

FROM THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE RYRIA REVELATIONS

HOLLOW WORLD

EXTENDED
PREVIEW

First 60 pages
4 Chapters

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE FUTURE IS COMING...FOR SOME SOONER THAN OTHERS

Ellis Rogers is an ordinary man who is about to embark on an extraordinary journey. All his life he has played it safe and done the right thing, but faced with a terminal illness he's willing to take an insane gamble. He's built a time machine in his garage, and if it works, he'll face a world that challenges his understanding of what it means to be human, what it takes to love, and the cost of paradise. Ellis could find more than a cure for his illness; he might find what everyone has been searching for since time began...but only if he can survive Hollow World.

Welcome to the future and a new science fiction thriller from the bestselling author of *The Riyria Revelations*.

HOLLOW WORLD

Hollow World Extended Preview - First Four Chapters

Copyright © 2014 by Michael J. Sullivan

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the copying, scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without permission is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this edition or portions thereof without the express permission of the author and publisher. If you would like to use material from this book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission can be obtained by contacting the author at Michael.Sullivan.DC@gmail.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Cover Landscape Illustration © 2013 Marc Simonetti

Cover Character Depiction © 2013 Michael J. Sullivan

Cover Design: Michael J. Sullivan

Print Release: Tacyhon Publications

Series editor: Jacob Weisman

Project Editor: Jill Roberts

ISBN 13: 978-1-61696-183-1

Audio Release: Recorded Books

Director: Claudia Howard

Narrator: Johnathan Davis

ebook Release: Michael J. Sullivan

Layout: Robin Sullivan

ISBN 13: 978-1-93747-576-5

General Release First Edition: 2014

Learn more about Michael's writings at www.rivria.com.

To contact Michael, email him at Michael.Sullivan.DC@gmail.com

PRAISE FOR HOLLOW WORLD

“This is a clever and thought-provoking story, with loads of interesting ideas, some adrenalin-pumping action and plenty of humour...overall an entertaining read with Pax being one of my favourite characters of the year.” — **Pauline M. Ross**, *Fantasy Review Barn*

“This is social science fiction that H.G. Wells or Isaac Asimov could have written, with the cultural touchstones of today. A modernized classic, *Hollow World* is the perfect novel for both new and nostalgic science fiction readers.” — **Justin Landon**, *Staffer's Book Reviews*

“This book made me laugh. It also made me cry. And in the end, it made me think. I highly recommend *Hollow World* for anyone looking for a book that brushes on and plays out some political and social issues we face today.” — **N. E. White**, *SFFWorld.com*

“I fully expected this to be a good speculative read, I had not expected it to be one of those rare literary gems that exceed the speculative genre to become worthy of any English literature class.” — **Stephan van Velzen**, *The Ranting Dragon*

“I'm happy to report that not only does *Hollow World* establish Sullivan as a force to be reckoned with in any genre he chooses to ply his talent to, it also is a prime example of one of the reasons speculative fiction is so important...Sullivan questions our assumptions about our society as a whole that makes this one of the best novels, I've read this year.” — **Matt Gilliard**, *52 Reviews*

“*Hollow World* is a character-driven story packed with intensity and emotion...*Hollow World* was easily one of my top reads of 2013.” — **Stephenie Sheung**, *Bibliosanctum*

*This book is dedicated to the people at Tachyon Publications
who are leading the way in publishing done right.
I hope more organizations follow in their footsteps.*

MICHAEL SULLIVAN'S WORKS

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (contains The Crown Conspiracy and Avempartha)

Rise of Empire (contains Nyphron Rising and The Emerald Storm)

Heir of Novron (contains Wintertide and Percepliquis)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower

The Rose and the Thorn

Standalone Novels

Hollow World

Antithesis (forthcoming)

A Burden to the Earth (forthcoming)

Anthologies

Unfettered

The End—Visions of Apocalypse

Triumph Over Tragedy

Help Fund My Robot Army (forthcoming)

Unfettered II

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the free extended preview of Hollow World. This file contains the full first four chapters (61 pages) of the novel which will be released on April 15, 2014. Our hope, of course, is that you'll like the story so much, that you'll want to buy the full version. Before you purchase, though, you should know that anyone who buys the print or audio editions will get DRM-free ebook versions at no additional cost. For full details, see the **Free ebook for Print & Audio Purchasers** section of the full version, which can be found in the "Look Inside the Book" sample on Amazon.

Also, signed print books, and discounted ebooks, are available from the [author's site](#) and have the added benefit of ensuring Michael earns the highest income possible. Pre-orders are available from that site as well as fine retailers everywhere such as [iBookstore](#), Barnes and Noble ([print](#) | [nook](#)), and Amazon ([print](#) | [kindle](#)).

Now with that out of the way, let me introduce you to the book.

Time travel as described in this novel isn't possible. It's important to mention this up front. I'm not saying, "Don't try this at home." I'm simply clarifying that this is as much a work of fantasy as it is science fiction—but, then again, most science fiction has a dash of fantasy thrown in, that artificial *what if* spark that ignites the chain reaction that propels everything forward.

In the classic *The Time Machine*, H. G. Wells's high-tech explanation for how his device was able to skip through years was: "Now I want you to clearly understand that this lever, being pressed over, sends the machine gliding into the future, and this other reverses the motion." That's pretty much the extent of his hard science. Of course his story, while named *The Time Machine*, really wasn't so much about the machine or the science behind it, but rather speculations on the future of mankind.

So is Hollow World.

The Time Machine was first published in Britain in 1895. Apparently, back then, you could get away with stating that pressing a lever resulted in doing something otherwise known as impossible. Of course back then, they didn't have the Internet. The average reader today knows that you can't travel faster than the speed of light, or through a black hole. This education may be due more to the success of science fiction entertainment such as *Star Trek* than to high school teachers, but here we are. The modern-day reader is better educated and demands plausibility.

To this end I did research into time-travel theory, and I drew inspiration from a handful of sources, most notably *Time Travel in Einstein's Universe: The Physical Possibilities of Travel Through Time* by renowned astrophysicist J. Richard Gott. Mr. Gott provided a plausible explanation for how a stationary object could move significantly forward in time by overcoming the g-force restriction of linear travel by moving interdimensionally. This is theoretically possible if you could put yourself in the near-center of a black hole while maintaining a defensive shell using electrostatic repulsions of like charges. That's the theory, but as I said, time travel of the sort required for this story isn't possible—at least not in an urban garage. I fudged the math—a lot. I aimed for a dramatic blend of façade, plausibility, and smoke-and-mirrors illusion so that if you don't look too closely, you can *almost* imagine it working.

Like H. G. Wells's tale, *Hollow World* really isn't about time travel any more than reality television shows are documentaries. I hope you won't allow a little creative license to get in the way of enjoying the ride. I felt providing a good reading experience superseded an adherence to strict probability. *Hollow World* isn't a story about the science of time travel.

So, what *is* this story about?

Read on—a world awaits.

—*Michael J. Sullivan*
January 2014

CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

<u>Chapter 1: Running Out of Time</u>	1
<u>Chapter 2: Time to Go</u>	17
<u>Chapter 3: No Time Like the Present</u>	25
<u>Chapter 4: Killing Time</u>	38
Chapter 5: Times They are a Changin'	
Chapter 6: Timing Is Everything	
Chapter 7: Sign of the Times	
Chapter 8: Another Time, Another Place	
Chapter 9: All in Good Time	
Chapter 10: Time Heals All Wounds	
Chapter 11: Quality Time	
Chapter 12: The Time Is Now	
Chapter 13: End of Times	
Chapter 14: Time's Up	
Chapter 15: Time Will Tell	
Chapter 16: Time Well Spent	

Afterword

Acknowledgements

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Michael J. Sullivan](#)

Theft of Swords Excerpt

HOLLOW WORLD



CHAPTER ONE

RUNNING OUT OF TIME

When she said he was dying, and explained how little time he had left, Ellis Rogers laughed. Not a normal response—the doctor knew it, Ellis did too. He wasn't crazy; at least he didn't think so, but how does anyone really know? He should have seen visions, flashes from his life: kissing Peggy at the altar, graduating college, or the death of their son, Isley. He should have fixated on all of the things that he'd never done, the words he had spoken, or the ones he hadn't. Instead, Ellis focused on the four-letter word the doctor had said. Funny that she used *that* word—he never told her what was in his garage.

The pulmonary specialist was a small Indian woman with bright, alert eyes and a clipboard that she frequently looked to for reference. She wore the familiar white lab coat—stethoscope stuffed deep in one pocket. She sat, or more accurately leaned, against the front of her desk as she spoke. At the start of her speech, the doctor had begun with a determined, sympathetic resolve, but that train had been derailed by his inappropriate outburst, and neither of them seemed to know what to do next.

“Are you...all right?” she asked.

“First test I ever failed,” he said, trying to explain himself, hoping she’d swallow it and move on. Given the news she had just delivered, he deserved a little slack.

The doctor stared at him concerned for a moment, then settled back into her professional tone. “You should probably get another opinion, Ellis.” She used his first name as if they were old friends, though he’d only seen her the few times it had taken to get the tests performed.

“Is someone working on a cure for this?” Ellis asked.

The doctor sighed, keeping her lips firm. She folded her arms, then unfolded them and leaned forward. “Yes, but I honestly don’t think anyone is close to a breakthrough.” She looked at him with sad eyes. “You just don’t have that much time.”

There was that word again.

He didn’t laugh, but he might have smiled. He needed a better poker face. Ellis shifted his sight away from her and instead focused on three jars sitting on a counter near the door. They looked like they belonged in a kitchen—except that these contained tongue depressors and cotton swabs instead of sugar and flour. He couldn’t tell what was in the last one. Something individually packaged, syringes, maybe, which reminded him to double-check the first-aid kit to make sure it had a good supply of aspirin. Not all of them did.

The doctor probably expected him to cry or maybe fly into a rage cursing God, bad luck, the industrial food complex, or his own refusal to exercise. Laughter and smiles weren’t on that menu. But he couldn’t help being amused, not when the doctor was unwittingly making jokes.

No, he thought, not jokes—suggestions. And she’s right, there’s nothing stopping me anymore.

He was dying from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis and she had given him six months to a year. The *to a year* portion of that sentence felt tacked on in an overly optimistic manner. Anyone else might have focused on that part of the equation—the dying part—and thought about trips to Europe, safaris

in Africa, or visiting neglected friends and family. Ellis was planning a trip of a different sort and began running a mental checklist. He already had most everything. Flashlight batteries, he should get more of them—can't ever have too many batteries—and some more M&M'S, why the hell not? It wasn't like he had to worry about his weight, diabetes, or tooth decay. *I'll buy a whole box! The peanut ones, the yellow bags are always the best.*

"I'm going to set up an appointment for you to come back. Two weeks should give you enough time to see someone else and have the tests repeated." She stopped writing and stared at him with her big brown eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Is there someone I can call?" She flipped through the pages on the clipboard again. "Your wife?"

"Trust me, I'm good."

He was surprised to realize he was telling the truth. The last time he felt that way was thirty-six years ago when he had sat across from the loan officer's desk and learned he'd qualified for the mortgage that allowed him to move out of his parent's home. Fear mingled with the excitement of facing the unknown. Freedom—real freedom—had all the rush of an illegal drug.

I can finally press the button.

She waited a beat or two longer, then nodded. "Assuming your second opinion concurs with mine, I will add your name to the registry for a transplant, and I'll explain the process in detail at your appointment. Aside from that, I'm afraid there's nothing else we can do. I'm really very sorry." Reaching out she took his hand. "I really am."

He nodded and gave a slight squeeze. Her smile appeared less forced then. Maybe she was thinking she'd made him feel better, made some emotional connection. That was good, he needed all the karma he could get.



“What’d the doctor say?” was the first thing out of Peggy’s mouth when Ellis walked through the door. He couldn’t see her. He guessed she was somewhere in the kitchen, shouting over the television she’d left on in the living room. Peggy did that a lot. She said it made her feel less alone, but she kept it on even when Ellis was home.

“She said it was nothing to be concerned about.” He dropped his keys on the coffee table in the candy dish their son had made years ago.

“She? Wasn’t your appointment with Dr. Hall?”

Dammit! Ellis cringed. “Ah—Dr. Hall retired. I met with a woman doctor.”

“Retired? That sounds sudden. Is he okay?”

“Yeah—yeah he’s fine.”

“Well good for him. I’m surprised, though. He really isn’t much older than we are, and I always thought doctors retired later than other people. So this other doctor, she wasn’t concerned about your cough?”

Ellis found the remote and turned down the volume until the gaggle of women arguing on the television was nothing more than a low hum. He wondered if it was the same show he always walked in on or if all the shows she didn’t watch were the same.

“Not really. She said it was just a virus,” he called back.

The living room was a milestone showing how far they had come. Two Williams-Sonoma mohair couches faced a big screen television as wide as the bathroom in their first apartment. On shelves near the fireplace sat his M.I.T. textbooks alongside dissertations he had bound in genuine leather. Above those were a pile of thrillers and murder mysteries by the likes of Michael Connelly, Tom Clancy, and Jeffery Deaver—his mind candy.

Photos were everywhere: hanging on the walls, propped on end tables, balanced atop the television. From each frame a sandy-haired cherub with freckles and a varying number of teeth smiled back. The one taken at Cedar Point commanded the centerpiece of the granite coffee table. All three of them had been in that amusement-park photo, but a strategic fold had left only Ellis's left hand visible where it rested on his son's shoulder.

"Did she even give you anything for it?" Peggy asked. She entered the living room still wearing her work clothes, what she called her "three Ps": power pantsuit and pearls. She glanced at the television, perhaps checking to see if she was missing anything important, then turned back to him.

For a moment he considered telling the truth, at least about his prognosis. He wanted to see what she'd say. What she'd do.

He couldn't say yes. She might ask to see the bottle. "She gave me a prescription. I just haven't filled it yet."

"Well, you better do that soon. The drugstore will be closing—at least the pharmacy counter will." She pulled a fresh pack of menthols from the pocket of her jacket and began to tap out a cigarette, then paused, looking at him. "Oh," she said with a disappointed tone and a little frown. "Aren't you going to the garage?"

"Actually, I'm meeting Warren. Just came home to get my coat. It's getting cold."

"Well, if you take any pills, look at the bottle before you start drinking."

Ellis grabbed Peggy's keys off the hall table as quietly as he could, but instead of heading out the kitchen door he climbed the stairs to their bedroom, and once inside, locked the door. His heart was pounding so loud he hoped Peggy couldn't hear it. Taking this first step made it real for him.

Jesus, I'm actually going to do it.

He crept to the closet, put on his coat, then began excavating. The left side of the walk-in had always been Peggy's territory. Stacked on the floor were old shoes, the wedding photos, and God

knew what else she had stuffed back there in an assortment of cardboard and plastic containers. Ellis knew what he was looking for, and after carefully disassembling a tower of shoe boxes, he uncovered the treasure-chest-shaped jewelry case. She kept it locked. The key was on her ring along with a bottle opener, flip-out nail file, coin purse, rape whistle, penlight, laminated photo of Isley, silver medallion of a camel or llama, another of a soccer ball, and a big plastic plaque that read: PEGGY. The ridiculous thing was that the Nissan had a keyless entry system and a push button start.

The jewelry box opened like a cash register with the top popping up and the drawers pushing out in tiers. The thing was packed with memorabilia. He spotted a Mother's Day card Isley had made when he was around six. Just a bit of folded poster board with the word MOM scrawled in crayon. There were a bunch of letters, a few photos of Isley, ticket stubs to a play called *No Parking* that he didn't remember, and a bunch of poems Peggy had written before they got married, back when she was learning to play the guitar and planned on being the next Carole King.

And, of course, there was jewelry.

Old clip-on earrings, and the newer pierced ones, some dangled like Christmas tree tinsel, others were just studs. She had two strings of pearls, a choker with what looked like an ivory medallion, and a host of rings. Most of it was costume. Four pieces were not.

Peggy's engagement ring and wedding band were there, but he wouldn't touch those. Ellis was only interested in a pair of diamond earrings he had inherited from his grandmother. The jewelry was at the bottom, buried under the memorabilia.

Downstairs he heard Peggy move. Her footsteps crossed the living room, heading toward the stairs. He froze.

Ellis imagined her coming up and reaching for the door.

Why is the door locked? What are you doing in there, Ellis?

What would he say?

What are you doing with my keys?

He paused, listening. She had stopped.

What the hell is she doing? Just standing in the middle of the hall? Screw it.

Ellis reached in and grabbed everything in the way. He stuffed the pile in his coat pocket, then felt for the earrings.

He heard Peggy starting up the steps, and scooped up the jewelry on the bottom. He closed the closet and raced his wife to the bedroom door, opening it just before she touched the knob.

“Still here?” she asked.

He smiled. “Just heading out.”

His heart was pounding as he went down the steps. He gingerly set her key ring back on the little table near the coat rack and walked out. On the porch he put his hand in his pants pocket and felt for the jewelry. Ellis sighed. He’d accidentally grabbed Peggy’s rings along with his grandmother’s diamonds. He’d leave them on the kitchen counter when he got back from the bar, although they obviously didn’t mean anything to her anymore. She’d worn them for eighteen years but stopped about the time she started taking the real-estate seminars. Peggy mentioned that an article had said women Realtors without wedding bands consistently outperformed those who wore them regardless of whether or not they were actually married. Ellis never argued, never put up a fuss because he knew the real reason. She had put away her rings and started her career the same summer that Isley had hung himself in the garage with one of his father’s belts.



Brady’s was a nearly invisible bar on Eight Mile Road. Sandwiched between a video-rental store and a Chinese restaurant in a neighborhood of liquor stores and bump shops, it was the only

building without bars on the windows. Brady's didn't have windows. The place was just a brick front with a white-painted steel door that clanged on a tight spring.

Ellis stood outside the bar, coughing. He always had trouble going out in the cold, not that it was all that cold yet. November in Detroit, with the moisture coming off the Great Lakes, was just the prelude to six months of bone-chilling misery. Still, his lungs didn't like the change in the air. These days his lungs didn't like much of anything, and the coughing came in fits of chest-ripping waves that left him feeling battered. He waited until the wheezing stopped before heading inside.

The interior of Brady's was about what the exterior suggested: a no-frills bar that smelled like fried food and still reeked of cigarette smoke years after the state ban went into effect. The floor was sticky, the tables wobbled, and the corner-mounted television showed muted football highlights while hidden speakers played vintage Johnny Cash. Without windows, the only light came from the television and a few old-fashioned ceiling lamps, leaving the place a flickering cave of silhouettes.

Warren Eckard sat at the bar, looking up at the television screen and swirling what was left of a Budweiser. Supported by his elbows, he was hunched over the bottle, one foot bouncing to the rhythm of Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues." Warren was wearing a T-shirt that read: I LOVE MY COUNTRY. IT'S THE GOVERNMENT I HATE. The 2XL shirt was still too small, leaving an exposed band of pale skin muffining out of his jeans. Ellis was just thankful Warren wasn't letting his waistband droop any more than it already was.

"Warren," Ellis said, clapping him on the back and taking a seat alongside him.

"Hey! Hey!" Warren turned, grinning at him with an overacted look of surprise. "Well, if it ain't Mr. Rogers. Wonderful day in the neighborhood to ya, old man. How ya been?"

Warren held out his hand, and Ellis took it, his own disappearing inside that big mitt. It had been decades since the accident, but he couldn't help noticing Warren's missing fourth and fifth fingers.

“Who’s the kid behind the bar?” Ellis asked, trying to catch the eye of the bartender—some young fella in a black T-shirt with a toothpick in his mouth.

“Freddy,” Warren said. “He’s Italian. So don’t make any dago jokes, or we’ll both be swimming *wit da fishes*.”

“Where’s Marty?”

Warren shrugged. “Day off, maybe. Laid-off likely. Who knows?”

“Freddy?” Ellis called to the kid, who was leaning back on his elbows, fiddling with the toothpick between his teeth. “Can I get a Bud?”

The kid nodded and popped the top off a tall, brown bottle frosted from the cooler. He slapped a square napkin on the bar in front of Ellis, set the bottle on it, and then went back to his elbows and his toothpick.

“Lions playing tonight?” Ellis asked, nodding at the television as he peeled off his coat.

“Against the Redskins,” Warren replied. “Gonna get creamed.”

“Way to support the home team.”

“Well, it’d help if they had any decent players.” He drained his bottle and clapped it on the bar loud enough for Freddy to take notice and pull him a new one.

“Maybe you can try out after the baby comes. What are you eight, nine months, now?”

“Very funny, you’re quite the comedian. You know damn well that”—he switched into his best impersonation of Marlon Brando, which sounded more like a sickly Vito Corleone than Terry Malloy—“*I could have been a contender.*”

“Yeah, well, shoulda, woulda, coulda. Speaking of which…” Ellis withdrew a stapled stack of paper from the inside pocket of his coat. The pages were creased, stained with coffee, and had notes jotted in the margins. The bulk of which was a lot of small text in two columns—much of it equations.

“What’s this?” Warren asked. “More of your geek leaking out? You bringing your work to the bar now?”

“No, this one’s all mine. Been working on it for years—sort of a hobby. You know anything about the theory of relativity? Black holes?”

“Do I look like Stephen Hawking?”

Ellis smiled. “Sometimes. When you’re sitting up straighter and speaking more clearly.”

Warren fake-laughed. “Oh you’re hot tonight.” Turning his attention to Freddy he added, “You hear this guy?—a regular Moe Howard.”

Freddy was pulling a pair of Miller Lites and a Michelob for three women, who had taken seats at the far end of the bar. He looked over, confused. “Who?”

“You know, the Three Stooges.”

Freddy shook his head.

“Jesus, are you shitting me? Moe, Larry, and Curly. Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk. The greatest comedians of our time.”

“What time would that be exactly?” Freddy asked, with a smile that both insulted and charmed.

“Never mind.” Warren had his disgusted-with-the-younger-generation expression on, which never ceased to amaze Ellis, because he had known Warren Eckard when they *were* the younger generation.

Warren flipped through the pages, shaking his head the way a cop might at a particularly gruesome crime scene. “I can’t believe you do this shit for fun.”

“You watch football,” Ellis countered. “I play with quantum—”

“Football’s exciting.”

“So is this.”

Warren pointed at the television where a blimp's-eye view revealed the mammoth FedExField in Landover, Maryland. "There's more than eighty-five thousand people in those stands, and a hundred million watch the Super Bowl every year. That's how fun it is."

"Five hundred million watched Neil Armstrong step on the surface of the moon. How fun is that?"

Warren scowled and sucked on his beer. "So what's with the egghead papers? Got a point or just showing off?"

"Showing off?"

"You're Mr. M.I.T and I'm Mr. G.E.D, right?"

Ellis frowned. "Don't be an ass."

"Fifty-eight years of practice, my friend. Hard to turn off." Warren took another swig.

Ellis waited.

Warren looked at him and rolled his eyes. "Okay, okay—skip it. What's this all about?"

Ellis laid the papers on the bar. "So, there was this guy in Germany back in the thirties, Gustaf Hoffmann, who published a theory reviewed in *Annalen der Physik*. That's one of the oldest peer-reviewed scientific journals in the world. It's where Einstein published his theories, okay? I'm talking important science here."

Warren's expression was one of labored patience.

"Anyway, it didn't get much attention. Mostly because the math didn't hold up, but basically he tried to show that time travel is not only possible but practical. I did one of my theses on Hoffmann, applying modern quantum theory on top of his concepts. Even after I turned in my dissertation, I continued to play with the idea and tweak the math. About two years ago I figured out what Hoffmann did wrong."

“That’s...that’s great, Ellis.” Warren nodded robotically. “Twisted and sad, but if you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“You don’t understand. This theory—it’s really simple. Not the math—that was a bitch—but the final equation was like all good physics—simple and perfect. The best part is that it’s applicable. I’m talking about applied science, not just theory and conjecture. You know, like how Einstein came up with a theory and the guys on the Manhattan Project built the A-bomb. Well, that took years of research and development and tons of infrastructure and resources to make it a reality. This”—Ellis tapped the stack of pages—“is much easier, much simpler.”

“Uh-huh, and so...” Warren was quickly losing interest, although Ellis doubted he had much to begin with.

“Don’t you get it? This right here is a blueprint for a time machine. Wouldn’t you like to see the future?”

“Hell no. I’ve seen enough of the present to know what’ll happen. The last good thing society did together was kill Hitler.” Warren took another swallow and wiped his mouth.

“C’mon, are you telling me you don’t want to see how everything turns out?”

“That’s like wanting to stick around to see how jumping off a cliff turns out.” Warren smirked, shaking his head. “World’s going to shit. America’s like that old Buick of mine. The old gal is rusting out. China is gonna kick our ass. Everyone’s gonna be eating rice and carrying little red books.”

Now it was Ellis’s turn to smirk.

“You don’t think so, huh?” Warren said. “The problem is, we’ve gotten weak. The baby boomers and their kids have had it too easy. Spoiled brats, really. And they’re making the next generation even worse. Everyone wants their big houses and fancy cars, but no one wants to work for it. Hell, the only ones willing to work these days are the damn wetbacks.”

Ellis grimaced and looked across the bar at a table of Hispanics near the door. They either didn't hear or didn't care.

“You wanna use your indoor voice, Mr. Bunker? And you might consider joining the rest of us in the new millennium and use the revolutionary new terms of *Hispanic* or *Latino*.”

“What?” He looked toward the table near the door, and in a louder voice added, “I'm complimenting them. They're good workers. That's what I said.”

“Never mind.” Ellis rubbed his face with his hands. “We were talking about the future, remember?”

“Screw that shit. It's gonna be some sort of apocalyptic hellscape or, worse, some kind of oppressive prison-world run by Big Brother from that Orson Welles story.”

“*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written by George Orwell. H. G. Wells wrote *The Time Machine*, and Orson was a director and actor.”

“Whatever. I'm just saying the future don't look bright, my friend.”

Ellis wondered if Warren realized he was part of that same baby-boom generation he was pinning the downfall of civilization on. He didn't think Warren would throw his own name in the spoiled-rotten hat, and maybe he was right not to. They both came from blue-collar families whose fathers had worked themselves into early heart attacks. Ellis had been lucky, Warren hadn't.

Warren's dream of playing professional football had died for good when he lost his fingers. He'd cut them off in the die-stamp press at work after removing the safety cover because it *was in the way*. Warren won a lawsuit on the grounds that the cover shouldn't have been removable. Apparently Warren felt as entitled as the next guy—felt he deserved something after losing his fingers. His friend's personal responsibility had evaporated with the lure of a big check.

“Now, if you can send me to the past, okay then,” Warren said. “Shit, the 1950s were a fucking paradise. America ruled the world and was a beacon of hope and freedom for everyone. Anyone who

wanted to could achieve their dreams. People knew what they were supposed to do. Men worked; women stayed home and raised the kids.”

“Can’t go back. It doesn’t work that way. This Hoffmann fellow says you can only go forward. Well, you don’t actually *go* anywhere. You pretty much stay put and let time pass you by. It’s like when you go to sleep. You lie down, close your eyes, and *poof* it’s the next day. You just skipped over those seven or eight hours. But even if it were possible to go either way I’d still like to see the future.”

“And you will. Part of it, at least. We aren’t dead yet, right?”

Ellis took another swallow of his beer, thinking how strange it was that Warren had chosen those words—almost like a sign from God. He considered mentioning his pink slip from the Almighty, but when playing out the scenario in his head, he decided to keep quiet. Life in the Motor City didn’t invite men to be lippy with their feelings. One recession piled on another created strata of cold steel in the spines of its people. Like those who came before, rust-belt folks gritted their teeth, smoked, drank, and got by. They didn’t hug; they shook hands. And Ellis didn’t see the point in telling his best friend that he was dying. Bad enough that he had to walk around with that depressing bit of trivia.

“Anyway.” Ellis picked up the stack of papers and handed them to Warren. “I want you to keep this.”

“Why?”

“Just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case it works.”

“Works? In case what works?” Warren’s eyes narrowed, then widened. “Oh, wait—so what are you saying? You’re thinking of doing this? Making a time machine?”

“More than thinking. I started building it right after I figured out Hoffmann’s mistake. I have it in my garage.”

It would be more accurate to say it *was* his garage, but he thought it best to keep this simple. Warren already had that knot in his brow like he was looking at a Magic Eye image and trying to see the three-dimensional object in the pattern.

“Is it—it’s not dangerous, is it?”

When he didn’t answer right away, Warren’s eyebrows went up. “Ellis, you’re a bright guy, the smartest I’ve ever known. You’re not thinking of doing something stupid, are you?”

Ellis shook his head. “Don’t worry. Probably won’t work. It’s just that...you know how you feel about not playing on the big fields?” He motioned to the game still on the television. “Well I never got my chance to be an astronaut, to reach space, walk on Mars. This could be like that, but I’m getting old and don’t have a lot of time left to do anything *important*—anything adventurous.”

“What about Peggy?”

Ellis drank from the fresh beer that had been making a puddle because Freddy had failed to put down a new napkin. He was tempted to ask, *Peggy who?*

“It might be for the best. I honestly think she’ll be relieved. A few years ago I mentioned we might consider moving to Texas. There was a great position opening up down there, and it would have meant more money and a big promotion for me. She said she couldn’t leave what little she still had left of Isley, but I could go if I wanted. She seemed disappointed when I stayed.”

“She still blames you?”

“With good reason, don’t you think?”

“Don’t beat yourself up. I would have done the same thing, you know.” Warren shook his head, his lips pursed like he just bit into a lemon. “Any man would.”

“Drop it, okay.”

“Sure. Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Forget it.” Raising his voice Ellis called to Freddy. “Hey, set me and my friend here up with a couple of shots of Jack. I feel like celebrating.”

Freddy poured, and when he was done, Warren raised his glass. “To a long life.”

Ellis picked up his. “To the future.”

They kissed rims and drank.



CHAPTER TWO

TIME TO GO

By the time Ellis got home, the reality of exactly what he was about to do had settled in, spoiling his initial excitement. He couldn't just leave. It wasn't right to walk out on Peggy like he was going for the proverbial pack of cigarettes. So they had drifted apart, so what? They still shared thirty-five years together and the woman deserved a proper goodbye. What if he made a mistake, if the wiring or Hoffmann was wrong and he—

What if she stumbles upon another body in the garage? I can't do that to her! Oh Jesus Christ! What am I thinking?

He needed to tell her, to explain. Maybe if he did, if she knew what it meant to him and how there might be a cure in the future, she would give him her blessing. Ellis was formulating his arguments when he realized the lights in the kitchen were still on. The grandfather clock in the hallway was just chiming eleven times. He was home earlier than usual, but for the last six years his wife had gone to bed every night by ten thirty.

So why are all the lights on?

They were on in the hall and living room too. They were on, and the television was off. *This is weird. Eerie even.*

“Peggy?” he called. He peeked in the empty bathroom. “Peggy?” he called louder, and began climbing the stairs.

Strange and eerie turned into scary when he entered their bedroom, and she was still nowhere to be found. When he caught sight of the open jewelry box lying on the bed, everything finally made sense. She had discovered his little raid. Of course she had; he’d left everything out. The moment she went to dress for bed she would have seen the open box.

Oh shit! She thinks we were robbed! She’s probably terrified and didn’t want to be home alone. I hope she hasn’t gone to the police. She wouldn’t do that before talking to me, would she?

He pulled out his phone. There it was, a voicemail from Peggy. He tapped the icon and put it on speaker.

“El? Oh goddammit, El, pick up! Please pick up.” Her voice quivered, and she was loud—not screaming, but frightened. “I need to talk to you. I need to know what you’re thinking.” A long pause. “I’m sorry, okay? Seriously, I am, and that was years ago. I don’t even know why I kept the letters. Just stupid is what it was. I’d honestly forgotten about them.

“I know I should have told you. Jesus, I wish you’d just pick up. Listen, are you still at Brady’s? I’m driving over. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. We can talk then, okay? Please don’t be mad. It wasn’t Warren’s fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, really. It just happened, and I know we should have told you, but...well...If you get this before I get there, don’t go anywhere or do anything crazy, okay?”

The message ended.

Ellis stared at the phone, his mouth open.

I don’t even know why I kept the letters.

He walked to the bed and the open jewelry box, remembering the Mother's Day card, the ticket stub, some photos, poems, and letters. But they weren't in the box anymore. The box was empty. He stared at it a moment, then realized he'd taken them.

Just stupid is what it was.

Ellis reached into his coat pocket.

I know I should have told you.

He took out the pile, letting the poems, photos, and even the ticket stub fall to the carpet. All that remained were the envelopes. The postmarks were from 1995, a few months after Isley's death; the address was Peggy's post-office box—the one she'd gotten for her business correspondence; the handwriting was Warren's.

It wasn't Warren's fault.

Ellis continued to stand there, stunned. After hearing a car, and thinking it might be Peggy, he took the letters and headed for the garage. Detached and set back against the rear fence of his yard the garage was a little house onto itself, the one place completely his. Since Isley's death, Peggy never went there. Ellis needed time, and the garage was his own personal Area 51.



The interior didn't look like a garage. With all the cables, it resembled an H. R. Giger sculpture. In the center sat the driver's seat, which he'd torn from their old Aerostar minivan. The captain's chair was mounted on a black rubber box with hoses snaking out of it, and the whole thing was surrounded by plastic milk crates. A dozen thick cables radiated from the shell like a spider web connecting copper plates, breakers, and batteries mounted on the walls and ceiling. What once had been a home for two cars now resembled the interior of the CERN Hadron Collider.

Despite all the equipment, a portion of one wall was left in its original condition where two ordinary-looking items hung. The first was a 1993 Ansel Adams calendar displaying black-and-white photos of Yosemite Valley. Isley had given it to Ellis for Christmas when his son had been just fifteen. Although filled with amazing pictures of waterfalls and mountains, Ellis had stopped turning the pages at September as that one was his favorite. September was also the month that Isley had died.

The second was a poster of the Mercury Seven. He'd had it since he was a boy, when it used to adorn his bedroom along with similar ones of the Apollo crews. When he found it in the attic while looking for more cabling, he couldn't help pinning it up. A little faded, the picture showed the original seven astronauts introduced to the world on April 9, 1959, when Ellis had been almost three years old. Two rows of determined men in tinfoil spacesuits with white enamel helmets stared back. John Glenn and Alan Shepard were his favorites, with Shepard winning out not only because he was the first American in space, but also because he'd managed the feat on Ellis's fifth birthday.

After entering the building, Ellis locked the door. He was having trouble breathing; the crackling rustled in his chest again, only this time he wasn't certain if the difficulty was just because of his lungs. It felt like something else had shattered.

If someone asked Ellis if he loved his wife, he would have said yes, even though he wasn't exactly sure what that meant. Like trying to envision heaven, thoughts of love turned cheesy whenever he tried to focus on specifics. All those movies and song lyrics made it schmaltzy with overuse. Words like *wind beneath wings* and *completing one's self* were nice one-liners, but did anyone really feel that way? He didn't feel that way about Peggy, and he was pretty sure she didn't feel that way about him.

He had met Peggy at a party held by Billy Raymond, a friend of Warren's. They were six years out of high school, and Warren convinced him to go. His friend had been working at the assembly plant in Wixom, and Ellis just finished his first master's degree. Warren never had any problem getting girls, but Ellis always had a better chance of attracting lightning. So he was floored when Peggy talked

to him. She was attractive, and it was good just to be noticed. They saw each other on and off for a few months, then Peggy told him she was pregnant. She also admitted she was scared he would abandon her, the way Warren had left Marcia. Ellis didn't. He did the right thing—at least what he had thought was the right thing.

He and Peggy had never talked much. Ellis was working at GM, improving solar cells and battery efficiency, and Peggy devoted herself to Isley. He had been their common ground, a shared interest. But after he died, they were little more than strangers in the same house. So it came as a shock that her betrayal hurt so much.

Peggy might not have been his soul mate, but she had always been there. They counted on and trusted each other. If gravity failed, the speed of light was broken, and death and taxes disappeared there would still be Peggy, telling him to be home on time because it was Tuesday and they were having salmon for dinner. The letters in his hands were notices that the sun wouldn't be coming up anymore; the world was no longer spinning, and time had stopped.

Except it hadn't.

Peggy would be back to *talk*. He didn't want to talk to her; he didn't want to talk to anyone. He didn't want to see anyone. If anything, he wanted to disappear.

He looked over at the disembodied van seat surrounded by milk crates.

Time hasn't stopped, but it could—at least for me.

Ellis stood up, moved to the fuse box, and flipped the new custom-built breakers for each line—setting them to bypass. He could pull all the power he wanted from Detroit Edison, and it would flow until the wire melted or he tripped a safety switch at the substation, which he would do pretty quickly, but not before he sucked the needed megawatts. The overhead lights dimmed noticeably as he drew power from the house's AC current. The garage hummed with a buzz similar to the noise heard when standing under a high-tension wire.

He took off his coat and stuffed it under the wrap of bungee cords. Everything else he needed was already there; it had been packed for months. He paused, looking around the garage, at the calendar—at his world. He felt alone, as if he stood in a desert; there was nothing anymore but the time machine—a single door at the end of a one-way corridor.

Ellis sat in the chair and set the milk crates in place. Through the grates, he could still make out the Mercury Seven poster. Was this how they felt climbing in the capsule and preparing to enter the unknown? They must have known nothing would ever be the same afterward, for them or the rest of the world.

He fastened his seatbelt.

Ellis picked up the tablet, turned it on, and swiped past the lock screen. He found the custom app he'd built and double-checked his numbers.

Don't go anywhere or do anything crazy, okay?

Why not? As Janis Joplin once sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

The button on the control panel was glowing red—all powered up and ready to go. His Atlas rocket was locked and loaded. His *Glamorous Glennis* was in the bomb bay of a B-29 Superfortress, awaiting history.

People time traveled every day without realizing it. Some moved faster, others slower, because a body at rest moved through time at one rate, while a body in motion traveled slightly slower. Einstein had discovered that time and space were related, the two connected by a sliding scale—just as the more effort a person puts into making money, the less time they have to enjoy themselves. The reason no one noticed was that the difference was infinitesimal. But send a person in a rocket to the nearest star and back, and if the trip took him twenty years, centuries would pass on earth. Of course most people lack spaceships, but there was another way to affect time—by altering its relationship to space.

Instead of traveling, all that was needed was the equivalent mass of Jupiter compressed down until it was nearly a black hole so that it would generate an enormous gravity well. This would warp space and slow time. Then the traveler simply needed to sit in a spherical mass shell, sort of like the eye of a hurricane where the winds of time didn't blow, and wait the allotted duration. When he climbed out, he would be in a different time. There were obvious problems with this method—or there had been until Hoffmann discovered the means to generate a *contained* artificial gravity well that wouldn't devour everything around it, while at the same time protect the person sitting in the middle.

To insulate the time traveler, an electromagnetic field could be used to create an electrostatic repulsion of like charges, protecting him from the critical mass. If anything went wrong, and the gravity well started consuming its surroundings, the power supply would be destroyed first and shut everything down—a perfect fail-safe. Still, this was essentially Wilbur-and-Orville-style science. A lot could go wrong and Ellis could easily be squished out of existence.

The really scary part would come near the end. Ellis had programmed the tablet to track his position in both time and space, so, no matter how long he remained in time's hurricane eye, he would come out of stasis at the same physical location that he had started. Those calculations were the most difficult. Not only did he have to take in consideration the rotation of the earth, but also the movement of the planet around the sun and the universe and galaxy spinning through space. If he calculated wrong, he could materialize inside a star or, more likely, into the immense vacuum of space.

Ellis had set his destination for two hundred years and eight months. The eight months would allow him to arrive in summer rather than fall. The calculation might not be that precise. Several variables might affect the exact time lapse. The power drawn, the batteries' storage capacity, the wiring used, even the humidity in the air could cause the arrival date to shift by a few years.

Ellis raised his finger and noticed it was shaking. He stared at the glowing ignition. Then it finally happened. His life did flash through his head. He saw his mother, saw his father, saw himself

at college, then him holding an eight-pound Isley followed by teaching his son to ride a bike. He saw Peggy in the snow at Mt. Brighton, flakes on her eyelashes, cheeks red, holding on to him for dear life and laughing. They were both laughing. They hadn't laughed together like that in...

Sadness, regret, anger, and frustration—the pain reached into his chest, squeezing his heart. Ellis took a labored breath. “Say goodnight, Gracie,” he said, and pressed the button.



CHAPTER THREE

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

The first thing Ellis noticed was that the overhead lights went out with a pop, signifying he'd just killed the breaker at the substation and possibly taken out the power to his part of the grid. Nothing else happened.

His heart sank in disappointment, but then he noticed that the light illuminating the ignition button was still on and the humming was growing louder. The Aerostar seat started vibrating like a coin-operated Magic Fingers bed, and everything was blurry. As much as he wanted to believe that the time machine would work, his rational mind knew it wouldn't. His brain was the *Chicago Daily Tribune* running the banner: DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN even while his senses told him something was happening.

Peering through the webbing of the milk crates, Ellis could still see the poster of the Mercury Seven, only it didn't look the same. It appeared to change color, turning bluish. The streetlight shining in the window was spreading out in the color spectrum. Then he noticed movement. He watched

shadows crawl slowly, advancing like a time-lapse film. They didn't race; they didn't flash by; they barely moved, but it was noticeable. Time was advancing outside the crates more rapidly than on the inside. He had achieved the gravity well, and it was self-contained, stable, and he was insulated. He knew this by the simple virtue of still being alive.

He looked at the tablet, and saw the numbers scrolling by, faster with each passing second. The program should auto kill both the gravity well and the electrostatic shell the moment the clock timed out, but what would happen after?

There was no going back now.

He'd been sitting in the time machine for about five minutes, and Ellis was concerned about Peggy coming home. He didn't know if she'd be able to see him. He should already be moving interdimensionally, but since he could still see the garage—as distorted as it was—he imagined she might be able to see a ghostly, unmoving image of him, still caught in the instant he pressed the button. Once he reached a certain threshold he imagined he would vanish in a burst of light like the starship *Enterprise*.

How long will that take? I need to go.

As if on demand, there was a jolt and a sound like a freight train. Everything went bright blue and then white. When the sound stopped, he felt as if he were free-falling. He might have screamed, but he never heard it. His mind focused on to just one thought.

So this is what it's like to die.



Ellis wasn't sure if he had lost consciousness or if the term consciousness even applied. He was certain the human mind, whether built from evolution or the will of God, wasn't designed to handle what he'd just done. Human perception of reality could only bend so far. There were limits to

comprehension, and without reference points his trip through the world of looking-glass physics remained nothing more than a blur.

Even the duration was hard to judge. So much of human understanding depended on the surrounding environment that even time lost meaning in its absence. If he'd thought about it sooner, he might have counted his breaths or tapped a finger to an internal beat like a clock, but such thoughts were far too reasonable for what he had experienced. Ellis wasn't an astronaut trained to react to the abnormal with calm indifference. Dropping the tablet, he gripped the armrests of the chair, gritted his teeth, and prayed while years streamed past in the form of sheering light and tearing thoughts.

Ellis believed in the Bible and the Methodist God, not that he'd read the book or had a personal come-to meeting with the Almighty, as his mother had liked to put it. Such things didn't matter. He hadn't visited France or read *Les Misérables*, either, but he was pretty certain Paris was out there. He'd gone to church with Peggy regularly when Isley was alive, less so after, hardly at all in the last decade.

Like with Peggy, he and God had grown apart, yet there was something about riding a bolt of electricity and two hundred solar masses through a twisted reality that got him to make the call. God, he imagined, got a lot of late-night drunk dialings. *Aw shit, God, I need your help. I really fucked up this time—damn. I'm sorry I swore just then—fuck, I did it again!*

Ellis found it strange that he hadn't prayed for his life before that. A death sentence should have provoked it, but Ellis had gone to visit Warren at a bar instead of a priest in a church after getting the news. He figured God knew his situation already. What a lousy job that must be, listening to the daily sob stories of everyone on earth. All of them begging not to die or for the life of a loved one, as if everyone didn't know the deal. Still, no matter how much he loathed the idea, fear overrode pride, and at that moment Ellis was terrified. All he had left was God, and for the first time in years he prayed.

Sound was the first thing to come back, a buzz that grew to a ring that hurt Ellis's ears. He dug his fingers into the cushioned velour, sucked air through his teeth, eyes squeezed shut. Finally, a booming crack like thunder exploded, and he felt a final jerk.

Then silence.

The vibrations stopped too. The aftermath left him numb, similar to how he felt after shutting off a car engine following a long stint behind the wheel. He opened his eyes. He didn't know what to expect—a hellish landscape of obliterated ruins, a megalopolis of towers and lights with flying cars screaming by, or the pearly gates and St. Peter shaking his head and sounding like Foghorn Leghorn stammering, "I say—I say—I say you're early, boy." What he saw instead surprised him, though it shouldn't have.

He saw the milk crates.

They were still there. He likely would have died if they hadn't been, although they looked odd now—warped the way his garage had looked just before things went white. He wondered if time was still bending and it took a moment to realize the plastic had just melted some. All the crates were fused, squeezed down, and listing to one side. They were also smoking. It smelled as if he were back in his high school shop class making polymer paperweights. Beyond the crates he could tell everything had changed. He wasn't in his garage anymore. He was outside. A breeze brushed past, carrying away much of the smoke with it. He could hear the rustle of leaves, a soft soothing sound.

The trip was over. He'd done it, though exactly what *it* was, he had yet to determine. He popped the seatbelt and pushed on the milk crates, which all moved as one now that they'd been fused. He was forced to kick several times. When he crawled out, Ellis, who was wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, and a sweater, realized he was overdressed for the climate.

All of the woods Ellis had ever been in were young-growth patches, usually of birches or maples. In school he'd been taught that all the trees in Michigan had been clear-cut back in the

nineteenth century—most forests had. Trees were a commodity farmed like corn and cows, and outside of some national parks, few Americans had ever seen old-growth forests. Once, his father had taken him camping up north near Grayling—*that* had been a forest—massive groves of eastern white pine, creating an endless series of trunks standing solemnly in a bed of ferns. Ellis had imagined that the trees went on forever and had been frightened he might get lost in that real-life version of *Where the Wild Things Are*. Still, the trees hadn't been very big, and there had been a systematic spacing of their placement.

Stepping out of the milk crates, Ellis realized the piney woods of northern Michigan had been an overgrown vacant lot compared to where he now stood. He felt insect-small as all around trees of unfathomable height soared into the darkness of a leafy canopy, the same way skyscrapers faded into low clouds. Brooding on hunches of gnarled roots the size of Volkswagens, the goliath trees were spread out, the undergrowth sparse and stunted—mostly moss and ferns. He popped into the right spot. Twenty feet to his left and he would have literally been one with nature. The reentry algorithm was supposed to shift the final location to avoid preexisting objects, but then again the GPS in Ellis's car once took him to a lake that it said was a gas station. Whether the calculation worked or he just got lucky, the result was appreciated.

The air was filled with a damp mist that a pale moonlight couldn't penetrate but instead illuminated, providing a soft-hazed light. Velvet moss blanketed the ground, making pillows out of shattered logs and boulders. Vines drooped in lazy loops, leaves gathered in crevasses, and ivy climbed. In the distance, he heard squawks and peeps he didn't recognize, cutting through the familiar chirps of crickets.

I'm Luke Skywalker crashed on Dagobah.

For a long moment, Ellis just stood still, staring out into the haze, breathing in the thick moisture. *What happened? Did I screw up? Am I back in time? Are there dinosaurs?* Everywhere he looked

resembled one of those dioramas in a natural history museum that often showed a triceratops fending off a Tyrannosaurus rex. Hot and humid, too, like a rain forest, but that could also describe July in Detroit.

Have I moved? The synchronization calculations might have been off. Theoretically he could have been anywhere, even another planet, but doubted that on sheer odds. Since he wasn't in the vast vacuum of space, he considered that part of the experiment a success. Any landing you can walk away from, as they say, is a good one.

If he was still where his garage had been, only one question remained: *When* was it? Hoffmann said it wasn't possible to go back in time, so this had to be the future—but when? *Can this really be Detroit in only two hundred years?*

Ellis leaned back on the plastic crates that were still warm and thought of the old Zager and Evans song: *In the year 9595, I'm kinda wonderin' if man's gonna be alive.* Maybe something awful had happened; maybe he was alone, completely alone, the last human in existence.

The absurdity caused him to let out a stress-induced laugh.

Then he coughed.

He didn't want to make noise in this alien place; he didn't want to alert anything, but he couldn't help himself and launched into a series of hacks.

Something moved. He heard it. A great crack and snap of branches—a thud and slap of the earth, then more cracks. Ellis sucked in a breath and held it. The sounds were moving away, growing fainter. One more distant snap, and then he waited for the length of several minutes but heard nothing more. An animal perhaps?

His throat ached from the coughing, and, tasting blood, he spat.

What am I going to do?

If it had been possible, Ellis would have gone back. This wasn't what he had expected. The future was supposed to be more advanced. He was looking for flying cars and moving sidewalks, jet packs, and nonstops to Saturn's moons. That had been his hope, but he also considered that he might touch down in some chaotic post-apocalyptic world complete with bloodthirsty Mohawked gangs of roving bikers. Not that such a thing would be better, just understandable.

"Relax," he whispered. Saying it, hearing it spoken aloud, helped.

I don't know anything yet. I can't judge a whole planet based off one spot.

Ellis waited a few minutes, listening—just crickets and a few distant squawks. He'd have to travel. He wasn't surprised. That's why he'd brought the gear. He just imagined things differently. Ellis had expected to be walking along some superhighway and ducking flying cars—not hacking his way Indiana Jones-style through a primordial forest.

He moved to the back of the time machine and unhooked the cooler and his other gear. He'd brought two backpacks and opted for the smaller JanSport one, the kind kids took to school. He left his sleeping bag and tent as this was good enough for a base camp, for now. He planned to take only what was needed and travel light.

He put a small notepad in his breast pocket, along with a pen, and put the compass in his pants pocket. To the pack he added a handful of energy bars, two cans of Dinty Moore stew, matches, and the rain gear—still in the compressed plastic bag that he'd bought it in. He also included a few bags of peanut M&M'S, his water purifier, jacket, and first-aid kit. He considered flipping on the Geiger counter he'd purchased from Geigercounters.com to take a reading, but he didn't think it was necessary given the abundant life around him. He left it, but added the sunscreen and aspirin. He slung a canteen over his head and slipped the hunting knife onto his belt, then he took out the gun.

This one was a pistol, which, he had discovered while shopping, was not another name for a revolver for reasons so obvious he felt stupid. This pistol was an M1911 that the balding guy behind

the gun case had explained was a classic single-action, semiautomatic model that was originally designed by John Browning. He went on and on about the gun's pedigree, its weight, ruggedness, and caliber. What sold Ellis was that it looked exactly like the ones he'd seen spies or military officers using in movies, the nickel-plated .45 that they would slap a clip into and fire more rounds than any handgun could possibly hold. He'd only shot it a few times at a practice range where they outfitted him with goggles and giant noise-canceling headphones. Turned out not to be nearly as scary as he thought—fun, really. He'd bought a belt holster that he slipped on and tucked the gun into, double-checking to make sure the safety was set right. He didn't want to plug himself in the leg—not much chance of finding a cell for a 911 call.

He felt better the moment he had the gun on. He wasn't a gnat anymore.

Pulling his sweater off and the backpack on, Ellis felt the weight center on his shoulders and didn't think it was too bad, although that assessment might change after a few hours of walking. He had no idea where to go. He had his choice of up- or downhill. Going uphill might afford a better view, but given that he was in a forest at night, what could he really expect to see? Given his physical condition, which was definitely short of Olympic athlete, he guessed downhill was better. Flipping on his flashlight, he panned around, but it didn't help much. With the mist, he could almost see better without it, and he also didn't like the creepy slasher-movie vibe the solitary beam conjured. Before switching off the lamp to save the batteries, he took a compass reading, made a notation in his notepad regarding his direction, and then set off. Every ten or fifteen feet he stripped away a patch of bark, marking the way he had come.

At the bottom of the little valley, everything was pretty much as it had been higher up, only with fewer leaves and more moss. Then he noticed the sound of water. Water was good, he figured. Explorers always followed rivers. He checked and noted his new direction, then walked toward the

sound, continuing to mark the trees as he went. Once he found the river, he walked downstream along its bank.

The stream entered into a clearing that provided a break in the vast canopy, granting him access to the sky and stars. Even with the mist, he could see a dazzling array of bright lights and the dust of the Milky Way. He'd never seen anything like it outside of a planetarium, and he stared in awe. As he watched, he caught sight of a falling star. Just a brief glimpse, but it made him smile.

I'm dying all alone on a dead world, but a shooting star amuses me.

The thought was liberating in an unexpected way. He had lived like George Bailey trapped in Bedford Falls, longing for adventure. And there he was, having gone where no man had gone before. It didn't matter that it would all likely end too soon, probably from starvation, some parasite, or, failing all else, his illness. But none of that mattered. Despite everything, he felt good, better than he had in his entire life. He had accomplished something amazing—something wondrous.

He was still alive and completely and utterly free.



The light caught Ellis by surprise. It shouldn't have. He had never known a day that didn't have a dawn, and yet it still startled him. He almost had it in his head that he was on another world, a distant one with different rules, and he'd simply forgotten about the sun. When at last it crested the horizon, he stood staring, grinning. The trees were strange, the mossy land alien, but the sun was an old friend, and she looked no different from the last time they had met.

Ellis had reached a broad clearing, a downward-sloping hill where the river met another tributary and widened. He was finally out of the pages of the Brothers Grimm and, with the first golden rays of dawn, into a Winnie-the-Pooh watercolor. The mist that had plagued him retreated to pockets and with the sun conveyed a serenity to the pastoral landscape. Dew glittered on green grass

speckled by golden flowers, while overhead a blue sky emerged and through it darted flights of birds, who sang until they drowned out the crickets.

Finding a log, Ellis sat to watch the show and, realizing he was famished, tore open a bag of peanut M&M'S. The hard-coated candy had always been an indulgence for him—his one extravagance during the lean days at M.I.T. while putting himself through college and stretching every dollar.

Down the slope he spotted three deer emerging from the fog that followed the river's course. Not much later he saw a red fox trotting, and something else he hadn't caught a good enough look at, which scurried among the heather along the forest eaves. Despite the birds, deer, and bumblebees, Ellis was impressed with the stillness. Inside the security of his own home, even late at night, there were always noises: trucks, horns, sirens. The quietest he had ever experienced the outdoors was in that forest near Grayling, a haunting lack of sound in the gray-shadowed world that pines, with their carpet of brown needles, could create. Still, he had always known he was never too far from a road. Some two-lane blacktop would always be there, offering the promise of a car to come. Yet as Ellis ate his M&M'S, he looked out over the gradual slope and realized he could see for miles, perhaps tens of miles. In all that open expanse, he saw no evidence of mankind. He appeared to have the planet to himself.

In a moment of arrogance that took place between the time he filled his mouth with water from his canteen and the time he swallowed, he considered how he'd won by default, how the entirety of the world was his. What Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Hitler, and a slew of Caesars had spent lifetimes trying to accomplish was his just by showing up.

"I'm king of the world, Ma," he said. No one heard. A hollow victory.

The moment passed with the realization that he was instead just one more organism in competition to survive. He wished he were younger, wished he wasn't dying and alone. Ellis had never faced a challenge like this. Few had, he imagined. Still he thought he might enjoy it—some of it.

Winter would be horrific trapped inside whatever shelter he might manage to build, shivering and eating nuts and bark like they had in Roanoke. Ellis felt better about bringing his flannel and sweater. But people back then knew how to survive. He wondered if he could build a cabin by himself, then realized it would take forever to chop down even one of those monster trees using the tiny steel-headed hatchet he'd brought. And he had no idea what day of the year it was. Summer, certainly—he was convinced of that—but was it June, July, or August? How long did he have? Best to try and find some natural shelter, like a cave or he'd have to resort to making a lean-to from branches to help protect his tent. He might be able to do that much. Then he'd have to set his mind toward food.

Plenty of animals were around, and he might be able to shoot some, but he only had so many bullets, and he'd need a longer-term solution. With a spear, he might be able to stab some fish. A net would be better, but somehow he had forgotten that. Could he make one? Ellis felt like a domesticated dog turned loose in the wild.

He continued to stare at the valley. Everything was so pretty—just lovely the way the hills sloped down, the river being joined by another stream that widened again and—

Ellis squinted. Something lost in the fog was standing out. Being square, it didn't fit. Nature so rarely made sharp, regular angles. Looking closer, he saw other similar shapes peeking out of the mist—buildings. He was seeing the roofs of houses!

He was looking down on a small village. His heart sprinted; maybe he wasn't alone. One more swig of water and he pulled his pack back on. His muscles were stiff. He felt a little light-headed and once more cursed his age and illness. He stood and took bearings. All he needed to do was follow the river and it would take him right near the buildings. He'd know he was close when he reached the confluence.

With a new purpose and his friend the sun smiling, he walked on, scaring a pair of rabbits that darted across the field. He was making good time that morning and was well down the slope when he

realized he knew where he might be. If he really hadn't moved, if he had merely shifted time, then he must be following the upper branch of the Rouge River. He was traveling south, and it had already joined with another river, which would have been the Middle Rouge. So that would put him in Dearborn somewhere. He bent down and looked at the river as the sun played through the ripples. He could see the sand-and-pebble bottom just as if he were looking through glass, and there were fish, lots of good-sized largemouth bass and walleye snapping their way along.

The sun was rising toward midday by the time Ellis got his second glimpse of the buildings. He guessed he was only a mile away and could see a brick wall over which the roofs of several houses rose. He had expected futuristic plastics, steel, and glass creating fantastic geodesic dwellings, and once more he was disappointed. The buildings were old-fashioned two-story Colonial-styles. Not just old-fashioned, but genuinely old. They looked like the back lot of a period movie set in the nineteenth century. Climbing out of a gully, he spotted the clock tower rising above the trees that was a perfect replica of Philadelphia's Independence Hall. Only Ellis wasn't in Philadelphia, but he did know where he was—Dearborn, Michigan, and he was looking at the Henry Ford Museum.

He hadn't been there since his sixth-grade class had visited on a field trip. They had toured the largest indoor-outdoor museum complex in the United States in a matter of hours. All he could remember was the Wright Brothers' shop, a replica of Edison's Menlo Park lab complex, and the fact that Anthony Dunlap had lost Ellis's favorite Matchbox car and offered to replace it with one of the crappy new Hot Wheels. He also remembered a parking lot, and the roads to get there, none of which appeared to exist anymore. Ellis didn't know the area well, but he was certain Michigan Avenue had come in there somewhere. A major six-lane divided freeway was gone without a scar, but the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century wooden buildings of Greenfield Village were still perfect. Something was out of whack, but Ellis was glad for it. If nothing else, he'd have a house to live his final days in.

The brick wall that circled the museum—that sealed off the attraction—was formidable, and Ellis walked around it, looking for a gate. He was hot but not sweating anymore. His feet were sore, his legs tired. His shoulders ached with the press of the pack, and he had a terrible headache. He wasn't hungry, which surprised him. Most days he ate little, but most days he didn't hike five miles. He also had a bad case of time-machine lag, and if no one was home, he hoped to find a nice house where he could put down his pack and perhaps take a nap. He was still circling the wall when, for the first time since he'd left Warren at the bar, he heard the sound of voices.



CHAPTER FOUR

KILLING TIME

The voices came from the other side of the wall, which was too tall to climb or see over. Ellis stopped to listen and was pleased to discover they were speaking English. Well, sort of—the voices exhibited an odd accent, but it was most certainly English and surprisingly easy to understand. Only two hundred years had passed, but Ellis had anticipated more differences. He even thought there was a good chance that Spanish or even Chinese would dominate.

“...to put it bluntly.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“So why did you ask me here then?”

“To show you the future.”

The two voices were oddly similar, almost as if one person was speaking to themselves. The pitch wasn’t high enough to clearly indicate women, nor low enough to ensure men.

“You’re lying. This is all about the Hive Project.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I’ve done research. I know who you are—or rather *aren’t*.”

A chuckle. “Then why did you come?”

“I came to find out why—why me?”

“You don’t know anything—or you never would have come here...alone.”

“What do you mean?” The voice was less confident.

“You see, I asked you here to get you to help me.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

A pause, then. “What are you doing?”

Ellis felt the hair on his arms rise. The words were spoken in fear.

“This is also part of the future.”

The screams that followed were the worst sounds Ellis had ever heard. High-pitched and horrible, they went from cries of fear to shrieks of terror, and littered in the middle were desperate pleas for it to stop. Only it didn’t stop. Ellis heard sounds of a struggle, grunts, and the thump of something falling.

Ellis wasn’t a hero. For the most part he preferred to steer clear of trouble. About the closest he ever got was stopping to help people with disabled cars. Peggy used to warn him that he would get shot by some lunatic, but he couldn’t just drive by.

After hearing the screams on the other side of the wall, his first instinct was to call 911. His hand actually moved to his phone before he realized his stupidity. Maybe it was the gun on his hip, or perhaps the chilling effect of the screams, but it certainly wasn’t a conscious thought that sent Ellis running to find the gate.

The screaming had stopped before Ellis reached the entrance, which was unattended. He navigated around a big oak tree and trotted past a pretty clapboard farmhouse with a split-rail fence and a prairie-style weather vane. Already Ellis's lungs were giving out. He could feel the crackle, like breathing through broken glass. He slowed down, dropping back to a walk, realizing he'd overextended himself. The all-night hike, the heat, and finally the sprint was too much. He wanted to fall where he was, but he forced himself to keep going. When he cleared the house, he could see the inside length of the wall. His blurring eyes caught movement—two people on the ground. Only one was moving.

Ellis didn't find what he had expected. The voices had sounded youthful. He had imagined teens with leather jackets, chains, spiked hair, nose piercings, tattoos, and drooping pants. Dated images, he knew, but he had no idea what else he would find. What he did see wasn't on the list.

They were both naked.

Neither wore so much as a bandanna, and both were bald—not just bald, hairless. Such a sight would normally have been the focus of Ellis's attention if not for the blood. Blood had a way of making anything else trivial—and there was a lot of blood. Both were covered, sprayed and splashed with rivulets dripping. One was crouched over the other, who lay prone, twitching. The one on top worked intently with a blade on the other's shoulder, cutting it apart, butchering the meat with both hands. The knife wielder grinned, then stood up.

Their eyes met.

Ellis, working to fill his shattered lungs, reached for the handle of his gun but didn't pull it. The naked, hairless, blood-covered butcher made no move. They peered at each other for an instant. Ellis still couldn't tell the person's sex. The killer had no genitalia—no breasts, no obvious curves. Slender and willowy, a perfectly androgynous figure like a prepubescent boy or a 1970s supermodel, except that the face was dripping in gore. Their expressions were a mirror of shock and puzzlement.

Without a word, the murderer reached out and picked something up off the grass. Ellis spotted only three fingers. He thought of all those alien movies where extraterrestrials groped with three bulbous digits, but then noticed the two stubs where the pinky and ring fingers ought to have been. A spark of light appeared beside the figure like the flash of a camera, making Ellis blink. Then the murderer stepped through a hole in the air and both the killer and the hole disappeared with a snap.

Ellis was stunned for a second and just stared, wondering what he'd seen. Then movement on the ground caught his attention. The one on the grass continued to twitch. Cuts and puncture wounds were visible along the torso, and a vicious slice had cut away a large section of the victim's shoulder. Ellis couldn't tell if this one was male or female either, being as indistinct anatomically as a Ken doll. More than that, Ellis was surprised to notice that aside from being wrenched in pain, this person could have been the twin of the killer.

Ellis dropped to his knees beside the victim and searched for a pulse. He didn't find one, and there was no chest movement, no sound of breathing beyond Ellis's own labored efforts, which were desperate enough. Ellis needed oxygen but couldn't pull in a deep breath. Efforts to draw in more air threatened a cough, and he knew he couldn't afford that. He was already dizzy, the world blurry, and a strange darkness gathered at the sides of his vision. Ellis planted his palms on the grass and lowered his head between his knees. He struggled to block out the blood and the body beside him and focused only on sucking in air.

Relax, goddammit!

In and out, he felt like he was trying to inflate a new pair of balloons and growing light-headed with the effort. He squeezed his eyes tight and realized he was rocking slightly. His whole body was in the fight, struggling to bring oxygen to his brain. Maybe this was it—respiratory failure had won. What an odd moment to go.



“Everyone just stay back.”

“Darwin—has to be.”

“Anyone see the attack?”

“No. I was the one who reported it—who requested help. We didn’t see it, though. They were like that when we found them.”

“And you’re part of the same group?”

“Gale University—I’m leading a class in ancient history. We were on a field trip.”

“All right, you can do us a favor and just continue with that. Stay clear of this side of the park, okay?”

“Is it really a Darwin?”

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with yet, so please give us room.”

Ellis opened his eyes and found the blue sky, now decorated with pretty balls of white cotton. The light was different, the sun having moved well to the west so that the trees and farmhouse were casting long shadows. His chest was better. He could breathe again, yet everything else felt sore.

“Pax—open eyes here.”

“Okay, everyone just relax.” The person speaking was the closest of those around him, but still about thirty feet away.

A dozen people had gathered near the old farmhouse, two standing closer than the rest and all looking identical. Each shared the same soft face with big, dark eyes, short noses, and tan-brown skin as if some Middle Eastern mother had popped out an Irish Catholic-sized brood of identical duodecaplets.

They were all dressed oddly, with several not dressed at all. Some just wore hats, or scarves, or coats. One was dressed all in bright yellow. Another had a full ensemble of red and white stripes—right down to shoes, which made Ellis think of Dr. Seuss. None of them had a single strand of hair, and just like the first pair of androgynous manikins, these new visitors also appeared to have been made by Mattel.

Ellis wondered if he was having a dream of *The Wizard of Oz* variety. Everyone looked vaguely like a bald version of the lady doctor who had told him he was going to die. Maybe he had never time traveled at all. Any minute he could wake up surrounded by Warren, Peggy, and the doctor so he could say, “*And you were there, and you, and you.*”

“We should get more help,” said one of the two nearest, who wore just a satchel hanging from one shoulder, a frightened look, and a decorative tattoo. Both spoke in the same fashion as the others.

“Give me a minute, okay,” the closer of the two replied. He, she, or it wore a full set of clothes, at least. Some strange getup pulled from a Sherlock Holmes story consisting of a long black frock coat, silver vest, white trousers, wing shirt, gray tie, and a bowler hat. Maybe Ellis had accidentally crashed a wedding or really *had* gone back in time. So what if Hoffmann didn’t think it was possible.

“Pax! Don’t go near it. If that’s a Darwin, we don’t know what it’ll do. It’s already killed one person.”

That jarred Ellis’s foggy memory, and he glanced over at the blood-covered corpse beside him. Everything came back. *I’ve been sleeping next to that!* He pulled himself up and quickly shifted a few feet away. He was only up to his knees, but he was still light-headed. The landscape wobbled like he’d been drinking.

All around him Ellis heard a series of gasps and the rustle of feet on grass moving away, a herd of cats retreating.

“Storm it all, Pax! Get back! It’s dangerous.”

“I didn’t kill anyone!” Ellis yelled. The effect of his voice froze everyone.

“You can talk,” Pax said. “You speak our language.”

“Actually, I think you’re speaking mine.”

The two looked at each other amazed.

“What are you?” Pax asked.

He reached up to wipe his eyes. This caused more shuffling from everyone except Pax, who didn’t flinch. “My *name* is Ellis Rogers.”

“But what *are* you?”

“I’m a man—a human. What are *you*?”

This brought a round of whispers from everyone except the one in the bowler hat, whose eyes never strayed. “Human,” Pax replied, absently discarding the word and moving on to more important matters. “But you’re different—are you a Darwin?”

“I don’t know what that is.” Ellis didn’t like the way he was feeling, sweaty, dizzy, and a tad nauseous.

Pax glanced back at the others, and Ellis noticed a look of embarrassment. “It’s a legend. Rumors about natural-borns living in the wilds. Nutty things about people who never joined Hollow World, who stayed on the surface and survived. You’re not one...are you?”

“No.”

“You’re an old pattern, then?”

Ellis shook his head. “Don’t know what that is either.”

Pax looked surprised and took three steps forward.

“Pax!” the other one snapped.

Pax stopped, looking irritated. “You say you didn’t kill that person next to you. Can you tell us what did happen?”

“I heard two people—arguing, I guess—then one screamed. I was on the other side of the wall at the time. I ran around and saw one on top of the other.” Ellis pointed at the body without actually looking at it, trying to avoid seeing the mess again while at the same time wondering if the dampness in the seat of his pants was his sleeping buddy’s blood or his own urine. He was far from certain which he was rooting for. “Then the one on top got up and...”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know exactly. Just sort of disappeared, I guess.”

“Disappeared?”

Ellis shrugged. “Went through a hole of light. That sounds craz—”

“The killer used a portal.”

Ellis had no idea what that meant, but the confidence in Pax’s words left little doubt, so he nodded.

“You’re not actually listening to it, are you?” the one with the tattoo said with an even mixture of disgust and disbelief.

“It’s the truth,” Pax replied, and even Ellis wondered at the level of confidence. After the story he had just told, Ellis wasn’t sure he’d believe himself.

“It’s a Darwin—you’ve heard the stories. You can’t believe anything they say. They’re cannibals.”

Pax gave the other an appalled look. “Ellis Rogers is telling the truth.”

“Are you *absolutely* sure?”

Pax sent off another look that could only be interpreted as *seriously*? Which caused the other to scowl in reply.

“Are you a cop?” Ellis asked. “I mean, a police officer?” The pair of eyes beneath the bowler hat peered at him intently, as if Ellis were a book with very fine print. “A law-enforcement official? A servant of the government? A peacekeeper?”

The last title registered a smile, and Pax nodded. “I suppose—yes. My name is Pax. I’m actually an arbitrator. This is Cha, a physician who would really like to get a closer look at the person next to you. Would that be okay?”

“Sure.”

Cha hesitated. “Tell it to move away.”

“I’m pretty certain Ellis Rogers can hear you, Cha. You don’t need me to translate.”

“It’s okay.” Ellis pushed to his feet, still feeling woozy.

“Are you injured, Ellis Rogers?” Pax asked.

“I have a respiratory illness. The exertion of running aggravated it. I think I passed out.”

“Are you all right now?”

“Dizzy.”

Ellis moved away from the body and leaned on the brick wall. It felt cool and reassuring against his back. Cha moved up, knelt beside the dead body, and opened a satchel. Several members of the crowd spoke in whispers among themselves.

“Where are you from, Ellis Rogers?” Pax asked, moving nearer to him and drawing a concerned glance from Cha.

That bowler hat made Ellis think of Alex DeLarge from *A Clockwork Orange*, but Pax was nothing like him—too cute. If anything, Pax was more like Charlie Chaplin’s little tramp, except for the missing greasepaint mustache.

He wondered how to answer. Could he say he was from another village? Was there another village? He knew so little it was impossible to make even a bumbling attempt at a lie, and he felt

deceiving a police officer wasn't the best way to start a new life, no matter how short-lived it might be. "I came from the city of Detroit." He paused for effect, then added in a soft tone, "From the year 2014."

Ellis had no idea what to expect. They should pack him off to a psychiatric ward, but times had changed. Anything might be possible now. Ellis guessed the plausible reactions ranged from him being worshiped like a god to a dismissive nod, as everyone was likely time traveling nowadays. It would explain the disparity in clothes, and that portal could have been Time Machine 2.0. If computers could go from room-sized vacuum-tubed monsters to tablets in eighty years, time travel had to be a whole lot slicker than a bunch of plastic milk crates and a car seat.

Pax just stared at him a moment, looking puzzled. Slowly he watched as Pax's eyes widened. "You're from the past...*way* in the past."

Cha made a dismissive huffing sound.

"Where is this time machine?" Pax asked.

"I left it up in the woods. Five—maybe six miles north along the river, not sure. I hiked a long way. Isn't much to see, really."

"Oh sure," Cha said. "Bet it's even invisible."

"Cha, please."

"You're being ridiculous," Cha replied.

Pax scowled.

"Time travel isn't common then?"

"No," Pax replied.

"It's impossible," Cha said.

Can I really be the only one? Why haven't there been others? "So I'm guessing you don't believe me."

Pax looked at him with intense eyes. “I believe you.” The statement was flat, no underlying tone, no sarcasm, and spoken so quickly and loudly that it left no room for argument. Pax continued to stare deeply into his eyes, no glances away or awkward shifts in stance.

If that’s a lie, it’s a damn good one, Ellis thought.

“The PICA has been cut out.” Cha looked up from the body, first to Pax and then accusingly at Ellis.

“Ellis Rogers didn’t do it,” Pax said firmly. “Ellis Rogers is telling the truth. Look—do you see any blood? Whoever committed the murder would be drenched.”

Ellis wasn’t certain of a lot of things. He didn’t know if the people around him were really human or the result of some android manufacturing plant. He didn’t know what year he was in or if technology was ahead of or behind his time. He had no idea what had happened to the city or the world. And the envelope had yet to be opened on whether he’d made a mistake or not, but he was certain of one thing. He was starting to like Pax.

So far everyone he’d seen had the same features, perfect copies of one another, but they weren’t the same. Ellis didn’t care much for the way Cha shared the same suspicious expression as the others in the crowd, but Pax was different—more gentleness around the eyes, more concern in the line of the jaw and the angle of the mouth, which appeared on the verge of a smile. Hair would have helped. Ellis had never known too many bald people, and the lack of eyebrows was disturbing. Their absence made Ellis uneasy, like he was in a cancer ward, but Pax impressed him as a person he might trust.

“Is there a Port-a-Call?” Pax asked Cha. “There would be an ID stamp on that, and we could trace the jumps.”

“I don’t see anything. Not even a tattoo—completely clean. Not much of an individualist. There’s nothing personal here at all.”

Pax turned back to Ellis. “Do you know who the victim was?”

Ellis shook his head, and he wished he hadn't. The world swam. “I just told you I'm from—”

“Yes, I know—I just thought you might have heard a name or something.”

“Oh—no.” Ellis tried to remember, but he was feeling terrible. “I'm pretty sure neither said a name.”

“What were they talking about?”

“I really didn't hear much. Something about a Hive Project and the future. That's about all I remember.”

“See,” Cha said with a superior tone that irritated Ellis. He had no idea what Cha meant by the single word. It sounded like a continuation of a previous argument, but all he knew was that he didn't like it. He also decided he didn't like Cha's tattoo. Ellis never cared for tattoos, they always made people look cheap—human graffiti—but he made exceptions for statements of honor like military insignias, the name of a loved one, or a quote from the Bible. But Cha's was just strange swirls, like some Aztec art.

“I'm going to sit down, is that okay?” He was going to sit down even if it wasn't. Ellis was feeling nauseous in addition to dizzy, and he let himself slide down the wall to the grass.

Pax nodded. “Nothing at all, Cha?”

“Sorry.”

“Concrete! I can't report another anonymous. It'll just make things worse.”

“There's nothing here.”

Pax looked angry, but Cha only shrugged.

“Can't you run tests?” Ellis asked. “You still have forensic sciences, right?”

They both looked at him, confused.

“You know, fingerprints and DNA samples.” He was about to say hair samples but caught himself.

“Those won’t help, Ellis Rogers,” Pax told him. “We all have the same.”

“Same what? DNA? Fingerprints? You can’t all—oh.” Not androids then—genetic engineering. Ellis finally understood the Darwin reference. So maybe he *was* a Darwin, at least in the strictest sense. *Is everyone here born in a test tube?*

“Without the chip we can’t identify the victim,” Cha said.

“Really?” Ellis asked. “So you all have chips in your shoulders to tell each other apart? C’mon, there has to be another way. I mean, what happens when those things stop working? Don’t they ever fail?”

“Not really.”

“In a case like that we could verify identity just by asking questions,” Pax explained. “Or run a neural scan. But being dead, those won’t work.”

“But you must have had this problem before.”

The two shook their heads. “Until recently, it’s never happened.”

“Seriously?” Ellis was amazed.

“What do we do now?” Cha asked.

“Like *I* have all the experience with dead bodies,” Pax replied, staring at the corpse with an expression that mirrored how Ellis was feeling.

“You’ve at least seen one before,” Cha said.

“Contact the ISP. They’ll want to look it over.”

“You two are homicide cops, and this is only the second dead body either of you has seen?” Ellis asked.

“First *I’ve* seen,” Cha corrected.

“What’s a *homicide cop*?” Pax asked.

“Police that deal with murders.”

With widening eyes, Pax pointed a finger at Ellis. “That’s right! You’re from the past! *Way* in the past. You know all about this—this sort of thing...about murders, right?”

“Not really. I wasn’t a cop. I used to design cars—parts of them anyway—worked on energy and alternate fuel. This village was a museum that was built by the Henry Ford Motor Company, and I—”

“Still is a museum,” Pax corrected.

“Okay, well—see, I used to work for another car company, trying to improve the capacity of batteries. I wasn’t a detective or anything.”

“But they had murders then, yes?”

“I lived in Detroit—they had plenty.”

“And you know that they used DNA and fingerprints to find the killers.”

“Everyone knows that.”

“Maybe everyone in 2014 knows about such things—not so much these days.” Pax took another step closer, until they were only an arm’s length apart.

Nice eyes, Ellis thought, something innocent and childlike about them.

“We don’t have this sort of thing anymore,” Pax said.

“Murders?”

“Death,” Pax replied.

Ellis just stared, certain he wasn’t getting everything. He was still trying to understand what Pax meant by him being from *way* in the past. How long ago was *way*? Then it sounded like Pax had said there was no more death. “What did you say?”

“Listen,” Pax began in a softened tone. “I’m sorry about all this. You’ve just been through a traumatic experience. You’re tired and not feeling well. You’re clearly a pioneer, a great scientist of some sort who’s accomplished something astounding. You’re a new Charles Lindbergh or Network Azo, and trust me, I’ll see you’re taken care of. Your very existence is amazing—”

“Impossible actually,” Cha added with disdain.

Pax went on without pause. “You should be welcomed with a parade, and a party, and I’m certain a great many people will wish to speak with you. I know you have all sorts of questions, but you need to believe me when I tell you I’m not a *cop*. I’m an arbitrator. I deal with general disputes between people—help them settle their differences with the least amount of bad feelings. And I help people who have experienced painful events in their lives. I was called here to see if I could help these students deal with the trauma of witnessing a dead and brutalized body. But this...is there anything else you could tell us?”

“Are you serious?”

“Right now you’re the foremost living expert.”

Ellis had never been the foremost anything. And whether he really was or not, he liked that Pax thought he might be. “I don’t know what I can offer. I don’t know anything about how things work here. All I know comes from reading crime thrillers and watching TV.” He said this even as he moved toward the body, crawling now, as standing was too much effort to consider. Cha quickly stepped back, but not as frantically as before.

The corpse looked like the bystanders, who were still shifting around to get a better look at him, except the dead person was covered in blood, cuts, and puncture wounds. Looking down, Ellis felt his dizziness rise a couple of notches. He also had a headache. He’d never seen a brutalized body before. All the dead people he’d been near were thick with makeup and tucked neatly in boxes surrounded by flower arrangements. Luckily, with the exception of the blood, which had already

mostly dried, it wasn't a very gruesome scene. No guts hanging out, no bones showing—just the mutilated shoulder, which wasn't as bad as he had expected. The killer had dug in like a doctor to retrieve a bit of shrapnel. He knew he wasn't going to puke, which surprised him, because his stomach had been churning for some time. He tried to focus and apply what he knew from the novels of Patricia Cornwell, Jonathan Kellerman, and the occasional episode of *Law & Order* or *CSI*. “Looks like he was stabbed to death and the killer didn't seem to know what he was doing.”

“Why's that?” Cha asked this time.

“Well, unless you've moved things around since my time, the best places to kill a person, according to most of the crime novels, would be a slice across the throat to cut the carotid artery, an upward stab under the ribs to the heart, or a stab to the base of the skull. This person was just jabbing anywhere, straight in and out. See all the puncture marks on the stomach? All of them have small openings, like he was just going for the soft spots. There was no twisting of a blade or attempt to open the wounds wide. And the victim didn't fight back...just defended. See the cut on the arm there? Probably from trying to ward off the knife. And see the blood pool? That wound caught a larger artery there, and I bet that caused the bleed out. These others might have damaged intestines, and maybe eventually done the trick, but not nearly as fast. Might have been saved if not for that arm cut.”

“Does that make sense?” Pax asked Cha.

Cha nodded, and Ellis thought there might be reluctance there, but “Aztec Tattoo” got points for being honest.

“So the killer isn't an expert.”

“I wouldn't think anyone alive these days is an expert,” Cha said. “So you haven't narrowed anything.”

“Is there more you can tell us?” Pax asked.

Ellis got up on his knees. “Yeah—this fella's eyes were bad. He wore glasses.”

“What did you say?”

“He or she—ah, I mean—well, I don’t really know what to...never mind. This *person* wore glasses. See the pinch marks along the bridge of the nose, and the little half-moons on the cheeks? Glasses do that.”

Pax looked at Cha. Both were puzzled.

“Hang on.” Ellis set down his pack, unzipped a side pocket, pulled out his reading glasses, and set them on his nose. “See. Glasses. I take them off and you can see the divots left—the little impressions.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Ellis Rogers,” Pax explained, “but no one wears glasses.”

Cha had found the courage to inch closer to peer down at the body. “I hadn’t noticed that. Something did pinch the nose, and there’s a crease along the forehead too.”

“Like a hat,” Ellis said, and pointed at Pax. “Some people still wear those, at least.”

Pax offered him a smile, and he responded with one of his own.

“So where are the glasses and hat?”

Pax and Cha looked around but found nothing.

“Killer might have taken them—but no, I don’t remember anything in his hands—oh!”

“What?” Pax asked.

“The killer—I just remembered—was missing two fingers. Right hand, I think.”

“So, whoever did it was interested in the Hive Project, had likely never killed before, and is missing two fingers. And the victim wore glasses and a hat.”

Ellis shrugged. “I told you I wouldn’t be much help.” He was feeling worse and reconsidering whether he might vomit after all.

“Actually, that’s much more than we knew five minutes ago. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And speaking of time and knowing things, what year is it?”

“Oh right.” Pax looked embarrassed. “This is the year 4078.”

“Forty seventy-eight? That’s...that’s more than two thousand...” Ellis wavered, and Pax reached out, grabbing his shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Pax offered. “I didn’t realize it would be such a shock.”

“No—no—well, yes, it is, but really I—I’m not feeling very well. I think I need to lie down.” He settled to the grass, lying on his back.

“What’s wrong with you?” Cha asked.

“I told you I have a respiratory problem,” he said, looking up at the sky. “It’s called idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. No one in my time knew what caused it or how to cure it, and in my case it’s terminal.”

Cha drew closer than ever before and studied him. “Are you feeling better right now?”

“Lying down, yeah. A little bit.”

“Stand up.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Do it anyway,” Cha insisted.

Ellis looked at Pax, who nodded. “Cha is a very good physician.”

Ellis pushed up and staggered, as the world swam more than before.

“Okay, okay, sit down,” Cha told him and gave up his security distance to touch Ellis on the neck. “Your skin is hot and dry. When was the last time you had something to drink?”

“Early this morning, I guess—a couple swallows.”

“And did you say you traveled down out of the forests? Five or six miles, right? That’s what you said.”

“Yeah.”

“And then passed out in the sun here?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded.

“You may have a respiratory illness, but right now you’re suffering from sunstroke and dehydration.”

“Really?”

“Trust me, I see a lot of it. People come to the surface and don’t realize the difference a real sun makes.”

“A real sun?”

Cha ignored him and turned to Pax. “We need to get the Darwin out of the sun, into a cool place, and reintroduce fluids and electrolytes.” Cha pulled Ellis’s canteen from around his neck, unscrewed the cap, and smelled.

“It’s just water,” Ellis explained.

“Then drink,” Cha ordered.

“I’m actually feeling nauseous now.”

“Of course you are, and soon you’ll start to have trouble breathing if we don’t fix you. Now sip. No big gulps, just sips.”

Pax stood up and drew something out of the frock coat.

“Where are you going?” Cha asked.

“My place. You call the ISP and wait for them.”

“You sure? You don’t know anything about this Darwin.”

“Are you offering to take Ellis Rogers home with you instead?”

“Forget I said anything.”

A burst of light and a hum, and Ellis saw another portal appear. Through it he could see a room with a bed, pillows, and blankets.

“Grab him,” Cha said, and they lifted Ellis by the arms. The world spun, far worse than before. He heard a ringing, and, as he was half dragged into the opening, darkness came again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After finding a manual typewriter in the basement of a friend's house, Michael inserted a blank piece of paper and typed: It was a dark and stormy night and a shot rang out. Well, he was just eight years old at the time, so we'll forgive him that trespass. But the desire to fill the blank page and see what doors the typewriter keys would unlock wouldn't let him go. For ten years Michael developed his craft by studying authors such as Stephen King, Ayn Rand, and John Steinbeck. During that time, he wrote twelve novels, and after finding no traction in publishing, he gave up and vowed never to write creatively again.

Michael discovered that never is a very long time, and he ended his writing hiatus after a decade. The itch returned when he decided to create a series of books for his then thirteen-year-old daughter, who was struggling in school due to dyslexia. Intrigued by the idea of writing a series with an overarching story line, he created the Riyria Revelations. Each of the six books was written as an individual episode but also included intertwining elements and mysteries that develop over time. Michael describes this endeavor as something he did "just for fun with no intention of publishing." After presenting the first manuscript to his daughter, he was chagrined that she declared, "I can't read it like this, can't you get it published?"

So began his second adventure on the road to publication, which included: drafting his wife to be his business manager; signing with an independent press; and later creating a small press. After two and a half years, the first five books sold more than 70,000 copies and ranked in the top twenty of multiple Amazon fantasy lists. In November 2010, he leveraged his success and received his first commercial publishing contract for three novels from Orbit Books (the fantasy imprint of Hachette

Book Group, USA). In addition, Michael reached international status with more than fifteen foreign rights translations including France, Spain, Russia, and Germany, just to name a few.

Michael's work has been well received by critics and readers alike, earning him thousands of positive ratings/reviews, interviews, and articles. He has attributed much of his success to the fantasy book blogging community. Dubbed "the little indie that could" he found his books pitted as the only independent in major competitions such as the 2010 and 2012 Goodreads Choice Award Nominee for Fantasy and the 2009 Book Spot Central's Fantasy Tournament of Books, which he won. His traditionally published edition of *Theft of Swords* was short-listed for the 2013 Audie Award for Fantasy.

Today, Michael continues to fill blank pages and is working on his third series tentatively titled *The First Empire*.

Contact Information

Website/blog: www.riyria.com

Twitter: [@author_sullivan](https://twitter.com/@author_sullivan)

Email: Michael.Sullivan.DC@gmail.com

Facebook [Author](#) | [Riyria](#)

MICHAEL SULLIVAN'S WORKS

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (contains The Crown Conspiracy and Avempartha)

Rise of Empire (contains Nyphron Rising and The Emerald Storm)

Heir of Novron (contains Wintertide and Percepliquis)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower

The Rose and the Thorn

Standalone Novels

Hollow World

Antithesis (forthcoming)

A Burden to the Earth (forthcoming)

Anthologies

Unfettered

The End—Visions of Apocalypse

Triumph Over Tragedy

Help Fund My Robot Army(forthcoming)

Unfettered II