

## One

Everything seemed normal, but it wasn't. Chance had thrown me a big, juicy bone and I took it. I would be famous, the first chrononaut. A time traveler. Yuri Gagarin had nothing on me and, for a while, I believed it all to be true.

The guys who came up with the crazy idea all worked in Silicon Valley. The best of the best, the creme of the crop. Mathematicians had proven what physicists had said was impossible. You could get an object to exceed the speed of light and, therefore, travel back in time. It was the holy grail of science. Who shot Kennedy? Go back and find out! Who was Christ? Meet you at Golgotha! What color were the dinosaurs? I'm betting on pink!

I don't really understand the math behind it and I certainly didn't fathom the engineering, but there I stood, outside the first manned time capsule. Don't get me wrong, I'm plenty bright, but these guys would have shamed Einstein. It seemed like voodoo to me. Take a pinch of relativity, mix with an obscene amount of power, fold a little space, and presto, a time machine. Frankly, I didn't give it much of a chance of working, though I was fairly sure it wouldn't flat out kill me, so I volunteered.

When you look at the gadget, it doesn't look like much. Its round and had sensors taped to the surface. In a way, it has an unsettling resemblance to the first atomic bomb. The scientists called that the gadget, too. My door would be screwed in with exploding bolts. I flip the little, red switch and off it'll pop. There are two of the doors. Each one is opposite the other, so if I roll, one will always be accessible after I stop.

I'm supposed to go back twenty minutes. Now, twenty minutes ago the gadget was on its stand, so I'm not sure why they think it will roll. They tell me it's just to be sure, a safety item of

sorts. I don't buy that even a little bit. They expect this thing to roll with me in it. Safety measures my ass.

So, what, you ask, does the well-dressed chrononaut wear? A white leather jump suit and a full face motorcycle helmet. I look like Evel Knievel without the stars and stripes. Tell me again how I'm not going to get banged up! So, at T minus 10 I get into the thing and they strap me down tight. Now I can move, a little, just enough to hit the release control for the straps and its backup in case it fails and that one's backup in case it fails, too.

They're doing a countdown. It's very old school. All they really have to do is flip a switch and I'll be gone. The rest is for the media. Now Jenkins, the head engineer, starts talking to me through the intercom.

"Andy, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear Doc. What's up?"

"One of our guys thinks the capsule will stay still while the Earth rotates under it."

"Which would place me?"

"In Nevada."

"How good is his hunch?"

"I've got five guys that say he's full of it and two guys that just shrugged their shoulders."

"Will there be an elevation change if he's right?"

"About forty five hundred feet"

"Well that sucks! I'll be buried more than a mile deep?"

"We think you'll slide up and over the Sierras if he's right."

"And what does the boy genius think?"

"He tends to agree with you. Do you want to scrub?"

“The tests never showed this effect?”

“Not one.”

“Then I think we’re worried about nothing. Keep counting down.”

Man, I sound like I have King Kong’s balls! Honestly, I wet myself when he told me about the shift and being buried. I’m just too embarrassed to call it off and walk out of the capsule with pee stained leather. The bastards should have made them black!

“Two...One...Ignition!”

## Two

There was a slight jerking motion. No bump, no crash. I'm stopped, so I go to push the button to release the straps. Before I can hit it, all hell breaks loose! I'm being slammed hard. The titanium shell grows a big dent and the capsule begins to fill with water. I'm still moving and the water keeps pouring in. Damn it! I must be in the ocean! As the water comes up to my mouth, it's fresh, not salt, and it's ice cold. Still moving, I hit the button anyway. It's shorted, of course. I hit the second release. No good. I reach for the third and the capsule slams down hard on something. It rocks a little, then the water begins to drain. I hit the third release and the bolts holding the straps explode. I pull the webbing off me and push the red button. The bolts pop, but the door stays closed. I reach across the capsule and try the other side. There's a bang and then I see sunshine.

I haul myself out of the capsule. Sure as hell, the one door is blocked by the earth. It's hot outside, easily into triple digits. I'm starting to steam in my leathers. I take off my helmet and look around. The wunderkind must have been right. I'm in the stinking desert. I have no idea where, but it looks pretty normal.

Now, I was supposed to pop back twenty minutes in a lab in Mountain View. I'm not dressed for the desert, nor do I have a change of clothes. The capsule is making a little shade, so I sit in it and think. This isn't Great Basin landscape. It looks more like West Texas. I do the math in my head. If I moved twenty degrees, I should be where Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Kansas kind of meet. The plants would be right. It also means nobody knows where to look, which also sounds about right. I'm not in a field, so that sucks, I'll have to walk. I look at my watch. It shows I've been gone about an hour. The capsule is too hot to touch, now. I don't have any food or water and I'm wearing wet leather. I could remove it and lay it on the capsule to dry,

but leather has a tendency to shrink and I don't think I could fit in it again. Then I wouldn't have food, water, or clothing. I'm wearing sneakers. While they're comfortable, they won't do a thing against snakebite or thorns. I take them off and put them on the capsule to dry, along with my socks.

I'm barefoot in a mesquite field, sitting next to my beat to crap capsule, roasting in the sun. I keep moving to follow the shade, such as it is, but have managed to burn the tops of my feet. The socks dry fast and I put them on to protect my skin. My shoes need a few more minutes. I have to walk out of here, but which way? We didn't exactly study Oklahoma when we discussed landing the capsule and I'm not sure if I should go north or south. Why not east or west? Because I need a road that travels east or west and you find those by heading north or south. My shoes are fairly dry so I put them back on. They are also hot from the sun and my feet begin to sweat.

If I had Vaseline, I would slap it on my feet and forget about getting blisters. However, I don't have shit. The sun has moved to the west and I decide to walk north. I unbutton my leathers part way so I don't overheat. Sweat is flowing off me in streams. What a place! Finally, I reach a dirt road. I head east on the road. It's beginning to cool, a little. I can button a couple buttons on the leathers. After half a mile, I see a field to the north of me. In the middle of the field is a water sprayer. It's off, so I walk towards it. I climb up the device and take a look around. I'm in what I lovingly call flyover fields. Those are those round fields in the Midwest set in square plots of land. You can see them real clear from 36,000 feet. That should give you an idea of how big this thing is. I climb back down. I saw nothing but fields in all directions. I think of that guy in the Mars movie. You know, the one where he gets stranded accidentally by the rest of the crew. I figure I've got him beat because I don't have to worry about air. Then the sun goes down and I

start to freeze. That guy had shelter and tools. I've got a giant sprinkler and damp clothes. I think I'd rather be the guy on Mars.

I decided to climb up the sprinkler again to see if I could spot any lights. Not even a lonely pickup truck. Overhead, I can see more stars than I've ever seen before. Straight out and all around, I only get inky black. I'm really cold and now I wish I was back in my stupid capsule. I climb down again and look at the big sprinkler. Off the center, there is a big hose, like a fire hose. I follow it to the other end. Nothing. It's just laying in the field. No stand pipes, no faucet. I go back to the big sprinkler and try to keep warm. I don't even have a match.

Morning comes slowly. The sky brightens and it begins its race to heat up again. I look at the crop in the field. Alfalfa, I think. It's not juicy wet. That means they are going to have to water it or it'll die. It's only about 9 inches tall, so it'll evaporate in this weather fast. I decide to stay put. An hour later, some guys in a truck pull up. Strangely, they want to know who the white fairy in their field is. I tell them I'm from San Francisco and I've gotten stranded out here during a science experiment and, if they could be so kind, could they take me to a telephone. The workers hook up the pipe to a pump I missed last night and set the timer. I get in the back of the truck and they take me west. We hit feeder road in a few minutes of rough riding and they turn north. Then they banzai down Highway 64 to the town of Felt, population 93. They drop me at the post office and assure me it'll open in an hour or two.

Having time to kill, I walk the town of Felt. Felt is three blocks deep and four blocks wide. They have a high school. I walked into the high school office and spoke with the nice woman behind the counter.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. May I help you?”

“I’m part of a science experiment and I’ve wound up here without papers or money. May I make a call?”

“Local or long distance?”

“Collect, long distance.”

She looked at me warily. She put the old dial type phone on the counter and picked up the receiver. “Junie, this is Elly at the high school. I have a man here who needs to make a collect call to...” She looked at me.

“Mountain View, California.”

“Mountain View, California. Okay.” She hung up.

“Junie will call us back as soon as she gets a line.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind.”

“It only costs us a dime. I’m happy to help.”

“Do you have today’s paper?”

“Nope. Will yesterday’s do?”

“That’ll be fine, thank you.”

I took the paper and sat on the oak bench next to the office window to wait for my call. I stared with the sports section. Their football team was having summer workouts and they were asking for sponsors. The Giants lost to the Dodgers 2 to 1. I didn’t recognize the players, but I rarely do. They change so often these days. Then a name in the article caught my eye. Sandy Koufax. I didn’t know who he was, but my Granddad had talked about him. My eyes crawled up the paper to the top. June 19, 1966. The telephone rang.

“Your collect call to Mountain View.” said Elly as she handed me the phone.

“Operator.”

I was thinking fast. “Collect to the commander of Onizuka Air Force Base.”

“Your name, please.”

He wouldn’t know me. Shit. “Colonel Andrew Sims.”

“One moment please”

She relayed the name to the base operator. After a few minutes, the call was put through.

“Andrew?”

“His son, sir. I have a serious problem.”

Irritated, “And what would that be?”

“I’m part of a black project. I’m stranded in Felt, Oklahoma.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“Near the border of Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico.”

“Okay. What do you need?”

“I have no ID or money. I need to get out to Moffet, ASAP.”

“Okay, Andrew. I’ll get you a ride in to Vance Air Force Base. And Andrew..”

“Yes sir?”

“If this is some sort of stunt, your ass will be in ‘Nam faster than shit shoots out a pig.

Understand?”

“Yes sir. Have them pick me up at the Felt Post Office.”

I handed the phone back to Elly.

“You look a little pale.”

“Generals always do that to me.” I smiled and walked back to the post office and waited.