

WANDERERS IN TIME, BOOK ONE

Servants & Thieves



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CHAPTER ONE

Amethyst Matthews put on her black dress. Her mother bought it for her before their family trip to London. “Maybe we’ll see a play, or the symphony,” Mom had said. “You can wear it then.” But Amy didn’t think she’d have another chance, so she wore it now. In mourning.

Her brother Ben gave her a look that said, “I knew you were weird, but not that weird.” She ignored him and sat down on one of the ugly chairs in their hotel room, trying desperately to hold back a storm of tears, so she could tell Ben the bad news.

She took a deep, shuddering breath, and said: “Our parents are dead, and it’s my fault.”



The morning began with an argument. Dad wandered between the two rooms of their suite, buttoning his

shirt cuffs and fiddling with his watch, off in his own world. Mom sat at the vanity, putting on her makeup. Amy waited for the right moment, and then fired the first shot.

She flopped onto the bed and heaved a sigh. “Can we *please* do something else today? Go outside, or rent some DVDs? I don’t want to be stuck here all day again with nothing to do.”

“I thought you had a good book to read.” Mom leaned in toward the mirror, and attacked the shadows under her eyes with a fat tube of makeup.

“No . . . I finished that one. And my other one looks kinda boring.” It was a historical romance, not the genre she liked to read, but a friend had recommended the book.

“There’s always the TV.”

“It’s called a ‘tellie’ here,” her brother said. Ben was reading a guidebook, lounging in a chair near the opening between the rooms.

“No thanks.” She grabbed a pillow and squeezed it in her hands. “There are some wacky shows on the TV here.”

“It’s a ‘tellie!’”

Amy wanted to throw the pillow at her brother, but exercised great restraint.

Her mother shook her head. “I’m sorry, dear. I don’t know what to tell you. You have to stay in here, and find something to do, at least for a few more days.”

“A few more days! I can’t stand it.” Amy rolled onto her front, watching her mother. “This place is a tomb.”

From the outside, the hotel looked decent enough, a clean and freshly painted row house, stacked between a bunch of other row houses. But the inside was gross. Pale wood flooring and paneling, orange and brown bedspreads, thick curtains of the same color, and furniture with sharp corners. Even with the blinds wide open, the light failed to chase away the gloom. Pipes and cords lay exposed on the walls, as if plumbing and electricity were an afterthought. There were two televisions, one in each room, flat-screen models screwed to the wall. They were the brightest things around.

“A real tomb.”

Ben burst out laughing. Was he laughing at the guidebook, or at her? Amy shot him a look, and strangled the pillow some more.

“You promised us a better place.” She glanced back at her mom. “You said we’d have an apartment, with rooms of our own, a place closer to the lab. You said we’d get a bigger TV, and a kitchen where you can cook normal food.”

“I know, I did. But the lab said it wouldn’t be ready until early next week. A few more days, that’s all.”

Before she could continue her assault, Dad walked over to the vanity and planted himself against the wall. “Strange though, isn’t it, Sheryl?”

He started conversations like that a lot, right in the middle of a thought.

Mom smiled at him. “What, dear?”

“I mean, why bring that huge stone arch into the experiment? They could have used any sort of door, or opening, or even a big wire loop. But why an arch from Egypt?” Dad was talking about the experiment again. The British scientists called it “the apparatus.” With their funny accents, it sounded more like “appa-RAY-tis.” The experiment was the whole reason they were here.

Mom turned back to the mirror. “Weren’t you there when the director gave his little philosophical speech?”

“I don’t know. I may have wandered off.”

“The arch is supposed to link history to the modern day. He even called it a ‘marriage’, if you can believe that. ‘A marriage of the past and the present, to give birth to the future.’ I think he meant it as a metaphor of some sort.” She laughed, light and clear. “Who says scientists can’t be poetic when they want to be?”

“I can’t imagine them dragging all those blocks of stone into the lab, and assembling that... that monstrosity, just so they can have their metaphor. It doesn’t sound poetic to me. It sounds silly.”

Amy had toured the lab with her family on the first day they arrived in London. Major yawn. But she didn’t remember a big stone arch. Maybe it was in a part she hadn’t seen.

“Elliot, you know as well as I do,” Mom said, “sometimes scientists make no sense. Doesn’t matter how

brilliant they are. Doesn't matter what field they studied. Now and then, they are completely goofy."

"You don't mean me too, do you?"

"Of course I do. But at least you're not a *theoretical* physicist." She smiled at him again. "I prefer my scientists to be real flesh and blood."

Amy groaned at her mom's joke. Why do parents think they have a great sense of humor? Most of the time they don't.

"Anyway, for all we know, they may have gotten funding from some eccentric guy who insisted they incorporate the thing in the apparatus."

Dad grunted. "You may be right. Say, Bennett, can you do your magic and fix this strap for me? I can't get it to close again."

While Ben took the watch — an antique that had belonged to their grandfather — and dug into his pockets for the right tool, Amy searched for the right opening to dive back into her argument. After all, her concerns were more important than all this talk about scientists and stone arches.

"Mom. Dad." She fixed them both with a stare. "Can you *please* wait until you get to the lab to talk about work? I need help here. If we don't figure something out, I'll just *die*."

Dad shook his head and left the room.

Mom sighed. "What now, sweetheart?"

"Can't we do anything else? Go shopping, or visit a museum or something? I'm sure there's stuff to do

around here, near the hotel, I mean. We wouldn't go far."

"Amethyst..." Mom always used her full name, even though Amy preferred her nickname. Who wanted to be named after a jewel?

"We won't get into any trouble, I swear."

"No, absolutely not. I wouldn't let two teens wander the streets of a large city, any more than...I don't know...any more than I would stick my finger in a light socket for a little excitement. It isn't going to happen. So forget about exploring London on your own."

In truth, Amy wasn't that interested in exploring new places, or even going out. She was hoping for a compromise, some concessions maybe. But, what her mother said bothered her. She was sixteen, and her brother fourteen. Why couldn't they take care of themselves on the streets of London? They were no longer children. Obviously, her parents thought otherwise, and it drove her nuts.

"Look, Amethyst, the director at the lab promised to send someone to watch over you —"

The words came out in a rush: "We don't need a babysitter."

"Not a baby." Ben shook his head. "Don't need a sitter." He had found a miniature screwdriver in his coat pocket and was tinkering with the links of the watchstrap. Her brother always had a ton of junk in his pockets.

"Bennett, hush." Mom turned back to Amy. "This wouldn't be a babysitter. More like a guide, and a

chaperone. She will show you around the city, take you to the museums and monuments, while we're working at the lab. London is a large place, and dangerous in many spots. Without a guide, heaven knows what sort of trouble you might get into."

"Trouble?" Ben said. "Don't you mean adventure? Excitement?"

"Knock it off, Ben," said Dad.

"Can we go to the Tower of London? I want to see the chopping block where they cut off Anne Boleyn's head."

"That's enough. We'll talk about it later."

"I just want to ride the Tube, okay? That's all I ask." He handed the watch back to Dad.

Amy tried a new tactic. "Can you at least leave your laptop? I haven't updated my status in three days. My friends probably think I'm dead by now, probably think I died in an airplane crash, because I'm not online. And I haven't been able to text. I can't even use my phone for calls! I feel so out of it."

"Sorry dear, I need my laptop with me at the lab, to crunch numbers for your father. And you knew your cell phone wouldn't work in England. I kept telling you that, so why did you even bring it?" Mom picked up a hair dryer. "Are we done here? I have to finish."

"Oh, Mom!" Amy buried her head under a pillow. "It's not fair!"

"Amy, there will be no more arguing, whining or complaining." Dad stepped in, like a tag-team partner, to finish the fight. Forget concessions, or compromise.

“We’ve heard enough. You’re not going anywhere today. Order room service for lunch, and we’ll go out for dinner later. You can look around a bit then.”

The pillow couldn’t drown out his words. “Look, I know it’s rough. But it’s only today and tomorrow that we’re down at the lab. After that, we’ll spend the whole weekend together, shopping, sightseeing, whatever you want.”

“The Tower of London?” Her brother again. “It says here there’s a museum of torture devices near there, called the London Dungeon.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Come on, Dad, it says it’s a museum. That *has* to be educational.”

“We’ll talk about it this weekend. Just hang on until then, okay? And Amy, if it helps, we *could* let you call your friends.”

“Can I really?” Amy pulled her head out from under the pillow.

“Yes, but no more than a half hour. Use the hotel phone, and ask to make a ‘trunk’ call. That’s what they call long distance here. Fair enough?”

Amy sighed. “It’ll have to do.” She was already calculating whether to call Jenny or Isabella first, what to tell them about London, and how long she would have to talk with each of them.

Ben snorted, which then turned into a cough. Amy glared at him, and debated throwing the pillow at him

as he hacked several more times. Was he laughing at her again? He held up the guidebook again, oozing innocence.

“Amethyst, make sure Ben stays out of trouble, would you?” Nothing got by Mom.

“Oh, *please*. I’m not going to babysit *him*.” She continued glaring at her brother.

Ben said something, but Mom started the hair dryer, and his comment was lost in the noise.

In a few short minutes, Mom and Dad headed for the door. Both had dressed casually, but Mom carried a coat along with her laptop. In case of rain, Amy supposed, even though the weather seemed fine.

“Behave yourselves.” Mom opened the door and glanced down the hallway. She turned back to Amy. “Get along with each other, and for heaven’s sake, cheer up, Amethyst. Things will get better, really they will.”

Dad and Ben did their goodbye routine—where they pointed their fingers like guns at each other and made “pchew, pchew” noises. Mom called it “shooting, with love.” Amy called it dumb. Why couldn’t they just hug and be done with it?

Mom shook her head, and gave Amy a quick hug. “Okay, goodbye. Goodbye.” And they were out the door and down the hallway. Ben closed the door and locked it.

Amy wandered over to one of the windows, and stared outside for a while. Something strange, though

— the whole time she watched, she never saw Mom and Dad leave the hotel or walk along the street. They had simply vanished.

She sighed. Time to settle down for a long day inside. Maybe she could get interested in her new novel. Amy wished she had one of her fantasies to read instead.

As she turned to find her book, Ben snapped his guidebook closed and stretched. He eased over to the door and unlatched the bolt. “All right, enough of this. Ready to go?”

“Ben, don’t you dare. You don’t want to get into trouble, do you? Mom and Dad told us to stay here, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

“Aw, come on! They wouldn’t know any different, would they, if we just walked down the street? Or,” — he pulled a folded map from his coat pocket — “look at this. I’ve got a Tube map, you know, for the underground trains? We can go anywhere and be back in a few hours!”

“No.” Amy plucked her book from her bag and collapsed into one of the hard chairs. She wouldn’t dare to do something so risky.

“Can we at least take a walk?” He put the map away.

“No.”

“Can we order something else for lunch? Like Chinese? I hate the room service food.”

“No.”

“You never want to *do* anything.” He fell back into his

chair and grabbed the TV remote. “You just want to *complain* about everything.”

“That’s not true —”

A talk show blared to life on the screen. She growled at him. Brothers! She stomped out of the room, and slammed the connecting door. Maybe now she could get some reading done.

Hours passed.

Amy read her book, losing herself in a complex story about a serving girl and her unorthodox master, peppered with long descriptive passages. Not quite as exciting or brainy as the science fiction she normally read, but not a total snoozer. After a while, Ben came into the room, playing his Nintendo DS.

“Order us some lunch, would you?” He wasn’t even looking at her, focusing instead on killing goombas or whatever.

“Knock it off. I’m busy.” She hid behind her book. “And what am I, your maidservant?”

“If you don’t —” He walked away, head still down. “I’m calling for Chinese.”

Lunch came and went, the food unremarkable and bland. The afternoon dragged on. She couldn’t call her friends yet, as California was eight hours behind. They wouldn’t be up yet.

Now what? Neither her book nor the TV sounded appealing. Ben seemed to have the same trouble. He sat with his DS in one hand, and the remote in the other, but wasn’t using either.

She sighed, and crashed onto the bed. “Oh, will this day ever end?” She raised her eyes toward the ceiling. “Please God, make something interesting happen.”

Ben laughed. “I didn’t think you believed in God.”

Did she? Did she believe, or just hope that he was real? She couldn’t put any of her thoughts into words, so she answered: “Not really. But I’m at my wits end.” She pulled a pillow over her face.

After that, everything went wrong.



She must have fallen asleep, or at least dozed some, with the pillow still on top of her. When the phone rang, she startled, and jerked upright. Ben had folded himself into his chair, and now struggled to get free. Two more rings, and then she was there, taking the call. “Hello?”

Her head spun from the sudden movement. She felt like she had left her own body, and she was watching herself from far away. A man on the phone spoke some words.

She said: “Yes. From the lab. I know.”

Ben stared at her, raising his eyebrows, wanting to know what was going on. If he was talking, she couldn’t hear him. She could only hear the man on the phone, and the words barely registered on her brain. A low buzzing rose in her ears and washed out all other sound.

She said: “They what?”

The light from the windows dimmed, as if a cloud

had blocked the sun. Or was something wrong with her? The whole room seemed darker. She sat down and closed her eyes. Sweat broke out on her forehead and hung there in expectation.

She said: "I see. Yes, that's right. Aunt Sylvia."

Her mind was blank. No thoughts bubbled to the surface. She simply sat there absorbing the facts, storing them for later. No time to ponder, no time to understand.

She said: "Okay." A pause, and then, "Okay."

Amy set the phone back in its cradle, her hands not her own, her thoughts not her own. Ben was right there, asking questions, but she still couldn't hear him. He was hopping up and down like a cartoon character. She ignored him, walked into the adjoining room and closed the door. She put on her black dress, the one her mother had picked out for special occasions, and wiped away the tears that were forming. She opened the door to face her brother.

Ben gave her a look that said, "I knew you were weird, but not that weird." She sat down on one of the chairs, trying desperately to hold back a storm of tears, so she could tell Ben the bad news.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Our parents are dead, and it's my fault."

There was a pause, and then: "What?"

He launched into a furious, random pacing, nearly colliding with every piece of furniture in the room. His ridiculous spiked hair bounced in rhythm. His arms flapped and his hands waved in complex patterns.

“How is that possible? What’s going on here?” He stopped and faced her. “Who was on the phone?”

She had to search her memory. “The lab.”

“Who from the lab?”

“That lab director guy, Mr. Abrams. That bald guy we had lunch with the other day, after the lab tour.” Details were returning to her, like bubbles rising to the water’s surface.

“What did he say happened to Mom and Dad? And why is it your fault?”

Amy blew the hair out of her face. “He said Mom and Dad were starting work on the machine — I mean, the apparatus — and then something strange happened.”

“What? What happened?”

“The director called it an accident of some sort. Mom and Dad were near the apparatus, near the arch thing...” Her throat closed up.

“And then?”

“And then they vanished.” She swallowed and it hurt. “There was... another scientist in the room, and he saw light all around, and then they were gone. He doesn’t know why, or what might have gone wrong. Besides, the apparatus was malfunctioning, right? Wasn’t that why they hired Dad?” Pressure built up in her head, and she felt tears gathering force.

Ben let out air, as if he had been holding his breath. “So they might not be dead. They might have disappeared.”

“What’s the difference? For all we know, the apparatus disintegrated them. Zapped them out of existence.

Dead or gone, they're no longer here." Amy wiped her eyes, dashing away her tears before they could start flowing. If she broke down now, she didn't think she'd ever get back under control. "The director also called Aunt Sylvia. We're to stay here until she comes to take us back to California."

"We'll see about that."

What did he mean by that?

Before she could ask, he continued interrogating her. "Tell me again why you think it's your fault?"

Amy stared at the floor. "Don't you remember? I prayed that something would happen. Something interesting."

"God doesn't answer stupid prayers like that. It can't be your fault. And they can't be dead." He rubbed his head with a hand. "I don't think we have any other choice. We've got to get down there."

"What? Where?"

"The lab, of course. Where they disappeared."

"What are we going to do? Look around for them? See if the scientists have kidnapped them and hidden them in a closet?" She started trembling. "Or maybe you were thinking you would tinker with the machine, and put Mom and Dad back together from the zillions of particles that they were blown into?" A sob nearly escaped. She hiccupped instead. "The apparatus is not a watch, Ben, and it's not something you can fix."

The whole situation was beyond their means to fix, although she desperately wanted to. She wanted

everything to go back to normal, and Ben must have felt the same way. That's why he wanted to go — that's why he wanted to do something, rather than wait. But in the end, it wouldn't do any good, if their parents were dead.

“Look, Ben, the scientists had to bring Dad all the way from America to help them, right? There's nothing either of us can do. Let's stay here and wait for them to figure this out. When Aunt Sylvia comes, she can help us decide what to do next.”

Ben shook his head violently. “No way. We can't let someone else worry about our parents. We need to help. We need to go to the lab, and find out what really happened there.”

“But we can't even get there.” Her objections were getting weaker. She hated feeling so powerless, so useless, but she didn't want to take any risks. She couldn't leave the safety of the hotel room. Her courage had disappeared with her parents.

“Yes we can. Look —” Ben fished around into his coat pockets again. “Forget taking a cab — they're way too expensive. But I've got the Tube map, and a few pounds we can use to buy passes —”

“Where did you get the money?”

“Mom gave me some coins as souvenirs.” Ben looked her in the eye. “Come on, Amy, please. We can do this. I can't wait around here, not knowing if Mom and Dad are alive or dead, or what.”

Amy turned away and wrestled with her thoughts,

feeling pulled in a thousand directions. She worried about her parents, whether they were missing or truly dead. She wanted to be sure one way or another. But she also worried about jumping into the unknown and doing what she wasn't supposed to do. Their parents and the director both told them to stay in the room. Sometimes she envied Ben, who had no qualms about doing whatever popped into his head. Yes, he was rash, but was he always wrong? Maybe they *could* help, somehow. Maybe being at the lab would prompt the scientists to work harder at finding out what happened to Mom and Dad. Maybe —

She looked up and saw her brother was gone, the door left wide open.

CHAPTER TWO

Ben didn't want to wait for Amy anymore. The time for thinking was over, and now it was time for action. He put up with her moods, and her need to over-think things, but enough was enough. He marched down the hall to the stairs.

"Wait!" A door slammed behind him. "Come back." Amy caught up to him and grabbed his wrist.

He jerked his arm away and turned his back to her. "I'm going. And I don't care whether you are or not."

He stood there for a full minute, not moving. Finally, he heard a sigh, and she spoke:

"All right, then. Show me that Tube map. I want to know where we're going."

He slipped the map out of his pocket, his excitement mounting. Time for action. "It's easy. See here? The closest Tube station is Bayswater, but that's not the one we need. We want Queensway. So here we are, on Newton

Avenue, then we walk to Queensway to the station, take a train to Oxford Circus, change to a train to Euston, here, then to Angel station, which is the closest one to the lab. I saw Angel station on our way back from the tour the other day, just around the corner.”

“I don’t know . . . that seems overly complicated. Isn’t there a more direct route? Just one train, maybe?”

“That’s not the way it works. You just can’t get from here to there.” He folded the map back up. “I think the British *like* to make things complicated—it’s their nature.”

Amy frowned.

Ben throttled back on his impatience. Was his sister having second thoughts already? “One step at a time. Don’t worry, we’ll get there.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, we can do this.”

He paused, looking at her. Why did she change into a black dress? “Did you want to change out of those clothes?”

She smoothed the front of the dress, and looked back down the hall. “I can’t. We don’t have a key.”

He shrugged. Another detail he had overlooked, but it didn’t matter anymore. He led the way down the stairs and onto the street. This was it. The start of their adventure. He almost wanted to skip down the road. Yes, Dad and Mom were missing, but as long as he was doing something—some action, some decision, some movement—he was sure things would turn out okay.

Outside, he stopped and checked his bearings. Their

hotel was tucked in between other remodeled relics, on a quiet avenue lined with tall trees and parked cars, the city noises distant, the sky bright. He nodded and marched on.

Down a block, over a block, and then they were on Queensway. Here was a coffee shop, stacked at the bottom of a six story building, and a homeless man out front holding a fresh cup with two hands. Ben pointed out a Chinese restaurant. He also saw Indian, Italian, Thai, Russian, and other dining places from foreign lands. Nobody here wanted to eat the local food.

A gang of punks, with spiked green and purple hair, browsed through the souvenir shop on the corner, sneering and making rude gestures at people passing by. Amy walked closer to Ben, but the punks didn't worry him. Music boomed and rattled along the street, coming from somewhere, a parked car or an apartment over one of the shops.

Ben spotted the first Tube station, and they plunged underground. The scenery was all the same: stations bricked in white, terminals arched and buried deep. As the trains pulled in and out, creating complex wind patterns, he checked the map and grabbed his sister to keep her close. She was acting like a zombie — totally disconnected.

He wished Dad could be there — he loved to explore new places almost as much as Ben. Hadn't his parents been here? Wasn't this the same route they

took to the lab? He could have been standing on the same spot Dad stood earlier today. He shivered, and focused on getting them through the Underground, catching trains, changing stations, standing up, sitting down, “minding the gap.”

At their last stop, Angel Station, they rode up a really long escalator and emerged out of the dim tunnels into the light. Ben steered them over to a low wall, and leaned against it. He waited. Amy blinked, finally looking around.

“It looks the same.” She shook her head. “Are you sure we went anywhere?”

“We’re not really in London anymore. This is Islington.”

“Where do we go from here?”

“We can head down toward the river and see if any of the buildings look familiar.”

“You mean, we don’t know which one is the right one?” Her voice nearly squeaked.

“I remember it was on the water, and...it’s made out of brick. And I thought it was around the corner somewhere.”

“Ben...half the buildings here are made of brick. And I don’t see any water or river.”

He shrugged. “I know the name of the lab — maybe we can look around.” A quick glance around revealed very few signs for businesses. Maybe these were apartments, or warehouses. “Or we could ask someone for directions.”

Amy pointed to a glass booth, with posters advertising lipstick pasted on every surface. “We could check in there.”

It was a phone booth.

“Sweet.” There was no phone book inside, but the phone itself was a blocky computerized terminal. Ben stepped forward, punched a few keys, and found an electronic phone directory. “Now we’re good.”

“What’s the name again?”

“Theoretical Physics Labs of London. I remember that because of the initials. ‘TP Labs.’ Get it? TP?”

Amy shook her head. “Yes, I get it.”

Five minutes later, they had found the lab, and were standing at a large rectangular building that stretched five stories high, and reached toward a wide canal in the back. It was made entirely of brick, unpainted and dark, with tumbled edges. The windows along the front and sides had arched tops and multiple square panes, and got shorter and shorter the further up the building they went. On one side, iron fire escapes scaled the building like ivy, twining up to the top floors.

It was a strange place for a lab, but Ben thought it was cool. Amy shivered.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. I just have a bad feeling about this.”

“Don’t be a baby.” Ben grabbed her hand again and pulled her inside.

The reception area was stark white and devoid of

furniture, magazines, or any other comforts of a waiting area. It was cold and smelled faintly of bleach. They really didn't encourage visitors to stay.

Behind the counter sat a young woman, her hair a black wedge, and her eyes dark and deep. If she put on chains and spikes, she would make a perfect Goth. "Yes?" she asked them.

Ben crossed his arms on the counter. "Our parents are the Matthews."

The receptionist's eyes widened. "Just a moment. Let me ring the director." Her accent was prim and proper, but her voice cracked on the last word.

Two seconds later, Mr. Abrams burst through a door near the desk. He was tall, with fishy lips and rounded cheeks. What hair he hadn't already lost, he had shaved close. He reminded Ben of a badly drawn cartoon.

"You are not supposed to be here. Your aunt will arrive tomorrow morning, and she expects to find you in the hotel room. If you cannot manage for yourselves, I can phone for a caregiver —"

"Do I look like a baby?" Ben said. "I don't need a baby-sitter."

Amy grabbed his arm tight, trying to rein him in. "We've come to find out what happened to our parents. You didn't explain it very well on the phone."

"At the moment, we have no news. The technicians are examining the equipment, of course, to determine if the apparatus caused them to disappear." This Mr. Abrams was a real fish.

“What do you mean, ‘disappear?’” Ben snapped at him. “Didn’t that machine vaporize them? Didn’t it kill them?” Amy squeezed his arm more, and he shrugged her off.

“I never said they were dead, or vaporized. And when I say ‘disappear’ . . . I simply mean we don’t know where they are. I doubt your parents popped out a window and went on holiday, right?” He sniffed, as if insulted. “As I said before, we will determine what in the apparatus caused the accident. It was not, as you suggest, designed for . . . vaporizing things.”

He spread his hands wide. “Look, there’s really nothing you can do here. Please return to your hotel.”

“We want to see it — the apparatus,” Ben said. “We want to see where this *accident* happened.”

“No, I can’t be responsible for you here. You are both underage and no longer have a legal guardian with you.” He puffed out a breath, then said to the receptionist, “I knew I should have called for a constable.” The woman nodded.

Ben stepped back. “Constable?”

“To take charge of you until your aunt shows.”

“We’re not going with a constable,” Amy said.

Ben wasn’t so sure. The director guy had a point — if there was no adult with them, then the government would assign somebody. But they were Americans, foreigners to this country. Would that make a difference? Maybe they should make a break for the American em-

bassy. He had no idea where it was, but their options were getting fewer.

Mr. Abrams must have been considering his options as well. “Follow me, please.”

Maybe he had decided to show them the apparatus after all. But no, the director led them down a short hallway and into a conference room. It was another white room, plastered and painted, and hung with several clean whiteboards. A cheap wooden table and plastic chairs filled the middle of the space.

“Have a seat. I will return directly.” Mr. Abrams left.

Amy sat down, once again doing whatever she was told. When would she ever learn? Ben shook his head, then went to the door and checked the handle. “It’s unlocked.”

“Where are you going?”

“We’re not waiting here.”

“Ben, why not? They’re trying to help us.”

“Duh. No, they’re not.” He jerked his thumb at the door. “He’s calling for the constable right now.”

“But, we’ll get into more trouble — worse trouble — if we run off again.”

He went over and pulled her to her feet. “I don’t plan on leaving the building.”

He opened the door, and glanced up and down the hallway. Clear so far. He pulled his sister around the next corner, going deeper into the lab. Footsteps behind them. He tried the next door, found it unlocked, and peeked inside.

It was an office, cluttered with papers and books. More whiteboards plastered the walls, these ones filled with layer upon layer of colors. The lights were off, and no one was there. A good place to hide. They went in, and he put his ear against the closed door.

He heard footsteps, and voices mumbling. The director yelling for someone named Zelma. Was that the receptionist? Then he said, "They must be somewhere in the building." Ben caught the words "constable" and "want those children found!" He leaned back.

"What is it? What's happening?" Amy's face was pale in the dim light. The rest of her was hidden, black bleeding into black.

"They're looking for us. Time to hide." He stumbled back toward the desk. "They'll do a quick search first. After they don't find us, then they'll tear the place apart." He shoved her into the space under the desk and settled in, hidden from view.

"This is a bad idea." Amy wiggled in the tight space. "We're trapped in here."

"No, just wait a minute. You'll see."

It didn't take long. The office door flew open, the lights snapped on, and the door slammed immediately after that. Whoever had opened the door had only glanced in. Ben nodded to Amy, and they climbed out.

Ben listened at the door again. "Okay, it's time. The trickiest part's going to be the stairs."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"They'll probably put people by the stairs, looking for

us.” His sister continued giving him a blank stare. “The apparatus room. It’s on the second floor, remember?”

“You still want to see it?”

“Of course. We can see what they’re doing, maybe even help. If we can get there, without getting caught by Fishface.”

Amy was silent for a moment. “What if we used the fire escapes?”

“Great idea. All we need to do is find a window or another door. Let’s go.”

Ben eased out into the hallway, Amy close behind. At the end of the hall, there was an emergency door, warnings and alarm stickers plastered all over it. He reached into his pocket for his folding knife, calculating how he could disable the alarm...

“Ben, don’t.”

“It doesn’t matter. If we go through, maybe they’ll think we left. They won’t be expecting us to go back inside. It’s too easy.” He pushed the door open and heard an electronic buzzing sound echo through the building. More chaos, more confusion. It would only help them get where they wanted.

Once outside, they found themselves on the far side of the lab. Ben climbed on a garbage bin and pulled the fire escape ladder down. Soon, they were on the second floor, climbing through a window he had pried open. He broke the tip off his knife working on the window, but at least they were in the right place.

The hallway stretched from one side of the building

to the other, with all the doors closed, and no one about. How many scientists worked here? Where was everyone? The first time they were here, there were lots of people, but now it seemed empty. Strange.

They hurried down the hall and found another passageway heading toward the back of the building. That was where the room with the apparatus was, if he remembered correctly. They met no one else on this floor, but they crept along, afraid they would be discovered at any moment. Ben tried several doors down this corridor, until he found the right one.

“Whoa.” Amy rushed passed him into the apparatus room. There was no one here, and all the equipment was off, or looked that way.

“Where is everyone?” She stood staring at the arch. “Are they all out looking for us?”

“Or doing something else.” Planning to take over the world, maybe. He turned away from the apparatus and examined the open door. It was steel and had a push-button lock in the knob.

“But where are the scientists? The technicians? Mr. Abrams said they were finding out what went wrong. He said they were examining the equipment.”

“Maybe the director lied. Maybe they all ‘popped out the window and went on holiday.’”

He plunged his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a paperclip. He straightened the paperclip, set the lock on the knob, and then jammed the paperclip into the keyhole. A few short wiggles, and the metal clip

broke off. He did it again, until the hole was blocked. It wouldn't keep them out forever, but it would buy them a little time to look around. He closed the door and joined Amy by the apparatus.

The largest part of it was the Egyptian arch, which seemed completely out of place here, among the wires and boxes of modern equipment, centered in the large warehouse space of an old building. The arch itself was a stack of thick stones, topped by a massive flat cross-piece. Hieroglyphics and carvings, inscribed thousands of years ago, still stood out in sharp relief.

Inside the arch, a series of wires looped up and around, then gathered into a coil that plugged into the rest of the apparatus. The other parts looked like nothing more than a jumble of gray metal boxes.

Ben moved away from the apparatus and studied the rest of the room. Even though it was on the second floor, the room took up a large space, both tall and wide. Windows dotted the walls at regular intervals — most of them were covered by canvas and let in very little light. To compensate, someone had strung floodlights around the perimeter of the room, all pointed toward the apparatus.

"There's a lot of junk in here," Amy said. She must have found a light switch and snapped it on. The floodlights lit up the apparatus, bright as the sun. "What are you looking for?"

"I don't really know. Evidence? Scorch marks? Or melted circuits?" Or the smear of ashes, or the charred cinder of bone that were the only remains of

their parents? He shivered. They couldn't be dead, he couldn't admit the possibility, and yet he had to look. He saw nothing. The room was clean and bare, except for the apparatus, and he knew *that* was the beast they would have to deal with. Odd, though, that no one was here working on the equipment.

Amy had returned to the arch. "What's it supposed to do?"

"I don't remember." Ben chewed his lip. "I wasn't paying attention, really. When Dad started talking about 'proton pairs' and 'field enhancers,' and I thought for sure he was going to launch into a lecture about 'the wave-particle duality —'"

"Of light." Amy nodded. "Again."

"Yeah, again. So I zoned out." Dad loved to talk about his work.

"But why is the arch here? Why would they need a doorway like this?" She walked around to the other side. "Unless you are supposed to walk through the opening, and...go somewhere?" She paused, stared at Ben through the opening. "Maybe it's a teleporting machine, like a transporter. You know, from Star Trek?"

"I just hope it's not like the 'Honey I Shrank the Whatever' movies." But it made him wonder. He knelt by the gray boxes, and started flipping switches. No response.

"What are you doing?" Was there a little panic in her voice? He almost grinned at her.

"I'm finding out stuff." He followed the cables attached to the equipment and came across a computer. He

turned it on. If the apparatus was some sort of teleporting device, wouldn't you need a computer to work out the math? Wouldn't you need a computer to calculate the location? If Mom and Dad went through the arch, and were teleported somewhere, wouldn't the computer be able to tell him where they went?

But when the screen came alive, it only showed rows and rows of paired numbers, followed by a “?” prompt. Not exactly WYSIWYG. Not a Microsoft product either.

Amy bent down near the gray boxes. “These are labeled. ‘Photon Pair Splitter.’ ‘Field Amplifier.’ ‘Directional Analyser.’ Check it out — Crazy British spelling strikes again.”

Ben pressed “enter” on the keyboard, and the whole apparatus started to hum.

“Ben...” She glared at him.

“What? All I did was push a button.” The computer beeped, and ran through all kinds of errors on the screen. It finished with the same matrix of numbers as before, and the same prompt. “Hey, are all those boxes on?”

The door to the lab rattled. Someone on the other side pounded on the metal and cursed.

“Uh-oh.” Now they would see how much time his little trick gave them. “Now what?”

“Turn that thing off.” She pointed at the computer.

“I don't know how.”

Amy frowned at him, then turned away. “Maybe we can hide, and they'll think the room is empty.”

“No, I spiked the lock. They know we’re here.” Their options were disappearing fast.

Now someone was kicking at the door. *Thump!* The hollow noise echoed throughout the room. *Thump!*

Amy dashed over to one of the windows, and ripped the canvas back. She threw her hand over her eyes to block the sudden light. “It’s a long way down. There’s a loading ramp, and then the canal. No good.” She lowered the canvas. “Maybe we can use another fire escape. There must be a way out through one of these other windows.”

“Forget that. There’s no time.” Ben rushed over to the gray boxes, checked the switches, and ran back to the computer. A quick tap on the keyboard, and the apparatus really got humming. Even the building started to vibrate along with it.

The pounding at the door ceased for a moment, then resumed with more frantic blows, and more shouting. Someone out there yelled, “Police, open up!” but everything else was drowned out by the noise.

“What have you done?” Amy backed away from him and the apparatus. “What have you done?”

Her hysterics seemed real this time. No drama queen now. Ben ignored her and continued to monitor the numbers on the screen. This was the only way to solve their problems — getting away from the scientists, and finding their parents.

The apparatus was doing something. Ben assumed it was working. The opening in the arch grew darker and darker, while the edges shone more brilliantly, as

if all the light in the room was pulled toward the ancient artifact. The sight reminded Ben of the bright corona around a black hole. It was a strange and unearthly sight.

Amy stared at the darkness and the light, fixed in place. Ben raced over to her and shoved her toward the arch.

“No!” She pushed back. “No! What are you doing?”

Ben paused. “Do you want to go where Mom and Dad went? Do you want to find out where the arch goes?” He pointed to the door, where the scientists were still banging away. “*They* don’t know where our parents went. But I bet Mom and Dad walked through the opening, or fell into it by accident, and got teleported. This is the only way we can find them!”

The sounds at the door were louder now — noise caused by something more massive than a man’s foot, something more like a battering ram. *Boom!* The steel door bent inward. *Boom!* They would be through in a matter of seconds.

Ben pushed at his sister once more. “We don’t have time to debate it!”

“All right! Stop shoving!” She grabbed his hand, and they stepped forward together.

As they neared the arch, the darkness between the columns sucked them in. At that same moment, the door to the lab burst open, and the police constables and scientists rushed in. Ben heard one of them say, “No, don’t — !” Then all the light and all the sound was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Amy was sure they were dead. Vaporized, like Ben kept saying. Everything was dark and silent. She felt nothing, like her body was floating in water, or out in space. But she was still able to think — why was that? And why did she smell something? It was a strange mix that reminded her of smoke, manure and rotting vegetables.

Slowly, her vision cleared and sound returned. They were no longer in the lab. Instead, she and Ben were lying in a darkened, sheltered alcove. At her back, a solid oak door propped them up, and in front, an arched passage led to brightness and activity. Amy climbed to her feet and took a few cautious steps forward.

Ben followed, his mouth wide open. “Oh, wow... oh, wow.”

Before them opened a scene of wonderment. An outdoor market was taking place, with an assortment

of goods for sale. Fruits and vegetables, dried and fresh flowers, coffee and pastries, rags and unidentified knick-knacks. The people, all in strange clothes, were in constant motion. Some were shopping, browsing among the goods. Others were entertaining. There was a pair of acrobats, a boy playing a tin whistle, and a man grinding an organ while a monkey danced and collected coins. Children wandered through, selling things as well—little girls with flowers or matches or oranges. Boys stood by with brooms, playing some sort of game, or waiting to perform some sort of service.

The noise added another dimension to the confusion. Everything and everyone was making some sound—the organ grinding away, the merchants yelling out what was for sale, the squeals of children. To even have a normal conversation, people had to speak up. Among all the words, Amy recognized the same accent she'd been hearing for the last few days. Definitely British.

Beyond the market, gray and grimy buildings stretched up and faded into the haze. After the first set of buildings, the rest looked almost flat, unreal. From the right, a faint breeze blew, and brought the stench of mud from a nearby river, mixing in with the smells she had already noticed.

“Oh, wow, it worked.” Ben stepped forward, a moth drawn to the flame. “It really worked.”

Amy pulled him back into the doorway, out of sight. Had anyone seen them? Had anyone noticed? They couldn't go charging out there without knowing

more. Ben read her mind, and asked the first question that came to mind.

“Where are we?”

Right away, she had an idea, and thought she knew, but she dismissed the notion. She wanted a more rational answer. A more reasonable answer. “It must be some kind of Renaissance Faire or Dickens Fest. You know, where everyone comes dressed up as people from the past?”

“I’ve never been to one. Looks cool, though.”

“I’ve only seen pictures.” She dug her foot into the dirt between the cobbles of the street. It seemed quite authentic, even for a Ren-Fest. Or were they in a very dirty part of London? Except for the mad dash from the hotel to the lab, she hadn’t seen much of the city. Maybe this was one of those areas her mother warned them about.

“Maybe it’s a movie set.” Ben pointed in the distance. “Those buildings don’t look quite real. It could be a backdrop — something painted, I mean. They do that on movie sets, and even in theaters. And all these people could be actors.”

“But where are the cameras? Or the film crew? No one looks normal. Everyone out there is dressed in a costume.” She shook her head. “I don’t know. This is very weird. It’s not where I thought we would have teleported to.”

Ben made the leap that Amy was avoiding. “What if the apparatus is . . . not a teleporting machine?”

Amy felt her stomach quiver. “What else could it be?” She didn’t want to speculate anymore. She only wanted

the problem solved, so they could go home. They were here to find their parents, weren't they? She couldn't leave until they discovered what happened to them. Did they also end up in this alcove? She had to carry on for their sake.

"Mom and Dad." Ben looked around and scratched his head. "They talked about the arch being a metaphor — something that's like something else, or stands for something else —"

"I *know* what a metaphor is."

"So, Mom said the arch in the apparatus was a metaphor, linking the past and the future. What if the apparatus is a time machine? Makes sense, doesn't it? Not a movie set, or a Dickens Fest, but we're actually here. In the Renaissance or Victorian times, whichever."

Amy spun and faced the oak door. She couldn't breathe, or think. She stretched her hands out on the door, pushing on the solid wood, going nowhere. "What did we do? We should have stayed in the lab. We should have let the scientists figure out what to do."

"No, don't you see?" Next to her, Ben nearly vibrated with excitement. "Mom and Dad went through the arch. They're *here* somewhere, and all we have to do is find them! Come on! Let's at least see if I'm right, if we are in another time."

"But we can't leave here, we'll get lost."

"No we won't. Remember, I've got the Tube map. Come on, what's the problem with finding out where we are? For all we know, Mom and Dad are right

around the corner, watching to see if anyone else came through the arch.”

“I don’t know. Let me think.”

“You can’t stay here, you’ll miss everything! We need to go check it out.”

Despite her brother’s enthusiasm, she couldn’t face all the consequences of what they’d done. She leaned forward and rested her head against the door, questions pelting her like a hailstorm. What if her parents were here? How would they find them? Where would they go? Were Mom and Dad expecting someone to come after them, like Ben said? Were they waiting for some sort of help?

And what would they do when they found out that Amy and Ben had left the hotel room, and followed them through the arch? They’d be grounded for life.

Amy suspected they were in serious trouble. Her common sense prevailed — they didn’t belong here, and they wouldn’t be able to help their parents. They needed to wait in this spot until the scientists could retrieve them or open the portal again. The scientists knew they had gone through the arch — they were right there in the lab when she and Ben stepped through — wouldn’t they immediately run the experiment again? As soon as the black opening appeared, they could go back home, right? That’s what they should do. Her mind made up, she turned around.

“I think we should wait —”

But her brother was gone. Again.

“Ben?” She rushed to the end of the passage and stuck her head around the corner. The market was still there, busy and colorful. A perfect lure for her brother. But she couldn’t see him anywhere. Panic propelled her into the crowd. She continued to call his name, hoping to be heard over all the other noise. “Ben!”

To her right, a man pushing a cart of pastries called to her. “Oy! Miss! Fresh meat pie? Baked just this mornin’. No rat meat ‘t all, I swears on my mother’s grave, though she’s not dead yet.” Who was this guy? He acted like a reject from a bad comedy sketch. “Pie? Fresh pie?”

Amy shook her head and pushed away from him, moving further into the crowd. She tried not to bump into anyone or make eye contact as she looked. Where was Ben?

A little girl tugged at her arm. “Ould ‘ou like to buy a flu’er?” The pathetic creature gazed up at her with huge eyes and held out a wilted rose.

“N-no. Thanks, but I can’t.”

A gaggle of boys rushed by, like a gang on the move. Amy followed for a few steps, supposing that Ben might be among them. He wouldn’t have made friends that fast, would he? Nothing about her brother surprised her. But she didn’t see him running with the boys. She slowed to a halt.

In the middle of the market, she had a better view of all the details. This was real. She was sure of it now. It was not a festival or a movie set. For one thing, the smells were overpowering. Smoke and other noxious fumes

were everywhere, not just in certain areas. You couldn't fake that. And why would you want to?

Also, the clothing was too diverse and too dirty to be costumes. Another thing — everyone had a hat, even the women. The ones in patched and torn dresses had ragged straw bonnets. The ones lost in a sea of fabric and struggling with their wide skirts, they sported felt hats with bows, pearl pins and other decorations. The men all dressed different, from the sellers in aprons and sensible caps, to the handsome young men in their suits and bowlers, who were probably lawyers. There was even one ridiculous gentleman buying apples, who was wearing a top hat with knickerbockers, bright-colored hose, coat with long tails, and a silk scarf at his throat. He was just the sort of thing you'd expect at a Dickens Fest.

But for all her scrutiny of the crowd, Amy still didn't see Ben. She rotated where she stood, determined to make a methodical scan. When she found him, she was going to strangle him.

At the edge of the market, she caught sight of a boy about Ben's size, talking to a woman in a plain, light-blue dress and wearing white cap. It obviously wasn't her brother. She was about to pass him over, and continue searching, when he looked right at her and pointed. The woman next to him nodded.

Amy froze and stared at the boy. Who was that? Why did he just single her out? When he saw her staring, he waved and gave her an easy smile. The warmth of his greeting tugged at her heart. Something about him

seemed familiar. Had she met anyone like him before? At this distance, it was hard to be sure. Maybe she should go talk to him and ask him if he'd seen her brother.

As focused as she was on the boy at the edge of the market, she failed to notice the woman bearing down on her until it was too late. One minute, the woman had been at the boy's side, and now she was grabbing Amy's arm, right above the elbow. A shock, like a zap of electricity, shot up her arm and into her neck.

"Found you at last, you rascal." Having said her piece — and making no sense whatsoever — the woman turned and yanked Amy through the market.

She struggled to break free, but this woman was an oak tree. Her hand was an iron band on Amy's arm. "What are you doing?"

"The nerve. Making me come out and get you." The woman pulled Amy close and studied her. "And lost your apron and mobcap, as well. If that just doesn't add insult to injury. Mrs. Harris won't go easy on you this time."

Before the woman marched on, Amy tried again to escape, shoving with her free arm. "Stop it, you're hurting me!" The woman didn't loosen her grip in the least. "Ben!" she yelled. "Ben, help me!"

The woman hit her. It was a quick but effective blow to her cheek, and it left Amy stunned. She'd never been hit like that. She'd never been in a fight, not even with her brother. Her parents had never hit or spanked her. She didn't know what to do. The woman was saying something, but Amy shook her head and only caught

the tail end of it: "... yelling to him won't do any good. Come along now."

Instead of the panic and disbelief Amy felt before, now dread rose within her. "Where are you taking me?"

"Back to where you belong. Where else? Now shut your mouth, or you'll get another slap."

While the woman dragged her along the street, Amy took stock. That boy with the cute smile had pointed her out to this iron-fisted woman. He must have recognized her. The woman had said she was taking Amy back where she belonged. What if she was taking her home? If her parents were around here, would they send someone like this woman to rescue her? Maybe. But why would someone working with her parents hit her? Her cheek still stung. The woman could be helping the scientists, and she might have been preventing Amy from making a scene in the market. Maybe they had already taken Ben away from the area, too. That's why she couldn't find him.

It was a lot of "what ifs" and "maybes," but in the end Amy decided to see where the woman would take her. She also didn't want another slap, so she kept silent.

These thoughts distracted her through the forced march out of the market and while they waited on a corner. A double-decker bus drove by, pulled by a team of horses. It looked nothing like the modern buses Amy had seen just yesterday. The woman at her side waved it down, paid the conductor and pulled her inside the stuffy box. The seats were not padded in the

least. A few passengers glared at her and her captor, but she didn't say a word. Even if she told them she was being abducted, they weren't the kind of people who would help or even care. After the bus let them off, they hurried down a broad avenue lined with saplings. The woman still gripped Amy's arm as if she were drowning.

Along the avenue were several large row houses, and Amy felt a wave of *déjà vu*. Why did all the houses in London look the same? Or at least very similar? Even their hotel looked just like these. But the street was different — not as developed, not as overgrown. Were her parents in one of these houses? Were the scientists? She imagined the nerdy group of physicists renting out a house as their headquarters. What a laugh.

Finally, after twenty minutes of walking and riding the bus, the woman pulled her toward one of the houses. This was it. Their destination. Rather than going up and through the main door, the woman steered her down a set of stairs to a small, sunken courtyard. Their hotel had two entrances like this. Ben had called the lower area the "moat," and the steps and landing at the front door was the "drawbridge."

Down in the courtyard was the basement door, on which was a plaque that read "Tradesmen." The woman yanked this open and thrust Amy through. She stumbled into an old kitchen and skidded to a stop in front of several people. They stopped whatever they were doing and stared at her. They seemed to evaluate her and found her

wanting. She felt naked, exposed and embarrassed. But there was something worse.

None of them looked familiar.

It took her only a moment to realize her mistake. She didn't know who these people were. Her parents were not here and neither were the scientists. The woman who brought her here was nothing more than a stranger, who had plans to do who-knows-what with her.

Amy didn't belong here, any more than she belonged in the market. But now she had left Ben behind, and she didn't know the way back.