I'm looking for, specifically, is plutonium or any indication that Doctor Brown has been involved in weapons construction. Since he's not here and the police felt you might have a key to get in, I thought approaching you might be easiest. Do you know where he is, by the way?"

"In New Jersey, last I heard. His wife works at some private school there, and she was just about to have a baby. He wanted to be there for that."

"Then why doesn't he move there, or bring her here? That sounds kind of strange, if you ask me."

Marty made a vague gesture. "That's Doc. Clara's got a contract with the school that she can't break, it's not over until next spring, and he had a contract with HVU when they met. They didn't want to stiff the schools, but they didn't want to wait, either, 'cause... well, Doc's not getting any younger, I guess. He said he decided to stay here after he retired from HVU a couple years ago 'cause they want to get a place here when she's free, and moving all his junk back and forth would be a real pain." He sighed, to add dramatic effect to the story he was weaving. Parts of it were based on the story Doc had already given him, about the long-distance marriage and their work obligations, but he'd added the part about moving, thinking it sounded good and would further enhance the tale. "I can't imagine living on opposite coasts like that, especially with kids. It'd almost be like pretending you aren't married. I couldn't do it."

"Neither could I," was Lee's earnest opinion, offered without the knowledge that in only a year or two, he himself would do something very similar, for real. For now, he continued in blithe ignorance. "We've checked the address you gave the police, though, and haven't found him — or anyone else in his family. The place looks like someone packed in a hurry, and *not* to go to a hospital. There're no hospital admission records for a Clara Brown, no hotel reservations or check-in for anyone with any of their names, anywhere in the country — a little strange, don't you think?"

"No," Marty disagreed. "If you heard some terrorists were trying to finger you in some wild bomb plot like this, wouldn't you try to disappear for a while? Especially if your wife was just about to have a baby?"

The agent considered the question for a moment or three. "I suppose I would — but I might do it either way, because I was innocent and wanted to lay low until I could prove it, or because I was guilty and wanted to hide so I wouldn't get caught. I know what *I* would do, but I don't know what your friend would do."

The younger man ground his teeth, feeling as if he was beating his head against a stone wall. "Maybe not, but doesn't the law say *innocent until proven guilty*?"

"It does, but if you're a field agent and you want to stay alive, you're usually better off assuming people are guilty until you know they're innocent. It's cynical, but it's saved my neck more than once."

He let loose a breath that was a mixture of exasperated and reluctantly understanding. "You may not believe me, Marty, but I'd actually be very happy to find that what you're telling me is true. Anything else would mean that much more work for me, trouble for you for interfering with a Federal investigation, and more headaches than I think either of us really want. Just because your records show you get in trouble at school — usually for being late, which I don't think is any big crime — doesn't mean you're a bad kid. I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and go into this with an open mind, but I *am* going to get into Doctor Brown's house, with or without your help. And if it's without and I do find something suspicious, it's not gonna go easy for you, I promise you that. So which way would you like it? The hard way or the easy way?"

After what had happened to him the last time he'd heard that question, only a few days ago (but what seemed like ages ago) in Biff's idealized revision of Hill Valley, Marty's initial reaction to those words was an unpleasant coldness in the gut, but he had to allow that Stetson was right. If the Feds had what they felt was reasonable cause to search Doc's place, they wouldn't have any trouble getting a warrant to do so legally. Though the cops had pretty much come to the conclusion that the scientist was basically weird but harmless, the local judges were another matter.

Of the three who had power to grant search warrants, one was the brother of Sidney Strickland, the stiff-necked vice-principal of Hill Valley High; Gerald Strickland was a younger carbon copy of Marty's arch-nemesis. He had as much respect for Doc as did his brother, which was none whatsoever. Another, Raymond Morris, was the descendant of Hill Valley's first County Judge. He took tremendous pride in his exalted lineage, and had no tolerance for anyone or anything who, by his standards, tarnished the image of his beloved home town. The third, Sharon Cromwell, was the daughter of the former Marian Ryman, the woman who, as a teenager, had delivered the also teenaged Doc the ultimatum to choose between her and science. Having lost in the decision, Marian had never again had a kind word to say for her former boyfriend, and her daughter carried the family grudge like a badge of honor. Of the three, Morris was the only one who would ever consider cutting the inventor a break, but in a case like this, Marty was morally certain that if asked, they would all hand Stetson a search warrant without a second thought. It would be easier if Marty did what he could to help rather than hinder the agent. Cooperation might convince him that everything was on the up and up, and if it was just the two of them, Marty might be able to do things to divert him, should he come across something he considered suspicious.

Upon arrival at 1646 John F. Kennedy Drive, Stetson had a strong and immediate opinion of the place: "This isn't a house, it's a garage."

Marty shrugged innocently as he found the key to open the door. When Doc had warned him of coming troubles with the authorities and that he wanted his young friend to take care of his place while he was gone — not merely as a fib for the benefits of the nosy; the scientist did not plan to return for several years, and did not want to come back and find his home either trashed by vandals, gutted by thieves, or demolished by the city as abandoned — Marty had taken the spare key from under the mat and put it on his key ring, figuring it would make his business with his mentor's home look more official and convincing if he didn't need to fish around looking for the emergency spare whenever he visited.

"It's where Doc lives," Marty said simply as he unlocked the entrance. "You can look it up in any phone book, if you don't believe me. Didn't all your undercover research tell you that, anyway?"

"Yes," the agent admitted, "but I thought it meant an apartment above a garage, not an actual garage. Where I'm from, this wouldn't be legal."

The youth shrugged again. "This is California. We do things different out here. The place is kind of a mess, right now, so you might wanna watch your step."

When the lights were turned on, that truth was revealed in all its glory. After trashing the big speaker and knocking over the shelves opposite it, Marty hadn't had the time to clean it up, not then nor in any of the days after. It was the huge speaker and amp, in fact, that had more than convinced the Hill Valley cops that the Libyans were just using Doc as a convenient scapegoat rather than an actual accomplice. It was just the kind of stupid, nutsy thing that most people figured a mad scientist would do: silly, utterly pointless, and therefore completely ineffective. Like them, Stetson noticed the amp and blown speaker first — being as big as it was, it was hard to miss — and like them, he asked the inevitable question. "What the hell was *that* for?"

Even though he'd answered the same query before, Marty felt faintly embarrassed. "Something Doc made for me 'cause I kept complaining that my band would sound 'way better if we could only find a system with enough juice to really let people hear the whole sound. I guess it didn't quite work out the way either of us wanted."

At this point, the cops had laughed, and everything they saw thereafter had been colored by that initial proof that Emmett Brown was certifiable. Stetson, however, smiled, but did not laugh. Instead, he set down the briefcase he'd brought with him, and from it removed a small boxy device with a connected wand. Marty wondered what it was only until he turned it on. It began to click softly, a crackly sound the musician immediately recognized as the noise produced by a Geiger counter. It was very quiet at the moment, probably registering nothing more than typical background radiation from things like smoke detectors, but that he'd brought it at all was alarming. The police hadn't

done this, maybe because they'd already believed Doc was too crazy to be involved even before they stepped through the door. The agent clearly had no such preconceptions.

"Y'know, Doc probably has some junk in here that'll set off a thing like that," Marty pointed out helpfully, hoping to put Stetson off the trail just in case he did come across something damning the inventor had left behind. "He's worked on a lot of experiments just since I've known him, and nuclear physics was some of his favorite stuff."

"So I hear," the agent said distractedly, paying more attention to the meter. "But I'm not looking for anything legitimate, just stuff that's illegal. Now, what the heck is *this*?"

In a box crammed under one of the many workbenches, Marty spotted a distinctive geodesic shape that he knew quite well from a time both a few weeks and thirty years ago. He smiled. "That's Doc's mind-reading stuff. He tried to find a way to do it back in the '50s, but he could never make the thing work."

"And he kept it all this time?"

Marty shrugged amiably. "The Doc's a packrat; he never gets rid of anything if he might be able to use it again, someday. You aren't picking up radiation from that, are you?"

"Not from that," Stetson confirmed after a moment of rummaging around through the box. "From this." He pulled out an old wind-up alarm clock, one that probably had a broken spring that Doc planned to repair, someday. "Looks like it's got a radium face to make it glow in the dark. They don't make stuff with that, anymore."

"It's not illegal, is it?" Marty wondered, worried.

But Stetson shook his head. "Not to own old stuff with it, just to manufacture new ones." As he put the thing back and pushed the box under the bench again, he glanced around the oversized garage. "Was Brown obsessed with punctuality or something? I don't think I've ever seen so many clocks in one place outside the Time Museum in Rockford, Illinois."

"Not punctuality, just time. He wrote a couple of papers about it back in college, the work he did to get his PhDs. Unless you want to go deaf for a while, you want to make sure you're out of here before it hits the top of the hour. We're coming up on seven, and that's enough to get pretty darned loud when everything goes off at once."

The agent favored him with an expression that clearly wondered what kind of a nut this scientist really was. Good. Though Marty normally deplored that reaction, for the moment, it meant that Stetson was buying into just the kind of mindset that would work in Doc's favor.

And he got to hear the symphony of the hours more than once before he was done; the agent's search was so thorough, it took him until well after nine before he finished with the workshop half of the garage. As he went over every inch of it, he asked questions about the bits and pieces of projects and experiments Doc had scattered about. Most — especially when Marty gave simple answers that didn't really explain the entire picture — further convinced Lee that the local police had been right in their assessment of Brown and his possible involvement with anything as sophisticated as the construction of nuclear weapons. He even came across a note and some small gadget that had been one of Doc's early attempts at a time control mechanism, and Marty — now able to recognize it for what it was, something he could not have done less than a week ago — told him exactly what it was, or what he thought it was. Stetson reacted precisely as predicted, with utter disbelief, and happily moved on to search the portion of the garage that served Doc as living quarters.

This side, being less cluttered, went faster. It was coming up on eleven and Marty was sure the worst was over — until the agent neared the bed and the musician remembered just where he had stowed the few remaining parts of the DeLorean he had salvaged from the train tracks and kept, just in case Doc might return and want them, someday. Though he had removed all the labels for things like "Last Time Departed," it occurred to him that since the Time Machine had indeed once functioned on plutonium and later on fusion power, some parts might still have a strong radioactive trace.

He was thinking fast and furious, trying to come up with some wild but plausible excuse to explain where such radiation might have come from, but after doing a pass around the bed and coming up clean, Stetson glanced under it, saw nothing but what he interpreted as more junk, and continued on. The counter made not a single extra click,

to Marty's huge relief. When he'd refitted the system to run off the Mr. Fusion device, Doc must have gotten rid of anything still radioactive, probably for his own safety. Though Stetson was undoubtedly trained to notice anything suspicious, apparently he saw not a single thing to set off any such feeling. Marty had to make a supreme effort not to let loose a massive sigh of relief, which would probably have warned the agent that he'd missed something important. As he continued his search, Lee shook his head, puzzled.

"What did Doctor Brown really *do* for a living, anyway?" he asked. "We have him listed as a scientist, and we know he used to teach physics, but his bank accounts are pretty slim, and he's not getting much from Social Security and his university pension. How's he managing to stay afloat?"

Marty was genuinely surprised. "You mean, you guys don't know? Can't you just get his records from the IRS?"

Stetson smiled crookedly. "Officially, no, not without the right warrants. Unofficially... yeah, we know what he tells the IRS, but that doesn't mean he isn't pulling in extra cash on the side — from people like the Libyans."

Marty frowned. "Doc *didn't* take any money from those bastards," he insisted, getting a little annoyed with that repeated implication. "If he had, would he be living in a place like this?"

The agent made an equivocal gesture. "He might if he'd been promised a reward he never got. Terrorists will do just about anything to get what they want, and if that includes saying they'd pay big money they never planned to deliver, that's what they'd do. If you lived in a place like this, wouldn't you at least think about it if someone offered you a lot of cash, tax-free and completely off the record, for one job?"

"Maybe I would," the musician replied honestly. "But not Doc. He's not that kind of a guy. Sure, he's had a lot of money and he's lost a lot of money over the years, but he never goes looking for quick fixes and other people to bail him out. It's just not the way he works, not the way he thinks. If somebody came up and waved a fortune under his nose to do something he thought was wrong, he wouldn't do it. He might *think* about it if they asked him to do something he thought was interesting, a real challenge, but he still wouldn't do it if it was wrong, and either way, he probably wouldn't even notice the money."

One of the agent's sandy-brown brows arched as he paused his search to look up at Marty. "And he wouldn't consider building a nuclear bomb a challenge?"

Marty snorted. "Hell, no. My sixth grade science teacher, Mister Gerbick, told us how you could do that. He was some hippie anti-war protester back in the '60s and '70s, and he said the group he belonged to used to spread the instructions around so people would know how easy it was, get afraid, and then go after the government to make 'em stop building bombs. If you can get your hands on the nuclear stuff, the rest of it's a snap. The Feds don't already know that?"

Stetson went back to work. "We know it — though I wish we didn't. Being aware of just how easy it is to find out how to build nuclear devices makes a lot of people in national security *very* nervous."

"Yeah, I guess it would. Doc *could* do it, but he just wouldn't. He has other ways of making money. Ever since he retired from HVU, he subs at the high school once in a while when the regular physics teacher's out, he does research projects for the university and some of the businesses around town, and he helps out with testing things in development at a couple of local factories. He's got an accountant who keeps all his records for him, a guy called Norm Pitlik. He gives Doc a rate on his bookkeeping and tax work, and Doc does odd jobs for him — y'know, fixing his car, doing electrical work around his house, that sort of thing. You can check with him if you want someone who knows all the details of Doc's books. Doc says it's more than enough for him to get by, it's letting him save up for the house he wants to get when his wife and kids move out here next spring, and he's happy. Is that a crime?"

Stetson shook his head as he finished his inspection of the kitchen area. "No, but stealing that plutonium was, and so's aiding and abetting terrorists. But I haven't picked up even a hint of radioactivity from anything besides the clocks and the smoke detectors. He doesn't have another lab or office or apartment somewhere, does he?"

"If he does, it's a couple hundred miles from here — but before you start looking, he doesn't, trust me. Doc lived here because it's paid for, the taxes are practically zilch, and he didn't want to waste the money on stuff he doesn't need, not when he's got a family to help support and take care of."

The agent harrumphed softly, studying the gadgetry on the workbench near the door, the dog feeding machine, the breakfast cooking gizmos, all the other wacky Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions that were delightful examples of the inventor's sense of whimsy, but also a large part of why so many people in town were convinced that he was nuts. As he watched Stetson studying the things, Marty could see in his expression a growing sensation that what he was dealing with was a harmless kook whom the Libyans had tried to use as a front for their scheme because his skills made it plausible that he could indeed do what they supposedly asked, and also because his disreputable status in local society would make the rest of Hill Valley not give a damn if anything happened to him. Marty willed the man to put all these things together in the way he wanted, and reach the conclusion that Doc couldn't possibly have been a part of their plot.

"You say he's in New Jersey with his wife?" Stetson asked after putting away the Geiger counter.

"Last I heard," Marty confirmed, not sure if this was good or bad. "His wife's supposed to have a baby soon, and he left a few weeks ago so he could be there. He missed out when his son was born 'cause he was stuck teaching his last term at HVU and they wouldn't let him take leave that early in the semester. He sent me a letter after he got there — didn't the cops show you the copy they made?"

"Yes, but I'd like to see the originals, and anything else you might have to help substantiate what you've been telling me."

Marty grunted softly, as if in surrender. "Yeah, sure, I think I left everything here after the cops were finished with it. Hang on...."

He went to a drawer in one of the workbenches and rummaged around it more than was necessary, pretending to be looking for the letter. In the process, he pulled out an assortment of other papers and pieces of junk, among them the photos and certificates Doc had sent to help with the charade. As predicted, the agent's interest was drawn to them like a magnet; he picked them out of the pile and began to examine them even before Marty handed him the letter.

As Stetson began perusing the items, the phone rang, thoroughly startling Marty, who hadn't been expecting any calls. To make the notion that he was taking care of the place more believable, however, he answered it, doing his best to seem casual about it. He had to make a supreme effort to maintain that cool when his calm, "Hello?" was answered by a very familiar, "Marty, is that you?"

At the very last instant, Marty managed to catch himself before blurting out, "Doc!" He wasn't sure if this was something Stetson should know, and until he was, he didn't want the agent to know anything out of the ordinary was going on. "Uh... yeah, it's me. Where the heck *are* you?"

He could hear the inventor's faint smile in his voice. "Somewhere you don't need to know about, but a place I'm sure the Feds will pin down, one way or another, later on. Are they there right now?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"The same way I knew to write that letter. But after I did it, I thought it might be helpful to leave at least a few other traces, so no one gets the idea I've just fallen off the face of the Earth. It's fortunate that I'd already spent most of October out of town, and didn't interact with anyone but you when I *was* there."

Marty couldn't help but smile, knowing the sort of rumors that had begun to circulate concerning Doc's absence. "Yeah, Old Man Peabody's already started his 'abducted by aliens' bit."

Stetson, who had been listening to the conversation while he went over the things from the drawer, stopped and looked up. "Is that Doctor Brown?"

Marty waved him off, hoping he wouldn't persist. For the moment, he didn't. "Typical," Doc was saying on the other end of the line. "But useful. I can't tell you what I know you're going to tell the agents — hopefully, I'm not changing history by contacting you, though I know they haven't tapped my phone lines, so this is safe enough for a few minutes — but let's just say that given the situation with the Libyans and the threat they pose to my family, if I were living in that time frame, I'd be inclined to 'disappear' for a while, until I thought things were safe again. I don't believe I specifically mentioned it in my letter."

The musician nodded, even though it couldn't be seen or heard. "Not exactly, but that's what I already figured. How long is that gonna be?"

The inventor's sigh was genuine. "At least a few years, like I said. Not because I'm actually afraid of the Libyans, but because I need to come back at a time when my family won't be considered a curiosity because the kids are older than they have any right to be. I just wanted to make sure you understood this, since you won't be seeing or hearing from me again for a while. I would've discussed it with you when we visited on the morning of the 27th, but we didn't dare stay for long, not with the risk of attracting attention, and I hadn't actually considered the entire situation and all its problems at the time."

Something in Marty's chest dropped like a stone. "So that's it?" he asked after clearing his throat.

There was a note of confident reassurance in the answering, "No. I *will* be back, Marty, but I can't tell you exactly when. Not only is it dangerous for you to know too much about the future, but before long, you're going to have plenty of other things to keep your life busy. I wish I could be around to see it, but... well, that's what I get for dawdling and hanging in mid-air for too long during a lightning storm. Unless I've created problems with my interference, everything's going to turn out fine. Just don't let them plow down my place until I've had a chance to take care of it on my own."

"I won't," Marty promised. "You guys be careful."

"Always. Take care, Marty. See you in the future." And with that, the connection closed.

When Stetson heard the impending goodbyes, he reached out to grab the phone from Marty's hand, but too late. He frowned. "You should've let me talk to him," he said sternly, perfectly aware who had called. "Did he tell you where he is?"

Marty shook his head, feeling depressed. "No, but I imagine you have ways of finding that out."

"Not if I don't know where the call originated and didn't get a trace on it. Did he say when he's returning?"

"No. He's not planning on coming back for a while." Though he could feel his chest tighten as he spoke the words, he thought quickly, devising as good an explanation as he could muster. "I guess he heard about this business with the Libyans, and he's afraid they might try hurting his family, so he wants to kinda disappear for a while. I think he's planning to leave the country, take a trip around the world until things blow over." That sounded like a reasonable plan of action; it was what Marty would have done or tried to do under similar circumstances.

Stetson's frowned deepened for a moment, then lightened. "Then we should be able to find him when he passes through customs."

It was the younger man's turn to scowl. "Why? I keep telling you, Doc didn't *do* anything! He's just trying to protect his family. Is that a crime?"

"No, but I think we could do a better job of that. We have witness protection programs—"

Marty wrinkled his nose in disdain. "Oh, yeah, right, and would Doc qualify for that? What did he witness? Besides, I've heard plenty of stories about just how effective those programs aren't. There was a guy who used to live next door to one of my friends who turned up dead on his front porch when he went out to get the paper one morning. Turns out he'd been relocated here after he testified against some bunch of hoods back in New York, they'd found him and got rid of him not even a year after the Feds put him here for 'protection.' Why can't you guys just leave Doc alone? Do you think he really *did* try to help those wackos build a bomb?"

After a moment's pause, Stetson shook his head. "No, I don't. I've been through the labs of other homegrown bombers before this, and there were always certain things to indicate either a tendency toward violence or a dissatisfaction with some part of the government. I haven't seen shred one of that, here, or in any of the records I studied before I came to Hill Valley. Your friend may be eccentric, but he's not a criminal. Still, I can't really close the books on this without talking to Brown directly."

"Well, I'd love to arrange that for you, but I can't," Marty snapped, feeling irritated and frustrated and several other things he couldn't quite define. "Hell, I can't even do it for myself! I don't know where Doc is right now, he didn't tell me where he's planning to go or when he's gonna get there or when he's coming back. I wish he had, but he didn't, and I'm stuck waiting, just like the rest of you." The vehemence with which he said that startled even Marty, and definitely left an impression on the agent.

"Sorry," he said with surprising sincerity. "In this job, you sometimes get so focused on one goal, you forget how other people are affected by it. How did the two of you wind up being friends, anyway? You're nowhere near the same age, and everyone else in town thinks Brown's the resident crackpot."

The musician ran a hand through his hair, trying to calm nerves that had been suddenly rattled when he'd realized that it really might be years before he'd see his mentor again — if ever. "Yeah, I know," he grumbled. "I used to think that, too, until I got to know Doc. When I was eight, we met by accident — literally — and I guess after that, we got to be friends 'cause he was there and willing to listen and do stuff with me when my folks weren't, which was 'way too much of the time. That's why I know Doc would *never* have agreed to do anything that would hurt people, not even if he was flat broke and had to live on the streets instead. He's scared for his family, right now, and he's trying to do the best he can to protect them. You've been to the police, you've heard the way they talk about Doc, what they think about him. If that was the way the authorities treated you, would *you* go to them, trust them to make sure a bunch of terrorists wouldn't get to you?"

Lee thought about it for a moment or two, then shook his head. "No, I guess I wouldn't. There're people in my own agency I wouldn't trust to watch my back. But I wish you'd at least let me talk with him on the phone. I believe his involvement in this whole plot is completely involuntary — meaning the terrorists are trying to set him up as a fall guy — but I would've liked to hear it straight from him, and officially offered our assistance in seeing to it that he and his family don't become targets for retribution."

"Maybe," Marty agreed rather listlessly, more concerned about his own situation than any terrorist threat to Doc, since he knew his friend was safe. "But he hung up, not me. And Doc wouldn't've accepted the offer, I can guarantee it. He's used to standing on his own two feet."

"That's pretty much what his files show." For a minute or so, Stetson said nothing, doing a final review of the papers he'd been given and measuring what he could see of the younger man's sincerity. To Marty's good fortune, he misinterpreted his evident dismay as concern for the inventor's life, not distress over the thought of not being able to contact him for an unknown amount of time. Though he sometimes gave the impression of being hardnosed, everything by the book, the agent was actually less of a stickler than appearances belied. Since he'd been given this assignment several days before — a matter of convenience, since he happened to be in Los Angeles just finishing up another job — he'd spent the time finding out as much as he could about Emmett Brown, Hill Valley, and anything else that could shed light on the situation. And aside from the records of the terrorists themselves, he had found absolutely nothing to support their claim that he was a collaborator in their illegal activities.

The agent sighed. In recent years, he had dealt with more than his share of similar situations, where the real criminals did their best to divert attention from themselves by placing it on others who were wholly innocent. Somehow, though he had a feeling that things weren't precisely as they seemed, he also felt that Marty was telling the truth, insofar as the most important part of this equation was concerned. With no trace of the plutonium to be found, nor even a hint that something so powerfully radioactive had been within a mile of the place, Lee was inclined to accept the teenager's explanations. Still, he couldn't just dismiss it without making sure his job was complete.

"Look," he told Marty at his earnest best, which he hoped the youth would accept, "I have to admit, I haven't seen a single thing to support what the terrorists told the police. Which means I get to go grill them in person and see if I can find out what really did happen to that plutonium — *if* they were the ones who actually stole it. But before I do that, I have to make sure I've dotted all my i's and crossed all my t's here. Does Doctor Brown have any vehicles — cars, trucks, whatever?"

Marty nodded. "He's got an old step-van he uses for his work; he keeps it next to the loading dock of the warehouse on the opposite side of the alley. He still owns that hunk of land, and they let him park there in trade for him not raising the rent. That's one of the ways he makes money — not a ton, 'cause he hates being a landlord, but it's steady. Didn't you check with the DMV about that?"

Stetson smiled crookedly. "Actually, no, that's the one thing I forgot. I'm trusting you to play straight with me."

Which, Marty presumed, meant that the agent would go and check afterward to make sure nothing had been hidden. "Then before you look it up, I may as well tell you Doc owned a DeLorean, too."

The hazel eyes widened with surprise; Marty was sure he knew why, and offered an explanation before it could be requested. "Doc sort of collected sportscars as an investment, though he only ever owned one at a time. A couple years ago, he sold his last car, a '58 Corvette, and got a *real* good price for it. What he didn't sock away, he used to buy the DeLorean. I guess he wanted to have something he could drive from here to Jersey a couple times a year and not have to worry about it getting scuffed up and ruining the investment. But it's gone, now."

"He drove it to New Jersey?"

Marty shook his head. It was amazing, he thought as the words came to him, just how easy it was to come up with convincing lies when one had to. He wished it could only be this easy when the situation wasn't quite so important. "He let me drive it while he was out of town, and Sunday, I wrecked it on the train tracks that cross Elmdale Road over near Hilldale. I guess nobody reported it to the police, 'cause they never came around to check it out, but I'll bet the railroad has a report on it. Doc's gonna kill me when he gets back...!" He winced dramatically to add to the effect.

Stetson was sympathetic. "Maybe not. Accidents happen, and that might just be the concrete proof I've been looking for."

The younger man blinked, puzzled. "What, pieces of a wrecked car? They're probably squashed into scrap at the junkyard by now. There was hardly anything left, nothing in any shape worth putting back together."

"Not that. But by any chance, were you out joyriding when your mother said you were home asleep — say, somewhere around 1:20 Saturday morning?"

Marty swallowed the icy lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. "Uh... well, I might've sneaked out for a few minutes, yeah. But I didn't go to the mall." The lies that had seemed so glib and easy only moments before abruptly seemed all too transparent.

"I didn't say you did. Did you have any trouble while you were out? A stalled engine, maybe?"

"How did you know that?" The question was out before he could stop it.

Lee smiled. "Because the police went looking for witnesses to trace the Libyans' movements that night, and got a report from a guy named Red Thomas that he'd been sleeping on a park bench and woke up when a drunken driver in a silver sportscar with strange doors hit what he thought were some trash cans, then parked in the middle of the street when the engine died. He saw the Libyans' van swerve to miss it, and according to Red, the car stayed there for at least half an hour until the driver, a young man fitting your description, finally got it going and moved away. Since I'm willing to wager there isn't another DeLorean registered in the county, I'd say we have pretty clear evidence of where you were while the Libyans were conducting business at the Lone Pine Mall. Or do you want to deny it?"

Marty shook his head again, more emphatically. "No, that's exactly what happened." He didn't, of course, add that he'd run off in pursuit of the van, since Red had plainly forgotten it, nor that Doc had come back with him to help start the car, which Red must not have noticed. "I don't get to drive cars like that too often, and I wanted to take her outside of town and see what she could do on the open road, at a time when I stood a pretty good chance of not getting caught. I didn't know the thing had such a finicky starter, though. That's how I got stuck on the train tracks on Sunday." He'd given this part of the matter thought several days ago, when he worried that someone might have reported the crash and seen him jump out of the DeLorean before it was hit.

"Do you have a receipt from the junkyard for the scrap?"

"Yeah, they said I'd need it for the insurance." Which was the truth; Marty had taken the receipt at the insistence of the guy running the yard, just in case Doc came back and wanted to file a claim for his trashed car. He wondered now if Doc already knew about the fate of the DeLorean. He hadn't said anything, not on the tracks nor in his letter or phone call, but Marty supposed Doc must have known, or he wouldn't've come straight to the spot where the wreckage was still strewn about. "Why? That won't show where the car was Saturday morning."

"No," Stetson agreed, "but if it shows the vehicle identification number and your name as the person who brought it in, it confirms that you had access to the car, and provides corroboration of the report that you were seen with it in another part of town when the Libyans were at the mall. It doesn't confirm Doctor Brown's whereabouts, but it does confirm part of your story, which makes the whole thing more believable. You should've just owned up to being out of the house in the first place — though I understand why you didn't. I lost my folks when I was about five, but the uncle who raised me was Air Force through and through, and he was worse than half a dozen overprotective mothers, in his own way."

Marty tried not to let his relief show. "So you're gonna leave Doc alone?"

Stetson shrugged. "Not exactly. We'll still try to get in touch with him, but it won't be a high priority case — not unless we *do* come across that plutonium or find something that directly connects him to the theft."

"You won't," the musician said, absolutely certain. Somewhere along the way — perhaps around the campfire the night before his showdown with Buford Tannen — Marty had mentioned that it was very clever of the inventor to trade in all the nuclear stuff for that Mr. Fusion gadget, but Doc had said it hadn't been a trade-in, not even figuratively speaking. The little fusion reactor had become a necessity as much as a convenience after the plutonium had disappeared, to the best of his knowledge stolen from the DeLorean's trunk while he'd been off ogling the wonders of 2015. The price one paid for not staying focused on one's business, especially when it was something as important and dangerous as time travel. Regardless of what had happened, there was now no way in hell that the police, the Feds, or anyone else was going to be able to find that crate and positively link it to Doc. Even if it eventually surfaced sometime in the future — 'way into the future — Marty very much doubted that any connection between it and Emmett Brown would survive. "After all, you can't find a connection that isn't even there, right?"

And they never did. Marty later learned that when Stetson went to have his discussion with the imprisoned terrorists, one was so terrified by the sudden involvement of Federal agents and the fear that he would be tortured, then horribly executed, he spilled the entire story from beginning to end. The tale exonerated Doc, for the terrified terrorist admitted that, though approached, the scientist had ultimately refused to cooperate, giving them a worthless delivery device that couldn't possibly be used as any form of weapon.

Though he also claimed they had given Brown the stolen plutonium, no trace of it was found anywhere in Hill Valley. The terrorists suggested he might've taken it with him when he fled, but a check of the airline records showed that Brown had left town via air on October ninth — before the plutonium had even been stolen, on the twelfth — headed for New Jersey, taking no suspicious luggage with him. Mail and other shipment records turned up no evidence that such a package had been sent from Hill Valley in recent weeks. Thus, with absolutely no proof to support their claim that Doc had ever taken possession of the plutonium, much less been involved in their illegal plans, both the local and federal authorities concluded that, as had happened so often in the past, the inventor had once again been chosen as a convenient scapegoat for the acts of others, and that the research facility had been correct in claiming the plutonium had gone missing through a bookkeeping error, not theft.

For a month or so afterward, Marty fretted over whether or not the Feds would show up and haul him off to prison for having lied to them, but as the weeks went by and he heard from neither them nor Doc, he eventually concluded that everything had worked out in ways the inventor found satisfactory. He still wished there was some way he could contact his friend and find out for sure, but before long, the holidays were upon him, followed by a round of attention-intensive events, such as preparing for the SATs, a spring break vacation to Hawaii with his family, senior prom, finals, graduation, offers from a rock group to buy performance rights to some of his songs, and dozens of other things to keep him more than occupied.

Marty faithfully kept up his promise to keep an eye on Doc's place, getting in touch with Doc's accountant to make sure the yearly property taxes got paid out of his rental income from the warehouse. In the summer of 1987, he and Jennifer spent three weeks cleaning up the garage after Jennifer's father — who had a part-time side job as part of the city planning commission — mentioned that some business group interested in the land was talking about having the health and safety inspectors check out the place to see if it could be rezoned and condemned during its owner's absence. In the process, the musician collected and removed anything that Doc mightn't want seen by the wrong eyes, in particular things connected to his development of the time machine. When they had finished, the place looked better than it had in years, but still seemed terribly lonely and empty, to Marty's eyes. He clung to the promise that it wouldn't always be so, and tried very hard not to wonder just how long he would have to wait.

MONDAY, JUNE 20, 1988
8:30 P.M. PACIFIC DAYLIGHT TIME

Although under ordinary circumstances, Marty would have been very annoyed with anyone who asked him to spend his first free weekend of the summer babysitting a couple of kids, the fact that the kids happened to be Doc's went a long way toward making him feel more forgiving. That he shared the task with Jennifer and the boys were actually staying at her house while her family was out of town made it all the more bearable. During the past almost three years, Marty had had time to wonder about some of the things he'd seen during his time travels, in particular the notion that he would someday be a father. It was both an exciting and frightening thing to ponder, since he had no younger siblings and had never needed to take care of little kids for more than a few hours at a time. Being responsible for them for longer stretches — indeed, perhaps forever — was a completely different experience, one that Marty had only thought about in the abstract until two days ago.

Early that Saturday morning, one of his friends from the now-disbanded Pinheads had called from the Burger King on JFK Drive, alerting Marty that someone was trying to break into Doc's place. The someone turned out to be Doc himself, and his family, come to see if someone had broken in during his absence and stolen the blueprints for the time machine. Though that worry proved groundless, the problems that had prompted the scientist's visit remained. Marty and Jennifer had helped him find at least where to look to start correcting the inexplicable temporal disruption, and though Doc and Clara had not stayed for long, they had left Jules and Verne in their young friends' care, just in case things went wrong in their attempts to repair what was about to become an unraveling universe. Marty wasn't quite sure why they hadn't come back ten minutes after they'd left, but the two days he'd spent with the boys began to help him understand just how difficult — and rewarding — parenthood might be.

That evening, before the time travelers left, while Jennifer was letting the boys have one last game on her brother's Nintendo system and Clara was watching with rapt fascination, Marty — who was watching with his own form of fascination while Doc readied the holographically disguised time machine for departure — asked why they hadn't returned sooner. After making sure the fusion reactor was loaded, the inventor's first answer was a curious smile.

"For exactly that reason," he said, amused to discover how well it had worked. "I don't remember if it was my idea or Clara's, but we thought it might not be a bad idea to let you experience what it's like to be responsible for children without the safety of knowing for sure that their parents will be back to get them. I'm sorry if we gave you a scare by showing up late."

"Well, not too much of one," Marty only partly lied. "You said you'd be back in a couple hours if things turned out all right, and when you didn't, I *did* get kinda worried, until Jen said that maybe this thing you were going to fix might've messed up your clocks or something — you know, the way magnets or nuclear blasts can screw up anything electronic — so you might not know exactly when you left, and had to be careful about when you came back. I promised myself I'd go with that, and not start worrying for real until Wednesday. Jules and Verne are pretty good kids, Doc — curious as hell, and smart, but a lot better behaved than most of the kids Jen's babysat for. Does bringing 'em here now mean you're ready to move back home?"

Emmett shook his head, wistful sadness in his expression. "Not yet. The boys are still too old. They obviously weren't born only a few years ago."

The musician frowned. "Then why didn't you fake the records to make it look like you and Clara got married a couple years earlier?"

His friend favored him with an amused sidelong glance. "Come on, Marty, if I'd told you I'd gotten married to a woman in New Jersey in, say, 1975, had two sons by her, spent all that time living here while she and the boys lived back East, and didn't breathe a word about it to you in all the years we'd known one another, wouldn't *you* think I was crazy?"

Marty cleared his throat, not wanting to actually say yes, but forced to admit that he would. "I guess I see what you mean. People are gonna have a hard enough time buying it no matter when you come back."

"Precisely. Besides, it's not just a question of creating phony documents to show where and when Clara and the boys were born and when we were married; there're tax records to be considered, too. I've done what I can to

fudge those, but I hope to God no one ever goes looking for Clara's social security number and tax returns before 1982. If they do.... Well, I'm not going to borrow trouble and think about that, right now. Suffice it to say that the fewer records that needed changing, the better. Going back ten years would mean needing to alter ten years' worth of records; this was much easier. I wish I could figure out an easier way to do it, but this is the best I could come up with."

After spending a moment or three digesting this, Marty finally sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I know, and I don't suppose it's any easier for you, thinking about having to come home years after you left. A lot of things could change, and you'd never know it."

The inventor nodded vigorously. "Exactly! I already know how much things will change, and it *is* a little frightening to think about having to face it for real — not just the changes, but the way people are bound to react to the whole situation. I can only hurry things so much, but if it's any consolation, I *have* finally settled on a time, if things work out the way I hope."

The youth's face lit with hope. "Soon?"

Doc shrugged, apologetically. "That depends on your definition of the word, and your perspective. For me, it's only going to be a matter of months, but for you, I'm afraid it's probably going to be a few more years."

Marty's face fell. "And how do you define 'few,' Doc? I mean, I don't mind keeping an eye on your place; it gives me somewhere to go when I need to study or practice and my family's getting on my nerves. I don't even mind answering the questions about what happened to you and even running interference with the cops and other jerks who think you've gotta be dead or something. I know they're wrong — but what if something happened to you, and it turned out they're *not* wrong? How would I ever know?"

There were a great number of unasked questions in those comments, and even more unexpressed feelings. Doc *had* been right when he'd told Marty he would soon have more things in life to keep him busy than he'd counted on, but even with all the distractions of college life and becoming an adult and all that those circumstances implied, he had never been too busy to forget that he missed the friend who in ways had been a better father to him than George McFly. It wasn't the absence, Marty found, that hurt as much as not knowing when it would end.

The inventor sighed softly as he sat down at the top of the steps into the cab of the Train. "You wouldn't, I'm afraid," he admitted, "especially not if it was an accident related to time travel. But you must remember, Marty, time is moving differently for us. Not literally, of course, but subjectively, because I'm able to move about using a time machine and you're not. Yes, it's been nearly three years since we met near Hilldale — from your perspective. From mine, it's been only a few months. And for most of that time, I *have* been working on planning my return home."

From a pocket of the futuristically styled shirt he was wearing — the styles of 2025, he'd told Marty, the last place he'd visited before coming to check out the garage a few days earlier — Doc produced an envelope, somewhat thicker than the one he'd sent from somewhere in New Jersey in October of 1985. As he handed it to Marty, he explained. "I've already sent all the appropriate documents and legal paperwork to the people who need it, both my accountant and my attorney. What they got were copies; these are the originals, and you'll have to have them, if you're willing to help me with the next stage of my plans."

"What is it?" the musician asked, not bothering to look, since he suspected it was something he wouldn't understand without clarification.

It was. "The notarized documents giving you my power of attorney to act as my representative in the sale of my property and the subsequent investment of the proceeds."

It took a moment for the meaning of those words to sink in. When they did, the blue eyes blinked. "Sale of your property? Doc, does this mean you're selling your place? If you do that, where the hell are you gonna live?"

"Hopefully in a place better suited to housing a family," the inventor replied with a crooked smile. "I couldn't take Clara and the boys to the garage, not even if I wanted to. The place is too small for four people, and if I brought anyone else to live there, it would violate my agreement with the zoning commission and let them condemn the property. No, I've known all along that I'd have to find a new house once I was able to get out of the past, even if it had only been just for me and Clara. I've already told Norm Pitlik what I'm asking for the property and how much I'm

willing to dicker on the price; I've even told him exactly what I want done with the money once it sells. All you have to do is be my proxy and sign the papers for the closing in my absence, and there's a note in with the papers there that tells you what you should look out for in the final contract. If it doesn't meet those specs, tell Norm he has to fix 'em."

"And if he doesn't?"

Doc's smile brightened mischievously. "He will. He's a licensed realtor, and he'll be acting as a seller's agent, so he won't want to lose his commission. It won't be hard for you, Marty, I promise. Once the bid's been accepted, I'll be back to help you clean the place out before the actual closing, so I'll get a look at things before you sign anything. Norm won't know it, but you will."

Puzzlement crinkled the younger man's entire face. "Yeah, but how will *you* know when to come back for that?" A single arched brow from the inventor answered the question. "Right, you've got a time machine, so you probably already know."

"If nothing changes between now and then," Doc confirmed. "But even if it does, I still have ways to find out. I have an idea of where I want to move and what I want to do with the place, and that's going to take time to arrange and get everything into shape, so when the time comes, you'll probably see more of me than you expect — maybe more than you'll want. I'm going to need help, and you're the only person here that I can trust with some things."

Marty snorted his opinion that this was not an inconvenience. "So long as you don't mess around with my finals or work schedule, I don't mind. It's funny, the things you take for granted until they're gone — especially the people. I never realized how much I depended on you for things like help with my classes and moral support until you weren't there, anymore. Even the way he is now, my dad's not real good with that stuff. He's better than he was before I messed with his life back in '55, but we just don't run on the same wavelength. He tries to be supportive and all that, but he's either too busy doing his own thing, or he doesn't really get where I'm coming from. It was totally different with you, and I've *really* missed that." He shrugged uneasily. "I know that sounds kinda selfish, but..."

"It doesn't," the scientist assured him. "It's normal to miss people you care about when they aren't there. I've spent almost nine years learning that. Once, I honestly thought I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life a hundred years in the past, where times were simpler and nobody knew who I was, but I don't think I really understood what I was losing in the process. Not the technology and the everyday conveniences, but the people. You, for one, because you *are* my friend, but even all the others who think I'm out of my mind or consider me dangerous."

Marty's expression shifted to pure skepticism. "How could you *miss* those jerks? They treated you like dirt...!"

"Perhaps, but at least I didn't need to be anything but what I am around them. A few months of having to pretend to be something less than you are, of constantly keeping your mouth shut about things people in your own time wouldn't think twice about wasn't that difficult. *Nine years* of doing it, though...!" He shuddered dramatically and shook his head, wisps of white hair dancing about his ears. "I had to watch almost every word I said, for fear that I might say the wrong thing to the wrong person and wind up destroying the entire space-time continuum! It was like being an actor on stage for nine years, constantly playing a role I could only drop when Clara and I were absolutely alone and away from any possibility of people overhearing us. I never imagined how much stress that could be until I actually had to do it. So trust me, Marty, as much as you may be looking forward to having me come home, you can't be anticipating it half as much as I am."

"I guess I can't," the musician admitted after pausing to imagine what it would be like. A large part of the reason he and the rest of the Pinheads had disbanded after graduation from high school had been his own realization that, much as he loved music, loved writing songs and playing the instruments, putting together an act and performing it on stage was *not* his strong suit. If being a rock star meant simply sitting in a studio and recording music, he would've gone for it, but it also meant concert tours, music videos, and a lot of putting on an act for the audience that he wasn't as comfortable with as he'd thought. If his entire life had, by necessity, become one big stage which he could leave and be himself for only a few hours a day, he would've freaked, no doubt about it. "That must've been a living hell," he added quietly, both reflecting on how his own life might now be different if he'd chosen a path toward a performing career, and how he had never really considered how difficult living in the past for so long could be.

"It was difficult," Doc agreed, "but not exactly a nightmare. There *were* compensations — but I *am* glad to know that I'll finally be able to come home, and can stop worrying that living where and when I am is a danger to the whole universe."

Marty understood. "So, am I supposed to go to Norm Pitlik with this stuff, or your lawyer?" He held up the envelope with the important papers. "I'm not sure I even know who that is."

"Stephen Andersen. I think you know him."

The musician nodded, surprised. "Yeah, I do. He's my dad's lawyer, too. I didn't know you used the same guy. Should I take this to him?"

"Definitely. Norm wouldn't know what to do with it, and there's nothing he *can* do with it, even if he did."

From what he knew of the guy, Marty was quite willing to believe that was true. Something else, however, occurred to him. "Will Andersen give me any trouble over this? I mean, if you're supposed to be somewhere in Canada or out of the country right now...."

But Doc shook his head. "Steve isn't going to care where I am, only that the papers were all properly drawn up and notarized in the US, which they were. Once he sees that and it checks out, he won't have a problem with it. He might have some misgivings about you being so young, but you *are* legally an adult now."

Marty snorted softly. "Tell that to my mom. I don't think she's *ever* going to believe that."

The inventor chuckled. "Maybe not; I had the same problem with my mother. It's endemic to being either the youngest child or an only child, I think. But it doesn't matter what she thinks, as far as this is concerned. What matters is what *I* think, since I'm trusting you to handle the disposition of my property. And I *do* trust you, Marty. You'll be fine."

The musician smiled, feeling inordinately pleased by his friend's confidence in his judgment, which he so seldom heard from his own parents. "I'll do the best I can," he promised. "So, when am I gonna see you next?"

Emmett's own smile turned mysterious. "Soon enough. I don't want to say specifically, or you might rush into letting Norm accept an offer he shouldn't because you feel as if you're on some sort of deadline. It may not destroy the universe, but the wrong move now *could* adversely affect my future, and I'd just as soon avoid that."

"Yeah, I'd feel terrible if I screwed things up for you and your family. Okay, I've waited this long, I guess I can live with waiting a little longer. But will you promise one thing, Doc?"

"If I can."

"Try to make it home before I graduate from college, okay? You did a lot to help me make it through high school, and I was kinda bummed out when I realized you couldn't be there when I finally finished. I don't think I'd even *be* in college if it wasn't for you, so it'd be nice if you could make it for that — providing I manage to survive the next few years and actually finish, that is."

"You will," the scientist assured him. "Not because I know the future — which is uncertain, at best, and could change from moment to moment — but because I think you've finally learned how to stick to something and see it through. You'll be fine, and I should be able to make it. I might wind up cutting things a little close, but I'll be there."

Marty's, "Thanks," was both pleased and a little disappointed. Though he was happy his friend intended to make the effort, he was also implying that it would be another two or three years before he would return for good. Still, it was better than having no idea whatsoever of when this waiting would end, so he did his best to accept the news cheerfully, and not wonder too much how long it would be before Norm Pitlik would actually sell the garage.

SATURDAY, JULY 16, 1988

6:15 A.M. PDT

Given that it was the first weekend he had off from his summer job since he'd helped Jen take care of Doc's sons in mid-June, Marty had planned to spend the morning sleeping in late and then maybe working on a new song that had popped into his head during a dull stretch at work the day before. He was in a pretty good mood, having heard from Norm Pitlik late Friday afternoon. The accountant/realtor had dropped by the store to show Marty the offer he'd just gotten for Doc's property, and it suited all the inventor's requirements to a T, even exceeding them a little in the money department. Marty had told Norm to go for it, which meant they would be closing the deal on the first of August. Marty's boss had been a little sticky about letting him off for the day to take care of it, but if he hadn't caved, the musician would have happily quit. He was only working until mid-August, anyway, and he knew his parents wouldn't object. When he'd told them what he was doing for Doc (at least in general terms), they had been surprisingly pleased by his willingness to accept such adult responsibility for his friend. They would have supported his decision and been annoyed by his bosses' inflexibility, which was certainly a far cry from the parents Marty had left behind in what was now another universe's incarnation of 1985.

Thus, he was less than thrilled when his phone rang at a quarter past six in the morning, well before the time he'd hoped he'd awaken if left to do so without interruption. If it was his boss or one of his co-workers asking him to come in to work, he'd find some way to shoot them via the phone line. But when he discovered it was Doc, he was too startled to be angry.

"I thought you said you weren't coming back for a few years," the flabbergasted youth pointed out once he realized who had disturbed his sleep. "It's been less than a month!"

"I said I wasn't coming back *permanently* for a few more years," the inventor corrected, typically undisturbed. "I said I'd be back to clean out the garage shortly after a bid on my property was accepted. Norm did that yesterday, didn't he?"

"Uh... yeah, he did, but I didn't figure you'd find out about it so fast."

Doc clicked his tongue softly. "You're not thinking fourth dimensionally, Marty. When you have a time machine, you can find out about things as quickly as you want. I hope this isn't a bad time for you. I only have until the end of the month to get everything out of there, and I did promise not to disrupt your work schedule."

Needlessly, Marty shook his head. "No, your timing's perfect, I'm off until Monday. This isn't exactly how I was hoping to spend the weekend, but I said I'd help, and I will. But can we get it done in just a couple days?"

"Oh, easily. You haven't been to the place in a few weeks, have you?"

"Ah... no, I haven't had the time. My brother Dave got married last week, and I was busy helping out with that and work and giving guitar lessons to a bunch of kids at one of those summer recreational programs. Sorry, I shouldn't've let it go that long..."

"It's not a problem, Marty. While you were gone, I spent most of those evenings sorting and packing and getting things into some semblance of order. There's a lot of stuff I'm planning to simply dump, and I've already taken other things back with me for temporary storage, but there're some things I don't want to risk taking back a hundred years, not even for a few days. If you'd be willing to hang onto them for me until I come back, I'd appreciate it."

The musician thought about it for a moment. "Sure," he eventually allowed, "provided I've got room for it. But if you're talking about furniture or your big lab equipment, forget it, it won't fit."

"Nothing like that," he was instantly promised. "The stuff I'm most concerned with are papers and other information that could give the wrong people dangerous information, if they accidentally stumbled across it, especially in 1893."

Marty saw the point. "Oh, like the sports almanac."

"Precisely. There's about a dozen boxes' worth, none of 'em bigger than your average office filing box. Would that be a problem?"

The youth glanced about his room and once again shook his head. "Nah, I've got that much space I can spare. So you don't need my help, after all?" He was surprised at how disappointed that made him feel. Normally, he would've been relieved to have gotten out of such work, but he'd sort of been anticipating this as a chance to spend more than just an hour or two with his mentor, to tell him things about the past three years. Of course, Doc probably already knew every story Marty might have to relate, but getting the opportunity to actually say it was something Marty had been looking forward to. He knew Doc wouldn't spoil it for him by acting bored or disinterested, unlike the way George often did simply because he didn't know how to relate to his son's interests and chosen form of creativity. Having the chance delayed yet again was depressing.

But he was wrong. "No, I still do. I've just taken care of removing the important stuff. There's still an awful lot of junk to be gone through, cleared out, and gotten rid of. I was hoping you wouldn't mind lending a hand today, but if you have other plans...."

Marty grinned. "Only if sleeping 'til noon counts as 'plans.' Did you go into the future and check out what I've been up to every single day so you'd catch me on one of the few weekends I have off, Doc?"

He could fairly hear the inventor rolling his eyes in a classic "give me a break!" expression. "Of course not. Not to be insulting, Marty, but your life isn't exactly the stuff of which history books are made. If I'd hung around trying to find out things like that, someone would've spotted me for sure, and that isn't something I want. As it is, finding a pay phone sufficiently secluded was tough. No, I just checked public records to find out what day the bid on my property was accepted, and picked the first day afterward when you might have a chance of being free to contact you. It was nothing but pure luck, trust me."

"Yeah, I suppose it wouldn't make much sense to be so careful about pretending you're out of town and then go snooping around too much. But did you have to call so early? Seems like every time I get to see you, it's practically in the dead of night."

"With good reason. I'd like to be able to get what needs to be done today finished before the traffic picks up on JFK Drive. The fewer people around to notice that I'm in town, the better."

It was indeed a reasonable concern, Marty allowed. "Can you give me half an hour to wash up and grab something to eat before I come over?"

He did, and almost precisely thirty minutes later, Marty arrived at the old garage on the east end of town. There was no vehicle parked either in the Burger King lot or on the street that was large enough to be the new Time Machine under holographic disguise, but as he headed to the entrance, the musician spotted what looked like a moving van in the alley behind the place, and knew he wasn't seeing a van at all. He smiled to himself, amused by how well this trick of Doc's worked, found the door already unlocked, and stepped inside.

He was astonished to see just how much the interior of the place had already changed. The huge speaker and amplifier that had done so much to help convince the authorities that Doc was harmless and not involved in a terrorist plot was gone, as were a lot of the lab supplies and Doc's personal effects — most notably, the majority of the clocks. The only ones that remained were a few digital types and those that were so obviously products of modern technology, they would certainly raise questions if they were even seen a hundred years in the past. Next to that, the piles of boxes, stray heaps of what might be junk, and missing pieces of furniture were no surprise whatsoever. From the first moment he had set foot in Doc's garage, Marty had associated the place with the sound of ticking clocks, a rhythmic symphony to which he had grown so accustomed, he scarcely noticed it — except for now, when he noticed it because of its absence. The unexpected quiet drew an uncomfortable gasp of surprise from the musician, which in turn drew the attention of the owner.

"Oh, good, you're here," the inventor noted cheerfully as he stood straight from behind a pile of boxes he'd been marking. To Marty's eyes, he looked almost exactly the same as he had the month before, and three years before, on the tracks near the Eastwood Ravine, or even a hundred and three years before, when he had tried to escape from 1885 with Marty. Even though Doc admitted that only a matter of months had passed for him between

the first two events, Marty knew that nearly ten years had passed between them and that unsuccessful escape attempt — yet he looked very much the same, despite the time gone by. Either life in the Old West had been exceptionally kind to the scientist, or his rejuvenation really had given him a new lease on life, in very important ways. From what he'd seen of life on the frontier, Marty strongly suspected the latter. "I'm sorry I had to disturb you so early, but there's only so much I can do on my own, and I guess I'm a little paranoid about anyone actually seeing me here too soon."

"It's okay, Doc," Marty assured him as he carefully picked his way over and around some of the scattered flotsam and jetsam. "I really didn't have anything special planned for today. Jen and I were gonna try taking a trip up to Owen's Lake, but she just started an internship job at the *Telegraph*, and she gets all the weekend assignments nobody else wants to cover. Bugs the heck out of both of us, but she's serious about making journalism her career, and she'd like to be able to stay here in Hill Valley, if she can. That means either a job at the *Telegraph* or one of the TV stations, and she thinks she's got a better shot at snagging a permanent position on the newspaper staff than getting into TV, at least for now. So I try to be supportive and tell her it's okay — even though I think it really bites, taking away all her weekends."

"Sounds like a typical internship," was Doc's opinion, offered as he hefted up several boxes and added them to a particular heap. "You're low man on the totem pole, so you get all the lousy jobs, until someone decides you know what you're doing and gives you a shot at the better work. My first college internship was with an archaeologist, and I spent most of that summer fetching and carrying. He didn't really think I could handle anything more scientifically demanding until two weeks before the job was supposed to end. Of course, I was only thirteen when I started the job, so that might've had some influence on his feelings. Did you bring your truck?"

The sudden change in topic nearly gave Marty whiplash, but he enjoyed the sensation, not realizing until now how much he'd missed Doc's mercurial nature over the past few years. He smiled. "Yeah, I figured it'd come in handy if you want me to move some stuff to my place, or haul junk to the dump. Where do you want to start?"

As they went to work, Marty's astonishment over just how much Doc had managed to get done during the past month without his knowledge increased. He knew that when the scientist got into a project, he could work at lightspeed, but housekeeping had never seemed to be one of the things that could catch and hold his interest so well and for so long, especially not when he'd apparently been working only a few hours a day so as to avoid notice, and had to return to his home in the past when he was finished. From their idle conversation, Marty didn't get the impression that something had happened during his time in the Nineteenth Century to change the scientist's not precisely neat habits; even having kids hadn't gotten him to organize his work areas, merely to childproof them as best as he could.

The musician *did* notice that his friend seemed oddly distracted, as if he was focusing on the task at hand so as not to think about something else. It didn't seem at all like the Doc he remembered, and he couldn't help but wonder if this whole business of selling his place wasn't a cover for something more serious — such as putting his affairs in order because he knew he didn't have long to live.

The thought made Marty's insides go cold the moment it popped into his head, but having thought it, he couldn't make it go away. He didn't want to just blurt out such a horrible suspicion — that was the surest way of *not* getting a straight answer from Doc, and he knew it — so he went for a slightly less direct approach.

"Is something wrong, Doc?" he asked when they'd finished moving the boxes Marty would be taking home into his truck, which had been moved to the alley in back, where it and the door could be hidden under an extension of the Time Machine's holographic disguise, thus covering their movements, at least from casual observers. "You seem... I dunno, a little more preoccupied than usual. Are Clara and the kids putting up a fuss over moving?"

The inventor's dark eyes narrowed with puzzlement. "Are...? Oh, no, they're completely in favor of it — well, Clara is, anyway. The boys don't know anything more than the fact that we're moving, and we don't plan to tell them precisely *where* we're going until just before we leave. Less of a danger that they might tell one of their friends, that way. Arranging our departure from that time isn't nearly as much of a problem as arranging our arrival here. There, people think we're moving back East because Clara misses her old friends and relatives, and so the boys can take advantage of the more advanced education at the old private schools. As far as they'll be concerned, we'll never make it. I booked our passage on a train that's going to meet with an unfortunate end long before it even reaches St. Louis. We'll be just another family that was lost with all the others. A sad ending, but it'll keep people from ever coming to look for us."

Marty was impressed. "That's pretty clever. Did you time when you plan to leave around that train... what was it, a wreck or an Indian attack or outlaws?"

"A wreck — a disturbingly common cause of death, back then. This particular crash was caused by the collapse of a bridge that'd been recently undermined by a flood. They didn't have structural engineers constantly out checking things like that, back then, and the bridge was in the middle of nowhere in a particularly rough part of the Rockies. No one even realized there was a problem until the train didn't show up, and when they sent a crew out to investigate, there wasn't much left to find. The train fell several hundred feet into a ravine and caused a terrible fire in the process. No survivors and very few remains of the passengers were ever found. I went checking historical records for something like that when I started thinking about how we were going to get out of the past without a trace. I really would've preferred a shipwreck — that might have left no remains at all — but there weren't any in the right places within an acceptable time frame. This was as good as I could find, and given the condition of the wreck when it was finally located, it'll do, so I'm not worried about that, either."

"Then what *is* bugging you?" the younger man wanted to know. "I might not have seen much of you these past few years, but I still remember the way you act when something's bothering you, and you're giving one heck of a performance. What's the deal? Is something else wrong?"

Emmett shrugged as they headed back inside. "Not wrong," he admitted, "just... well, I can't say not right, either; it just is. Clara's expecting."

Marty frowned, perplexed. "Expecting wha— oh!" He could almost feel himself blushing at his denseness. "She's gonna have another baby? That's *good* news — isn't it?"

Doc's answering, "Yes," didn't sound entirely convincing. "At least it would be, if we were already back in the Twentieth Century. She's over forty, and while she's in excellent health, Nineteenth Century medicine just isn't up to handling the potential complications of later-life pregnancies. The doctors don't even know what sort of things they should be watching out for, and I can't tell them without endangering the space-time continuum."

"Why not?" Marty wanted to know as he started to pick up obvious bits of garbage and stuff them into empty boxes for hauling to the dump. "Don't they just do things like make extra blood tests and keep an eye on blood pressure an' stuff like that?"

"If they knew they were supposed to, yes, but a hundred years ago, they barely understood the overall importance of things we take for granted, like blood pressure — the sphygmomanometer was only invented a couple of years ago — much less how monitoring it could be an indication of problems with a woman's pregnancy. And while I *do* understand, there's only so much I can do if I realize something *is* going wrong. I can't give the doctors information they don't already have about things like gestational diabetes, pregnancy-related toxemia, Down's Syndrome.... and I just don't have enough medical training or the facilities to handle problematic situations properly."

"Well, couldn't you bring Clara along with you for regular check-ups here, or just hurry up the move?" He didn't want to think about the potentially selfish motives in the latter part of the question.

But Doc shook his head, not even noticing. "I'm moving as fast as I dare, and bringing Clara too soon is out of the question."

"Why? So your doctor'd see her a little sooner'n everyone else. That's not a big deal...."

The inventor disagreed. "Yes, it is. I can't bring her here, not unless I plan to leave her here until the baby's born. Once any doctor gets a look at her, they'll expect her to deliver within a matter of months, not a matter of years. And even if we could come up with some sort of schedule based on our projected time of arrival, it would still mean taking Clara back and forth, and I've never done any studies on how time travel and exposure to its high-intensity energy fields could affect a developing fetus or its mother. I am *not* going to run the experiments with my own wife and child!"

Marty saw his point, wondering even as he did so if those same energy fields might be dangerous to any living creature. Logically, he didn't think so; despite rumors, Doc was *not* a mad scientist who didn't care about how others might be hurt by his experiments. But that left him with another puzzle. "Does that mean you won't be back until after the baby's born?"

Emmett shrugged. "It depends on how the timing works out, and whether or not the baby arrives when it's supposedly due. If things go according to my plans, we should be back shortly before it's born, so he or she will have all the proper birth records in the present, not at some fabricated time in the past. That's how it'll have to work in order to use the train wreck alibi. But things could change."

"And you're not worried about bringing them here in the Time Machine?"

"Not just once, and not so close to delivery. By then, I doubt there's any real damage it could cause, since the baby will be very nearly fully developed. But doing it repeatedly in the early months is a risk I'm not willing to take!" He said it with pointed emphasis, jamming the papers he'd picked up from one of the remaining tables into the box Marty had been filling with trash.

The musician looked at it, and sighed. "Are you sure you want to throw that away, Doc?" he wondered.

The preoccupied inventor frowned. "Throw what away?"

Marty fished out the papers and held them up. It was copy of the accepted bid offer he'd brought for his friend's final perusal. "I guess you probably know what's gonna happen already," he allowed charitably, "but you haven't even looked at it, y'know."

Doc saw what he was holding, realized what it was, and groaned. "I'm sorry, Marty, you must think I'm losing my mind right about now."

The younger man's chuckle was not in the least bit mean-spirited. "Nah, if I was gonna think that, I would've thought it years ago. This is nothing compared to some of the other stuff you've done — and this time, you've got an airtight alibi. Worrying about your wife and kids is really heavy duty. If you're that worried, though, should you be spending so much time here instead of there? I mean, I could've taken care of cleaning out the place, if it would've been easier for you...."

"Easier for me," the inventor agreed, methodically smoothing out the papers, "but not for Clara. I'll worry regardless of where I am, and being there worrying is starting to annoy her. I'd thought about asking you to do this, but she insisted — quite stubbornly, mind you — that I do as much of it myself as possible, just to get me out of the house and out of her hair for a few hours every day. I thought she was over-reacting, but I'm afraid she's right: I'm the one over-reacting. There's really no reason to believe anything bad will happen; if something *did* start to go wrong, I've got the means to make sure she gets taken to a time and place where it can be made right again."

"But that's not gonna stop you from worrying, anyway," Marty noted sagely, taking away the papers before Doc flattened the ink right off them. "I know the feeling — well, not exactly the same way, but it's still the same feeling. Something screwy showed up on one of my mom's chest x-rays last winter. The doctors told us not to worry, it probably wasn't anything serious, but my Grandma Baines died from lung cancer just last year. My mom used to smoke, and she'd had a cough she couldn't get rid of for a couple months before they took the x-ray, so we all knew that maybe they'd spotted cancer and couldn't stop ourselves from worrying until the new test results came in. Turns out it was a stubborn infection, not enough to make her really sick, but enough to give her that cough and make her kinda tired. But for two weeks, I had nightmares about it, and kept imagining the worst whenever I wasn't too busy to think. It's gotta be a heck of a lot worse, having the worry part drag on for nine months."

"Exactly." And to prove it, he picked up the papers Marty had taken away and almost stuffed them back into the garbage.

The musician stopped him before he quite managed it. "Tell you what, Doc," he suggested soothingly, trying not to smile too noticeably. "Why don't I go around picking up the trash, and you sit down and actually *read* that thing before you toss it out? I guarantee you, it'll be more mind-numbing than garbage picking. And if I don't know if something's junk or stuff you want to keep, I'll ask. Okay?"

Marty was relieved when the inventor agreed. He'd done a few stupid things while he'd been worrying about his mother — including running the same stop sign near his home three times, nearly running into other people twice, and once getting stopped by a cop who happened to be patrolling the neighborhood. Though he didn't ask, he wondered how many more months of this Doc had to look forward to, and hoped that the scientist didn't run any stop signs while crossing the fourth dimension between now and the baby's arrival.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 18, 1988

11:00 A.M. PDT

Between the two of them and a little help from Jennifer, Marty and Doc had the garage almost entirely cleared out by the end of that weekend; what was left behind was worthless pieces of junk for which Doc had no use. After the closing on the first of August, the new owners gave notice to the warehouse tenants that they were being evicted. This came as no news to them; in fact, they had been in the process of moving ever since they were notified that the property was up for sale. By the end of the first week in August, they were gone, and the property sealed off with a chain link construction fence. A bold sign on it proclaimed the site as the future home of the Riverside Office Building and Hyatt Legal Services, which was due to open in the spring of '89. Through a friend who was working a summer job with a local contractor, Marty heard the date when the excavation was scheduled to start, and was there on the morning when the garage was finally leveled.

Though he had only come because he wanted to make sure the crew didn't accidentally find something Doc might've left behind about time travel, watching the bulldozer plow over the old building in one pass and then move on to decimate the old warehouse beyond the alley gave Marty a strange, unhappy feeling he hadn't quite anticipated. Though he knew this was a necessary step toward Doc eventually coming back home to stay, what Marty had always thought of as the inventor's home was now gone, reduced to rubble that skiploaders were already shoveling into the back of a dump truck. Perhaps to Doc, it was an exciting new beginning, but to him, it felt like an unhappy ending. All the memories that were wrapped up in the old garage were still there, but they were now nothing more than images in a mental scrapbook, their ties to a real place snipped and gone. He watched the workers from the safety of the Burger King, wondering how the evidence of so many years and so many events could be wiped away so quickly. In less than an hour, the wreckage of the garage was gone, and a couple of guys with jackhammers had moved in to start breaking up what was left of its concrete slab.

Before they could finish, Marty left, feeling as empty as that now vacant lot. He trusted Doc's word that sooner or later, he'd be back — but somehow, he knew it wasn't going to be sooner.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1989

2:00 P.M. PST

Done with his last final for the semester — a jury for his keyboard class, which he was positive he'd nailed — Marty headed across the windy university commons, headed for the parking structure where he'd left his truck and wishing he'd thought to wear a heavier jacket when he'd left home that morning. The temperature had been dropping steadily all day under leaden clouds, convincing him that the weatherman hadn't been nuts after all when he'd said they might have snow in time for Christmas. Just so long as it held off for a few more hours, Marty didn't mind. He wanted enough time to get to the mall to pick up Jennifer's gift — which the jeweler's had finally finished last night — and to get home before the crazy holiday traffic was made even worse by the season's first real snow.

He was trying to keep his head tucked into the upturned collar of his jacket while dodging other students similarly unprepared for the cold when an amused voice asked, "Didn't your mother ever teach you how to dress for the weather?"

Marty's first impulse was to return with a snappy comeback, but in the seconds it took him to think of one, he recognized the voice and grinned out of sheer delight. "Doc! What the hell are you doing here, right in the middle of campus? Aren't you still supposed to be out of the country?"

The inventor, who was more properly prepared for the cold and stiff wind, shook his head and grinned. "Not anymore. I'm not back permanently, yet, but I just finished some business with Norm that's the next step in the right direction."

"You can't be planning to move back into your old place," the musician was certain. "It's long gone, and there's an office building where it used to be."

"I know, and that was never part of the plan. If you have a few minutes, would you like to see where we *will* be moving?"

Marty didn't have to think twice. If it started to snow before he got to the mall, so be it. That his best friend might finally be coming home in only a few weeks was enough to improve his mood and make him willing to put up with the worst holiday and first-snow drivers Hill County had to offer.

When they arrived at the place, however, his good spirits faded. He'd heard of the old Morris mansion all his life, a big, empty old house on the outskirts of town. It was at least three times the size of his parents' home on a huge, craggy tract of land several miles southwest of Hilldale, virtually on the lip of Fairy Chasm. When he'd been about eight or nine, some of the kids had talked about breaking into the place and turning it into a sort of clubhouse, since no one had lived in it for at least ten years and nobody seemed interested in buying it. But the place was not easy to get to, both because of the terrain around it and its distance from the more populous areas of Hill Valley, so the idea had been quickly abandoned. Though it thus remained free of vandalism and was still in fairly good condition, once Marty's truck had plowed its way through the overgrowth and underbrush clogging what had once been the private access drive to the house, he could see that it wasn't yet in any shape so that a sane person would bring his family there to live. Without climbing out, he eyed the ominously dark house and barn and other buildings, dubiously.

"I dunno, Doc," he finally said with a sigh. "This looks more like the kind of place your friends in New York would be interested in — if it doesn't have at least one ghost haunting it, I'll be surprised. If you're planning to live here, you've got your work cut out for you. Why didn't you just buy a nice new place, all ready to go? You made enough off the sale of your old property to buy six of 'em, easy."

"Perhaps," the scientist allowed, unperturbed. "But I gave this a lot of thought. It's going to be tough enough on Clara and the kids, having to learn to deal with my reputation in Hill Valley of today without making it worse by living in a crowded neighborhood. Out here, I won't bother anyone, and they won't bother me. And the new Time Machine isn't something I can just park in an ordinary garage, not unless it's the size of a warehouse or hangar. I've taken all the necessary measurements, and with some modifications, the dairy barn here has more than enough space to house the Machine, and keep it from accidental discovery. Besides, Clara already knows this house. It was built the year after I was stranded in the past, by Judge Morris, and he's been on friendly terms with us, especially ever since Clara showed him how nicely suited his property is for stargazing. Once I clean the place up and bring the utilities up to date, it'll help her adjust to living in a strange new world by giving her at least a home that's familiar. And the developers had just given up on selling the place and were about to level it, so I got it for a song."

"That's a pretty good idea," Marty commended as they got out of the truck to have a look at the inside of the house. "Moving into a place Clara already knows. I never would've thought of that. How's she doing, anyway? Did the baby arrive okay?"

Doc cleared his throat as they climbed the stairs on the porch, the planks of which were in serious need of either refinishing or replacement. "It hasn't arrived at all, yet. I know it's been more than a year for you, Marty, but to me, we cleaned out the garage less than a week ago."

At first, the musician's eyes widened with surprise — getting used to these fourth-dimensional discrepancies was a little tough — but as Doc unlocked the door, he smiled. "Still a basket case, then?" he teased good-naturedly.

"As much as I was a week ago," the inventor admitted, not able to take offense at the truth. "That's another good reason to buy a place like this. Getting it ready will take enough work to keep my mind from imagining problems that aren't there."

Though the building looked to be in pretty good shape for something over a century old, Marty could see that this was no minor cleaning and painting job they were looking at. The last owners had moved out nearly thirty years ago, and even Marty, who had no real experience with such things, knew that there were some things you couldn't let sit that long without causing problems. Plumbing, heating.... He whistled softly. "But if you spend all your time working on this, won't that make problems for your family? You still need to eat and all that, don't you?"

He was rewarded with a perfectly arch glance. "Of course, but money isn't really much of an issue. Clara's dowry was surprisingly generous — well, perhaps not so surprisingly, since her parents were furious with her sister for eloping with Clara's first fiancé, so they gave all the money to her instead, to help her make a new life for herself in California. But so long as she was working as a teacher, she had her home provided and a more than adequate salary to cover living expenses. When we decided to get married, we put that money into sensible investments that would help to finance the new time machine we both knew would have to be built as soon as possible. Since Hill

Valley was so far out on the frontier and the townsfolk liked Clara, they didn't insist she resign once she was married, so for at least a while, we had both our incomes to live off of."

As he brushed aside a dusty curtain of cobwebs that hung in the doorway between the central corridor and what might once have been a den or a library, Marty frowned. "Why would she've resigned when she got married?" he wondered.

"Because that was the custom back then, at least in more populated areas back East. Married women weren't supposed to work, not unless the family was positively destitute, and schoolteachers were generally either young women, old maids, or widows. She *did* have to resign once Jules was born — there's no such thing as daycare back then, and a respectable wife and mother generally took pride in rearing her own children and managing her household. But I also had a considerable amount of gold and silver I'd brought with me in the Time Machine's money case, for use in places where getting hold of local currency was difficult or impossible, but precious metals were good negotiable tender. Between that and Clara's dowry, I had quite a bit to use as base investments, and in time, they paid off. Her parents died a few years ago, too, and left her a reasonable inheritance, so while we're working on moving, I don't have to work as a blacksmith to support us, not any more than is necessary to maintain appearances."

Marty stopped and gave his friend a skeptical look. "Isn't that just as bad as Biff using a sports almanac from the future to get rich, making investments back then?"

"Only if I used specific knowledge from the future to make big investments in companies I knew for a fact were going to be profitable. Although I knew which companies would be worth it, and I deliberately made minor investments in many companies so that the impact of my actions would be very minimal. What it gave us was the money to provide a decent life for my family and the capital to design and construct the second Time Machine. I never used a penny of it to influence things like politics or the financial world, and since each individual payoff was small, I wasn't likely to deprive someone else of money they should have made instead and might have needed for some reason of greater historical significance."

"But it was still pretty chancy, wasn't it?"

Emmett shrugged as he idly inspected the hinges on a door between two rooms, which had all but frozen in place with years of disuse. "It could have been — tiny changes can sometimes make monumental differences — but I was as careful as I could possibly be. It was either take that risk, which I could do *something* to control, or stay in the past, which was almost certain to eventually cause problems, with four of us living in a time where we don't belong, soon to be five. It was a risk, but a calculated one. And from what I can tell, it was successful. History appears to have remained unchanged, and when you put it all together, I made more than enough of a profit to pay for everything we needed."

Marty had to concede that point, since as far as he could tell, nothing catastrophic had happened to time and space, certainly no universe-unraveling paradoxes. He noticed that the room they'd moved into had a large stone fireplace, much like the one in the last room. Given how cold it was here inside, out of the wind, he wondered if that was the only heating the place had available. "You aren't planning to work on the place through the winter, are you? You'd freeze to death, and I hear contractors charge a mint for doing construction in the winter."

"They do," Doc agreed, "but the exterior work can wait 'til spring, and there's a lot I can do on my own inside until then. One of the Judge's kids had an oil-burning furnace installed around the turn of the century, and the owners back in the '40s had that replaced with natural gas. Once the lines have been reconnected and the heating system inspected, it won't be so bad in here, and I can upgrade the electrical systems by myself; I've got the licenses. That's probably going to take a month or two, and by then, we should be through the worst of the winter."

"So you're not gonna worry about people seeing you around town, anymore?" the musician asked as they moved into what was clearly the kitchen, though one about forty years out of date. The appliances were long gone, but the niches into which they'd been supposed to fit were still there, along with the distinctly unmodern sink and faucets. "You're not moving back before the rest of your family, are you?"

"No, to both questions." The inventor tried turning the faucet handles. Only one moved, and it produced no results. "Looks like the water's been shut off for a while," he reflected. "Just as well; that way, there won't be any hidden water damage from pipes that burst from freezing in the winters when no one lived here."

Marty blinked. "Didn't you check this place out before you bought it?" He found it difficult to believe; Doc was generally more cautious about such things.

"Of course, but I wasn't quite as picky as I would've been with a newer place. I knew there'd be renovations and remodeling to be done, and so long as the house was structurally sound, I'd intended to buy it, for Clara's sake. I'm going to replace the plumbing, anyway, to get rid of any potential lead problems, but I'm just as happy I'm not likely to find hidden problems that didn't affect the basic structure. I told Norm that Clara and the kids are living in Sacramento with some cousin of hers until the house is ready," he added, giving Marty mild whiplash with the sudden change of subject. "I also told him that she's nervous about moving here after all these years, which is the truth, and so I wasn't giving him a phone number to contact me until I have the phone connected here. If he has any *really* important business, I said he should tell you, and you'd pass the message on to me. Don't worry about him bothering you," he assured the younger man, seeing Marty's mild gulp of dismay. "I'm going to have the phone here connected right after the first, and he's usually on vacation between Christmas and New Year's. After that, he can bug my answering machine, if he needs to fret about something and I'm not here."

The musician breathed a sigh of relief. "So as far as everyone else is concerned, you're gonna be commuting between here and Sacramento, fixing up the house? That's reasonable. Jen's dad does it three or four times a week, and it's no hassle. But what're you gonna drive if you need to get around town? Your new Time Machine won't cut it, you had me get rid of your truck before we even sold the garage, the nearest hardware store's almost ten miles away, and I know darned well you're gonna need it."

The inventor laughed. "I dare say. Calling a cab from out here is a pain in the neck, especially with the phone service out. Don't worry, I've got that taken care of, too, or I *will* have, next week. That's part of why I bought the house now. I get to take advantage of a lot of year-end clearance deals that'll make things more affordable, all around."

Marty smiled crookedly. "Guess that's one of the fringe benefits of owning a time machine, huh? Being able to do your shopping at all the best times."

"That's a pretty frivolous attitude toward something that could destroy the universe," Doc half-scolded, "but in this case, it's also true. And if it helps keep me occupied so I don't spoil the holidays for Clara and the boys with my worrying, so much the better."

"Is it Christmas back in... what year *did* you come from, anyway?"

"1893, and yes, it's the same time of year. But that's why I'm not planning to start anything serious until after the first of the year. This way, all the closing business is finished so I don't have to worry about scheduling it at a lousy time of year, and I won't have to pay more than half a month's worth of property taxes for the year. It's worth that much to have it over and done with before the holidays."

Having sat through the closing on the sale of Doc's garage and other real estate, signing what seemed like half a million documents as his proxy, Marty understood the desire to get it out of one's hair before what was supposed to be a festive season. "Yeah, I'll bet it would be. Do you want any help working on the place after New Year's? I don't know much about rewiring and all that, but the next semester doesn't start 'til the middle of the month, and I'd rather spend it helping you here than stuck at home for two weeks. Linda's been moping around the house, whining about not getting a promotion at work and one of her boyfriends dumping her, and my Dad's got some sort of contract deadline hanging over him, so he's been worse'n she is."

"I'd certainly welcome any assistance, but wouldn't you rather spend the time with Jennifer?"

Marty snorted. "Sure, but that's not an option. She's the star intern at the *Telegraph*, and they're sending her to Chicago to cover some big convention right after New Year's. She won't be back 'til the day before classes start."

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten."

The blue eyes blinked. "You knew Jen was gonna be back on the fourteenth?"

Doc shook his head, noticing as he did do that his hair brushed against another dusty cobweb streamer hanging from the suspended light fixture at the center of the kitchen. Distracted, he pulled it down. "No, that she was

interning at the *Telegraph*. You've mentioned it before. It's a good thing I don't have any dust allergies, or I'd need a particle filtration mask just to walk into this place."

"Could be worse," was Marty's opinion, which sprang from helping one of his old band buddies clean out his grandmother's house after the old woman had died earlier that summer. "The place could have rats in the cellar, or squirrels in the attic. Eric's grandma's house had critters that got in through broken windows and made nests practically wherever they wanted. You checked for that kind of stuff, didn't you?" he asked as they were about to head up a dim stairwell at the back of the house. "What's up there, anyway?"

"Not vermin," was the inventor's assurance. "Mostly bedrooms on the second floor, storage space in the attic, and a widow's walk on top of the house. There isn't any real cellar to speak of, just a couple of small rooms the Judge used for cold storage and wine. The ground here is too rocky to make digging that kind of foundation feasible, especially a hundred years ago, when excavation was considerably more difficult. We don't have to go up if you don't want to. For now, there're only more empty rooms, cobwebs, and dust. If the windows hadn't stayed in one piece and the roof had weakened and collapsed since the last owners moved out, it might be a completely different story. But the Judge paid for excellent original construction, and all the subsequent owners have done a good job of maintaining the place. Other than cleaning and updating things, it really won't be that big a problem, getting it into shape."

Marty snorted softly, half-sneezing as he inhaled a bit of dust from a nearby cobweb. "Big enough, given the size of this place. Maybe you could just leave the windows open for a day or two and let the wind blow out all the dust...."

"Yes, and blow in rain and ice and snow to replace it, and possibly damage the floors. I'd rather put up with the dust. I suspect the barn will actually prove to be more of a challenge, since I'll have to install new joists capable of holding the weight of Train in the upper barn, and come up with a better set of doors to make getting it in and out relatively simple."

Marty glanced out the window set into the breezeway door near the bottom of the stairs, which looked directly toward the old dairy barn. "Isn't the thing parked in there now?"

Doc shook his head. "I wouldn't take the chance until I'm sure the building's capable of handling it. I used the holographic projectors to keep it hidden while I took care of business."

"Then where is it?" Marty asked as they returned to the outside, pausing while the scientist relocked the doors. "Somewhere back near campus?"

"No, that's far too busy an area, too much of a danger that someone might accidentally discover the Time Machine isn't what it currently appears to be."

"Then where did you leave it?"

"Right over there." A nod of his head indicated the area beyond the barn.

Marty thought he understood. "Behind that hedge?"

Emmett smiled mischievously. "No; it *is* the hedge. Take a close look at it. The wind's coming from the northeast at about twenty miles per hour. Do you see a single one of those bushes moving so much as a twig?"

Now that it was brought to his attention, Marty realized that the evergreens were perfectly — unnaturally — still. "Heavy," he remarked, finding the sight most peculiar. "That's *really* strange. That's because they're nothing but a projected illusion, like the truck image you used to disguise the Time Machine when you brought it into Jen's neighborhood, right?"

"Precisely. It's enough to keep the thing from being noticed by a casual glance, but something like this wouldn't go unnoticed for long. Eventually, I'll work on the programming to eliminate the problem and make the illusions more convincing, but for now, other things have to take precedence."

As they approached the faux hedge, Doc pulled a small device from a pocket of his coat, thumbed a button, and, amid a burst of static, the illusion disappeared, revealing the huge but fascinating new Time Machine. This was

the first time Marty had seen it undisguised since that brief visit back on the tracks in '85, and he was fascinated by it all over again. Although it no longer gave off the intense heat of its coal or wood fueled counterparts in the past — those systems had been replaced by more efficient fusion reactors on its maiden voyage, or so Doc had told him back when they'd cleared out the garage — it was large and solid enough to provide a good barrier to the increasingly chilly wind. Marty happily moved close to it, both for shelter and to get a closer look. Not a one of the exterior lights or moving gadgets were on, but there was still plenty about it to catch his attention, a myriad of details that looked like something straight out of a Victorian adventure novel. He smiled.

"Y'know, I couldn't place it the last time I saw this thing," he said as the inventor pushed another button to open the entrance to the cab, a door very reminiscent of those on the decimated DeLorean. "But if you didn't have the *Nautilus* in mind when you designed this thing, I'll eat my shorts."

Doc made a face of amused disgust as he stepped up onto the ramp and reached over to fetch something from the passenger's bench. "Find a better snack, Marty," he suggested puckishly. "Yes, I guess I was thinking along those lines. Why not? I was living in the Victorian Era, anyway, and short of some augmentations necessary for the time mechanisms, this was no more outlandish a design than some of the other private railcars of the day. Did you actually get around to reading the book?"

"Yeah, a couple of months after I came back from 1885, a book report for my English class. Made the teacher *real* happy, 'cause he'd been complaining that nobody bothered to read the classics, anymore. It took three tries before I found a decent translation, though. It was a pretty good story, but it wasn't exactly my cup of tea. I guess people had different ideas of how to write adventure stories, back then."

"That's true. Styles change over the years, just as tastes do. At least you enjoyed it well enough to finish it."

"Sure did, and I got an A for it, too. What's that?" he asked, noticing the paper-wrapped package his friend had picked up.

"A Christmas present from Clara. When we mapped out our plan of action for moving between times back in June, we knew that I'd be coming here somewhere near Christmas to finalize the purchase of the house — which house, she doesn't know, and I'm not telling her until we move in. She wanted to send you a gift, since she hasn't had the opportunity before this, and she asked me to make sure it fits before I leave."

As he took the parcel and untied the string securing the plain paper, a small frown crinkled the musician's brow. "Aw, heck, Doc, I don't have anything for you guys...."

Emmett was undisturbed. "How could you, if you didn't know I'd be here? We're not expecting anything; this is mostly for Clara's benefit. It gave her something to work on while I was taking care of other business, and if I take it back because you feel awkward about accepting it, I'm afraid I'm going to have a very cranky wife on my hands."

Remembering that the teacher was still pregnant (a situation that continued to warp the younger man's mind), Marty understood the wisdom in the remark. Without a ton of tape to hold things as securely as top secret documents, the paper fell away easily, revealing a hand-knit sweater of very nice workmanship, in a surprisingly vivid but pleasant shade of blue. "Wow, I didn't think they had colors this bright back then," he said, whistling appreciatively, though it was nowhere near as bright as the neon hues that were becoming popular in his own time. He set it down while he removed his too-light jacket, eager to try on something that might provide an extra layer of warmth between his jacket and his t-shirt. "It looks like it should fit. How'd she know what size to make it?"

Doc smiled. "She used Seamus' measurements. She made a sweater for him for Christmas two years ago, when he was having some trouble with a nasty recurring cold. She figured that unless you had an unusually vigorous growth spurt between now and then, you'd probably be about the same size."

"Very clever," Marty commended as he pulled it over his head, "and she's right, it fits just fine. I just wish I had something to send back...."

"Not necessary," his mentor assured him. "You've been a great help to us in making the arrangements to come home, and that's more than enough of a gift to cover a dozen Christmases. Besides, there really isn't time. I should be heading back, and you haven't even picked up Jennifer's engagement ring, have you?"

"No, I— " Marty choked to a halt, completely flabbergasted. "How did you know *that*? I haven't even asked her yet, not officially! Have you been checking up on my future, Doc?"

Emmett was all innocence. "Not significantly, just enough so that I can try not to interfere with your day-to-day life when I make these little visits. But I knew this was the Christmas you planned to propose to Jennifer for a long time, before I even came back to take the two of you to 2015. Why do you think I didn't want to answer any of her questions about your future together? I knew too much, more than the two of you should have known. I'm glad to see that it's happening on schedule, even though it's not happening in the same way it did before you stayed away from that drag race with Needles."

Suddenly, Marty understood completely. "Yeah, you knew about that before it even happened, didn't you? That's the accident you didn't want to tell me about back in 1885. I should be ticked with you for not saying anything, y'know. I could've wound up messing up both my life *and* Jennifer's if I hadn't wised up enough to not get mad when Needles started pushing my buttons."

"You could've," the inventor agreed with a shrug of submission. "But you had to make your own choice, Marty, and not do what I told you to do because I'd seen what might've happened because of it. If I'd done that, you might *never* have learned to control your temper. But you did, you did it on your own, and you learned a very valuable lesson, one nobody else could teach you."

"I know — *now*. But I was a little hacked with you for a while after Jen told me what she'd seen and heard in the future. She didn't have a chance to say anything to me until after the whole thing was over, but you had a lot more time than that, and you wouldn't say a thing. But I've thought about it these last few years, and I understand that if you'd just told me not to get into *that* drag race, I still would've been a hot-headed idiot, and I just might've gotten into another mess later on, something worse. So I'm not mad at you, and I can see why you did what you did, but there's still one thing I don't understand."

"What?"

"If you couldn't tell me about *my* future 'cause it wasn't written yet and I had to write it myself, then what the hell good did it do for us to go to 2015 and try to stop my kid from screwing up *his* future?"

Marty wasn't quite sure if it was a reaction to the cold wind, his imagination, or what he thought it was, but Doc appeared to flush, ever so slightly. "Ah... no good whatsoever, actually," he confessed sheepishly. "At that point, I was almost as much of a novice to time travel as a reality as you were, and there were a few things I hadn't quite figured out — such as the pointlessness of changing events in the future. Not only is the future in a constant state of flux based on what we do in the present — or sometimes in the past — but the real problem was in the present. I was afraid that telling you about the accident might make things worse — like you said, postponing the critical event without teaching you a thing about controlling your temper, so that when the crisis came, you might wind up hurting yourself even worse, or, God forbid, getting killed. When I saw what your future was like the first time I went to 2015, I was appalled, but when I discovered that things had gotten even worse for your children, I wanted to do *something*. But what we did wasn't the answer, at least not in the way I'd intended."

The musician frowned faintly. "What do you mean? What didn't you intend?"

Doc happily explained. "Old Biff seeing the Time Machine, realizing what it was, stealing it and the almanac, forcing us to go back to 1955 to clean up the mess we'd made, the DeLorean getting hit by lightning, you coming back to 1885 in spite of my instructions.... If none of that had happened, you wouldn't have ever met Buford Tannen, and if you hadn't been pushed into facing him, would you have realized the foolishness — not to mention the danger — of letting people goad you into fights *before* Needles challenged you to that drag race?"

For a long moment, Marty reflected on that long past but never to be forgotten sequence of events, seeing it in a new and startling light. "No," he finally admitted. "I think you're right, it was going through that whole ugly mess with Buford that made me wise up and realize that letting people push my buttons was dangerous, not just for me, but for other people." He shivered, not just because of the cold. "He really was gonna shoot you...."

"But he didn't, and you learned exactly what you needed to keep your wits when Needles tried the same thing. So it wasn't how I'd intended to help your future family, but it was the best possible thing that could've been done."

I'm sure if we were to look at 2015 now, we'd find that things are considerably different, not just for your kids, but for you and Jennifer, too."

The notion was intriguing. "Would it hurt to take a quick look?" Marty wondered.

"Probably," was the expected answer. "Just be happy with knowing you avoided at least one major pitfall that could've ruined your future. That's more than most people will ever know about their lives, and how they could have been."

"Yeah, you're right, I decided a long time ago that I don't want to know anything about the future of me or anybody I know. Knowing stuff like that is too much of a headache." He slipped his jacket on over the sweater, grateful for its additional warmth as a few flakes of snow started to drift down from the skies. "Is it okay if I tell people where I really got the sweater? I know Linda's gonna ask. I swear, she has radar that goes off every time someone brings a new piece of clothing into the house."

Given that she had studied fashion design in college, it wasn't surprising. "That's fine, you can even tell your family you saw me today, if you want. Just remember, we're living in Sacramento until the house is finished." He looked up at the leaden sky and the thickening fog of snow. "You'd better head for the jeweler's before enough of this falls to make people start driving like idiots — and thinking of the jeweler's, I almost forgot...." He rooted around in the many pockets of his coat, didn't find what he was looking for, then reached beneath it to check the pockets of his pants. He finally struck paydirt, pulling out what looked to be a wadded-up but clean linen handkerchief, which he offered to Marty.

The musician was puzzled. "What, did I get dust all over my face plowing into one of those king-sized cobwebs in the house?"

"No, no, it's something I picked up for you a few years ago on a trip to San Francisco, long before I finished the new Time Machine. I thought this would be as good a time as any to give it to you, since it *is* almost Christmas."

Now curious, Marty took the cloth and could feel something heavier within. He peeled back the folds of cloth carefully, in case they were protecting something fragile. Inside, he found a gold pocket watch, like the antique ones he'd seen on display in some stores but in much better condition. It was the sort once used by railroad conductors, relatively simple in design, but clearly a product of the last century. "This is nice, Doc," he began, even though he wondered how often he'd have occasion to use it, since this type of watch wasn't exactly in style in 1989.

Out of idle curiosity, he popped it open to have a look at the face, and was startled to hear it play what seemed to be strangely familiar music. When the entire tune repeated itself, he suddenly recognized it, and gasped. "That's one of my songs — the first one I sold! Where the heck did you find a watch in 1890-whatever that can play one of my songs? Did I accidentally plagiarize someone else's stuff?" It was a horrifying thought.

But Doc shook his head, smiling. "No, that's your song. We were in San Francisco for almost a month, visiting with a bunch of Clara's relatives and friends who'd come to see her about a year after Verne was born, but they wanted to stay somewhere a little more civilized than Hill Valley. While we were there, I found the shop of a watchmaker from Switzerland who was also an expert at constructing music boxes. All I had to do was jot down the tune for him, and he was able to take it from there. He thought the song sounded rather strange and unpleasant, which was just as well, 'cause if he'd liked it, he might've gone around repeating it to other people, or putting it in other music boxes."

"That is really cool," Marty said, genuinely meaning it, and thus appreciating the gift all the more — not just because of its uniqueness or value, but because it meant that Doc had actually listened to the tapes he'd given him, and had liked his music well enough to remember it, even after the better part of a decade spent stranded in the past. His own parents didn't pay that much attention to it, beyond praising him in the way parents do just because you happen to be their child and they feel it their duty to make an effort to be supportive. Their tastes in music didn't lean in the same direction as Marty's, and so far as he knew, they listened to that type of stuff only when they listened to him. He listened to the silvery rendition of the tune he'd written almost five years ago, perfectly rendered note for note, and smiled softly. "But how come you took that kind of a chance to have somebody make this when you didn't even know if you'd be able to get back home again?"

The inventor made a dismissive gesture. "Oh, by that point, I pretty well knew I'd be able to make the train work as a time machine, even if I didn't quite know when. But I guess I had it made because I was feeling homesick."

Marty looked up and blinked. "Homesick?"

"For people and places I knew," the scientist clarified. "When we went on that trip, it really hit home to me that I hadn't seen a face I'd known for more than six years in... well, more than six years. We'd been in San Francisco for almost a week, and I was starting to feel like the proverbial fifth wheel. The only relatives of Clara's that I'd met were her parents, and they hadn't come on that trip. These people were cousins and friends of hers, nobody I knew at all, most of them were women, and back then, it was generally considered gauche for husbands to hang around when the ladies got together to socialize. I didn't even have the kids to keep me distracted, 'cause the women wanted to make a fuss over them, so I spent a lot of time on my own, seeing whatever there was to see. San Francisco was very different back then; so much was lost and had to be rebuilt after the big earthquake in 1906. I guess I also spent a lot of that time thinking about what I'd left behind here, especially *who* I'd left behind, and having that made was a way of telling myself for certain that I *was* going to see you again. I hadn't planned to give it to you for any specific occasion, but this seemed like the perfect time. From some of the things you've been saying, I suspect you've had some doubts about whether or not I was really coming back to stay, too."

"Yeah, I have," the musician admitted, looking at the watch in his hand and realizing what a precious gift it was, no matter what its cost. "Y'know, I once thought I might've been able to live back then, like you did, but eventually, I knew I couldn't. It would've driven me nuts, keeping my mouth shut about things other people couldn't know, not knowing anybody, having nothing around that I could really relate to...." He shook his head. "They would've had to lock me up inside a month. I don't know how you survived."

"Distractions," was the simple reply. "Needing to survive, needing to build another time machine, Clara, the kids.... It kept me busy. That's why it took so long before I started to feel seriously homesick. You don't have the time to really think about how much you miss things and people when just living from day to day is so much more difficult."

A crooked smile quirked across the younger man's face, thinking back to his first day in Hill Valley, 1885. "That's the truth. People today talk about how nice it was that everything was so much slower-paced back then, but they don't stop to think that doing things like running to the store could take all day, and you had to keep your own cow for milk and go out hunting for supper. The movies make it look a lot easier than it was."

"Exactly. There are some very pleasant things about living a hundred years ago, but I think I've had enough of the experience to last the rest of my life. I'm more than ready to come home."

Less than two weeks later, the final stage of that project began in earnest.

SATURDAY, JUNE 9, 1990
3:00 P.M. PDT

After hearing everything Doc had planned for the old Morris place, Marty had had his doubts that it could be done inside six months, even with full crews of professional contractors and remodelers on the job. He also wondered just how his mentor was able to put in a very full day's work, from dawn to well beyond dusk, virtually every day of the week, without collapsing from exhaustion. After a while, though, the musician figured that Doc had to be taking advantage of his ability to travel through time so that he could rest decently in the past before returning to the present, sort of double-booking his days so that he do the work and not suffer from burnout. One day — a pleasant weekend early in March when Marty came to help with some painting — he asked about it, and the inventor confirmed his suspicions. It wasn't something he'd care to do indefinitely, but it was the only way he could do everything he needed to do, both here and in 1894, so that the move could be completed before Clara gave birth and before Marty's graduation.

As it was, things were finished just barely in time. Since the last thing on the house was completed after dark on the evening of Friday the eighth, Doc took his family to a nice hotel for the night, to give them a little while to get used to the idea that they really *were* in the Twentieth Century before they went to see their new home for the first time in the full daylight of Saturday morning. Although he was busy getting ready for graduation on Sunday, Marty

made sure to drop by Saturday afternoon, both to see how everyone was settling in and if they needed his help with anything.

He already knew that the furniture and fixtures and drapes and just about everything else were already in place; he and Doc had taken care of that during the last two weeks. What he *didn't* know was that Clara — who was *still* pregnant, a very mind-bending concept to the young musician, who had first heard of the coming baby almost two years ago — was only a few weeks from her due date. The last time Marty had been around a woman so late in her term had been when he'd met his Grandmother Baines in 1955, and even she'd been several months away from actually giving birth. Suddenly, for some reason he couldn't even explain, he understood why Doc had been so frazzled over the last few months. Maybe it was some strange hormonal thing, setting off instincts that said "this baby could come at any second," or maybe it was just the fear that it would arrive while he was around, an experience he wasn't ready for in the least.

"You can stop staring any time now, Marty," Clara told him after he'd watched her come down the back stairs with an armload of linens while her husband went off with Verne, acceding to the boy's demand to be shown, once more, how the television worked. "And do close your mouth, or your jaw might freeze in that position."

Embarrassed, he scraped his chin off the floor and hustled over to relieve her of her burden, a gallant gesture she deftly refused. "Thank you, but I can carry a few towels without overtaxing myself. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect you've never seen a woman with child before."

"Not *this* with child," he admitted, able to feel his cheeks turning red the instant after he spoke. "I mean, I've seen some of my aunts and our neighbors before they had babies, but usually that was months before they had 'em, when my Mom was giving a shower for them or something. Doc said you still had a few weeks to go...."

She smiled. "That's what Doctor Williams told me before we left, but I'm sure he's wrong. I know the way I feel, I know what to expect now, and I suspect she'll be along in a week or so."

Marty blinked. "She? You know it's gonna be a girl? I thought they couldn't tell things like that back then."

"The doctors can't," she confirmed as she headed down the long central corridor, toward the front washroom. "But I've had the feeling for months. Things don't feel quite the same as they did with the boys, and I think it might be because this one's going to be a girl."

For a moment, Marty tried to picture what she might look like, then gave up. He could barely remember what the boys looked like; attempting to imagine a girl who hadn't even been born yet was beyond him. "Does Doc know?" he wondered instead.

Clara shrugged. "I mentioned it to him, but I rather doubt he really heard me. He's been rather... preoccupied, lately."

Marty grinned. "Yeah, I noticed. Even if he wasn't a basket case over the baby, I think he's been too busy notice anything but getting the house finished."

She agreed. "He did a wonderful job — and I understand you helped."

It was his turn to shrug. "When I could. This last semester was awfully busy, and I couldn't help as much as I would've liked. Doc did most of it."

"I've noticed some things were considerably changed, more than just new furnishings and fixtures.... Was it really empty for almost thirty years?"

"Something like that," he confirmed. "I don't ever remember anyone living here, and my dad says the last owners moved out about the time he and mom got married. It wasn't exactly ready to fall down when Doc bought it, but it was pretty much of a mess. But he thought it'd be worth cleaning up 'cause you'd like living in a house you already knew."

She smiled. "I know, that was very thoughtful of him. He told me the house we owned a hundred years ago burned down when he was a boy — but *not* because of something he did," she added with a small laugh, knowing well the story of what had happened to the house he had inherited from his parents.

She glanced about the small room for something as she arranged the towels in their proper places; she frowned. "I must've left the package with the soap I bought this morning in the kitchen, on the counter near the sink. Marty, would you mind fetching it?"

"Sure, no problem. Anything else you need?"

"No, that should do. It's in a white sack — plastic, I believe." Her smile turned rueful. "It's going to take a little while for me to get used to so many little changes. I'd never even *seen* plastic before Emmett took me into the future, and here, it's so ubiquitous...!"

Marty smiled back as he headed off, not wanting to admit that he wasn't quite sure what *ubiquitous* meant, though he figured he could pretty much tell from context. At least he didn't have to ask where the kitchen was. After the last few weeks, he knew just about every nook and cranny of this place almost as well as Doc did.

He was distracted as he entered the cross-corridor right outside the kitchen, hearing the distant sounds of Doc patiently trying to explain the wonders and mysteries of a television remote to the approximately five-year-old Verne in the nearby rec room, and looking up at a lighting fixture he couldn't seem to recall having seen before. His entry, however, was heard by someone else, who said, "Mom, I can't find — oh."

The startled and disappointed way in which that last syllable was uttered pulled Marty's attention to the speaker. On his knees and poking through the cabinets below the sink was seven-ish Jules, who looked up at the newcomer with a peculiar expression the musician had no idea how to interpret. Rather than run the risk of misinterpreting, he went for polite, and smiled. "Hi... Jules, right? I'm not always real good with names until I've met a person more'n once or twice, and the last time I saw you was... well, a while ago, when you and your brother spent the weekend with me and Jennifer. That was a couple of years ago, for me."

The boy stood up as he nodded. Interesting, Marty noted, that the kid was already showing signs that he would someday grow to be as tall as his father, and had apparently been introduced to such Twentieth Century comforts as athletic shoes. "Yeah, I'm Jules," he confirmed. "Do you need something, Mister McFly?"

The musician's smile became a grin. "You can call me Marty. I'm not exactly old enough to be your dad — well, maybe technically, but 'Mister McFly' makes me feel like I'm old enough to be my great-great-grandfather."

From the odd way in which his expression twitched, it was difficult to tell if Jules was trying not to wince or not to smile. Maybe it was both. "You look a lot like him," he finally said instead. "Your great-great-grandfather, I mean. Dad said the Mister McFly we knew back home was your great-great-grandfather."

"Did he? I didn't know Doc said much of anything about me to you guys."

This time, it was definitely *not* a smile the boy was trying to suppress. "Dad talks about you all the time," he said quietly.

Spotting the package Clara had asked for on the nearby counter, Marty was again distracted and didn't quite pick up any greater meanings to the remark. He snorted softly, amused. "Yeah, probably because all the stupid things I've done over the years make great bedtime stories. Is this the stuff your Mom got from the store this morning?"

Jules looked at the indicated bag and nodded. "Before Dad brought us here. Are all the stores around here as big as that one?" he asked, his attention diverted from whatever had been bothering him.

Marty glanced at the logo printed on the white plastic, that of a chain drugstore not far from the hotel in which they'd spent the night. He personally didn't consider it that large a place, but to someone newly come from the Nineteenth Century — who had apparently spent less time going on trips across the fourth dimension than Marty had expected — it probably seemed huge. He smiled kindly. "No, there are lots of smaller stores, and a lot of bigger ones, too. Wait'll the first time your dad takes you to the mall. It's bigger'n all of downtown Hill Valley, at least back around 1885."

The notion of a store that huge made the boy's dark eyes go round with wonder, then narrow with disbelief. "You're just joshin' me," he felt sure.

But Marty shook his head. "Nope, I'm not teasing. Just wait; you'll see. An awful lot can change over a hundred years."

Jules considered this, and had to concede the point, since he had been even farther into the future more than once, and had seen Hill Valley in a state far more unusual than its current appearance. But though Marty could see his understanding of this in his eyes, the boy did not want to admit it out loud. "I've gotta go finish puttin' away my stuff," he said instead, and suddenly hurried off.

He left in such a rush, Marty had to look down at himself and wonder if he appeared somehow alien or completely incomprehensible to the eyes of someone raised in the last century. Clara hadn't acted that way around him, but maybe it was only because she was an adult and better able to hide her reactions. It was something he knew about from first hand experience, since this was the first time he'd had an opportunity to interact with Doc's family, especially Clara, with the knowledge that they *were* his family, and were going to be around as a permanent part of the inventor's life. He could tell it was going to take some getting used to, just as it had taken a while before he'd become truly comfortable with the people who were now his own family, no longer a collection of nerds and losers. He'd adapt to this change just as he'd adapted to the changes at home, but he knew it wasn't going to happen in a day, for him or for Jules.

From what he could hear in the rec room as he headed back to the bathroom, though, Verne was adapting at lightspeed. Maybe it was easier for littler kids, simply because to them, *everything* was pretty new and interesting and changing all the time. He wondered, though, how things would go once the new baby arrived.

He almost found out about half an hour later, when Clara suddenly appeared to go into labor. Fortunately, it was nothing but a false alarm. Marty had once heard somewhere that after their first child, women tended to give birth even faster to those that followed, something to which his own birth gave some credence, as his mother almost hadn't made it to the hospital in time. He was sufficiently nervous around pregnant women that he didn't even want to think what it might be like being around one actually giving birth. He'd seen films in his high school health classes, and though he hadn't had to run out of the room like a few of the supposedly tough jocks, they'd left him feeling a little queasy. Why would anyone want to be around to watch somebody they loved going through that kind of ordeal? From what the films had shown, the miracle of birth was a lot of pain and other grossness until the baby *finally* showed up, and though he figured he'd probably feel different by the time he was in the position of being a father, he didn't have a hard time understanding why guys used to prefer sitting it out — or pacing it out — in waiting rooms.

Of course, waiting wasn't necessarily all it was cracked up to be, either, or so Marty deduced after he'd been left to watch the boys while their parents rushed off to the hospital. The kids, especially Verne, had a million questions that he didn't know if he could or should answer, at least not those relating to childbirth. Their curiosity about hospitals surprised him, until he realized that they had never seen one, save for some clinics in the Twenty-First Century that Doc had taken them to after the second Time Machine had been completed. Hill Valley's first hospital — St. Catherine's, which had originally been founded and funded by one of those semi-missionary branches of the Catholic Church — hadn't opened until 1898, when the population had grown large enough to make it financially feasible. Prior to that, people had gone to Sacramento for serious medical care, and women delivered their babies at home, generally attended only by female family or neighbors and a midwife. Doctors only entered the picture if there were problems with the delivery. Marty had heard all about this from his McFly grandparents. Arthur had been born at home out on the farm, just like his fathers before him, and Sylvia had been a midwife, until that option fell out of favor.

Having left the past before the hospital even broke ground, Jules wanted to know why his mother needed to go there for something so simple, and Verne wanted to know just what kind of a place a hospital was. To appease their curiosity, which was intense, Marty told them about his own trips to Hill Valley General, the first when he'd been ten and needed his tonsils out, and a couple of other times when he'd cut himself and needed stitches, or fell and needed to have x-rays taken to make sure nothing was broken. He was in the middle of explaining what it was like having an x-ray when Doc and Clara returned.

"Nothing's wrong?" he asked the inventor when his still-pregnant wife took the boys off into the rec room to explain where they'd been and what had happened.

Emmett shook his head, looking rather more frazzled than he had when they'd left, which had already been considerable. "This happened with both of the boys, a couple of false alarms during the weeks before they finally arrived."

Marty winced as he whistled tonelessly. "Jeeze, no wonder you've been a wreck! Do they know why that keeps happening?"

Again, the inventor shook his head, plopping down into one of the kitchen chairs rather than attempt to continue standing, which was getting to be a chancy proposition. "A hundred years ago? Not likely. Here, they thought it was caused by stress due to the move, and I have to agree — though not for the reasons the doctors are probably thinking."

Marty settled into another chair, considering the remark as he did so. "You think it has something to do with time travel?"

Doc shrugged. "I can't be sure, but it's a possibility. That's why I didn't want to bring Clara here sooner, even though the medical care is better. If it was going to have an effect like inducing premature labor, I wanted to make sure the baby would be able to survive without suffering for it."

It was a more than reasonable concern. "Yeah, I see what you mean. One of my mom's civic groups does volunteer work at the neo-natal units in the local hospitals. She's told me how hard it is for some of the kids born too soon, and I've seen stuff on the news about it. If this happened because of time travel, then you were right to not bring her sooner."

"I know. But I was hoping that just this once, there wouldn't be any false alarms. It's hard on her, and the rest of us. Thanks for watching the boys, by the way. I wasn't expecting anything like this today, but I suppose given past history, I should've."

Marty dismissed the thanks with the wave of one hand, though his brow furrowed faintly. "How many times did this happen with the boys? Just once?"

Doc rubbed his forehead as he tried to remember without causing himself more worry. "Twice with Jules, three or four times with Verne. I don't really recall. All I really remember was that after the first time, I was a nervous wreck until she finally *did* have the baby. I hope this'll be the only false alarm, this time around — but somehow, I have a feeling I won't be that lucky."

He was absolutely right.

Over the course of the next few days, there were two additional false alarms. The first came during Marty's graduation ceremony the following afternoon, but fortunately, Clara managed to keep it to herself long enough to prevent them from rushing out of the auditorium before they'd had a chance to see Marty receive his diploma. By then, the spasms had stopped, and she refused to let Emmett take her to the hospital for no good reason.

The next came on Monday, right in the middle of a local supermarket, since Clara had insisted she be allowed to at least come along so that she could begin to acclimate herself to this new world she would have to live in for the rest of her life. The manager on duty — a college kid who had gotten hired for the summer by his uncle, who owned the place — freaked out more than Doc at the thought of a woman having a baby right in the middle of his produce department. He had insisted on calling 911 even though the inventor was quite prepared to take her to the hospital himself, but once again, the contractions stopped by the time the paramedics arrived. They checked their somewhat exasperated patient anyway, just to make sure she was all right, and eventually agreed that she was not in the midst of labor.

Marty heard the entire story from his sister Linda, who happened to have been in the store at the time, and he had to wonder just how long his best friend would be able to take this, if this kept happening on a daily basis until Clara reached her due date around the end of the month.

TUESDAY, JUNE 12, 1990

7:15 P.M. PDT

As Tuesday happened to be a day both Marty and Jennifer had free from work and other commitments, they'd planned to have a little backyard barbecue for the friends and family who hadn't been able to attend their big graduation party on Sunday. Doc happened to be among those people, partly because he didn't think introducing his family to Hill Valley society the day after they'd moved to another time was a good idea, and partly because Marty had forgotten to invite him, since he hadn't known exactly when his friend was planning to finalize his return when the invitations had to be sent out. This cookout was going to be a much smaller affair, a few friends and close family, something far better suited for the first time Clara and the kids would actually need to interact with the inhabitants of Hill Valley 1990 on a social level. And everything went just fine — until just after dinner was ready.

When he saw the schoolteacher lean over to whisper something to her husband, Marty had a pretty good idea what was up. He also had a pretty good idea why Doc reacted to it with a pitiful, "Not again!" expression, though that lasted only until Clara whispered to him again. Although his mouth formed the words, "Great Scott!" not a single sound came out, and he suddenly went so pale, Marty was certain he was about to faint dead away.

He didn't, though he was on his feet so fast, Marty wasn't sure he actually saw him make the transition between sitting and standing. But when he made a beeline in Marty's direction, the musician was quite sure he knew what was happening. "Another false alarm?" he asked before Doc could say a word.

But the scientist shook his head. "Not this time. When the water breaks, it's for real. I have to call the hospital and get Clara to the car and find someone to watch the boys...."

"Don't worry about them," Marty assured him before he could sink into a full state of panic. Somehow, the musician thought, it didn't matter how many times you went through this; you never got used to it because it was different every time. Out of the corner of one eye, he noticed that Jennifer had seen something was up and was coming to investigate. Good; he could probably use the help. "We'll keep an eye on 'em, don't worry. But I don't think your car's going anywhere. Zak and Eric have their vans blocking it in the driveway, and they went off with Lisa half an hour ago to pick up some stuff she wanted to give Jen. They didn't leave their keys."

Horrified by the realization that he hadn't thought to make sure he wasn't parked in, just in case, Doc looked as if he was thinking about fainting again, until Jennifer said, "That's okay, Marty, my car's parked out front, on the street. There won't be any problem getting it out, and you're welcome to use it, Doctor Brown."

This time, the inventor was more faint from relief than panic. "Thank you, Jennifer."

The young journalist was just about to go fetch her keys when Grandpa Arthur — who had stayed at home on Sunday to nurse his wife through a flare up of her sciatica, and was an inveterate eavesdropper — piped up. "You want to go somewhere, now? Forget it. I was out front about ten minutes ago, and there're all sorts of trucks blocking the road. Looks like a water main broke or something, flooded the whole intersection. Seeing my son didn't have the brights to buy a house on a street with more'n one way out or in, nobody's going anywhere with a car for at least an hour, minimum."

All three of his listeners blanched; Doc looked more than a little unsteady. "Okay, okay," Marty said, attempting to be calm even though he'd started hyperventilating. "This can't be that bad. We can call a cab, and then all we have to do is get Clara up to Pine Street to catch it."

"I don't think the baby's going to wait that long," said Clara announced as she joined them, almost but not quite as pale as the rest of them. She, at the very least, knew what was going on and what to expect. "I'm sorry to disrupt your party like this, Marty, but...."

"We should call 911," Jennifer suggested, doing only a slightly better job of staying calm. "I'm sure at least *they* can get in here...."

"Not in time, I don't think," the teacher said, taking a deep breath and gripping the nearer of her husband's arms as another contraction rippled through her. "This baby wants to come *right now*, and I don't know how to keep her from doing it!"

Doc winced as her fingernails dug into his forearm with a strength that could've shattered smaller bones and was probably going to leave bruises. "Can't you get it to wait a few minutes — or was this planned so you could avoid the hospital?"

As the spasm abated, she favored him with a glare that could have left frost on burning coals. "Emmett, really!"

He relented, chagrined by his own lack of tact. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, it's just that I've never seen a worse case of bad timing in my entire life!"

Her icy expression melted. "No, I don't suppose I have, either, but it's too late now. You don't think the doctor could meet us here, do you?"

Arthur snorted. "Not unless he's got a boat and a launching permit. That's one hell of a lake out there."

"Then I don't see any other choi—ssss!" Clara's last word ended in a sharp hiss as another contraction hit. She leaned more heavily against Emmett, who looked like he could use a little support himself, but somehow managed to provide his wife with the help she needed without falling over.

And that was enough to kick Marty into a full blown panic. "But... but... but..." he sputtered, suddenly getting an absurd vision of something he'd once seen in a clip from *Gone with the Wind*. *But Miss Scarlett, I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies!* "I don't know how to do this! We need a doctor...!"

"Oh, no, you don't, Marty, there's nothing simpler in the world," his Grandma Sylvia told him, having become interested in all the fuss when she'd noticed Clara's most recent contraction. "Women have been doing this on their own for centuries, and I used to help deliver babies back when we still lived on the farm. If the baby can't wait for modern conveniences, then modern conveniences will have to wait instead; we'll do this the old fashioned way."

She turned to Clara and smiled, offering one withered old arm for support. "You'll be just fine, dear," she soothed, gently urging the teacher to follow her into the house. "I was a licensed midwife, and just because people got the silly notion they need all those doctors and fancy equipment doesn't mean the new way is the best way. I haven't forgotten a thing, mind you — and I suspect you haven't, either. Such darling little boys! How close are the contractions, now...?"

As they headed off, it took a moment before Doc realized what was happening and went after them, a suddenly frantic but reasonably controlled Lorraine also following to help with whatever needed to be done. Meanwhile, George headed for the phone to call the paramedics, just in case they *could* arrive in time. Marty felt as if his feet had grown roots; he could only stand there and stare. Not only was he seeing an entirely new side to his father's mother — an eighty-three-year-old woman who usually spent her time at parties complaining about her aches and pains or reminiscing about the good old days and whining about how bad things were now — but he found it impossible to comprehend that the baby was going to be born in his house, right in the middle of his party.

"I don't believe this!" he finally breathed, too stunned to even shake his head.

Jennifer patted his arm as she smiled at him. "Well, you've always wanted to give the kind of party no one would ever be able to forget," she teased gently. "I'm willing to bet that everyone we know is going to have a hard time topping *this!*"

Arthur, still eavesdropping, snorted loudly around the chicken leg he was eating. "Most damned fool thing I've ever seen," he opined, impolitely chewing his food at the same time. "Robbing the cradle, if you ask me. What the hell's an old crock like him doing, having kids at his age?"

His eighty-eight year old grandfather's predictable pessimistic disapproval shifted Marty's consternation to aggravation. He scowled. "Nobody *asked* you, Grandpa — and I don't know, maybe they just happen to love each other. It's not a crime, y'know, even for people *your* age." It was a pointed dig, since Arthur was a good eighteen years older than Doc (not counting the years the inventor had spent traveling through time), and in far worse condition, both physically and mentally.

Not trusting himself to say anything more without getting seriously angry, Marty headed into the house to see if he could be of any help — a frightening proposition, but less dangerous than standing and listening to Arthur spout the kind of biased remarks that had always gotten under Marty's skin. Maybe, he reflected as he strode away from the momentarily dumbstruck old man, it was listening to garbage like this all his life that had helped give him the hair-trigger temper he'd finally managed to lose.

Jennifer, no fonder of Arthur's narrow-minded attitudes, went to intercept Jules and Verne, who had noticed that something was afoot when Sylvia and Lorraine had taken their mother inside, with their father a few steps behind. Marty happily left the job to her. Having no younger siblings, he'd never lived through the experience of witnessing the long process of another brother or sister coming into the world, while Jennifer's younger brother had come along when she was almost seven.

Inside, he found that the women and Doc had gone off into one of the bedrooms, and that his father was having trouble getting through to the EMTs. "The phone's dead," George announced, hanging up as Marty drew near. "I don't understand...."

But Marty did. "If that flood's as bad as Grandpa says, it might've taken out the main line into the neighborhood. They buried all the lines down there a few years ago, didn't they?"

He was right; they both recalled the construction mess all along the street when the job had been done. "Do any of your friends have a portable phone?" George asked after trying to think of a way to summon help. "I know none of our relatives do."

Marty considered it, then shook his head. "Doc used to, but he cut off the service while he was out of the country, and he hasn't gotten it started up again, yet. But wasn't Mike Rutledge showing off his new cell phone at that pool party he had over Memorial Day?" The person so named was an insurance agent who lived a couple houses down the street, a bit of a blowhard who liked to consider himself and his business of considerably greater importance than anyone else did. He and his family had lived in the neighborhood for as long as Marty could remember, and while he sometimes found the guy exasperating, he usually could be counted on to come through in a pinch.

One could see the light come on behind George's eyes. "You're right, he was. He should be home by now, too. I'll—" He set his hand on the phone receiver, planning to call, when he realized his own foolishness. "I'll go check. Good idea, Marty." He clapped his son on one shoulder as he headed out with such determination, Marty had to wonder if he wasn't glad for the excuse to get out of the house before someone could ask him to help with... other things.

Left alone, the musician started thinking that maybe he should be doing something like boiling water — he'd heard people instructed to do that in God only knew how many movies, though he'd also seen one where the doctor said it wasn't because the water was actually needed, it was to give the fretting bystanders something to do while the mother was taking care of the important work. He was in the middle of trying to work up the nerve to go ask if there was anything he could do to help when his mother appeared at the end of the corridor to the bedrooms.

"Oh, Marty, would you mind getting the towels I left in the laundry room?" she asked when she saw him standing there, adrift. "They're in the dryer; I just didn't have a chance to put them away."

"Sure thing, Mom," he agreed, relieved that she hadn't asked him to come in to help with something more clinical. It might've been nothing more than sending him off to boil water, a pointless errand, but when he returned with the towels, she was still in the hallway, waiting.

She smiled as she relieved him of his burden. "Thanks, honey. Did your father call 911?"

He shook his head. "The phones are out, so he went over to the Rutledges' to use their cell phone."

Her smile faded, replaced by rather forlorn expression. "Then I don't think they'll get here in time," she sighed, and headed back to the bedroom.

She was right. Ten minutes later, before they even heard the first sound of the rescue vehicles finally on their way, a much closer and more piercing wail heralded the arrival of the ever so impatient baby. After hearing the cry, Marty worked up the nerve to peek into his parents' bedroom, which Lorraine had thoughtfully offered for Clara's

comfort (to Marty's relief; he wasn't sure he'd have been able to ever sleep in his own bed again after a baby had been born in it). Sylvia had just finished cleaning up the infant and had turned it over to the proud parents when Marty peered around the jamb. As she and Lorraine left the room, removing all the dirtied cloths and whatnot and going to guide the just-arriving paramedics, Sylvia spotted him and shooed him away before moving on. Marty retreated down the hall until they were gone, then looked back into the room.

"A girl?" he asked, not wanting to interrupt — Clara looked exhausted but happy, and her husband no less so — but needing to know if the teacher had been right. The tiny bundle in her arms had a full head of fluffy dark hair, but that alone was not enough to tell its gender.

She smiled at him as she nodded. Despite her earlier protestation to the contrary, something in her expression told Marty that Clara was immensely relieved that things had turned out this way, even though it had inconvenienced others. She was probably far more comfortable with the idea of having her child in the familiar surroundings of a home — even if it wasn't her own — than in the sterile and strange environment of a modern hospital. "Emily Ann. I'm sorry if we ruined your party...."

He brushed the concern aside without a second thought, suddenly glad for the conspiracy of events that had produced this result. "Nah, you *made* it. Things were getting a little dull, and now, nobody's ever gonna forget *this* one — 'cept maybe Zak and Eric and Lisa, but the guys probably would've fainted, anyway. I nearly did, a few times. Did everything go all right?"

"Just fine," Doc said. Though he didn't quite look it — he had a slightly dazed aura about him, probably the emotional equivalent of the aftereffects of labor — he sounded much more his normal self than he had in months. "We'll let the paramedics take them to the hospital just to be sure, but Clara and your grandmother agree that this was the easiest delivery they've ever seen. Thank you for being patient with us, Marty. We talked about this yesterday, and after what's happened today, I think it's an excellent idea."

The musician frowned, puzzled by the non-sequitur. "What is?"

The couple exchanged glances; Clara nodded, feeling too tired to speak if it wasn't necessary. "If you wouldn't mind, we'd like you and Jennifer to be Emily's godparents, when the time comes."

The blue eyes blinked. "Godparents? You guys go to church? I mean, well, yeah, why not, lots of people do, I just didn't know. Sure, I'm honored, I think that'd be great — an' I'm sure Jen'll think so, too."

"Think what?" Jennifer asked as she came up behind Marty with two curious little boys in tow. When Marty told her, she smiled broadly. "Oh, I'd love to! Thank you for thinking of me. The paramedics are almost here, but Grandma McFly said it would be all right if the boys had a chance to see their new sister before she goes to the hospital."

At their mother's nod, the boys hesitantly went into the room to get a closer look at what was causing all the fuss. Jennifer pulled the door closed to give them a moment's privacy, and smiled up at Marty, her eyes shining. "You didn't pass out," she said softly, a laugh threading her voice. "And you always said you would if you ever got within a hundred feet of somebody having a baby. Do you think this means when we get around to it, you'll actually be able to make it into the delivery room?"

He returned her smile, rather more crookedly, but no less amused. "One step at a time, Jen. Let's not try to cross that bridge 'til we get to it, okay?"

She nodded, and anything else she might have said was drowned out by the clatter of the EMTs finally arriving on the scene. As he and Jennifer got out of the way to give them room, Marty wondered if having kids always created this much of a ruckus, and if so, would he be able to handle it when his turn came along in the grander scheme of things? Only time would tell.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 1997

8:53 P.M. PDT

Seven years later, he was thinking of those words and that day as he drove himself home from the hospital, an exhausted but happy new father of a baby girl who had taken twenty long hours rather than twenty short minutes to come into the world. It had been almost two days since he'd been able to rest, and now that Jennifer and Marlene were both doing fine, fast asleep after their own ordeals, the doctor had recommended he do the same, go home to get cleaned up, catch a decent meal and maybe a few hours' shuteye before going to back to check on his family.

Weird and hectic though Emily's birth had been, it hadn't really prepared him for his own daughter's, mostly because no one had expected the labor to take quite so long. After a few hours of watching Jennifer suffer, he'd been all for whatever ideas the doctors had to make things move along more quickly, but Jen had stubbornly refused it until and unless it became absolutely necessary. She'd never been comfortable with the idea of surgery, and she'd heard from enough of her friends that once you delivered a baby by C-section, there was virtually no chance that you'd ever deliver another in any other way — which meant that she would face the unpleasant prospect of going under the knife at least once again. So long as she and the baby were in no danger, she'd wanted to do this without drugs or surgery, and though Marty hated to watch her in pain, he knew this had to be her call. In the end, she got her wish, and they now had a healthy baby girl.

Funny, Marty reflected as he pulled onto his home street, but he'd never thought that one day of waiting could be worse than five years of it. Of course, those five years hadn't been one long, unpleasant ordeal from beginning to end, and even though he'd missed Doc and sometimes wondered if he was really going to return home, he'd never genuinely feared for his life, as he had for both Jennifer and Marlene during this long, long delivery. But he now understood why his mentor had been such a basket case during the months before Emily's birth. If he'd ever felt that either Jennifer or the baby were in any danger during her pregnancy, he'd have been a nervous wreck, too. Knowing that your wife was carrying a baby during a risky time of life and in an era that could really do little to help if anything went wrong.... If he'd been carrying any lingering notions that Doc had worried too much back then, they were gone for good. Clara and his grandmother may have been perfectly comfortable dealing with childbirth at home, but he for one had been mighty glad to have all the facilities and experts of a modern hospital right there, should they have been needed.

As he pulled into the driveway to his house on Silver Creek Lane, Marty was startled to see a car parked in it. It took only a second for him to identify it as one of Doc's — a holographically simplified version of the gold-plated Jaguar that was his newest Time Machine — and a second more to wonder why it was here. Figuring there had to be a good reason, but still puzzled as to why the inventor had come in a Time Machine, he went inside.

Once the door was opened, he smelled something that made his mouth water at once. Guessing that he'd find his answers in the kitchen, he headed straight for it. The delicious aroma, Marty deduced, came from the unfamiliar dishes waiting on the table. Doc himself was standing at the counter beside the sink, writing a note. He looked up when Marty entered, and smiled.

"I guess I won't be needing this," he said, crumpling the paper and tucking the pen in a pocket. "I thought I might've miscalculated how long it would take for you to drive from the hospital. The traffic's not heavy at this time of night, but there's more than enough construction along the way to make up for it."

Marty blinked. "You knew I was coming home? How'd you find out? I didn't even call you after Jen finally had the baby." He suddenly realized how inconsiderate that was, all things considered.

But Emmett was unoffended. "I've known when Marlene was going to be born for years, Marty," he reminded the musician with a mischievous chuckle. "Provided everything followed the paths I'd already seen, that is. As for knowing when you left the hospital, it wasn't that difficult. I suspected the doctors were going to want her and the baby to sleep once they were settled into their room, and if they behaved like the doctors did after we took Clara and Emily to the hospital, I figured they'd kick you out and send you home about half an hour later. I called at what I estimated was the proper time; I was told that the mother and baby were doing fine, and that you'd gone home just a few minutes earlier. Clara knew you wouldn't be in any condition to fix yourself a proper meal, so she sent the leftovers from ours. It was just a question of timing it so you wouldn't have to reheat them, which is why I brought the Jaguar, in case something I couldn't predict delayed your arrival. A pretty petty use of time travel, all things

considered, but I didn't really think I'd need to use it. From the look of things, though, I'd say it's possible you might not be able to stay awake long enough to eat."

"I'll manage," Marty promised, sitting down to dig in, grateful for his friends' thoughtfulness. "Thanks a lot, Doc — and thank Clara for me. I passed feeling ready to drop about ten hours ago; now, I think I'm running on nothing but pure adrenalin. I didn't imagine anything could be worse than all those false alarms Clara put you through when Emmy was born, but right now, I'd rather Jen had had those every day she was pregnant than going through twenty hours of labor. Do you know, is she gonna go through this with our next kid, too?"

He was favored with a scolding sidelong glance. "You know you shouldn't even be asking that kind of question," was Emmett's chiding answer, to which he added, "but I don't believe so. I'm not entirely sure, though, so don't take my word as fact. I didn't look *that* closely at your family's future history, and things could easily change between now and then."

"I suppose so," Marty sighed, savoring the taste of real food, which, though simple stew, was a far cry from the slop he'd choked down at Hill Valley General's cafeteria. "I never thought that just waiting for something to happen could be so hard, but from everything I've been through over the last twelve years, I think I could write a book on the subject."

"And what would you write?" the inventor wondered, curious.

"That waiting can be a real pain — but that the only things in life that're really worth having are the things you have to wait for."

"That's very profound," Doc approved, "and very true. You waited nine months and twenty hours for your daughter to be born, five years for me to come back — and I waited twenty-two years to meet you, thirty to finish the Time Machine, and almost sixty-six before I finally met Clara. Being patient for so long can be the most difficult thing in the world, but in the end, it's always worth it."

Marty considered those observations as he chewed and then swallowed his mouthful of food; he then nodded, in full agreement. "Yeah, it's tough, but it's definitely worth all the headaches. Have I ever told you I think you've been a great dad, Doc?"

The inventor shrugged, still smiling. "Now and then. I'm not so sure my kids would always agree with you, but..."

The musician waved his fork, dismissing the notion. "Nah, they think you're the best dad in the world, even if they don't say it to your face very often. They've told me. I meant to *me*, not them. There've been a lot of times I've had to wonder just how my life would've turned out if I'd never known you, and only had my father and grandfathers to go on for role models. I've got a feeling it wouldn't've been pretty. Grandpa Arthur was a born pessimist, Grandpa Sam went through life with a chip on his shoulder, thought he knew everything and the only right opinion was his opinion. And my dad might be better now than he was when he was a total wimp, but what he learned from being a success is that it's great for everyone to stand on his own two feet — even when you're a kid who's still learning how to walk, if you know what I mean. Even before you had Clara and the kids and knew what it was like for real, you were a better dad to me than my real one — not because he didn't love me, and maybe not so much because he didn't know what he was doing, but because I was the kind of kid who needed more time and attention than he knew how to give. He sure didn't learn any of that stuff from his own dad. Thanks for filling in all these years. I don't think I've ever come right out and said that."

"You're welcome, but it wasn't necessary. You've said it often enough in other ways — right after your wedding, if I remember right — and it's been a mutually beneficial relationship. After all, if not for all those years of dealing with you as a kid, I probably wouldn't've had any idea of how to relate to anyone under the age of twenty outside a classroom. That undoubtedly saved my own kids a lot of aggravation, especially Jules."

Marty laughed. "Yeah, I suppose, I just never looked at it that way. So, you got any good advice about how I should start this fatherhood gig? My mom's given me tons of it — most of which would work better if I was Jen or Linda — my dad's come up with a few suggestions that aren't too bad, Dave's even sat me down and given me the benefit of what he likes to call his wisdom, but I'd kinda like to hear your take on it. After all, I think we're the only

two fathers on the planet who've ever had to spend years waiting for our future to catch up with us — or to catch up with it."

And since that was unquestionably the truth, Doc sat down and they talked, until Marty fell asleep, finally reaching the end of a day that had been almost twenty exhausting hours — and, in some ways, twelve long years — in the making.

To Be Continued....