

THE GIRL IN THE TIME MACHINE by Debra Chapoton
Chapter 1

What did we (two nervous, frantic girls) do with a dead body while a storm brewed outside, the lights actually flickered, and the minutes ticked closer to the moment when my car would drive up—with me driving? You would have thought we'd discussed the subject before. Because in less than five minutes of rational, scientific debate we settled on burying Megan, time machine style, in the hill out back. It sounded cold and callous, but really it was the best thing for everyone.

Mack made agitated chimpanzee howls when we dragged Megan down the hall, past his cell. The steps were the worst. Her toes smacked every stair tread with a dull thump. It was heart-breaking.

I hope you're reading this, Skylar. Or Emily. Or whatever you're calling yourself in your new reality. (I'm still going by Laken Mitchell, by the way.)

Sorry.

Sorry about leaving you in the past. I'm writing this down—a totally complete explanation and apology—so you'll understand. And so when, and if, we meet up again in some future or past you'll have already forgiven me.

Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure we'll never be best friends again where I am now. Never finish high school together. Never have another sleep over where we dye my hair black and bleach yours blond. Never giggle over you-know-who's cute butt.

Never.

Anybody who did what I did—what we did—would eventually lose someone. Kill someone. Accidentally ... or not so accidentally. And sometimes you can see death on someone's face. There's nothing you can do then except move on. Right? Right?

I'm going to leave this diary at the pump house in hopes you'll find it. That seems to be the only place that didn't change. I can only hope that maybe an earlier version of you or me will find it, read it, and figure out a way to restore things. After all, I seem to be getting smarter with every time jump. It's the hibernation that's the killer.

Anyway, I'll just record everything in this journal the way I remember it. Here goes:

On a sunny Saturday morning when I was ten—that might be twenty years or so into your future—I went into our garage, hunched over the front fender of my bike, and pressed on pink stickers. My dad came out, pulled his car out into the driveway, and then hummed as he cleared off the top of a small workbench against the back wall. He drilled a hole into a brick and put a bolt through it. I stopped to watch him. He snapped a set of keys onto the end of the bolt and then used a soldering gun to melt the ring closed. After that those four keys weren't going anywhere without the brick.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked. I expected one of his long explanations. Remember how he could hold us spellbound with his scientific descriptions? What a science geek. In a good way. I loved my dad—my real dad, the first and original version of him, that is—and I guess you got to know that version best.

"You'll find out when you're older, Laken." A tight smirk and a raised eyebrow—I knew that look. It meant subject closed. Picture my dad, that super brainy nerd, with his full professor's beard and that unfortunate bald spot, yeah, picture him giving me that look. I knew

better than to nag at him. I went back to working on my bike, rearranging my stickers while he made several more sets of bricks with keys. I never suspected the bricks and keys had anything to do with all the missing girls in our town, even though by then I'd heard loads of tales about kidnappers and serial killers. I told you all about those stories as soon as we met, remember? Who would've thought one day I'd be all those things—kidnapper, missing girl, and killer.

I didn't think much about the bricks and keys until a couple of years later when my parents started dragging me to work with them on weekends and I saw them use the keys on the brick to gain access to their lab. That was around the time I got my first period, right before my birthday, still four years before you moved to town. I'm only writing this part down because what happened then changed my life in the worst and maybe the best way and I don't think I explained it to you before.

Up until then I had a few friends—none as good as you—and I was doing well in middle school. You know me, I never got into trouble. But one day, the day before I turned twelve, trouble found me.

Shelly Ayers—lunchroom loudmouth, smarty-pants, sometimes teacher's pet—passed several notes out, one to each boy in our class. I only know what the notes said because a kid named Lawrence stuck one in my book later; it said *check out Laken Mitchell's butt*. Worst day ever. Bloody jeans, bloody chair, cruel laughter. You get the picture. When I came home from school and begged my mom not to ever make me go back there, she drove me to the lab and asked my dad to show me what was in the tower, locked off by the fourth key on the brick. Physically I'd become a woman and symbolically my parents acknowledged that by revealing a massively unbelievable secret.

Well, you know what that secret was: they had a time machine in the tower.

For weeks after that I thought of only three things: compassion—why didn't Shelly Ayers have any? Revenge—how could I get mine? And the machine in the tower—how did it work?

Shelly's cruel joke changed my life and I wasn't about to forget it. A part of me wanted nothing better than to “do unto her” in an equally unsympathetic manner, but the horrific humiliation I suffered also produced feelings I recognized much later as empathy. So even though I wanted something awful to happen to her—get run over by a car, drown in her bathtub—I also began at that time to develop a sensitivity to other girls' feelings though I withdrew from my few friendships. What I saw in the tower of the lab tickled my imagination and in the basement of my mind I began to fantasize about how I could use my father's invention for revenge ... and for good, too, of course.

On through middle school and into high school there were multiple incidents, other emotional upsets, and humiliations I endured at the hands of bullies and mean girls. They shaped my thinking. And my actions.

The very day I got my driver's license, a Friday, my mom and dad shooed me out the door after dinner, told me to drive solo all over town, and enjoy my new freedom. Visit some friends, they said, go shopping or find a party. Yeah, like that was going to happen. They just didn't want me going with them back to the lab where they worked practically 24/7. I spent too much time training the mice, they said. I shouldn't get so attached, they said. But what else did I have to do? That was before you entered my life. Well, the seventeen year old you.

But I didn't argue. I took the car keys and drove everywhere I'd practiced driving before: through town, a short ways into the country, a few miles on the expressway, back through town and down some side streets until it started getting dark. I burned through a quarter of a tank of gas without spotting a single “friend” or party or even getting near the mall.

I drove to my high school and then followed the convoluted bus route home, hoping I'd never have to take that route—seated in the spot behind the bus driver—again. It wound through several subdivisions and seemed totally alien to me at night. That's when my headlights caught a wobbly Shelly Ayers on foot. She looked lost. She took a step and stumbled, lurched toward the pavement, then hobbled a little further along somebody's lawn. Could she be drunk? I passed her, pulled into a driveway and reversed direction to come up beside her. I rolled down my window and let my compassionate side take control.

“Shelly? Do you need a ride?”

She staggered to the window and caught her balance with a hand on my door. Her hair swung forward and she used her other hand to tuck a snarly mass of it behind her ear. One of her eyes looked swollen and red and there were scratches on her face from her temple to her chin. The front of her shirt was wet and her breath stank of beer. Yup, she was drunk. But there was something else, something out of place about her.

“A ride?” she said. “You'd give me a ride? But—” She teetered to the side then righted herself and leaned fully on the door, poking her head in through the window, hippie beads jangling. There was no way I could open it then. She reached both arms through the window like she wanted to give me a hug. Her whole upper body was aiming to follow and I was afraid she'd vomit on my lap next.

I put the car in park and slid across to the passenger side to get out. I went around and guided her to the passenger's door and got her buckled in.

“I can't go home. I can't go home.” She sobbed into her hands and kept repeating the refrain.

“Why not?” I turned off the engine and tried not to think how I had my first enemy literally in my clutches. Did I still want revenge? Honestly, Sky, I think I did, but I was trying really hard to be compassionate.

She wiped at her eyes and took a couple of stuttering breaths, like a kid does after she's balled her head off, and then she fumbled with her beads and started singing an old Beatles song. I waited patiently while finally she composed herself and spoke clearly. “My parents abuse me.”

I never expected to hear that. “Should we call the police?”

“My step-father is a cop. So ... no. Can't call the cops.”

“Well, what do you mean they abuse you? Like hit you?”

“That and worse. It's why I drink, why I—” She gulped back a sob. “I can't go home. I never want to go home again.” She suddenly seemed almost sober. She pulled at the holes in the knees of her jeans.

“I have an idea. I'm sure my parents will go for it.” I smiled at her and continued, “They own a place where you can live. You could be like the night watchman or something. Maybe clean the animal cages in exchange for living there, at their laboratory.”

Shelly got real still. Hopeful, I guessed. Yeah, I was doing a good deed. This felt better than revenge. She looked so pathetic.

“You'd really help me?”

“Sure. Let's go talk to them now. They're at the lab.”

I started the car and drove out of the subdivision. Shelly didn't say another word as I headed straight to Mitchell Labs, where my folks would be, where they always were, where they'd worked together since they bought the land and old buildings.

Shelly gave a startled cry when we hit the first speed bump on the driveway into the lab. It was a long driveway and especially spooky at night.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “this is where my parents work. It’s really cool. You’ll like it. It’s pretty bright inside.”

I felt a little disobedient bringing someone to the lab, but only because I’d never done it before. Of course, you already know about how my parents bought an old monastery and remodeled the interior to start Mitchell Labs. They’d done it with money they won right after they graduated from college. You probably also figured out right away why they were super lucky—it took me a while to figure out why—and why even though we were probably millionaires (well duh, you saw the treasure chest), we lived like ordinary middle-class people in that old-style three bedroom ranch. I didn’t want to take Shelly to my house, but the lab would impress her. So what if in the back of my mind I was also thinking about what was in the tower. And maybe a seedling of revenge was taking root over the kindheartedness I meant to cultivate.

(Wow, Skylar, it feels really good to confess all this to you.)

We traveled down the long twisty road and I expected Shelly to gasp at the specter of the old crumbling monastery, but she had her head down in her hands again and missed seeing me switch to high beams, on and off three times, to signal my arrival—it was what my mom always did when she brought me here at night. I parked close up to the front door instead of going around to the back gated entrance. I didn’t have the key, or the brick it was attached to, so knocking on the front tower door would have to work.

Parked there with the headlights aiming off into the woods and only a little light illuminating the stone façade was a lot less intimidating. I beeped the horn three times then went to the door and knocked. It took a few minutes and some extra hard pounding, but finally both my mom and my dad opened the door and looked from me to the bedraggled passenger in the car.

In a harsh whisper my dad scolded me for bringing someone to the lab. “Laken, what were you thinking? You know better.” My mom was right beside him shaking her head, a concerned look tightening the lines around her mouth.

“No. Listen. This is Shelly Ayers. She can’t go home. I thought she could stay here. Work for you. Live at the lab.” I added in an even lower whisper, “She won’t find out what’s in the tower.”

“What? Laken, you know we can’t do that.”

“But, dad, her parents will kill her, I mean actually kill her, if she goes home. Please, can’t she stay here for a while?” I glanced back at Shelly. The dome light was still on and her face looked made up for Halloween, mascara running down, eyes dark, hair matted. I looked back at my parents, made my case outlining a job for her at the lab, how she could sleep in one of the rooms, and ended with “Please?”

Mom stepped forward. “She can spend the night at our house. Take her there. We’ll talk in the morning.” She pulled on my dad’s elbow, stepping back as if to say “end of discussion.” Okay, I got it. So much for trying to do a good deed. You’d think they’d be happy I’d found a friend. But no. Their reaction was nothing like when I brought you home.

They closed the door and I got back in the car.

“What did they say?”

I waited a beat. “They said no.” Another sigh. “But you can spend the night at my house. We’ll figure something out.”

She slumped lower in the seat and pulled the seat belt away from her throat. "Might as well drive me off the bridge," she mumbled. It flashed through my mind that a few years ago I had hoped for such an end for her.

I took us home and parked out in the street so my folks could pull in more easily at whatever late hour they finally returned. Shelly needed my help to walk without falling. I encouraged her to take a shower to sober up and I lent her my favorite pajamas. We ate some junk food and started talking.

And talking. She unloaded every sordid detail of a horrible life. I had no idea anyone, anywhere, ever had to endure the awful abuse that she did. I guess I cried as much as she did that night. And I tried to forgive her for what she did to me long ago, though I didn't say so out loud.

My parents came home around midnight and went to bed without checking on us. We kept talking, or rather, Shelly kept talking, telling me about her succession of evil step-fathers. I lost track of how many times her mother had been married or pretended to be. Shelly's real father was in and out of the picture, and he was nothing to brag about either. The one positive was Shelly's interest in music; she could quote a string of lyrics to fit as captions to each scene she described. Scenes of maltreatment, neglect, and injury. I guess the music was her way of coping.

"I wish I was somewhere else. I wish I was some *time* else," she said.

I nodded. I thought of the tower. I thought of what was in the tower.

It was rash, it was impulsive, I knew that, but with a sudden increase in my heart rate I had the perfect answer and came to the realization that I was going to totally exploit what was in the tower. For good, a good cause. Not revenge.

"Shelly, if you could live any time, like the turn of the century, or before there were computers, or like the 1950s, what would you choose?"

She didn't think long. "The 1960s. I'd want to be around for the beginning of when music really got cool. The Beatles ..." She went on naming other groups, but I stopped listening because I was planning how we'd sneak through the house, grab one of the bricks with the keys, take the car that was parked on the street, and steal back to the lab where I could make all of Shelly's troubles disappear.

End of Sample Chapter.

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