

Two teenage friends inherit the ability to stop time. The biggest discovery in the history of mankind. A teenager reluctantly picks up his murdered father's torch, creates a scientific formula that changes the world, and avenges his dad.

Stopping Time

By Ray Cutler

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STOPPING TIME

RAY CUTLER



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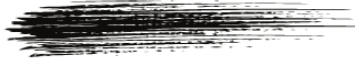
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PROLOGUE



The huge aircraft fought against the storm, buffeted by shearing winds and pelted by bullet-like rain. Bill Griffith sat in the copilot's seat next to his friend Jeff Edelman. Tonight, the two were shuttling a C-17 back to the States at the request of their current employer, the CIA.

“Bill, remember that time you and me were flying cover for those grunts in the Unai Pass...”

Jeff looked at his friend but found him AWOL, lost in a thousand-yard stare.

“Buddy, you haven't said two words since we left Ramstein.”

Lt. Col. William Griffith stared out the cockpit windscreen, replaying his last frantic twenty-four hours over and over again.

Racing up the stairs to his flat, hastily throwing a handful of clothes into a bag, then running back downstairs

minutes ahead of the Chinese agents sent to kill him. Cajoling his Afghan driver to go faster while stealing glances out the back window of their dilapidated Toyota.

“Bill! Bill! Shit, what’s up with you?”

Faintly hearing his name, he gave his head a shake to clear it.

“Sorry, I’ve got a lot of baggage I’m bringing back...”

Boom!

Crack!

Snap!

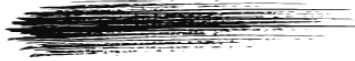
Crunchhhh!

The cabin walls convulsed as a series of explosions collapsed the C-17 inward.

Both men whipped their heads toward each other as a final, huge explosion tore the fuselage in half, freeing the cockpit compartment from the body of the plane and sending it plummeting to the sea below.

Bill Griffith’s last thoughts were of his son Tom and the secret he was now taking with him to his grave.

CHAPTER 1



Mary Griffith shuffled aimlessly around her Columbia, Maryland, kitchen, collecting the ingredients for tonight's Taco Tuesday dinner. Today was her 43rd birthday, and it had been six weeks since the call.

"Mrs. Griffith?"

"Yes?"

"This is Major Cutter at Air Base Andrews. Mrs. Griffith, I'm afraid I have bad news. We're sorry to inform you that your husband's plane went down over the Atlantic."

That's all she had heard. She didn't remember dropping the phone or collapsing to the floor. That had been almost two months ago, yet she was still cooking enough for five when there were now only four, and she still got up in the morning, looking for Bill's clothes on their bedroom floor.

“Shit, shit, shit!” She burned herself on the hamburger grease. Squeezing tears from her eyes, she moved to the sink and ran cold water over her damaged knuckles.

Now crying sporadically, she sat down, her exhaustion receding but not gone. Like a toothache that never quite stopped hurting, Bill’s absence was never far away.

She knew her family needed her, so she dutifully presented a brave face in spite of the hole in her heart.

She pulled out one of their photo albums.

Mary and Bill had led a full, happy life. Not exactly a typical American family, Bill spent six months out of every year in Europe working with the European technology consortium (read: CIA) on what he liked to call his “science projects.” Mary’s project management job with the agency kept her busy too, but unlike Bill, none of her work came with the dreaded “top secret” label.

Now, where there had been a loving family, there was only a deep depression that the kids had fallen into. The youngest, Bill Jr., 14, and Louise, 12, had resorted to hiding behind their bedroom doors. If she hadn’t made them eat, they would never have come out.

Tom, her sixteen-year-old, was pretending to be solid, but his façade was paper-thin; everyone saw through it.

Her retrospection was interrupted by her phone, but by the third ring, she still hadn’t decided whether or not to answer.

Ring number four. What the hell?

“Hey Mary, how are you doing?”

It was Michael Watkins, the friend who recruited her and Bill into the agency almost six years ago. She had known Mike for over a decade.

“Getting better, making progress,” she replied while drinking wine and looking at vacation photos of her dead husband at four in the afternoon.

“How are things on the sixth floor?” she asked Mike, changing the subject. “Anything new on our mole?”

Hearing the deadness in her voice, Watkins thought, *Wow, I called just in time.*

“Nope, management is still fumbling around. They have no leads, and the agency’s still got a leak.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the two friends, unusual for them.

OK Mike, get on with it.

“Andrew Graves called today about an opening in our Los Angeles office for a project manager. He asked if I knew anyone who might be interested. How would you feel about a change of scenery for you and the children?”

Dabbing at her eyes while wiping tears off the photos of her dead husband, Mary finally gave in.

“Michael, at this point, I’ll try anything.”

Taco Tuesday, that evening

“Sit down, kids. I’ll bring the stuff to the table, and you can make your tacos there.”

Mary had spent the day mentally circling what to do and eventually came to an understanding. She figured out why her kids weren’t moving on—because she wasn’t. She was mired in her grief, and her kids were stuck there with her.

Once she understood that, her course became clear. Clear, but not easy.

Ready now, she waited for her troops to settle at the kitchen table.

“I spoke with Mr. Watkins today. He said there’s an opening in our regional office in LA and asked if we would consider moving.”

Not one reaction.

OK, try again.

“I told Mike I lived in California twenty years ago, and the traffic, even back then, was something I didn’t want to ever deal with again. He said they have a satellite location in Orange County, in a town called Laguna Niguel, about forty-five minutes south of LA. He said the traffic is still a bear, but nothing like Los Angeles.”

She stopped to gauge their responses, having debated how hard to sell the move, but still got nothing.

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One more time.

“So, how would you like to move to Southern California?”

Bill Jr. twirled his dinner fork over his fingers like a boardwalk magician, while her oldest stared back, not even bothering to feign interest.

Thank God, Louise broke the silence.

“Would we live on the water?”

“No, baby, that’d be too expensive. But we could be within 10 minutes or so. We might be able to afford Laguna Beach on the ocean side of Interstate 5, but not right on the water. Though if we moved to Laguna Niguel or Laguna Beach, you might have a peek at the Pacific from your room.”

She shamelessly thought, *A little salesmanship wouldn’t hurt.*

“Bill Jr., what do you think?”

Bill began wringing his hands, and his left eye started twitching.

“Not sure. Let me think about it.”

Billy always froze when asked a direct question. Her middle child was a follower, and what he lacked in confidence, he made up for in indecision.

“What do you think, Tom?”

Finally, a real response, and so mature—her 16-year-old. She sometimes wondered if he was some old soul, working on his third or fourth reincarnation.

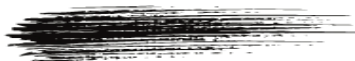
“Mom, if you’re good with it, for your career I mean, I think it could be good. Everything I’ve heard about the schools in Orange County says they’re better than ours, and the weather is close to perfect. For me, the academics and athletics are a fit.”

Looking across the table at his family, he concluded “And I think Dad would want us to move on.” *Finally. He pulled off a suggestion that could have come from his father.*

Her breath caught, and she worked to smooth it out before continuing. She ducked her head to hide a few tears.

“Thanks, kids. Let me talk with my boss some more. Maybe they’ll pay for a house-hunting trip or two.”

CHAPTER 2



On a dark Monday morning, Director Huang, head of the Chinese secret service, exited his government limousine and walked up the stairs of the headquarters of the MSS, the Ministry of State Security. Instinctively, he covered his mouth, even though he was wearing a face mask. The smog was so thick he couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him.

Secret service headquarters was located in Tiananmen Square, housed in an ultra-modern building composed of sleek, polished grey marble. It was a stark contrast to the thousand-year-old brick entrance to the Forbidden City, which sat catty-corner across from Mao's portrait. Walking toward it, it felt as though one were traveling back in time.

Inside, the headquarters was no less austere or devoid of personality than its featureless façade. Neither the building nor the blank faces of its guards gave any hint of the power and danger posed by the most formidable party apparatus in China.

Huang badged in and made his way to the meeting room, removing his useless mask while clinging to the hope that this meeting might improve his faltering reputation.

Huang's cachet inside the MSS had been declining for several years. His downward spiral had little to do with his performance, but rather with his lack of political connections. Being good at his job didn't matter.

As an outsider in Beijing politics, Huang understood this well. He was not a traditional Chinese bureaucrat and hadn't obtained his position through nepotism. He had no personal connections to Xi or any other senior leaders. He had earned his job through ruthlessness, single-minded dedication to his country—and to himself.

Unfortunately, President Xi was looking for a scapegoat, someone to blame for China's failure to stay ahead of the West. A sacrifice was needed, and when Xi's childhood friend, Li Bao, had been appointed to his committee, Huang figured his time was up.

Li Bao and Xi had grown up together. As children, they rode bicycles around their housing compound. If Huang had to pick one person to fear, it was Li Bao.

This morning's meeting was about yet another Western threat—possibly the greatest one China had faced in the past fifty years. Smiling grimly, today Huang would explain just how big the threat really was.

For the past fifteen years, China had quietly been catching up to the West, both economically and technologically. They had done so in the same way the PRC

had outmaneuvered countless countries over the past thousand years—through bribery, deceit, perseverance, and most of all, stealth.

For decades, America and Europe had been oblivious to China's rise, wasting time fighting amongst themselves while China quietly raced ahead by competing with them as one common enemy.

Until President Phillip Sheridan was elected.

Sheridan changed everything. He reached across the pond and convinced every European leader that America wasn't their enemy. Instead, he argued, they shared one common foe—China. Now, the economic and technological partnership between America and Europe had become a force to be reckoned with.

Well, Huang thought as he approached the conference room door, it was never going to last forever.

The door was opened for him by a matronly woman in her fifties, who bowed deferentially and said, "The committee is all present, Director Huang."

He entered the room projecting poise and calm, his posture straight and a bit stiff, intentionally ignoring the men at the conference table. This was one of the tactics he used to make a group uncomfortable. However, today there was only one man of consequence present—Li Bao. The seventy-year-old not only had the ear of Xi but was also a respected politician in his own right. Almost a legend, he had survived many silent coups.

Walking to the lectern, Huang waited for the room to settle.

Unsurprisingly, it was Li Bao who broke the silence.

“Well, Huang, where do we stand against the West?”

Although resenting the authoritarian tone in the old man’s voice, Huang did not react.

“Almost five years ago, the President of the United States approached the European leaders, suggesting a new kind of alliance. He told them they were ignoring the fact that we, the People’s Republic of China, were catching up to them in nearly every area while they wasted their time and resources competing with each other over petty table scraps.”

The Director paused to clean his glasses, an affectation since they were already spotless.

“As of today, we have achieved parity, and in some areas, we’ve surpassed them. Our central development committee assesses that had the Western countries remained at each other’s throats, we would have become the world’s leader in both technology and wealth within five to seven years.”

“At first, we believed it unlikely that two such large capitalist spheres could simply stop competing. This, of course, was wishful thinking.”

He had their full attention now.

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“To be fair, we had grown complacent too, relying on their infighting and cultural differences to sustain our advantage while we built our capabilities.

“Then they elected Sheridan. He didn’t care about ‘America First.’ He believed that as long as their alliance succeeded as a whole, America won. He pursued the partnership with vigor and trust, defending his ideas with honesty and tenacity. His ‘boy scout’ image and openness convinced both America and Europe to set aside their rivalry and confront a greater threat—us, the PRC.

“Now, we’ve learned their alliance has achieved an incredible breakthrough in bio-neuroscience. One so profound that it could change the course of the world. Our spies inside the CIA tell us the Americans, led by the now-deceased scientist William Griffith, developed a DNA-affecting chemical formula that allows the subject to manipulate time.”

The staid Chinese politicians erupted in a cacophony of shouts. Huang waited for them to calm down, then raised his right hand, palm facing his audience.

“Gentlemen, please hold your questions until I finish.”

“We were able to smuggle out an inadequate piece of evidence before our agents eliminated its inventor. Normally, his elimination wouldn’t matter; we would simply have one of our traitors inside the CIA steal the formula.

“Unfortunately, it appears the CIA doesn’t have it.”

The room grew quiet. The men knew there had been a huge screw up.

“Apparently, this scientist,” Huang consulted his notes, “this William Griffith, had not shared his discovery with his employer.”

The whispers around the table grew louder until Huang raised his hand again.

“We don’t know why he didn’t share it, but what matters is that the Americans don’t have it, and neither do we.”

The men understood the implications: the scientist must have hidden his work somewhere else. When the MSS assassinated him, they lost their only chance to retrieve it.

“I have dealt with those responsible for prematurely killing the inventor, but that doesn’t bring back what we lost. I am sending one of our best teams to America to find out if his family has any of his work. This mission is risky, but we must recreate the discovery to neutralize this threat.”

Huang mused aloud, almost to himself, “We don’t have enough information. Not on all the formula can do, nor on its specific components.”

He looked up, anger in his eyes, sweeping his gaze across the table.

“No plans, no descriptions, no lab reports. The only evidence we have are eyewitness accounts from two spies and a short cell phone video smuggled out by a traitor.”

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He paused for dramatic effect, then pushed a button on the conference room computer. The room darkened, and a monitor came to life.

“This video was taken by one of our agents in the CIA’s Euro lab. It was taken at great personal risk.”

A lopsided, shaky video filled the screen. At first, nothing happened. A lab assistant could be seen setting up several large, analog clocks, placing them on folding chairs in front of the hidden camera. The techs went about various tasks for about two minutes before something incredible occurred.

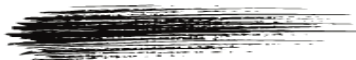
The Beijing officials gasped.

All the lab personnel stopped moving—frozen wherever and in whatever condition they were in when the formula kicked in. The second hands on the analog clocks froze too.

Huang paused the video.

“The inventor we eliminated found a way to stop time.”

CHAPTER 3



Tom Griffith, son of the late Bill Griffith—the inventor of the ability-enhancing formula in question—worked hard at projecting confidence and maturity. He figured that with his dad gone, it was up to him to be the man of the house. His younger siblings and mom needed him to be poised and confident, both absent since his father’s death. Despite his outward demeanor, inside he was riddled with self-doubt.

This morning, he sat in his AP chemistry class at Laguna Hills High School, bored out of his mind, listening to the teacher and some cute girl argue about the course syllabus. So much for Southern California schools being better than DC’s. He wasn’t arrogant, but the material outlined for the semester was all old news to him. And with his dad gone...

Jesus. He worked hard not to cry. His dad had been his rock. Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out his *dad bag*—a small plastic bag of his father’s personal things. His naval academy ring, a letter his dad had sent him when he was ten and at summer camp, and a few other sentimental

items. Whenever he was having a rough day, these mementos brought him comfort. Tom took out the ring and rubbed its face with his thumb, back and forth. For just a moment, he allowed himself to cry, tears silently slipping from the corners of his eyes.

Quickly wiping them away, he looked up and saw the same red-haired girl from earlier glaring at him. Or at least, he thought she was glaring.

“Amy, do you have something to say?” The teacher noticed her too, clearly unimpressed by her silent criticism.

“No, Mr. Allison, except the material you outlined is the same as last year’s. I was kind of hoping we’d move on.”

The other students groaned softly. It seemed this back-and-forth between Amy and the teacher was a regular occurrence.

“I understand, Amy, but I want to make sure the whole class is ready to move on before we tackle new material. And while I know you feel you’re a bit more advanced than the rest, I’m afraid we’ll be doing this my way.”

Amy rolled her eyes, but Mr. Allison didn’t care. “It’s my responsibility to ensure everyone gets it,” he said, glancing around the room, making it clear the discussion was over.

After that, the rest of class was a nonevent, but the interaction gave Tom an idea. When the bell rang, he shot out of his chair and ran after Amy, catching her just outside the classroom. Grabbing her arm, which clearly annoyed her, he said, “Hey.”

She scowled at him, like he wasn't worth the \$29.95 he'd paid for his Jay-Z t-shirt.

"I'm Tom Griffith, and I think I'm probably more disappointed in our AP Chemistry syllabus than you are."

Amy, with her cute red hair and piercing blue eyes, stopped trying to pull away, but still glared. "Yeah? Well, you've been dealing with this shit school for like maybe five minutes. I've been stuck here for years."

Suppressing a smile, Tom replied, "I feel for you, Ms.?"

She grudgingly replied, "Amy. Amy Christianson. And I know who you are, Mr. Transfer Student. You're the only other person here who can spell 'chemistry.' I checked you out with Sylvia Clarke in admissions. She said you won first prize in your old school's science fair the last two years and were on track to become president of your science club. How'd you end up at this shit school, anyway?"

Surprisingly, Tom found himself enjoying her company. "My mom's job transferred us here from Columbia, Maryland."

He let go of her arm and stepped a little closer, so they were now about a foot apart. "I was told the schools here were better than ours, but it seems that reputation was overstated. Is the rest of your curriculum as underwhelming as our AP Chemistry?"

Amy's anger faded, replaced by sadness. Staring down at her Nikes, she said, "Buddy, in this school, what you see is what you get."

Tom studied her for a moment, then made a decision. “Listen, Amy. I’m thinking of adjusting my plans based on your feedback and my limited experience.”

She offered a weak grin, so he smiled back and asked, “Can I tell you what I think *we* should do about *our* situation?”

Now smiling for real, she replied, “Sure, Mr. Smart Guy. What do you think *we* should do?”

“Well, since you’re the smartest person in my new school, and I’m the second smartest,” he said with a playful grin, “I suggest we join forces and study together. Maybe we can teach each other. I have a lab set up in my garage, and I’ve got a ton of notes from my father, who was a brilliant scientist.”

She hesitated, having heard about his dad’s death and unsure what to say. Tom, sensing this, took the lead. “What do you say, Amy? Do we give it a shot? You and me, teaching ourselves?”

Amy was intrigued, and it wasn’t a boy-girl thing. It was the chance to work with someone smart, which, God knows she desperately needed. Even though Tom was attractive, she wasn’t interested in anyone right now. Her focus was on school, with only two more years left before college she needed to focus on getting the best education she could get. MIT, ideally, though Caltech would be fine too.

But as she considered his proposal, she had to admit she enjoyed his self-deprecating humor, and he *was* extremely attractive.

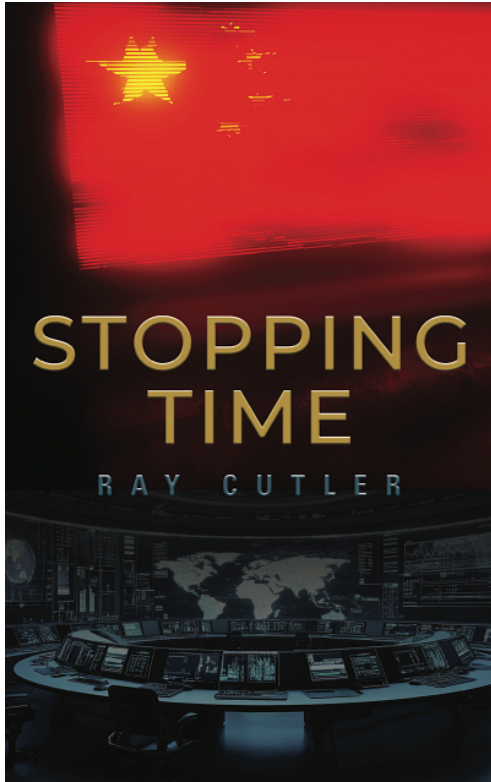
Ultimately what tipped the scales, though, was that she needed a change—something to snap her out of the academic and emotional rut she was in. If she had to spend one more minute alone in this backwater academic wasteland, she'd scream.

Offering her hand to shake, she said, "I've got a lab in my garage too. I don't know how it'll work, but it wouldn't hurt to get together and talk."

"Fantastic! How about you come over to my place today, say 4 or 5? I'd love to show you some of my dad's stuff and get your opinion."

"Sure, your place at 4. I'll text you from my cell," she said. "Text your address back."

"See you at four."



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