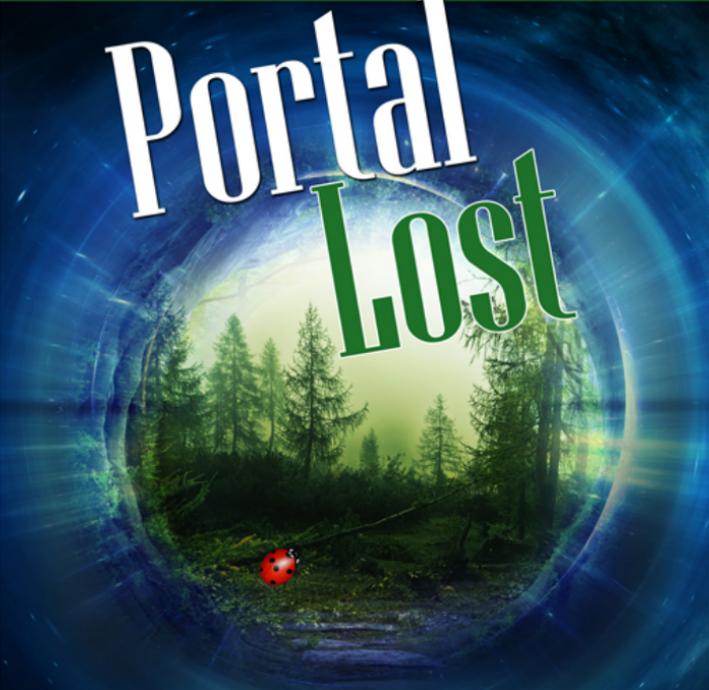


BOOK 2 IN THE MACK'S JOURNALS SERIES

Portal Lost



IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN A ROUTINE COMMUTE
NOT A TRIP INTO THE UNKNOWN.

B. G. PRESTON

Portal Lost

A Novel of Adventure and Survival

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

The complete work will be available in print and e-Book formats, beginning Sept, 2015.

Barry Sanders - writing as:
B.G. Preston

Portal Lost

Copyright © 2015 by B.G. Preston

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from Magic Glass Publishing or the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments or locales is entirely coincidental.

Distributed by Ingram

@ Cover Art by Cora Graphics

ISBN-13: 978-0-9861477-2-2

First Edition: September, 2015

Magic Glass Publishing

Lebanon, Ohio

www.MagicGlassPublishing.com

For Sandra, this book could not have been completed without her guidance and support.

A special thank you and note of appreciation to Denice Wilson for her editing prowess and substantial input.

My gratitude goes out to Donna Nicely. Her final round of edits contributed greatly to the quality of this manuscript.

Thank you also to Cora Graphics for the great work they have done in crafting the covers for this and other “Mack’s Journals” novels.

BEGIN SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Chapter 1

The Reality Show

None of what she saw should have been there.

The sky overhead was crisp blue and the only clouds were off in the distance. It was a beautiful late April day, warm with no sign of haze or smog. The air was so clear she felt she could see for miles.

Amy took a few tentative steps forward and paused to look up in wonder as a large, blue-gray bird did lazy circles in the sky high above her. The bird, with its size and coloring, was unlike any she had ever seen.

In the distance, the tips of three jagged, snow-capped mountain peaks poked above the snowline. They were postcard beautiful and appeared to be volcanic. The sharp-peaked mountains reminded her of Oregon's Cascade Mountains, an area she had visited with her fiancé, Brad, while on vacation together.

Yellow-green grass blanketed the gradually sloping field in every direction for at least a quarter of a mile. It was undisturbed, as if no human or animal had ever crossed here. The only breaks

Portal Lost

in the grass were a few rock outcroppings and some intermittent scrub brush and trees.

Taking a slow breath, she strived to get her bearings. In the distance, there were mountains to the west. Given the time of day and the position of the sun, this seemed a reasonable guess, but it was of little comfort. The air was thinner than she was used to, causing Amy to realize she was probably at a higher altitude than her home in Wisconsin.

Looking up from the grassy plain and toward the mountains, a line of conifers could be seen about a third of a mile ahead. This explained the delightful scent of fresh pine in the air.

Her mind was racing. It was all beautiful except it shouldn't be here. This should be downtown Minneapolis, a block from the Wells-Fargo Bank where she worked in public relations.

"How the heck did I get here?" Amy announced to the world around her as she knelt down to touch the earth and coarse yellow grass at her feet. "And, for that matter, where the heck am I?"

She should not be here. Wherever "here" was.

Moments before, Amy had left Madison via a neighborhood portal for her job in Minneapolis. This wilderness was definitely not the Twin Cities!

"Portal!" Amy suddenly remembered how she had just stepped through a portal for her daily commute from Madison to Minneapolis. Shouldn't she be at the portal station a block down 7th Street from her office building?

Her total commute time from her condo in Madison to her office was only around ten or fifteen minutes. Ten minutes total if there was no line at the portal station or the mid-point stations,

but sometimes she did have to wait in line for her turn. In comparison to driving, this travel time was nothing.

Portals were still fairly new and some people were afraid of them. Maybe, Amy thought, she should have been more questioning of the portal technology herself. Ten minutes ago she had been in Madison on her way to her work, now, she had no clue where she was. It sure wasn't anywhere around downtown Minneapolis.

Had something gone wrong? Did the portal attendant key in the wrong location?

Amy turned, looking in every direction. She hoped to see a doorway or open portal of some sort hovering above the field. The portal, which would allow her to go back to where she had started, should be there, but it wasn't. As she did a complete 360, all she saw was nature. Lots and lots of beautiful, undisturbed nature.

"Don't overthink it, Amy," she said aloud to herself. "There has to be a simple solution. Maybe a practical joke or something." She took a deep breath, trying to calm the panic that had been growing inside her.

Suddenly, she knew what this was! It was the new reality TV show, *Where Am I?* It was a spin-off from the former *Survivor* TV show. In that show, a group of people were put on an island and, over a period of weeks, were voted off of the island until one person remained. The show had been quite popular in its time, but eventually ran its course. This new show, *Where Am I?* utilized the new portals to send contestants off to unknown, remote locations. The contestants had to figure out where they were, survive the wilds, and eventually find their way back to a designated location.

Portal Lost

All the while, a camera team remained close as they filmed the contestants' every step and misstep.

Yes, Amy thought, this must be *Where Am I?* This thought gave her great relief as she reflected on how she and her fiancé had recently put in an application to be a contestant team on the show. They had applied two weeks before solely as a lark, never expecting anything to come of it.

Maybe she had missed the e-mail or letter letting her know she had been selected. Yes, that must be it. But, if so, where were the camera guys? Where was her fiancé? Mostly, where was she?

Chapter 2

Missing

“I hear the research team is coming along nicely with the transcontinental portals,” Christine Carson stated as she entered her husband’s office. It was near the end of the workday, and her husband, Jim, was engrossed in his work. He was one of the co-founders of Obsidian, Inc., in addition to being the firm’s president, a position he had held since the company’s inauguration, six years before.

The portal technology had been a catalyst for significant economic changes worldwide, and as a result, there had been substantial negative press. Aidan Obodin, the firm’s CEO and initial investor, had proven to be adept at deflecting this. Jim knew he would have botched working with the press so he was happy for Aidan to take the lead. Without Aidan, Jim knew their company would probably have been shut down long ago.

Jim slowly became aware of his wife’s presence. He motioned for her to shut the door as he gave her a look indicating she should know better than to openly mention the secret transcontinental portal project. “Good morning, Christine,” he muttered around

the bite of apple he had just taken. "Close the door, and tell me about Santa Barbara."

Christine jauntily strode up to her husband, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Welcome back, dear? How was your trip, dear? Was the weather okay in Santa Barbara, dear?" she playfully chastised her blonde husband as she ran through this litany of questions he had failed to ask. "Good to see how you missed me so much."

"Sorry. It's been busy here," Jim responded as he looked over to his petite, thirty-year old wife. To Jim, she was as beautiful as she had been on the day they married. They had become engaged while exploring for a special form of obsidian on the big island of Hawaii. Their wedding was held a few months later, after they'd returned to Ohio.

"So busy that you didn't even think of me?" Christine playfully taunted her husband.

"You only left yesterday for Pete's sake!" Jim was referring to the fact that his wife had been able to travel by one of the newer long-distance portal chains their company now provided. Christine had been able to simply step through a series of connected portals to easily go across the country.

With the portal chains, all a person had to do was make the first portal transit that led into a small antechamber, wait a moment or two, then step into another portal at the other side of the chamber. Each antechamber was about ten feet in length. In Christine's case, it took over twenty portal stations to transit from Cincinnati, Ohio to Santa Barbara, California. A process that took less than fifteen minutes.

She could easily have done the round-trip in one day, but had chosen to spend one night at an ocean-side lodge in Montecito, a neighboring community of Santa Barbara. By staying at this lodge, Christine was able to spend time with her married sister, Melanie, who worked at the U.C. Santa Barbara campus.

"You know," Christine sighed, "it's curious to see how things have changed for so many since we launched the portals. The hotel business, for example, has radically changed."

Jim tried to counter the negative aspects of the discussion. "We've focused on hiring people from industries we've adversely impacted. We've gone out of our way to create meaningful jobs when we could have automated."

"I know, I know," Christine responded simply.

"You know as well as I do how we could have automated the portal systems. Instead, we chose to have most tasks done manually. That, combined with the very short workweek, has caused us to hire masses of good people. Now, most of those people are financially better off because of us."

Once Jim wound down on his defense of the portals, she started to ask her husband about the intercontinental portals that were in development. When these were complete, a person would be able to step from one station to any other station within two thousand miles. The chains of connected portals would no longer be necessary. This would be a huge boon to international travel. It would hurt the airlines still more, but as Obsidian, Inc., had done in the past, they would go to great lengths to take up the employment slack.

"Will they be able to transport people all the way to Hawaii?" Christine asked.

"That needs to be tested," Jim responded, just as an interruption occurred. The door to the private office abruptly opened as a frazzled looking technician, Joe Hill, came into Jim's office with a woman following close behind.

Jim just looked at the two individuals who had come in unannounced. They appeared to be in a state of high anxiety.

"Missing People!" Joe exclaimed excitedly. "People are missing!"

"Slow down, Joe," Jim said calmly. "What are you talking about?"

"Something happened! The TV news people think maybe it was a local power surge or something. Hell, we don't know for sure!" Joe added excitedly.

The woman who had come in with Joe, Maggie Sims, clarified. "We have reports coming in from Wisconsin about missing people. It seems that quite a few stepped into a portal, then just disappeared."

"Many different portals, not just one errant one!" Joe added, his face still flushed with distress.

Jim sat down in his desk chair, trying to absorb what he had just heard. "Say this again, slowly, with detail," he prodded. As he asked this, Jim looked over to Christine who looked just as befuddled as he felt.

"It seems that it happened early today. Maybe six or seven hours ago," Joe said in slow measured tones. "The anomaly seems to be limited to a sector in Wisconsin. The area between Milwaukee to Madison seems to be where most, maybe all, of the problem was."

“And, the problem is people went missing?” Christine prompted, desiring clarification.

“Yes,” Joe responded. “People are missing!”

“Is that all from one portal grid?” Jim asked. The portals were laid out in a grid-like fashion, with each grid having its own power source.

“Yes,” Joe added. “It’s an area of about one-hundred miles square. Grid number 417.” Joe looked over to Maggie Sims who nodded in confirmation while handing Jim a map that outlined the problem grid.

Joe continued, “I received a call from one of the Milwaukee TV stations asking if we could add any information about reports that hundreds of people were missing...”

“Hundreds!” Jim exclaimed, interrupting Joe.

“I couldn’t confirm anything with the press. It was the first I’d heard about it,” Joe quickly added. “I learned from the TV reporter that around the start of the work day some people never made it to their jobs. People had left home, never arriving at their destination. Missing persons reports have been coming in all afternoon to the police. Presumably they all used the portals.”

“The news folks begin piecing things together, and it doesn’t look good,” Maggie added. “Also, someone started a wild rumor about sun spots causing people to disappear,” she paused for her words to sink in. “This doesn’t look good, Mr. Carson,” Maggie said to Jim. “It doesn’t look good at all.”

Jim Carson hesitated, in measured tones, gave the simple instruction. “What say we figure out what happened to these people, find out where they are, then get them all home safely.”

Chapter 3

Alan

Alan Pilar was unexpectedly swimming for his life.

Minutes before, he had been on his way to work. Now he was gasping for breath as he broke to the surface in the middle of a lake... a cold lake. Surprised at this unexpected situation, he found himself flailing about to stay afloat.

He didn't have time to think. His immediate goal was simply to keep from drowning!

Moments before, Alan had stepped through a portal near his apartment in Milwaukee heading to work on the west side of town. Once the portal "proceed" light had turned to green, he had stepped through, expecting to arrive at the portal a block from his office. Instead, he found himself falling, feet first, into a body of water.

His fall took him deep below the surface, forcing Alan to realize he was in trouble. Alan didn't have time to even wonder about what had happened or why. All he knew was he needed to fix things quickly.

The glimmer of light provided the “this way is up” guidance he needed. Rapidly orienting himself, Alan kicked hard, aiming for the surface. Thankfully, the unexpected fall had not caused him to gasp for air when he fell. Had he done so, Alan would have had a mouth full of water, possibly a lung full as well. Only after his head had bobbed up above the surface, did he gasp for much-needed air.

The water was fresh and cold. Actually, it was very cold, and he knew he had to get out of there quickly. Alan treaded water to stay afloat, a challenge as his business suit and dress shoes were weighing him down.

He quickly glanced around, needing to get his bearings.

It was some sort of country lake less than a mile across. It was sizeable enough that Alan knew he was in for a difficult swim. Scanning the distant tree-lined, rock-strewn shore, he searched for someone who could help. He didn’t see any sign of people, buildings or boats on the water.

Calling for help would be futile.

Alan soon determined which was the closest approach to the shoreline, then headed that way. He had nearly the distance of a football field to travel. Normally, this wouldn’t be too problematic as he was in reasonable shape for a thirty-year-old. These were not normal circumstances. The combination of his shock at this unexpected situation plus the weight of the wet business suit made it difficult, slow and exhausting work.

Slogging toward safety, one slow stroke at a time, his mind was buzzing with unanswered questions.

It took almost half an hour to reach the nearest shore. Several times Alan had to stop, catch his breath, and reorient himself to

ensure he had not veered off course from the ever-closer lake's edge. His shoes felt like lead weights. The suit coat and slacks he wore were equally burdensome. Still, Alan kept them on. Had he taken them off, his swim would have been far easier, but he felt doing so might be a mistake. He might want them later.

With great relief, and completely out of breath, he came close enough to the rocky shoreline to touch bottom with his water-logged shoes. He stood with his feet on the lake floor for several moments with the water level up to his shoulders. Cautiously, Alan made his way to shore.

Finally, he was on the shoreline, free of the water. Alan stripped off his sodden suit jacket, and then sat on a gravel patch while trying to gather his thoughts.

"Okay, Alan," he muttered aloud to himself. "What have you done this time?" No easy answer appeared. He knew he should be comfortably in his office by now sipping his first coffee for the morning. He certainly should not be here, wherever "here" was.

He tried to mentally reconstruct his actions that morning. His last moves were to chat up the portal attendant, wait for a signal to proceed, and then step into the portal. With one small exception, it had seemed to be a normal portal transit. The small exception was a very brief flash of light that happened just as he was stepping through.

After a while, he reflected on how his attempts to flirt with the cute, blonde portal attendant had still gone nowhere. "Did you tick her off enough that she sent you into this place... wherever this place is?" he asked himself rhetorically. "Man, she is going to hear from me!"

Alan pulled off his wet shoes, which were likely ruined, along with the socks, laying them out on a set of rocks beside his suit jacket. "Great, just great," he muttered, "My new two-hundred-dollar Hugo Boss shoes are destroyed!"

Thankfully, the air wasn't cold. The temperature was in the mid-seventies, fairly normal for the end of April. Alan removed his shirt and tie, hanging them on the bare branch of a nearby tree. It was just warm enough that he could strip out of the wet clothes, and not be chilled in the open air. He looked around to make sure no one was watching as he stripped off his wet garments. This done, Alan sat there in his boxers enjoying the feel of the sunshine as he pondered the situation.

The only signs of life were some large birds circling in the sky, plus an occasional fish jumping and splashing in the water. In the distance, he could see snowcapped peaks that looked vaguely familiar. Really familiar. There was a mix of some type of conifer, probably pines, and what looked like birch trees along with some maples beside the lake. The trees were not dense, and he could see an open area on the other side of them. He decided to explore that clearing once his clothes had dried enough to put back on.

There was no sign of human life. Nothing. No buildings were to be seen. No sound of a highway in the distance. No boats on the water. No smoke from campfires. Just pure nature. He looked upward for signs of a jet contrail. Nothing. The sky was as devoid of human life as the land and the lake.

"Hello!" Alan called out loudly, hoping his voice would be heard. "Is anybody out there!" He waited, not surprised when no response came.

Portal Lost

“Could she really have done this to me?” he reflected on the portal station he used every day. The one with the cute attendant.

He had only been teasing her, nothing serious. “Surely she’ll get fired for this, and what the heck did I ever do to her to deserve this! And, what is her name...Susan? Sally? Suzette? I’m going to kick butt when I get back! It would just help if I knew the name of the person who was about to get their hind-end kicked!”

He picked up a small stone, angrily throwing it at the water. It skipped twice across the surface before sinking.

“So, what now?” he asked himself aloud. “What now?”

Chapter 4

Amy

Amy Scott was asking herself the same question. “What now? Where is the place, and what do I do now?” She frankly did not know what to do; this sort of predicament was entirely new to her.

Slowly, Amy paced about hoping for a spark of inspiration. No pearls of wisdom were forthcoming. “I shouldn’t leave here in case they come looking for me. Right?” she muttered aloud.

She considered her options. Stay put, and hope for some sort of rescue? Go look for some help, but which way? To the west, there were the mountains. To the east, at least she thought it was east, the elevation seemed to decline gradually. In every direction, there were trees. Mostly pine trees. “Yes,” she said aloud. What direction? If help was nearby, where were they most likely to be?

A new line of thought arose. What if she was truly on the reality show, *Where Am I?* Amy knew from watching the show that her first priority was to find her teammate, then shelter, and after that, some food.

“Food!” she exclaimed aloud, quickly looking into her overly large and brightly colored Vera Bradley tote. “Thank heavens it was my turn to bring in treats to the office!” Amy said relieved as

she looked deep into her bag. Anxiously reaching deep into the bag, she soon came upon the dozen slices of banana nut bread that she had picked up at Starbucks before going to the portal station.

The food situation was temporarily solved. Now, what about her fiancé, Brad? Shouldn't he be somewhere close by? The contestants on *Where Am I?* were always put into the wild in pairs, but not exactly in the same location. Her thoughts brightened as she thought about that fact. She had seen episodes of the show, and thought she knew what to expect. In past seasons, team members were dropped, via portals, a half mile or so apart. The two individuals were expected to find one another. Brad, she thought, would probably be somewhere nearby.

All she needed to do was find him.

With Brad nearby, her spirits brightened. "Brad!" Amy called out as strongly as she could, hoping for a reply. No response came. "Brad!" she repeated, still there was no response.

Amy waited for several moments, scanning the horizon for any sign of Brad. She wasn't surprised that he might not have heard her. He was probably out of earshot. The slight breeze might hamper his ability to hear her if he was upwind at all. He could be anywhere, in any direction up to a mile or so she rationalized. *Let's hope the show's producers follow the same plan this season,* Amy thought.

The thought of being on that popular reality show both excited and irritated her. Amy could not think of a season in which contestants were dropped into the wild completely without warning. They had always had the chance to prepare a bit so they could dress for the adventure. Also of concern, what about her job!

She couldn't just leave work for a month or more without saying anything!

"This may be a new twist to the game," Amy said to herself. "I don't like it, and it could get me fired!" she called out to the openness with the hope this was being picked up by a hidden camera. "It's not my fault!" she pleaded, as if to speak to her unseen boss and coworkers.

"Brad!" Amy called out futilely. There was simply no sign of him.

Amy again considered her options, should she stay in one place while waiting for Brad to find her, or should she start to look for him? Her current location in this open field was okay, but there were few places to sit and no shade. She looked around again, realizing that a short distance to her left there was a rise in the ground. The added ten feet or so in elevation would put her in a much better position to see all around the area, and to be seen by Brad from almost any direction.

Amy quickly moved the fifty yards across the grassy field, avoiding any tall grass along her way. She could not know for sure if the tall grass was hiding some unknown critters. Amy reflected on an episode of *Where Am I?* when a contestant was out of the game on the first day of the contest as a result of a snake bite. In that case, medics had come out of hiding, and the injured contestant was quickly sent to a hospital via a hidden portal. Were there show people and medics nearby watching her? Was there a hidden portal in the trees?

She cautiously worked her way to the top of the rise. The afternoon sun was a little warm so she shucked her top layer, a light

wool blazer, stuffing it into her tote. Her remaining bright blue, short-sleeved blouse was just right for the warm afternoon.

A troubling thought emerged. "Afternoon sun," she pondered, and looked up at the sky to confirm that the sun was indeed high in the sky. "It should be morning. I left the office just a little while ago, and it was early morning." She looked up at the sky another time. "Weird," she thought. "I definitely need to ask Brad about this."

Once Amy arrived at the top of the rise, she felt much better. The visibility was greater now, her vantage point enabling her to see clearly in all directions for at least a quarter of a mile. She sat down on a waist-high boulder near one side of the rise. As she sat there, Amy studied the area in the distance, hoping to see Brad appear at any moment.

Brad had been staying in his own place in Chicago, while Amy continued to live in Madison. They had not yet resolved where they would live once they got married in six months. She didn't want to give up her place in Madison and, likewise, he didn't want to give up his place in Chicago. So, for now, they simply avoided this issue.

He doesn't start work as early as I do, she realized after sitting there for nearly ten minutes.

"Maybe he hasn't taken his portal trip yet. Maybe he isn't here now and isn't in the game yet? Maybe, there are just a lot of maybes!" Amy chuckled hopefully. "You, Amy Scott," she muttered aloud to herself, "are completely clueless."

Feeling deflated, she just sat on the rock while carefully scanning her surroundings, checking every detail. Soon, she felt that Brad would appear. Maybe the reality show people would have

him arrive in the same area where she had begun, or maybe they would plop him into a place like that thicket of pines. She looked down-slope, across the open area to the pines in the distance, desperately wanting to see Brad appear there.

Nothing. Just trees. She knew she could stare at that stand of pines for hours and see just that... pine trees.

Amy again pondered the situation with her job. She could only assume, and hope, the TV producers had secretly made arrangements with her boss. Otherwise, her not showing up to work could have serious, negative repercussions. This show could cause a contestant to be away from work and home for a month. If they hadn't worked something out with her employer, who knew if she would have a job when she returned. Amy liked her job in public relations. She worked for the PR department of a large bank that had offices in several major cities including Chicago where Brad, lived. It would be a shame if she was fired due to this.

"Not just a shame!" She looked up to the sky and loudly added, "I'll sue. Yes... that's it; I'll sue the TV company and everyone in it!"

Turning her thoughts away from job worries, Amy continued the slow scan of her surroundings. She stood up on the rock so it would be easier for her to be seen. There was nothing other than the large grassy field, the trees across the field, and the mountains in the distance to be seen. No Brad. No camera crew. No people at all.

"Don't panic lady," she said to herself, as she felt her concerns mount. "Stay focused."

A movement off to her right caught her attention. It was a brief flash of red. Maybe, Amy thought, Brad was wearing the

new red dress shirt she had given him for his birthday two weeks before. She liked the way it looked on him and how it complimented his blonde hair. Now, she definitely liked how it made him easier to find. If, that is, it was Brad she had just seen.

No, it wasn't Brad, she soon realized. Amy continued to study the location where she had seen the movement with the flash of red. She soon determined the red color was that of a bug. A very large bug. She watched it for a moment and her fear grew. Amy had never seen anything like it.

She scanned her immediate surroundings, looking for something she could use as a weapon against the large bug. Nothing was to be found, not even a small branch or stick. She prepared herself to run if need be.

A bright red ladybug rose out from the tall grass about thirty feet away. It made no movement against her. Instead the bug simply flitted about. "Wow, I've never seen anything like you before!" Amy's fear dissolved as she watched the ladybug come her way while skimming along five feet above the ground. "You're huge!" Amy said with glee. This ladybug, if it was a ladybug, was almost a foot across. She had no idea they got to be so large. Other than the size, it looked exactly like the ladybugs she often saw in the summer, even with the black dots on the back.

The ladybug came to within three feet of Amy, hovering in the air as if it were studying her. Amy, in turn, was studying this marvelous creature. "You won't bite, right?" Amy said nervously as the bug hovered just out of her reach.

"I never saw anything like you in the zoo," Amy said as she studied the bright red creature while preparing herself to run if it should attack.

The ladybug, apparently tiring of this, slowly turned and went on its way. It skimmed over the hillock, toward a grove of trees a quarter of a mile in the distance.

A new realization hit her. "It isn't a bug, it is a flying camera made to look like a bug!" She laughed. "That's why I don't see a camera team and why it is so big! The reality show people are using flying cameras, or some such thing, made up to look like bugs. How cute! It makes this all-alone-in-the-woods thing seem so much more real!"

"Hey ladybug, camera thing!" Amy called out, trying to get its attention. "It's me, Amy. Amy Scott. Where is Brad? Take me to Brad would you?" The ladybug ignored her, going on its way.

"Odd. What kind of reality show camera ignores the contestants?" Amy muttered aloud. Off to her right, she saw another flying ladybug camera looking in her direction. "Okay, so there are more of you. I get it!" This, Amy felt with some relief, was a clear explanation for the absence of a camera crew. "I wonder what other tricks they have up their sleeves?" Amy questioned as she looked back at the first ladybug that was slowly gliding further away.

As she watched the first ladybug skim across the field, the second one remained close by. Amy kept her attention on the first ladybug and where it was heading. Suddenly, she realized, she could see the glimmer of water in the distance, through the trees in the direction the ladybug was heading. It might be a lake or stream, she thought. Amy couldn't be sure as trees blocked most of the view, but it was definitely water, and that was probably a good thing.

"I'm guessing you want me to follow," Amy said matter-of-factly as she watched the first ladybug. "So, I guess that's what I'll do. Sitting here on this rock sure hasn't done me any favors. And..." she added, "my butt aches!"

Suddenly, she saw movement. It was just a brief, distant flash of movement. She was almost certain someone was there on the other side of the trees. Near where she had seen the water, something, perhaps someone, had moved. "Brad!" she called out loudly. "That better be you, damn it!"

Amy grabbed her tote, quickly working her way off the low rise. She began to run across the field, calling out for Brad several times as she ran. She did not see the person a second time, but she felt the movement had been from a human and not an animal. It had to be Brad. Running out of breath, she slowed down to a walk just before the edge of the tree line.

She saw movement again! This time, however, she felt caution was in order. There was no specific reason for this caution other than something didn't feel right.

Choosing to keep silent, she stood still for several moments. If it was Brad, she thought, he would be out there looking for her. It could be, she realized, one of the competing *Where Am I?* teams. She knew, from having watched the show, she was supposed to avoid them.

This person certainly wasn't scouting around looking for her as Brad would be doing.

As Amy edged closer, she realized she was approaching a lake, a fairly large one. After several cautious steps forward, she saw the person. It was a man. She slowed down even more, her uncertainty growing.

B.G. Preston

Coming to within fifty feet of the lake, and still hidden by trees, she could see the man clearly. Like her, he was Caucasian, and around thirty years old. Unlike her, he was nearly naked, and he certainly was not Brad!

Chapter 5

Lakeside

Alan heard a noise as he paced restlessly about waiting for the clothes to dry. It was probably just a small animal or perhaps a deer. Still, in this unexpected environment, it made him nervous.

His clothes, after hanging from tree limbs for over an hour, were a bit dryer, but they still had a long way to go before he would want to put them back on. Once dressed, he would search the area for help.

Another light noise, closer this time. Slowly, not wanting to startle the creature, he turned in the direction of the sound. If the sound came from a bear, Alan was prepared to run the few steps to the lake and dive in. It wasn't a bear, or deer. The sound had come from a woman. She was partially hidden behind the trees.

This was a woman in a full business outfit, dark slacks, plus a large colorful tote. All that was missing from the "woman-on-the-go" image was her holding an iPhone to her ear while sipping out of a Starbucks cup. She was as out-of-place here in the wilderness as he was, and she looked scared. It was as if she didn't want to be seen.

"I see you!" Alan called out. "Might as well come on over to here."

"I would, if you would put some clothes on," she called back. This caused Alan to suddenly remember that all he was wearing were loose fitting boxers.

"Sorry," Alan called back to the woman who was now a bit more out in the open. Alan could see she was a cute brunette in her late twenties. Beyond that, he could tell little about her other than she was wearing more than he was at the moment. "My clothes are all wet from the cold lake. I really don't have a choice. Just pretend I'm wearing a bathing suit or something."

The woman slowly edged closer. She took each step cautiously, as if fearing Alan might suddenly jump out at her. "Are you a contestant with the show?" she asked as she came within a dozen feet of him.

"The show? What show? What contestant?" Alan responded, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"The reality show, *Where Am I?*" Amy stated matter-of-factly. "Aren't you with the show also?"

"Lady," Alan responded, feeling a bit irritated, "all I know for sure is a couple hours ago I stepped through a portal in Milwaukee, then I was in the middle of that lake," he nodded toward the pristine blue water beside them, "and I was swimming for my life," he added. "No, I'm definitely not on a reality show."

The woman paused, looking about, finding a flat rock to sit on. Once she was settled, Amy looked back to him, her eyes carefully focusing on his face, avoiding his droopy, and possibly revealing, boxers.

Obsidian Portal

"I'm on the reality show," she repeated. "At least, I think I am." She looked around her, taking in her surroundings. "Have you seen anyone else? Other contestants, I mean? I'm looking for someone in particular."

"No, I haven't..." he started to respond, but instead exclaimed, "holy crap, what is that!" A large red bug had just settled on the flat rock a few feet away from Amy. "Move slowly. You don't want it to bite you!" Alan started to back away carefully as he said this.

She surprised him as she chuckled. "They aren't alive. They are micro, flying cameras, made up to look like ladybugs."

Hearing this, he looked back to the large red bug, admitting to himself how it did look like an overly large ladybug. He looked back to her. "Lady..."

"Amy," she interrupted. "My name is Amy."

"Okay, Amy. I don't know what you are smoking, but that's no camera, and this is no reality show."

"Sure it is," she hesitated. "Isn't it? It has to be a mechanical, flying ladybug camera. It just has to be!" Becoming unsure herself, Amy slowly scooted off of the rock, carefully moving to where Alan was standing. This movement caused the bug to rise up, and then zip upward toward a tree some distance away.

"Please tell me what I was saying is true. Please, uh what is your name?"

"Alan," he responded as he studied the petite woman before him. "Alan Pilar. I live in Milwaukee."

"Oh." Amy was at a loss for words. "Alan, it just has to be a camera, if not, where are the camera crews for the show?"

"I hate to break the bad news to you, but I really don't think either of us is on a reality show."

"I applied for *Where Am I?* just a couple weeks ago," Amy said, as if this simple fact proved this was, indeed, a reality show.

He took a moment, moving back to the rock Amy had been sitting on a few moments before. She followed him, sitting three feet away, and the two looked out toward the lake as they gathered their thoughts. Another bright red ladybug zipped along about two feet above the water. Suddenly, a large fish jumped up out of the water, grabbing the ladybug in its mouth before dragging it underwater with a splash.

"Holy crap, what was that!" exclaimed Alan in shock. "It was huge! Did you see the teeth on it?"

In response, she took several steps back from the lake. "Uh, well, wow! I don't know. Could it be some sort of lake shark?" She studied the lake a bit more. "It's not something I want to get to know up-close and personal."

"Lake shark?" he laughed. "That was no shark, and I don't think you will find sharks in lakes like this." He looked back out to the lake. "Well, so much for that bug, or flying camera, or whatever it was," Alan was shaken by what he had just seen. He had been swimming in that water earlier. The same water occupied by the huge fish, or whatever it was.

Amy was taken aback by this, along with everything that had transpired during this day. "Did you apply for the show like I did?" she asked quietly, needing to bring their conversation back to something more normal.

"No," he said softly. "Heck, I like the show, but it would never cross my mind to apply to be a contestant."

Obsidian Portal

"Why?" Amy asked as she sat there feeling the afternoon sun warm her.

Alan looked over at her. Sitting fairly close as they were, he could see she was disarmingly cute. He realized this woman, with her shoulder-length brunette hair, petite shape and bright eyes would get any man's attention. She was the kind of woman who inspired a guy to want to simply be with her, and be close to her. "I couldn't apply, even though it might be fun." He paused, looked out over the lake, "If I tried to get away from work for a month or so, like those shows require, I'd lose my job."

"What do you do?"

"Account development," he replied. "That's a fancy title for a sales guy. I work for an electronics firm. My job is to bring in new, and hopefully large, corporate accounts. It takes a long time to build a good relationship with a prospective account. Being gone for a game show would bugger my job up something fierce."

Amy looked up at the sky, slowly studying her surroundings. It was a gorgeous spot. A sylvan lake in the middle of a beautiful setting. There were snow-capped mountains in the distance. Between the mountains and their location, she could now see a series of forested foothills.

"I'm still hoping this is a game show," she said softly. "Otherwise, this makes no sense."

"Your game show theory makes more sense than the goofy idea I had come up with," he chuckled. "I was thinking that the chick who operated the portal near my apartment did this to me on purpose."

"Chick?" Amy asked in mock amazement. "What decade are you from?" she playfully scorned.

“Sorry, the Portal Attendant. The female Portal Attendant back in Milwaukee,” Alan clarified. “I was thinking she might have sent me here.”

“Why would she do that?” Amy said as she looked over at her newfound partner in adventure. He looked to be a couple years older than her, a little handsome with intelligent blue eyes, and well-trimmed, dusty-blond hair.

He chuckled as he thought of the ongoing game he had developed with the attractive young woman in Milwaukee. She had been one of the attendants at his neighboring station for several months. Bit-by-bit he had let his flirting with her grow until she was starting to respond. She wasn’t actually flirting back, but at least she seemed to recognize his existence. “I think I may have been a bit too overt in my attentions to a portal attendant who didn’t necessarily want them.”

Amy laughed. “That’s dangerous!” she laughed. “Everyone knows you don’t tick off people like a dental assistant who has sharp objects in your mouth, or hair stylists who have scissors in their hands, and you definitely don’t mess around with someone who could, at the flick of a button, send you off to parts unknown!” She reached over, patting Alan’s forearm. “Yep, guy, she just might be the cause of your problems.”

“Let’s hope we find out, and soon,” Alan responded as he stood up to walk over to a neighboring tree where his clothes were hanging. His pants, hanging out in the direct sun as they were, were a bit drier now.

“How are they doing?” Amy asked. “Any chance you can get decent?”

Obsidian Portal

"They're better. Enough that I can at least put my slacks back on. Everything else, my socks, shirt and jacket have a bit longer to go," he paused. "And, I suddenly realize I'm starving!"

"Getting dropped into a lake in the middle of nowhere can do that to you," Amy attempted to tease him. Her thoughts went to the banana nut cake slices from Starbucks she had in her tote, but she didn't know if she wanted to reveal their existence to this stranger.

After pondering the situation, and realizing that she was quite hungry, Amy decided to go ahead and let him know at least some of the truth. "I can help," she said reaching into her tote to retrieve one slice. Amy broke the half-inch thick piece of banana nut bread in two pieces, handing one to Alan.

"My hero, uh, heroine!" he responded playfully as he quickly wolfed down this unexpected treat.

"Well, so much for savoring every last bite," she laughed.

After several moments, he thought about their situation further. Just sitting there was not accomplishing anything.

"It will get dark in a few hours, and we don't yet have a clue about much of anything." As he said this, he slipped on his black shoes without socks while stuffing his damp socks into a coat pocket. "How about if we do some exploring to see if we can figure some things out, or at least see if we can find a good place to make camp."

"First, I want to go back into that field on the other side of the trees there," Amy gestured in the direction where she had come from a while earlier. "I'm still holding out hopes I'll find Brad, and confirm this is all just a game show."

“Who is Brad?” Alan asked as he gathered up his clothing, putting his damp shirt on.

“My fiancé. He lives in Chicago. And, if this is the reality show, he should be somewhere around here. We both applied to be on it as a team.”

With this, she too gathered up her jacket and tote, and the two of them went back into the meadow in the direction where Amy had first arrived while keeping an eye out for Amy’s fiancé, wildlife, and the oddly-large ladybugs.

It wasn’t long before one of the curious, huge red ladybugs was hovering nearby. The odd creature appeared to be watching and measuring their every move.

“I hope you are right about those being cameras,” Alan said somberly as he watched the red bug, “otherwise, they kind of give me the willies.”

“Brad!” Amy called out after walking beyond the lake and trees. “Brad, where are you!”

No response came from Brad. The only sound was from the breeze, and the hum of the nearby ladybug.

END SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Please view MagicGlassPublishing.com for details on availability of the completed work.