

About Time

By Michael Murphey

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by Michael Murphey

## CHAPTER ONE

OCTOBER, 2044

GLOBAL RESEARCH CONSORTIUM LABORATORY  
SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA

“So doesn’t it bother you that they don’t know why some of the dogs died?” Sheila Wilkerson whispered out of the side of her mouth while glancing up into the glowing lights above her.

“That...what?” Marshall Grissom had to replay Sheila’s comment one time before he could muster the concentration to make sense of it.

“We should have practiced this naked” was what he had been thinking. “It was a mistake to let everybody keep their clothes on.”

The one time he’d suggested it, several of the female computer technicians had looked at him like he was the lowest bundle of perverse male hormonal scum on the planet. No one said anything, but the looks—and the barely suppressed snorts of disgust—were enough. (That was, of course, back before the camaraderie of shared adventure had allowed everyone to loosen up and grow a sense of humor.)

The scientists pursuing time travel had, in fact, debated that very issue. Would the required, but unpracticed, nudity create such a diversion at a critical moment as to jeopardize the initial experimental steps?

One side of the argument—let’s call it the argument of the “astronaut model faction”—was that everything must be rehearsed in precise detail. Every expected circumstance must be

duplicated and trained for, just as it had been when man took his initial steps into space. Every effort must be made, and no expense spared, to maximize the first time travelers' chances of survival.

At the GRC, this philosophy represented a distinctly minority position.

The Global Research Consortium *will include, does include, did include*, some of the world's governments—those that you *will expect, would expect, would have expected* to be involved. But the governments *will not be, are not, were not*, the main financiers. Private industry *will be, is, was* footing the majority of the bill.

*(OK, we have to come to an understanding here about tense. As you will come to see over the course of this narrative, there is really no good way to deal with tense when it comes to relating time travel experiences. Just as every point in space exists at once, it turns out that every point in time also exists at once. This is because space and time, when you get right down to the pure physics of it all, are the same thing. So the only absolutely correct tense to use is all of them. And we'll get to that later. But this makes for a cumbersome writing task. So for the convenience of everyone concerned, let's agree that, throughout, we will incorrectly use either past, present, or future tense as the standard rules of communication dictate, even though, from a theoretical physics point of view, the concept of tense is absurdly naïve.)*

So the philosophy that controlled the project regarding the Travelers themselves was different. Training was fine, but ensuring everyone's survival *was* expensive. And, as the supervising representatives of the various global conglomerates pointed out, the Travelers themselves didn't really have to do anything. They didn't have to push any buttons or fly any ships or punch in any navigational coordinates, so there was no problem if their concentration was a little bit divided at the critical moment of passage. All they had to do was observe and

report. So what was all the training about anyway? These people were going to be compensated very well—if they survived.

As far as the nudity went, any male who suggested that some of the rehearsals should take place in the buff was automatically subjected to the unspoken suspicion, mostly from the women scientists and female Travelers candidates, that all he really wanted was a peek at a naked woman. And what was that all about? Were they not all professionals? Hadn't they all seen members of the opposite sex naked before? Weren't they all adults?

Up until this moment, despite his genuine belief in leaving no aspect of this historic mission to any sort of chance or uncertainty, Marshall had granted that the scientific gravity of the occasion should, indeed, be able to overcome the male animal's natural penchant—anytime, anywhere—for lust.

He was, for example, able to deal with Flight Lieutenant Marta Hamilton's nakedness. The lieutenant was a native of Nevis, an island jewel at the top of the Lesser Antilles archipelago in the Caribbean Sea. With skin the color of lightly creamed coffee, Marta stood a couple of people down to Marshall's left. She was petite, with muscular shoulders and compact breasts crowned by tiny black nipples. Her waist was a tight V down from her torso, but a thick twist of black hair between her legs maintained the last mystery of her femininity.

Marta was certainly not an unattractive woman.

But Shelia...

Clearly, nobody had accounted for Sheila Wilkerson in the nude.

Throughout the training program, her beauty had been evident to everyone involved. She was tall, with the graceful posture of a dancer, or a matador. A slightly tomboyish face and a subtly blunted nose were all that might keep her off magazine covers. Her hair was styled for

function, and not looks; sometimes raven, sometimes blond, sometimes auburn, reflective of whim or mood. The aura of sexuality she cast was pervasive.

In the climate-controlled atmosphere of the training labs, she wore form-fitting running outfits that seldom offered a glimpse of cleavage, and while the fact of her breasts was unmistakable, she kept them tightly bundled in sports bras that blunted her nipples in all but the coldest of air conditioning and negated the possibility of jiggle.

So nobody had expected this.

Standing nude immediately to Marshall's right, Ms. Wilkerson was the paragon of female sensuality.

Her bare shoulders and arms were well defined with long muscles trained for movement and flexibility. Her breasts sloped down elegantly from her chest in defiance of gravity. Each movement at some other distant point of her body set in motion tiny waves that seemed to crest and break at the top of those breasts.

Their fullness was such that the view several of the technical staff had from behind her was of backlit, glowing half circles protruding effortlessly on each side of her body beyond the outline of her arms relaxed at her sides.

Their peaks were topped by brown, ovular areolas that spread wide across the expanse. Her nipples were proud and sharp.

Sheila's body tapered to a flat waist and then flared into athletic but completely feminine hips. Her dark pubic hair was trimmed into a thin strip pointing down to the secrets below.

One of the male technicians did his best to stifle a hungry groan. The female technician beside him would have gouged him with an elbow, but she, too, was transfixed.

“The...the dogs?” Marshall asked, taking the opportunity to turn away from the lights and look directly at Sheila. He tried mightily, but he couldn’t help glancing quickly down to take in the whole magnificent view.

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Uh...but the monkeys were OK.”

“I know...but I still wonder about the dogs.”

No question now in Marshall’s mind. They should have practiced naked. The other five of them were just nondescript people. And they didn’t have a clue—well, maybe Lieutenant Hamilton did—but the four male members of the group were standing there helpless. They were all average physical specimens. The only one of them who stood out at all from the vast quantifiable physical norm was Marshall. He was 6’6” tall and had always struggled to weigh enough. His chest was completely unremarkable, just managing not to be concave. He did, however, wear size-fourteen shoes. And, at this moment, he was acutely aware that the stereotype concerning men with big feet did tend to be true. He had always been noticeably and uncomfortably different from his peers in the shower at gym class. And now, embarking on the exploration of mankind’s next great frontier, to his mortification, Marshall could do nothing to help himself.

Yep. When Neil Armstrong took that “one small step” onto the surface of the moon, Marshall would have bet anything that he didn’t do it with a hard-on.

\* \* \*

*Busting the codes of time travel wasn't like inventing the telephone, or the light bulb. No lonely genius labored away the hours in a basement laboratory until the magical device, or formula, or forced inducement of subatomic alignment, sparked that "Aha!" moment when everything becomes clear.*

*Finally realized, the solution—or rather, more truthfully, the long string of solutions—making time travel possible was so far beyond the capabilities of a single human intellect that to even consider it might have occurred that way is fantasy taken to the absurd.*

*I am attempting to explain all of this to you from a perspective based in the second decade of the twenty-first century. My readers will perceive this to be a work of fiction for at least another forty years and, perhaps, forever. For we have no way of knowing how successful the bureaucrats of the future will be at keeping secrets. Or, for that matter, of knowing what merits secrecy and what doesn't.*

*I have no fear that anyone from my future will interfere with the telling of this story. I'm not going to use any future historical figures' real names. No hit squad from the mid-twenty-first century will come to silence me and sequester this manuscript in the interest of national security. That's all too complicated, and I'm simply not that important.*

*So here it is—the novel that every journalist feels like he has in him, just straining to get out. The irony is, my novel is still locked inside me, awaiting whatever it is that allows real novelists to create something from beginning to end. I realized some years ago, to my crushing disappointment, that I am likely devoid of that gene. To ever get this thing written, I have to lie. This story was laid out for me page by page by the reality of someone else's experience, and I take good notes. So rather than a novelist, I remain just a journalist, doing what journalists do—*

*recording the truth of history as we know that truth to be at any given moment in time, which turns out to be a whole lot more complicated than we thought.*

*So back to my explanation of what a difficult oyster time travel was to shuck.*

*I don't understand the technical part of it, certainly not well enough to explain it to anyone else. I didn't even have the benefit of the limited training courses they put the first Travelers through. Suffice it to say that Einstein did have a basic grasp of the issue. Wormholes, and time and space bending back on each other, and the speed of light...they all come into play.*

*But when it finally happened, the secrets of skipping through the decades succumbed to the brute force of massive amounts of money, massive amounts of technology, and massive amounts of energy.*

*A global consortium of governments and industries determined that time travel was the next frontier. And, driven by those things that have driven government and business for a long time—the accumulation of wealth, the defense against outside threats, and the fear that somebody who doesn't like us and we don't like might get there first—the consortium succeeded in projecting a small group of pioneers back through time.*

*Impossible, you say? Consider the twentieth century. Look at the technological journey undertaken by our parents and grandparents: a journey that spanned the distance from horse-drawn carriages to the moon. From telegraph lines to communication devices you carry in your pocket. From accounting ledgers to computers. From gunpowder to atoms.*

*Now, think of what changes await us, and in what sort of time frame those changes will occur. Disappointed because in 2010 we weren't all driving flying cars and eating magnificently flavored foods that are perfectly nutritious but devoid of calories?*

*Just wait.*

*(No, in 2043 we're still not flying around in cars. Not that we couldn't, but somewhere along the line, we decide the idea's not that hot. Do you really want your teenage daughter to worry about up and down along with left, right, forward, and back while she's texting her friends?*

*And no matter what they do, they still can't get rid of that awful aftertaste in artificial sweeteners.)*

*In just a few years, the growth of technology becomes exponential. Technology solves a lot of problems, but creates a lot of others. Mankind, it turns out, isn't destined for a smooth ride, no matter how many gadgets we come up with.*

*Being relieved of the burden of dealing with fossil fuels, for example, is great—as well as being free of the high costs associated with heating and cooling your home, or moving from one place to another. But did you ever stop to consider what other problems might come up when almost everyone on the planet has the means at his or her disposal to move to the most attractive spots and climates?*

*Terrorism and peace in the Middle East? Don't think that the abandonment of the oil-based economy solved that problem. Whereas before they were pissed because we manipulated their societies in order to get their oil, now they are even more pissed that we don't want it anymore.*

*The bottom line is that in a program not unlike the Manhattan Project we created the technological means to transcend the limits of time. And as the first Travelers took those initial tentative steps, all those bureaucrats and industrialists who knew what was happening had to be burning with an imagination completely foreign to their specifically ordered brains.*

*Who among us—even the most literal-minded—has not thought of that moment he or she would like to change? Who hasn't wondered what might have been?*

*And then there's all the time travel clichés—going back to twist the pistol out of John Wilkes Booth's hand and then watching as a better world unfolded. Murdering an Austrian housewife so Adolph Hitler would never be born. Buying those shares of Microsoft when Bill Gates still lived in Albuquerque. Placing a bet on Joe Namath and the Jets. Sneaking fifty years ahead and seeing what piece of land is going to be hot so your children will find themselves wealthy in their middle years. Or, armed with foreknowledge, doing any of a thousand completely altruistic things that would make the world a safer, better, and kinder place.*

*Unfortunately, most of what all those insiders thought wasn't recorded in any way that I would know. But I am absolutely certain the financial backers of the Travelers program were really steamed when they finally figured out that to almost all those purposes, time travel was useless.*

\* \* \*

The singular focal point of the GRC complex was one room at the end of one long hallway among dozens of rooms and hallways buried three stories deep below the southeastern Arizona desert. The underground complex spread for acres beneath the cacti.

Marshall, Sheila, Marta, and the other three Travelers were standing on a slightly raised elliptical “projection” platform constructed of twenty-first century plastic polymers infused with an impossibly complex grid of wires and sensors and microchips. Surgical-style lighting bathed the platform and its occupants from every angle, eliminating any hint of shadow.

On each side of the platform, looming seamless globes gleamed with mirrored metallic skins. The globes hummed, but appeared to do little else.

Surrounding this center stage were banks of computers, each monitoring some aspect of the undertaking. Rows of video cameras and environmental sensors filled the spaces the computers did not. A control panel made to appear much more complex than it really was stood in front of the platform.

The engineers and scientists who originally put the control panel together constructed a flat metal plate with a throttle-looking device, a switch, and a couple of buttons. The first time Program Administrator Michael Huxtable walked through the control room, he knew that wouldn't do.

“Dress it up,” he said. “Lots more lights and buttons. Put in some of those rotating red strobes, like on a police car, and an alarm that makes lots of noise.”

“Um, but we really don't need---” attempted chief scientist Yuni Andropov.

“Yes, you do need,” interrupted Huxtable. “Think about the first time the investors' representatives come down here for a tour. You invest ten billion, believe me, you want to see something more complicated than an on/off switch.”

“Um...OK,” Andropov said, motioning to an assistant to be sure and make notes.

“And a periscope,” Huxtable said. “Let's put in a periscope.”

“A periscope?” Andropov said in bewilderment. “What would we use a periscope for?”

“I don't care what you use it for,” Huxtable said. “Just put one in. And any time there's an investor's representative down here, I damn well want someone looking through it.”

Behind the embellished control panel, on a raised dais, sat three chairs with three monitors. These positions of importance belonged to the program's three top scientists.

In all, about forty people were on hand to monitor, manage, fine-tune, and observe this historic event.

Standing on the projection platform at this momentous occasion in human history, Marshall needed badly to find something to think about other than the nude Sheila Wilkerson. But the other thoughts running through his mind were all the things that could go wrong. The psychologists had impressed upon them the importance of expectations as they approached the unknown. Block out negative thoughts. Expect something good to happen! All the good expectations he could muster, though, ended with Sheila's left nipple in his mouth. And the result of that line of thinking was his growing erection.

So he decided to go negative.

The reason they were all naked in the first place.

That was the dogs.

The first time travelers were two dogs wearing sensors and miniature video cameras and recording and tracking devices all built into their collars. When the scientists waved their wands and pulled their levers and looked through their periscope, the dogs went away—somewhere. The scientists waited a little while, waved their wands and pulled their levers again, and were thrilled to see the animals reappear on the platform. Their sense of triumph was dampened, though, by the fact of the dogs' decapitation. Both dog bodies and dog heads were present, albeit disconnected, but the collars were gone.

The process of narrowing down the problem required three more trips and six more dogs. The fifth time around, someone suggested that the problem, rather than the fine-tuning of all the calibrations of the various devices and power settings, might be the collars.

So they tried putting all the instrumentation into doggie vests. This time, a head and four doggie legs were all that reappeared on the projection platform.

At that point, someone suggested that there might be some inherent problem with dogs.

So they tried pigs.

The pigs worked out better in the cases of both the collars and the vests, in that the scientists could at least barbecue the leftovers.

Eventually, the scientists tried it without vests or collars, and both the dogs and pigs were fine. The dogs came back confused and begging forgiveness, as dogs tend to do when something traumatic has happened to them. The pigs just came back annoyed.

(If the monkeys had been blessed with the cognitive ability to realize that the dogs and pigs were being used in the first steps of experimentation because they were cheaper than monkeys, the monkeys would have breathed a great sigh of relief.)

Through further analyzing and hypothesizing and scribbling of formulae, the scientists deduced that only living, breathing organic matter could be transported. You can't send devices crashing around in time and space to record things remotely. You can't write notes to yourself to send back through time to warn yourself about some impending doom. You have to send a living, breathing human who has been showered and scrubbed free of anything inorganic, and who is willing to step naked onto a well-lighted platform in full view of about thirty-five scientists and technicians, not to mention twenty video cameras.

\* \* \*

*When the program finally evolved to the projection of people, the scientists were relieved not to have to worry about things like vests and collars. They did, however, have to concern themselves with implants.*

*Take breasts, for example. By 2043, implants will advance to the point that enhanced breasts are absolutely undetectable by sight, feel, or taste—although if you want, they do come in a variety of flavors. Any woman will be able to have perfect breasts without worry that her lover will be put off by the plastic feel of a fake boob.*

*That means that women everywhere insist what they have is what they were born with. “Those other women might have had the surgery, but these puppies are all mine!” And when asked on the questionnaires about the status of their breasts, most of the female Traveler candidates said just that. Lying to a bunch of theoretical mathematicians is difficult, though, because they know the statistics. In any given group of mid-twenty-first century women, statistics show, X percentage will have modified their breasts. And taking the female Travelers candidates as a statistical sample, the numbers simply didn’t add up. They could have put all the female candidates through an expensive scanning procedure that has the capability of detecting the high-tech frauds. But the program backers didn’t want to spend the money.*

*So GRC officials simply made an announcement.*

*“If you are lying to us about any surgical implants, you will be at great risk during a time projection. It appears that inorganic matter of any kind projected through time is decimated in the process. Our best guess is that your boobs will catch on fire.”*

*So the female Traveler candidates were given the opportunity to get things off their chests, so to speak. They could either drop out of the candidate pool and apply for some other*

*job on campus to fulfill their five-year contract obligations, or they could have their implants removed. The result was a significant reduction in breast size for the remainder of the program.*

*(And in answer to your question, no. Neither Sheila nor Marta were affected by this development.)*

*By 2043, though, breasts are hardly the only things being enhanced. Artificial organs will be coming into vogue. Knees, elbows, hips, and other joints are replaced almost at a whim. Optical implants will make glasses and contact lenses obsolete.*

*Because the Traveler candidates were all young and healthy as a prerequisite to the program, these implants were not so much of an issue. Cell phones were the other big problem.*

*Yep, that's right. In the future, you won't have to carry a cell phone around—at least for the span of a few years. Tiny cell phones—fully functional computers, actually—are implanted in the cranial cavity just behind the ear. Brain function allows you to direct your phone to place calls, answer calls, or access any sort of information. The more advanced models have a 'heads up' display that places a three-dimensional image in the frontal lobe of your brain so you can see all your data or visual information by simply closing your eyes and thinking the correct coded sequence.*

*They did it that way so people wouldn't be trying to drive while watching pornography or doing their taxes. They just assumed that people would have the common sense not to drive with their eyes closed.*

*Ha!*

*This went on for just a few years before the government decided that having the entire population strolling about and talking into the air is not a good idea. For one thing, schizophrenia becomes impossible to diagnose. Everybody walks around hearing voices and*

*talking to people who aren't there. Soon, even the sanest of people were not always sure if someone was calling them, or if they were just imagining it all.*

*Finally, the phone manufacturers were required to implant a small light in the middle of the person's forehead, which became a bright red dot when you were on the phone. This solution worked well enough—except in India. But soon, people just tired of the whole thing and went back to carrying their phones in their pockets.*

*The time projection program, though, was developed during the early phone implant era, and the Traveler candidates considered it a great hardship to have to go back to using a manual device rather than thought-directed technology.*

\* \* \*

The politics of designing and defining the goals of a complex and expensive research program are fierce almost beyond imagination.

Let's again go back to the US space program as an example. Within the program, a debate raged about who the astronauts should be. Should the program be controlled by the military, or should it be civilian? Should machines or humans do the exploring? If humans, should they be scientists or engineers? Should they be athletes or race-car drivers or test pilots? Should they be writers and artists? The disputes were fierce, and the ultimate decisions were political.

Now, that was one country: one political system ruled by one president and one Congress. Multiply that by many countries and ideologies and complicate it with funding from numerous private interests, and you have all the ingredients for bureaucratic gridlock.

Even before the question of who might go came up, so many aspects of the Travelers program required so many difficult agreements and so many compromises, that by the time it got down to codifying a set of qualifications for the Travelers themselves, everyone was just tired out.

Arguing for a rigid system of physical or intellectual standards was fine. Getting enough of the others to agree with you on the specifics in order to establish a voting bloc strong enough to carry the day was something else entirely. In the end, everyone who was significant enough to have a meaningful stake simply got to pick someone, and didn't really have to defend the selection very vigorously. The candidates just had to have reasonable powers of observation, the ability to communicate those observations, and have no outstanding felony arrests.

With a few exceptions, this meant that the Traveler candidates were not so much the best and the brightest as they were the annoying and the inconvenient. In more cases than you would imagine the candidate ended up being the corporate big-wig's wife's sister-in-law's younger brother who couldn't manage anything else useful to keep him occupied in the corporation.

Some of the candidates accepted the assignment for the sense of adventure, for the pioneering ethic, for the chance to take a place in history. Most of them, though, did it for the money. They were hired on for five years. The biggest negative to that was that for five years, they (and everyone else involved with the program) were, essentially, prisoners confined to the GRC campus. They were allowed no contact with the outside world.

The biggest positive was the compensation package. Each of the candidates was paid a salary more than competitive with the jobs they were leaving in the outside world. And a trust fund was set up for each of the candidates that reflected the number of years they survived in the program. If they voluntarily left the program short of five years, they got nothing and would be

transferred to a maximum-security facility where they would be confined comfortably for the remainder of their enlistment. And under the severest of penalties in the various nations they hailed from, all were forbidden from disclosing any detail of their experience at GRC.

If they died during their five-year commitment, their heirs received the amount accrued in the trust fund up to the time of their death. Anyone who survived the five years was still bound to the nondisclosure agreements in their contracts. But they would have so much money that the temptation to violate the agreement would be mitigated.

The biggest bucks would go to those who were projected through time. Each projection added significantly to the pot. The six people standing on the projection platform during the morning of this first test—or their heirs—would be pretty much set for life.

They also got dental insurance.

Noticeably absent from the ranks of the first Traveler candidates were the pure scientists. They figured there would be plenty of time to make the trip later on. Let someone else have the thrill of being first. Not to mention the nagging suspicion that none of this was really going to work and most of these people would end up dead anyway.

\* \* \*

Marshall Grissom, Flight Lieutenant Marta Hamilton, and Sheila Wilkerson will become the three principal pioneers of time travel.

Marshall came to the program via the public relations department of one of the multinational conglomerates that made up the Global Research Consortium. Marshall was a creator of advertising and promotional campaigns in his previous life. The public relations

company for which he worked in Las Cruces, New Mexico, was just one of many branches of a subsidiary of Magnum Corp.—a significant contributor to the GRC—and Magnum’s board chairman naively dreamed of one day packaging time trips for the über-wealthy. As one of the contributors to the consortium, Magnum got to name someone to the Traveler candidate group.

The chairman asked the president of the public relations firm to choose someone who could eventually parlay his or her time travel experience into an attractive tour package once the program advanced to the point where time travel might be for sale. The president, located in Denver, went to the chief of Marshall’s branch—with whom the president was having an affair—and, in hopes of impressing her with his far-reaching power and influence, gave her the privilege of suggesting someone to send away on a five-year mystery assignment.

Had it been a different week, the PR director would likely have picked someone else. But that week, she was mad at Marshall and seized the opportunity to be rid of him.

While he was creative and hard-working, Marshall was instinctively too ethical to really be good at public relations. Something in his makeup constantly tugged at him to tell the truth, and in the director’s view, clients were frequently not best served by the truth.

Earlier that week, in fact, Marshall had been charged with presenting a market research study in which the PR director strongly suggested he emphasize certain aspects of the study while downplaying others. Marshall had not been comfortable with this, but he did his best. He made his presentation to the key members of the client corporation with an enthusiasm that seemed to ebb the nearer he got to the end. In the last moments, he was shifting awkwardly from one leg to the other, as if he had to go to the bathroom. The PR director watched with growing alarm, because she knew what was coming.

“And so, I conclude by saying we should—”

“Thank you so much, Marshall, thank you so much,” the PR director interrupted. “I think now it’s time to move on to some of the ad mockups. And for this portion of the presentation, I will introduce Angela Barton from our art department.”

All the attention around the table shifted from Marshall to the art department representative, which was easy enough to do because Angela Barton was a knockout.

That’s when Marshall cleared his throat.

The president of the client corporation—who was a heterosexual woman and didn’t care whether Angela Barton was a knockout or not—turned to look back at Marshall.

“Uh,” Marshall said.

“Marshall, I believe it’s Angela’s turn now,” the PR director said quickly, but without any real hope, because she knew the president of the client corporation was most likely immune to the brevity of Angela’s skirt.

“I would like to hear anything Mr. Grissom has to add to his previous comments,” the president said.

The PR director offered a stiff smile.

“Well,” Marshall said, “I think I would be remiss if I did not point out...”

And that’s how Marshall got to be a time traveler. The PR director wanted him out of her hair, and it never really occurred to Marshall that he could say no.

Marshall, it turned out, was a good candidate. What he lacked in scientific aptitude, he made up for with his ability to communicate clearly and completely to those who didn’t speak science and technology. And a lot of the nonscientific folks in government and industry who were backing this whole thing saw a lot of value in someone who—rather than offering technical

evaluation and scientific reports—could sit down and tell them what the whole experience was like.

Marta Hamilton was a spy. On the surface, she was an officer in the Royal Air Force with degrees in engineering and physics, but she worked for the British Secret Service. She grew up in a family of modest means on the island of Nevis amid the stark beauty of the Caribbean. But in her youth, she had been indifferent to the incredible weather and scenery. Rather than succumb to the laid-back island lifestyle, she was driven by an unquenchable intellect.

Military service was the best route she could find off the island and toward an education. The Royal Air Force provided all that and more. She grabbed at the opportunity to venture into the clandestine world of international intrigue, and an aptitude for math and science led her to into the realm of high-tech espionage and all the odd alliances that the technology explosion created in the twenty-first century. She lived her life in a cocoon of professionalism that shielded her from close personal relationships and distanced her from fun.

The British government—as a participant in GRC—appointed a couple of other Traveler candidates as well. But the Brits wanted an espionage expert on the scene to keep close track of their investment and get the real story—not a filtered version aimed at keeping investors happy—so they included Marta. Strictly speaking, it turns out that lots of spies were among the Traveler candidates, confounding the consortium's attempts at security. No one was interested in any knowledge of the time travel initiative getting out to the general public, or your run-of-the-mill congressperson or senator. But key members of powerful governments and powerful conglomerates damn well wanted to know what was going on.

For the government professionals, like Marta, the point wasn't to ferret out all the little details of day-to-day operations. Rather, their governments wanted to embed these

representatives into the program to establish relationships with the scientists and bureaucrats who knew all the details, so, at the end of the day, they could provide a broad and accurate sense of what had been accomplished, and what the opportunities were.

(The industrial spies, though, were another story. The corporations they represented wanted *all* the details.)

Most of the spies didn't end up ranking very high in the Traveler candidates' hierarchy. But to the British government's chagrin, Marta was a natural who picked up on the basic concepts of time travel with apparent ease. Intellectually, she was at the top of the candidate heap, so she was chosen for the first trip. As one of a hundred or so candidates, the Brits had expected Marta to be able to hang around the program for five years without any real danger of being fried in a time machine.

Marta, on the other hand, was thrilled at the prospect.

Sheila Wilkerson had been a broadcast journalist working her way up the experience ladder.

Now, stunning beauty is hardly uncommon, particularly among aspiring female broadcast journalists. Sheila, though, combined her extraordinary looks with the raw sensuality that just seems to radiate from a very few remarkable women. Men seemed to instinctively intuit that she was a sexual enthusiast. Not that Sheila was promiscuous, *per se*. She was just one of those women who enjoyed sex, knew better than to confuse lust with love, and hadn't found all that many men with whom she was impressed enough to consider a long-term relationship. She was, in fact, quite undecided about the whole monogamy thing.

This set of circumstances worked fine in her personal life when it came to her peers. Where her superiors were concerned, though, Sheila's persona created some difficulties for her.

Her path to the time travel program was initiated when an executive of the parent corporation that owned the network she worked for noticed her and asked her to dinner. He was almost immediately disappointed to find her a remarkably focused individual who was determined to overcome her good looks and be one of those rare broadcast journalists who succeeded on the basis of competence. That meant that she wasn't going to sleep with him. His advances were rebuffed in such an emphatic way that the executive worried that other corporate honchos might get wind of his failure. So he chose Sheila as his company's representative to the Travelers program.

The program coordinators quickly discovered that, besides being really hot, Sheila was graced with both athleticism and brains. Like Marta and Marshall, her overall performance pushed her to the top of the list.

The other three Travelers for the first mission—including Raul Hinohosa of Mexico, Omar al Habir of Saudi Arabia, and Alexsi Tereshkova of Georgia (not the one that's always on Ray Charles's mind, but the one in the former Soviet Union)—had all been unremarkable in their former chosen professions, but they displayed aptitudes that led the scientists to choose them over others.