

Time Stealer: A Novella

by

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My Writing Process: An Introduction to “Time Stealer”

The writing process is as unique as the writer. Often, writers, both professional and amateur, discuss their processes in an attempt to improve their craft and to advise other writers. Some people end up taking these tips as plain facts and think that a work of fiction can be written in only one way. However, people operate differently and not every writing tip can apply to every writer. People have different reasons for writing and different goals that they want to achieve through their creativity; therefore, claiming there is only “one way” to write is impossible. Especially with the barrage of content that social media provides, it is easier than ever for elitism to take over and writing tips to be seen as “rules” of creative writing. Personally, my creative process, including the process of writing “Time Stealer,” continually fluctuates and, as a result, is difficult to explain. I find my process has been influenced by personal experience, observing social media, and, most importantly, faith.

Writing is something that comes naturally to me without too much effort. It is an experience in my life that makes me say, “This is what I am meant to do.” My grandmother taught me to read and write at age two and, as a result, I began to tell stories. She wrote them for me until I was able to do so myself. I never had a problem understanding the broad concepts of storytelling: that every story must have a beginning, middle, and end; that characters must be interesting; and that there must be a conflict of some sort. The intricate details came over time, of course.

I started to consider myself a “serious writer,” whatever that means, during my senior year of high school. I had already decided to major in accounting in college, and write on the side with the expectation of pursuing publication. As expected of life, that did not happen.

However, I attended a handful of creative writing workshops, got published, and started a reading- and writing-related blog. No one read the blog, the publishing company was a scam that has since been shut down and sued, and the workshops were a mixed bag.

While the workshops that focused on critiques wound up not really providing any helpful tips on becoming a more skillful writer, those that taught craft kept me engaged. Every critique-based workshop I have attended has always been focused on conforming my writing to someone else's expectations. I can't write to please someone else and I don't think anyone should. Art is for the artist, and if the artist is satisfied with the content, that should be all that matters.

Audience is secondary. If artists rely on audience reception as a gauge of success, they will never be satisfied because audiences are fickle. It is impossible to create a piece of art that will please everyone. However, I am also aware of the opposite opinion. There are writers who intentionally write to please an audience because the end goal of writing is publishing. In this mindset, writing stories is no longer an art but a business. As a result, it becomes necessary to cater to an audience in order to create a successful, profitable business. Since this is not my motivation, my audience is myself and maybe some friends who might be interested. This is especially the case with "Time Stealer." The story is strictly for exercising my own imagination and entertaining a small audience. A story written with this mindset is generally not suitable for sharing with a workshop or a wider audience.

On the other hand, workshops about craft discussed how to become a stronger writer by using a personal style and skill set. This has always been the preferable option for me. Such experiences were encouraging rather than demanding. Hosts and other participants of the workshops discussed becoming a stronger writer not by imitating someone else or trying to please an audience, but by improving existing skills. When I attended my first writing conference

in 2010, I was shocked to be among people with a similar mindset. For the first time in my life, I felt as if I fit in with other people; that thinking in and about stories was not as weird as I had been led to believe. Some things I learned during that conference have stayed with me over the years: how to create tension, using descriptions that allow the reader to imagine, and maintaining consistency in tone and point of view. I still have the notebook from those classes and look back on it occasionally as a positive memory and a depiction of how far my writing has come. I even remain in contact with some people I met during those conferences.

Writing has often been portrayed as a solitary task; the lonely artist hunched over a notebook or keyboard. Yet, when writers bond through friendship and common interests, there can be a more community-based approach to writing. Writer friends encourage each other to keep going and can be honest reviewers of a work in progress. As someone who is extremely private about stories—a product of the publishing scam—it is sometimes difficult for me to pick which stories to share and with whom. When I do share, I am only concerned about general enjoyment or entertainment and clarity since my main audience is myself. If my point is not clear to another reader, I must rethink how I am telling the story. Asking such questions about a work in progress, as I did while writing “Time Stealer,” does help the overall process of getting the story on paper. In my experience, I have heard many writers say not to edit while drafting, but that seems illogical to me. If something is not working with how I am telling the story at the very beginning, there is no point in continuing with a train of thought that does not make sense. It is even less logical to continue writing the story as if the mistake has already been corrected. It just creates a bigger mess to clean up at the end. I try to write as close to the final draft as possible in order to keep my thoughts clear and concise. If there needs to be a change, it only makes sense to change it right away rather than assuming I will remember to go back to it. Editing, in this sense,

becomes improving existing content rather than puzzling together inconsistent fragments. I often enjoy the editing process because I have this mindset, whereas, I have heard other writers dread it because it means trying to clean up the messes they have made. I enjoy editing my own work and helping others improve. This is also a good place to get the assistance of writer friends. In the case of “Time Stealer,” I asked both writers and non-writers for feedback. We tend to be too close to our own work, so a new pair of eyes and a fresh perspective is always a big help.

Social media has made it easier to connect with other writers on an individual or group basis. While I personally rarely use social media, I have seen the effects, both negative and positive. My main source of content comes from YouTube where I watch a handful of writers discuss their stories, writing processes, and thoughts on both traditional and independent publishing. As with every realm of life, there are positive and negative sides to this community of content creators.

In her video, “Problems I Have With the Writing Community,” Shaelin Bishop addresses some concerning attitudes and ideas she has seen in the community of writers on YouTube. She has noticed the idea that high productivity is equated with success: “It’s this idea that your worth is your productivity... and if you don’t produce constantly [and] consistently at a high output, you’re not a serious writer” (Shaelin Writes). Viewers see only what the creator wants them to see, such as highlighting the productive and successful moments while eliminating the flubs, and this can create false expectations for viewers of what a writer’s life is like. New or young writers might compare their own work to their favorite content creator who appears to be producing a lot of content and easily become discouraged. This adds undue pressure to something that is supposed to be a creative outlet. Bishop continues,

Let the new writers, the children, the people with families, responsibilities, jobs, or

whatever write as slowly or sporadically as they want... I can figure out how much I want to write for myself and so can anyone in this community. You are allowed to take your time and you're allowed to write at whatever pace you want.

Emphasizing quantity over quality also creates false expectations. Just because a content creator advertises a high rate of production does not automatically mean the writing is high quality. For some reason, many viewers permit content creators to dictate this production standard just because the content creator is the one whose life is on display.

There is a difference between taking inspiration from someone else's process and feeling pressured by it. Because writers each have their own process, it can be overwhelming to watch and listen to a variety of writers who take different approaches to the writing process. I agree with Bishop's comment, "The writing process is not clean, nor has it ever been, nor will it ever be." Any creative endeavor is messy as the creative person finds the process that fits best as an individual. While it is helpful to listen to advice videos or try to imitate another writer's routine, it is not necessary to conform to another writer's standard. If there is an element of a writer's routine that the viewer thinks might be helpful to implement, by all means, try it to see if it helps. However, viewers who are seeking advice should not allow the content creator or the community to dictate what is and is not correct for their own processes. "We create because we enjoy it," Bishop adds,

There are different ways to write a book and different ways to write a book well. I feel like it should be inherent that all advice should be taken critically and considered circumstantially... If you want to know if someone is someone that you should be taking advice from, critically listen to their advice and ask yourself if it resonates with you.

Turning all writing advice on the internet into mandates discourages an ambitious writer and is

not enjoyable or conducive to developing an individualized writing process.

The concept of trying out other writers' writing routines has been popularized by Kate Cavanaugh and her "I Tried Writing Like" series. She researches a popular author, such as Steven King or Nora Roberts, or another YouTube writer, or polls her audience and applies elements of that routine to her own life. Cavanaugh's YouTube channel contains a variety of writing challenges. She has tried 24-hour writing challenges, a traditional nine-to-five workday, and her newest challenge is to write one million words in one year. She uses these challenges to evaluate her own writing process and encourage the audience to have fun with writing experiments. In different Q&A videos, Cavanaugh has explained that she would not have had the ideas for these challenges had she not started making videos ("authortube cliques"). She comes up with the ideas herself, takes suggestions from viewers, or finds similar ideas in non-writing-related videos, then remakes them to be writing-related ("5-year plans"). Furthermore, she addresses the issue of feeling pressured by the viewers or other writers. Just as there might be pressure on viewers to imitate a content creator, the content creator may also feel pressured by viewers and other creators. Cavanaugh specifically says that she both does and does not feel this pressure to be more productive or to change anything about her writing process or publishing goals. She acknowledges that being on YouTube "can help feed into this perfectionistic side because now... it's not just maybe two pairs of eyes on the book and hoping that they'll buy it... but now it could potentially be like a hundred pairs of eyes." The progress of others is "mostly motivating" and in the occasional down moment, she reflects and learns, "it has zero to do with the other person and entirely to do with [me] and then I just kind of refocus my energy and that helps a lot" ("authortube cliques"). Therefore, she presents how there can also be pressure on writers who create content to meet the expectations of viewers, other creators, or themselves.

Rather than becoming discouraged by those pressures, creators and viewers alike can turn them in a positive direction as motivation for continuing to write and being creative.

Cavanaugh's videos show the full spectrum of the writing process and how it can be affected by a social media presence. This spectrum includes coming up with ideas, how to incorporate writing into a daily routine, drafting stories, editing, and publishing plans. She is also honest about areas where she feels she has failed, such as working for years on a project and deciding when to put it on the "back burner" and pause progress for the time being. "In essence, I did fail my initial goal: I did not get an agent," Cavanaugh explains about a five-book series she has been writing. She continues,

So, I failed, and... that, I know, has been the hardest part to talk about on this sort of platform, to say 'I just wasn't ready to write that book' or 'I queried and didn't get an agent.' Or even seeing people who are doing self-publishing and... watching them make mistakes... You fail, you learn, you fail some more, you keep trying, and then you go from there ("public failure").

By reflecting on her own goals and sharing success as well as failure, viewers can understand the reality of the writing process with its ups and downs instead of succumbing to the aforementioned discouragement that comes from comparison, sharing only successful moments, or conflicting advice.

While this is just a small sample of the content I personally consume, which is a miniscule fraction of all of the writers who create content on social media, it does show an overview of what can be found within the internet writing community at this time. Social media content in the writing realm can easily become something harmful and discouraging, or it can be an open forum of discussion and encouragement for writers of all calibers. A worldwide

audience is invited alongside the content creators as they figure out the writing process together. Hopefully, the audience overcomes discouragement, learns something new, and is inspired to write.

Social media also displays a variety of worldviews. No two people think exactly alike or perceive the world in the same way. In writing this particular novella, I acknowledged the importance of worldview and how it affects a writer's style and perspective. My stories never take place in or are influenced by the real world. While I may reference real locations, I generally invent a town or city and place it within that real location, such as the main character's hometown. Otherwise, I create an entirely new world with its own rules. I also never mention when my stories take place, though mentioning certain technologies will give a general, but not exact, timeframe. I do this because I dislike confinement in my writing. Reading and writing are often viewed as a means of escape from the real world and its problems. Rarely do I try to give commentary on the real world; the interior life and moral character are far more vital topics.

I write about ideas and concepts that are important to me. This includes strong families and friendships, gaining courage, overcoming difficulties, and having faith. I see my stories the same way I see the real world: through a Biblical lens. Since the term "Christian" has been taboo and mired in false doctrine since the first century, clarification is in order. I follow Jesus as a sinner saved by grace. I fail every day to meet His standard, yet, the price He paid is sufficient, undeserved mercy that covers my failures and gives me the ability to turn away from what is evil. Religious ritual is not nearly as important as a complete change of heart and mind (Psalm 51:16-17). As society drifts further from objective, absolute truth, I believe it becomes even more important to express truth through art. It is not about preaching to the audience, but speaking the truth in love. Even if no one reads my stories, my worldview will be in my writing

as I reflect on my own thoughts, questions, and struggles with faith.

The concept of “Christian fiction” has been the subject of debate for as long as Christians have been telling stories. In recent decades, Christian entertainment has held the stigma of lacking the same quality as mainstream entertainment. Movies tend to be low budget with poor acting and visual effects, and books sometimes turn into sermons or alienate non-Christians through unfamiliar terms and concepts. E. Stephen Burnett and Zackary Russell of the website Lorehaven host the podcast “Fantastical Truth,” which aims to promote quality Christian speculative fiction and to discuss finding Biblical truth in it. In Episode 2, they address the question “What do we mean when we say ‘it’s a Christian story’?” When explaining his childhood encounters with Christian media, Burnett says, “The connotations... I got from an early age is the label ‘Christian’ doesn’t automatically make something artistically horrible... but lots of people have a negative connotation with the Christian label” (Lorehaven). They discuss certain assumptions that consumers make of what must be included in a film or book labeled “Christian,” such as a Jesus metaphor, Bible reading, or a call to conversion. Or, the content will be labeled “inspirational” if it does not contain an overtly Christian message, but avoids content seen as objectionable to Christian ideology, such as vulgar language or gratuitous violence. Russell sums this up with, “Either... it’s going to include some content from Christianity, or it’s going to exclude content that Christians find objectionable.” The reality is that it is not necessary for these clichés to be present in media created by Christians. Media created by Christians can be high quality entertainment with engaging storytelling without a heavy-handed lesson to learn.

There can also be the attitude of “an artist who is a Christian” in order to avoid the stigma. This idea typically stems from the negative connotations mentioned by Burnett and Russell. Someone who is accustomed to the stigmatic low quality of Christian media will try to

distance from that idea by changing the terminology, emphasizing the “artist” label over the “Christian” label. In response, Burnett says,

I don't think we should pitch out perfectly fine words because there's something we need to heal from. I think that the word 'Christian' is a good one. 'Christian,' by the way, literally means 'one who is like Christ' or 'a miniature Christ,' 'a person that reflects Christ,' and I think that it's okay to apply that to people. I think we need to approach this topic from a proactive Biblical viewpoint (Lorehaven).

When used correctly, there is no need to shy away from the term “Christian” just because society has stigmatized it. In fact, Jesus has told His followers that they will be hated by the world because the world hated Him (John 15:18-19). What remains, then, is the need to separate authentic faith from inauthentic because of pervasive false doctrine that tries to paint Christianity as something it is not.

Authentic Biblically-based Christian artists will recognize their creativity as a gift and see the act of creating as an imitation of the Creator. Jesus taught using parables, or short stories of illustration. When the disciples ask why, He responds, “The secrets of the kingdom of God have been given for you to know, but to the rest it is in parables, so that looking they may not see, and hearing they may not understand” (Luke 8:10). There are hidden truths within the stories that some people will understand and others will not. To some hearers, the story gives clarity on a topic of faith or a concept of how to live a godly life; to others, it is just a confusing story. Not everyone who hears or reads the truth will accept it. Therefore, in a similar manner, a Biblical worldview will naturally appear in the art of a Christian artist, and not everyone will receive or understand it. Burnett puts it this way, “Because we've been entrusted with the Gospel, I see that everything we touch, everything that we create or make, has in some way the influence of the

Gospel... so applying it to a Christian story... all I think is ‘a Christian made this story’”

(Lorehaven). Russell expands this idea by explaining different concentric circles of stories made for, about, and by Christians. The “by” circle is the largest because it includes the other two categories and describes many stories that the audience might not even recognize belong in that category. He says, “The novel by a Christian is for a wide general audience. It’s not a message or theme driven story, but the author is known to some extent to be a believer.” I would categorize my stories in this circle. Some of my stories never mention God or quote a Bible verse, but as a follower of Jesus, a Biblical worldview will naturally be present in the story. There is not always a message to convey, but worldview affects every aspect of storytelling including the characters, setting, plot, and how the story is told. For example, my stories will always imply that there is a sovereign God who created the universe, even if such a detail is never mentioned on the page. I chose to include faith in “Time Stealer” because I knew the main character’s decisions were driven by the confidence he has in his faith. The secondary character also has a conflict of faith as he has to question what he has believed for a long time. Without these elements, the reason behind the plot was not clear. Being authentic to who I am as a Jesus follower naturally carries over into the art I create.

Burnett addresses the method of infusing Biblical truth into a story in his review of C.S. Lewis’s essay “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s To Be Said.” He explains Lewis’s point that creating Christian stories is neither the mechanical regurgitation of allegory nor giving free reign to the imagination. Rather, Lewis was “calling the serious creator to consider not only the imaginative life, that is, the part where you get pictures and start giving them form. Lewis wants us to explore the author’s responsibility as a person” (Burnett). The initial images must take form; in other words, the writer must take an initial idea and determine how the story is to

be told. Then, the responsibility of the Christian writer is for that story to do something for the reader; in this case, to reveal Biblical truth. “Yes, C.S. Lewis does believe in expressing faith through imagination *by intention*,” Burnett concludes.

Furthermore, the idea of intentionality in Christian media is echoed by Max McLean, founder and director of Fellowship for Performing Arts (FPA), a Christian production company in New York City. The company’s goal is to provide theatre with a Christian worldview to a diverse audience. Many recent shows have been based on C.S. Lewis’s life and writings, such as “Shadowlands” and “The Great Divorce.” During a recent post-show interview, McLean says:

In the arts world, Christians are normally seen as cultural critics. We’re not usually perceived as culture makers, providing sustenance to the culture. Mainstream opinion is that Christianity is a regressive idea that has nothing to add to the cultural conversation. And, of course, I think that’s being said because there’s no real engagement with the Christian message at a deep level... You can’t say that if you’re engaging with thinkers like C.S. Lewis or G.K. Chesterton or John Milton, [etc.] ... The picture that’s painted of a Christian is as a naïve fundamentalist who needs to be enlightened and I believe our responsibility at FPA is to address that by telling stories that are thoughtful, provocative, nuanced, [and] passionate that capture the imagination and leave room for the Holy Spirit to do His work (Fellowship for Performing Arts).

I have a similar opinion as my fellow Christian artists that Christian-made stories reveal Biblical truth. It should be done through thoughtful creative endeavors, in a manner that is kind and loving, and that engages the mind and heart of the audience. Personally, I will not edit my faith out of a story to please readers. I have succumbed to self-censorship in the past, in which I did not include the faith elements I wanted to because I suspected the story would be misinterpreted

or because it would be read by people who would not like it. Perhaps this is another reason why I have become so private with stories; so that I feel freer to express myself honestly. Then, when I do share a story, I hope that the truth would be revealed to those who are meant to find it. There will always be pushback, misunderstanding, and even hatred from other believers and unbelievers alike, but I try not to let that deter me from expressing my faith within my creative projects.

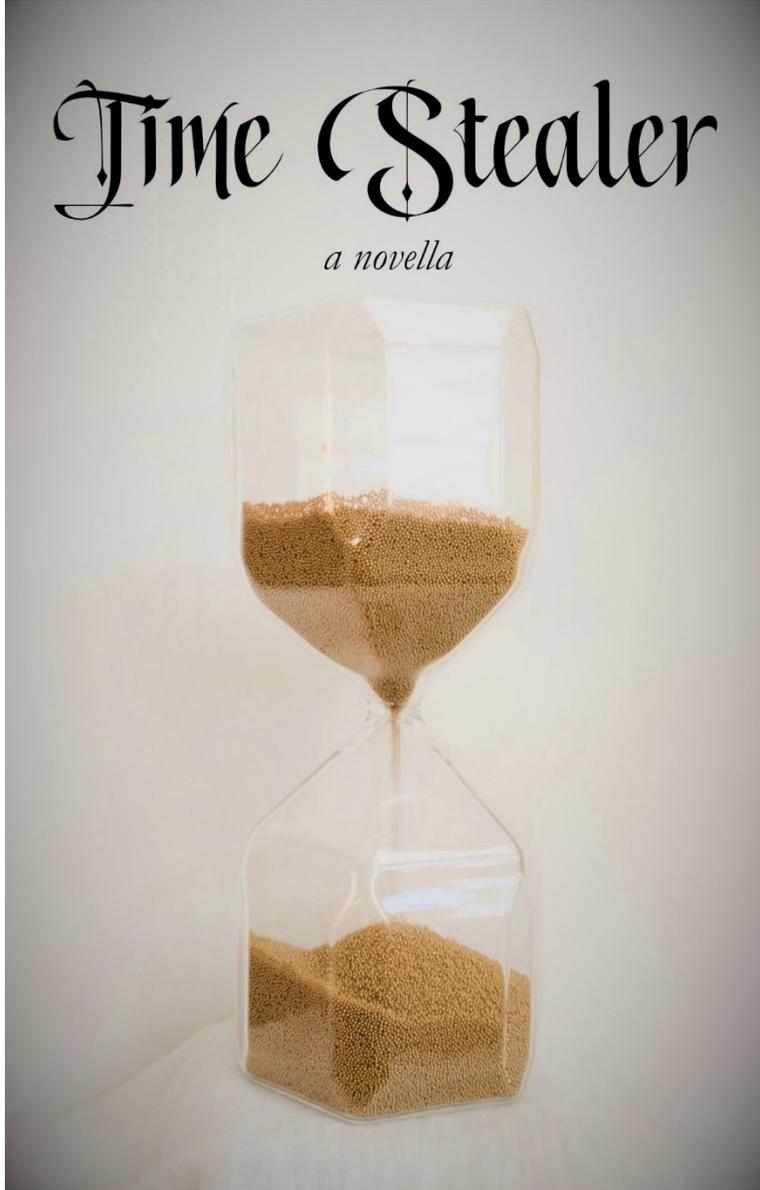
The combination of personal experiences, information gleaned from social media, and my faith has turned me into the writer I am today. As life goes on, changes will only continue and, hopefully, further improve my writing skills. For this project, I chose a story idea that has been with me for over a decade. “Time Stealer” began with the picture of a young man climbing the spiral staircase of a circular tower with countless clocks on the walls. Waiting for him at the top of the tower was the Time Stealer. I was never sure what kind of story it was or how it should be told, though I have held onto clear pictures of the characters. The story that took shape as a result of this project turned into something I did not initially expect. That is the excitement of the writing process! The concept I hope becomes clear through the story is that our lives serve greater purposes than we realize. While I did not write with this concept in mind, it is the concept that developed as I wrote. There are no hidden meanings to uncover or lessons to learn from the characters; it is just an entertaining story about using time wisely. My main audience for this story is myself and I am mostly satisfied with the final product. With this in mind, I hope it brings enjoyment to anyone else who might read it.

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Time Stealer

a novella



This project is dedicated to my mother who never gives up on me.

Plus, a special thanks to my early readers:

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Time Stealer

Chapter One

Like clockwork, Gavin arrived home from the office. The humid New England Friday was cooling into evening. Gavin parked in the driveway, shouldered his messenger bag, and walked down to his mailbox, draping his blazer over one arm. Mail in hand, he flipped around his keyring for the house key and entered.

He left his shoes and bag near the door, loosened his tie, then tossed his blazer on the armchair. Sorting through the mail as he walked to the kitchen, Gavin came across a blank white envelope. He looked over the envelope, dropping the rest of the mail to the kitchen counter. No stamp or return address. It didn't even have *his* name or address on it. How had the envelope made it through the postal service without such details? Had someone placed it there intentionally?

Gavin lifted the envelope to the light. Nothing but the outline of a piece of paper showed through. Maybe it was a joke. Immediately after the thought, Gavin shook his head. There weren't any people in his life who would try to play a trick on him. With a curious, "Hmm," Gavin placed the envelope on the counter. The mystery would have to wait until later. He had other things to do first. He quickly sorted through the rest of the mail so he could get started on dinner.

He turned on the TV as background noise while he cooked a simple meal of chicken and vegetables. The channel and show didn't matter much, just as long as there was some noise to fill in the empty spaces. It had been a long week and he couldn't be bothered to think too much. Relaxing over the weekend was just what he needed.

Meal prepared, Gavin brought the important pieces of mail to the table with his food and water. A few expected bills had come in, plus a postcard from his brother's latest trip. He also had the TV's remote nearby to flip channels while he ate. Changing from a detective show to the news, Gavin turned over the postcard from his brother. Emmett was hiking in the Cascade Mountains with his wife Ariella. The card was almost a week old, so the pair had probably moved on to the next stop of their trip. The photo was of Mount Rainier and the note said they had just hiked Skyline Trail for some photos and writing opportunities. "We'll keep following the mountains into Canada," the note continued, "and then head to the coast for some fishing." It was signed "With love" and their names. Gavin smiled wistfully. Emmett and Ariella maintained a travel and photography blog and traveled the world while Gavin stayed home in Rhode Island and worked in an office. He was good at his finance job and liked it well enough, but it was definitely demanding and he rarely got to use his vacation time. The brothers had always had different interests, Emmett being active and outdoors while Gavin stayed home with his nose in books. But sometimes Gavin wished they could do more together. Someday, he'd like to go somewhere with his brother and sister-in-law. Have an adventure the way they did.

Gavin set aside the postcard to save it with the others that Emmett had sent over the years. He picked up his fork for the last few bites of his dinner.

"...unusual sounds from Tower on the Beach for the first time in fifty years," came a reporter's voice on TV.

Curious, Gavin reached for the remote to turn up the volume. Then, he reversed the footage to return to the beginning of the story.

Camelia Richards, the local news anchor, reported, "Residents of Beachview have reported unusual sounds from Tower on the Beach for the first time in fifty years." The image

changed to vertical phone footage of the Tower in silhouette at sunset. “This recording from Armando Hawthorne caught the sounds at six PM last night.” Mixed with the sound of waves came six loud gongs like a grandfather clock. “And here’s what Mr. Hawthorne had to say about it.”

Armando Hawthorne, a middle-aged Hispanic man, appeared on screen with the beach behind him. “Yeah, I don’t know what it is, but I’ve been hearing it at exactly six o’clock every night this week. I’m trying to watch the game, you know, and there it is,” he gestured with his words, “bong, bong, bong, making a ruckus. Figured it might be some kids poking around, thinking that urban legend is real. So, I thought I’d film it and send it to the news. Maybe someone can figure it out.”

The image returned to Camelia Richards in the studio. “Local police investigated this morning and have found no suspicious activity in the area. However, they have asked for anyone to report any other findings to the department’s tip line.” The phone number appeared at the bottom of the screen. “Now, onto our weekend forecast.”

Gavin turned off the TV. Interesting. He hadn’t heard anything about Tower on the Beach or its rumors since he was a kid. As he washed the dishes, Gavin thought about it. No one really knew much about the Tower. It looked so out of place, as if it had been taken from a medieval castle and plopped on the edge of the beach like a lighthouse. Rumor was that some kind of wizard lived there. Maybe even the legendary Time Stealer. But of course, most people wrote that off as childish and silly. Wizards weren’t real and the Time Stealer was just a story told to guilt children into better behavior. Therefore, there had to be a reasonable explanation for the Tower. Most likely it was a rundown relic and only plants and animals occupied it.

Continuing with his evening routine, Gavin washed up and changed into sweats and a

loose t-shirt. He took his bills into his home office and booted the computer. After paying his bills and balancing his checkbook, Gavin found himself searching the internet for anything about Tower on the Beach.

The general information available was what Gavin already knew. There were no records of who built the Tower or how long it had been there. Rumors spread that someone lived there, but no one had ever been able to open the door. It looked like a basic wooden door, but very thick, with rusted metal hinges and a dull golden handleset, no visible lock. Someone had tried to burn it down many years ago, but the door didn't even catch fire. There was no access to electricity or running water at the Tower, so if someone lived there, it would be very basic living.

Whenever civilians or law enforcement tried to investigate, there were no signs of life. Teenagers sometimes challenged their friends to try to climb the rough stone sides of the tower and make it to the first stained-glass window about thirty feet from the ground. These ventures usually ended in injury as the person taking the challenge would fall after minimal progress. Any "warning" or "no trespassing" signs erected by authorities would disappear. The Tower was never affected by high tide or any forms of weather. In fact, a handful of hurricanes had passed through over the years and the Tower stood strong.

Gavin scrolled through a couple articles about the news report that had just aired. Armando Hawthorne wasn't the only local resident who had taken phone footage of the Tower. Gavin found at least a dozen more videos from the past week with the same gong sounds in the vicinity of the Tower. Time stamps or captions indicated that the gongs sounded on every third hour morning and night.

He remembered from the report that the last time anyone had heard a sound from the Tower was fifty years ago. After a little more research and clicking through articles, Gavin found

minimal information about the events from the past. There were no cameras in phones to record anything back then, so the information he found was limited to archived newspaper articles and news broadcasts. He played a few of the clips and heard the same sound. Reports at the time were equally as stumped about the noise.

Gavin glanced at the clock to find he had spent almost three hours researching the Tower. He stretched stiff limbs as he got up from the chair. He still had a couple more tasks before going to bed for the night. Since the next day was Saturday, there was no need to get to bed early. Gavin tidied a little on his way back to the front of the house. In the living room, he checked that the front door was locked and retrieved his blazer and messenger bag to bring them back to his bedroom. On the way, he did a double take at the kitchen counter. He'd gotten so caught up in the news report and research that he had nearly forgotten about the plain white envelope. Picking it up, he continued to his room.

After placing his work things where they belonged, Gavin fiddled with the envelope on his way to the bathroom, slipping a finger under the seal and finding it easy to open. He placed it on the counter as he readied his toothbrush. Then, with his free hand, Gavin slipped the piece of paper out of the envelope and opened the single fold.

The paper, yellowed with age, didn't match the outer envelope. It could've been mistaken for ancient parchment. Handwritten in smudged black ink at the center of the page was the message:

Tower on the Beach

Saturday, 3pm

The toothbrush fell from Gavin's grasp into the sink.

Chapter Two

Gavin had trouble sleeping that night. He tossed and turned, thinking about the note and what it could mean. Several times, he sat on the edge of his bed, turned on the lamp, and picked up the note again, looking it over. At one point, he realized he'd been so distracted that evening that he'd forgotten his nightly prayers. With rare exception, Gavin took the time to reflect on his day and talk to God about his concerns and requests. Though it was the middle of the night, he looked at the note and prayed. "Should I go or not?" he asked, but didn't get an answer. He never expected immediate answers, but knew he'd understand over time.

With a sigh, he turned the paper over and over, looking at it from every angle he'd already looked at dozens of times. He couldn't find any other details about the paper, the envelope, or the handwriting. If only he had a magnifying glass to investigate the tiny details. Or maybe there was an additional message in invisible ink. Something, *anything*, that could explain the note and why he had received it.

It wasn't a prank. Sure, his coworkers pulled the occasional prank on each other, but nothing this obscure. Emmett was on the other side of the country and they were both adults now, no longer prone to childish pranks. There was no way his parents or other family members would send him something without explanation, and he didn't have many close friends or a girlfriend. It had to be from a stranger. Maybe there was something more to the Tower than the legends and rumors told.

Since there were only a few minutes left until five AM, Gavin gave up on getting any more sleep. With a frustrated groan, he heaved himself out of bed and rubbed his face. The note still sat on the bedside table. Gavin cast a side glance at it, annoyed, but still curious. He sighed and grabbed it, then stalked out of the room.

As Gavin went through his normal morning routine, getting ready for the day and starting breakfast, he occasionally glanced at the note as he carried it around with him and placed it on various countertops when he needed both hands. He was going to find out what it meant sooner or later. But how? He hadn't figured out that part yet.

After breakfast and getting dressed, Gavin returned to his computer. He'd forgotten to shut down before bed, so the browser with his research on the Tower was still open. Gavin settled in for more research. Someone, somewhere on the internet had to have information on the Tower that could explain the note.

Most of Gavin's research centered on the events from fifty years ago. Not much had been documented about the recent occurrence yet, so researching the past would hopefully yield more results. After scrolling through articles detailing basically the same thing about the unusual sound, Gavin finally found some articles about the Tower itself. One day in the summer, some children were playing on the beach. They didn't realize how close they were to the Tower. Then, something startled the children badly enough for them to run back down the beach to their parents.

Gavin read half a dozen articles reporting fairly similar accounts of the incident. Yet, not one of the children involved could identify what had caused them to run away. "I just had a bad feeling," was the general consensus. And that wasn't helpful to Gavin's research.

As he kept reading, Gavin found something about the parents. Only one article mentioned it. "We thought the children had been playing for over an hour," one mother had said. "But when they came back to find us, I checked my watch and it had been less than a minute."

Time. No time had passed while the children were playing. People heard the gongs at specific times. Rumors said the Time Stealer lived in the Tower.

Gavin leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, and stared at the wall above the monitor. The story of the Time Stealer was told to kids all over the world. No one quite understood the true intent of this mysterious figure. Legend said that every person on earth had an hourglass with a set amount of sand representing the extent of his or her life. The sand fell through the hourglass naturally as people aged. Yet, the remaining sand could also be stolen by the Time Stealer. If people wasted time being unproductive or made costly mistakes, it meant those minutes and hours now belonged to the Time Stealer.

Parents often guilted their children into behaving by claiming they would lose precious time to the Time Stealer if the children didn't do their chores or homework. Adults knew better than to believe in such silly things and grew out of the story very quickly. Most people didn't give the Time Stealer much thought, like the Sandman or the Tooth Fairy, but they still remembered the stories from childhood.

Gavin held up the note again for another inspection. He hadn't found anything about anyone else getting a note related to the Tower. Was this something that went undocumented or had it never happened before? And why him?

After a bit more searching about the Tower, the Time Stealer, and mysterious notes, Gavin had another thought. His parents. They would've been around ages eight and ten during the incidents mentioned fifty years prior. Maybe they might remember something.

Making his way to the living room, Gavin called his dad.

"Hey, Gav. What's up?"

"I have a... weird question to ask."

"Okay. Shoot."

Gavin sank into his comfortable armchair. "What do you know about Tower on the

Beach?”

“Hmm.” Gavin could hear some shuffling on the other end, as if his dad was settling into his favorite chair, too. “Well, there are a lot of rumors about it. No one knows who built it or why it’s there.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard all of that since I was a kid, but what about when *you* were a kid? Maybe Mom remembers something?”

His dad was quiet for a minute. “I do remember something,” he had a faraway tone. Then, he hummed in thought. “Let me grab your mom and we’ll talk together.”

“Great.” Gavin got comfortable and put his phone on speaker so he could place it on the table next to him.

“Hi, Gavin, dear,” his mother’s melodic voice came from the phone.

Gavin smiled. “Hi, Mom.”

“What’s this about the Tower?”

“I’m just wondering if you and Dad remember anything about it back when you were kids.” Gavin’s parents had grown up as neighbors and had been together for quite literally their entire lives, except the first two years of his mother’s life in Spain before his father was born. If one of them had a fuzzy memory, odds were the other would remember clearly.

“Well, yes. Your father was really interested in the Tower. Right, Jer?”

In response, Gavin’s dad cleared his throat. “Children often make mistakes, Graziella, wouldn’t you agree?”

“What do you mean by mistakes?” Gavin asked.

His mother laughed, a bright and cheerful sound. “You know your father’s curiosity and sense of adventure, dear. Your father wanted to follow along with the older kids and go with

them to the Tower.”

“I was eight and always tagged along with my brothers and their friends,” his father added.

Gavin sat up. “Wait a minute, did you go to the Tower when those strange sounds happened?”

Another uncomfortable throat clear. “Um... well... yes, I did, son. I just followed along. I didn’t know what the other kids were doing.”

“Hold on,” his mom cut in, “how did you know about the sounds?”

“Oh, I meant to say that,” Gavin lightly hit the arm of the chair. “The sounds are back. I saw it on the news last night.”

“Really?” the word came out in an exhale, a sense of fascination behind it.

Gavin waited for more. “And?”

“We didn’t catch the news last night,” his dad said.

“Okay.” Gavin recapped the news report.

“Sounds about right.” He could hear the nod in his father’s tone. “That’s just what it was like back then.”

“So you remember hearing it?”

“Absolutely. I went to the beach with my brothers and their friends and we heard it. It was so loud that one of the kids challenged everyone in the group that whoever could get closest to the Tower without wincing or backing away would get his new skateboard.”

“And what happened?”

“I got his skateboard.” After a beat, he added, “And a terrible headache.”

Gavin could hear his mother giggling in the background. He smiled at the affection his

parents had for each other.

He took a deep breath and brushed back his hair. If he was going to get advice from anyone, his parents were the best people to ask. “In light of all that, what if I told you that someone wants me to go to the Tower at three PM today?”

“Who asked you to go?” his father asked.

“I don’t know. The note just showed up in the mail yesterday.”

“Oh,” there was curiosity and cautiousness in the syllable. Jeremiah’s tone became faraway again, “Something seems familiar about that...”

“You should go, Gav!” his mother chimed in. “Go and have an adventure like your father did.”

Gavin smiled at her upbeat tone. “Really? You think it would be an adventure?”

“Very well could be. Maybe you should see who asked you first.”

“I’ve been researching and I can’t find anything.”

“Well, it’s a mystery, then! You still love your mysteries, don’t you, Gavin, dear?”

Gavin started to answer, but his father spoke up first, “Graziella, we don’t know what the Tower is like these days.”

“Let the boy live a little, Jeremiah. Emmett has always been the adventurous one. Now it’s Gavin’s turn.”

Jeremiah sighed. “Son, do what you think is best.”

“Well,” Gavin started, thinking about their reactions, “I still have some time to think about it.” He decided to change the subject and ask what they were planning to do with the weekend. After some small talk, they said their goodbyes and hung up.

As he stared down at his phone, the device told Gavin it was just after noon. He had three

hours to make a decision. His stomach growled. Maybe lunch should come first.

He couldn't think about anything else but the Tower, so he didn't know what he wanted for lunch. Sandwiches were made for these moments. With a simple ham and cheese on a Kaiser roll, Gavin sat at the table, the note to the side of his plate. Knowing that his father had had an experience with the Tower as a child made him curious to know more. Plus, his mother's comment about the opportunity for an adventure still swam in his thoughts. She was right; Emmett wasn't the only one who could go on adventures. All the research he had done had barely revealed anything. Gavin was curious. It was a mystery to solve and he still had so many questions. As he ate his sandwich, the questions ate at him.

Chapter Three

Gavin stood on the beach looking up toward the top of the Tower. Its top, made of dark wood like the door, looked like a wizard's pointed hat seated on the gray stone cylinder. The door, about twenty feet away, didn't invite Gavin or turn him away. He didn't feel excited or uneasy. Just... neutral. With a heavy sigh, he said to himself, "What am I doing here?"

He also thought he had made a mistake in changing his clothes. Instead of his casual weekend wear, Gavin had wanted to dress professionally but something not quite as stuffy as his business suits. He had no idea who he would meet at the Tower, so it was always best to make a good impression. But it was too hot for long sleeves. He unbuttoned the cuffs of the sleeves and rolled them up to the elbow.

Wanting to be as precise as possible, Gavin checked the time on his phone. 2:58. He walked closer, but would wait for exactly three PM to approach the door. Watching the seconds tick by was maddening. Whether someone would exit the Tower to meet him or he had to enter,

Gavin had a semblance of a plan. Just go for the door handle and see what happens. There were no records of anyone ever opening it, but if he was supposed to be here—if someone was expecting him—he assumed, somehow, he'd be able to enter. If someone came out, however, he was ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. Otherwise, he would take it all in stride.

Gavin had to stop his train of thought as the clock flipped to 3:00. Palms sweaty, he put his hand on the golden handleset. At the same time, a gong sounded from within the Tower. Gavin startled and looked around, but found he didn't want to let go. Instead, he pressed his thumb on the latch and pushed. The door opened.

The second gong sounded as Gavin peered inside. He easily spotted the start of a spiral staircase to the right. Signs of wear, but not neglect, all over the interior. Small lanterns along the walls lit the interior in a faint yellow glow. He also saw the source of the gongs. Hundreds of clocks. Various shapes and sizes. Standing, hanging on the walls, dangling from gold chains.

At the third gong, Gavin slipped inside. The aged wood and metal of the door creaked and clicked shut behind him. The Tower's interior architecture appeared to be from the middle ages. Yet, there were touches of modernity. The details of the large circular room gave the impression of three smaller rooms. There were no distinct dividers, but the purpose of the different sections was clear. Where he stood was a foyer. To the left, a dining area with a wooden table and chairs. To the right, a sleeping area under the spiral staircase. So, someone *did* live here.

But who was it? How did this person know him? Why had he been invited? Gavin continued to look around, taking a few steps toward the center of the room. There were so many clocks that he lost count. Gavin could assume some were much older than others based on the designs and signs of aging. There were the smallest of pocket watches dangling from gold chains

to modern digital clocks of unusual shapes. From an elaborate cuckoo clock above the dining table to the large grandfather clock with its pendulum swinging back and forth, they decorated every available space. He continued his cautious steps toward the grandfather clock and called, “Hello?”

In response, a cat meowed. A Russian Blue emerged from behind the clocks and padded over the stone floor.

“Alright. Not what I expected,” Gavin said with a smile. He crouched to greet the cat.

The cat was intrigued enough to sniff at Gavin’s extended hand. But then, it turned abruptly and bounded up the spiral stairs. It stopped just before ascending out of sight and meowed again.

It seemed like an invitation to follow. Gavin knew from his research that the Tower was seventy-five feet tall. He guessed there was only one more room at the very top. The cat disappeared up the stairs as Gavin began his ascent.

More clocks lined the stone wall of the Tower. Unsurprising. None of them ticked or tocked, beeped or sounded like a gong. Yet, the second hand circled numerous faces and colons on digital clocks continued to blink. He heard the *tap tap* of his shoes on the stone steps. A light creaking sound when he leaned on the wooden banister. The wood and stone architecture certainly reminded him of the European Middle Ages. Carefully carved stones fit together perfectly. The occasional circular stained-glass window broke up the gray. There were no intentional pictures or patterns to the glass; just a colorful array of geometric shapes.

Gavin paused when he heard footsteps above. He felt like he was intruding in someone’s home. He looked down at the spiral of stairs he had climbed. Now that he was almost at the top, the view made him a little dizzy. Gavin closed his eyes and faced forward again, determined to

see this through. He was aware of the note in his back pocket, an assurance that he had been invited here.

At the top of the stairs, an arched entryway allowed access to the room. A white analog clock hung above the entryway. It was decorated with a variety of cats where the numbers would be. Gavin stood on the landing trying to see what he could through the arch without stepping into the room. More clocks. He expected such. But what did all of the clocks mean?

“Hello?” he called, cautious.

“Yes, yes, welcome!” came a man’s voice from the other side of the room. “Please come in. You’re right on time.” He ended on a light chuckle.

Gavin stepped over the threshold, but couldn’t see the owner of the voice. Instead, he gaped at a giant hourglass anchored by twin golden arms on either side, attached to a round stone table in the center of the room.

“Do come in, lad. Will you have some tea?” the man asked.

“Um... tea? Sure.” Gavin walked to the stone table, craning his neck to continue looking up toward the top of the hourglass. “What on earth...?” he whispered to himself. Through the glass, he could see a huge collection of light brown sand in both the top and bottom. One by one, grains continuously fell through the narrow middle.

“Here you are.”

Gavin startled at the voice beside him.

The elderly man in a hunter green cloak chuckled and steadied the mugs in his hands.

“Sorry,” Gavin said quietly.

“No trouble, lad.” The man held out a dark green mug.

Gavin accepted and took a sip. Earl grey.

“So, you answered my letter.” The man beamed as he wrapped his hands around a matching dark green mug.

Gavin took said letter from his pocket as proof. “I did. I... don’t know who you are or why I’m here.” He furrowed his brow and looked into his tea.

“Ask and you shall be answered.”

Gavin couldn’t quite place the man’s accent. Sometimes it sounded Irish, sometimes Persian or Russian, but mostly indeterminate. For that matter, his race was obscure as well. His olive complexion was dark, light, and medium all at once. His face and hands held numerous wrinkles; his long hair and beard were gray. But at the same time, his eyes and smile were youthful. And his irises were the color of opals.

“Who are you?”

“I go by many names,” the man said. “People often think I’m an angel or a demon or... a wizard.” He smiled. “Others have called me Professor or Teacher. Different regions come up with different names for me. You may call me Lawrence.”

“Alright, Lawrence. What is this place? The Tower, all the clocks?”

“This is my home.” He stretched out one hand to indicate the room. The cat appeared again with a jump onto the stone table. “And this is Emerald.”

The Russian Blue aimed its yellow-green eyes at Gavin.

Lawrence scratched behind the cat’s ears.

“And the clocks?” Gavin sipped his tea, interested, but unsure.

“A product of time.” There was that smile again. Gavin couldn’t decide if it was jovial or secretive.

“And why am I here?”

“Because you’re curious.” Lawrence drank some tea and began to walk around the table. Emerald followed for a few steps, then turned the man’s shoulder into a perch. “You want to solve the mystery. You want to be the one who enters Tower on the Beach and lives to tell about it. I have some bad news.”

Gavin put down the mug and prepared to run.

Lawrence turned, facing Gavin from the opposite side of the table, the hourglass distorting his image. “You *will* survive, but you won’t be able to tell anyone.”

Gavin relaxed. “Why?”

“What I do is secret. A legend. People don’t think I exist. Rather, they don’t *notice* I exist. They’re absorbed in their own lives and concerned with their own time. Never having enough of it.”

Through the glass, Gavin watched Emerald hop from Lawrence’s shoulder to the table. The cat made its way around the hourglass and sat in front of him, swishing its tail. Gavin reached out to pet the cat. The cat’s purrs indicated it was pleased with his attention. He didn’t know if he was a cat person.

“And what do you do, exactly?” Gavin took another sip of tea.

“You will soon find out, lad! That’s why I invited you here. The first person to accept my invitation in fifty years!” He laughed joyfully and clapped his hands. Then, with a happy sigh, Lawrence returned to Gavin’s side. “You are now my apprentice.”

Gavin choked on the tea.

Chapter Four

As his coughing subsided and after a couple hearty claps on the back from Lawrence,

Gavin recovered from the tea's assault on his throat.

"Apprentice?" he asked. "What kind of apprentice? Why me? I don't understand."

"You will understand, Gavin."

"You know my name, too. Why am I not surprised?" Gavin threw his hands up and let them slap his thighs as they dropped again. No one knew anything about Tower on the Beach, yet its resident knew so much. The minimal things he had learned thus far revealed just how much was unknown about the Tower: the clocks, Lawrence, the cat.

Gavin leaned his hands on the stone table and stared at the sand in the hourglass. Emerald weaved through his arms. "Okay, who are you, Lawrence? Really?"

"I'm the Time Stealer."

Gavin straightened and crossed his arms. The story came to mind as he looked over the other man: his ambiguous appearance, wizard-looking clothing, and opalescent irises. The Time Stealer traveled the world and stole bits of sand from the hourglasses of people who wasted their precious God-given time. No one knew if this was a sinister thing or something to teach people a lesson. It was just a children's story, a fairytale.

Gavin gave a slight shrug. "Alright, seems legit. Let's get started."

"Really?" Lawrence beamed. His eyes glowed with mirth.

"No, of course not!" Gavin laughed. "I'm not that gullible. The Time Stealer is a myth. A story parents and teachers tell kids to get them to pay attention and stop wasting time." He inspected the mug on the table. There was still a bit of tea left, so he finished it. "Thanks for the tea. I'll be going now."

When Gavin started to walk away, a force beyond his control engulfed him and halted his progress. Frozen mid-step in an extended moment of time, he saw Lawrence's arm reaching for

him, crooked fingers extended like a catcher's mitt. The minute passed like an hour and finally broke. Released from time's grip, Gavin tumbled to the floor, nearly knocking over some clocks. Heart racing, he panted as if he had run a marathon.

"You just wasted a minute of your life not believing me, Gavin." Lawrence's outstretched hand was now a tight fist. He stepped closer and turned his hand palm up to open his fingers. On Lawrence's palm sat a tiny hill of blue, pink, and purple sand. "I am not a myth."

Gavin looked up, gradually recovering, and saw small dots of the same three colors shining in Lawrence's irises. Those eyes bored into his soul and saw all of his time. Shame over his wasted moments and fear of losing more time turned his gaze away.

This was real. And, despite trying to convince himself otherwise, he knew it ever since he had heard those gongs on TV.

Lawrence held tight to the sand again. With his free hand, he withdrew a small purple pouch from an inner pocket of his cloak and opened it. He released the sand from his fist into the pouch's opening. As he pulled the drawstring closed, he cleared his throat to speak. "I thought you were more receptive than my other candidates over the years. That's the first time I've had to do that."

"I actually believed you," Gavin said. "But... I didn't want to."

"I know." The pouch dangled from its string on one of Lawrence's fingers. "You don't believe in yourself either. You think you're not worthy."

Gavin pulled up his knees and hung his head.

The cat came back and plopped on the floor next to him for a bath.

Gavin looked at the Time Stealer. "Why am I here, Lawrence? Why did you pick me?"

"You value time." Lawrence tossed the bag and caught it, then hid it away in his cloak.

“You like your routine, your schedule, and having everything in your life precisely planned so there are no surprises.”

Lawrence was correct, of course. The Time Stealer knew how everyone on Earth spent his or her time. He measured, weighed, calculated every person’s hours, minutes, and seconds.

Gavin concluded, “So, you want to steal my time?”

“No, lad. I want *you* to steal time. I will teach you.” His harshness faded as he spoke and the jovial persona returned. “I think you’re the most promising candidate yet.”

Gavin thought about that. “Fifty years ago, you were looking for someone then?”

“Oh, yes.” Lawrence stepped to the stone table again and looked up toward the top of the hourglass. “My search has been long because it takes a particular kind of person to fill this role. What I do is not easy and should not be taken lightly.” He gestured for Gavin to follow.

Lawrence made his way to the other side of the room, floorboards squeaking under him.

Emerald stretched and yawned, then followed along like a small shadow.

“I can’t and won’t keep you captive, Gavin. That’s not the point here. An apprentice must be willing.”

Gavin stood and brushed himself off. “In that case, I could leave right now.” He put his hands in his pockets and took a few steps, glancing casually at some of the clocks. “What would happen if I did?”

“You would forget everything about this place.” Lawrence turned to face Gavin, spreading his arms, wide sleeves sweeping over nearby clocks. “It would be as if the time you’ve spent here never happened and you would resume life as normal. Then I…” he gathered his hands in his sleeves and his eyes took on a distant look. “I would try again.”

The sorrow in the words and gaze didn’t escape Gavin. A myth had just come true before

his eyes, one he had sometimes pondered as a child and ignored as an adult. He remembered what his mother had said about having an adventure. How he had always wanted to be more like his brother. And it felt good to be considered important, *chosen*, even, despite the fact that he didn't know how Lawrence knew him or why he was chosen. The offer to leave whenever he wanted was like a secret exit, accessible at any moment. Even though he had experienced a portion of Lawrence's power, he didn't feel uneasy. He was curious, just as Lawrence had said. But if ever the alarm bells went off, Gavin could leave. The Time Stealer needed an apprentice and hadn't been fortunate enough to find one who stayed.

“So many failed attempts. So much time wasted,” Lawrence continued. “Even I am bound by time, Gavin. It rules us all.” Head down, he turned away.

Gavin crossed the room and met the other man. They stood at a dark wooden table in the corner—if there could be a corner in a circular room—on which sat an old-fashioned balance scale, made of the same gold as the stand that held the hourglass. The half-moon window of stained glass above it let in colorful strands of light.

He watched as Lawrence placed a palm sized purple cloth bag on one side of the scale. Then, he pulled three more bags from an inner pocket of his cloak and placed them on the table. He rummaged a bit, adjusting the bags and some other utensils. A set of large and small tweezers, a pair of glasses with layers of magnification lenses, a beaker of black sand, various sized measuring spoons. With care, Lawrence opened the drawstring of a bag and dug into its contents with the smallest measuring spoon. With a soft *shhh* sound, each scoop of sand fell into the empty dish of the scale.

Stolen time.

Gavin tried to imagine whom the time had been stolen from and how. Maybe some of it

could be his or from people he knew. But, watching the colorful sand pile up and the scale start to balance, he thought he might have an idea of *why* time was stolen. “Time is our most valuable resource,” he started, testing the waters. “It’s something we don’t truly understand. Everyone has it, but we always want more of it. There’s nothing we can do about the time that has passed or the time that is still to come. We can only use the present moment.”

Lawrence hummed in approval. “A thoughtful if... generic statement. But all of us must begin somewhere.” He tipped the plate with the loose sand into a purple bag and pulled the drawstring closed. “In these bags are all of humanity’s wasted moments. Including yours.” He turned to Gavin, fiddling with the bag some more. His eyes glimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. “You can step outside the boundaries of time and learn how to steal it instead. If you become good enough at time stealing, you’ll replace me.” He held out the bag.

Gavin looked at the purple pouch, then at Lawrence. An adventure that could last a lifetime and beyond. Could he truly leave behind the comfort of his home, family, job, and routine? The well-known boredom of a common life replaced by world travel and the unknown reaches of time.

He took the bag. “I’m in.”

Chapter Five

“So, when do I start?” Gavin asked, giving the purple bag a light toss. “Should I give a two weeks’ notice at the office?”

Lawrence’s eyebrows lifted. “No. This isn’t some ordinary job, lad. Your time with me started the minute you entered the Tower.”

“What?” Gavin’s free hand patted his pockets for his phone. “I can’t just leave my life

behind. I have to tell people. They'll wonder what's happened to me." He took out the device and turned on the screen. It still displayed 3:00 PM. He squinted at it. Turned off the screen and on again. Checked the settings. Peered at Lawrence.

"Life will continue as normal for everyone else. They won't know you're gone."

"I..." Gavin shifted his gaze between the items in his hands. His routine, or stealing time. "Can't I say goodbye to them?"

"I didn't take you for the sentimental type, but I guess I should have suspected it. Your father said no because of his family, too."

"My father?" Gavin's hand slowly lowered the bag to the table.

Lawrence closed his eyes and snapped his fingers. With a sigh, he turned to Gavin. "I thought I found the right kind of person when I chose your father as an apprentice fifty years ago in your accounting of time. He answered his letter, just like you did. The same kind of curiosity and determination brought him up here to talk to me. But he said no. He was just a child and he didn't want to leave his family. They meant more to him than anything else."

Gavin nodded. "He's still like that."

"Time stealing requires detachment, Gavin." Lawrence's hands disappeared into his sleeves as he crossed his arms. "When I found out that Jeremiah had a son very much like him, but without attachments, I thought my search was finally over. But if you're more attached to your life the way it is, you're free to leave."

Gavin gazed around the room, thinking. What did he have to lose by leaving his life behind? Absolutely he would miss his family, but they always supported him and wanted the best for him. They wanted him to find where he fit in and enjoy his life. *Did* he enjoy life? His routine, doing the same things over and over. Back and forth to work and home. The same

people, the same tasks, the same meals. Monotonous, but stable. And there were no risks in such a life.

His eyes settled on an intricate clock across the room. Internal gears of bronze, gold, and silver showed through gaps in the ivory clock face. Each number was a black Roman numeral at different distances from the center; each wedge a different size trimmed in polished wood. The hands were unusual curvy shapes with sharp arrows at the end. It was the kind of piece that one wanted to look at beyond just checking the time. That was the life of the Time Stealer. Intricate and interesting, leaving people wondering about the details.

Unlike the phone in his hand, still frozen in time, the Tower's clocks told him he had been there for three quarters of an hour. It wasn't enough time to make a decision. And who but the Time Stealer would have more time.

"Can I have a day to think about it?"

Lawrence's eyes became stern. "That's not how this works, Gavin. You're either all in or all out."

"Yes, I understand that, but I just need," Gavin made a frustrated sound, gripping his phone tighter than necessary. "Time." He sighed and put the phone away. Running fingers through his hair, he paced a bit. "I want to be all in, but I need the time to make a decision. Can you make this one exception? Please."

Lawrence adjusted his sleeves and scratched the bridge of his nose. "Fine. I like you, Gavin. I think you're the apprentice I've been waiting for. Just this once, I will break the rules for you." He held out his hand, palm up.

Gavin looked from his hand to his face, brow furrowed.

Lawrence curled his fingers in a "hand it over" gesture.

Still confused, Gavin offered his phone.

Lawrence placed his free hand over the phone's screen, pressed the device between his hands, and released. Then, he returned it. "Twenty-four hours. Say your goodbyes and return here. Once you do, you are committing to not a job, but a lifestyle."

"Understood." Gavin took the phone. Without even turning on the screen, the phone displayed a silver hourglass with pastel pink sand in the top chamber. The sand had not started moving yet. "Thank you."

The Time Stealer bowed his head in acknowledgement.

On the drive home, Gavin's mind wandered. Maybe he should talk to his parents in person rather than over the phone. He couldn't quite accept the information about his father and the Time Stealer. A day was definitely not enough time to get into all that history. He went into autopilot toward his parents' house as he continued to guess about the experience his father had.

The next thing Gavin knew, he was knocking on his parents' front door and being admitted with warm hugs. Jeremiah and Graziella had just finished some gardening in the backyard and were relaxing, so it was an easy atmosphere to join in and bring up conversation.

After they talked about the garden's progress, Graziella asked Gavin, "How has your day been, dear? You must not have spent much time at the beach." She glanced at the digital clock on the mantle. 3:25 PM.

"Well..." Gavin wasn't sure if he'd be able to share his experience or if there were more rules he was breaking. He'd go for it and see what happened. "I went to the Tower."

"And?" His mother leaned forward and put her head in her hands, eyes bright.

"The Time Stealer lives there. He's real."

"The Time Stealer?" his father's tone was surprised, but contemplative at the same time.

Jeremiah rubbed his bearded chin, gazing into the distance.

“Yeah, Dad,” Gavin said cautiously. “He... told me about you.”

After a moment, Jeremiah’s voice came, hesitant, “It’s... like a dream I had... not a real memory.”

“What do you mean, dear?” Graziella asked.

“There was a note. That’s why your note sounded familiar, Gavin.” Jeremiah’s tone and expression gained clarity as he told the story. “There was a blank envelope in the mail one day. Nothing on the paper inside either. I was the only one who saw writing on it, but no one believed me. My brothers thought I was making it up to make fun of them.” He laughed and shook his head. “It *really* happened. All this time I thought it was just a dream.”

“It’s possible your memory was erased,” Gavin said, “because you left the Tower.”

“Or at least repressed,” Jeremiah considered. “I’ve never thought about it until your call this morning. It was sort of hazy then, but as soon as you said ‘Time Stealer,’ I can remember it like it was yesterday.”

Both Gavin and Graziella inched forward, interested.

Jeremiah’s bewilderment turned to happy contemplation as he continued. “The note said, ‘Tower on the Beach, Thursday 3pm.’ My brothers didn’t believe it and they told me I’d never be able to get there on my own. We were all interested in the Tower, sure, but it was nuts to try to go alone. We always went as a group. Plus, we had baseball practice after school. I said I was just going to go to the Tower and not go to practice. I took the bus home from school and walked to the beach. We lived a lot closer back then. I was so excited. I wanted to tell the guys about everything I saw. But... I never did say anything. I couldn’t remember it until now.” He shook his head, staring at nothing, eyes moving slightly as if watching a personal movie of his

memories. “It’s so clear to me now. All those clocks, the cat.” Jeremiah broke off with a laugh. “The cat did *not* like me. Maybe I was a little too enthusiastic when I rushed over to her. She ran away from me every time.” He smiled at the memory. “Anyway, when I found out that the Time Stealer wanted me to be his apprentice, I couldn’t stay.”

Gavin nodded. “That’s what he told me. You told him you were too young and you couldn’t leave your family.”

Jeremiah sighed. “Yeah, I felt... special, being chosen. My brothers are older and smarter; I didn’t think I was particularly important since I was just a kid. Yet, the Time Stealer said I was the right person for the job. Since we were interested in the Tower and he made time stealing sound so interesting, I really wanted to accept. But family has always been the most important thing to me. It didn’t feel right to leave.”

“What’s so important about this Time Stealer person?” Graziella asked.

“Mom, don’t you remember the story?” Gavin answered. “You used to say it all the time. Most people do. ‘Do your homework or the Time Stealer will take away your video game time.’ Stuff like that.”

Graziella waved off Gavin’s words. “That’s just something parents say, dear. Like the Sandman or the Tooth Fairy.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too. But he’s real, Mom. I wouldn’t be able to make this up.” Gavin pulled out his phone and showed his parents the hourglass on the screen.

They both stared awestruck at the device.

Jeremiah reached out and Gavin gave him the phone. He pushed the buttons and tapped on the screen, but nothing changed. No matter what direction Jeremiah turned the phone, the pink sand continuously slipped from the top chamber to the bottom. “Fascinating,” he murmured.

“What does this mean?” Graziella asked.

Gavin explained his experience as briefly as he could, including the information Lawrence had shared about his father. “I think I’m supposed to do this,” he concluded, “but I couldn’t see just disappearing off the face of the earth without letting anyone know.”

“Gavin, dear,” Graziella took her son’s hands, “I’m not sure if I can quite believe this story, but... if it’s that important to you, we’ll support you.”

“Even though you’ll go on with life without me?”

Graziella gave her son an unconvinced look. “No matter what this Time Stealer says, there’s no way we can forget you, dear.”

Gavin smiled, appreciative.

Jeremiah continued to watch the hourglass for a moment. Gavin could almost see the gears of his father’s mind churning with unspoken thoughts. Then, he nodded slowly. He reached out to return the phone. “Go, son. And do what I couldn’t.”

Back at home, Gavin stood in the middle of his living room, arms akimbo. Was there anything in his house—in his life—that was worth sticking around for? Puttering around the room and fiddling with his belongings, he couldn’t find anything that struck him as extremely important. Matching tan couch and armchair. Comfy, but often unoccupied. A bookshelf with some of his favorite books from childhood as well as the present and some financial tomes he sometimes had to reference. Two fake plants took up some shelf space, too. The 32-inch TV that drowned out the silence next to the window that showed life passing by. The table next to his chair where he kept the remote, daily newspaper, and a coaster for a beverage. And the coffee table with a stack of files from work.

As he passed by, Gavin flicked out his hand and sent the stack of files sliding to the floor like an avalanche. He'd brought them home earlier in the week and had begun to review them in preparation for an upcoming project, but it wouldn't matter now. Douglas and Marty would have to do the work themselves instead of always putting the work on him. They wouldn't miss him. They'd miss using him to get their stuff done. Probably none of his coworkers would notice his absence.

He hesitated at the bookshelf, reaching for one of several Rex Stout novels in a neat row. The detective novels had inspired him to be classy, professional, dedicated to his work, and organized. And he'd noticed a book from the series on Kassie's desk more than once. Just yesterday, he'd brought her some corrected forms that needed to be filed and spied a worn copy of *Black Orchids* open and face down at the far side of her desk. He'd stammered through his sentences about the forms, distracted by the book. The series was so old fashioned, he hadn't thought anyone read them anymore. Once Kassie had figured out what he was trying to say about the forms and taken them from him with that pretty smile that lit up her eyes, Gavin had wanted to say something about the book. To say anything to her that wasn't about work. To get to know who she was as a person, not just a coworker. But he couldn't. Gavin sighed at the memory and shuffled the novels out of order. He tipped a few larger books onto their spines and relocated the fake plants.

Why was he doing this? To make a mess of his life. To leave a mark. To give the appearance that his life was busier and more involved than it really was. "I just want my life to mean something," he prayed as he sat at his desk. "I think this is the way to do it." Every detail was falling into place in a way that told him to go for it, so he wasn't going to back out now. After a few more moments of contemplation, Gavin felt at peace and more confident in his

decision. Something important was going to come from apprenticing with the Time Stealer. He just knew it. And it was exciting to find out what that would be.

After disorganizing the home office, Gavin continued to the opposite side of the house, leaving a few belongings in random places. He didn't know if he would ever come back to this house. He didn't know what a life of time stealing would really be like. But it had to be better than what he was leaving behind. If he ever did return, the mess would remind him that he'd chosen the more exciting option. Maybe he'd pack a few clothes and toiletries. He wasn't sure if he would need them, but better safe than sorry. Lawrence lived in the Tower as his home, but traveled to steal time. What would that entail?

In his bedroom, Gavin dug in the back of the closet for a small rolling suitcase and laid it open on his bed. He wondered how Lawrence traveled all over the world without anyone noticing his presence. Was it something like a ride on a magic carpet, or an instantaneous teleportation? How did he get food and take care of himself? And the cat? So many questions that he hoped to answer soon. There came a lightness to Gavin's steps and he started humming a made-up tune as he picked out the things he wanted to bring. He was preparing for an adventure.

When his usual dinner time at 6:30 PM rolled around, Gavin had obliterated his normal routine. He had completely rearranged the furniture in every room of the house and even moved some things to different rooms. The research books he kept in his home office were under the sink in the bathroom. The bedside lamp now sat on the couch, and that couch was in the kitchen. Gavin lounged on the couch with the TV up louder than normal as an action movie played and he waited for a cake to bake in the oven. He hadn't cleaned up the utensils from his baking endeavor, and he didn't plan to eat anything healthy before indulging in a piece of the chocolate cake. He even broke out the bottle of Cabernet he'd gotten from a coworker for his birthday. Not

being much of a drinker, he was saving it for a special occasion.

After his little celebration, Gavin turned off the TV, the movie also finished. Something about the main character reminded him of a childhood friend who had wanted to become a cop. As he pattered around the kitchen, intentionally not cleaning up as much as he should have, Gavin fiddled with his phone. Did Josh have the same number? Would Josh even remember him? It had been probably twelve or thirteen years since they last saw each other when Josh moved to another town the summer before starting high school. They had connected over their interest in detectives. Josh knew from a young age he'd wanted to be a cop while Gavin had spent most of his childhood unsure what kind of job would suit him. On the last day they'd seen each other, they had exchanged numbers so they could stay in contact.

Gavin couldn't figure out how to bypass the hourglass on his phone's screen to get to the features. He leaned on the counter and tried tapping different spots on the screen, pushing the power and volume buttons. The pink sand continued to flow undisturbed. Then, with a flash of color, the home screen appeared. Gavin's eyebrows lifted. He didn't know what he'd done to get through, but shrugged it off and continued. Since meeting the Time Stealer, weird occurrences didn't seem so weird anymore.

Gavin's thumb automatically scrolled through his contacts, but he slowed down. Other than family, there were few people on the list whom he contacted frequently. Kassie, Marty, and his boss Rick from the office. Fred and Erica, the elderly couple next door. He bypassed several names he couldn't even recall. Probably some of them were leftovers from high school and college, people a lot like Josh whom he hadn't kept in contact with.

Before Gavin knew what he wanted to say, the phone was ringing Josh's number. He had to think of a reason for calling. As the line rang, he remembered it was the character in the movie

that made him think of Josh.

“Sargent Griffin.”

“Hey, Josh. Not sure you remember me. It’s Gavin Alvarez. It’s been a while since we last talked.”

“Gavin? Yeah, man, I remember you,” Josh laughed incredulously. “What’s it been, like... fifteen years?”

“Probably.”

“What’s the occasion?”

Gavin described the movie and how the main character reminded him of Josh. They talked about Josh’s career in the police department and that he’d recently gotten married. Gavin tried to make his job as an accountant sound exciting, but it wasn’t easy. The more they talked about life in general, the easier it was to let the conversation flow. Josh brought up memories from middle school and the dumb stuff they had gotten into. Gavin laughed until it hurt his stomach.

“Hey, I have to get going,” Josh said. “But we should meet up sometime.”

Gavin hesitated. “Y-Yeah, that’ll be great.”

“My schedule’s off right now since I’m covering for someone who’s out sick, but when I have a chance, I’ll call you back?”

“Sure thing. It’s been great talking to you again.”

“Same here, man. Good night.”

Gavin ended the call and the screen once again showed him the silver hourglass. Less than half of the sand had fallen through.

It was that easy to make connections. Just pick up the phone and contact someone who

was on his mind. He didn't have to let his life be as boring as it was. But it didn't matter now. Everyone would forget about Gavin's existence in fifteen hours. And he felt peace about it. Josh would forget the conversation they'd just had. Douglas and Marty would have a different person on their project team. He'd never talk to Kassie or entertain the idea of asking her out. Like Lawrence had said, life would go on as normal for everyone else. He had never been good at keeping in touch anyway, hence the fifteen years since he had last spoken to Josh. It would be as if Gavin had never existed in the first place. Time stealing required detachment, so he would detach. He was going to steal time.

Chapter Six

Just before 3PM on Sunday, Gavin again stood on the beach looking up at the Tower. This time, he held his suitcase, and he was ready for an adventure.

He took out his phone and looked at the silver hourglass. He could count the number of grains of pale pink sand still remaining in the top. When the last grain had fallen through, he put it away and reached for the door.

The gongs didn't sound this time when he touched the door handle. The door creaked slowly behind him again and clicked closed. There was the smell of something cooking. An array of food smells that culminated into a feeling of warmth and comfort. It was as if he was welcomed home.

Gavin rested his suitcase against the wall and made his way to the dining area to the left of the door. There, Lawrence stirred a pot on a small stove. Gavin didn't remember seeing the stove before. It was a shallow oven with two burners on top. Above Lawrence's head was a dark wooden cabinet with one door and a shiny golden doorknob. Emerald the cat sat between the

stove and the table with dishes of food and water.

“Smells great,” Gavin greeted.

“Beef stew,” Lawrence replied. “You’re just in time. Yet again.” He produced two bowls from the cabinet over his head and ladled stew into each bowl.

Gavin accepted the dark green ceramic bowl and a metal spoon and sat at the table. He helped himself to a glass of water from the pitcher already on the table. When Lawrence sat across from him, Gavin heard a slight scraping sound and looked up at the stove area again. With a swivel, it was hidden from view behind a large silver vertical rectangular box with green digital numbers on the display area toward the top. Perhaps that was how Lawrence had all the necessary accoutrements within the Tower to make it his home. What other interesting features might be hidden behind the clocks? Gavin hoped to find out.

Lawrence folded his hands in front of him and bowed his head, silent for a moment. Gavin waited politely for his host to start eating. For another wordless moment, there was only the scrape of spoons against bowls. Then, Gavin said, “I spoke to my father.”

“Oh, really?” Lawrence said, eyebrows raised. “Did you get some answers to your questions?”

“I did, actually. I found out that he truly wanted to be your apprentice and since he couldn’t, I should.”

Lawrence nodded once. “Excellent. Then we will be able to start as soon as we’re finished with our meal.”

Emerald jumped up on the table and sat next to Gavin’s bowl. He could hear the cat purring, its eyes watching him gently. Gavin smiled, remembering what his father had said about meeting Lawrence’s cat. Was this the same one? He held out his hand and the cat accepted his

attention. “Tell me about the cat,” he said to Lawrence.

“Emerald. She is my companion and helps during the missions.” Lawrence pulled a cloth napkin from his sleeve and dabbed at his mouth. “Some cats chase mice. Emerald chases time wasters.”

“How does she know which people to chase?”

“She knows.” Lawrence smiled. He gestured to Emerald and she jumped down from the table to curl up at his feet.

“So there are things you just *know*... as the Time Stealer?” Gavin gathered the last bites of stew onto his spoon. “Without asking questions or doing research? Like how you knew me before I got your letter.”

“It comes with the territory, Gavin. All in due time.”

Gavin finished the last of the stew. “But I just want to know how all this,” he gestured at the room around them with his spoon, “happens. Is it magic or what?”

“Magic, magic!” Lawrence slammed a hand on the table, rattling the utensils. “All anyone believes in these days is *magic!*” He continued to mutter under his breath.

Taking note of the reprimand, Gavin quietly placed the spoon in the empty bowl then pushed them aside. He clasped his hands in his lap and stayed very still.

Lawrence grumbled once more and stood, the chair scraping noisily behind him. “You will learn what is real and true when you’re supposed to learn it, Gavin. Magic is real, but it is not how I operate.” Hands flat on the table, he held Gavin’s gaze for a moment. Within the opalescent stare, Gavin again understood that this man had a unique power.

“Now,” Lawrence’s voice broke the overwhelming feeling, “let’s get started.”

Gavin blinked to regain his bearings and stood, steadying himself with a hand on the back

of the chair. “Shouldn’t we clean up first?”

“When it’s time to clean, we’ll clean.” With a wave of his hand and the fluttering of fabric as his sleeve followed, Lawrence led the way up the stairs. “There is a time for everything, Gavin Alvarez, and the sooner you understand that, the sooner you will understand the meaning and importance of this job.”

Gavin quickened his pace to follow. Emerald ran up the stairs as well.

Back in the room at the top of the Tower, Gavin again marveled at the giant hourglass. Though a day had passed, the device appeared unchanged, and the tan sand continued in a steady stream through the glass.

“Over here.” Lawrence patted Gavin’s shoulder.

Gavin turned to the wall of clocks.

Lawrence reached as high as he could for the tiny knob on the door of a cuckoo clock. Opening the door revealed not a little bird to announce the time but a roll of beige cloth. Lawrence continued to pull until the cloth stretched across the length of the wall where the doorknob lined up with a hole on another wooden clock and clicked into place. Then, the cloth unfurled to the floor displaying a Eurocentric world map. The silver threads of the country borders and dots representing major cities shimmered with the same iridescence as Lawrence’s eyes. In seemingly every inch of the inhabited world flashed tiny dots of color. Blue, pink, purple, black, white, and yellow. The dots were highly concentrated in some areas and sparse in others.

“Fascinating,” Gavin whispered. He reached out, but wasn’t sure if he should touch the map, so he lowered his hand. He continued looking, trying to figure out what everything might mean. “This is where people are wasting time.”

“Precisely. Everyone in the world wastes time and this map documents it, past, present, and future.”

Gavin considered this and crossed his arms. “So, it’s more than just world travel, but time travel as well?”

Lawrence stroked his beard a moment, then said, “More or less, that is true. Time here does not pass in the same way it did for you before you entered the Tower.”

“Alright. What’s different about it?”

“Perception, mostly. This conversation may feel like a few minutes, but out there,” he gestured grandly in the vague direction of the outdoors, “it could be years, or even decades.”

Gavin stepped closer to peruse the map some more. “And that’s how it’ll seem like nothing is different for the people in my life? My time is different from theirs.”

Lawrence’s eyes sparkled as if revealing a secret. “I think you’re getting the hang of it.”

“Am I on the map?” Gavin asked, turning his attention to New England.

Lawrence pointed to three small icons in what seemed to be an area off the map. Two hourglasses, one dark green the other dark blue, and a blue-gray pawprint. They appeared matte instead of the sparkle of other colors.

“We’re not in Rhode Island anymore?”

Lawrence shrugged. “The Tower is not bound by time or place.”

“How convenient.” Gavin shook his head, deciding he wasn’t going to try to figure it out just yet. “Alright, what else is happening on the map?”

“You tell me.” Lawrence stepped back, one hand combing through his beard.

Gavin regarded the Time Stealer, then focused on the map again. He took his time looking at the details and forming his guess. “If the dots are where people are wasting time—

pretty much everywhere in the world—then the colors must represent *how* they are wasting their time. Though, I don't know what that means.”

Lawrence clapped his hands once. “You've got the right idea, lad.”

“Then we just choose a place and go there.”

“Well,” Lawrence paced to the opposite side of the map, “some locations are more urgent than others.”

“Where there are different colors and larger quantities.”

“Excellent!” Lawrence gave another clap and smiled at Gavin. “Already, you're ahead of any other apprentice.”

Even Emerald gave her approval with a meow as she weaved around Gavin's legs.

Gavin smiled back. “So, where will we go first?”

Chapter Seven

After some discussion of how to choose the best place for a mission—identifying a specific location, person, and type of sand—Lawrence revealed the apparatus they would need to get there. He placed a sphere of frosted glass in Gavin's palm. It was about two inches in diameter and held a dark wooden hourglass within. A hill of red sand sat in the bottom chamber.

“This is how we travel?” Gavin asked, examining the sphere.

“Flip it over,” Lawrence demonstrated with an empty hand, “and when the sand shifts down, we'll be in the location we chose on the map.”

“That shouldn't take too long. It's a small hourglass.” Gavin began to turn the sphere.

“No! Not ye—” Lawrence couldn't finish his protest as the pair of men and the cat appeared in the hallway of an office building. Lawrence sighed and shook his head.

Getting his bearings, Gavin shifted in the narrow space to avoid a man striding determinedly down the hall. The man should have bumped into him, but Gavin didn't even feel the expected rush of air at the man's pace. "Um..." Gavin turned to look at the man who was busy sorting papers in an open manilla folder as he walked. He looked back at Lawrence, eyes wide. "Did that man just walk right through me?" Gavin asked, hiking a thumb over his shoulder.

"People can't see us when we're on a mission."

"Ah. That... makes sense. I guess." He looked at the sphere. A slightly spooky tremor passed through him. No longer bound by time or place, there was a lot to learn and get used to about time stealing. "I shouldn't have jumped in without waiting for you."

"Indeed." Lawrence began to rummage through the pockets inside his cloak. "I don't even know where we are because we hadn't confirmed the location. This probably is not Japan."

"I'm sorry." Gavin fiddled with the sphere, being careful not to flip it. "Is there a way to go back?"

"Not until we have finished the mission." He gestured for the sphere and Gavin complied. Lawrence hid the device in a pocket and from a different pocket withdrew a smaller version of the map in the Tower. "Ah! Alright. We're somewhere in the south of France." He rolled up the map and put it away. "Let's get going. Are you wearing comfortable shoes?"

Gavin looked at his plain gray sneakers. He had decided on comfort for his whole outfit of jeans and a lightweight long-sleeved off-white shirt with thin blue stripes. "Yes. Why?"

Lawrence just smiled and began to walk down the hallway. Emerald followed along.

The office building was rather bland; gray walls and carpet, minimal décor and furnishings. Business as usual, Gavin thought. As they passed some enclosed offices, the color of

the employees showed in the pictures they hung on their doors and windows, as well as small plants and bookshelves. Gavin tried not to dwell on taking in the details, though he wanted to. He had a job to do and a skill to learn; exploring would come later.

“Here we are.” Lawrence stopped in the entryway of an accounting department.

There were six employees, four men and two women, seated at a block of cubicles. The same gray of the hallway continued into the large room, but the personal touches were lacking for all of them except one woman. She had decorated her cubicle with pictures of three small children—presumably hers—and some crayon drawings, probably made by those children. Her desk supplies featured numerous bright colors whereas her colleagues had chosen supplies with neutral colors. She snapped a piece of gum between her teeth while she tapped away at her keyboard, nails also painted in bright colors. She reminded Gavin of Tiffany back at the office. A flighty, distracting woman who never did her own work and spent the days gossiping about everyone in the office. He assumed they would be stealing time from this woman. Maybe she spent her workday distracted by the pictures or was a gossip like Tiffany and never got any work done. Or maybe she was more colorful than this job afforded and daydreamed about quitting.

“Do you see the colors?” Lawrence asked. He was looking at one of the men at the opposite end of the cubicle clump.

“Wow,” Gavin drew out the syllable, eyebrows lifting in surprise. Surrounding the man was a mist of blue, purple, and white. The colors gave the appearance that the man was sitting in a cloud. He wore a dark gray herringbone suit in need of ironing. His eyes held little life as he blinked at his computer screen. His desk inbox was full of paperwork, but he had not started on it the way his coworkers had. The other five people were working at their own paces to get their respective jobs done, but this man had yet to start working. It was nearly noon according to the

clock in the room.

Putting his head in his hand, the man sighed and clicked on the mouse with the other hand. Invisible to him, Emerald jumped on his desk and swished her tail over his paperwork.

“You can see it?” Lawrence asked again.

“Yes.”

“Excellent!” Lawrence snapped his fingers and smiled.

“It’s... what is it?”

“Time.”

Gavin chuckled, “That makes sense.”

“I’m sure you can guess, only we can see it. And the colors each have a meaning.”

Gavin nodded as he took in the information. Crossing his arms, he surveyed the room. None of the other people had a cloud around them, but surely they wasted time, too? Back at the Tower, they’d talked about how the map combined the past, present, and future of wasted time. But when deciding where to go and what to collect, they had to be more specific. In that discussion, they had narrowed down the options to see the details of individuals. Lawrence had told him there was a man in France who was lazy, then poked at the map exactly on France where there was a high concentration of white. “White is laziness?” he asked.

“Any sort of idleness in general, yes. Someone is not doing what they should be doing, as you can see.” Lawrence gestured to the man.

Gavin circled around to see what was on the man’s computer screen. Instead of addressing the tasks he had for the day, the man was playing Solitaire. “How about the blue and purple?”

“Worries and indecisiveness.”

Gavin nodded as he processed the information. There weren't too many colors, so it would be easy to remember their meanings. "Alright. How do we steal his time?"

"Well, it's a gift. There's no magic wand or spell to cast. I just have this ability. And you will, too, if you're meant to have it."

Gavin narrowed his eyes in thought. Would he have the ability? What would it feel like if he did? He saved his questions and focused on the moment.

"I just concentrate on the time and open my hand." With a deep breath, Lawrence extended his hand toward the man for a moment that passed like five seconds and five hours all at once. The cloud dissipated during that moment. When Lawrence closed his hand, the cloud vanished.

"Some days, the minutes feel like hours," the man said more to himself than to any of the people in the room. It startled Gavin to hear the sentence in English, though he knew they were in France. The man yawned and stretched in his chair.

Emerald jumped from her perch and settled at Gavin's feet.

Lawrence stepped closer to Gavin and showed him the sand in his hand. Gavin remembered the tiny hill of blue, pink, and purple sand that Lawrence had stolen from him. This hill of sand was much more substantial, covering Lawrence's palm. Mostly white, there were touches of blue and purple grains throughout and it stood about three inches tall. Lawrence's free hand reached into his cloak and withdrew an empty purple pouch. He poured the sand into it without spilling one grain.

"What happens to him now?" Gavin asked.

Lawrence pulled the drawstring to close the pouch. "He'll get fired."

"That's the lesson he's supposed to learn?" Gavin followed as Lawrence headed out of

the room.

“He’s been like this for weeks. Clocking in, but not working, passing his work to everyone else.”

Gavin slowed to a stop in the middle of the hallway as he tried to process.

Lawrence looked back at him. “He does better at the next job. Trust me.”

“So... why the sand?”

“In time, you will see.”

Gavin shook his head with a smile. He should’ve guessed that answer.

“Now,” Lawrence gestured for Gavin to follow. “On to the next location.” He continued down the gray hallway. Emerald bounded ahead at first, but slowed down and circled back to them. She sat at their feet, but her tail flicked impatiently.

Then, Lawrence withdrew the travel sphere. “Maybe now you’ll let me explain further, hmm?” he chided with a glint in his eye. “Red sand is the only kind that allows travel. When you flip the sphere, all of the sand descends at once. It does not act like a normal hourglass.”

Gavin nodded. “Yes, I figured out that part when I didn’t pay attention the first time.”

“Good! You’ve learned something!” The elder laughed. “Onwards.” He flipped the travel sphere and the trio appeared in a bustling open-air Asian market. “Now, *this* is where we had agreed to go.”

Gavin looked around as they walked down the pathway and remembered the map again. Lawrence had mentioned that all of the colors were present in the marketplace of a small suburban town in Japan. It would be a good place to start because he would get to see how stealing works and they’d be able to collect all the colors of sand in one location. As Gavin observed the people buying, selling, and browsing in the market, he didn’t see any clouds of time

surrounding any of the people. “Where are the colors?”

“Not here yet, but they will be.” Lawrence picked up Emerald and held her like a loaf of bread. “This is where Emerald gets to shine... no pun intended.” Lawrence smiled and scratched under the cat’s chin. Her eyes closed and she purred.

“But if no one can see us,” Gavin pondered, not bothering to move out of the way of some children chasing each other, “how does she help?”

“Well, the people will be able to see her when I tell her to hunt for time.”

“How does that work, exactly?”

Lawrence opened his mouth to answer, but closed it and furrowed his brow. He looked at the cat and the cat looked at him. “I don’t know.” He shrugged. “It seems there are things that even I still don’t understand after all these years.” He led the way to the side of the road between two stands selling fruit. “Go hunt,” he told Emerald and she sprang into action.

The Russian Blue snatched a melon from one of the stands and ran down the street. The petite middle-aged woman behind the stand noticed right away and jumped up to chase the cat, shouting at her to stop. Along the way, other people dodged out of the way or tried to help the woman. Emerald left the melon at another stand in favor of grabbing a shiny piece of jewelry, upsetting yet another stand owner and continuing the chase. She tried this one more time before changing her tactic to causing general upset among the sellers and buyers.

The goods sold at the stands were important to the sellers. They reflected the sellers’ hard work and dedication to a craft or skill that could benefit others in need. The first woman in particular had a child in the hospital and she needed every cent of the day’s sales to make a payment on the bill. Wait a minute, Gavin thought to himself, how could he possibly know that? These were complete strangers and yet facts about them and their lives came to him as he

watched the scene unfold. As the people chased Emerald and neglected their tasks or became angry at the situation, a cloud of colors formed over the marketplace. Gavin could understand that many of them were upset at the disruption to their day. Some of them hated cats. And some people thought the whole thing was ridiculous and questioned if they should return to this market again. He glanced at Lawrence. Should he tell the older man about these thoughts?

Lawrence appeared unaffected by the situation; an amused look on his face, and his stance relaxed. After another moment, Lawrence clapped twice and Emerald ran back to him. She rubbed against his legs, then sat down and licked her paw.

The people at the market remained confused for several more minutes about what had happened. Were any of their wares missing? Had the cat just vanished into thin air? What an odd day! They tried to return to their respective places little by little.

Lawrence took a few steps closer, looking up at the cloud. "Hold onto these for me." He held out several purple pouches.

Gavin took them.

Lawrence extended his hand palm up this time. The cloud began to descend like a mini colorful tornado and accumulated quickly into Lawrence's hand.

Gavin opened one of the purple pouches and reached out to help.

"Ah, thank you, lad. Good thinking ahead." Lawrence tilted his hand toward the open pouch. The sand then began to waterfall from his hand into the pouch.

Gavin wasn't sure how much each pouch could hold or how much sand there would be, so he watched carefully. They worked together to fill over one hundred pouches while Emerald chased a butterfly. Gavin had the strange sensation that he was aging with each bag that filled.

With a tug on the drawstring, the last grains of sand were contained in pouch number one

hundred seven. Gavin passed it to Lawrence who stowed all of them in the pockets of his cloak. “Is this typical?” he asked, following Lawrence’s lead away from the marketplace.

“Oh yes. When people find their day disrupted by unexpected circumstances, it tends to lead to them wasting a lot of time. And the more people involved, the more overall time wasted since it affects each of their lives in a different manner.” They stopped beyond the row of stalls where they had started the mission.

“But isn’t that just how life is? Things happen randomly that are beyond our control. Those people didn’t know that Emerald was going to show up.”

“It all depends on how each individual reacts.” Lawrence withdrew the map again.

Gavin recalled the thoughts that came to him as he watched the scene. “Many of them were angry.”

Lawrence nodded. “And they’ll learn to expect the unexpected and think about how they want to respond rather than reacting on impulse.” Lawrence lowered the map and looked at Gavin. “Sometimes people get upset about things for no reason. There are things that we can’t control and yet we so desperately want to.” The Time Stealer’s gaze grew distant. His eyebrows came together and he looked at the ground, deep in thought. Then, he shook his head and returned his attention to the map.

Gavin thought about that. He could definitely see evidence of it in his own life. As he pondered about his own choices and whether or not he had a need for control, Emerald began to rub against Gavin’s legs and purr loudly. He squatted to pet her. “Lawrence, I…”

“Yes, lad?” Lawrence didn’t look up from the map.

“I could… hear things about the people. Well, not really *hear*, per se. It was like I *knew* things about them that I couldn’t possibly know.” He paused. Emerald stopped in front of him

and put her paws on his knee. He picked her up and stood. “Is that what you meant about it being part of the job?”

Lawrence nodded. “You have to know things about the people the time is coming from.”

“That the Frenchman wasn’t doing his job properly and the people in the market were angry. These are the mistakes they don’t realize they’re making in the moment, but they will look back on them and realize they learned a lesson that changes the course of their futures.”

The Time Stealer looked at his apprentice with eyebrows raised. “Exactly, lad. All of us have to understand the power of time. That how we use it can change the future.”

“Because we always wish for more time than we have, or that we had done something differently in the past.”

Lawrence shook the baffled look from his face. “There’s something different about you, Gavin.” He gestured at the younger man with the map. “We have one more place to go before we return to the Tower.”

“Alright.” Gavin took a moment to look past the marketplace to the mountains beyond. His fingers glided across Emerald’s soft fur as his mind wandered. Emmett had always wanted to visit Japan and hike the mountains, learn about the historical sights. And here he was looking at them and his brother had yet to visit the country. “He’d be jealous right now,” he said to himself with a wistful smile.

“What’s that?” Lawrence rolled up the map and put it away.

“Just thinking about my brother.” He explained Emmett’s job and some of the locations Gavin knew his brother had on his travel wishlist. “I’ve never been too inclined to travel, but sometimes I wished he’d ask me to go with, you know? Just to hang out.”

“Bonds are forged by time together. You didn’t have enough time with your brother.”

“Yeah, I feel like that sometimes. We have such different interests that there wasn’t much to bond over.” Again, Gavin felt much older than he really was. He sighed, lost in thought.

Lawrence regarded him with an unclear expression. “We must move on to the next location.” He retrieved the travel sphere.

Before Gavin could agree, they had arrived. It was a girls’ school in rural Venezuela. The teacher spoke with a serious, yet engaging tone and the girls listened intently, sometimes writing in their notebooks. All except one. Gavin immediately noticed the thick cloud of white, blue, purple, and a little bit of black surrounding one little girl at the back of the room.

“Tell me about her,” Lawrence said. He held Emerald and stepped across the room to stand behind the girl’s chair.

“Her name is Yazmin.” The thoughts came to Gavin quickly. “She’s twelve. She doesn’t like going to school because she thinks she’s not smart. Her best friend Sara keeps bringing her. Sara’s the smart one and she’s already talking about university. Yazmin thinks that’s ridiculous. She thinks she’s going to end up just like her dead-beat dad. It’s impossible to get out of her situation and find a better life. Especially considering the corruption in the government.”

The facts about Yazmin tugged at Gavin’s heart. He wished he could give her hope and help her with her education if she was struggling to learn. He wanted to show her that school wasn’t a waste of time and that good effort was a step in the right direction. Everyone started with nothing and had to work hard to get to where and what they wanted to be. The more he learned about valuing time and how the Time Stealer was supposed to teach others, the more Gavin wished there was a better way to help people than letting them make mistakes and lose their precious moments. If Lawrence stole time from Yazmin, she might never learn how valuable her time at school was and how it could help her in the future. She was so set on a

trajectory she imagined for herself that she couldn't see a way out. Letting her waste this moment wasn't going to help her change her future.

Lawrence held out a purple pouch. "Your turn."

Gavin instinctively reached for the pouch, but paused, fingers curling around air. "I can't steal from her, Lawrence. She needs to have hope, not have her time stolen."

"Most people learn the hard way, Gavin. If she doesn't value her time when she's young, she'll either learn the lesson or keep making the same mistake. It's the way people are." He gestured with the pouch.

Gavin sighed. On the one hand, he didn't understand how Lawrence could be so cold. On the other, he remembered he was supposed to detach. They were here to make sure people learned from their mistakes, valued their time, and changed their futures. He pushed away the information about Yazmin and took the pouch. "What do I do?"

"Hold out your hand and concentrate. Think about time."

Gavin took a step back and looked at Yazmin's back. He didn't know what he was doing or if he'd be successful at stealing from her. He didn't *want* to steal from her. He told himself to detach. This was just a job and the girl would learn from it. She would lose this time at school and suffer the consequences of not paying attention. It would lead to her either learning from the mistake and changing in a positive way, or not learning from this moment and continuing in the path she already imagined for herself.

With a deep breath, Gavin held out his hand toward her. He thought about Yazmin's boredom and laziness. Her doubts about her future. And faintly, there was a bit of revenge in her. The minutes passed like hours again and Gavin closed his hand. In the last second, he hoped that it wouldn't work.

His fingers closed on something with a gritty texture. He turned his fist palm up and opened his hand. Shock took his expression as he saw a hill of sand on his palm. He'd stolen time. But the cloud around Yazmin remained as a haze of white; he hadn't captured *all* of her time.

"Excellent!" Lawrence stepped closer to get a better look. Emerald sat across his shoulders and gazed at Gavin, contentment in her yellow-green eyes. "Pack it up and we'll head home."

Gavin poured the sand into the purple pouch. "But there's still a cloud," he said as Lawrence put the pouch into a pocket. "I didn't steal everything from her."

"The first time is the most difficult."

"Shouldn't I try again?"

Lawrence brushed down his beard as he looked at Yazmin and back, his expression unreadable. "We'll let this one go," he said softly. Emerald tilted her head, continuing to give Gavin that contented look.

In an instant, they were back in the top room of the Tower. Gavin felt weary. He thought they must have been gone for an incredibly long time, but the clocks told him it had been only a few hours. He remembered that they had been hopping around in time as well as different locations. The map was gone and Lawrence walked to the table with the golden scale.

Gavin had experienced and learned so much that his mind was overwhelmed and he could use a break. He wondered if there would be time to rest, or at least wash up and relax a bit. But Lawrence just kept going. Emerald jumped off the Time Stealer's shoulder and disappeared among the clocks.

"Do you have a bathroom?" Gavin asked.

“Of course.” Lawrence turned and gestured as he explained, “Downstairs, behind the staircase. There’s a black and gold art deco clock. Pull the lever on the nine.”

Gavin tilted his head at the description, trying to picture it, but shrugged and followed the directions. Sure enough, he found an art deco clock under the stairs amid the small bedroom area. The entire numeral nine was the lever and pulling it made a door swing inward. Inward to where, he wasn’t quite sure. He figured it was like the stove area earlier; things were hidden in the clock covered walls of the Tower.

Gavin made use of the surprisingly spacious bathroom. As he dried his hands on a dark green towel, he did a double take in the mirror. It looked like his father was looking back at him. Gavin touched the scruff on his cheeks. No, it was definitely him. But he now had the beginnings of a black beard on his face, just like his father. And maybe his hair was a bit longer, too. Just how *much* time had passed on that mission?

“Come along, lad,” he heard Lawrence’s voice from the top of the stairs. “Time waits for no man.”

Chapter Eight

“Don’t you ever sleep?” Gavin asked as he reached the top of the stairs.

“There is a time for sleep and that time is not now.”

“But we were on that mission for hours and hours. Aren’t you tired?”

“Hours?” Lawrence laughed loudly as the pair met by the stone table again. “That wasn’t hours, lad. That was about five years in your accounting of time.”

“Five years?!” The room seemed to spin and Gavin grabbed the edge of the table as an anchor. “How was that five years?” He remembered he’d felt like he was aging while on the

mission, but he hadn't thought it was literal; just his mind trying to interpret the time spent.

"Everything we do in this life takes time, lad." Lawrence provided a supportive arm around Gavin's shoulders. "Time is a perception of our reality. Though we are bound within it, we have different ways of interpreting it."

"Okay. I'll pretend that makes sense."

Lawrence smiled. "It was the same for me when I first started and it's been the same for all of my apprentices. The concept of time as you know it has changed. You no longer belong to that world outside," he motioned vaguely toward the stained-glass window. "For us on the mission, it seemed like a few hours. But in the life you left behind, five years have passed."

Gavin took a deep breath, trying to adjust his concept of time in light of this new life. The concept distanced himself from everything he had ever known. The world outside the Tower had moved on without him. The places on the map that he had visited had been in different times as well, not necessarily the present as he had always understood it. Gavin had a vague sense that it was like straddling time and eternity. That while he was experiencing things in time-bound reality, some element of the timeless eternal was having a say in the actions as well. Whatever it was, it was fascinating and confusing. He scratched his cheek in thought. It explained the beard at least. Would it eventually become long and gray like his mentor's?

Lawrence patted his shoulder. "You're doing just fine, Gavin. You're handling it far better than any other apprentice I've trained so far." He stepped aside and polished a clock face with his sleeve. "Ninety-nine years ago, Zelia Winchester ran out of this room when I told her that her first mission took eight years. A pretty standard reaction. The fact that you're *not* running is unusual."

Gavin turned to face the older man. "No, I'm not going to run. I think I'm here for a

reason. Not sure what that reason is, but,” he shrugged without finishing his thought.

Lawrence smiled, appreciative. “Ah! I have something for you.” He weaved through the clocks and opened a drawer concealed by a mantel clock. After rummaging a bit, he withdrew a swath of cloth and returned, opening the garment and holding it out to Gavin. “Navy seems like the right color for you.”

It was just like the hunter green cloak Lawrence wore with the long sleeves and bottomless pockets, but no signs of wear and age. Gavin’s eyebrows lifted and a baffled laugh escaped him. “I didn’t realize there would be a uniform.”

“It goes with the myth.” Lawrence’s eyes shone with mirth. He gestured with the fabric for Gavin to put it on.

Gavin did so. The weight of the fabric was like a feather and an anvil at the same time. An overwhelming feeling of responsibility washed over him. If he was good at stealing time, this would be his life for countless years in this crevice between time and eternity. Yet, in the same way the cloak fit perfectly, Gavin thought the new life might just fit him perfectly as well. He tugged on the lapels, making the last adjustments, and tied the matching belt around his waist.

Lawrence brushed off nonexistent fuzz from Gavin’s shoulders and had a proud, grandfatherly look on his face. “Come, come!” He gestured for Gavin to follow. “No time to waste, lad.”

Gavin followed to the table again. “Alright, I know you’re going to say ‘there’s a time for everything,’ and now that I have to cope with the concept that time flows differently for us, I’m just curious.” The extra fabric of the cloak took some getting used to and he nearly tripped over it. “How *do* you have time for everything? The simple things like cleaning and eating.”

Lawrence pulled full purple pouches from his pockets and placed them in an ever-

growing pile on the table. “I just make it up as I go along.”

Gavin scoffed. “You’re kidding.”

Lawrence shook his head. “No.” He looked at Gavin. There was less of a shine to his opal eyes. “I have all the time I could ever want.” He gestured to the hourglass. “It’s mine to do with what I will.”

Gavin watched the sand slip through the hourglass. The top never seemed to empty and the bottom never seemed to fill. The supply of sand had the potential to be endless. Gavin wondered if the hourglass *could* empty. If it would eventually belong to him. He spoke softly, “Are you ever going to... run out?”

“Of course.” Lawrence had finished piling the pouches and began to arrange the utensils on the table. “I am dying, Gavin. That’s why you’re here.”

Gavin swallowed hard. Questions welled up again. How long did he have left? What would happen when the Time Stealer died? Couldn’t he just collect more time? Would Gavin even be able to replace him? How would that work exactly? Did Gavin have his own hourglass like the Time Stealer myth said? So many questions, and Gavin couldn’t voice any of them. He didn’t think it was the right moment. He watched Lawrence scoop sand out of a bag and pour it on the scale until the sides were even. With the tweezers, he picked out black grains and added them to the beaker on the table.

After a moment, Lawrence had to put on the glasses with layers of magnification. He continued to pick out different colored grains of sand and collect each color in a separate container. Gavin didn’t understand the purpose of what Lawrence was doing, but he picked up another pair of tweezers and helped. It took both no time at all and a span of several days for the pair to get through the entire pile of pouches and sort all the colors of sand.

Time continued to pass as Gavin followed Lawrence's lead around the Tower, doing various domestic chores, including cleaning up after the meal they'd eaten earlier, and time-related tasks: sorting sand, adding sand to the hourglass, checking the map, and going on more missions. Even Emerald lived her life outside of the missions in a similar manner. She could be found lounging, playing, eating, or grooming as she saw necessary.

They slept when it was time to sleep. The bed under the stairs was for Gavin. Lawrence slept on a cot between the bedroom and dining areas. Gavin took the time to empty his suitcase and sort his belongings into one of the drawers hidden behind a clock. He washed up, getting used to the growing beard on his face, and donned his usual sleeping attire. Then, he hung the cloak, already showing minor wear, on a hook under the stairs. Moonlight streamed through the stained-glass window, providing dim light on the space. Gavin looked at the garment from where he sat on the edge of the bed. He hoped his family was living well without him. Were his parents still healthy? How were Emmett and Ariella doing with their business? Did they know that time was passing differently for him than it was for them? He wondered less about his job, knowing that financial needs would still be met without him. But he did think about Kassie and how he'd never had the courage to ask her out. He hoped she was happy. He remembered his conversation with Josh. Could they have rekindled their friendship? Gavin let his mind wander and tried not to dwell on the past as he put head to pillow. He was content with his decision. He didn't understand how or if the passage of time had changed for the people he'd left behind, but he trusted their lives were going well.

Though Gavin perceived he had been the Time Stealer's apprentice for only a day or two, it could very well have been a lifetime that had passed outside the Tower. Gavin had grown used to his new lifestyle, and it was still completely foreign at the same time. He began to understand

that this was what it was like to be the Time Stealer: doing every action from start to finish when it was necessary, no matter how long it took. It would be impossible to create a set routine like the one he had left behind. Rather, there would be endless tasks and missions for as long as the hourglass had sand flowing through it. Life was meant to be lived. Gavin realized his routine had never truly allowed him to live. As the Time Stealer's apprentice, he had a brand-new life that he could learn from and help others, as well as himself, change the future. As he said his nightly prayers, Gavin expressed thankfulness for the opportunity and asked for guidance as he made his decisions. He had a hunch that something important was on the horizon.

~*~*~

"How did you start stealing time?" Gavin sat across the table from Lawrence, each with a cup of tea. His beard had continued growing and his hair had passed his ears. He'd even spotted a few gray hairs in the mirror. The navy cloak had become travel worn from countless missions. Emerald snoozed on the table, curled into a ball.

"Well," Lawrence's gaze became distant, "it's a long story."

"We've got time." Gavin leaned back and sipped his tea.

The Time Stealer's lips twitched with a smile. "That we do, lad." Lawrence looked into his mug and sighed softly.

Gavin could almost see the gears of his mind churning as he recalled information. Even though he had gained the ability to understand information about the people he'd stolen time from, the Time Stealer was a blank wall to Gavin. Often, he could easily sense Lawrence's mood, but beyond that, there was no information about his history.

"I was a clockmaker," Lawrence said. Emerald stirred and opened her eyes. With a stretch, she focused on Lawrence as if wanting to hear the story, too. "I made all of these clocks

in the Tower. But before all this, my specialty was hourglasses. It was important to learn how to measure sand accurately and create timepieces for certain lengths of time. People relied on them for the precision they provided beyond that of a sundial or a water timer. I ran a shop with my brother and our two cousins. Each of us had a specialty that allowed us to work together to make the hourglasses. I was the designer and my newest design was to find just the right proportion of sand to fill an hourglass for exactly twenty-four hours. It was difficult. Always too much or too little, never just right.

“But I found it. I found there were different types of sand and there was one type,” he emphasized with an index finger in the air, “that measured time perfectly. I worked on a new hourglass model that could store that sand and use it most efficiently. During my investigation and design work, I saw hourglasses everywhere. Only, they were attached to people. Not the ones that people used in their homes or on the job to keep track of the time. These were imprinted on the lives of people. Everyone in my village had one filled with this specific sand. Some people had a lot of sand, others a little. Men, women, old, young, didn’t matter. Each hourglass fit each individual. And for everyone, it kept time perfectly to the point of death. I asked my brother if he could see them, if he could see *mine* to tell me what it looked like and how much was in it. He didn’t know what I was talking about.”

Lawrence paused for a drink. Then, he rummaged in a pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. It was the same aged parchment as Gavin’s letter. When Lawrence unfolded it, it revealed a sketch of an ornate hourglass. There were arrows connecting different parts of the device with handwritten descriptions in a script Gavin didn’t recognize.

“Looks like the hourglass upstairs.” Gavin took the paper and the script became Roman letters. He could read the explanations of material to use, dimensions, and the specificity of what

type of sand could go into the device.

Lawrence continued, “When I finally captured my own hourglass, I redesigned it and checked the sand. There wasn’t much.”

Gavin nodded solemnly.

“I started experimenting with various quantities the hourglass could hold and how using the sand could affect my time personally.”

“What about the original project, though?” Gavin asked. “The twenty-four-hour hourglass?”

“Oh, that was resolved,” Lawrence waved it off as unimportant. “The new sand worked perfectly and we started making more of them in addition to starting other projects. This became my project.” He pointed to the sketch. “I wanted more sand and a bigger hourglass.”

“Why?” Gavin asked.

“To change the future. My future, mostly, but...” Lawrence’s gaze became distant again. “It took some time before I figured out how this new thing could affect other people. I started to see the colors around people in my village. I didn’t know what the colors meant yet, but I started to notice something. When I wanted some of their sand, there it was in my hand,” he demonstrated the familiar process, holding out his hand, then clasping it into a fist. “Just like you, I thought it was magic. But really, there was a greater, eternal power behind it. As I documented my findings, I drew the map, marking where I was finding different colors. And the map started doing the work itself, showing me different countries all around the world. It wasn’t just my village. All people everywhere are subject to time, of course, and the map began to show me where and how. I divided the sand into its different colors to learn more about their properties. I gathered yellow sand from gossips and liars. Pink from those bound to deadlines.

Purple from indecisive people or those who didn't fulfill their promises. Blue from the worriers. A *lot* of blue sand. White from anyone who was being lazy or idle. And black for revenge, hatred, or criminal activity. With all this information, my little village became insufficient. I wanted to start traveling. Because, of all the colors, only one type of sand worked in the hourglass."

Gavin had helped Lawrence add tan sand to the hourglass upstairs. He could easily imagine Lawrence's discovery turning into an obsession that created the massive timepiece. "What about the shop you ran? And the rest of your family? Did you have a wife, kids?"

"Yes. I did." Lawrence's hands tightened around his mug.

"What did they think about all this?"

"I left them." He took a long drink of tea. "I knew I would never have enough time with them. But if I collected enough sand, maybe... *maybe* I could change that."

Gavin stared at the table. At least he'd been given a chance to say goodbye to his family. If Lawrence had just left, he couldn't imagine how difficult it must've been. As if sensing his sadness, Emerald approached, purring and settling near his arm. Gavin moved to pet her.

"So," Lawrence cleared his throat, "I had to keep rebuilding a larger and larger hourglass in order to store more sand. And then, of course, I needed a place to house the hourglass." He gestured to the room. "I built the Tower, installed the hourglass, and kept working. I had no way of knowing if anyone else could steal time the way I could. And even when I learned I was the only one, I had to protect myself. People started talking, telling a story about a cloaked man stealing time from the hourglass of life. Well, I couldn't have anyone finding out it was me. As my abilities grew stronger, I learned how to camouflage the Tower when needed. It was high on a mountain to begin with, isolated from the rest of the village, but I needed it to be a base of

operations and able to go where I needed to go, be seen only when I needed it to be seen. Harnessing time stealing allowed me to manipulate these things. The myth grew and spread around the world, so when inexplicable time-related incidents occurred, no one really believed it anyway. Only a few with the right kind of personality and curiosity made it into the Tower.”

“But what about helping people?” Gavin jumped in. “You said that we were allowing people to learn from their mistakes and giving them a chance to change their futures.”

Lawrence nodded. “Yes, that became part of it. I had to do something with all this extra time. Why not teach people the things I had been learning? If I was entrusted with such an important concept as time, surely I could use it to make a difference for other people. They could learn their lessons about the value and power of their own time and I could collect the sand I needed.”

“Did you have any sort of goal in mind?” Gavin’s hand stopped petting the cat and she curled around his forearm possessively. “Other than collecting sand? I mean, the only thing I can guess is that you didn’t want to die.”

“Indeed. Isn’t that what we all want? To avoid the unavoidable?”

“Well,” Gavin looked around the room to think. “It’s rather morbid to think about death, but it doesn’t make life any less important. Whether it lasts long or not, life is supposed to be an experience, not a march toward death’s door. And what about the promise of eternity?”

“Well, I want eternity now!” Lawrence slammed a fist on the table.

Both Gavin and Emerald startled. The cat skittered to the far side of the table, away from the Time Stealer.

“I will *not* be satisfied until I have what I want.”

Gavin’s brow furrowed, concerned and a little confused.

“Haven’t I become a force to be reckoned with?” Lawrence stood and began to pace. “Everyone thinks I’m a myth. They waste away their precious time with pointless grumblings and are completely unaware that their lives are shortened by it. And mine continues longer. If they’re just going to waste it anyway, why *shouldn’t* the sand go to someone who will use it? Someone who can shift the very sands of time if I wanted to.” He stopped abruptly. One hand smoothed down his beard.

“Lawrence, I don’t know about this. The message seems to be positive; that this is about helping people value their time. But the method doesn’t make much sense to me anymore. Collecting sand just seems like... an obsession.”

The Time Stealer moved to the other side of the room and began to putter around the clocks and rummage through hidden compartments.

Gavin continued, “An eternal life is not found in the sands of time. Rather than stealing the moments when people make mistakes and making them learn from the past, wouldn’t it be more helpful for them to learn in the present? You can use your ability to show them that and they will still have the chance to change their futures. Instead of letting them struggle through it on their own, you could help them personally instead of hiding behind a myth that no one truly believes in or understands. Like that little girl Yazmin. She didn’t learn from her mistake. But had we been able to help her through her struggles and hard times, she could have changed her future.”

Lawrence gave a wry laugh and turned toward the table again. “This is a first. My apprentice defies me!” In one hand, he held out the travel sphere. “You don’t know my life, Gavin Alvarez. You have no concept of the true value of time.”

With a flick of the wrist, the Time Stealer disappeared.

Chapter Nine

“Lawrence?!” The chair clattered behind Gavin as he shot to his feet.

Emerald bounded for the opposite side of the room. She meowed in distress and scrambled about the room, searching for her human.

“What do I do?” Heart racing, Gavin shifted from foot to foot, hands grasping air at his sides as if they could grasp an idea. “How do I find him?” Lawrence had used the only travel sphere. Gavin gave a false start, nearly tripping over Emerald. He flailed a little, regaining balance. Emerald ran up the stairs, her claws scraping the stone. Just like when he had first met her, Gavin decided to follow her.

Emerald continued to cry and search the top room of the Tower. Gavin followed her lead, searching around every clock. He found secret compartments, some holding knickknacks, various supplies, or clothing, but most were empty. “There has to be something I can do.” Gavin paused in the middle of the room, looking over the hourglass. Sand continued to flow, unchanged.

He felt something at his feet. Emerald weaved around his legs. Then, she moved to the wall beyond the stone table. Gavin followed, looking over the clocks on the wall. The cuckoo clock. He reached for the handle and opened the map. The fabric rippled to the floor and Gavin stood back to take a look. The expected country borders and dots of color were there. But, when he looked off the map for the icons representing him, Lawrence, and Emerald, the dark green hourglass was missing. Gavin’s eyes scanned the map until he spotted it in southwest Asia. Gavin poked the map. “There!” He looked at the cat. “But how do we get to him?”

Again, Gavin searched around the room. “Think like the Time Stealer,” he said to himself. He paused and searched his pockets, withdrawing many empty purple pouches and a few full ones. He found a smaller copy of the map, but no travel sphere. Maybe there really was only one. He pocketed the map and brought the pouches to the table at the far end of the room. When he dropped them there, Gavin’s eyes moved over the sand sorting utensils and containers of colored sand. “Red,” he said. “Red sand is for travel.”

The only place Gavin had seen red sand was in the travel sphere. But Lawrence collected so much sand, surely there had to be more. Something in storage just in case the travel sphere broke and he had to make a new one. Gavin checked all the containers on the table. All the expected colors were there, but no red. Some of the containers he knew they had filled were now empty. He continued to search for hidden compartments in or behind the clocks. “Travel, travel,” he thought aloud. “Something for traveling... a car, train, boat... airplane?”

Emerald meowed. Gavin looked in her direction. She sat near a display of decorative clocks shaped like real-world objects. Gavin sorted through them. A tree, a barn, a duck, an airplane. He grabbed the silver airplane with a clockface for a nose. He fiddled with the device, tugging on different parts and using his nails to try to find a seam somewhere that might open it. Frustrated, he threw it to the floor. A puff of red sand engulfed Gavin and Emerald.

The next thing Gavin knew, he was on a mountaintop in the middle of the night. A faint light created a circle around him and Emerald. Gavin turned and nearly ran into the Tower. It had the appearance of a mirage, but touching the stone told him it was, in fact, real. A small lantern hung on the wall next to the door, illuminating just enough for him to see his surroundings. Continuing to turn in a circle, Gavin’s eyes traced the silhouettes of other mountains. This definitely wasn’t a beach in Rhode Island.

Other than a handful of lights from a small village at the bottom of the mountain, Gavin couldn't see any signs of life. Had he once again traveled to a different time as well as a different place? Gavin wasn't sure what to do or where to go. He looked up at the clear sky full of stars. A feeling of sadness and loneliness mixed with peace and expectation.

Emerald ran a short way down a worn path and back. A moment later, Gavin could see a cloaked figure approaching them. As he waited, Gavin looked at the map to confirm the location that he had been pondering.

The figure of Lawrence became clear in the lantern light. The two men regarded each other with nods of acknowledgement. Emerald rubbed against Lawrence's leg.

"Zagros Mountains," Gavin said. "This is where you're from?"

"Yes. That village there." Lawrence gestured down the mountain. "I come here sometimes to think and every time I do, so much... *time* has passed and it's no longer the home I once knew."

"Time... changes everything."

Lawrence huffed. "I'll have none of that from you." He shook a scolding finger.

Gavin lifted his hands. "Alright."

Lawrence brushed past his apprentice and tapped his fingertips on the Tower. A stone jutted out and became a seat. When Lawrence sat, Emerald hopped onto his lap. She basked in his attention.

Gavin remained standing and waited.

"You," Lawrence began after a long moment, "are unlike any apprentice I have ever trained before, Gavin."

Gavin nodded, unsure if he should speak.

“My brother and cousins, when we made clocks together, we occasionally sailed across the Gulf to sell and trade. One day, they never came back. The boat sprung a leak on the return trip. I watched from the comfort of my Tower. I watched as all three of their hourglasses ran out. And the whole time, I knew... I knew mine was supposed to run out with them.”

Gavin looked at the ground. In a way, he was glad he didn't know when his hourglass would run out. That no one truly knew how much sand had yet to fall. Life was meant to be lived without knowing so that people could be responsible for the time they did have. Maybe even trying to teach people to value time was a fruitless effort. “It's not your fault that they died, Lawrence.”

“No, it's not. No one could've predicted that. But... I *have* killed people, Gavin. I've stolen their time and shortened their lives. All because I wanted to avoid my own death.”

“Time can be cruel, Lawrence. It causes us to confront ourselves like that. To think about why we've made the decisions we did to arrive at this point.” He smiled. “You know, before your letter, I was perfectly content with my boring life. I never second guessed it. It was safe. Ordinary. But I was lonely, and I didn't know how to acknowledge that. I lost touch with most of my friends because life took us in different directions. I've never been able to keep a girlfriend for very long because, after a few dates, each one would call me boring and predictable. I just sort of gave up trying to find love. I never thought that maybe I should've changed myself.

“That's what you did, Lawrence. Your letter showed up in my mailbox and I had a choice. I could keep being boring and predictable, or I could take a chance and have an adventure. It's not about how *much* time I have, but what I choose to do with it. And that's exactly where you missed the point when you locked yourself away in your Tower. Now, over one thousand years later, what do you have to show for it? Are you any different? Have you

enjoyed your life? Did you accomplish your goal?”

Lawrence stared at the cat.

Gavin sighed. “I’m sorry if I spoke out of turn.” He looked at the map still in his hand. Maybe they should just continue with what was familiar. “I guess, since we’re here we should... steal some time?”

“Indeed, we should.” Lawrence stood and placed Emerald on the ground. “I’d like to go home soon.”

The trio descended the mountain path to the village below. By the time they arrived, the sun had started to rise and people were beginning the day. The small village had an air of antiquity, no signs of modern technology or conveniences. Gavin could confirm his earlier thoughts that the village was stuck in the time period that Lawrence had left behind. The simple buildings, tools, and clothing, the pathways they walked on were all from a time long gone. Almost every person had at least a small cloud of colors.

Even though Gavin had taken the lead in some of the missions, and had stolen time without Lawrence’s prompting, he waited. There were plenty of options. Gavin felt the itch to reach out and steal, but he resisted.

Lawrence surveyed for a long time. His gaze changed when a woman approached. She carried a baby in a sling around her torso and tried to corral two small boys who insisted on playing while their mother tried to guide a wagon loaded with parcels behind her. She had a thick cloud of all the colors around her. Lawrence extended his hand. The moment froze as the woman smiled at her children. Though she was frustrated with the delay the two boys caused, she couldn’t deny the joy her children brought her. The cloud swirled around her. Lawrence closed his hand and lowered his arm to his side. When he opened his fist, it revealed an empty palm.

Chapter Ten

Gavin said nothing as Lawrence gazed at his empty hand. Then, in a sudden gesture, Lawrence threw a purple bag at the woman. Blue sand leaked from the bag as it flew. When it hit her, the cloud became completely blue and the scene was no longer frozen. She went on with her day, but was now burdened by worries. Lawrence turned away and, with a clap of his hands, they were back in the Tower.

Gavin, in the top room, looked around, then hurried down the stairs to where Lawrence must have reappeared. Out of breath, he paused at the bottom step and held onto the bannister. The Time Stealer just stood amid his clocks.

“That was your wife,” Gavin said. “I may not be able to read you, but I could read her. Suri. And your kids. Two boys and a baby girl. She worries about you every day, why you won’t come home. She tells the kids bedtime stories about their dad who’s away on fantastic trips and when he comes back, he’s going to tell them all the details. Suri doesn’t understand why you left. She has to get herself through every day just on hope. They need you, Lawrence. Not more time, just *you*.”

The Time Stealer just stared at his clocks.

The silence extended interminably.

Then, Lawrence picked up a small digital clock. “It’s all but a breath,” he started. “A passing vapor. There is a time for everything under the sun. To be born, to die. To kill, to heal. To build up, and tear down.” At this, Lawrence chucked the clock across the room. It hit another clock, of course, destroying both of them in a loud clatter. “A time to tear down,” he repeated

quietly. His fingers twitched as if trying to grasp something. With a wave of his arm, more clocks crashed into each other and broke. Gavin covered his ears at the discord of wood splintering, plastic cracking, and glass shattering. “What is there to gain from all our struggles?” Lawrence ascended the stairs again. “Whatever’s happening now has already happened and will just happen again in the future.”

Gavin followed the Time Stealer to the top room. When it looked like Lawrence was about to destroy some more, Gavin grabbed his arm and held firm, forcing the elder to face him. Lawrence’s opal irises had begun to return to brown. Gavin guessed where his speech was going and said, “Everything is beautiful in its own time. We cannot know or understand the scope of God’s work. Nothing is better than being happy for as long as we can, enjoying His good gifts.”

Lawrence wrested his arm free and turned away. “Using my own words against me.”

“They’re not your words, Lawrence.”

In the silence, Gavin thought he heard a clock ticking faintly.

Lawrence began again, “I had a different life than yours, Gavin. I thought my life was full. I had a job I enjoyed, good friends, a young and happy family. I left all of it behind because I thought I would never have enough time.” He approached the stone table and leaned both hands on it, looking up toward the top of the hourglass.

“What’s more important than the amount of time is to use it with purpose. Suri doesn’t need a million years and neither do you. Why would anyone want to linger for so long?” Gavin picked up a plain wooden rectangular clock with a small face and a tiny pendulum swinging back and forth. “Time can only be a gift. It can’t truly be stolen from anyone.”

He could almost hear his words echo off of the clocks in the room: Time cannot truly be stolen. The sand the Time Stealer had collected for over one thousand years continued to flow

through the hourglass. Gavin put down the clock and stood at the table with the Time Stealer. The ticking clock continued.

“I had everything I’d ever wanted,” Lawrence’s voice was quiet. “I made it all myself through the power of time.” He lowered his head and held out his hands. Both hands began to fill with colorful sand.

Gavin took a step back, unsure what was happening. Was Lawrence stealing from himself? The ticking clock grew louder.

“I’ve... *trapped* myself here,” Lawrence continued, “in a device of my own making. All the sand in the world can’t replace what I’ve lost.” Gripping both fists, he tossed the sand to either side, causing Gavin to startle and dodge out of the way. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

The loud ticking clock slowed its rhythm. Then, the sound turned into the crackle of breaking glass. Gavin looked around for the source. Lawrence returned his gaze to the top of the hourglass. Gavin followed his eyeline. A crack had formed in the hourglass, thin as a strand of hair. It began to spiderweb in all directions. Then, with a great crash, the hourglass burst open and light brown sand poured into the room.

Chapter Eleven

Just before 3PM on Sunday, Gavin stood on the beach with his suitcase in hand. He was looking at an intricate sandcastle some other visitors had left behind.

He wore gray sneakers, jeans, and a striped long-sleeved shirt. His hand shot to his face. Clean shaven. And his hair was close cropped. His hand patted his pocket for his phone. The clock flipped from 2:59 to 3:00. “What on earth?” The date on the screen was one he thought he had left far behind. Had anything he’d just experienced truly happened?

Suddenly, a spray of sand shot up to his face. Gavin waved it away.

He heard some young voices shouting in the distance.

“Sorry!” he heard the voice of a boy approaching.

Getting his bearings, Gavin saw that a football had destroyed part of the sandcastle. He put down his suitcase to brush sand off the front of his clothes.

“Sorry, sir,” said the boy, maybe middle school aged. He ran closer and his footsteps further ruined the sandcastle as he reached for the ball. “Are you okay?”

Gavin smiled. “I’m fine. It didn’t hit me.”

“Great.” The boy gave a little wave and turned toward the other boys waiting farther down the beach.

“Wait a minute,” Gavin called before the boy got too far away.

He turned back.

“Do you know what day it is? And what time?”

“Yeah, it’s Sunday,” the boy said. He took out his own phone and checked it. “3:03.”

“Thanks.”

“Have a good one.” The boy waved and jogged back to his friends.

In his car, Gavin couldn’t comprehend what had just happened. His perception of the time since 3PM on Sunday had already happened. In fact, an inordinate amount of time had passed. And now he was back to where he had started. It was something straight out of a fantasy novel. He laughed.

He automatically drove to his parents’ home. He knocked rhythmically on the door. When his mother answered, he snatched her in a bear hug.

“Where’s Dad?” he asked. “He has to join us!”

“What’s going on, dear?” his mother asked, a bit muffled by the embrace.

“I’m on my way!” Jeremiah called as he approached. “What’s happening?”

Gavin gestured for his father to join the hug. “I just want you guys to know how much I love you.” He squeezed and his mother giggled.

“We love you, too, dear,” Graziella said.

“Love you, son.” Jeremiah clapped him on the back.

Gavin let go. “Clear some time next weekend. You’re coming to my house for dinner. I have so much to tell you! I’ll call you later!”

Gavin was out the door while his parents called after him, asking what he meant and saying goodbye. Gavin waved as he backed out of the driveway.

At home, Gavin had a spring in his step as he tossed his keys in the air and caught them. Rolling the suitcase behind him, he squinted at something on the steps leading to his front door.

Approaching a bit slower, he crouched to get a better look. “Emerald?” Gavin moved to one knee. “No. It can’t be.”

The Russian Blue had the same yellow-green eyes and approached him confidently as if she knew him. She meowed and propped her paws on Gavin’s knee.

Hesitating only a little, Gavin reached out to pet her. She accepted the attention, closed her eyes and purred. “There’s no way this is real. You’re a slightly different color than Emerald.” This cat had a darker tint to her blue-gray fur. He checked for any identification and found none. “Well, if you need a home, I’ve got one.” Gavin stood and unlocked the front door. The cat bounded inside as if she owned the place. Gavin chuckled. He decided to call her Jade and made a mental note to call a vet.

The mess that greeted Gavin beyond his front door just brought more laughter. Planting

fists on hips, Gavin surveyed the scene and shook his head at his own actions, smiling. “I’ve got time for this.”

Gavin worked long hours to restore order to his home. While he didn’t return everything to its exact former locations, he arranged things in a way he found tasteful and functional. He threw out things that he no longer needed. He lingered on items that had sentimental value and smiled at the memories. He found an old cookbook that had been his mother’s and attempted to make a Spanish dish he had never tried before. He burnt it, but ate it anyway. He cut up some chicken on a plate for Jade and gave her a bowl of water.

After dinner, Gavin collected the work files and sorted them on the coffee table. As he read, he added to his list of notes that he could share with Douglas and Marty for the project. He determined he wasn’t going to let them force all the work on him again. In addition to notes about the account itself, Gavin jotted down ways they could divide the work fairly. He was nearly done with his review, but couldn’t get rid of the feeling that something about work was off. He stopped writing and tapped his pen on his paper.

It wasn’t the project; he was sure of that. He’d done these sort of client reviews and presentations before. It was the thought of someone that was bugging him.

Gavin put the files aside and retrieved his phone. Scrolling through his contacts, he found the one he wanted and started a call. As it rang, he realized he had no idea what he was going to say.

“Hello?”

“Uh, hi, Kassie. It’s Gavin.” Why didn’t he think about what he’d wanted to say first?

“How’s it going, Gavin? Is everything alright with the project?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s fine. I’m just about done, I think.”

“Alright, so... Can I help you with something?”

The silence was intimidating. It quickly reminded Gavin of his previous failed attempts to talk to Kassie about anything other than work.

“Well, I, um... I was just wondering...” He had to think of something.

“Yeah?”

His eyes darted to the bookshelf he’d just cleaned. “Well, I was wondering if you finished that Rex Stout novel you were reading on Thursday. *Black Orchids*, was it?”

“Oh, I did. I’ve read it before, actually.”

“Really? I think it’s my favorite of the series.”

“No way! I didn’t know anyone even read those books anymore,” Kassie laughed.

“I read a lot of them in high school. I pick one up now and then.”

“That’s really cool, Gavin. I didn’t know that about you. You should’ve said something. You’re always so quiet.”

Gavin smiled. “Well, I’m trying to change a few things. Um...” he hesitated. “Would you maybe want to get lunch together on Monday? We could... talk about the book.”

Pause.

“Sure. I’d like that, Gavin.”

When Gavin returned to work on Monday, he no longer felt the need for a routine. He didn’t need an alarm to wake him. He prepared for his day with enthusiasm rather than robotic expectancy. He tried not to dress in such a stuffy suit, but opted for something relaxed business casual. And, since he’d gotten used to the longer hair and beard, he thought he might try growing it out. Then, he took a different route to the office.

On Tuesday, during the first project meeting with Douglas and Marty, they accepted Gavin's proposal and agreed to his terms for completing it.

On Wednesday, Gavin got a text from Josh about scheduling lunch the following Saturday with him and his wife.

On Thursday, he took Jade to the vet and took all the necessary steps to adopt her formally.

Every day that week, Gavin enjoyed lunch with Kassie to the point that he asked her out to dinner the following Monday.

That first week back to "normal" was anything but normal for Gavin. His job was the same and all the people were the same, but nothing was the same at all. He didn't dread the projects at work or move around from task to task like a machine. He walked up his driveway humming and Jade greeted him at the door. He had plans after work some nights and on the weekend, but still a chance to relax and be by himself. Maybe he could take up a new hobby.

On Sunday evening, Gavin prepared paella for his parents' visit. It was his mother's favorite and she often made it for the family. He hoped his attempt at it would be just as tasty. While he prepared the table, he wondered how he would address what had happened the previous weekend since he still couldn't quite process it himself. He wondered if they experienced the time without him the same way he did. Since he had reappeared in the same place and time where he had started the journey, did his parents know he'd been gone at all?

Jade was the first one at the door even before Jeremiah and Graziella rang the bell. She greeted them with meows and nuzzled their ankles. Both of Gavin's parents smiled at her and bent to pet her.

"I had no idea you liked cats," his mother said. She sat on the couch and patted the seat

beside her. Jade happily obliged.

“She just showed up at the house the other day,” Gavin explained. “I had her checked out at the vet and no one owns her, so I adopted her.”

“Looks like a lot has changed since we were last here.” Jeremiah scanned the living room and peeked down one hallway before sitting in the armchair.

Gavin brought a tray of tapas to the coffee table and sat with his mother on the couch. “A lot *has* changed, Dad. And I think there will be a lot more changes as time goes on.”

His parents exchanged a thoughtful glance.

The family munched on tapas, watched a game show, and chatted for an hour before moving to the dining room. Since it was in line with the living room and, subsequently, the TV, Gavin intentionally turned it off at meals now. Instead, he focused on more productive activities while eating like reading, trying challenging puzzles, or keeping in touch with friends. Since he had guests at this dinner, they would be his focus. He hoped for guests more often, and someday in the future, maybe a family of his own to join him at dinner.

Gavin’s heart gladdened to see his parents enjoying a meal he’d prepared and he warmly accepted their compliments. Sometimes they ate silently, sometimes they chatted. When they had exhausted all the small talk topics, Gavin found the moment to tell his story.

“So, I wanted to explain last weekend and how sudden everything was.”

His father nodded.

“Go on, dear,” his mother said.

Gavin started from the beginning and explained the whole story of his experience apprenticing for the Time Stealer. He skipped over some of the repetitive details, like going on missions, but focused on the things he learned about time and how important it was to use time

wisely.

Then, he came to explaining Lawrence's internal crisis. He had no way of knowing what had happened in the Time Stealer's mind that changed him. But Gavin did know that his thoughts and words had brought about the change. By the time he reached this part of the story, all of them had finished their meals. Jeremiah and Graziella gave complete attention to their son's story. Even Jade sat at Gavin's feet listening.

"I don't know what happened when the hourglass broke," Gavin concluded, "but the next thing I knew, I was right there on the beach again where I had started the whole thing. Even the clock on my phone told me that not a minute had passed." Gavin shook his head, an incredulous smile breaking his face. "I know all of it was real, even if it sounds insane. And there's just something... different since I've been back. Something about me, and... I don't know. I just want to use my time differently now."

Gavin sat back and let his words hang in the air. His eyes shifted between his parents.

They looked at each other and back.

"It's an... interesting story, dear," his mother said. "Of course, it's wonderful that you're making all these positive changes. It really *is* noticeable even after only a week."

"Thanks, Mom." Gavin smiled.

"But you never told us about visiting the beach."

Gavin balked. "Y-Yeah, I did. I called Dad on Saturday and we talked about Tower on the Beach. Then, I visited you when I got back and told you what happened."

Graziella looked at her plate and shifted the utensils.

"You don't believe me?"

"It's not that I don't believe you, dear, it's that..." she gave a sympathetic look, "*when*

could it have possibly happened?”

“That’s what I’m saying! He’s the Time Stealer. He can mess with time.”

“Son,” Jeremiah leaned his arms on the table, “I’m with your mother on this. I trust that you’re telling the truth; it’s far too extravagant for you to make this up. You’ve never been the kind of person to make up stories. But there’s something that doesn’t connect for me.”

“What’s that?”

“We’ve never heard of a Time Stealer.”

Chapter Twelve

The revelation that the myth of the Time Stealer had never existed sent Gavin reeling. He stammered through his explanation; that it was a story like the Sandman, a legend told all over the world. Surely, they had heard of it.

But his parents shook their heads. His father even took out his phone to search for it and came up with no results.

“I’m not crazy,” Gavin insisted.

Jade meowed her support from the floor.

“Of course not, dear!” his mother exclaimed, reaching for his hand. “We would never think that about you.”

“Whatever it is that happened,” Jeremiah said, “it clearly affected you. And there have only been good things, so why should we be worried? As long as you’re safe, that’s what matters.”

Graziella nodded and patted her son’s hand.

Gavin tried to accept this as the conversation moved on.

Once they said their farewells, Gavin didn't bother starting the cleanup and instead hurried to his home office. Jade followed on his heels. She hopped up on the desk as Gavin opened a web browser to search for the legend.

No results.

Gavin tried as many search terms as he could think of. Not just the words "Time Stealer," but he added "myth," and then "legend." Maybe under "folklore" or "fairytale." He even tried "stories from the middle ages" and "Zagros Mountains mythology."

The legend of the Time Stealer didn't exist.

Gavin sat back in his chair and ran a hand down his face. "It was real. I know all of that stuff happened. I was *there!*"

He stared at the webpage telling him, "Your search yielded zero results." He looked at his cat sitting beside the monitor. "You believe me, don't you?"

Jade meowed and swished her tail.

With a heavy sigh, Gavin closed his eyes and tried to make sense of it.

That evening, his parents hadn't heard of the Time Stealer. Yet, the previous weekend, he had discussed with his father the experiences both of them had concerning the reality of the legend. Now, they said that conversation had never happened. Clearly, what *had* happened in between was Gavin's apprenticeship. But how had something recent changed over one thousand years of storytelling history?

"Time." Gavin opened his eyes and looked at Jade again. "The perception of time is different. We existed in a space between time and eternity."

If the shattering hourglass had brought Gavin back to the moment where he had started his journey with the Time Stealer, maybe the same thing had happened to Lawrence. It would

have sent him back one thousand years to his home in the Middle East. He probably had made different decisions and changed the course of his future. He never became the Time Stealer.

Gavin reached for the keyboard again. This time, he searched for “history of clockmaking” and “Middle Eastern clockmakers in the middle ages.”

“Yes!” He cheered and spun his chair around. “I found him, Jade.” Gavin pulled the cat to his lap and scrolled through the articles.

Featured prominently in an article on hourglasses was an artist’s rendering of four men. The two men in the middle held a decorative hourglass. Second from the right was a man who looked just like Lawrence. According to the article, he was Behruz Javed, a Persian clockmaker. He became famous for developing the most efficient hourglasses in the region. Typically, hourglasses were used only on ships, but the accuracy of Behruz’s hourglass led to a wider range of usage and popularization. He furthered his research and design work and eventually moved to Iberia. During that time, he had started sketching ideas for an automatic clock with gears powered by sand, mirroring clocks with water powered gears. The gear design went on to inspire mechanical clocks in later centuries.

Gavin couldn’t find much information about Behruz’s family other than his wife and children were always with him wherever he went. It brought a smile to his face and warmth to his heart to know that the experience, the words Gavin had spoken, had changed someone’s life. Both of them had changed their futures.

Other articles were about how clock design developed in the middle ages with only a sentence or two about Behruz’s contribution. Gavin closed the browser and shut down the computer. Jade had fallen asleep in his lap. As he brushed her fur, Gavin reflected and prayed.

Unbelievable! The experience had changed his life forever, and he *wanted* to change. He

was ready for whatever came next. Not just the new week ahead, but his whole life. Gavin had been able to reconnect with friends and was excited to see where his relationship with Kassie went. He enjoyed the challenges at his job, and he loved his family. He didn't know how much sand was in his hourglass, and he was glad for that. Whether he worked, rested, fell in love, traveled, he'd use the time he had been given. There would be no more stealing time.

The End