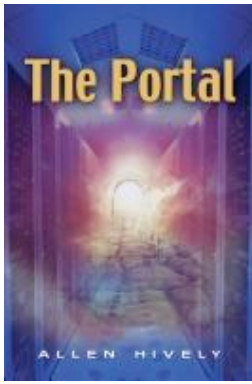




The Portal

ALLEN HIVELY



*Mark Jacobs, a genius-level scientist and inventor and his sister, Kelly, a software designer, build a time machine by accident while working on a teleportation device. They decide to use the time machine to secure and preserve ancient treasures that have been lost to history. This first book in the series, *The Portal*, centers on the protagonists' attempt to recover treasure never found from the 17th century Spanish ship, the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*.*

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The Portal

Allen Hively

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ISBN 978-1-62646-637-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

Dedication

Writing a novel is a labor of love that asks for more time and effort than I could have ever imagined. Of all the people who helped along the way, I would like to recognize my son Luke for his unconditional love, moral support, and friendship. And my thanks to Susan for pushing and encouraging me all the way through.

Chapter 1

France: 1865

Outlines of the chateau began to take shape as Kelly ran up the dirt path. The sun was just peeking over the horizon and flickering through the trellised grapes laden with the year's harvest. Huffing from the exertion, she hiked up her skirt and quickened the pace. What had begun as delicate beads of perspiration soon turned into rivulets of sweat. She made a mental note to chastise her brother for making her late, even though she knew that, technically, it wasn't his fault. Still, she needed someone to blame.

Good grief ... I should never be late, she thought.

Ten grueling minutes later, she arrived at the estate's front entrance. She stopped on the cobblestone walkway and took a breath. Then she primed for a dignified entrance and continued to the large oak door. She closed it behind her and stood motionless long enough for a deep breath and then continued to her room. Perhaps it was the squeaky wooden floors or merely the housekeeper's intuition, but Claire seemed to appear out of nowhere.

The old woman scowled as well as any drill sergeant, hands on her hips with dark piercing eyes. She blocked Kelly's path.

"Mademoiselle ... you are late!" she said. "Where have you been? Monsieur Monet has been waiting for nearly thirty minutes."

Kelly sighed, more annoyed with herself than the old woman, since the encounter was no surprise and quite predictable. Nothing happened in the house without Claire's knowledge. She was the housekeeper but filled in as judge-advocate and mother to everyone on the estate. The old woman was cranky by nature, but the entire staff loved her, and Kelly knew her bark was worse than her bite.

"Oh, Claire, you know me. The grapes are getting close to harvest. Who should I ask to walk the vineyard if I am not willing to do it myself? Please give Monsieur Monet my apologies and tell him I will join him in a few minutes."

She offered her best smile, noting the old woman's frown. It was very hard for a modern-minded young lady to not come across as cavalier. And that was a trait frowned upon in the nineteenth century. Nor was it proper according to Claire.

A few minutes later, Kelly, as presentable as could be after a mid-September three-mile run, made her appearance in the parlor wearing a long-sleeved, full-length dress.

"Ah, Monsieur Monet," Kelly said, "please forgive me for being late for our appointment. It was quite rude of me."

As was customary, she approached him and offered her hand.

Holding it gently, he kissed the back of her hand and said, "Mademoiselle ... I would wait all day for you. But please, after all the time we have spent together, call me Claude."

She smiled, reliving a private thought that occurred every time they met: *Like a dream—to personally know your favorite artist.*

Kelly glanced at him. Claude was a nice-looking man in his early twenties, trim but not exactly athletic, his brown stormy eyes teeming with emotion. He was clad in a blue suit faded from excessive use and a rumpled white shirt stained with colorful splotches of paint. His dark hair was unkempt and long overdue for a barber's attention; the beginnings of a scraggly beard added to his scruffy appearance.

"It would be my pleasure, Monsieur Monet—Claude. These archaic formalities weary me. This conversation has occurred several times, and yet you refuse me the same favor," she said, mimicking her best coquettish smile.

He acknowledged her words with a grin and nodded without further comment. She knew it was uncommon for him to work for someone his own age, and she suspected he would miss their vigorous conversations. Well versed on any subject, Kelly knew without doubt she had more education than any female—and perhaps any male—on the planet. She was a bit taller than what was considered to be average of the time, thin but not spindly, and had bouncy, long red hair, a color best described with paint. She knew herself to be a pretty, full-figured woman that most men would consider a pleasure to see. Her eyes were intense like emeralds: bright, inquisitive, and intelligent. She also managed an unpretentious demeanor and the uncanny ability

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to treat everyone the same. Some might have said the perfect woman, but in her mind, Kelly was more or less just ordinary.

“I believe, mademoiselle that politeness is a good thing, and I am thankful for it to be a hard habit to break. However, after today, I will be finished, and then instead of you being my patron, we can just be friends. Shall we get to work?”

Kelly nodded and took her spot to pose, allowing the young master artist Claude Monet to finish her portrait.

“Am I correct in assuming, then, that I will finally get to see it?” Kelly asked.

“Yes, I promise. Today is only to touch up.”

His touch-up took most of the day. Sitting still was not one of Kelly’s stronger traits, but knowing that this was the last session helped. Although the painting had sat in her parlor for the past month, it remained covered and off-limits. She was daydreaming about going home when Claude finished and thus did not notice his silent gesture.

He cleared his throat and said her name for the first time: “Kelly ... it is done. Would you care to see my scribble?”

She bounded to his side to see the painting. Stunned, Kelly blurted out her words without thinking: “It’s a beautiful traditional piece.” She wanted to take the words back, but already they had escaped lips.

The young artist’s mournful expression confirmed her remorse. “I am so sorry; we never discussed style. I presumed you would want a traditional portrait.”

“Monsieur ... it is I who am sorry. Many times over the past month when discussing art, the subject of Impressionism has been at the forefront of our conversations. It was I who presumed.”

“This is not a problem, mademoiselle. I shall do it over at no cost to you.”

Kelly’s mind raced for a way out of her predicament; Claude’s pride would dictate the course of events. *Maybe there’s a way out ... one that’s fitting for an injured ego*, she thought.

“Monsieur Monet, as I see it ... we are both to blame, and there is a suitable solution. My family, being quite stuffy when it comes to this sort of thing, will love the painting. It is a beautiful piece, and I

insist on paying you our agreed amount. However ... I do expect an Impressionistic portrait that we will start upon my return from England. Do we have a deal, monsieur?"

One should never underestimate the power of a female to turn the tide of a male's self-esteem, especially that of an artist. Claude paused only long enough to digest what she had just proposed and then began to laugh.

"Oui ... Kelly," he said. "We have a deal."

Two days later, after saying good-bye and leaving final instructions with the estate's servants, Kelly left on a carriage hired from the city of Nogent-sur-Seine, which was a few miles away. Leaving, as always, was complicated. Everyone had to know—and believe—she was off to England to see family. The truth of her destination was inconceivable even to her ... and she had made the trip many times. The coachman was confused and reluctant to drop her off in the middle of nowhere less than ten miles down the road. A large tip and several reassurances were required before he relented. Once alone, she rolled back a sleeve, revealing a lady's Rolex, and checked the time.

Twenty minutes to spare, she thought.

Kelly took a breath of the fresh country air, closed her eyes, and enjoyed her last few minutes in nineteenth-century France. Soon a smell similar to an overloaded electric motor filled the air, and a rectangular portal appeared a few yards away from where she stood. There was no house, cave, or other reason for it to be there. Even more, inside the bright interior of the portal lay a world much different than the one Kelly was leaving.

Without hesitation, she walked through the portal and it closed behind her, leaving nothing behind but footprints.

Chapter 2

Florida: Present Day

The morning's twilight hour offered just a hint of light in spite of the raging storm, so it seemed to Freddy like a perfect time to enjoy the car's extraordinary capabilities. The Porsche dealership of Tampa Bay had called about the rush delivery the day before. Josh was an old navy buddy turned general manager and sometimes needed an exotic car taken from Point A to Point B in a hurry. Whenever the occasion presented itself, Freddy jumped at the chance. His scant living as a salvage diver would never allow him to afford high-dollar toys like a Porsche, but Freddy loved them and would always do the job for free.

This time, the buyer—Mr. Jennings—was impatient, and as luck would have it, he knew Freddy and trusted him to drive the car to Fort Lauderdale. Mr. Jennings' instructions, though, were clear: take the interstate and no detours. Not one to follow instructions to the letter, Freddy decided to take a more scenic route. Cruising along, he glanced at the brochure lying in the passenger seat. A crooked smile etched his lips as he silently read the cover yet again: "*The Porsche 911 turbo is meticulous German engineering in the timeless pursuit of speed and motorized art.*"

"You got that right," he said to the empty car. "You have five hundred horsepower at seven-thousand RPMs, with a top speed of 194 miles per hour. So ... let's see what you've got, sweetheart."

Traveling well over the speed limit, Freddy drove the winding country road with intent, repressing common sense with fleeting self-assurances, and pressed the pedal to the floor. He imagined that most of Florida's natives were spending the early morning in the confines of their homes, safe from the storm ... and his driving. The latter of the two thoughts put that odd lopsided grin back on his face as he prepared for the next curve. Intoxicated with power, Freddy hardly noticed the G-forces produced by the maneuver. The engine responded to the accelerator with a throaty rumble as the turbocharger

spooled up. The little red car exploded down the meandering road with the elegance of a ballet on wheels.

Freddy had grown up in Florida and was familiar with its thousands of miles of beautiful interstates. It also, of course, had its share of county roads in ill repair. The rural areas surrounding Lakeland, Florida, were a testimonial to that fact. Of the thousands of lakes that covered the state, this particular area was an old community with unique boundaries. It was part of the appeal ... and the reason that Freddy had chosen it: he knew it would be a challenging drive.

The visibility grew worse as the torrential rains—a byproduct of Tropical Storm Hanna—pummeled the narrow, dark road.

Damn. I didn't count on this weather. But ... what the heck! These conditions will be an exceptional test of the car and my driving.

As he gunned the engine, Freddy felt like a projectile on wheels, man and machine entwined as one as the miles and minutes passed by.

Freddy never saw the yellow caution sign. Dense roadside vegetation covered the placard that signaled an impending curve and a recommended speed of twenty miles per hour. Realizing the curve's severity too late, Freddy downshifted and pushed the engine well past its intended limits. The car responded, seemingly unselfish and eager to give all it could. The sudden influx of power created a high-pitched whine as the engine's twin turbochargers spooled up and the tachometer buried itself past the redline. The speedometer held steady at sixty miles per hour, and the Porsche settled onto the pavement as if the two were symbiotic. Judging that the car would need both lanes, Freddy gripped the steering wheel and hoped the road remained deserted.

About the time he was thinking to himself, *I've got this*, a car pulled out on to the highway from a hidden driveway. Subliminal instincts that have perpetuated the human species for thousands of years made Freddy's split-second choice, and he swerved to miss the car. His excessive speed and the wet narrow road gave one option. Cranking the steering wheel hard to the left and then the right resulted in an awkward fifty-yard slide. The car came to rest abruptly in a

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water-filled ditch. Uninjured except for his pride, Freddy slapped the steering wheel several times in anger.

“Crap! How am I going to explain trashing the car?”

Disgusted, he leaned his head against the wheel and mouthed a few more choice words, hoping for some sort of gratification. It didn’t help, though, and as if on cue, the water in the flooded ditch stalled the engine. Then he found out that the door was jammed and wouldn’t budge even after several animated physical attempts. He slapped the dash, angry with himself more than anything, and then thought to try the window. To his relief, it went down, but the water level was higher than the window sill, and muddy ditch water came pouring into the interior.

At six-foot-one and around 190 pounds, Freddy was not a little guy. Wriggling out of the tiny cockpit was a challenge even when the door worked. He gathered himself into an uncomfortable crouching position on the seat and began the task of squeezing his broad shoulders through the window. The escape plan was going well until one of Florida’s oldest residents burst into Freddy’s view.

Seven feet long, the alligator was trapped between the car and an old tree stump. The reptile’s agitation made up for any consideration of size, especially when Freddy found himself hanging halfway out of a car window in the rain just before dawn. The injured gator struggled for freedom, snapping at everything within reach. The razor-sharp teeth were so close to Freddy’s face that he could smell the decay of death on the animal’s breath.

Freddy managed to squirm his way back into the Porsche. Only his head was still exposed to the angry reptile. A powerful flick of its tail came within inches of his face. His reflexes avoided the gator, but jerking back into the confined space caused him to hit his right temple against the roof line of the window—and then everything went black for him.

////

Mark Jacobson was a nerd. He was brilliant but a geek nonetheless. His khaki pants were two wash cycles’ old, and his shirt was wrinkled from sleeping in it the night before. Black-rimmed glasses reminiscent of the 1960s were broken in the middle and held

together with a generous amount of white tape. He kept his reddish-blond hair cropped short, more for convenience than appearance. And his slight build suggested he'd never seen the inside of a gym, while pasty skin proved he rarely saw the sun. Even though he had an IQ over 160, he became slow-brained when hurried. Now, preoccupied with cleaning his wet, fogged-up glasses rather than with watching the road, he swerved from one side to the other while driving with his knees.

The gravel driveway was in poor condition, and the potholes hidden by rainwater were potential quagmires. Guided by muscle memory rather than skill, Mark missed most of them and rolled onto the road without stopping. A hasty glance for oncoming traffic caught the red blur in his peripheral, but it was too late. He slammed on the brakes and locked his arms, bracing for impact. Mark's old Toyota Camry came to a stop in the middle of the road, blocking the path of the oncoming Porsche. It happened so fast that by the time Mark opened his eyes, the car had missed him and was sliding down the road sideways.

Shaken from the near miss, he got out and walked toward the wrecked sports car that he could see now sat in the roadside ditch. The downpour splattered and fogged Mark's glasses so fast that it was almost a losing battle. Using his fingers to wipe them clean, he regained enough clarity to grasp the horrific scene. An alligator was trapped between the car and an old tree stump, and the driver was halfway out of the window, struggling to get back inside. Delirious from pain, the beast flailed about trying to get loose.

"Oh man!" Mark whispered to himself. "If he gets loose, that guy's a goner."

He shuffled side to side for a few moments, trying to decide what to do next, before a solution came. The epiphany sent him sprinting back to the Camry, which still sat idling in the middle of the road. He almost fell on the wet pavement when he pulled hard on the handle and his hand slipped off. The passenger door opened on the second try, and he dropped into the seat. He fumbled with the glove box latch until it came open, and then he retrieved a .44 Magnum revolver from inside, remembering at the same time he never kept it loaded. The

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center console was the best choice for finding some ammo, so he rifled through candy wrappers, assorted trash, napkins, and old receipts. At the bottom, he found two cartridges. His hands were shaking so much that when he opened the revolver's cylinder, he dropped one of the cartridges between the seats.

Mark managed to load the remaining shell, snapped the cylinder closed, and rotated it so the next pull of the trigger would fire the weapon. Running back to the wrecked car, all he could think about was what a lousy marksman he was.

Need to get as close to point-blank range as I can, he thought.

In the back of his mind, it hit him that he should be shooting from a parallel alignment with the car, and he moved into that position. Then he raised and fired the handgun—just missing hitting his own forehead as the revolver recoiled past his right ear. Even though he was standing a few feet away, it ended up being a lucky shot that somehow found its target, and the struggling gator stilled. Mark looked at the gun, awestruck.

Wow ... I made the shot!

Cautious and still shaking, he crept closer to scrutinize the condition of the ill-fated gator—and the driver of the car. Lighting erupted across the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder, and for a short moment illuminated the scene enough for Mark to see that his one reckless shot had indeed been fatal to the giant reptile. Mark mucked his way down around to the passenger side of the car and gave the door a try. The mud and water created a gooey sludge that pressed against the door and resisted his efforts. Puffing from the exertion, he opened it enough to drag the occupant out of the car and onto the road. The man was breathing but unconscious.

“Hey, are you okay?” Mark asked.

He received no response. He looked for any sign of a wound or broken bones and found nothing except a small cut and some swelling by the man's right temple. Being a man of small stature, Mark found it to be a struggle to drag the heavy, lifeless body back to his car, talking out loud to the unconscious man as he went: “How is it that a big strapping guy like you can just knock yourself out?”

Then Mark stopped where he stood in the rain, holding the man.

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“Crap! I’m such a dumb ass. Why didn’t I just drive the car over and load him up?”

Too late to matter, and nearing exhaustion, Mark opened the rear door and somehow managed to push the guy into the backseat. His house was about two hundred yards from the scene, and minutes later, he was wrestling the unconscious man into the house, finally dropping him with a thump onto the floor. He checked for vital signs. Satisfied his guest was indeed alive, Mark grabbed an old bedspread off the couch and covered him, then hurried off to the kitchen.

Chapter 3

Freddy awoke on the floor of a strange house, feeling groggy from unconsciousness. He blinked and tried to comprehend his surroundings.

Where am I? He wondered.

Memories of the wrecked car and trapped gator flooded back, and in a comical but understandable panic, Freddy threw off the bedspread covering him. Apprehensive but driven by the need to know, he checked every extremity. Reassured that he was still in one piece, he breathed a sigh of relief—and sat up too quick. The blood-pressure change caused his head to start throbbing. He felt for the cause and discovered a swollen tender spot near his temple. His fingertips came back wet from his rain-soaked head but with slight traces of blood mixed in.

Looks like I'll live.

A subtle movement caught his attention, and he turned his head. A man walked into the room carrying two cups of hot coffee on a tray, along with a small sandwich baggie full of ice.

The man set the tray on the coffee table, picked up one of the mugs, took a short sip, then made a gesture toward the couch and said, “If you feel like getting up, please have a seat.”

“Thanks,” Freddy said.

Standing up slowly, Freddy walked on shaky legs to the leather sofa, dragging the worn bedspread along with one hand. He sat down and pulled it up over his legs, then picked up the coffee cup with both hands and blew on the hot liquid to cool it down. For a while, they sat, drank their coffee, and regarded each other like a couple of alley cats. The warmth returned to Freddy’s body, and the pounding headache began to subside. Freddy ignored the sensible thing to do and decided to rely on first impressions instead. It wasn’t one of his better attributes. He was a nice guy and had been brought up with good moral standards; he was, however, ruled by impulse.

“Where the hell is my car?” Freddy said. “You ran me off the road and then your pet alligator attacked me. What are you going to do now—shoot me?”

He pointed to the butt of the revolver sticking out of the man’s pants and realized after the fact that perhaps he should hold his tongue. The revelation caused his good manners to return as fast as they had left. He shut up and waited to see what happened next.

The guy’s reaction was subtle, and he seemed distracted, with no desire to participate in the exchange. The storm outside raged on, and a clap of thunder echoed in the distance, rattling the windows seconds later. Freddy began to wonder if the guy was of limited mental capacity since he kept avoiding eye contact.

“It was mutual carelessness that caused the accident,” the man finally said. “Your car is in the ditch where you crashed. If you go to the end of my driveway and turn right, it’s about fifty yards down the highway on the right. You can’t miss it. I called for a tow truck, but the weather is so bad, they said it would be a few hours before they could get out here.”

Freddy was still fixated on the pistol and decided due vigilance with regards to his answer might be prudent.

Oh my God ... I hope this guy is not crazy.

Apparently realizing the source of Freddy’s discomfort, the man pulled out the revolver and laid it on the coffee table.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s empty, and besides that, I’m not much of a gunslinger. I managed to get one cartridge in it and shot the gator.”

An odd look of regret creased the man’s face, and he once again became silent.

Freddy still felt the anger bubbling inside, and he hadn’t given much thought to anything except how he was going to explain the accident to the Porsche’s owner.

“I’m guessing you feel like I should thank you,” Freddy said. “The thing is, as I see it, you caused the wreck in the first place.”

“Perhaps ... but how fast were you going?” the man asked.

Freddy shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

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“Looks to me like we both were in too much of a hurry tonight,” the man said. “The good thing is, no one was hurt and your car can be repaired.”

Still unable to let go of his resentment, Freddy shook his head and replied, “Just what in the hell am I supposed to do until the tow truck comes?”

Disgusted, he took a large gulp of coffee, disregarding the fact it was still hot, and then spewed it all over himself.

The strange little man disappeared into the next room and returned moments later with a towel. He pitched it to Freddy, keeping his composure with only a hint of brusqueness.

“If it’s not too much trouble, please refrain from making any more messes. There’s not much to eat in the kitchen, but feel free to help yourself. I’m going to finish up some work. You’re welcome to stay here until the wrecker gets here. Get some sleep on the couch if you want. It’s pretty comfortable. Oh, and please don’t go wandering around. The work I do here can be hazardous for someone unfamiliar with high-voltage equipment. The bathroom is down the hall if you need it.”

With no apparent interest in a reply, the man left. Seconds later, though, he poked his head back into the living room.

“I apologize,” the man said. “I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Mark Jacobson.”

Freddy looked up from his cup of coffee, “Freddy Sanchez.”

It was sinking in that Freddy should accept his share of responsibility for the accident and that he was as much to blame. But Mark disappeared without another word.

Guess I was being a jerk, Freddy thought.

He had gone full circle with his emotions and was now feeling some regret, and his sarcasm did nothing but make it worse. The reality that he had wrecked someone else’s \$130,000 sports car was sinking in. Insurance would cover the damages, but it would also mean admitting fault—and he would never be asked to deliver any more cars. The Porsche was in a ditch full of muddy water due to his unauthorized route and poor judgment.

Freddy buried his face in both hands and cursed quietly; as usual, it didn't help much. Wishing for a distraction, he picked up the baggie of ice, wrapped it in the coffee-stained towel, and held it against his injured head. He stood up and started wandering around the room, looking but not really seeing his surroundings. Little by little, he noticed a few oddities that stirred his interest. Slowing his steps, he took a closer look at the art scattered around the room and noticed that many of the paintings looked quite authentic. Then he looked again.

Something didn't add up.

The colors were bright and had a "just painted" look, yet they were old in style; he also noted that the canvases were not modern.

Freddy knew something about antiquities. It was his job and favorite hobby. He spent most of his free time in museums or on the Internet learning about art and ancient treasures. A salvage diver by trade, knowledge was essential; otherwise one could miss a discovery of a lifetime. Paintings were more on the hobby side, but there was something peculiar about one of these in particular. Moving closer for a better view, he realized the work had a familiar feel. Although he could not remember ever seeing the piece, the style was unmistakable: mid nineteenth century. When he looked at the corner of the painting and read the signature, he was dumbfounded. The name scribbled in the corner of the canvas was Monet. Freddy's heart raced as his mind spun to make sense of it.

Could it be an unknown original? He shook his head. *No way.*

Retracing his steps, ambling from one piece to another with methodical efficiency, he confirmed what could not be true. Every painting had familiar signatures that any student of art history would know: Renoir, Bazille, and Monet ... all nineteenth-century French Impressionists. The fact that they were unfamiliar mystified Freddy.

Why would anyone make fakes of unknown work? he wondered.

Oddly, the Monet was painted in a traditional fashion, not the Impressionistic style he was famous for. Freddy knew the master artist had painted some conventional pieces early in his career.

Still ... where could they have come from?

Sitting back down on the couch, Freddy tried to piece together and understand what he was seeing, things that common sense could

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not accept. The possibilities were endless. He glanced toward the kitchen, which was the direction Mark had disappeared.

Something strange going on here, the work is too new. No cracking or fading. The colors are fresh and vibrant. They have to be clever reproductions, he mused, even as another thought struck him.

“Hmm, this could be a very lucrative niche for me,” he muttered to himself.

He stole a cursory look around the room, hoping he was still alone, even as he scolded himself for thinking out loud.

Think I should have a look around and see what this guy's up to.

A big smile spread across his face as he remembered Mark's warning not to wander around the house.

Makes sense.

He stood up and started off toward the kitchen. The arched doorway led into a long and narrow galley-style kitchen. It was very much like any other. Unwashed dishes were piled high in both sides of the double sink. The smell and their appearance suggested they had been there for some time. There was a box of Captain Crunch on the counter and a half-eaten bowl of cereal with a carton of milk sitting out beside it. A brief survey of the kitchen brought Freddy to the conclusion that Mark was a pig.

“Please refrain from making any more messes,” Freddy said, mimicking Mark while rolling his eyes and shaking his head in disgust.

At the end of the kitchen stood a large steel door that looked to be the only exit. On the wall next to the door was a sophisticated entry keypad that included what appeared to be a palm-print scanner.

Locked, no doubt, Freddy thought.

Irritated, he started back to the living room when he noticed that the door was slightly ajar. He gave it a light tug, and it opened with very little effort.

On the other side was a landing with a metal railing and steps leading down into a large, well-lit room, clearly a lab of some sort. There was an extraordinary feeling of power—and static electricity that was so intrusive. The hair on Freddy's neck and arms bristled. The pungent smell of ozone filled the room. It reminded Freddy of an

electric motor shorting out, or a close lightning strike. An eerie feeling similar to walking a graveyard at midnight crossed his mind, but curiosity drew him farther into the room. The ambiance of the lab was as mysterious as it was complex. Long rows of computers covered two walls. A control panel similar to NASA's mission control was built in a semicircular fashion and sat at a diagonal in the far corner of the room where the two massive rows of CPUs met. He noticed a head moving from one task to another—Mark, he figured—but as Freddy walked down the stairs, the person disappeared from view. Having expected to find an art studio and instead discovering something very different, Freddy decided to not make his presence known just yet.

Some interesting high-tech stuff here, he thought.

In the big scheme of things, Freddy considered himself to be an average guy. He took pride in staying fit and even tried to come across as a bit cocky. Pushing forty, he knew it was a character flaw ... but old habits die hard. His military background had taught him the value of being resourceful and vigilant of people, places, and things. The endearing qualities like kindness, generosity, and caring were there, although one would never notice without getting to know him, Freddy knew.

Trying to stay out of sight, he wandered into an open space in the middle of the room, and a large television screen came into view.

That's odd.

Taking a couple of steps back, he realized it was invisible from the side. He moved to a different vantage point and saw it was shaped like a door but had no boundaries in the physical sense. The bottom ended at the floor, but the sides and top just ended in empty space. The snowy display looked like a TV channel that was either out of range or had gone off the air for the evening. Fascinated, he watched the screen change to a blurry unfocused image, and then it became a clear, sharp picture.

The perspective was from the edge of a large lake rimmed by trees so tall they seemed unreal. On the horizon, a massive volcano puffed smoke like a giant cigar, with rivers of red-hot lava streaming down the sides. At first, he thought the overpowering smell of sulfur

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and other unrecognizable odors were his imagination. But when his eyes started to burn and water, the sensation felt real. The tropical scene was surreal and unlike anything he had ever seen. He saw colorful birds darting in and out of the tree line, and could hear a strange mix of jungle sounds that were unfamiliar to his ears.

“Wow,” he said in a whisper, “this is the best hi-def ever—like being there ... sight, sound, even smell.”

Enticed by curiosity, he crept to within an arm’s length of the doorway, close enough to notice a terrible foul odor, a stench he could almost taste.

“Stay back!” Mark yelled from across the room.

Before Freddy could react, a huge reptilian head came through the screen, its open mouth revealing hundreds of razor-sharp teeth. Horrified, Freddy fell backward, kicking wildly and trying to get away, mouthing words that came out as primitive guttural sounds. The jungle scene disappeared, and the head dropped to the floor in between Freddy’s splayed legs, making a loud thump. Working like an automaton, the jaws—with three-inch incisors—continued chomping uncomfortably close to Freddy’s manhood. The slippery floor impeded his frantic backpedal, and his movement ended with him crushed against the control panel. He looked from side to side for a way to escape. Finding none, he began clawing his way up. Trapped with no place to go, his fear-filled eyes went back to the beast that could not exist.

There was an explosion of sparks and a sputtering of circuits hissing their last moments of life. The room filled with smoke, triggering an automatic exhaust system that removed it mere seconds later, all of which Freddy barely took note of. His heart pounded like a jackhammer as he struggled to make sense of what had just happened.

A hand touched his shoulder.

“Ah!” Freddy cried out, convulsing as he jumped back.

“It’s okay. You’re safe,” Mark said.

Freddy glanced back still confused with what had just happened and with Mark’s attempt to calm him down.

“Safe? Are you crazy? That ... thing just tried to eat me!”

His words came out ragged as he struggled in vain to control his breathing. The creature's lifeless eyes held him in a temporary hypnotic trance.

"I assure you that it's dead," Mark said, this time with a little more compassion.

Freddy managed to tear his eyes away long enough to see Mark grinning and looking happy as a clam.

"What in the hell is that thing?" Freddy asked, gesturing to the head on the floor.

"If I'm not mistaken, it's the head of an adolescent Tyrannosaurus rex," Mark replied.

"Oh my God, you can't be serious! I must be in the twilight zone," Freddy said.

Bewildered, he watched Mark walk over and examine the head as though he had just shot a pheasant.

I've been duped, Freddy thought.

Searching the room, he tried to imagine what had just happened and whether it had been staged.

Has to be a trick!

A trick at his expense—and it was not a bit funny. Freddy walked to where the doorway had been and was careful to avoid the severed head by a wide margin. Nothing was there except empty space. His anxiety level soared due to his overloaded adrenal glands, and trying to understand what had just happened only made it worse. The questioning thoughts racing around his brain could not fathom a reasonable answer. Reaching up with his hand, he tried to touch the screen that moments ago had been there.

Nothing, he thought. *Just ... air.*

He looked back at Mark, who was still probing the decapitated head.

"Okay," Freddy said, "I know it's a really cool trick. How does it work?"

The response was silence. Mark looked at him with a perplexed stare and then stood up. Freddy could see there was turmoil in the man's eyes—and signs of irritation.

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“A better question for now would be, how did you get into the lab?” Mark asked.

“You forgot to lock the door,” Freddy said.

“Is it a normal character trait for you to enter places that are private, especially after I warned you not to wander?” Mark asked. “I would think anyone could figure out that a door with a security keypad means to stay out whether it’s open or not.”

“I can’t believe you’re lecturing me on door etiquette instead of explaining where that big-ass lizard came from. Perhaps it’s slipped your mind, but that ... that thing just tried to eat me!” Freddy said, pointing in the general direction of the severed head.

His emotions were in turmoil, reeling from anger and the near-death experience. The artwork he’d seen earlier flashed through his mind, but he decided to remain silent about why he had entered the lab. Mark’s response was a long time in coming, and the silence made Freddy feel uneasy.

“I can’t say,” Mark finally said.

“Whatever!” Freddy said. “I’ll have the cops on you in a heartbeat once I get out of here, and then we’ll see how uncooperative you are.”

Again Mark said nothing for a long moment. The silence ended with a loud sigh that served as a preamble to what Freddy guessed to be a hard decision.

“Fine,” Mark said. “It’s ... a time portal,” Mark said.

The comment came across as though a time portal was as common as a space shuttle.

“Uh, okay. So ... what’s a time portal?” Freddy asked.

“It’s a time machine, but instead of a device that you travel in, it opens a doorway to a place and time using complex mathematical computations and a lot of stuff you wouldn’t understand.”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t understand?” Freddy asked. His ego bruised.

“Well, to be blunt, I had to explain what a time portal is. That was pretty easy, but now we move on to quantum physics on steroids. Where would you like me to start?” Mark asked.

He didn't act smug or cocky. His behavior was more along the lines of a college professor conversing with a grade-school student.

"Look, I may not know much about physics, but I'm not stupid," Freddy said.

"I never said you were. I merely stated that there was stuff you wouldn't understand. My comment was not demeaning in any way. You took it personal," Mark said.

"All right, all right, I concede to ... being touchy. I tend to get a little grouchy when things try to eat me. You still haven't answered my question. How did the baby lizard appear out of nowhere?" Freddy asked.

Mark considered the question for a moment and replied, "The machine is able to open a door at a predetermined date and time. It is a portal that allows people, animals, or things to pass through to the past or vice versa. I can't keep it open for very long because of the immense amount of power it uses."

Mark paused, apparently to see if it all soaked in.

"So ... when the door closed, it worked like a giant guillotine," Freddy said.

"I couldn't have explained it better myself," Mark said.

"I could have been killed," Freddy said.

"Use of deadly force in response to trespassing is legal in Florida," Mark said with a stone face.

"You're a funny guy. I don't think attack lizards are on the list of acceptable home defense," Freddy said, then sighed. "Okay, so you're seriously saying that thing is a T. Rex."

"Yes, an adolescent Tyrannosaurus Rex ... judging from the ones I've been lucky enough to see. Fortunately for both of us, the rest of him was left in the middle of the Cretaceous period about seventy-five million or more years ago."

"Did it occur to you that this thing could have come in here and had both of us for a little snack?" Freddy asked.

"That's an improbable scenario. The portal is very much like a cave. He would only be able reach in a few feet since his body is too big to fit through. Predators like T. rex have a distinct odor that you

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will never forget. This one must have had the wind in his favor for him to get so close. They are very clever creatures.”

Freddy finally summoned up enough courage for a closer look. The tyrannosaur’s teeth were three to four inches long and razor sharp, and there seemed to be hundreds of them.

“Wow! Look at those choppers!” Freddy said. As he edged closer, he caught another whiff of the repulsive odor. “Good God ... it stinks. Whew!” He fanned his face with his hands in a hopeless effort to clear the air.

Mark walked away, shaking his head, then returned seconds later with a small tarp. He spread it out beside the head.

“All animals have a smell,” Mark said. “You do, I do, and so do dinosaurs. A T. Rex’s smell is extremely bad, and they do stand out among the other animals of their time. I guess it was nature’s way of helping those on the bottom end of the food chain to know that danger was close.”

“And what if he had been smaller ... or a velociraptor happened by?” Freddy asked.

“If that had happened, we wouldn’t be having this stimulating conversation. When I’m looking around, I try to avoid waving dinner in front of them,” Mark said.

Reaching down, Mark grabbed the head and tried to slide it onto the tarp. It was clearly more than he could manage, and with obvious reluctance, he asked Freddy, “Would you mind helping me get it onto the tarp?”

“I’m not touching that thing! The smell will never come off.”

Mark shook his head and pointed to a table a few feet away. “You can use those rubber gloves.”

Freddy donned the gloves and helped lift the head onto the tarp. “Man ... this head must weigh over a hundred fifty pounds. It’s going to take a really big hole to bury it. I hope you have a backhoe. It’ll take a long time with just a shovel.”

“Have you always been so stupid?”

“Well, what are you planning to do? Stuff it and mount it on the wall?” Freddy asked.

“This specimen is seventy-five million years old. What we are going to do is put it in the freezer so it can be preserved and studied.”

“Oh ... uh, yeah, I knew that. I was just ... kidding,” Freddy said, trying to salvage some face after what he realized to be a stupid remark.

He noted a slight tremble in his hands and knew the side effect was triggered by the physical contact and proximity. He had been in many life-and-death situations over the years, but nearly being eaten by reptiles twice in one morning was new to the list.

Together they folded the tarp around the head and dragged it to the opposite side of the lab, stopping at a large stainless steel door. Mark opened it, and Freddy saw within a walk-in freezer containing a few exotic creatures hanging like sides of beef. They deposited the heavy package into a clear spot in the rear. Mark double-wrapped it with some shrink wrap as Freddy looked around the interior, gawking at the frozen menagerie.

“Are all these creatures from seventy-five million years ago?” Freddy asked. “And have you tried to sell any of your little lizards?”

There was an awkward pause, but Freddy decided to give the man some space. *This guy is a genius, but sometimes smart people miss the easy stuff.*

“The specimens are all millions of years old and come from a variety of times and locations. None of them have been seen by man as they appeared alive. Science has had nothing but petrified bones to study and can only guess as to what they looked like, what they ate, if they lived in packs or alone, et cetera,” Mark said.

“I understand the scientific significance, but it still has tremendous value. And this is just a layman’s observation, but it’s pretty obvious the big guy here eats anything he wants.”

Freddy tried to smile at his joke, but the humor disappeared as he relived the terrifying event from just minutes earlier.

“You still don’t get it,” Mark said as he closed the freezer door. “It’s the scientific value that’s important here.”

“Which means it’s worth a lot of money, right?” Freddy asked.

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“Yes, to the right person, it could be worth a lot of money,” Mark said, looking frustrated but seeming to realize he was defending a lost cause.

Freddy knew that an opportunity had just dropped in his lap. His challenge was to sort out how he could write himself into the script.

“If this machine of yours does what you claim,” Freddy said, “then you’re the smartest person I’ve had the privilege to meet. I suspect, though ... you have very little business savvy? I think that our chance meeting could be beneficial for both of us. I’m a commercial salvage diver. Rare objects have come my way from time to time. Over the years, I’ve met people who have disposable income and like to collect things. It seems you could use someone like me.”

Freddy knew he was stretching the truth. The few contacts he did have would buy the occasional gold coin or trinket he found while diving old wrecks. He had no experience in extinct animals, but he was resourceful, and that was good enough for him.

“Maybe one of my contacts would be interested in buying one of your dinosaurs ... or perhaps one of the paintings in the living room,” Freddy said.

Mark frowned and gave Freddy a puzzled look. “The idea of selling my zoological specimens goes against everything I believe in. It’s not like selling a piece of gold or an artifact lost over time. These creatures are an important part of our planet’s history and evolution. The problem with selling an intact extinct creature would be the difficulty of explaining it. At the end of the day, there would only be one logical conclusion, and I want to keep my time machine a secret—but now that’s at risk because you know.”

Mark paused for either a response or personal contemplation.

There was an underlying infatuation for prehistoric life that Freddy could see was important to Mark. And it didn’t take a genius to figure out that in the wrong hands, time travel could be very dangerous.

“I can keep a secret,” Freddy said.

“Perhaps ... but I don’t know you. And, no offense intended, but you’re not a likely candidate for this project.”

Freddy gambled that he had nothing to lose so he went all in: “Give me an hour of your time. If I can’t convince you that I bring needed skills to your project, then you can go back in time and not pull out in front of me. We will have never met. No harm no foul, right?”

Mark said nothing, then a small smile formed on his lips. “You may be smarter than I’ve given you credit for,” he said.

“See? We’re halfway to an accord already. And thanks ... I think,” Freddy said.

“Okay, I’m listening,” Mark said.

Freddy knew that he was an honest person with a good head for business and people. And his instinct told him Mark needed something. Once the need was established, his challenge would be to prove he could fill it. Although it wasn’t a noticeable quality, Freddy was a good listener and intuitive.

“So!” Freddy said. “What is it that you need and how much will it cost?”

“The lab uses huge amounts of electricity. I’ve been using power off the grid. The problem is that sometimes the local service can’t always keep up with my needs—not to mention explaining the tremendous usage. A power fluctuation at the wrong moment and the computers crash, which is what happened moments ago. I need a generator that will supplement the lab’s power. I’m sure you can smell the burnt circuitry. There’s a long list of computer hardware that will need replaced as well.”

“I don’t understand why you need so much power.”

“I’m opening a window in time and space. The additional power would enable me to make the window larger and maintain that window for a longer period of time. If I lose power in the middle of a transfer, it could be fatal for the traveler ... as you just witnessed with the T. rex. I think further explanation would be lost in translation.”

“See? That’s the nice way of saying I wouldn’t understand,” Freddy said, adding his best warm, charismatic smile. “You’ve been doing a pretty good job of collecting animal specimens without any help. Since selling extinct animals comes with complications, perhaps we should focus on collecting the right things.”

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“So ... I have your word that you’re willing to walk away from this impromptu chat?” Mark said. “And that you understand if we disagree on principle, you may have no recollection of this discussion tomorrow?”

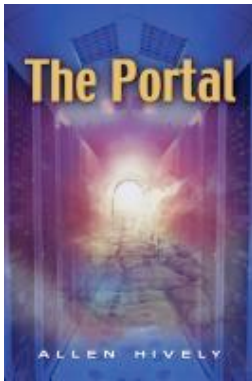
“How could I be upset about something that I never knew happened?”

Mark pointed to a solitary desk piled with papers and a hodgepodge of other nondescript items. There were two high-back leather chairs on opposite sides and facing each other. He offered Freddy one of them and he sat in the other.

“Four years ago, we went back in time for the first time,” Mark said. “At first, all we could do was look through a small window into the past. Most things and their surroundings are slow to noticeable change. For example, this house has been here for twenty-five years. This lab was an addition built nine years ago. There’s not a lot of seasonal change in Florida, so we had to go back nine years to see a dramatic change. Once we traveled far enough for the lab to disappear, we knew we had traveled in time. We still didn’t know if a person could go through the window or not.”

“Hold on,” Freddy said. “You keep saying ‘we.’ Do you have another partner in this project I should be aware of?”

“Yes.” Mark replied, “My sister Kelly. In fact, she designed a lot of the computer software that runs the program. ”



*Mark Jacobs, a genius-level scientist and inventor and his sister, Kelly, a software designer, build a time machine by accident while working on a teleportation device. They decide to use the time machine to secure and preserve ancient treasures that have been lost to history. This first book in the series, *The Portal*, centers on the protagonists' attempt to recover treasure never found from the 17th century Spanish ship, the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*.*

The Portal

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