

## Chapter 5—A Really Poor Use of a Time Machine

Poor Lisa. Poor emotional Lisa.

Lisa was saddled with an overabundance of emotion, and when she fell in love, it was as if a two-ton steel dumpling fell on her head, releasing a toxin that drained every drop of reason and logic from her veins, leaving her numb, lifeless, incapacitated.

She carefully arranged the plates on the table, adjusted the candles, and stared again at the geometry of her dinner presentation. Deep in thought, her mind drifted. Of course Bruce was worth it. Bruce was the object of her obsession. Yet, he did not seem entirely right for her emotionally or intellectually. As she thought about it, he wasn't entirely right physically, either. Still, there was something about him.

He was smart, very smart. Sometimes too smart. Sometimes so smart he seemed retarded. Here it was, Valentine's Day, and he was nowhere. Late again.

The phone rang.

"Lisa! Leese! This is Bruce! Happy Valentine's Day! Hey, I got you a present."

"Where are you?"

"Look outside your window."

Lisa walked over to the window and peered down at the dark, narrow street below her apartment. There was nothing there except a semitrailer.

"I don't see you. Just a big semi—"

"That's it! That's your present! Look! I'm waving out the side window!"

"Huh? You bought me a semi?"

"No no no. We're going to take a trip in it."

"Trip? Where? When?"

“Right now. You don’t need to pack. I got everything here. Just lock up and come down.”

Lisa sighed. She snuffed the candles, put away the dinner, and paused in contemplation.

“I’m doing this for love,” she told herself calmly, emphatically, coldly. Then she snapped up her keys, locked the door, and walked down the steps.

The door to the cabin opened.

“Step up, Lisa!”

She struggled into the cabin and sat in the passenger seat.

“OK, Bruce. What’s this all about?”

“We’re going on a trip.”

“Where?”

“Guess!”

“So, OK. You know my family is German and they came from Dresden. You’re taking me on a trip to Dresden, like I told you I dream about all the time.”

“No. Guess again.”

“I’m not in the mood for games.”

“This is a time machine, and we’re going back to the time of Christ.”

Lisa sighed disdainfully. “I’m not in the mood for games. Please. A church? Museum? Bible something...?”

“No, it’s a time machine, and we’re going back to the time of Christ.”

“Eeeeeiiii!” Lisa screamed. “Bruce! You think you could do something normal? Flowers! I like flowers! Or chocolate, or maybe perfume, or maybe just a quiet dinner! But no! Some stupid crazy—”

“Lisa, you’ll enjoy this. No one else will ever experience it.”

The rear cabin window slid open and a short curly-haired teenager popped his head through, handing Bruce a laptop. “Huh, whoa! Howdy, Lisa!”

“Lenny?” Lisa turned her head slowly in Bruce’s direction. “Bruce! You’re bringing Lenny with us?”

“Well, yeah. I suppose I should’ve said no one will experience this besides you and Lenny.”

“Bruce! This is—”

“Just cool it and brace yourself.”

Lisa’s scream was like an air raid siren.

Surroundings melted into complete and utter blackness. Senses went numb: no sound, no light, no smell, no touch, like death but with consciousness. Then in an instant a landscape began to materialize around them. There were sand, trees, and a giant wall extending as far as her eyes could see. Lisa’s mouth hung agape, accompanied by a slightly nauseated feeling.

“What is...? Bruce...?”

“That wall you see is the wall of Rome.”

Tears flooded Lisa’s eyes, and her eyes flooded her mind with imagery that she could believe, but could not believe. She began to shake. This is a gift, she thought, a tremendous, wonderful gift. To be able to see Him! To talk to Him! To hear Him! Not the distillation of edits passed on over centuries, but His words from His mouth. And perhaps, if they were fortunate, to rescue Him! Or at least to tell Him that even in the darkest moment, when everything seems wrong and cruel and evil, He can be confident that His religion has grown and is alive and He is remembered vividly and lovingly millennia to the future.

Tears pouring down her cheeks, she turned to Bruce and hugged him, sobbing.

“Bruce, this is wonderful. You are wonderful. I’m so sorry, I’m so lucky—”

“Right, I know. But first we have to get past the guards.”

Six young Romans approached the truck with shields and spears drawn, apprehensively looking over the alien craft.

“Slight miscalculation. Should’ve been inside the wall. Would’ve saved some stress.”

“What do we do?”

“This is what I brought Lenny for. He knows Latin.”

“Subsisto! Quisnam es vos?” a guard yelled.

Lenny, dressed in a toga, crawled out of the rear of the truck.

“Amicita! Nos addo munia pro Caesar!”

Lenny handed them each something, and after a tense pause and a rustle of cellophane, they appeared to start eating, followed by grins, laughter, and friendly waves. Lenny said something and hurried back into the truck. The gate opened, Bruce started the engine, the wheels dug into the sand, and incredibly they motored into the walled city.

“Leese, that’s one thing you won’t find in the history books. Twinkies opened the gates of Rome!”

Bruce gazed at a map as the truck moved. “Leese, crawl through the hatch and get your toga on. I’ll do mine right after you.” Lisa began opening the hatch and writhing through to the other side. “You got everything you’ll need in the toga. I mean, it’s not your standard issue toga. Got an inside hip pocket with an SW990L. It’s loaded with a laser and it’s got these neat tritium—”

“What?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a handgun.”

“WHAT?!”

“Purely defensive. Fast action, great sights, lasers make you dead-on, nine millimeter with hollow points, blows a hole through anything. Lenny’ll fix the backstraps to fit your hand like a glove.”

Lenny quickly yanked Lisa through the hatch before she could kick.

The white Arch of Septimius towered above them, sparkling in the sunlight. Coupled with the marble steps and marble lower face of the Curia Julia, it made the three travelers snow-blind in the bright afternoon sunlight. Awe-inspiring if not intimidating to them, the newcomers, but not as much to the members of the growing plebeian mob who were transfixed on the semi.

“Everyone is so young here. Like a fountain of youth!” Lisa observed.

“Yeah. Top age is probably thirty-five.”

“Top age? Why?”

“Pffft...war, disease, plague, murder—”

“What? So you brought me here? What if we get sick? What if—”

“Leese, all you got to do is just be quiet and follow Lenny and me.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Trust me! Nothing to it. Lenny does the talking. Just listen and smile. Hey, Lenny!”

Lenny poked his head through the hatch.

“Lenny, wheel out the goods and lock up.”

“Roger, boss.”

They wheeled a large cart out of the trailer and down the ramp, locked the truck, and began the arduous task of pushing the cart up the steps of the Curia Julia. Lisa walked by the side of the cart, looking nervously about. At the top of the steps they parted doors, which opened into

an expansive room, housing a number of men who turned quickly and rose, startled, with quite angry looks.

One of them pointed and shouted, “Quisnam permissum lemma penetro?”

A guard shrugged and shook his head.

Another yelled, “Quisnam es illud populus?”

Lenny responded, “Nos es viator! Munio pro Caesar!” Subsequently he opened the cart and removed crates and boxes, doling out samples to each senator.

Lisa drew her fists to the side of her head, her eyes bulging, her mind throbbing because of what she saw, her face reddening. Then she turned to Bruce.

“You ass!” she screamed. “You came here just to give Twinkies, Ho Hos, and Wonder Bread to the—”

Bruce clamped his hand over her mouth, discretely moving his lips close to her ear, and whispered, “Don’t...talk.”

A senator gave a Twinkie to Lenny, who ate it without any signs of distress. Then another senator gave a Ho Ho to the guard, who cautiously tasted it then gulped it down, smiling widely. The senators were curious, though a bit cautious. With immeasurable relief that their guinea pigs did not die, they tasted the treats, then broke into a spat of laughter.

Lenny was emboldened, “Tracto nos...? Puella?”

A senator turned to the guard and whispered, “Nutritor lemma ut bestia.”

The guard calmly uttered, “Adveho,” and motioned for them to follow him. He led them down the steps of the Curia Julia and across the Forum.

Bruce whispered to Lenny, “Where’s he taking us?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You were talking to them!”

“Yeah, but I didn’t hear what the senator told him.”

“Well, what did you ask for?”

“I asked for entertainment, kind of.”

“Kind of? Don’t you know what you’re talking about? You’re supposed to know Latin!”

“So I was at a loss for words. So what?”

“This isn’t Disney World, you know.”

“This stinks,” Lisa snarled.

“Beg your pardon? I think our luck is on the upswing, Leese.”

“No, I mean this place stinks! Everybody stinks! Rome stinks! It’s like a sewer!”

“Leese, this is kind of a third-world country. It’s not like they have hot running water and underarm deodorant.”

“This is stupid! I never should have got into that truck. You had no intention of seeing Christ! You lied to me!”

“Now, I never said—”

“Liar!”

“Whoa! The Colosseum! Entertainment!”

There in front of them was the white marble Colosseum. The guard led them inside through an archway and down a flight of stairs, ushering them into a room.

“Exspecto hic,” he said, closing a gate behind them and walking away.

“Lenny? What’s he doing?”

“He said to wait here. Probably will get an usher to lead us to our seats.”

“This is the place where they kill the animals, isn’t it? What a freakin’ treat.”

“It’s an adventure, Leese.”

“Adventure my—”

“Let’s not be hasty. This will be fun. You’ll see.”

The wait was interminable. Minutes passed in the dark room. They could hear the crowd roar, punctuated by other noises, the sound of steel, shouts, groans, and trampling of feet. While Lenny and Bruce drank in the sounds and the atmosphere, Lisa became more agitated by the minute. She tapped her toes, walked in circles, rolled her eyes, and then suddenly burst, unable to contain her emotions any longer.

“Arrgh!” she groaned, stomping her feet. “I’m sick of this! I’m getting out of here! And when we get back, Brucie dear, we’re through!” She walked to the steel gate, looked it over, pushed it, shook it, angrily kicked and shoved it.

“It’s locked! It won’t budge!”

“Let me try.”

Bruce pushed against the gate, tried to lift it, looked for a latch, but found nothing.

“Lenny?”

Lenny looked the gate over, on the sides, top to bottom, then shrugged.

“Nope.”

“Nope what?”

“That’s the way out,” Lenny pointed. Then they saw the light of day pouring in from a wooden door that had opened in the darkness ahead of them.

“C’mon, Leese! Hurry! Let’s get good seats!”

They ran up a ramp and into the sunlight, slowing their pace in disbelief as they found themselves in the middle of the arena.

“Yeaaaaaaaaw! Wah wah ewe wah! EEEEEEEAAAAGGGGGHHHHH!”

“Lisa, control yourself.”

“WE AREN’T BEING ENTERTAINED! WE ARE THE ENTERTAINMENT!” she screamed. The crowd cheered approval of her quaint display as the wood door shut abruptly behind them.

“Lenny! How the hell did this happen?”

“Something lost in the translation, I guess. You know, you shouldn’t have whispered in her ear.”

“Bite me! What’s the big deal about that?”

“Embracing in public is illegal here.”

“So is asking for women for entertainment!”

“Huh? How’d you—”

“Don’t think I know any Latin, huh? Guess again, geek!”

“Yeah, well Lisa should have shut her mouth! They hear her talk and carry on and figure she’s a barbarian.”

“Both of you should die! Where’s my gun—”

“Lisa, don’t! Don’t! Don’t!”

Lenny hurriedly backed away from them.

“Lenny! Get over here! We need to stay together!”

But Bruce’s admonitions were too late. Lenny was over a hundred feet away from them when the trap door in the floor of the Coliseum opened up releasing seven very hungry, emaciated, starving hyenas. In an instant they were on top of Lenny, who writhed on the ground. The crowd cheered.

“WWWHHHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

“Shut up, Lisa! The 990L! Take off the safety, use the laser. Hold it with both hands, and don’t squeeze the trigger unless the red dot’s on hyena flesh.”

One, two, three shots. Four, five, six...ten, eleven, and then silence. Bruce ran to Lenny, put an arm under his shoulder, and dragged him to his feet.

“Something’s wrong.” Bruce looked at the stands for cheers and approval, but there were none. There were no boos. There was no movement, only still, complete silence. “The guns freaked them out. They’re afraid of us. We need to get out of here fast.”

The gate at the far end of the arena opened. Armed guards swarmed through.

“Lenny! How do you say to stay away?”

“Permoveo absentis.”

Bruce fired shots into the air. People screamed. “Permoveo absentis! Permoveo absentis!” he shouted. “Lisa! Put your back next to mine and face backward. Keep your gun out. Cover our backs!”

The trio moved out through the gate.

“Don’t be afraid to shoot, Lisa! Permoveo absentis! Permoveo absentis!”

A throng gathered away from them, buffered by a few hundred feet for safety, but they were growing in number one by one, two by two, and becoming bolder, fueled by curiosity.

The truck was in sight, but the gap between them and the mob was narrowing.

“Lees! We have to run for it. Lenny’ll slow me down. You go ahead. Take the keys from my pocket. Run! Open the cabin!”

“But—”

“Just run!”

Lisa ran to the cabin and fumbled with the key. Bruce hobbled as fast as he could, but the crowd ran faster. Lisa left the door open. Bruce heaved Lenny's body into the center of the cabin and leaped into the driver's seat, slamming the door on clawing hands amid painful screams.

"Lisa, I'm making this up to you."

"Don't both—"

"No! It was a bad idea. A horrible idea for a Valentine's Day."

"Just get us home."

"No! Better!" Bruce fumbled with the laptop as the mob crawled over the semi. "You wanted Dresden. Dresden you'll get."

"Really, no. I don't—"

"I need to make this right. I need to fix this. Space and time are relative. Let's see. February 14..." A loud crash startled him as a mallet shattered the windshield. "Jeesh!"

"Get us out of here, Bruce!"

Bruce screamed and clicked the touchpad. The ancient Roman vista flowed like molasses into a thick blackness. Senses went numb: no sound, no sight, no smell, no touch. Then in an instant, there was a change. A landscape began to materialize around them, a distinctly European landscape. There were shops, a bank, a theater, a quaint restaurant, and in the distance, vaguely discernable in the twilight, the towering landmark Frauenkirche and New Market square.

"Well, Bruce, looks like we are indeed in Dresden. I should be grateful."

"Yeah! Whew! Not bad!"

"But—"

"But nothing, Leese. We're out safe! Don't look a gift horse in the mouth!"

"But something's weird."

“Oh, good grief. Come on, it’s all—”

“What year is this?”

“Year? It’s two—”

“Check your laptop.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And what is that insignia on the side of the building?”

“It’s just a swas...oh hell...”

“And Bruce, what’s that buzzing sound?”

“Buzzing sound? It’s...oopsie.”

“Tell me.”

“Seems like I made a data entry error.”

“Which is?”

“This is Valentine’s Day, February 14, and this is Dresden, but it’s 1945, and...and...and

I have to do this fast...”

“Yes?”

“That,” he said, nodding to the sky as he typed on the keyboard, “is the U.S. Eighth Air Force.”

Explosions rocked the semi as flames leaped hundreds of feet into the air and smoke rolled in monstrous billows to the sky.