

# The Tunnel

by Robert Laird

## Chapter 1

Carth was getting cold, but he was used to it. A quarter-mile back in a water-filled cave, he had bigger problems. His buddy was missing. The 70-degree water, normally crystal clear, was filled with tiny clay particles. Silt.

Little River was a high-flow spring that created a steady stream of cold, clear water which flows into the Suwanne River of central Florida. Carth had made over one hundred dives in this underwater cave system over the last twenty years and could literally find his way out blindfolded. And that may be necessary today, he thought.

Moments before, his buddy Louis had made an unusual mistake. A single downward kick from his Jet Fins created a cloud of silt which quickly filled the small passageway. Carth's experience took over and he slid to the right, out of the flow, and calmly waited in a hollow. He knew that in a few moments the high flow of outflowing water would clear the passageway and he would be able to see again.

I've got plenty of air, plenty of time, he thought, so just wait it out. The only sound was the slow exhale of bubbles from his regulator. The bubbles cascaded across the limestone ceiling, looking for the highest part of the tunnel. The beam from his 50-watt canister light could not penetrate the silt, making only a bright brown glow. This was taking longer than he thought it should..

With the skill that came from 20 years of safe cave diving, Carth placed his hand over his light. The resulting blackness might allow him to see perhaps a faint glow from Louis' light. But there was nothing. A minute later, he knew he'd better act. The silt was not blowing out of the passage. That might mean Louis is entangled in the line and struggling, making the silt worse.

His awareness of where the main guideline was allowed him to locate it only seconds later. He gently touched the line and waited. He would be able to feel any movement up or down the line. It was a small passage and Louis had been leading the dive, so Carth felt sure he was only 15 or 20 feet upstream. Half a minute later, Carth was worried. There was no hint of movement on the line.

The silt was still bad and he couldn't read his gauges. But he knew he had at least five minutes before he reached thirds: one-third of the air in his tanks would have been consumed: time to exit the cave.

Still plenty of time, he thought. I'm starting to sound like I'm trying to convince myself. Not a good sign.

Carth slowly and carefully proceeded further into the cave, hoping to break out of the silt cloud. After 50 feet of careful finning, he finally saw the silt begin to clear. He was only 15 feet from a corner. He took a quick glance behind him and saw the slowly receding silt cloud as a brown wall of muck.

Ugh, he thought, I'm going to have to go back through that to get out.

But Carth knew that would be a piece of cake. As long as everything else was going okay. He found out a moment later, it wasn't.

## Chapter 2

Carth turned the corner and had to stare for a moment to take in what he saw. A cave diver, fully equipped but with an extra bottle clipped to his side, was heading for him at full steam. Carth barely had time to get out of the way before the diver blasted past him. And he was dragging Louis by the tank manifold.

The diver never even slowed down and was not concerned with his finning technique. A moment later Carth saw him plunge into the brown cloud he had just recently emerged from. And the new cloud kicked up by the diver engulfed him a second later. He didn't hesitate a moment longer and headed out of the cave, only a few feet behind the towed body of his friend.

The last 100 feet of Little River was a near-vertical shaft. A normal dive would find the cave divers slowly ascending the shaft, pausing about half way up for a few minutes. At the 30-foot mark, most divers who had planned a long dive in the cave would have a 72 cubic foot tank filled with pure oxygen. The oxygen would be breathed to accelerate the process of outgassing the dangerous nitrogen bubbles that had been pushed into soft tissues throughout the body. This process helped the diver avoid "the bends," a neurological disorder which can become anything from an annoying tingle to death. After breathing oxygen at the 20 foot and 10 foot stops, the divers would exit the water with a good certainty that they would be safe.

Today, Carth and the diver with Louis in tow didn't pause at the bottom of the shaft. Carth watched as the diver pulled Louis up so he was eye-to-eye. The diver skillfully added a small amount of air into his own wings -- air bladders for compensating for buoyancy changes -- and started to swim up the shaft. As he did, he firmly pushed his hand into the area just below Louis' diaphragm. They ascended steadily and every few feet the diver would expel a bit of air from his own wings, avoiding the death-dealing out-of-control ascent. The same principle was causing the air in Louis' lung to expand. If it wasn't purged by pressing in on his diaphragm, the air would leap past the lung/capillary interface and force air into the blood stream.

This would be almost certain death for Louis, so Carth was gratified to see the diver skillfully control the ascent and, at the same time, keep Louis from embolizing. This was a textbook life saving effort, and Carth had never seen it done better. Although filled with concern for his friend, he was wildly curious as to who this diver could be.

Not taking any more time than was necessary to control the ascent, the diver surfaced a few moments later with Carth at his side. Carth knew the diver would be exhausted from towing Louis, so he took over.

Less than three minutes from the time Carth saw the diver appear out of the tunnel, Louis' body was on the beach and Carth ripped off his gear and started CPR on his friend.

"Call 911!" he screamed at some people he saw on the steps leading to the parking lot. "Call 911!"

Turning Louis on his side, Carth tried to get the water out of his lungs, then put him on his back and started the breathing. Breathing, breathing, pushing on his chest, breathing, breathing, Carth continued for what seemed like hours. But his adrenaline was getting the better of him, and he was scared. The other diver had finally dragged himself out of the water, threw his gear off and came over to spell Carth.

A minute later, Louis started to gag and cough. Carth was incredulous, watching his friend

come back life. He helped Louis roll over on his side while the other diver raced over and grabbed an oxygen tank. Together they helped Louis breathe from the oxygen regulator. Carth wanted to shout at Louis, "What the hell happened?" but he was really angry with himself. This was his fault, he was sure. He had almost killed his friend and he felt terrible. Twenty years of diving and instruction and I kill a friend.

"But he's not dead," said the mystery diver.

"What?" Carth asked.

"You said you killed a friend. He's not dead."

Carth hadn't realized he had been vocalizing his thoughts and was now embarrassed on top of everything else. He choked down his emotions for a moment and looked up at the diver.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Jim Oliver. Pleased to meet you."

"Hi. I'm Carth Pickens and this lucky son of a bitch is Louis Nisson."

Jim looked to be very young to Carth, and that made his rescue even more special. Not many kids can handle themselves like that, he thought.

In the distance they heard a siren. Louis was gasping and coughing, but looked to be okay otherwise. An hour later, they were all at the hospital. Louis went home that night, sold his tanks and bought a lottery ticket.

## Chapter 3

"How long have you been cave diving," Carth asked.

"A little more than three years," said Jim. "How about you?"

"My whole life, practically."

Carth and Jim had agreed to meet at Peacock Springs State Park the next day. A brisk, cool wind sighed through the pine trees. Jim shivered a bit and welcomed the sunlight fighting its way down to them. It was cooler than usual for a March day in central Florida.

"My dad wouldn't let me go in the caves until I was 18, but I've been diving since I was 12," said Carth.

"So how old are you now?" Jim asked.

"An ancient 42, but after yesterday, I feel like 100."

"Wow! You're a real old-timer!" Jim said. "Oops" he quickly said, quietly realizing he shouldn't have said that. Carth laughed.

"Well," Carth smiled, "I'm not quite ready for the retirement home, but, yeah, I've been doing this a while."

With a practiced eye, Carth casually looked at Jim's equipment and watched him prepare his cave kit. He was impressed once again. Rather than the usual jumble of hoses, cords, regulators, unnecessary d-rings, lights, waist bags and other nonsense often found on new cave divers, Jim's kit looked clean and orderly. It was a near match with his own configuration. Carth thought back to the years it took him to develop such an efficient cave kit and envied the quickness at which the new crop of cave divers learned the right way. Actually, he thought, not that many do it right. It's still an up hill battle with most.

Carth asked, "You know how many successful rescues are done in underwater caves?" Jim blinked, not knowing the answer.

"I can count them on two hands. You did a pretty great thing yesterday."

"Aw, you're the one that got him breathing again. I was just the tow truck," said Jim.

"Misplaced modesty, Jim," said Carth. "That was a fine piece of rescue. If you hadn't done everything just right, I'd be burying Louis right now."

"Well, it's too bad Louis quit cave diving, but I can also understand it," said Jim.

Jim took a look into Carth's impressive equipment bins, plastic tubs that held a variety of equipment.

"What's this?" Jim asked. He had extracted what appeared to be a very old hockey puck. But this was thicker and was made of some transparent material. He peered into it and saw a clock face.

"Oh, please be careful with that," said Carth. "That belonged to my grandfather. It was handed down to him by his father, my great-grandfather, so it's really old."

"But what is it?"

"Well," Carth said, scratching his heads, "that's probably the oldest underwater timepiece in existence."

"What in the world was your great-grandfather doing with an underwater watch?" asked Jim.

"My grandfather was a diver . . . and my father, too. My great-grandfather was an eccentric inventor around the turn of the century, so he was always trying to make things work underwater. He was very safety conscious and was always worried about his son -- my grandfather -- trying to

do too much underwater."

"But a watch . . . er, a clock? SCUBA wasn't even invented until 1938. Why would your grandfather need an underwater timepiece?"

"Beats me. He did some hard-hat diving before SCUBA came along. I suppose my great-grandfather thought he'd need to know when it was time for dinner. I don't even know for sure if he actually made it or not. My great-grandfather really knew how to make things, though. If he did make it, it's a real tribute to his skill: that housing has never leaked, and I've taken it on many dives . . . to over 100 feet!"

Jim looked a little closer. The clock hands hadn't moved. "Does the . . . what is this, a pocket-watch? Does it need to be wound?"

"Yeah, it's a pocket-watch. You have to remove all twelve of the screws to get at it, and it needs to be wound once a day. But it's broken now."

"Mind if I take a look?" asked Jim. Before he even asked the question, Jim had his toolkit out and had started removing the screws. Carth couldn't quite say no at that point, so he just watched.

Jim's hands moved with a mechanical smoothness, holding the screwdriver just so. He never hesitated, strong hands twirling the screws out of their homes efficiently, never marring the screw heads. Carth could now see why Jim's cave gear was in top shape: he was a born engineer.

"This gasket is Bakelite!" said Jim. "He's got fine ridges in the glass which "v" into the Bakelite, forming the seal. Very nice work."

"If you say so, Jim. I just wish the darn watch would work."

"Well," Jim cast a sidelong glance at Carth, "if you give me a shot at it, maybe I can get it working again."

Carth somehow knew Jim, if anyone, could get it working again. "Sure . . . why not?"

"So did you want to do a dive?" asked Jim.

Carth's buddy had quit and he generally didn't like to cave dive solo. And from the performance he had seen yesterday first hand, here in front of him was a perfect replacement.

"Yeah, but I also wanted to ask if you usually dive solo, like yesterday?"

Jim nodded. "It's hard to find a good buddy, and I love to dive so much, I just carry a buddy bottle."

"Well, I'm short one buddy, and want to know if you want the job?"

"Sure!" said Jim. "As long as you promise to tell me about the old days. Seems your family pre-dates Cousteau."

Carth rolled his eyes, but smiled at Jim and, in a really bad Humphrey Bogart imitation, said, "This looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

## Chapter 4

By summer, Carth and Jim had done over 30 dives in various systems, and Carth could see that the skill shown in Little River that day was not a fluke. The kid was good. Almost as good as he was, he had to admit. But I probably have a few more things I can teach him.

"Why did you quit teaching?" asked Jim.

"It had something to do with my divorce, I guess," said Carth. "I kind of zoned out and started diving solo, stopped taking on students, and just collapsed into myself. Once I almost stayed in the cave . . . Couldn't think of a reason to come back out."

"You obviously did, though," said Jim. "What brought you back?"

"I guess I wasn't through having fun. There's still a lot of cave to discover, and that's the ultimate fun there is."

"So when are we going to lay some line?" Jim knew that he was being tested and, at the same time, being mentored by Carth. Carth had stuck to the known systems at first -- Ginnie Springs, Telford, Peacock, Cow Sink, Little River, Cheryl Sink -- but slowly took Jim to more and more of the obscure tunnels. Jim was anxious to see some virgin cave, where no one had gone before. He knew Carth would eventually get around to it, when he felt confident with his new buddy.

"Well, I'll tell you a secret. Just before Louis got himself resurrected, he and I had found a new tunnel in the Madison Blue cave system. We didn't have the gas to penetrate it, but it's very well hidden and I'm pretty sure it's still there, waiting for me."

"Us! You mean us!" Jim was excited.

Carth's enthusiasm matched Jim's, but he disguised it a bit better. He smiled, "Yeah, it's waiting for us. Let's go!"

Madison Blue Springs sits alongside the Withlahoochee River and has been a favorite dive site for cave divers for many years. In earlier times, it was a favorite swimming hole and, before that, a watering hole for horses. Cold, fresh water streams from its deep basin in large quantities throughout the year. Only a major flood on the river will slow the flow.

The land around the main basin contained a few other sinkholes which were windows into the cave. More importantly, they were also alternative exits for cave divers that might get in trouble. On a well planned dive, however, a diver could also execute a traverse: entry at one sinkhole and exit out another. Carth was familiar enough with Martz Sink but hadn't thought too much about the other karst windows in the surrounding area. He always entered the cave through the main basin, ducking through a small opening called The Rabbit Hole.

"Consider this first dive a familiarization dive, okay?" asked Carth.

"Sure." said Jim.

"We'll take an exploration reel along, just in case things go really smoothly. We might have enough air to lay a couple hundred feet of line."

Jim was trying to look calm and nonchalant. "That's a good plan," he said. "You're leading the dive, right?"

"You bet. That'll give you the chance to look around." Carth grinned at his buddy, well knowing that they would probably empty the reel before turning the dive on thirds.

The dive was going well. Jim's breathing rate wasn't nearly as fine-tuned as Carth's, but they

managed to find the opening of the new tunnel with plenty of air left. Even if Carth had a lot of air left when Jim reached thirds on his own air, the dive was "called" and they would return to the surface going back the way they came. Carth skillfully plucked his exploration reel from his harness webbing, tied it off to a limestone outcrop, and plunged eagerly into the mysterious passage. The opening to the new tunnel was high on the ceiling and very tight -- a major restriction. All the previous divers who came this way missed it, he realized, because you have to practically shove your head against the ceiling and be looking down the tunnel to realize it was there.

His light pierced the cobalt blue water for 30 feet ahead and he saw the tunnel was gradually ascending and curving to the right. That would put us underneath the heavy forest area on the other side of the river, he thought. He glanced back at Jim and, although it's hard to smile with a regulator in your mouth, Jim was clearly beaming with happiness. His finning technique was perfect; not a single wisp of silt was disturbed by their passage. That was all the more important with a new tunnel. They were probably the first people to ever see this tunnel.

Wrapping the line from time to time, Carth was trying to keep track of the knots in the line, tied at 10 foot intervals. Okay, he surmised, we've gone about 600 feet and I'll be running out of line pretty soon. It was then he saw the tunnel rise sharply. He hesitated a moment, glanced at his bottom timer -- which keeps track of the total amount of time in the water, a modern version of his grandfathers pocket-watch -- and did a quick calculation in his head. He knew they had a decompression obligation -- the need to let the nitrogen bubbles escape their system slowly and safely -- but it wouldn't be a long one.

As Carth slowly ascended the rising tunnel, he glanced back at Jim and held up his hand: Ok? Jim flashed an "Ok" sign back, so Carth continued up. A moment later, he knew he had to be seeing things: there was daylight up ahead! That's impossible, he thought. Well, not impossible. But this was too easy.

He held his hand over his light and, sure enough, there was daylight coming down from above. This must be a very well hidden karst window, he thought. In the 60s and 70s, intrepid cave divers would spend weeks every year wandering around the forests on the karst plains of Florida, looking for these windows. It was easier to find the karst window and dive into a tunnel, lay line and hope you found some other line that was laid from another tunnel, originating from another window. This was how, in the early days, cave systems were found and mapped. A little at a time. SCUBA technology wasn't advanced enough to allow long dives, so the karst window was a more sure way of exploring and expanding the knowledge of a cave system.

This was a fairly significant discovery and Carth was happy for Jim. His first virgins cave and he strikes it rich. They would take basic compass, depth and distance notes on the way back, created a stick map and publish their finding in the cave diving journals. Jim would have his name on a map, something to be proud of.

Jim flashed his light at Carth to get his attention, and gave him the thumbs-up hand signal. He had reached thirds; only 2/3rds of his air remained in his tanks. "Calling the dive" was the ultimate command in cave diving. The diver giving that signal was never argued with, and it should always be returned immediately by all the other members of the dive team. That way there was no doubt in everyone's mind: someone had reached thirds and it was time to head out of the system. So, Jim was puzzled when Carth hesitated, and looked above them toward the light.

Jim knew that many cave divers fudged on thirds, pushing further on a little while longer. He



also knew it was playing Russian roulette. If any team member developed a catastrophic loss of air, there may not be enough air in the buddy's tank to get them both to safety. He didn't expect someone as competent and safety-minded as Carth to ignore such a basic rule of safe cave diving.

Carth saw the thumbs-up from Jim, but knew that if they didn't surface he would have a hard time finding this opening in the heavy forest. He had two options: head on back the way they came, or do their deco stop here and surface. It would be hell to find their way back to the main basin area of Madison Blue, but it would be worth it. They were about 3600 feet from the basin, and he roughly knew the right direction. The forest can't be that bad, he thought.

The other consideration was their oxygen bottles. They were still sitting at the platform at the bottom of the main basin. We'll be sacrificing a little bit of safety by doing the decompression stops here using normal air, but it can still be done safely. It would take a bit longer, though. Jim was only in a wetsuit. Carth was quite comfortable in his drysuit.

Carth looked back at Jim and considered their predicament for a long moment. He thought, let's see if this is okay with Jim. Knowing Jim was watching him closely, Carth pointed at Jim, then pointed at himself. He gave the sign for "swimming," the sign for "up," the sign for "deco," the thumbs-up sign, and then pointed toward the light. He ended with a question mark sign.

Jim knew he was asking him if he wanted to do the deco here and swim up to the surface. Ok, so I'm not a big-time expert on cave diving, he thought, but it seems a bit risky. Suppose we spend the time to do the deco and then find we can't exit the water. After all, from here, we can't see the surface of the water, so we have no idea how the karst window is configured. Is it possible Carth hadn't considered that?

Well, it wasn't going to do any good wishing he could discuss it at length with Carth. Hand signals only went so far. But his curiosity and excitement finally got the better of him and he signaled "Ok" to Carth. They ascended to 30 feet and both looked at their timers.

Jim surprised Carth by removing his grandfathers' glass-housed pocket watch from a thigh pocket. It had been a challenge, but when Carth entrusted the watch to Jim, he was determined to fix the watch and return it to Carth.

Jim removed the regulator from his mouth long enough to give Carth a big grin. He handed the watch to Carth and delighted in Carth's reaction when he saw the watch was working. Carth flashed several big "Ok's" to Jim and handed it back. Jim admired his own handiwork for a moment, then put the watch back into his thigh pocket.

Carth knew there was risk involved in surfacing here. But when it came to the subject of risk, almost all active cave divers live in denial. He looked up and watched his bubbles boiling their way to the surface, to the unknown.

## Chapter 5

Thirty minutes had passed and they were now at the 10-foot level. Jim had just flashed him the "I'm cold" sign, and Carth felt sorry for him. He knew how miserable it is during deco, being cold with nothing to do, and usually little to see. For very lengthy deco stops, many cave divers actually take paperback books and read. The books hold up surprisingly well for one or two dives. You just have to keep in it a bucket of water between dives.

To be completely safe, they had another 25 minutes to go. At the 10-foot level, Carth and Jim could see that the tunnel led to what appeared to be a fair sized but shallow basin. This provided great relief to both divers. The decision they had made had been correct. Carth still didn't look forward to the walk back. But, what was worse, they wouldn't have the survey information until they made another dive. Oh well, he thought, that's the life of a cave explorer.

Jim glanced at his gauges as he surfaced, noting how much air he had left: a little more than half a tank. When you're cold, he thought, you sure do breathe heavier!

Carth surfaced next to him and looked around. The basin was shallow but large in diameter. They were roughly in the middle of the sink, 20 yards to shore.

On the shore, there were about 12 people standing motionless, staring at them. Some were pointing at them. Carth was used to this kind of reaction and was fairly oblivious to them. Jim watched the people on the shore for a moment and turned to Carth.

"Those people sure are making a big deal out of our arrival." Several had run into the woods behind them. The remaining group was slowly backing up.

"Ah, don't worry about it. The locals around here don't like cave divers much."

Both Carth and Jim were going through their mental checklist, securing their hoses and light cables in preparation for the swim to shore. The smart cave divers are never in a rush to get out of the water. If the nitrogen bubbles are not fully purged from their system, the exertion to walk with the 120 pounds of cave gear on land can sometimes initiate decompression sickness. Taking it easy, doing a slow, low-effort swim to shore was the smart thing to do.

The easiest method for swimming in the bulky cave gear is to turn over on your back, inflate the wings a bit, and then kick your legs. You are swimming backwards, but an occasional look over the shoulder keeps you going in the right direction. Jim and Carth soon found their feet touching the gravel bottom. They turned and kneeled down on the bottom and breathed a sigh of relief.

Jim looked up to see two young women standing close together, apparently whispering urgently to each other. They were pale, eyes wide open, and nearly jumped a foot when Jim said a casual hello.

They both screamed then ran into the woods.

"Huh?" Jim said. "Did you see that? It was like they'd seen a ghost. And did you see what they were wearing? Long dresses!"

"No, I hadn't noticed," said Carth. Carth felt very nervous, looked around a bit more and tried to take it all in. This isn't right, he thought. This is too big to miss. The woods are pretty dense as is the undergrowth, but it wasn't something that would stymie the dedicated and determined cave divers that he knew had combed this area decades before.

It was a pretty location. Rather than the usual pine trees, the forest was heavy with

hardwoods, oaks, ash and dogwood. The basin was clear thanks to the heavy gravel on the bottom, the shore was wide and sandy, and the light streamed in creating an idyllic setting. Very nice!

Carth removed his slate from his thigh pocket and looked at the compass that was mounted there. After a moment of dead reckoning, he pointed across the sink and said, "That's the way back to the main basin." But Jim was still staring after the girls who had just left so abruptly. He now noticed they had left behind blankets and picnic baskets. In fact, the entire group had left behind their things.

Since there were no picnic tables, they both doffed their gear at the waters' edge. Jim still shivered a bit but was glad to be out of the 70-degree water. Carth removed his drysuit and dragged his gear into a bush.

"Better drag your stuff over here, too. We'll have to do some walking and I don't want to leave this in plain site. The locals sometimes help themselves." Carth then took a limb from a bush and did his best to cover the tracks they made with their tanks.

"Ok," said Carth, "let's go." He started walking into the woods in the same direction the other group had gone.

"I thought you said the main basin is the other way?" pointed out Jim.

"Well, I'm guessing there's a road this way. They all probably went back to their cars."

"Why do you suppose they left all their picnic stuff?" asked Jim.

"I have no idea," Carth said, wondering the same thing.

Jim still had the lower part of his wetsuit on, the long-johns, so he wasn't bothered by the thick underbrush. Carth, in his shorts he wore under his drysuit, made his way gingerly through the thorns and briar. Finally they were into a part of the wood where the underbrush didn't grow. It was farther to the road than he had thought it would be. Suddenly, 20 feet ahead of them, they saw the same two women. They dashed out from behind a tree and starting running away at full speed. The second woman tripped, fell hard and didn't get up. The other kept running.

Jim rushed over and knelt beside her, turned her over. She looked to be about 20, with light brown hair and rosy cheeks on fresh, tight skin. Jim found himself anxious to awaken her. He wanted to see what color her eyes were.

She stirred, blinking her eyes, then they went wide open and she turned pale again. She gasped, then said in a small voice, "Please don't hurt me!"

Jim rocked back on his seat and scooted back a few inches.

"Don't worry, we're not! Are you okay?"

She sat up quickly and scooted back a few inches from him. "You're . . . you're not monsters at all." The color quickly returned to her face and she forced herself to relax a bit.

Carth and Jim just looked at each other and then looked back at her. What could you possibly say to that? From her reaction, and the reactions of the others, they clearly believed they were in the midst of monsters. Something was wacky. They just didn't know what.

The girl kept staring at Jim's wetsuit. After a few minutes she gathered up the courage to ask him if she could touch it.

"Sure," said Jim, "but tell us what your name is."

"Mary. Mary Wells. And that is Jenny . . . where . . . where did she go?"

"She ran off after you fell down," said Carth. "I'm Carth and this is Jim. We're trying to find our way back to Madison Blue and were looking for a road."

"Madison Blue?" she echoed, emphasizing the "Blue." "The town of Madison is a day's ride that way," she said, "about 18 miles. But I don't know what Madison Blue is."

"Did you say a day's ride?" Carth asked.

"Yes. On horseback," she said, tugging and pressing her fingers into the neoprene on Jim's wetsuit. "Where are your horses?"

"Um, we . . . we don't have any horses" said Jim.

Mary started to look scared again. "And how could you hold your breath so long? We arrived here over an hour ago for our picnic and we never saw you go in the water. And what were all those bubbles? We thought it was a volcano! And what about the way you looked with all those strange clothes? And what is this material?" She was wheezing, turning pale.

"Calm down, now," said Carth, taking a step toward her. "We're puzzled about a few things ourselves."

In one motion, she turned and gathered up her skirt and took off running, taking the same path her friend Jenny had taken a few minutes before.

Jim's natural reaction was to start running after her, but Carth stopped him.

"Let her go. We need to find out what's going on. Let's go find a road." Carth looked over at Jim who was still gazing in the direction the girl had run.

"Her eyes were green," Jim said, with a light smile.

The two cave divers struck out after Mary, confused and not a little nervous.

## Chapter 6

It was a long walk. When they finally found the road, it was more of a wide path. The only evidence someone had been there were some shoe prints, horseshoe prints, and thin tracks that looked as though they came from a wagon. An hour later the path opened to a meadow and in the distance they could see what looked like some wooden shacks. A large group of people were standing by the buildings.

There was a general commotion as the two divers approached the group. Jim took a good look at the people and he couldn't quite figure out what was wrong. The women all wore long dresses; the men and boys wore suspenders over poorly fitted shirts.

"T-shirts!" said Jim.

"What?"

"T-shirts. None of them is wearing a T-shirt! Don't you think that's kind of odd?"

Carth, after having it pointed out, started looking harder at the group and they both stopped walking.

"This is too weird. Maybe it's a commune, or they're Amish, or something," said Carth.

Just then one of the men from the group walked closer to them.

"Gentlemen, excuse us for gawking at you, but you apparently gave everyone on the picnic quite a fright," said the man.

Carth stuck out his hand, "Hi. I'm Carth Pickens and this is Jim Oliver." The man tentatively reached out and shook his hand, and then Jim's.

"My name is Archibald Winfield, and these are the good folks of Hamilton Springs."

Jim could see Mary Wells and her friend Jenny encircled by several other women. He took a couple of steps toward her, smiled and gave a little wave. She blushed, turned around and the women all starting talking at the same time.

Archibald was still talking. "Mary Wells over there said you helped her when she took a bad fall. We'd like to thank you for that."

"No problem, really," said Carth.

"No, we'd really like to show our appreciation. It don't look like you have any provisions with you, so how about coming into town and having supper?" Archibald suggested, motioning toward the wooden shacks.

Jim looked at Carth and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, sure, why not? Carth nodded and said, "That would be great. We are kind of hungry. Thanks very much."

"We're not big enough to have a hotel, so Mrs. Whittington here takes in boarders when there's a need." Archibald was saying.

Carth and Jim were in a daze. The town was a collection of small wooden buildings, some looking quite new, but most were old and dilapidated. The streets were dusty paths, horses were tied up in the front of the saloon -- a saloon?-- and there wasn't a car in sight. They kept looking at each other, daring the other to say it, but neither would. It was as if they were in an old TV western.

"Is this some sort of commune where you only wear natural things and don't have any TVs or radios?" asked Jim.

Mrs. Whittington and Archibald exchanged nervous glances and then acted like Jim had never

spoken.

"Just sit here," said Mrs. Whittington, "and I'll bring you some soup and bread."

Carth could see out the windows of the small house and there was still a sizeable group of people standing around in the street.

When Mrs. Whittington brought the soup, Carth reached into his pocket and pulled out a \$20 bill. "Thanks very much. I hope this will take care of it." Mrs. Whittington took the bill and stared at it. Archibald took the bill from her and inspected it closely while Mrs. Whittington stood there, staring at Jim's wetsuit which he still wore.

"What is this?" he asked.

"That's a twenty. Isn't that enough?" said Carth.

"No, I mean, where did you get this. This is odd looking. I've never seen money like this before. It's small and green. It's not like any of the National Bank Notes I see every day. What does this "Series 1995" mean?"

"Oh, that's the year it was printed."

"1995? That has to be a mistake. They probably meant to say 1895."

Carth laughed between spoonfuls of soup. "Oh no, that would make it 103 years old!"

"No," said Mrs. Whittington, looking quite solemn, "only three years old." Carth and Jim put down their spoons and looked at each other.

"Um . . . Do you have today's newspaper?" asked Carth.

"Today's newspaper? This town ain't got a newspaper, but we get the Madison Sentinel on the weekly mail run." Archibald motioned to Mrs. Whittington who walked over to a sideboard, opened a drawer and pulled out a newspaper. Carth almost snatched it out of her hands, and looked at the date on the banner: "June 10, 1898." He was glad he wasn't standing up as he felt weak in the knees. Jim looked at him, and then looked at the paper, then stood up so quickly the chair fell over.

"What!?"

## Chapter 7

Jim and Carth were sitting on their beds, facing each other. They told their host that they were not feeling well. Mrs. Whittington urged them to rest and showed them into a tiny bedroom with two very short beds.

"What do you make of this?" asked Carth.

"Well, it's like some science fiction movie, isn't it? I mean, these people believe that this is 1898, and we haven't seen anything that would contradict that claim."

"But it doesn't make sense. I don't like this one bit." Carth was visibly agitated and would stand up a moment then sit down again.

"Well, let's say it's true, and that somehow we are now in the year 1898. What do we do?"

Carth almost cried out, "Do? We have to go back, that's what we 'do'. We have to go back, now!" While Jim was upset by this strange turn of events, he was even more surprised and concerned by Carth's reaction to it. Carth was not happy at all and obviously wanted some action.

"Why don't I go talk to some of these people and see what I can find out?" suggested Jim.

"Ok. Ok. But what do I do?"

"I think it would be a good idea if you went back to our gear, make sure it doesn't wander away and figure how much air we have left." Jim felt uneasy taking the lead, but Carth seemed to welcome the suggestion.

"Fine with me. But if you don't show up back at the sinkhole within two hours, I'll come looking for you."

Carth made a bee-line for the small road that led back into the forest. Jim watched him as he almost jogged out of sight, never looking back.

When he turned around, he saw that Mary Wells had approached him.

"Hi," Jim said. "Are you doing all right?"

"Yes, thanks for asking." she said, reflexively touching a small bump on her forehead.

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions? My buddy and I are a bit confused. We didn't know this town was here and I think we're lost."

"We figured as much," she said, giving him a big smile. "You look lost. Where are you from?"

Jim found himself gazing into her emerald green eyes, not hearing the question. "What? Oh, well, I'm originally from Houston."

"Oh!" she said. "That's not far from here at all. Only two days ride due south."

"Um, no, I meant Houston, Texas. So there's a town near here called Houston? Humph. Isn't that funny?"

Mary had a hard time understanding the manner of speech Jim used, but he was handsome and seemed very nice and very smart. She liked smart men. She bet that he could even read.

Jim was looking around the town again, and asked, "So, is it really 1898?"

Mary almost jumped, the question was so unusual. "What a very odd thing to ask," she said. "Of course it is. I can't imagine anyone not knowing the year. The day or even the month, maybe, but . . . ." and her voice trailed off.

"Like I said, we're very confused right now," Jim said apologetically.

Jim's mind was racing with possibilities, but each one he examined fell apart. He wasn't equipped to deal with the situation and felt overwhelmed. I feel like I'm drowning, he thought.

And with Carth gone, he had no one to talk to about what he was thinking. Suddenly he couldn't stand it anymore.

"Mary, I really need to tell you some things but I'm worried you won't believe me." He reached out and held both her hands in his, without even thinking. Mary's face immediately turned bright red, and she looked around at the other townspeople looking their way.

"Come with me," she said, and pulled his arm. They quickly walked around the corner of a building and Jim followed her while she took a path into the forest. A minute later, they were at a small brook and she sat on a boulder. Jim was suddenly very nervous and shifted from foot to foot.

"You're not going to believe any of this," he said. He looked at her with a sidelong glance, trying to size her up. If she didn't believe him and told the other people in the town, there might be trouble. But he somehow felt he could trust her, even if she didn't believe him.

"I'm 24 years old," said Jim.

Mary smiled really big, "Well I'm 23!"

With a grave tone in his voice, he said "But I was born in 1974."

Mary's smile disappeared. "You mean 1874." She said it as a teacher would correct a student, a slip of the tongue, a fact incorrectly remembered.

"No, I mean 1974. Look, I'm a cave diver, and we were doing a dive at Madison Blue and found this new tunnel and saw daylight, so we came up in that pond where you were having a picnic."

Mary was motionless, and her eyes dug into Jim. Slowly, she said, "I didn't understand very much of that. All I know is we were having a picnic at the pond, and you and your friend came bubbling out of the water and scared the Devil out of us."

Jim realized that he had little hope of making her understand. Then it struck him: even if she could understand, what good would it do? He began to wonder why he was even trying, but it occurred to him that he liked her. And, it seemed, she liked him. Jeez, he thought, was a great time to check out the babes and land a new girlfriend. He marveled at the thought that she was apparently more than 100 years older than him. Jim shook his head to clear it.

"Ok, maybe we just need to leave it at that. Can you take me back to the pond?"

"Sure!" She was smiling again, and reached out for his hand and pulled him down the trail. Ninety minutes later, they could see the pond beyond the trees. Carth was standing on the beach, staring into the water.



## Chapter 8

Jim felt like he was 13 years old again, and was just getting to know the girl across the street. It was like it was his first girlfriend again. They held hands the entire time and she blushed at every nice thing he said, laughed at his jokes, and he saw her glance at him from time to time, and grow a smile on her face. He was smitten.

Carth's mood had not improved in the last two hours. He had dragged all the diving gear out of the bushes and had meticulously arranged it. As Jim and Mary approached him, he looked up and presented the grimmest face Jim had ever seen. It stopped Mary in her tracks. Jim stepped up and considered the gear.

"So, what's the situation?" asked Jim.

"I'm pretty sure we can get back" Carth answered.

"“Pretty sure?” That doesn't sound very reassuring."

"Well, you used up a lot of gas, so as long as nothing goes wrong, you'll get to the deco bottles just as you're running out of air. I have plenty of air left, so if you run out, I can get you to the bottles," explained Carth.

"Hmmm, I think I hear a 'But . . . ' coming," said Jim.

"Yeah, but, if we arrive at the main basin and we're still in 1890-fucking-8, then the O2 bottles won't be there!"

Mary gasped when she heard Carth's profanity, and took another step back. She didn't have any idea what all this equipment was, or what they were talking about, but it sounded dangerous.

"Jim?" she said. "What are you going to do?"

Jim turned and walked over to her, and held her hands in his. "Well, we're trying to figure out if we can go back through the underwater tunnel that we came through, and get back to where we left our other gear."

Gear? She looked around him at the equipment on the sand, and didn't see any gears. She just shook her head and tried to smile, but nothing came out.

"You know," said Carth, "if I take your tanks with me, I'd have more than enough gas to get back, and do a safe deco, even if the O2 bottles aren't there."

Jim thought for a moment. "That's actually a pretty good idea. It's not like I can't tough it out here for a while. And if you get back to 1998 and a compressor, you can fill my tanks and come back for me. Then I'll have plenty of air to get back safely."

"Yeah, and if I come up at Madison Blue and it's still 18 . . . ", he looked over at Mary, " . . . uh, 1898, then I can probably find my way back here. I'll do a stick survey on the way back and that will guarantee I'll find my way back."

"Good plan," Jim agreed. " Let's get started."

Mary watched in amazement as Jim assisted Carth first with his drysuit, then reconfiguring Jim's harness so that it would fit across Carth's chest. With double tanks on his back and front, Carth was starting to look like a monster, again.

An hour later, the final triple checks had been done, and Carth - - with only his head breaking the surface of the water -- looked at Jim. "It's funny how I feel much better now, in the water, with all this crap on me."

Jim laughed. "Well, you're just a born cave diver!"

Carth smiled but then frowned and turned grave. "I'll come back for you. No matter what, I'll be back. You can count on it."

Jim was smiling. "I know you will. And," looking around at Mary, "I don't think I'll be in any danger. You just be careful and even if it takes you a few days, don't worry. After all, what's a few days out of 100 years?" With that, even Carth managed a smile.

Carth hadn't felt this clumsy in 20 years. He felt like the Michelin Man. He knew his arms wouldn't have much range, but he didn't really need them. He held his slate in his left hand, stopped at each turn in the cave and wrote down the compass heading, distance and depth. The idea of a map was no longer the purpose. He wanted to be able to get back to retrieve Jim. The idea of the time difference still was beyond his comprehension. He was fully intending on tracing his stick map back to where he had left Jim, and fully expected to see him waiting on the beach.

Getting through the major restriction at the beginning of tunnel proved to be extremely difficult with the double set of gear. Carth had to remove Jim's set and push it through the opening. Once Carth was back to the main tunnel of the cave system, the surging outward flow sped him to the entrance in good time. Rather than going back through the Rabbit Hole, he let the current push him around to the big entrance. As he rounded the last bend, he squinted hard to see if the deco bottles were where they had left them.

There they were! And there were two other divers in the basin, apparently doing deco. One of them turned to look and from his body language was acting very surprised. He turned to look at the other diver and frantically flashed his light and waved at him. When he finally caught their attention, he pointed over at Carth. The other diver quickly swam over to where Carth was settling down on the platform at 30 feet. He came right up into Carth's face and looked really hard. His eyes grew really large and he looked over at his buddy and was gesturing and pointing at Carth, while his buddy was making exaggerated nods.

The diver pulled out his slate (after seeing Carth's was covered in notes) and wrote, "Where is your buddy?"

Carth wrote, "He's okay. Do not go looking for him." Carth realized that this team of divers had probably been looking for him and Jim. He didn't want them to spend any more effort looking for Jim, since it was pointless.

The diver took the slate back and drew a large question mark and pointed at the extra set of tanks Carth has been towing.

Carth took the slate and put a double-underline under the words he had just written, then gave him the hand signal, "Ok?" The other diver reluctantly returned an "Ok."

Carth then got busy untangling himself from the extra gear. He secured Jim's doubles onto the platform, then retrieved his oxygen bottle and started his deco. He certainly didn't want to go through all of that only to get bent!

Thirty minutes later, Carth surfaced at Madison Blue and pushed Jim's gear over to the steps. There were about 10 people on the deck and several helped with the equipment, and helped Carth up the stairs. Among others that Carth recognized, Louis was there along with a sheriff's deputy. The deputy stepped forward and started to say something, but Louis put his hand on his shoulder. The deputy stepped back.

"So, where's Jim?" Louis demanded.

"He's okay. Really!" Carth answered back. He was a lot more fatigued than he realized.

"We checked Martz Sink. He's not over there. So where is he?" said the deputy. Louis gave him a dirty look.

"He came up at another sink, one that no one has seen before. He didn't have enough gas to get back, so I brought his gear out. I need to get his tanks filled and go back for him."

Carth knew that sounded reasonable and the deputy was beginning to look satisfied. But Louis was not to be put off so easily.

"There is no other karst window around here," Louis said. "And you know that. So where is he!" Louis was getting very agitated and the deputy was looking confused.

"I tell you, he's fine. Now will you let me get this stuff off, get the tanks refilled and I'll go back and get him."

The deputy stepped forward again. "I don't like the sound of all this. I'm going to have to confiscate all this gear until we can figure out what happened."

"No!" Carth yelled, "I'm telling you that Jim is fine. He's not in the cave. He's sitting on his ass in the forest somewhere over there," pointing across the river in a northeasterly direction. "Look, I've got the notes on how to get over there," he said, pulling out his slate. The deputy took the slate and looked at it.

"Well, let's go take a look," he suggested. He asked Louis, "Can you decipher this and get us over there?"

Louis looked at Carth. "You know we have to know about where in the system the tunnel began before we can make heads or tails out of this. Will you tell us?"

Carth sighed. "Of course!" Thirty minutes later, the patrol car pulled onto a small dirt road about a mile away. A minute later they were out tramping through the thick underbrush.

Louis ran ahead and yelled, "Over here!"

The small group peered through some shoulder-high grass and looked upon a depression in the ground.

"It looks like it might once have been a karst window," said Louis, "but it looks like it's been filled in for at least 50 years."

"Or a hundred," said Carth, glumly.

## Chapter 9

"Let's go over it, again," said the deputy. "You came up into a new opening you've never seen before, and that rightly shouldn't have been there. It's not like you're new to this sport, Carth. Why would you do such a foolish thing?"

They were seated around a tiny table; a one-way mirrored glass on the door was the only window in the room. The room was cold, made of stark concrete blocks, painted off-white. The deputy had Carth in there for over an hour. About 25 minutes into the interrogation -- there was nothing else you could call it -- a conservatively suited man entered, stood in a corner and watched without saying a word. Louis was there, too, because the deputy didn't know much about cave diving, and he needed an expert.

A sympathetic expert at that, thought Carth. I feel like I'm being railroaded but I haven't done anything. They simply don't believe me. It's a good thing I left out the crazy parts about the year being 1898!

Maybe I am crazy! Maybe I did leave Jim in the cave and hallucinated all the rest of it?

Carth let out a big sigh, put his head in his hands and tried to shut out what the deputy was saying.

Finally, the man in the corner spoke up.

"Mr. Pickens. My name is Lester Wilton, and I'm a clinical psychologist. I'm not here to make any judgements about you or your story. But I would like to make a few suggestions."

Another sigh and Carth shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

"You know as well as I do that the story sounds implausible. That is what upset the deputy so much. Perhaps you've left something out that you are thinking is trivial, but it might help us piece the story together better." The psychologist sounded earnest. Carth couldn't decide if the guy was really okay, or just well trained in appearing earnest.

"You mean, was I narced?" Carth said with a slight disgusting tone to his voice. "No, I've been in these tunnels many times. The depth is only 70 feet max, and while it's not impossible that someone could have a little narcosis at that depth, there isn't any way it would be severe enough to cause me to blackout or forget things. I don't even take any medicines that might enhance the narcosis, and I don't drink."

Carth looked hard at the man, then turned to look at the deputy. His eyes finally rested on Louis. "I'm telling you the whole thing, man. You can tell these two: in all the years you've known me, dived with me, have I ever told you a lie?"

Lloyd looked grim for a moment longer, but then his face went lax. He suddenly looked very tired. "No, you've never been anything but the best possible cave diving buddy anyone could ever want. I believe YOU, but I'm still finding it hard to believe the STORY."

The deputy blew out a breath of disgust, and kicked the table. "Ok, let's at least put a couple of search teams together and take a look. If we don't find anything, then we'll have no choice but to take his word for it."

Carth suddenly felt eager. "Let me go back in and get him! That's all I've wanted from the beginning. You're not going to find anything. I brought his tanks back with me to get them filled so I can go get him!"

"No way," said the deputy. "You are going to get free room and board from the county

tonight. Until we have some independent parties take a look, I don't want you back in there."

"Dammit!" Carth kicked the table, making it jump a couple of inches toward the deputy. They both glowered at each other. Wilton stepped forward.

"Gentlemen, I don't think it's necessary to come to blows over this." He turned to Carth. "If your friend is indeed waiting by the water for you to return, then waiting another 12 hours or so won't hurt. He might get a bit hungry, but he'll be fine. In the meantime, let the sheriff's people do their thing."

"Look, Carth," said Louis, "if it'll make you feel any better, I'll go in. I'll be in the first team and I'll clear all this up."

"B-but, Louis . . . you quit cave diving!" said Carth.

"Well, the way I figure it, I owe this to Jim." He looked at Carth with an intensity that Carth had not seen since before Louis died that day at Little River, the intensity that had gone from his eyes when he finally sputtered back to life. Carth knew he would do just fine.

## Chapter 10

Twelve hours later, the deputy opened the cell door with a loud clank. Carth had been standing there almost since the moment he was first introduced to his cage. The deputy started to talk but Carth wasn't waiting. He stormed down the hall to gather his gear and other belonging. The deputy was having a hard time keeping up.

"They didn't find a thing, and they didn't find your new tunnel, either. It still doesn't make sense to anyone but we can't hold you any longer. But I want to know what you intend on doing?"

"What I've said all along. I'm taking his tanks back to him and bringing him back."

The deputy stopped and let Carth go on. He shook his head and decided this one had to rank up there with cattle mutilations and alien abductions. The funny thing about all these weird cases, he thought, is that the people obviously believe what they believe . . . with an intensity that drives them. If it were a joke, no one could possibly carry on that way. But, it still can't be true. So, which is it?

He shook his head again, and again.

Carth was back in the water, with the four tanks strapped to him as before. Lloyd had helped him configure it and even suggested another set of wings as a redundant backup.

"Probably not a bad idea considering the weight," said Carth.

"You know," said Lloyd, in a low voice, "I know exactly where you said that tunnel was and there was nothing there." A crowd of people was standing on the dock and sitting on the rocks around the Madison Blue basin, watching.

"But you had to do a 180 . . . turn completely around and drift up, and then the tunnel would be over on the right," Carth explained.

"Well, I thought that is what I did, but I have to tell you, I was shivering like a leaf, and I wasn't cold. I was just damn scared." Lloyd took an asking look at Carth.

Carth actually was thinking that his friend was pretty brave. He's not sure he'd go back into a cave if he had once drowned in one. "Well, I hope you're wrong, or I'll be coming back soon enough . . . and without Jim." Carth's voice and demeanor were grim. He continued to doubt his own sanity. He had even started thinking that if he couldn't find Jim, couldn't find the tunnel, then he just wouldn't bother coming back at all.

"Grrrr!" he said out loud. That's no way to start thinking, he admonished himself. Jim is there and I'm bringing him back. He grit his teeth and made last minute adjustments to his buoyancy, then dipped under the surface of the cobalt blue water.

Carth had no trouble finding the tunnel, and very quickly found himself doing his deco, looking again at the light coming from above -- where it shouldn't be, because the sink is all filled in. In 1998, anyway, he thought. There had been even more chunks of limestone fall on him during his traverse. The precipitation from the ceiling was so bad that he had to use the line up to the deco stop.

Jim and Mary had been camping out on the beach. The insects were ferocious, so they dashed their arms and face frequently with some water, to wash off the sweat from their skin. Jim was

terrified. Not about being here, with Mary, but for Carth's safety. Over and over he considered that Carth got lost, drowned, something. How else would it explain why it was almost two days since he left, but he wasn't back yet.

"But he is a really good diver you said," Mary pleaded. "You said he was better than you. So why are you so worried?"

"I still don't think you understand how dangerous it is," said Jim.

"Oh you don't have to tell me that again. I think you're plum crazy to do something like that," she said, pointing to what was left of his gear.

"I just don't understand what's keeping him."

"You want me to go back to town, again, and bring some more food?" Mary asked.

"No," Jim sighed, then sat down hard. "Let's wait here until evening. If he's not back then we'll just go back to town and come back in the morning."

Just then, they both heard the bubbles at the same time. Jim stood up and waded into the water while Mary watched from shore. He stopped, went back to shore for his mask, and then dove in. With his wetsuit on and no weights, he could only float on the surface and peer down into the water. He could see a light moving around and could see bubbles cascading upwards from the tunnel opening. Mentally, he sighed. Good boy, Carth!

Twenty minutes later and Carth surfaced. He spit out the regulator and gave Jim and big smile.

"God it's good to see you, Jim. I thought I was going out of my mind."

Jim pulled him over to where he could just stand on the bottom and started helping him with the double sets of tanks. "Same here, buddy," said Jim. "I thought maybe you had bought it!"

"That would have been easier," said Carth. Jim gave him a puzzled look. "We never thought about what would happen when I showed up without you."

"Oh, jeez," said Jim. "Yeah, now that you mention it, I guess that could be a bit hard to explain. Did you tell them that we went back in time?"

"Hey, I'm a bone head sometimes but I'm not that crazy. They had a hard enough time believing you're safe and breathing. They threw me in jail last night!" Carth then told him all that had happened once he surfaced at Madison Blue.

Jim realized that, while Carth had been dealing with the raw end of this situation, he had been having the time of his life, talking to Mary and learning all about her town and her life.

He and Mary had walked back to the town and had dinner at Mrs. Whittington's. He had remembered that Jules Verne's classic, "20,000 Leagues Under The Sea" had been published not too long before, so he asked if they had read it. It was an embarrassing moment. He couldn't know yet that Mary couldn't read. But he successfully turned it around, and told them the story aloud. They were entranced. Mrs. Whittington has to stifle more than a few gasps as Jim unfolded the story of Captain Nemo. Mary never left his side, watching him every second, not understanding most of what he said.

Jim realized later that he had Captain Nemo's Nautilus running under nuclear power, and probably provided more detail than they could possibly understand. But it had been an interesting moment for him, being the center of attention, and having Mary sit and squeeze his hand as the story became more thrilling. He was in love but didn't realize it yet.

In the meantime, Jim thought, Carth has been going through hell. I should have tried to go back with him, yesterday. No, then I'd probably be dead right now, or at best, bent to hell.

"Well, struggle into this stuff and let's go," said Carth. In the background, Mary was frowning.

"No," said Jim, "why don't you struggle out of your kit and let's go have dinner!" Mary brightened a bit at Jim's suggestion.

Carth blinked and looked at him. "Are you nuts? There must be a hundred people waiting back at Madison Blue for us. If at least one of us doesn't show up pretty soon, they'll start looking for us. And I can't decide how bad that is. If someone drowned while looking for us, I'd never be able to live with myself."

Carth looked at Jim hard. "So get this on and let's go. Besides, I don't think our little time tunnel is going to hold up much longer." He shoved the tanks toward Jim.

Jim shivered. He looked at Carth, who was practically fuming. A very long moment passed as the two men glared at each other.

"I'm not going back," said Jim. He couldn't believe he had said that. Mary's heart leap up into her throat. Jim's was in his stomach. He felt like he should be bending over double.

"What?" Carth's voice was hoarse, a mere croak.

"I know this sounds crazy, but it can't be any more crazy than what we've already been through. But I think I'm in love with Mary." Mary froze, riveted with internal emotions wanting to burst out, but she just stood there, motionless.

Jim continued, "I don't have anyone in 1998 that needs me, my parents are dead, and this," waving his arm around, "is really cool!"

"Really cool?" Jim mocked him. "Oh, you're really going to fit in well in 1898."

Jim ignored the sarcasm.

"Look, come back with me, tell everyone you're okay, and then you can come back. I'll let you tell them that you're going back through the time tunnel to 1898 and you're in love with someone who's a hundred years old."

"I'm 23!" Mary shot back, angry with Carth. "And he can do what he wants."

"I've already thought of that." He turned to Mary and said, "Bring me that newspaper. They let me have that Madison newspaper," he said to Carth. "It's a few weeks old, but I think that won't matter much."

He walked back up on the shore, took his slate pencil from his thigh pocket and started to write on the newspaper. A minute later, he folded it up and turned to Carth.

"Let's stick this in your light canister, and you can give it to anyone who questions you."

Carth was once again feeling like his world was crashing in on him. He was visibly becoming nervous and had that overwhelming feeling that he was powerless to control things around him. I just want to swim through the caves, he thought, the never changing caves. But this time, they had changed, and it was rocking his world off its stable base.

"This is nuts," he said again. He turned his head up to the sky. "THIS IS NUTS!" he yelled, loud enough to cause an echo.

Jim just stood there, the water lapping at his ankles, with the folded newspaper in his hand. Carth squeezed his eyes shut for a long second, then opened them. "Damn!"

Jim smiled a little then waded in and helped Carth get his canister light off his belt. A few minutes later, the newspaper was safely in the waterproof canister and back on Carth's belt.

Carth was defeated and he knew it. "I'm going to leave your tanks here. Maybe you'll change your mind."

"Nope, I won't." Jim turned to look at Mary. She smiled and he smiled back. "But I would like to keep the tanks with me. I have a feeling that I'll have to invent a compressor, though!" Jim



smiled really big at Carth. Carth couldn't help himself, and smiled back, although he didn't feel the slightest bit happy.

"Jim, I'm happy for you, I guess. I sure hope you know what you're doing."

"I don't actually, but it'll be exciting, that's for sure."

"Well," said Carth, "I don't know how all this time travel stuff works, but the way I understand it, you'd better not do anything to change history or else things will change a lot. And some of those changes may be really bad. So, my advice to you is to lay low."

"Hmmm, I hadn't thought about it much but you may be right."

They looked at each other for a long moment. Carth turned his mask around and adjusted it to his face. He looked at Jim and Mary one last time and descended into the Time Tunnel one last time.

Carth was at the junction of the Time Tunnel and the original tunnel when silt and chunks of rock spewed out from the tunnel, shutting down access to 1898 and his friend, Jim. He started to dig at the rocks, but he couldn't see a thing and knew it was pointless. He surfaced at Madison Blue an hour later and ignored all the questions. When he was finally on the deck, he didn't say a word. He opened the canister and handed the newspaper to the sheriff, then clumsily walked up the long path to his truck.

The next morning he woke up to a knock on the door. His head was pounding. Too much beer, he thought . . . and I never drink! "Ohhhhhhh" he moaned as he pulled himself upright. He managed to get to the door and saw a very old man in an expensive pinstripe suit, standing there with a briefcase in his hand and a box under his arm.

"What can I do for you?" asked Carth.

"The name is Smith, Jacob Smith. I'm an attorney with Barnes, Smith, Allevier and Jenkins. Are you Mr. Carth Perkins?"

"Um, yeah. What can I do for you?"

The man just stood there for a moment. Carth swore under his breath.

"Um, come on in, I guess." He stood back and opened the door wide. Smith walked in and sat down at the kitchen table. Carth momentarily forgot about his headache and let the screen door slam. It thundered in his head and Carth grimaced.

"I'd like to see some identification," said Smith.

"Uh, sure." Carth scuffled back to his bedroom and fumbled around for his wallet.

"Shouldn't maybe you show me . . ." Carth started to ask, but the man had swiftly retrieved a business card from his pocket and presented it to Carth.

Carth looked at it and tried to focus in on it, feebly gave in and handed his drivers license to the man. Smith inspected it closely, looked at some papers he had removed from his briefcase, then looked again at the drivers' license. He then offered it back to Carth, who took it and sat down opposite Smith.

"Please sign here," said Smith, shoving a single piece of paper in front of Carth.

"What is it?" Carth tried his best to read the typewritten page.

"Just a release form saying you've received this envelope and box." Smith pulled out a yellowing envelope and gestured toward the old-fashioned looking box and placed them both

carefully in the middle of the table.

"Ok," said Carth. He signed the release, the man snatched it up, stuck it into his briefcase and left the house without a further sound. Weird dude, thought Carth, grimacing again as the door slammed once more.

Carth opened the envelope and saw about 4 sheets of a thick, yellowing paper covered with typewritten notes. It started, "Dear Carth."

Carth gasped and sat back in the chair. He quickly looked at the bottom of the last sheet and saw, "Your friend, Jim" and it was dated 1966.

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*Dear Carth,*

*Right now it's May 1, 1966. I'm 91 years old and I still haven't even been born yet. What a kick, eh?*

*Mary and I were married for 67 years, until she died last year. I'm still hanging on and had hoped to see myself being born in 1974, but I don't think I'm going to last the year out. So I'm dictating this to my lawyer, and he assures me this letter will be delivered to you the day after you get back from leaving me in 1898, er, well, in 1998. You can imagine that my lawyer thinks I'm totally bonkers, but I pay him enough so he doesn't really care. The funny thing about all this time travel stuff is that I'll still never know what you went through -- or rather, what you'll be going through now that you've come back without me. I'm truly sorry if my staying back in 1898 is going to cause you problems, but take solace in the fact that I've had a long, full life, filled with exciting times.*

*Did you know that I was a history major in college? Yeah! So, living through the golden 90's, World War I and II, and all that, has been quite thrilling. Living through history is much sadder than reading about it in the history books. Most of the people in Harrison Springs died of the influenza outbreak in 1917 and the town disappeared off the map. That's why we didn't know about it in 1998. Really sad stuff. Mary's parents died, and she was really sick for a while.*

*But she got better and we've had an interesting life. I took what you told me to heart about not changing the future, and I laid low. But at the same time, I've done some really interesting things, too. I finally came up with a compressor that would fill my 104s to about 1000 psi. I was able to do short dives for quite some time. Naturally, I wasn't able to send my tanks out for a hydrostatic testing until about the 1940s, so I took care of them like little babies. Speaking of babies . . . that was my hardest decision. I could not possibly know if Mary was going to get married and have a family if I hadn't shown up. And I was worried that would change things enough to screw up history. But, I just played it by ear, like I usually do. As it turns out, it was a good choice. I'll explain why a bit later in my letter.*

*But for now, I wanted to mention a thing or two about cave diving in the 1890's! At first I thought it would be hard to manage. But most of the places I could dive in were pretty isolated in those years. I'd haul the tanks in by wagon, do the dive and get out. Never got caught, which was pretty remarkable.*

*The only piece of equipment that puzzled me for a while was the light. My existing batteries only lasted about three years. I made a housing for a carbide lamp, but it kept blowing up on me*

*underwater. I was finally able to find some batteries that would fit and give me about 10 minutes of dive time. I dived most of the popular sights: Ginnie Springs (they called it Jenny Springs), Cow Sink, Telford, Little River and of course Madison Blue. It would take me a year to do all these because getting around by wagon was a mite slower than my van. Although I knew I was the first person to ever see these caves, I had to keep it to myself all these years. That was tough!*

*I can't tell you how pretty these systems were, decades before clumsy divers violated them and busted them up. It makes me angry every time I think about it. But there was nothing I could do. That was the hard part. All the history you wanted to change, but I didn't dare. I knew I could end up making things even worse, and it was a nightmare I lived with night and day for all these years.*

*Ah, but here I am 90 years old and I keep changing the subject. My lawyer just reminded me I'm 91. He's so smart. How come I'm not even born yet, huh? Well, he doesn't understand any of this, and after all these years, I still don't either.*

*I want you to know, more than anything else, that you did the right thing, leaving me there. Don't think about what you left behind, think about what I had ahead of me and the wonderful life that resulted in that decision. Don't regret leaving me, you should rejoice in it. It was the right thing to do, for both of us.*

*Anyway, let me get to the good stuff. I spent a lot of my time inventing things I needed to keep cave diving. It was tempting to get my inventions patented and become rich and famous, but I decided on simply being rich. I took best guesses at what the "big boys" were up to, I'd approach them with some drawings and descriptions of my "new" ideas and offer to sell the whole kit and caboodle to them for princely sums. Most of the time I was turned down, but boy do I have some interesting stories! I ended up making a good living that way. I figured these guys were on the brink of most of these inventions anyway, so I wasn't changing history, just lending a hand to it. I hope I haven't screwed with the fates or whatever it is I would be doing, but I had to make a living, too! You have no idea how hard life was back then. I have enormous admiration for their strength of spirit and resourcefulness. By 1898 standards, we're wimps in 1998. I wouldn't have lasted a week if Mary hadn't been there to help me through the rough spots. But we did okay.*

*Anyway, I remembered that Jacques Cousteau and Emil Gagnon had invented the Aqualung in 1942, and that it was the combination of the compressed air in a tank with a demand regulator that made it special. I had the advantage of a 1998 regulator to inspect, so I of course knew the principle backwards and forwards. But I took it upon myself in 1941 to send them an anonymous letter suggesting the combination. Oh, I'm not trying to take credit for anything. They probably discarded the letter as tripe, or maybe they didn't even read English! Ha! I never thought of that! But it was still fun to think I had a hand in it.*

*Before I could get my compressor working, I did a lot of hard-hat dives with hand-pumped bellows. That was fun, but quite dangerous compared with open-circuit SCUBA. The air supply lines weren't too tough and could easily get bent or even broken. It's amazing I never got bent! Or drowned! But I had a lot of fun!*

*I could rattle on for hours, but my lawyer looks like he's about to call the funny farm. So let me get to the best part.*

*Mary and I did finally decide to have kids, and it was a good choice. Our children loved the water and, of course, became excellent divers in time, as did their children.*

*And as crazy as the time tunnel was, this will blow your mind: turns out, you are my*

*great-grandchild! Yes, I know it makes no sense, but then none of it did anyway. I watched you being born and watched you every step of the way . . . It's funny how I knew you'd turn out to be a good egg!*

*So, I'll bet you're pretty surprised right now. Can't take it all in. Well, the biggest surprise is still to come: open the box, take a look and try to figure out who made it . . . because I can tell you one thing: I didn't.*

*Your good friend,*

*Jim*

*May 1, 1966*

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Carth put the letter down on the table, completely stunned. He stared off into space for many minutes trying to understand something that was incomprehensible. Suddenly he snapped out of it and looked over at the box. He was almost wild-eyed, wondering what it could be that was even a bigger surprise than the fact that the dive buddy he left just days before turned out to be his great-grandfather.

He finally screwed up the courage to look, took the box in hand, and removed the lid. Inside, wrapped carefully in tissue, was the underwater pocket-watch. "...take a look and try to figure out who made it . . . because I can tell you one thing: I didn't."