



A Taste of Adventure

M. Bradley Davis

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

The Worlds of M. Bradley Davis

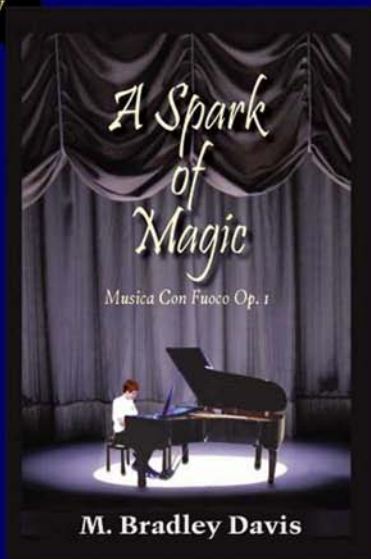


Tunnel of Dreams

A Fantasy



A
Free
Sample





From the author...

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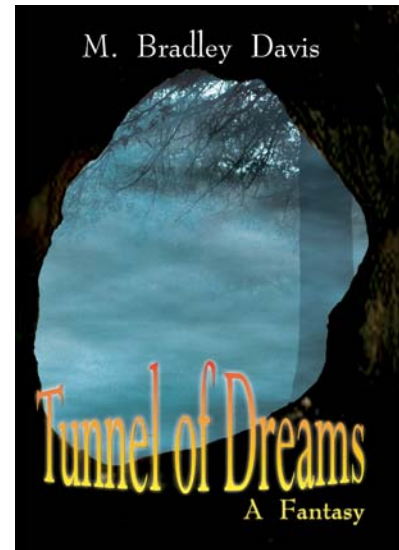
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M. Bradley Davis

TUNNEL OF DREAMS – A FANTASY

What would you dream about if *you* were buried alive? Join sixth graders Robert and Melissa on an unforgettable adventure as they are buried alive in a collapsed drainage tunnel.

Tunnel of Dreams is an adventure for readers and brave dreamers in fourth grade through middle school.



Chapter One: *Mud*

Sometimes, Melissa thought, *boys could be the pits.*

Sometimes, Robert thought, *girls could be a real pain.*

He stuck his tongue out at her while the teacher's back was turned.

He knew she saw it. She acted as if she didn't, but he *knew* she did.

Mrs. Johnson turned from writing on the board, explained the example problem from their math assignment, and then started another example. When she turned her back, Robert looked toward Melissa just in time to see *her* tongue poked out at *him*. Then, primly, Melissa focused on the board, ignoring him.

Robert couldn't *stand* being ignored. So, he wrote a note to his best friend. It didn't say a thing about Melissa, but she didn't know that!

When Mrs. Johnson finished explaining the new example and turned toward the board again, Robert passed the note to his friend, making sure Melissa saw it change hands. He grinned at her and then innocently looked back at the board.

Melissa ground her teeth in frustration. She slipped a piece of paper from her folder and began writing.

Tunnel of Dreams

Robert!

Don't tease me! I don't like it! We used to be friends. Now, all you do is act hateful to me. Why?

Melissa

When Mrs. Johnson finished the lesson and assigned their classwork, she allowed the students to get paper from their lockers and sharpen pencils. As they passed, Melissa “accidentally” bumped into Robert and her note passed to his hands. As they rummaged through their lockers, he read her note, wrote a quick reply, and then “accidentally” bumped into her a second time to return the note. Melissa made a show of rearranging her things after taking her seat. While hidden from the view of everyone else, she opened the note to read Robert’s reply.

Robert’s answer contained one word.

Right.

She took a chance and glared across the room at him, hoping Mrs. Johnson wouldn’t notice. Robert grinned back at her, delighted with her response to his written comment.

The school day wasn’t half over, yet.

He could still have lots of fun!

Recess arrived at last.

Robert was a solidly built boy. Not thin, and not stocky, but *solid*. A shade taller than usual for his eleven years, Robert’s wavy, red-brown hair and hazel eyes went well together. His hair wasn’t a true red in color; more like light brown with misplaced strands of red scattered about. *Lots* of misplaced strands of red. His wide face

M. Bradley Davis

and ready smile showed a generous mouth; in fact, his mouth was so square his teeth spread apart, leaving gaps. He was one of those kids people called “all boy,” meaning he was into just about everything.

The break outdoors was welcome, especially to Robert. He liked being outdoors and spent hours in the fields and meadows surrounding their community on most sunny days. Despite places like the playground, which had a lot of caliche in the soil, the land surrounding the town was rich and fertile; a wide variety of grasses, trees, and other plants grew naturally here. The land made decent farmland, though there was quite a bit of limestone underground; the soil itself, where rocks weren't the best growing crop, was loose and productive. Robert enjoyed discovering the many different plants and small animals hidden around him.

He chased several other boys around the playground in a game of freeze tag, and Robert was “it.” He ran, fast as he could, chasing his friend, Billy. Sure enough, he was catching him! Making his legs pump even faster, Robert put on a burst of speed and firmly slapped Billy as the smaller boy tried to dodge. Robert skidded in a cloud of yellowish dust, changed direction, and went after another boy. Robert's blue jeans were patched from where he'd torn out the knees. He wore a striped pullover shirt, and tennis shoes. His socks, after all the dust on the playground, were no longer white.

Across the way, sitting on a bench under a large tree, Melissa tried to enjoy the spring day and ignore the freeze tag game. It wasn't something a young lady in a dress should play. Melissa didn't really *think* of herself as a young lady, but she heard her mother remind her of it so often the phrase popped up in her thoughts more than she liked. Melissa sat with several of her girlfriends, chattering away. Today, Melissa wore a cotton print dress patterned in white daisies on blue, matching blue socks, and loafers. Her slightly curly blonde hair swept the air just above her shoulders. Blue eyes sparkled in a

Tunnel of Dreams

delicate, doll-like face with hints of attractive dimples in her cheeks. The dimples were *not* showing at the moment, however.

“Oooh!” Melissa complained, her voice filled with aggravation. “I wish he were in another class!”

“Robert?” One of the girls beside her asked.

“Yes!”

“He does tease you all the time,” another commented.

“Without mercy,” Melissa agreed. “I just can’t *stand* him!”

“I thought you two were friends,” the first girl said, her voice sounding puzzled.

“Me? Friends with *him*?” Melissa shook her head violently. After a few seconds, she added, “Well, sometimes...sometimes he can be...okay, I guess.” She decided she’d better not sound *too* forgiving, though! “But today *isn’t* one of those times! He’s driving me crazy!”

Everyone nodded.

Recess outdoors was a nice change. Rotten weather kept them indoors for most of the week. Melissa didn’t like wet, soggy days. They were lucky, though, because the playground dried out quickly. Its soil contained quite a bit of caliche, and that allowed water to evaporate rapidly leaving a dry surface. While the girls watched, the boys ran, coating their pants legs with a fine layer of yellowish dust from the grass-starved playground.

Across the playground, Robert tagged the last free runner and the group of boys gathered for a drink before that last, unfortunate runner had to face the task of being “it.”

Robert somehow managed to end up behind Melissa in line on the way back to their classroom. While she faced forward, he pulled her hair, whispering as he pulled.

M. Bradley Davis

“Hi, there!”

“Stop it!” She hissed back at him.

“Why?” he asked. “No one can see.”

“You’re mean!” She accused.

“No,” Robert denied. “I just like teasing *you!*”

“Yeah,” she agreed, her voice dripping anger, “and *I’m* the one who pays for it!”

Before he could answer, Mrs. Johnson interrupted.

“Melissa! You are in line!” Her stern tone required instant compliance. “Behave like a young lady, please!”

“But Mrs. Johnson, it’s not my fault! Robert is pulling my hair!”

“Robert has his hands at his side as he’s supposed to,” Mrs. Johnson told her, making a special effort to see exactly where Robert’s hands were.

“They weren’t there a minute ago,” Melissa protested.

“*Enough*, Melissa,” Mrs. Johnson told her firmly. “We will not discuss it any more.”

Robert grinned.

When Mrs. Johnson turned around to lead them back inside, Melissa glanced at Robert for a brief second, her face filled with fury.

“You got me in trouble...*again!*” She accused.

Robert smiled his pleasure at her discomfort.

The rest of the school day went in Robert’s favor. He managed to score victory after victory in every minor battle with Melissa who, to his delight, became more and more frustrated. When the final bell of the day rang, he made sure he was the first one out of the room—with a mob of kids between Melissa and himself. Now was the time she’d try to get even; he wanted to keep her away, making this his final victory for the day—one he could enjoy all weekend long. When he left the school, Melissa was well behind him and she would have to hustle just to have a chance to catch up with him.

Tunnel of Dreams

Hustle she did.

By the time Melissa exited the building, Robert was well on his way home, angling across the playground. Melissa trotted, steadily making up the distance between them, hoping he wouldn't look back until she was close to him. She made up most of the distance; Robert was nearing the far edge of the playground when he finally looked back and saw her catching up. As soon as he spotted her, he sped up.

"Robert!" Melissa called when she realized he'd seen her. "Wait! I want to talk to you!"

"Are you kidding?" He called back. "And get myself knocked into next week? No, thanks!"

"No!" Melissa denied, though that was *exactly* what she wanted to do. Realizing he wasn't going to slow down, she started to run.

Part of the reason Robert picked on her so much today was that it was the first day that week that the kids were able to play outside. Monday, Tuesday, and part of Wednesday were filled with rain; they had to wait the extra day for the playground to dry out. Finally, Friday arrived and the kids were able to get outside.

Robert knew better than to pick on Melissa when he couldn't get away from her; sometimes he thought she was part cat. When the pretty weather finally arrived, he couldn't resist baiting her for all he was worth.

Now she was chasing him.

Realizing she'd catch him if he didn't get with it, Robert looked around, trying to spot his easiest way out. He was near the back edge of the schoolyard, approaching the creek that marked the rear edge of school property. The creek flowed through a deep gully. The footbridge provided the only way across. Beyond the creek lay another field – and the subdivision with their houses in the distance.

He couldn't get away. Melissa stood a good chance of catching him in a simple footrace across the open ground. Robert's eyes continued searching.

M. Bradley Davis

Then, off to the left, he spotted a dark hole—the drainage tunnel for Town Creek under the old roadbed.

The road couldn't be seen any more; grass overgrew and broke the old blacktop surface into asphalt powder with its roots. Small trees sprang up everywhere. Nature was trying to reclaim what man abandoned. Robert wasn't even sure the county engineers remembered this drainage tunnel was still here and in service. He knew the forgotten road was built around 1910 and then replaced in 1940 by the more modern road that passed in front of the school. Even the modern road had been rebuilt and widened as traffic increased. The remains of the old road weren't visible anymore.

The back edge of the school grounds was marked by Town Creek, wet only when it rained, which twisted its way to and fro through the land some ten or fifteen feet below. The drainage tunnel let the creek pass under the old road. The tunnel didn't go straight under the road, but instead went at a sharp angle following the original creek bed, making the tunnel almost seventy feet long, though the tunnel itself was as straight as an arrow.

The school's principal, as well as their parents, warned the kids that the tunnel wasn't safe any more and was too dangerous a place to play.

Naturally, every boy in the school found a "good" reason from time to time to have to go inside it.

After all, the danger made the trip an adventure.

The county *should* have closed up the sides with steel barriers designed to pass water but not animals or people. Robert grinned. They hadn't, and it continued to be the perfect meeting place for boys and the best place to hide from others chasing you—like Melissa.

Robert just *knew* Melissa would *never* follow him in there! She always obeyed the rules! He turned, scrambled down the side of the gully to the creek bed, and headed for the tunnel.

Tunnel of Dreams

At the bottom, the footing was slippery; it rained only two days before and though only a trickle of water flowed now, the creek bottom remained very muddy.

Robert's imagination kicked into high gear every time he neared the tunnel. The creek's passage under the forgotten road made him think of an old mine entrance. Light at the other end didn't ruin the picture.

The timbers framing the opening sagged some. Grasses and vines dangled overhead, almost hiding any sign of man's work.

Robert grinned as the opening loomed before him. He held his arms out for better balance as he entered the drainage tunnel.

Melissa watched Robert scramble down the embankment, knowing with sick certainty where he was heading. She, too, remembered the warnings and was *very* inclined to obey them. If she did, Robert would simply go far enough inside that she couldn't see him and wait for her to leave.

He would win...*again*.

After today's frustration, she *couldn't* let that happen!

She looked back toward the school, now small with distance, and saw several groups of her friends walking across the playground. To her right, a sturdy footbridge spanning the creek led to their homes, hers included—Robert's too. Her friends walked toward that bridge. Resolutely, she turned back toward the creek and scrambled down the side of the embankment. She didn't know that her friends in the distance were watching her.

The light inside the drainage tunnel was dim and Robert had to move slowly to keep from falling into the mud. If Melissa followed she could easily catch him, but he *knew* she wouldn't come inside the tunnel. All he had to do was wait her out and then go home.

M. Bradley Davis

He was about thirty feet inside when the darkness abruptly deepened. Robert looked back and saw Melissa, to his surprise, gingerly making her way into the tunnel, one hand brushing the sidewall to help her keep balance.

“Robert!” She commanded. “Stop! You are *not* going to avoid me this time. If you keep going, your name’s going to be mud!”

“Are you *crazy?*” He asked her. “It’s not safe in here! Don’t come in any more!”

“No crazier than you are,” she replied, still moving forward in small, careful steps. Robert knew he could keep ahead of her; but if she slipped and fell, he’d never hear the end of it. He waited for her to catch up to him.

When she finally slipped and slid the thirty or so feet into the tunnel to his side, he couldn’t resist temptation.

“Gee, I thought you couldn’t stand me and here you are chasing after me!”

The wisecrack made Melissa very, *very* mad. Rather than answer him, she slapped his face—hard enough to turn his head. He backed up against the wall in surprise. Robert raised a hand to touch his stinging face.

“You’ve been cruel to me all day, Robert,” Melissa stormed at him. “I haven’t done *anything* to deserve it!”

“But,” Robert told her, some of his spirit coming back as he leaned a step away from the wall, “you’re so much fun to tease! I can’t help it!”

“I—You—Oooh!” She exclaimed, shoving him hard. “I *hate* you!”

Melissa’s unexpected shove unbalanced him. Robert fell backward against the tunnel wall. It was an uneven wall, not smooth concrete like the modern tunnels, but made of wooden timbers. Old timbers that, over the years, had rotted. Softened by the recent runoff, they gave way as he fell against them. Robert struggled not to fall all the way to the mud by grabbing hold of the wall. He tried to stand back up, feeling large chunks of wood come away in his hands as he grabbed, frantically twisting to keep from falling down.

Tunnel of Dreams

Robert regained his balance in just a few seconds and turned eyes wide with surprise on the pieces of wood in his hands. When he looked up from his hands, he saw Melissa's shocked eyes in the dim light as she reached to touch what he held.

"What?" She exclaimed, not understanding. "How?"

They held the pieces between them.

Then, he heard the rumbling and felt the ground start to shake.

Robert frantically looked around, seeing dirt along with rotted wood, falling from the ceiling. He threw the pieces of wood away.

Melissa screamed and he grabbed her arm, pulling her against him as dirt and wood pelted them. A three-foot long chunk of timber from overhead just missed hitting her as she fell against him. Mud and water splashed all over them, turning both an unrecognizable drab brown almost instantly.

"No! No!" Melissa screamed. "*I don't want to die!*" She clutched at him. "*Help me, Robert!*"

Robert was still leaning against the wall of the tunnel. The wall moved behind him, buckling outward, shoving Robert and Melissa toward the center of the tunnel. They twisted and turned, hit from all sides by falling debris, trying to keep their feet under them.

They didn't succeed. Robert fell into the piling mud and rotted wood, landing partly on his side, with Melissa on top of him. They were both sobbing and crying, but only Melissa was speaking. She cried over and over that she didn't want to die. He put his arms around her, holding her close as he felt the dirt pile up around them, blotting out the faint light.

In seconds, darkness and silence came.

From a hundred yards away, the group of students watched as first Robert and then Melissa went into the

M. Bradley Davis

tunnel; the group neared the footbridge when they heard a rumbling sound. The young people looked around, wondering where the noise was coming from. Abruptly, one small boy pointed toward the tunnel. Every eye in the group followed his outstretched finger, their attention riveted on the tunnel entrance. The group saw the entrance sag, flex, and then fall in on itself. The ground above the tunnel began to move, its appearance more frightening than anything the children had ever seen. It looked as if some giant animal were burrowing through the ground, raising the surface as it moved. They watched as a little dirt belched from what was left of the old tunnel opening. A small cloud of dust boiled into the sky from the middle of the moving ground. The tunnel roof fell in. The dirt hanging in the air hid everything for a few seconds. When the air cleared, all they could see was a jumbled gash in the earth where the tunnel had been. There was no movement and no sign of either Melissa or Robert.

No one moved for a few seconds. It ended too quickly. Disasters just didn't *happen* in their little town. But there, before their eyes, was a muddy, jumbled trench where the drainage tunnel once yawned. It looked like some of the World War I pictures the older kids had seen in their social studies books—the pictures from the trenches in France where so many soldiers died under shellfire.

“Where are they?” One little girl whispered.

“Melissa?” Another girl exclaimed. “*Melissa!*”

“*Robert!*” Several boys shouted.

Then they were all running, running toward where the tunnel used to be, their feet pounding on the uneven ground. The group of a dozen or so kids skidded to a stop short of the edge of the gash in the ground. All the girls in the bunch began to cry, and several of the boys looked ready to cry with them. Everyone was white-faced with fear.

Tunnel of Dreams

Before things got out of hand, somebody had to take charge. Several of the boys looked around, not quite willing to be the one to act. Then they spotted Paul. He was the one they always wanted to be the group leader in games, sports, class...wherever they had to have a group. All the boys looked directly at him. Paul squared his shoulders; he'd just volunteered.

"Carl," he said, "take the younger kids and go back to the school. Find Mr. Dean and tell him what's happened. *Hurry.*"

"Right," Carl said, gently grasping and tugging on the arms of the littler girls who were sniffing and holding onto each other, trying not to cry in front of the boys. "Come on, girls," he told them. "You too, Dan, Jesse. I need your help with these girls," he said, calling the youngest of the boys by name and gathering them into his group. "Let's go get help. That's the best thing we can do right now." He put his hands on the shoulders of several of the younger girls and turned them toward the school, away from the sight of the jagged, gaping rip in the ground. The two boys followed his example, pairing up with girls who were upset and crying. "Run!" Carl commanded, and he ran with them, making sure the older ones didn't outdistance the smaller kids.

Paul watched them start off and then turned toward the group left around him. He was surprised to see two of the older girls still there, with five boys. "Spread out," he told them. "Let's look for them, but don't go too close to the edge. Two of us missing are more than enough. If you spot Robert or Melissa, yell out, *but don't try to get to them!* Let's get with it!"

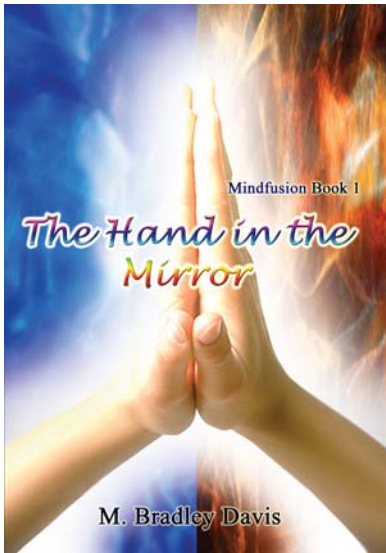
With that, he turned toward the trench and began making his way carefully along the rim, looking for the smallest, slightest sign of Robert or Melissa.

"Robert?" He called. "Melissa?"

To his left, farther down the ruin of the drainage tunnel, Paul heard the other boys and girls calling out

M. Bradley Davis

the two names, hands shading eyes, looking for any sign
of life in all the broken wood, mud, and dirt.



THE HAND IN THE MIRROR MindFusion Book 1

What would *you* do if *your* best friend turned out to be an alien? Join the fun with eleven year old Jerry Saunders as he faces fear, adventure, and responsibility in ***The Hand in the Mirror*** – the first in a new series of Sci-Fi stories for readers in grade six and up!

The Hand in the Mirror was a Fiction-SciFi *finalist* in the 2003 *ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year* competition, an international competition for independently published authors.

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Book of The Year Search Results for 2003 by Finalist

Place	Category	Title	Publisher	Author
Finalist	Fiction SciFi	Ring	Vertical	Koji Suzuki
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Finalist	Fiction SciFi	The Hand in the Mirror	1stBooks	M. Bradley Davis
Finalist	Fiction SciFi	Arcalian Apocalypse	1stBooks	Michael Anthony Cariola

1: The Voyage Begins

If someone had come up to Jerry at the beginning of the summer and told him that, before the summer was out, he and his parents would be the first people from Earth to travel beyond the solar system, Jerry would have told whoever-it-was that he was out of his mind. However, sitting here on the observation deck of a starship, fifteen degrees above the rings of Saturn and moving steadily farther from the sun at a speed much faster than anyone from Earth had ever traveled, he had to admit that if someone had predicted the outcome of this summer he would have been right.

It seemed impossible that so much could happen in such a short time. In less than two weeks, Jerry's entire future drastically changed direction. He began the first few days of summer as a brown-haired, brown-eyed, eleven year old boy; now, he was spending the summer as a brown-haired, brown-eyed, eleven year old ambassador to a world that was many light-years away. He was an *unofficial* ambassador, since no one on Earth knew about the planet *or* that he was going there!

Jerry looked down, marveling at the ringed planet. Saturn more than filled the entire left side of the observation deck's clear metal walls, its rings curving away in a huge sweep that changed constantly as the starship sped past the planet. He could see the hundreds of rings in all their intricacy; only a few years ago, scientists had believed there were just seven rings. Then, the Pioneer and

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

Voyager space probes had flown past Saturn and changed the course of history with their intricately detailed photographs. The spectacle below enthralled him—as he knew it would captivate scientists and schoolchildren for years to come. Of course, those probes had also discovered rings around all the planets in the solar system outside the orbit of Mars...

Talk? A voice whispered quietly in his mind.

Sure, he sent back telepathically. *Join me?*

In a moment.

Jerry smiled as the contact was broken. Telepathy was another of this summer's wonderful surprises. On Earth, telepathy had never developed beyond the tiniest beginnings; he possessed it in far greater dimensions than anyone from his world. Those who knew about such things told Jerry his strength and skills were both underdeveloped because he was so young. It *was* a gift; indeed it was, for he had had only the *potential* for telepathy a few months ago—and not even known it!—until need had forced others to break the barriers between potential and reality.

A moment later, Jerry heard light footsteps rounding the corner. He tore his eyes away from Saturn long enough to look over his right shoulder and watch Kelvin close the panel dividing the observation area from the rest of the ship. The darkened panel made viewing the wonders outside the ship easy and pleasant. Jerry knew Kelvin was less than an inch taller than he was; they were literally of a size. Kelvin's hair was blond, his eyes were blue, and he had the freckles across his nose Jerry had outgrown the previous year.

"I still don't understand how this ship can be invisible to Earth's radars," Jerry said as Kelvin took a moment to soak up the view of Saturn.

"Well, there are about a dozen special devices spread across the space behind us," Kelvin explained. "Each is following at the same speed about a thousand kilometers back—"

"I know about *those*," Jerry interrupted.

"—which soak up any radar signal that would bounce off our distortion field. Since no signal is bounced back to Earth, we're invisible."

“I know that!” Jerry said with some asperity. “You’ve told me that before. How do they *work*?”

Kelvin shrugged his shoulders. “I haven’t the faintest idea,” he admitted.

“Oh.”

“Dad tells me,” Kelvin told him as they both turned back to the view of Saturn, “that we’ll stop in about an hour and a half to meet the exploratory ship.”

“We’ve been speeding up for so long!” Jerry exclaimed. “How can we stop so quickly?”

Kelvin smiled. “I knew you’d want to know, so I asked. Dad said that we started so close to Earth that our gravity drive would have set off all kinds of alarms. Now, we’re far enough away that we can use the drive without telling people we’re here. It took us several days to come this far and get going this fast, but we’ll stop, more or less, in about an hour. Dad said he’d reverse engines at 16:45...in about eighty minutes. Ten minutes later, we should be stationary...or so NORMAN assures him.”

NORMAN was the ship’s master computer.

“I...I almost can’t believe all that’s happened,” Jerry mused softly. “A few months ago, I was just a kid, and you were the new boy in the neighborhood; so much has changed since then.” Jerry, usually a headstrong boy who leapt without looking, was for once very deliberate about what he thought and said.

“You know, Jerry,” Kelvin replied, “I’d still *be* the ‘new’ kid, and you’d still be ‘just a kid’ if I hadn’t become ill.”

“I know,” Jerry said his voice still soft. *Without your unexpected illness, I wouldn’t be able to do this, and things would be very different.*

Yes, Kelvin sent, they would, and we wouldn’t be blood brothers, either. He changed topics. You have a beautiful home.

Thanks! Jerry sent in reply. *I...I can’t wait to...to see yours!* The thought was only half-enthusiastic; Kelvin noticed it.

“That’s what’s bothering you, isn’t it?”

“Sort of, but not all,” Jerry admitted. “I’m *more* scared of what’s going to happen when we meet the other ship.” He shivered. “I

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

haven't had years and years of training like you've had; what if I mess up?"

Kelvin leaned companionably against Jerry. "You won't," he reassured his friend. "Even though you've only trained for a few days, you know enough to do all that will be asked of you. Besides, until your training is complete, you'll be able to rely on my knowledge—and my parents'."

I've never done anything like this before, Kelvin!

Neither have I! Kelvin sent back.

"Could we practice some more?" Jerry asked meekly.

"Sure!" Kelvin laughed. "Come on." He pulled Jerry toward the doorway.

Behind them, the last of Saturn's giant rings slipped from view as the starship sped outward toward its rendezvous, now an hour and fifteen minutes away.

The Hand in the Mirror
MINDFUSION Book 1

Part One: Earth

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

2: Confusion

“I don’t think Danny is *ever* going to learn to dive!” Jerry Saunders exclaimed as he gave his brown hair a final rub with his towel. He glanced at his best friend, Kelvin Merritt. Jerry’s brown eyes sparkled in the bright illumination of the men’s changing and shower room. Kelvin was vigorously toweling himself dry after their morning at the town swimming pool.

“Not if he doesn’t learn *not* to flop,” Kelvin observed wryly as he tossed his towel onto the pile of their swimsuits and Jerry’s towel; his fine, blond hair dried more quickly than Jerry’s brown hair. Both boys pulled on clothing.

“Yeah,” Jerry observed as he dressed. “He half-empties the pool every time he tries!”

“He may not be able to *dive* like you and I can, Jerry,” Kelvin responded with a grin, his blue eyes twinkling, “but Danny sure knows how to *entertain* us!” Kelvin’s laughter bounced off the walls.

A guffaw escaped Jerry’s shirt-shrouded head.

The two boys attempted to appear presentable by using their fingers to comb their hair in front of the changing room mirror. They were partly successful.

“Come on,” Kelvin suggested cheerfully. “We can finish at home. I’m hungry! Let’s go get some lunch!”

Laughing as his stomach rumbled in accord with Kelvin’s wishes, Jerry agreed and the boys left the pool, their towels and

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

swimsuits stuffed inside a backpack slung over Jerry's shoulders. They continued to chatter and laugh about the antics of their friends as they walked through the town.

Afternoon sunlight poured down on the last day of May as Jerry and Kelvin walked along the sidewalk. They'd frolicked in the town swimming pool for several hours. Their dark tans marked the boys as outdoor types. Amusement over almost everything they saw showed in the grins on their faces. They were walking down Main Street. Small shops and stores lined the sidewalk, including Mr. James' drug store and a grocery facing the corner. They were just in front of Mr. James' drug store when Jerry's life took the first step toward an out-of-this-world future.

Kelvin stumbled, falling against Jerry and almost knocking him over.

"Kelvin!" Jerry exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

"Don't...know," Kelvin's answer was almost a mumble. His color went from tanned health to a sickly green before Jerry's eyes.

"Your *face!*" Jerry exclaimed, astonished. "It's...it's *green!*"

"*Green* sounds just about right," Kelvin gasped out. "I...feel...*terrible!*"

"You *look* terrible," Jerry agreed, grabbing his arm. "Let me take you inside the drug store and I'll call your folks."

"No..." Kelvin protested. "Can't...can't let anyone...can't...see a doctor..." Kelvin struggled free of Jerry's support. "Must get...home..."

He pushed away from Jerry and reeled down the sidewalk, plowing right into a man just coming out of the corner grocery. The man's bags flew out of his arms, scattering cans and other assorted purchases across the sidewalk. Kelvin caromed off him and then a lamppost, somehow staying on his feet.

"Hey!" The man yelled at Kelvin. "Watch where you're going! Look at the mess you've made!" Then he noticed Kelvin's color. "Are you all right, son?" he reached for Kelvin's shoulders to steady him.

"No!" Kelvin's speech slurred as he wrenched himself from the man's hold. "Leave...me...alone!" He started down the street, completely ignoring the mess he'd made.

“Have you been *drinking*?” The man demanded incredulously.

The man’s eyes followed Kelvin, his face radiating disbelief at what had just happened. Jerry pursued Kelvin after a single glimpse of the man’s face. *He won’t take ‘no’ for an answer*, Jerry thought as he tried to make up the distance between himself and Kelvin without seeming to rush past the man who was still staring after the pair of them.

Leaving his scattered groceries spilled across the sidewalk, the man trotted after Jerry and Kelvin. “Grab that boy!” He yelled to someone further up the block while pointing at Kelvin’s staggering form. “He’s delirious!” He picked up the pace and searched for help as he chased after the boys. “Someone call a doctor!”

Jerry dashed toward Kelvin, amazed to see him avoid several people’s grasping hands. The near misses gave Jerry the extra seconds he needed to catch up. Just as Kelvin stumbled and started to fall, Jerry ducked under Kelvin’s sagging shoulder, threw his arm across Kelvin’s back, and hauled him back onto his feet—all without missing a stride.

“Jerry?” Kelvin asked weakly as Jerry moved him along by main force. The boys’ unexpected behavior caused those behind to pause in confusion for a few crucial seconds.

“Right here,” Jerry answered as he tried to hustle them both along. “Keep going! What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know,” Kelvin replied, his voice slurred, every word an effort. “You mustn’t...let them take me...to a doctor.”

“Why?” Jerry demanded, and then commanded: “Get your feet moving!”

“I...I can’t—can’t explain; you’ll have to...to trust me.”

“Whatever you say,” Jerry agreed hastily. “What should we do?” He glanced over his shoulder. “They’re catching up!”

Kelvin’s answer was a barely heard whisper.

“...evade...”

Jerry almost didn’t hear Kelvin’s answer for the shout from behind.

“Wait up, boy! Your friend needs help!”

Jerry could hear the pounding of several pairs of feet behind them. A glance over his shoulder told him more than he wanted to

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

know. "I'll see to it!" He yelled toward the pursuers as he moved Kelvin along as fast as he could make his legs go with the added load of Kelvin's nearly limp form.

"Hang on, Kelvin," he gritted, his lips a thin line of determination. "It's going to get tricky!"

They were running along the sidewalk in front of some older houses. Jerry twisted down an alley between houses and managed a block down the next street. He hustled down another alley, dragging Kelvin with him, trying to shake their pursuers. Despite his weakness, Kelvin managed to keep his legs pumping, helping Jerry as much as he could.

Both boys were slim, and Jerry used that slimness to give them every advantage possible. He guided Kelvin through narrow corners and small spaces, forcing the pursuing men to go the long way around. He gained some distance; they were no longer in sight, but he could hear them searching.

"Hide," Kelvin whispered, his head next to Jerry's ear.

"Right," Jerry agreed instantly, huffing with his effort as he headed them toward a tool shed that was about to fall down. "In here." Jerry was already hot and sweaty from hauling Kelvin along and needed a chance to catch his breath.

So much for the benefits of a cool early-summer swim, Jerry thought wryly as he pressed Kelvin's head down to pass into the tool shed.

They almost fell inside. The tool shed seemed to remain standing by only a prayer. Cracks allowed light and small animals in between the boards. The door hung drunkenly on little more than half a hinge, and Jerry could see the sky through holes in the roof. They sat down against the back wall, near an opening large enough to crawl through in a hurry.

For now, it was silent outside; the search was a few minutes away. Beside Jerry, Kelvin found strength somewhere inside himself and spoke.

"I'm sorry I got you into this." He said softly.

"It's okay," Jerry assured him. "You should let them help you, though."

"I can't."

“Why? You’ve probably got some bug that a shot of penicillin would cure.” Jerry’s voice sounded reasonable, even to him. Jerry *hated* being poked with a needle.

“You’re not ready for the answer,” Kelvin’s voice held a wry note that echoed clearly through his weakness. “You *must* understand,” he whispered. “I can’t see a doctor. I’m not...right inside.”

“What do you mean? You’re a boy, like me, aren’t you? Two arms, two legs, and so on—”

“Yes, Jerry, but *inside* I’m...*different*.” At Jerry’s puzzled look, Kelvin took a deep breath and sighed. “Jerry, I didn’t grow up around here. I grew up on a world called Caris, where two moons light the nighttime skies.”

“You’re from another coun—” He bit off the word in mid-syllable. *Two moons*, Kelvin had said. Jerry swallowed hard. That meant...!

“You’re...an alien?” Jerry asked.

“Yes,” Kelvin put as much truth and conviction into his voice as he could.

“An *alien* alien?” Jerry asked.

Kelvin nodded despite his dizziness.

Jerry looked at the boy beside him, panic welling up inside. *Where is Peter Coyote when you want him?* Jerry wondered. Obviously, Kelvin wasn’t some short, leathery-skinned *E. T.-like* being who waddled like a duck and had an extensible neck! Jerry watched for a change in expression, some hint to prove Kelvin was pulling his leg.

He didn’t see Kelvin twitch once.

Kelvin just *couldn’t* be an alien...could he?

“Prove it.” Jerry challenged.

Kelvin thought for a few seconds and realized he had but one way to meet Jerry’s challenge.

“All right,” he agreed with a deep sigh. “I’m weak from illness, and getting weaker by the minute. To prove myself to you, you’ll have to help me, Jerry.”

“Umm...wait a sec...” Jerry said slowly. He just *knew* that if Kelvin was an alien, he’d have tentacles and two heads, or something

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

bizarre like that...yet he seemed so *sure* of what he was saying, and suddenly Jerry wasn't sure he *wanted* Kelvin to prove himself alien. This could very well turn out like the invasion from Mars in H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, which Jerry had recently seen on television. That was the *last* thing Jerry wanted. The memory of the movie made him shudder.

"Jerry, I'm sick. I can't argue all day about it. You asked for proof—do you want it, or not?"

"Okay," Jerry said slowly, still none too certain. "What do I do?"

"Clear your mind. Think about nothing at all. Relax."

"That's *it*?" Jerry asked.

"Right," Kelvin told him. His voice sounded tired from even that little effort.

"How?" Jerry asked. "How do I do that?"

"Think about nothingness," Kelvin whispered. "A black place, filled with nothing. Imagine the safest place you can think of...perhaps the back corner of a dark closet where you used to hide from the things that scared you."

Kelvin couldn't possibly have known that *right then*, the back corner of a dark closet was *exactly* where Jerry wished he could be! After a second, Jerry took a deep breath, leaned back, and let his body go limp as he cleared his mind, thinking of nothing but the dark inside of a certain closet.

Kelvin watched the process through a sense other than eyesight. He saw the disordered jumble of Jerry's confused mind settle down, leaving a path for him to prove beyond doubt that he *was* a boy from another planet. As Jerry calmed, Kelvin looked himself over. He was alarmed at how weak he'd become, but he knew he *had* to find the strength to succeed. He felt a feather-touch from outside, opened his mind to it, and felt energy pour in from his parents. They soaked up what he told them and agreed he had no choice but what he planned. He was buoyed by the extra energy, small though it was to what he needed.

Kelvin looked over Jerry, saw stillness, and took the path Jerry had prepared.

Fully relaxed, Jerry knew Kelvin was going to do *something*, but he also knew that Kelvin was his friend and would not do anything that would harm him—even if he *were* an alien. A tiny voice tried to argue the point, but Jerry ignored it.

He was totally unprepared for the instant of blinding pain that exploded inside his head—but it was over almost before it began.

Then he was *remembering* things he'd never known.

He *saw* a beautiful world, walked in the light of its two moons, fished in lakes for fishes he'd never seen before, and saw a flashing parade of faces unfamiliar to him. Then, he heard Kelvin's voice *inside* his head.

Jerry, Kelvin's mind whispered to him, I'm sorry for hurting you; there was no other way. What you're experiencing is telepathy, and you're seeing my home.

Jerry almost shuddered away from the contact. His world had suddenly come crashing down around him. The boy sitting next to him *was* from another planet, *was* an alien. He wanted to scream out: *I can't handle this! I don't know what to do!* However, his voice remained silent. Only the thought echoed around in his head. Then, he found the link Kelvin had opened for him and used it.

I believe you, now, Kelvin; even if I'm also scared to death.

Don't be, Kelvin reassured him. *I'm not a threat. I wouldn't hurt you—ever—even if I did when I opened this link. That's my weakness ruining the control I've worked so hard to learn.*

It's okay, Jerry answered, struggling to see Kelvin in the same way he had before all this started. *The pain's already gone, and I'm having trouble remembering what it felt like.*

"Jerry," Kelvin said softly, using as little energy as possible. "I know *you've* never lied to me," Kelvin explained. "My people can *see* a lie. In fact, *you* can see those lies, too, now—you could see them before, you just did it without knowing how."

"What do you mean?"

"When I look at you, I see *you*, and I see *colors* surrounding you and within you that are part of your personality. They're mostly shades of gold and red. If you were to lie, those colors would *tremble*, try to shift to other colors from shame at the lie you just told. They never do."

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

“So I’ve never lied to you?”

“Right.”

“You *are* right, Kelvin,” Jerry admitted. “I’ve never lied to you.”

“Look at me,” Kelvin suggested. “What colors do you see?”

Jerry really *looked* at the boy beside him, and noticed he *could* see faint colors now.

“Deep blue and silver, Kelvin.”

“Jerry, I have *never* lied to you.”

The colors didn’t quiver at all.

“I wish the rest of my friends treated me that way,” Jerry confided.

“So do I,” Kelvin agreed. “It hurt me to see them lying to you just so they could get you to do things for them. Now, you know what to look for.”

“Thank you, Kelvin. I’m sorry I doubted you.”

The picture of the two boys’ lives *almost* went back to what it had been, but not quite. Even as he apologized, Jerry hid away the doubt, the uncertainty, and the frightening sense of a twisting whirlpool of change in his life that was beyond his control—those changes which simply wouldn’t let him keep his old illusions.

Kelvin *was* an alien. Jerry knew he would have to face up to that later; it meant dealing with Kelvin’s *otherness*, the fact that though he was a boy, he wasn’t an *Earth* boy—he was a complete stranger whom Jerry had allowed to become his best friend.

No apologies needed, Kelvin replied. Jerry *felt* Kelvin grin at him; it was an unusual feeling, but pleasant. *I must explain quickly, now. I can’t see a doctor because the arrangement of organs inside my body is different...no, not exactly different. They’re in the same general places, but they’re not all shaped the same. My heart has six chambers. If a doctor tried to listen to my heart, he would hear a triple beat, rather than the double beat yours makes.*

Unbidden, school lessons about the body and its systems flashed by and Jerry saw the circulatory system Kelvin had learned, with its six-chambered heart providing a direct, independent supply of blood to the brain—and understood.

That would tip him off, right?

Exactly, Kelvin agreed. *Turn your mind toward me*. Jerry did so, and in that moment *knew* Kelvin more closely than he could ever possibly know any other person. For a fleeting moment, Jerry seemed to pour himself through Kelvin, sampling all that his friend was. He felt Kelvin doing the same with him; it was an inter-passage that left them both tingling with a joy verging on pain.

Jerry.

From this day forward, only *Kelvin* would be able to give his name the fullness it deserved, Jerry thought, feeling who and what he was for the first time as another truly *spoke* his name with mouth, mind, and heart.

I am weak. You must help me get to my parents. They are waiting in the barn. Relax for a few seconds and let me teach you some skills you can use to help. Kelvin hesitated. *May I also draw a little energy from you?*

I suppose so, Jerry answered silently and then relaxed, opening his mind as Kelvin had shown him, allowing Kelvin access.

Energy first, Kelvin spoke in his mind. Jerry felt a tingling on his neck and shoulder where Kelvin's hand and body pressed against him. The tingling lasted just a few seconds. Next, he felt Kelvin's mind shift to share knowledge with him, knowledge that was important to their continued freedom. He had a fleeting vision of stillness, deep strength, filaments of energy from within, being surrounded with a glow of light, and then Kelvin spoke within the vaults of Jerry's mind once more.

You'll probably feel a small prick of pain as you use the skills I've awakened in you, Kelvin told him. *It's just your brain adjusting to use a dormant part of itself.*

The next instant, Jerry felt Kelvin and himself soaring toward consciousness—and the sounds of the searchers approaching their hiding place.

Just as they returned to full awareness, Kelvin felt a tugging deep inside, but he had to shove aside any consideration of it until he was stronger—and they were out of danger.

"You check that yard," a voice said, "I'll get this one." The man's voice was coming toward the tool shed.

M. BRADLEY DAVIS

“Quickly!” Jerry hissed. “Out the hole and to the right behind the fence!” Kelvin scrambled through the opening and Jerry hurried to follow him.

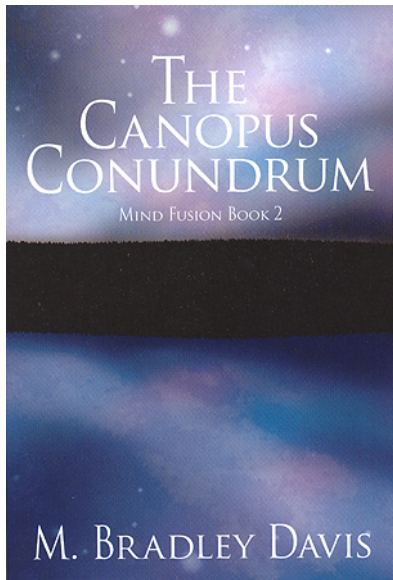
Just as he was starting through the gap in the wall, the man who’d tried to stop them earlier pulled the door open. He saw Jerry.

“*Here they are!*” he shouted, and lunged to grab Jerry’s foot. He just missed. For a brief second, Jerry’s hand slipped back through the opening, his fingers wiggling in the air. In an instant, all the long-handled tools danced about, tripping the man and making him fall into the man behind him.

A brief stab of pain went almost unnoticed with the wiggling fingers. It was the pain of *rightness* Kelvin promised as Jerry’s mind settled into a new function, taking up abilities that before were undeveloped potential.

Not one of the tools actually struck either man; when the two adults fell, the sharp edges and points of all the tools were turned away from them. The tools fell with them, piling into a tangled mess.

When the men untangled themselves, the boys had again disappeared.



THE CANOPUS CONUNDRUM

MindFusion Book 2

A nuclear war could ruin your whole day.

Six children are missing on Canopus V—and they come from the families of world leaders. No one can find the children; maybe no one *wants* to find them—except Carisian President Laskay, with Jerry and Kelvin’s help. What shape will they be in after four months of captivity?

Little Bo Peep has a cakewalk finding *her* lost sheep compared to Jerry and Kelvin! They must succeed before a secret plan destroys the world. Rescuing the missing becomes the *least*

of their problems!

The mind-brothers must apply important lessons from school—or see a world perish. Under the spectacular nightfire of Canopus V, the boys face one no-win situation after another as they work to solve *The Canopus Conundrum* before time runs out!

1: Escape to Confinement

The smooth surface of the lake reflected the rippling light of nightfire as the small boat slid silently across its surface. Transparent sheets and ribbons of burgundy, blue, mauve, yellow, and green light flowed across the skies above Canopus V as the boat's two occupants watched, the dim light revealing awe in their young faces.

"I've never seen it so beautiful," one boy whispered. "Have you, Arlin?"

"No."

The wispy veils of nightfire zigzagged and shot across the heavens. The colors shifted constantly, their transparent folds undulating across the constellations, bright enough to be seen yet dim enough that the brighter stars shone through.

"I'm so *glad* to get out of there," the first boy finally said.

"Me, too, Coris."

"Do you think we'll get away?"

"I don't know," Arlin answered truthfully. "I think we have a chance, but I just don't know."

The boys were using the formal tongue of Canopus V, a unified language making communication possible between any two people on the planet. This conversation was remarkable because the two boys hailed from countries utterly opposed to each other.

Arlin was the oldest; responsibility weighed heavily on him at the moment. He was nine and really just a few months older than his companion, but he still felt responsible for Coris' safety on this journey of escape. Of course, being the son of the leader of Stagros,

M. Bradley Davis

a country prominent in the world's affairs, led to quite an education in responsibility.

Coris too, he knew, was the son of another prominent leader, the president of Tanton. In fact, Coris' father was *his* father's bitter enemy. But, meeting and learning to appreciate Coris over the weeks of their confinement together, Arlin could no longer see Coris as his enemy. They were too much alike: they enjoyed the same things, got along well, and really *understood* what each meant when he spoke. Arlin simply *couldn't* continue to think of Coris Venevar as an enemy, no matter how *either* father would feel about it.

Arlin pulled his eyes from the nighttime display and looked at his friend. Coris was slender, black-haired and dark-eyed, yet of a size with himself, though only eight years old. His face was triangular, with a chin that appeared chiseled almost to a point—a point that could be jugged out with stubbornness, pride, determination, or even all three at the same time. Coris had a way of holding himself that made those older notice him. He could also, if he chose, blend in so well that *no one* noticed him. Arlin admired that ability in his new friend because he hadn't mastered it himself. Maybe Coris could help him get it right.

Coris, felt Arlin's eyes on him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing," Arlin smiled. "I was just thinking about how glad I am you're my friend. New friends are few and far between for me."

Coris nodded. "I know," he answered as Arlin looked back at the colors overhead. "We've both been brought up to trust no one except ourselves, yet out here the first lesson we had to learn was to throw *that* one out the window."

Coris watched Arlin's head nod in agreement. He knew that if the light were strong enough, Arlin's red hair would complement the display overhead, as would his blue eyes. Arlin had several qualities that Coris admired; chief among those was his willpower. Arlin seemed to have enough backbone for both of them...when it came to those who guarded them.

One day, early on, Coris slipped up and back-talked to a guard. The man raised a hand to slap him across the room. Incredibly, Arlin

stepped between them and stood there with feet planted, fists braced on hips, and faced the guard down.

“He’s tired. He’s scared. Like the rest of us,” Arlin said defiantly. “We don’t have any idea what’s going on. If you hit him, none of us will be cooperative.”

Arlin stared straight into the guard’s face, his eyes unblinking, until the man lowered his hand, turned, and left the room.

Arlin then pulled Coris across the room, through the door to his bedroom, and pressed him down onto the bed.

“Thank you,” Coris told him.

“Get some rest,” Arlin replied softly, a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Their friendship started that night.

Tonight was more than a month later. They had been kept here for over five weeks, and *still* none of them knew what was going on. Arlin went to sleep in his guest room at the Negotiating Center on the third day of Huron. He remembered the fright of waking—from a sound sleep—in the arms of a burly guard. Blackest night clutched him as closely as the guard’s arms. By the end of the fourth of Huron, he was firmly stuffed into the hidden mansion he and Coris had just managed to escape. Huron was a heroic figure from the distant past; Arlin sorely wished Huron was there to watch while he and Coris did their best to get back to the Negotiating Center!

Six young people were brought to the secret place, some older, some younger; the entire group was two girls and four boys. They waited, patience wearing thin, told only that they were here for their safety. He and Coris couldn’t stand it any longer and decided to escape.

The last hour of the sixteenth of Kyron blazed with nightfire as their boat, caught in the current, slid toward escape at the lower end of the lake. If they could only hold out for a few hours’ head start, they might well get away.

At first, Coris felt bad about leaving the others behind. One of them was Arlin’s older sister, Myrthe. He discovered Arlin didn’t seem to mind leaving her. He’d asked when they planned their escape.

“Do you want to take Myrthe with us?”

M. Bradley Davis

“Naw,” Arlin answered. “She doesn’t feel cooped up the way I do. She’d only make trouble for us. We’re better off without her.”

“Don’t you *care* about her?” Coris asked with wide eyes.

“Of course I do,” Arlin answered stoutly. “But I want *us* to get away. With *Myrthe* along, we won’t. She’ll decide we’re better off *here*—and the guards will ‘discover’ our escape plan. She’s *responsible* that way.” Disgust filled Arlin’s voice over his sister’s scruples.

So, they set off after dark—by themselves.

Now they were floating along, free of their confining cage, entertained by the most beautiful sight their world had to offer. The nightfire rippled overhead, its constantly changing pattern and colors mesmerizing them. In unconscious agreement, Arlin and Coris eased further down into the boat, rocking it as little as possible as they moved. The summer night was comfortable. The jackets they brought along made excellent pillows. They lay back, heads propped just above the gunwale of their boat, shoulders touching. They could see the countryside passing beyond the shore, the lake around them, and the nightfire overhead.

It had been a long day and they had little rest before slipping away. Lethargy stole over the boys as they stretched out, enjoying the nightfire, making arms and legs leaden with fatigue. Arlin and Coris murmured softly as the display continued, the pauses between comments lengthening until only their steady breathing accompanied them over the lake’s surface. Their eyes were closed as they floated down the lake, minds oblivious to the sky’s display, dreaming about what they would do when they got back to their families.

The boys woke at the same moment, lying on their sides, faces inches away from each other. Each was pleased his friend’s face was the first sight of the day. The morning air was pleasant but warmer than last night. Their smiles faded as both boys realized that neither could move an inch. Neither boy expected the seventeenth day of Kyron to start this way!

“I see you’re back with us,” a man’s voice said nearby.

They recognized that voice: their chief guard. Arlin's and Coris' hearts sank; they'd failed to escape.

"You had a busy day and night," the man continued calmly. "You led us a merry chase. I'm not surprised you slept until well after sunrise. Are you comfortable? Do you feel pain anywhere?"

"No, sir," they both replied with a reluctant sigh.

"Good," the guard answered. "Though your movement is restricted, I do not want you injured or in pain. I want no interference with returning you to our residence."

He ceased speaking; the boys heard the rhythmic creak of moving oars. After several minutes, the oars stopped, and the guard shipped them. He took a drink from a large water bottle. Then, he silently lifted two smaller bottles, uncapping one and holding it to Coris' lips so he could take several swallows, then using the other bottle for Arlin. When the bottles were tucked back in their places, he resumed an easy stroke on the oars.

"You realize there will be a penalty for your actions?"

"Yes," Arlin answered.

"Good. Just as there would have been a reward for your success, meaning that you would have had your freedom, there will be a penalty because you did not succeed.

"However, before we arrive at our residence, perhaps we should talk for a moment about *why* you decided to leave. I thought I had made it clear you were brought here for your protection."

"You did," Coris told him. "Yet you have *never* explained to us *why* that is necessary, *who* is responsible, or *when* we will go back to our families."

"I see your point, Coris," the man agreed readily enough. "As much as I'd like to tell you all you want to know, I'm not allowed to explain the details. It's enough to know that people who are very good at killing those they wish dead threatened your lives. Your fathers arranged your 'protection.' You are under our watchful eyes with *their* approval and consent; in fact, we were handpicked for this assignment. As to when you will be able to go back, not even *I* know that, because I haven't been told as yet."

"So you *do* talk with our parents?" Arlin asked.

M. Bradley Davis

“Of course. I speak with someone every two days. They know where you are and how you are doing.”

“Why can’t *we* speak with them?” Arlin demanded.

“You can’t because every communication is encoded. No names are used; only agreed upon phrases that sound like an everyday conversation. If I let you talk to them, it would be very easy to locate and then kill you. You are not allowed to talk with your parents for *your* protection...and *theirs*.” He took a deep breath. “Now then. Why don’t you tell me why you tried to escape?”

“We were tired of your *hospitality*,” Coris replied derisively. His tone told the guard he felt imprisoned instead of welcome.

“I see,” the man said thoughtfully. “Ah, there’s the dock,” he said pleasantly. “In just another moment, we will be close enough that the others can hear us talking—and see inside the boat—so let’s get this over with.” He shipped the oars.

“I want your word that you will not attempt to escape again, and that you will behave as proper young men so that we don’t have to restrain you in front of your fellow...guests.”

“What if we choose not to give our word?” Arlin asked, a hint of aggressiveness coloring his voice.

“You will regret that choice, Arlin,” he was told. “You will be taken from this boat under restraint and you will be held in isolation until you choose to agree.”

“And if we agree?” Coris asked the other half of the question.

“Then,” the guard captain replied conversationally, “you will pay a small penalty for your escape attempt and you may then resume your place within our residence without restriction.”

The boys looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment. Almost in unison, they nodded just the slightest little bit.

“I give my word to behave properly and not to attempt escape again,” Arlin said clearly and steadily.

“As do I,” Coris added.

The guard captain leaned over and, out of sight of those on shore, released their arms.

“Good,” he said softly. “I know you are men of your word.” Then, placing a hand on their shoulders, he shook them. “Act as if I just woke you and no one need know you were restrained.”

Obediently, the boys slowly sat up as the guard resumed rowing toward the dock.

The boys saw the mansion far in the distance now and small-seeming; the expanse of the mountain lake stretched about them and reflections of the tall peaks surrounding the lake were visible in several directions.

Arlin's eyes returned to the mansion. From this distance, he could see how different it was from most places he'd been. The main house was three stories tall and appeared to be more or less square. Two story wings extended from each side; each wing was surrounded on the outside by balconies. The lawn where he walked and sometimes kicked or threw a ball with Coris and Peren sloped gently from the mansion to the lakeshore. The grounds extended across wide acres in all directions from the mansion.

"Tie us off, please, Arlin," the guard asked as the boat coasted to a stop beside the extended float, several feet below the main dock, which was built high enough to remain operational even during infrequent periods of flooding. Arlin slipped to the float and tied the boat's painter to a ring. As Coris and the guard climbed out of the boat, a second boat following behind on a silent propulsion unit tied up as well.

"Up you go."

A small group waited when they reached the top of the dock.

"Our wayward friends have returned," the guard told the four children and several adults.

Arlin and Coris started toward the large house without a word.

"You shouldn't have run off," a girl with wavy, golden-red hair flowing halfway down her back said as she joined them. She was Arlin's sister, Myrthe. "And why you didn't tell me what you had in mind, I'll never know," Myrthe declared, her snapping blue eyes locked on her brother's face.

"I didna' tell ye, Myrthe Camsin," Arlin replied stiffly, the highland burr of their native tongue blurring his words slightly as he expressed his obvious disgust at her lack of insight, "because ye would ha' made sure we didna stand a chance o' gettin' away."

M. Bradley Davis

“*Humph.*” Myrthe sniffed. Her long, unusually colored hair, blue eyes, and fair complexion cast Myrthe into a beautiful young lady, even at eleven.

“Myrthe,” Denara Namoor called sharply. Myrthe looked back, spotting Denara behind her.

Denara was the older of the two girls; though they weren’t related, at moments like this she felt she should take charge. Denara had Peren Neltor walking with her, hand in hand. Peren, a six-year-old boy, was the youngest of their group.

“Leave Arlin alone,” Denara suggested firmly. “I expect he’s in enough trouble already without you making things more unpleasant for him.”

“But—” Myrthe protested.

“Let it be.” Denara’s ordered. “Walk with me.”

For one rebellious moment, Myrthe thought about defying the older girl; then common sense asserted itself. She shared a room with Denara and couldn’t avoid repercussions later on if she disobeyed. Denara *was* older than herself, after all.

Obediently, Myrthe shortened her steps until she was walking with Denara and Peren.

All too soon, they entered the house. The guards guided them toward their suite of rooms on the second floor.

“Please go through to your common room,” the captain asked of the other four. “You’ll see us on the balcony in a moment. Arlin, Coris, come with me.”

He and another guard led Arlin and Coris away while the other children did as they’d been told.

The children occupied a suite of four bedrooms, two baths, and a common recreation room. One wall of the recreation room was windowed from floor to ceiling. When they entered, they found the curtains drawn completely open, providing an outstanding view of the surrounding mountains. They also saw something dangling from the beams supporting the balcony roof, but couldn’t quite make out what it was against the glare.

A moment later Arlin, Coris, and the two guards entered the balcony from another room.

“Gentlemen,” the chief guard spoke quietly to the boys, “I promised there would be a penalty. That’s what this is: a penalty, not a punishment. There will be no spankings, no whippings, no electric shock, and no privation—not even confinement. I think what’s called for in this instance by way of penalty is a little good, old-fashioned humiliation. I promise it will be as painless as possible; the only real injury you will suffer...along with a few sore muscles...will be to your pride.”

“What are you going to do to us?” Arlin asked as quietly.

“I’m going to strip you to your underwear and hang you by the wrists from the rafters for one hour. I will also require your fellow guests to watch you for that entire time. They do not all have to watch you for the entire hour, but at least one of them must be looking at you throughout your penalty. They may take turns if they wish, as long as you are watched.”

“And if we refuse?” Arlin inquired.

“You will be punished,” the captain told them unemotionally. “Painfully.” He put a hand on each boy’s shoulder. “Please keep in mind that I could hang you there with *nothing* on; however, I don’t wish to rob you of your dignity. I know you are both very private young men and so this form of penalty will get your attention as no other might.” He squeezed their shoulders, causing them to look at his face. “You made a choice last night,” he reminded them. “Making that choice made you responsible for the reward—or for the penalty. You weren’t successful, so now the penalty must be faced. I cannot let you go on as if nothing happened, can I?”

“No,” Coris agreed.

“So prove your responsibility and accept the penalty I’m imposing. An hour from now it will be over and you may go on with your lives—having learned an important lesson.”

“What of our hands?” Arlin wanted to know. “Hanging us by our wrists will cut off the blood from our hands.”

“Not this time,” the guard assured him. “Look here.” He led them to the device hanging from the rafters. “This is a powered pressure cuff,” he explained. “It will hold your wrists and you without injury as long as you don’t move around. Once clamped

M. Bradley Davis

in place, the pressure cuff inside the grip helps pump blood to and from your hands and fingers while you are suspended. You shouldn't lose feeling in your fingers; all you should feel from this is soreness from being stretched by your body's weight." He looked from one to the other.

"It is time. Choose."

Again, Arlin and Coris looked at each other. Coris knew his face was already coloring, but he knew what his answer must be.

"May we change clothes, first?" Arlin asked softly. "We've worn these same things for many hours."

"Certainly," the guard agreed. "I promised you could keep your dignity. Go to your room, change, and come back dressed only in your underwear. I will explain to the others while you're gone."

"Agreed," the boys chorused and then left to change.

Neither said a word as they stripped off their dirty clothing, pulled out clean underwear, and put it on.

"We'll live over this," Arlin told Coris as they looked at each other, seeking reassurance. Arlin still found the faint markings on his new friend's torso fascinating. He knew they were a leftover from long ago when the people of Canopus were plains and forest dwellers. Faint traces of yellow-brown vertical markings showed on Coris' skin. Arlin knew his chest and back had very faint brown marks that were more horizontal; his ancestors came from the mountain forests.

"I know," Coris agreed, "though it's going to be embarrassing. I suppose we'd better get it over with."

"Yeah." They walked back to the balcony.

"You have a question, Warik?" the guard captain asked. Warik Kimbas was the oldest of the group, the eldest son of the leader of the western superpower, Xirtam. He felt responsible for the younger ones, even though none were his direct relatives; some were the children of leaders of enemy states to the one he gave his allegiance.

"Is this sort of punishment really necessary?" Warik's tone indicated he had doubts about its wisdom.

“You’re just a couple of months short of adulthood, now,” the captain responded obliquely. “If you were in charge of the situation, how would *you* handle an attempt to escape protective custody?”

Warik nodded. “I would probably decide some penalty was required; I’m *not* certain I’d choose the one you have.”

“Put yourself in my place, then,” the captain suggested. “I gave my word to your parents—and *their* parents,” he said, gesturing toward the others, “including Arlin’s and Coris’, that I would keep you from harm. I told them you would be detained safely and without violence until it was safe for you to return.

“Punishment, in many of its forms, can be considered violence. I have particularly stressed that despite what they did, I am *not* punishing Arlin and Coris. They chose to leave without permission. They were unsuccessful. There is a penalty when you make a choice in life and are unsuccessful. The boys have taken responsibility for their actions and chosen to accept the penalty I am imposing.

“What reason makes imposing a penalty on them necessary?”

“Maintaining discipline, I suppose,” Warik replied.

“If I don’t penalize them *somehow*, the rest of you might decide attempting to escape from here is a good idea. It *isn’t*. There are dangers nearby about which you know nothing. This place is safe, in one sense, *because* it is surrounded by dangers. *They* don’t know that,” the captain gestured toward the others. “I’m not planning to tell them. I *am* planning to give them a strong enough reason not to attempt escape again. If *you* were in *my* shoes, what would you do?” he asked for the second time.

“What you’ve told me puts a different light on the events,” Warik answered slowly. “I’m not sure it’s the only choice for a penalty, but I *can* see the need for the imposition of one. The one you’ve chosen will meet the guidelines you must use to keep your word to our parents.”

The captain nodded.

“I’m not criticizing,” Warik hastened to assure him. “I only want to understand.”

“Your desire to understand means you’re nearly ready to begin training in earnest...as an adult...for future leadership,” the captain assured him. “Your questions were well put and with sufficient

M. Bradley Davis

reason. I appreciate that you value the dignity, safety, and honor of those around you enough to ask.”

Warik nodded acceptance of the compliment.

“They will be sore and probably unable to move much when their penalty ends,” the captain told him. “May I count on your help when it is time?”

“Of course,” Warik replied firmly.

“Good.” The captain moved back to the balcony.

The other four stood watching when Arlin and Coris returned.

“Thank you for being prompt,” the captain told them, guiding them to the cuff and lowering it.

“We just want to get this over with,” Coris told him.

“A sensible approach,” the guard agreed. “Arlin, hold your hands before you, facing each other, shoulder wide.”

Arlin obeyed, and the guard began fitting the cuff and its support between his arms.

“This will feel tight at first,” he warned as he closed the first cuff around Arlin’s wrist, careful to keep his arm exactly upright in the center of the pressure band.

“Yeah, it feels tight,” Arlin agreed with a grunt as first one and then the other cuff locked securely in place.

“That will pass once I turn the power on,” the guard assured him. “Coris?”

Coris looked into Arlin’s eyes, saw friendship and encouragement there, and stepped forward, raising his hands as he’d seen Arlin do. A moment later, his wrists were fastened securely. When the boys spread their fingers wide, their little fingers barely touched.

“Here’s the power,” the guard warned as he turned the unit on.

Immediately, the friends felt pressure increase all around their wrists. Their arms were held completely immobile. Then, they became aware of the cuff’s pumping action. The entire cuff didn’t squeeze and release; actually, only the pad that pressed against the undersides of their wrists expanded and contracted, forcing blood upward and downward through arteries and veins sandwiched between tendons and bones in their wrists. The pressure from the

wrist cuff felt like a ripple up and down as different sections inflated and deflated to produce the pumping action.

“I’m going to lift you up in a moment,” the captain said as he moved beside them. “But first, several points to help you out. Don’t try to touch the floor with your toes. Your toes will be at least six inches above the floor; you’ll only injure yourselves if you try.

“Second, talk to each other. It will make the time go by faster.

“Finally,” and he actually smiled, “I want both of you to know that I’m proud of your composure through this. You have made difficult choices which most young people your age wouldn’t face, much less choose, and you’ve done so with dignity and poise. That is an accomplishment to be proud of, even if it started out from making a mistake.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir,” they responded.

“I will raise you very slowly,” the guard said, and their hands began to move upward. As their arms rose, they wiggled their feet and moved until they were toe to toe with only a couple of inches separating the main trunks of their bodies. A few seconds later, their arms were at full extension, and they felt their feet leave the floor. Though both of them wanted to, neither Coris nor Arlin tried to angle his foot toward the floor any more than its natural dangle.

When they stopped rising, there was a slight pendulum motion from their bodies moving toward each other. After locking off the controls, the guard captain brought them to complete rest with his hands.

“There,” he said softly. “One hour from now, this will be over.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Coris responded dryly, drawing a chuckle from the man.

“The clock is ticking, gentlemen. I’ll be back in one hour.”

They dangled with the others watching.

Coris and Arlin, nose to nose, looked into each other’s faces, the other’s eyes the only thing each could see.

“If I have to be embarrassed,” Coris commented in a near whisper, “at least I don’t have to do it alone.” He started to look toward the windows.

M. Bradley Davis

“No! Don’t look, Coris!” Arlin asserted. “We’ll start swinging!”

Their bodies were no more than two inches apart; if either of them moved, they would collide, and the resulting bumps would aggravate even the smallest movement. They literally had to go limp and hang there.

“It doesn’t matter,” Arlin said wryly. “We *know* they’re looking.”

“Thanks.”

“This is one seventeenth day of Kyron I won’t have *any* trouble remembering,” Arlin commented whimsically. Kyron was the last month of summer, though seasons didn’t matter much on the fifth continent.

“I feel like a side of meat hanging on display in the butcher’s shop, waiting for customers to come in and point out what pieces they’d like to buy.” Coris’ voice reflected his embarrassment over the others watching them hang there. “I don’t have much more on than that side of meat.”

“You still have your *skin*,” Arlin reminded him, his voice dry with humor. “I’m embarrassed, too, but we can’t do anything about it.”

“Yeah,” Coris agreed. “I doubt the others will say much to us when it’s over though—except maybe your sister.”

“Myrthe won’t say anything,” Arlin answered, surprising Coris. “*This* kind of thing she never mentions, for some reason.”

“We can only hope,” Coris said, a grimace crossing his face.

“My shoulders are already starting to ache and we’ve only been up here a minute,” Arlin groaned.

“Me, too,” Coris admitted. “I don’t even want to *think* about how I’ll feel after an hour.”

“Then don’t,” Arlin suggested. “Just be glad that we’re friends and that we’re together.”

“I am, Arlin.”

“When’s your naming day, Coris?” Arlin asked.

“The thirty-seventh day of Lumer,” Coris answered. “When’s yours?”

Arlin flicked his eyes to the side, glancing away. “The eleventh of Turvov,” he replied. Coris’ naming day was less than two months away, while his naming day had passed almost seven months before. “I wonder when everyone else’s naming day is.”

“Especially Peren,” Coris agreed. “He’ll be extra lonely if his naming day comes around and he’s not with his family.”

“*We’ll* just have to be family for him, then,” Arlin said stoutly. “I can’t wait for this hour to *end* so we can find out!”

Coris suddenly had a suspicion about why their penalty would make such a strong memory. “Arlin, can you see a clock?”

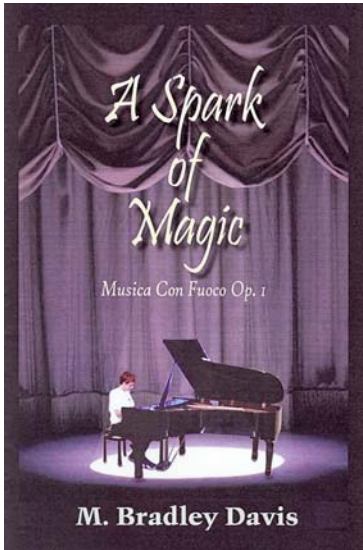
Arlin’s eyes flickered around as far as he could move them without turning his head. “No,” he answered after a fruitless search.

“Me, either,” Coris told him. “*That’s* what makes this so effective,” he told his friend. “We have no way of knowing how much time has passed...or how little. For us, the time we’re hanging here will seem to drag on and on...”

“But the hour will eventually run out,” Arlin assured him.

“Yes, but the *memory* of that *endless hour* will stay with us for the rest of our lives,” Coris commented softly.

They hung there, chests almost touching, and talked quietly, trying not to think about the soreness now spreading slowly throughout them.



A SPARK OF MAGIC **Musica Con Fuoco, Op. 1**

Not even rural West Virginia can hide the talents of a modern-day Mozart...

Stephen is a 13 year old musician who doesn't know how to become what he wants to be. He grows up in an orphanage only to be placed with foster parents who refuse to understand him.

Stephen's simple "I am what I am" will alter people's attitude and acceptance of who he is, including the conductor of a respected symphony orchestra, a lonely boy, the musicians and friends

he meets along the way, and the caseworkers and state officials who must straighten out the controversy surrounding him.

Wednesday, August 4

1. Flight

A boy in slightly worn blue jeans and a red plaid shirt scrambled over the top of the hill and squinted as the strong yellow light of the early morning sun hit him full in the face. His name was Stephen. He looked away from the brightness, grimacing at the unexpected pain, and then turned to stare intently over the ground he'd covered. No one was following him—yet. He'd made remarkable progress for a thirteen year old, considering the several miles of rough terrain traveled in the dark, early hours of the morning. He stood atop a hill halfway up the side of the Clark River Valley as it twisted its way west to east.

An ancient tree crowned the hill. Stephen leaned against it for a moment, resting. The small duffel bag carrying a few hastily gathered possessions dropped to the ground as Stephen examined the surrounding landscape.

Stephen's dark brown eyes flecked with amber highlights surveyed the twisting valley for any sign of pursuit. Those amber highlights were evident only when he was angry or, as he was at the moment, very tense. Stephen's almost square face showed strong and expressive lines. His cheekbones were fairly high, eyes wide set, and his jaw—though definitely not lantern-shaped—was quite firm.

Stephen didn't have the "unfinished" look of boys his age; rather, he looked as if the artist's carving was finished save for one stroke, a last touch left out for fear of ruining the completed sculpture. Thick, wavy locks of hair an earthy shade of brown surrounded Stephen's face, the red highlights scattered throughout visible only under very strong light. A particularly heavy lock fell across his forehead and eyes. Unconsciously, he reached up,

M. Bradley Davis

pushed it aside, his long, slim fingers patting it into place out of the way. He knew it wouldn't stay there very long.

The Clark River bubbled pleasantly as it passed through the West Virginia countryside. It began as a collection of unremarkable streamlets in the Appalachian Mountains. The small streams gathered into the headwaters of the Clark River and caromed down Appalachian slopes until it fell over the edge of a bluff at the upper end of the valley. The Clark River meandered from the pool at the base of the bluff through the peaceful countryside until it reached Clarkstowne, where a dam was built years before to create the Clarkstowne Reservoir. Once past the dam, the river flowed through a beautiful parkway in the center of the city and onward until it finally joined the larger Shenandoah downstream.

Stephen noticed that at last he couldn't see the town he had left under cover of darkness. The buildings on the lower slopes of the north side of the valley disappeared behind a twist in the terrain. Meadows and clumps of trees covered the floor of the Clark River valley, but its sides were heavily wooded. The spur of land where he stood gave him an excellent vantage point, yet allowed Stephen to remain concealed from the sight of anyone even a short distance away.

His sharp eyes caught a bit of color moving in the valley. Stephen had no intention of waiting around to find out whether it was simply someone walking on his own land or part of a search party. The terror of the night before—and the memory of what it would be like if he were forced to return to that small mining town—drove him onward. The combination of broad daylight and the sight of a person behind made Stephen decide to move on, unconsciously increasing both his pace and stride as he left the tree's shelter.

Stephen didn't know how far he'd traveled; he hoped maybe as much as eight miles during the dark hours of the early morning. The going was rough, especially in the dark. He carefully picked his way through the almost black woodlands despite his panic; if he fell or injured himself, there was no one to help him. Daylight finally arrived and he put on the burst of speed that brought him to this hilltop; now, he could *see*. His path was clear, for which he was thankful.

When he left his foster home in the wee hours of the morning, Stephen decided he wouldn't return to Bluffdale, the place of his childhood; instead, he would go to Clarkstowne—where he hoped to make *someone* understand

who and what he was. Stephen had no idea who might help with his situation; he had no friends or relatives in Clarkstowne. In truth, he had no family to turn to in the entire world.

He was totally alone.

The memory of a trip to the grocery store with his foster mother provided him with one bit of useful information. The distance from that small mining town to Clarkstowne was twenty-six miles; he had maybe eighteen miles to go, and he would cover them today if it killed him.

With resolution, Stephen lifted his meager belongings and resumed his stride.

Stephen rapidly covered the next eight miles, but then had to stop. An obstacle appeared. Another mining town lay in his path. Involuntarily, he shuddered. If his foster father...he had threatened to...to...

Stephen's mind whirled with memories from last night. He shivered, a haunted look filling his face. Terror threatened to take control and make him run until he dropped, but he managed to overcome the urge. He knew if he ran, he would go straight through that mining town and be caught.

That he *must not* do.

Patience was required. He was patient before; he would be patient again. Slow, deep breaths calmed his nervous body and let his mind focus on the task. He *must* find a way around this town without getting caught.

He watched people move about the town a long time. Stephen then used the next two hours to work his way invisibly around the town. At last, on the far side of town, covered in sweat, he turned and hot-footed it into the woods until he had to stop to catch his breath.

Two miles further on, however, the exertions of the morning caught up with him. As noon approached, he found an out of the way glen where he curled up for a nap. His duffel bag, only partially filled by a change of clothing, made an excellent pillow.

Stephen couldn't tell where he was, but he wasn't alone. His foster father stood over him, pounding the air with his fist as he shouted.

"You will go to work in the mines with me! I told you to give up this silly idea of music, and you will give it up!"

"No!" Stephen shouted back. He'd never raised his voice to an adult in his entire life. "I am a musician, a pianist, not a miner!"

M. Bradley Davis

His foster father slapped him for his insolence.

The force of the slap twisted his head and popped his neck. Unbelieving, Stephen advanced on the man, fury on his face.

The second blow knocked him against the wall and to the floor.

“Go to your room!”

Crawling shakily to his feet, Stephen turned and ran, slamming the door to his room as he searched for a place to hide.

Something brushed his cheek.

Stephen sat bolt upright, shouting!

Overhead, he heard the sound of wings flapping as birds left their perches, startled by his yell. Stephen rubbed his hand across his forehead, wiping away the cold sweat of his nightmare, and frantically looked around.

He found the cause of his abrupt return to alertness resting on his shirt. A broken feather fluttered away as he brushed off his clothes. He looked sheepishly after it, wishing he hadn't been so rude to the creatures nesting quietly in the tree above him—and hoping no one else was nearby.

Stephen propped his back against the tree and looked around. The shadows were longer than when he first lay down. Several hours passed while he slept. He unsuccessfully tried to relax and enjoy the cool breeze that blew through the trees. He couldn't. The past was closed to him; the black door of the future stood solidly ahead.

What to do now could wait no longer. Decision time.

For the first time in my life, Stephen thought, I'm running away from a problem.

He shook his head. Aching leg muscles screamed for attention. Stephen kneaded them while he thought. They were starting to feel like bits of overdone meat falling off his bones. Slowly, the cramps and twinges eased. Even as his mind returned to the basic problem, Stephen was amazed at his lack of hunger. He supposed he was too scared over the events driving his flight to worry about food.

The problem is simple: I am a musician. I can feel that. I know it is truth. Even though my foster parents are okay as people go, they can't understand what I am. They want me to change, to be something I'm not. I can't do that.

I'm running away because I can't change. Running so that I'll not be forced to do something I don't want to do.

Stephen felt that was a fair assessment of the situation.

Now, I have to decide what to do—besides just running.

He took a deep breath and explored the possibilities.

I can't go back to Bluffdale. I grew up there; that's the first place they'll search for me. As I decided last night, I'll continue in the opposite direction, toward Clarkstowne.

"A lot of good *that's* going to do me," he muttered as he climbed to his feet, gathered up his duffel bag, and walked from the clearing. The sight of a bird perched on a nearby branch, staring at him, made Stephen stop. The bird appeared to be listening. Stephen spoke softly.

"Look at me: An orphan, running away from everyone I know in the world, in hopes of finding someone who will understand me."

He paused, realizing what he'd said. The bird watched silently. Stephen softly chided himself.

"It's not as if there wasn't someone before who understood me; Miss Baker *always* understood exactly what I am," he said softly. "But she's gone now. I can't go back to Bluffdale and the few others who really understand me, either—and the one who hates my guts."

The bird chirped as if making a comment, flipped its wings, and flew away.

Stephen trudged on in silence, racking his brain for the name of a person in Clarkstowne, but none came. Soon, he saw a place where the trail split. One branch continued along the side of the valley, the other traveled a short distance and ended on a rocky spur jutting from a low cliff.

He walked to the edge and looked around.

The valley spread out behind him.

Directly below was the reservoir. Around the shore in the distance, he could at last see the skyline of Clarkstowne, still many miles away. The thin, white line of the top edge of the dam holding back the water was barely visible near the cityscape. Many of the buildings were familiar to him through television news and the newspapers. Images of the tallest buildings reflected from the lake's surface. He recognized quite a few of them. City Hall, the Police Tower, the Medical Center, the Banking Tower, and the headquarters building of the mining company his foster father worked for were easy to locate. He could even see the Sports Arena and Convention

M. Bradley Davis

Center Complex. Nearby was the Center for the Performing Arts that housed the city's fine arts societies. *Those* buildings drew Stephen's undivided attention.

Stephen knew from his reading that, in many ways, the city of Clarkstowne was a unique place for the performing arts. Located in the rural West Virginia mountains, it was the last place one would expect to find a flourishing home for the performing arts—much less a city. West Virginia was known mostly for its rural makeup and low economic standing. Clarkstowne was a completely planned development, begun in the early 1950s. It grew as designed, according to its master plan, for most of the time since. In the past few years alone, expansion—in this place where expansion was absolutely unheard of—took the suburban areas in unexpected directions.

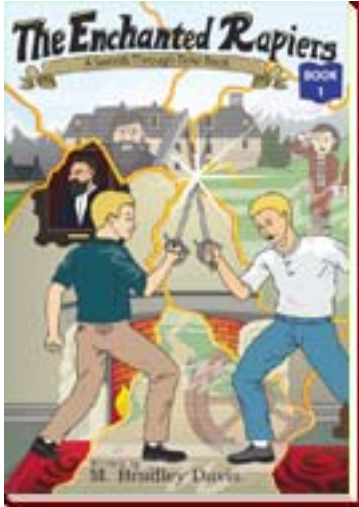
Several high profile benefactors from Washington D. C. and the New England area retired here. They joined together to found the performing arts societies, leaving large endowments and a trust management firm to handle them. Every investment the trust company made paid off handsomely; the most recent addition to the performing arts scene was the Center for the Performing Arts, which occupied parts of four separate city blocks, all connected by overhead skyways. The facility was state-of-the-art, and proudly exhibited by the city government.

Stephen stood for a long time looking at the city skyline. At long last, an idea began to form in his confused mind. A name rose from the Babel within, someone who *might* be able to help.

The Bard said 'This above all else: to thine own self be true' in Hamlet, Stephen thought as he stared toward Clarkstowne. *That's exactly what I'll do.*

It was after three in the afternoon. He still had a long way to go, but at last he had a *purpose*. The name of a person, a goal for him to accomplish, renewed his strength.

Stephen knew it would be hours before he reached the city. He still had to walk around the reservoir, enter Clarkstowne, find a telephone book and a map of the city, but now he had a *goal* to achieve. With a spring in his step, Stephen turned and retraced his path to the trail he had followed through the starlight of deepest night and into the present sunny afternoon, resuming his journey toward the future.



THE ENCHANTED RAPIERS **Swords Through Time Book 1**

Jordan & Julien are cousins born on the same day—12 minutes and 3,000 miles apart. They meet for the first time when the American side of the family visits their ancestral home in France for the summer. Jordan & Julien take an instant liking to one another.

A pair of almost 400 year old swords—rapiers—that once belonged to the only set of twins born into their family entices them into adventure. They cross swords in a mock-fight—and find themselves in 1620! Their task is to clear up the puzzle of the twins' murder—or else remain stuck in the past!

Would you take up the adventure with them? If so, then, as the cousins say in French:

“Permettez à l’aventure de commencer!”

1. *Cousins*

Jordan woke in a strange room. Confusion set in at first. This room was much larger than his bedroom. The ceiling soared overhead. Tall windows lined the right wall almost floor to ceiling. Their limestone sills stood barely two feet above the polished wooden floor. A marble-framed fireplace filled part of the wall past the foot of the bed. The mantel stood almost bare. Only two items rested on it—an old bronze drinking cup held a spray of long fireplace matches and a mirrored tray reflected several votive candles. Above the fireplace mantel, two highly polished swords stood guard, crossed, resting on pegs anchored in the stonework. Smooth paneled walls wrapped the room. The darkly beamed ceiling with its ancient chandelier capped the large space.

At least half a dozen paintings hung on the walls. The largest was a landscape; Jordan supposed it might be some of the nearby countryside. Others were portraits of people he didn't know. He assumed they might be some of his ancestors.

A dresser and mirror stood in one corner. His open suitcase rested on a large wooden chest next to it. Sight

M. Bradley Davis

of the suitcase brought Jordan fully awake and reminded him where he was.

This house was in northeast France, in a town called Saint-Dié. His father grew up here. He and his mother were visiting for an extended summer vacation. Before he left America, Dad told him the town's name was pronounced "San Dee-Aay." The *San* stood for *Saint*, and *Dié* was spoken as if naming the two letters, *D* and *A*—with the letter names slurred together. The thought that his dad came from a town with Saint in its name pleased Jordan. *His* last name was St. Croix (pronounced Saint Croy). He found it very fitting that the St. Croix family came from Saint-Dié, France.

Jordan's good spirits plummeted when unexpected work kept his father behind. An unplanned business meeting popped up. His dad's company, a major textbook and reference publisher, might get a very big contract. The president of the company, Dad's boss, gave *him* the task of winning the contract. *That* meant Dad stayed in San Antonio instead of going to France. The American branch of the St. Croix family put the best face they could on the situation. Jordan and his mom left on their trip. They hoped that Dad could soon follow.

"*Saint Anthony,*" Jordan whispered in prayer, "*you make sure he gets here quickly!*"

Jordan and his mother arrived in Saint-Dié after dark last night. He couldn't remember much. He was so *glad* he could fall into bed *somewhere!* The two days in Paris only whittled the jet lag down partway. Last night's sleep seemed to banish it completely.

The Enchanted Rapiers

Jordan sat up and saw the room lit by sunlight for the first time. He slept in a very big four-poster bed with a real feather mattress. He'd never slept on one before! Jordan remembered a joke about a feather mattress being so full of lumps that the sleeper thought that someone forgot to remove the geese. *This* bed didn't qualify. It surrounded him with warmth and comfort. The posts and headboard were dark with age. They were heavier than any furniture he'd seen. After a moment, he decided that he really liked this room.

Jordan threw back the covers and rolled out of bed. The wooden floor chilled his bare feet. He stepped briskly across the room to the rectangle of carpet in front of the mirrored dresser. Jordan caught a glimpse of his reflection as he rummaged through the suitcase for clothes to replace his pajamas. Green eyes in an oval face framed by mussed up blond hair examined his untidy appearance. Jordan smiled, and so did his reflection. He ran a hand through his hair without effect. Well, he'd do something about *that* after dressing.

He dug through the suitcase and chose shirt, pants, socks, and clean underwear. Donning clean clothes happened very quickly in the chill, mountain air. Another glance at the suitcase reminded him he must unpack it today. The dresser had plenty of drawers for his things. Jordan brushed the last stubborn tufts of hair into place as he heard a knock on his door.

"Come in," he called. Jordan glanced at the door and then made several last, deft strokes with his hairbrush.

M. Bradley Davis

If Jordan wasn't an only child, the boy entering the room could pass for his brother. He was half an inch shorter, had hair a touch darker, and eyes a shade lighter than Jordan's.

"Good morning, Julien," Jordan greeted him, but in French it came out, "*Bonjour, Julien.*"

"Good morning, Jordan," Julien replied in English. His French accent reduced the hard-sounding *J* to a softer *zh*. "Breakfast will be ready soon."

Jordan set aside the brush and grinned as he reached for his shoes. "So will I!"

The mothers talked while the boys ate breakfast. Neither could believe the close resemblance between their sons. Considering the differences in appearance between the women, the nearly identical boys seemed totally out of place.

Jordan's mother, Eleanor, had dark hair and brown eyes. Linette, on the other hand, had blue eyes and almost white-blond hair. The mothers agreed that the boys heavily favored their fathers.

"It's hard to believe that they aren't brothers," Eleanor looked from her eleven-year-old son to her eleven-year-old nephew.

"I know," Linette agreed. "But, they are as like twins as can be without *being* twins."

Jordan and Julien were born on the same day. They arrived in different parts of the world. Jordan entered first, in San Antonio. Julien followed twelve minutes later, in Saint-Dié.

The Enchanted Rapiers

Their birth certificates proved the twelve minutes' difference. The cousins' fathers spent a hefty sum on telephone calls to each other that day. Many photos and letters crossed the Atlantic since that special day. The mothers smiled at their sons. Both recalled the joy they felt at their sons' birth.

"What are your plans this morning?" Linette asked with a smile as the boys pushed aside their empty breakfast plates and drank the last of their juice.

"I thought that I'd show Jordan around," Julien replied. They rose, waved cheerfully to their mothers, and disappeared before either mother could find something *else* for them to do—like washing dishes!

"Where would you like to start?" Julien asked as soon as their mothers were out of sight. The morning was young and the boys full of energy.

"What do you mean?"

"Do we begin with the house or the town?" Julien prompted.

Jordan glanced around. "If we stick around here, they're going to find something for us to do. They'll figure we need time to settle down, get to know each other."

"Oui," Julien concurred with a grin. "Mother thinks the best conversation happens over shared work."

"That's the word I don't want to hear," Jordan agreed. "*Work.*"

"You are more French than you think, *mon ami!* Let's escape while we can," Julien conspired. "Come on. We have bicycles in the storage building. Saint-Dié is a few minutes' ride from here."

M. Bradley Davis

Julien moved down the hall at a quick clip. Jordan followed hot on his heels.

The ride to Saint-Dié was quick and exciting. The St. Croix family home stood on top of a tall hill just outside town. Julien called it a château and told his cousin he'd explain the difference when they returned.

"Wow! What a view!" Jordan exclaimed as they closed the entry gate behind them.

"I'll show you a better one later," Julien promised. The boys mounted their bicycles and pedaled onto the road. "Zoom, zoom, zoom!" Julien sang as he led the way onto the downward slope. Jordan laughed and pumped his legs. He wanted to catch up with his cousin!

The roadway curved downward at a respectable slope, switching back and forth across the hill's face. The boys rode all the way in the striped-off bicycle lane. They passed through sunlight and shadow as the morning sun struck through the tall conifers that covered the hill. They had breathtaking views to the side as they passed gaps in the trees.

Saint-Dié bestrode the banks of the Meurthe River as it poured from the mountains. Bridges both old and new spanned the stream. The town sprawled, in a modest way, across the landscape. A city of some 30,000 people, it housed industry and history side by side. The area held a reputation as a metal making and chemical processing center. However, its origin included a much different profession: printing.

The Enchanted Rapiers

The road dumped them into the historic part of town.

“Saint-Dié has a colorful past,” Julien explained as they rode along. “The town burned to the ground on at least four occasions and was rebuilt by its citizens. Occupying armies dating from the Dark Ages through World War Two also destroyed parts of town.

“Saint-Dié’s importance shifted from an unknown spot in the road to a monastic community in 660 when a priest named Deodatus started a monastery here. They named the town in his honor. Later, it became the retirement seat of a bishop with visions of greater position.”

“That’s quite a past,” Jordan noted.

“Oui,” Julien agreed. “Ownership of Saint-Dié and its surrounding lands passed through many hands, including the Dukes of Lorraine, various Kings of France, and the French Republics. Today it is an *arrondissement*—district in your English—to the *Vosges Département*.”

“Département?” Jordan inquired.

“Like your counties,” Julien offered.

The boys paused at a corner, waiting for the light to change in their favor.

“At least the temperature’s wonderful,” Jordan noted.

“Oui, most of the time,” Julien agreed. “However, the summers can get hot—and the weather stormy and very noisy once in a while.”

“How hot?”

“Oh, 25 to 27 degrees Celsius. Even our summer nights can be chilly. Winter is cold in these mountains.”

M. Bradley Davis

Jordan did some quick math in his head.

“That’s no more than 80 degrees Fahrenheit!” he exclaimed. “San Antonio hits a hundred or more during the summer—for three or four *weeks!*”

“A *hundred?*” Julian wondered.

“About 37 degrees Celsius, I think,” Jordan told him. “I’ll take the climate here any day!”

The boys’ wait at the light ended. The light changed color. They crossed with pedestrians, pushing their bicycles.

“What about historic sites?”

“Not much is left,” Julien told his cousin as they remounted. “Mostly, the historic buildings are gone. The north cloister wall of the Cathedral of Saint-Dié is all that’s left from the twelfth century.” He gestured to the side where a square opened as they passed another intersection. “This square is supposed to have been here since 1488.”

Julien guided them to the curb, where he jumped from his bike and lifted it out of the street. Jordan copied his cousin. They moved off the sidewalk, lay their bicycles on the ground, and sat on a bench in the square.

“I won’t take you to the family plant today,” Julien said. “Dad plans for us to visit while you’re here. We’re the only major publisher in the city.” Jordan nodded. He knew much of Europe respected St. Croix Press. “I wanted you to see this square because we think our family business began here long ago.”

“Really?” Jordan’s eyes widened. “When? Where?”

The Enchanted Rapiers

“The records are spotty,” Julien told him, “but we know that the first of our ancestors to go into the printing business did so in 1512. A mapmaker employed him for a few years before he started his own business.”

“I guess the original building isn’t here, is it?”

“No,” Julien confirmed. “This square has been torn down and rebuilt many times over the centuries. The location of the square hasn’t changed, though.”

“This is where he started, huh?” Their eyes traced speculatively around the square. Multistory and single story buildings butted against each other, their fronts a riot of designs and appearances. Colorful awnings cast pools of shade over the sidewalks. Tourists and townspeople bustled everywhere they looked.

Streets busy with small cars and buses zipping everywhere separated the park-like center of the square from the shops. A monument of some sort, surrounded by flowerbeds, occupied the square’s center. Benches like the one the boys occupied stood under trees on each side.

“That’s the best guess we can make,” Julien admitted. They watched the crowds for a few minutes before Julien stood up. “Come on.”

The cousins mounted bikes again and moved through the city. Julien led Jordan to the Cathedral. A tour group gathered outside the main entrance as they approached. The boys chained their bikes to a nearby rack and quietly joined the procession.

Over the next hour, Jordan learned the church’s and the town’s history through the centuries. The tour

M. Bradley Davis

broadened his understanding of his ancestral home and let him share his experiences in Paris with Julien.

“We toured Notre Dame and The Louvre before coming to Saint-Dié,” Jordan whispered. “This church is like Notre Dame in a small way, but I miss all the flying buttresses. It doesn’t have quite as much stained glass, either.”

Julien smiled. “Neither would Notre Dame if it had been torn down and dynamited several times in its history. You know they removed Notre Dame’s windows to underground storage during the wars, right?”

“Yeah,” Jordan agreed. “I knew it before they told me again during the tour.”

The boys exited the church and returned to their bicycles.

“Come on,” Julien suggested. “It’s nearly lunchtime. By the time we ride up the hill, they’ll be looking for us.”

“And we’ll be *really* hungry,” Jordan added wryly. “That hill’s a steep climb!”

“So?” Julien countered. “We’ll use first gear!”

Jordan and Julien returned their bicycles to the storage building. They slowly walked back to the main house. Both were short of breath and red-faced from the uphill ride.

“Let’s cool off a few minutes before we go in,” Julien suggested.

“Good idea, but I’m thirsty,” Jordan admitted.

The Enchanted Rapiers

“Me, too,” Julien agreed. “There’s a spigot over here.” He led Jordan off the graveled path. A water tap poked its head from among some flowering plants in a nearby flowerbed. The boys moved among the plants carefully, disconnected the sprinkling hose, and bent to suck water from the free-flowing stream.

“I wouldn’t drink water like this just anywhere,” Julien quipped with a grin. “The poor quality of French water is well known. That’s why we drink so much wine! *Our* well, however, draws from a small aquifer located entirely beneath our estate. Mountain streams and snowmelt feed it. The water from that source has never tested impure. Many bottlers begged us to let them pump from our source to sell far and wide.”

“You haven’t let them, either.” Jordan approved.

“Rien!” Julien confirmed forcefully.

The cousins walked through the grounds after reattaching the hose. They strolled until their faces returned to normal. When they finally started toward the house, Julien spoke. “After lunch, I’ll show you around the house.”

“That’s a lot of house,” Jordan noted. He nodded toward the main building not too far from their place under a stand of shady trees. The clear sky etched everything in sunlight and shadow. Château St. Croix stood revealed in all its glory. It stretched three and four stories tall in some places. Steep-pitched roofs capped its walls. Jordan easily imagined basements below, although Julien had as yet told him nothing about the layout. Jordan knew

M. Bradley Davis

only that his room was down the hall from Julien's, somewhere on the first floor.

"We won't see it all at once, but we can start today," Julien told him. "By the time you leave, you'll know this place like the back of your hand."

The cousins headed toward the house. As they walked, Julien realized he faced a hard decision. *This is going too fast*, he thought. *I want to be more comfortable with Jordan first!* However, this *was* perfect timing. His thoughts leapt around as he tried to decide what to do.

Jordan was his *only* cousin—and family. *Family* held great importance. Julien's parents taught him that blood made all the difference in the world. What they knew of their family history supported that position. St. Croix people had swayed leaders for five hundred years. Some of those leaders were locals. Record fragments hinted that the St. Croix family helped national leaders over the centuries, too.

Julien glanced toward the Château. Once, the St. Croix family filled this place to bursting. Today, Julien and his parents rattled around inside it. The château seemed hollow and bleak. Julien would give almost *anything* to have someone to rattle around inside there *with* him. Another boy would liven up the place! Now, here stood Jordan, his American cousin. Jordan was the closest thing he would ever have to a brother..

"Jordan..."

"Hmm?" Jordan glanced toward Julien, surprised by the soft voice.

“Can I trust you? Can you keep a secret?” Julien’s heart shone in his eyes.

Jordan looked into those eyes for a long moment. “Oui,” he replied softly.

“It’s my deepest secret,” Julien told him. “It’s been around for hundreds of years. Not even our *fathers* know about this. I’m the *only one* who knows.”

Excitement colored Jordan’s voice. “What do you mean?”

“Your word, first.”

Jordan took a slow breath. “How would you like it?”

Julien looked down—and then met his cousin’s gaze. “We’re family,” he whispered. “It has to be something we both value.”

“D’Accord.” Jordan sensed how important this was to Julien. He nodded once. “I give you my word, on the blood we share, that I will keep the secret.”

Julien sighed with relief. “Merci!” he breathed happily. “Come! It’s an easier secret to show than to tell.”

Julien led Jordan around the outside of the house. They walked as far as possible from the kitchen. Their mothers were likely there preparing lunch. Julien didn’t want to take *any* chance that they might be seen when he revealed his secret.

“Where are we going?” Jordan asked.

“You’ll see,” Julien assured him as they rounded the far outside corner of the château and headed for the archway into the central courtyard.

Château St. Croix crowned its hill in the shape of a closed box surrounding a center court. Archways pierced

M. Bradley Davis

three of the four sides. The fourth side held the main entrance into the château. A doorway from there led into the courtyard. Stout oaken gates sealed the archways in centuries past. Today, the arches stood open. No barriers hung from the heavy fittings sunk deep in the stonework.

Julien glanced around as they entered the archway. He stopped beside a carved panel in the stonework. A deft touch of his fingers opened a hidden door.

“Wow!” Jordan exclaimed. “How did *that* get there?”

“I rather think someone built it,” Julien drawled in a British accent. “*Vite!*” he urged, reaching back. Julien pulled Jordan inside and closed the door.

“It’s as black as night in here!” Jordan exclaimed.

“*Shh!*” Julien hissed. Jordan’s face appeared out of the darkness a few seconds later. Julien had turned on a flashlight. “We must always whisper! We don’t want anyone to discover where we are!”

“Where are we?” Jordan asked.

“Inside the ground storey walls of the château,” Julien explained softly. “Our ancestors feared uprisings and armies. They built these secret ways to escape capture. Our family forgot about them decades ago. I accidentally found the passages when I was eight. I’ve been exploring for the last three years!”

“How far do they go?”

“Everywhere,” Julien replied with a sweep of his arm. “You can get into almost any room from here.”

“Where shall we go?”

“We’d better head for my room first. Our mothers will have lunch ready soon. We don’t want them to miss us. Follow close—and walk as quietly as you can.”

The Enchanted Rapiers

Jordan obeyed as Julien moved off. He kept right on his cousin's heels. The path twisted and turned inside the house's walls. The boys went up and down several staircases. Some were straight flights; others spiraled around a post intended to fit a steep stair into the smallest space. They turned more corners than Jordan expected...until he was completely lost.

The dim light fired Jordan's imagination. He noted every detail and added a few that weren't there. Rough boards finished the passage walls. He saw sections of unevenly joined wood. Some walls were stone. Bare beams supported the ceiling. Spider webs hung from odd corners. The webs cast eerie shifting shadows. Jordan swore he saw people following them.

"You would not believe how long it took me to clean things up," Julien whispered, turning his head. "When first I found this place, webs and spiders *filled* the passages! Yuck!" Julien's whisper carried a load of revulsion.

"What did you do?" Jordan hoped his voice sounded normal.

"I entered here with a pump spray gun and killed the spiders," Julien replied softly. "I used so much insecticide that it made me gag. I had to start in parts of the house where my parents wouldn't go until the smell disappeared. After that, I sprayed just a shot or two at a time." Julien chuckled. "I couldn't use the wholesale method of slaughtering spiders I prefer." He broke off. "Here we are."

Julien stopped and passed the flashlight to Jordan. "Turn it off and stay here. Almost every room has a

M. Bradley Davis

couple of peepholes concealed in the walls. Most of them have a hidden door, sometimes two. I'll see if my room's empty. Be back in a second."

Jordan doused the light and waited. Just the feel of the flashlight's barrel eased his fears. Perhaps a minute later, Julien's touch on his arm made him jump.

"Hey!" Jordan whispered fiercely.

"It's just me," Julien tried not to laugh as he whispered. "My room is empty. Come on. The door leads into my closet."

The hidden door swung inward. Light poured into the secret passage. The cousins entered Julien's closet. Jordan watched as Julien shut the hidden door. The wall's molding completely hid the door's edges. He couldn't see a line anywhere he looked.

"It moves quietly," Jordan commented, looking around.

Julien nodded. "I had to grease every door I found, too."

"This is a weird closet," Jordan noted.

"It wasn't meant to be a closet," Julien told him. "It started out centuries ago as a small room for changing clothes and using the chamberpot."

"The *what?*"

"The thing you used indoors before bathrooms were invented."

"Oh." Jordan shuddered. "I'll bet it smelled."

"Umm hmm," Julien agreed. "Someone had to *empty* it, too."

"I'd rather not think about that."

Julien laughed.

The Enchanted Rapiers

“This is where my discoveries started,” Julien explained. “I was digging around in here and tripped the latch on the secret door there.” He showed Jordan the release. “After I got over the shock, I snuck a flashlight to explore...but then I went back for a broom, too.”

“Why did you get a broom?”

Julien shuddered. “You wouldn’t *believe* the cobwebs that were hanging everywhere,” he told his cousin with a shiver. “It seemed like it took *forever* to clean them up.”

“Did you ever tell anyone?”

“About these secret passages?” Julien’s seemed surprised and shocked at Jordan’s suggestion. “Heck, no!” His words held absolute horror at the idea of giving away a secret! “Are you crazy? Why would I want to spoil all the fun of knowing something no one else did?”

Jordan chuckled.

“Besides,” Julien continued, “I found an envelope stuck into the passage wall behind the first floor study. It had a note from our great-great grandfather Marcel.” Julien touched the wall in another place and a small rectangle opened.

“Wow!”

“Secret wall safe,” Julien explained as he pulled out an envelope yellowed with age. “Here. I’ll show you.”

The cousins entered Julien’s room and sat together on Julien’s desk chair. Julien turned on the light and then pulled a folded sheet from the envelope that he carefully opened. Jordan’s eyes tracked across the handwritten note as Julien smoothed it down.

M. Bradley Davis

22 Septembre 1944

Mon nom est Marcel St. Croix. Je suis le bout de notre famille qui sait que ces passages existent. Mon frère a su eux, mais lui est mort dans la guerre...

“This is what I see,” Jordan told Julien. “Make sure I translate it correctly.”

Julien nodded as Jordan read softly:

“22 Septembre 1944

“My name is Marcel St. Croix. I am the last of our family who knows these passages exist. My brother knew about them, but he died in the war in 1942. I never told any of my six children about them. Our ancestors built them, beginning in 1568, because they feared political attack and wanted a secret way out of the house. These passages have remained a secret known only to family members by direct descent. We have never shared them with retainers or others not of family blood.

“If I should survive the war, I will pass the secret to my children once the house is fully in our control again. I dare not risk doing so while the Germans occupy this place as a hospital. Should I die before then, the secret dies with me until someone, hopefully of the St. Croix name, discovers this note.

Marcel Iven St. Croix”

The Enchanted Rapiers

“Well done, cousin,” Julien complimented. “You translated that very clearly.”

“Merci!” Jordan responded, pleased the French his father spent all that time teaching him served so well now!

Julien pointed to the date on the note. “Marcel wrote this note in 1944, while the house was being used as a hospital during the German occupation. He died two months later.”

“What a neat secret!” Jordan exclaimed softly.

Julien grinned and Jordan shook his head. With a quiet laugh, Julien returned the note to its envelope. He placed it within his secret wall safe and then closed his closet door. The cousins pulled the hall door open just in time to hear Jordan’s mother call them.

“Boys! Lunch is ready!” Her voice echoed along the hallway.

“Coming!” they chorused loudly and headed for the first floor. “We’ll discuss this more *after* lunch!” Julien promised with a grin.