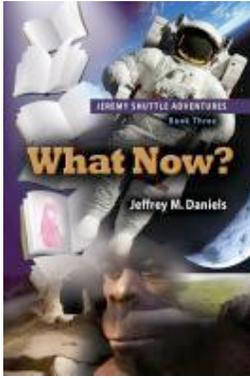


JEREMY SHUTTLE ADVENTURES

Book Three

What Now?

Jeffrey M. Daniels



Having found his missing Dad and rescuing his Mom and girlfriend, Jeremy Shuttle now has to face the malevolent mind behind the attempts on his life, and uncovers an apocalyptic threat beyond even Jeremy's vast imagination. The final part of the Jeremy Shuttle Adventures trilogy, What Now?, sends Jeremy and his companions on a roller coaster ride through worlds real and fanciful in a desperate effort to save the reality they know.

What Now?

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Jeremy Shuttle Adventures, Book Three

What Now?

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Read more about the books in the Jeremy Shuttle series and ask questions of the author, at the official website: jeffreymdaniels.com

Chapter 1

“You need to hear this”

The cough roused Natalie from her near-unconscious state.

It was a weak cough, causing her fears to return instantly. She had lost sense of the time and place. Prying open her eyes, once again caked with dust, she blinked at the burn when some of it fell into her eyes.

Oh yes, she remembered. We're trapped in this cave. She spared a few moments to consider the helplessness of their situation before her concern for Jeremy's Mom outweighed all other thoughts.

“Mrs. Shuttle?” she asked softly. “Teresa?”

Natalie became frantic at the lack of a reply. Jeremy had asked her to look after his Mom and she had failed miserably. Now Teresa Shuttle lay hurt from the cave-in and bleeding from a gunshot, Natalie had a shattered ankle and there was no cell phone reception through the rubble...no means to call for help. Natalie saw no hope for the two of them.

The soft cough came again and then a hoarse whisper which Natalie could not catch. She pushed herself back to a half-sitting position, grimacing as the awkward movement sent daggers of pain from the ruins of her ankle.

Reaching over to Teresa, she lightly brushed away the new layer of dirt from her face. The air was still clouded by the settling remains of the explosion that buried them here.

Having cleared as well as she could, she dripped some water onto Teresa's lips. She smiled grimly as she thought the water was the only thing they had in good supply...it would surely outlast the air in the cave.

Teresa's eyelids fluttered and opened as she licked the water from her lips. Seeing this, Natalie brought the bottle to Teresa's lips and carefully inclined the container until Teresa had managed a few shallow sips. She acknowledged Natalie with a grateful curl of her mouth.

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Amazing that she can still smile. Natalie thought about what Teresa had said – when was it...hours ago? – that her long-lost husband William would save them and wondered again at the woman's mental state. She had taken a blow to the head as well as lost so much blood from the gunshot in her side. Natalie would have been surprised if anyone could think clearly in those circumstances. *Especially with what happened to her son.*

The thought made Natalie want to cry out in despair. *Oh Jeremy!* He had used his sketchbook to transport himself somewhere that he thought would help him find his Dad, but when DaHurst had burned the sketchbook page, it should have ended the power of the drawing. Yet, Jeremy had not returned.

Despite the caked dirt, Natalie felt tears welling up in her eyes as she thought of the last moment she and Jeremy had shared. He had promised her he would come back and asked her to look after his Mom. Natalie had been certain she was never going to see him again. She wished she had followed her intuition and dropped the book and grabbed Jeremy and not let go. She should have known. Every time he used the sketchbook, something terrible happened.

"Natalie." The barely audible call from Teresa immediately brought her back from her thoughts. She felt the woman's hand move gently over her own. As she looked at Teresa, her heart nearly broke. All the more painful when she saw the smile in Teresa's eyes.

"Shh," Natalie said. "We should conserve our air." She didn't know why she said it. *It's not as if anyone knows we're here.*

Teresa actually smiled at that, as if guessing the young girl's thoughts.

"I know dear," Teresa whispered. "But you need to hear this." She motioned for Natalie to lean closer, sparing her the effort of talking louder. In truth, Teresa felt dizzy and faint. Despite the water, her throat felt dry and her lungs struggled to find breathable air. She had no illusions about how dire her condition was, but she strove to put all of her confidence and belief in her voice.

"It's natural that you don't believe me," she said, her voice strong despite the near whisper. "I understand you think it's my loss of blood and perhaps shock." She smiled again, to show she was capable of rational thought.

"I don't know that I would think differently if our places were reversed."

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Natalie's face twisted with indecision. She loved this woman dearly, as much as she did her Mom. A stray thought struck her that if things had gone as she hoped with Jeremy...but she couldn't pursue it from the pain of her own loss.

But what Teresa asked of her! To believe that they would be rescued by her missing husband...missing for the entirety of Jeremy's life... She understood Teresa's need to believe in that insane hope. Natalie desperately wanted to believe it too. For if it was true, it meant Jeremy had been successful in finding his Dad...and that Jeremy, too, could be alive.

Natalie closed her eyes to hold back tears. It was impossible. Incredible. And despite all the impossible and incredible events that had occurred since Jeremy was given the sketchbook, she could not convince herself that what Teresa claimed could be true.

She felt the hand on her own squeeze and when she opened her eyes, she saw Teresa looking at her with love. At that, Natalie did cry and pressed her face to Teresa's chest.

Teresa stroked the young girl's hair gently, thinking once more how wonderful and fortunate this was the girl Jeremy had fallen in love with.

"That's all right," she murmured. "I'll believe for the both of us."

In the stillness of the cave, the whisper echoed like a shout. It sounded like a promise of hope or a gasp of madness.

Chapter 2

“Let’s get started”

“I can’t tell the difference,” Jeremy said.

William looked at his son curiously. Still flushed with the thrill of seeing his son for the first time, he knew he had a long way to go before he could read Jeremy’s meanings when he spoke.

“Between what?” he asked.

“You and Will,” Jeremy said as he looked closely at his Dad. He finally just shook his head. “Never mind, it’s not important. What do you want me to draw, Dad?”

Jeremy looked expectantly at his newly found Dad. He was filled with pleasure at his success in finding and meeting his Dad for the first time in his life.

William Shuttle saw the joy in his son’s eyes and shared it. When his wife had told him that she was with child, now more than 13 years ago, William was beyond happy. He never thought that anything could top the feeling he had when Teresa had accepted his marriage proposal, but the years together had proved him the fool. Each succeeding year their love had grown deeper, their bond more close, their souls more linked. Yet, the ultimate expression of their love, a child, redefined his understanding of love.

Inwardly, William became grim. He should never have allowed Teresa and Carl to convince him to stay in France. No matter the precious value of the artifact he sought, this was his child! But he *had* allowed them and for his weakness, he had suffered 13 years away from his beloved Teresa and missed all of his son’s youth.

The grimness was dispelled by a simple thought, which brought a smile to his face.

Not all of it. And not anymore.

He walked over to Jeremy and hugged him. Jeremy was surprised and uncertain of the reason, but couldn’t care less. He was just glad to have finally found his Dad through all the danger and the trials. Jeremy thought about the story his Mom had finally told him about his Dad and his adventures. He remembered his time exploring with Will, the

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collective unconscious version of his Dad. His Dad was the coolest Dad he could imagine, a real live adventurer. Jeremy thought that his Dad must have dozens of amazing stories he could tell Jeremy. He was excited picturing all of them sitting together in the house and listening to the tales.

The thought brought him back to himself and William could feel the tension return to the boy's body. He looked at his son; heart filled with pride and released him with a nod.

"Let's get started," William said. He motioned for them to sit at the large wooden table in the front of the room. It was a massive construction made of thick beams of wood for its legs and a giant slab of polished wood for the top.

Jeremy pulled out a chair big enough for a man twice his size. He stared once more at the sketchbook on the table. His Dad had given him little explanation of its origin, or of the room they were in. For a wonder, Jeremy found his insatiable curiosity outweighed by his concern for his Mom and Natalie. He was sure they were both in danger. His Dad had confirmed as much when Jeremy first woke in the dimly lit room and how Jeremy was the only one who could help them.

Reaching for the sketchbook, he paused to see if this one bore any differences from the one he had been given by the shopkeeper. It had the same odd cover, with a drawing of an animal. The cover was oddly toned, almost holographic, in that the color of the cover changed as the book was moved. Shifting through a series of reds, browns and bronzes, it gave an eerie feeling of movement to the animal.

The cover was attached by six silver rings on the left side, binding the few remaining sheets inside. Those pages were of a smooth white finish wonderfully receptive to pencil art. Jeremy wondered why the book seemed to have less drawing pages than he recalled, but again put aside his questions and looked eagerly at his Dad.

William considered what to tell Jeremy about the situation inside the cave. Knowing Jeremy's curiosity, he would have many questions on how William knew what he knew. William also worried about how effective Jeremy would be if he were aware just how seriously the two were injured.

Still, he could not deny the pain Jeremy had endured in his quest to find him. Jeremy had sacrificed and had others sacrifice until it had nearly broken the boy, but Jeremy prevailed. *All in search of a Dad he's never met.* William mulled over that idea. Jeremy risked what he

did in the hope that he could reunite William and Teresa so that the three of them could be a family.

That bravery demands my honesty.

“Jeremy,” William began slowly. “There is a lot you deserve to be told.” He looked meaningfully at his son, who returned the look with one of such complete trust William had to swallow before continuing.

“I will tell you everything I know. I promise this to you.” He held his son’s eyes. “But right now, circumstances demand I tell you only what you need to know.”

Jeremy understood the unspoken plea his Dad implied. He compressed his lips and his jaw tightened.

“I understand, Dad,” he said. “We need to save Mom and Natalie first.”

William’s face relaxed into a relieved smile.

“Good,” he replied. “Because this will be difficult for you.” He paused. “Your Mom and Natalie are in serious condition and are trapped inside the Ardèche cave.” He waited, gauging his son’s reaction.

Jeremy did not think to question his Dad’s statement. Nor did he ask how his Dad came to know what had happened. Somewhere inside, Jeremy had felt something awful had happened to Mom and Natalie. His eyes narrowed and his lips twitched, but that was his only outward display of his fear.

Clamping down on his emotions, William nodded at Jeremy.

“You’re going to use the sketchbook to transport me to the cave where I can help the two of them.”

Jeremy’s surprise and hurt forced the question through his lips.

“Just you?”

William placed a hand on Jeremy’s arm.

“Yes, and I’ll explain why.” Jeremy looked at him wide-eyed but trusting. William pulled out a chair and sat facing Jeremy.

“We’re in the real world now. There is a reason this room looks much like the room you drew when you first entered the collective unconscious. It is unique. In a sense, it is a nexus, an echo, like the sketchbooks.”

“Like the art store?” Jeremy offered helpfully.

“Yes!” William said, flashing an appreciative smile at his son. “What makes these places unique is that they are only accessible if they are occupied.”

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“But don’t we both want to leave?” Jeremy interrupted.

“And who will protect the sketchbook?” William asked.

“Can’t we just come back and get it?”

William smiled. “That’s an excellent question. Would you like to hear that tale or help save your Mom and Natalie?”

Jeremy frowned at his Dad, but knew he was right. He was wasting precious time.

“Okay, then. What should I draw?”

William ruffled Jeremy’s hair and began to describe the place he wanted to go. He gave Jeremy explicit detail to ensure the location would be correct but avoided any mention of the condition of Teresa and Natalie.

Jeremy held back asking his Dad how he had all these details; he was confident his Dad would tell him eventually. Opening the sketchbook, he began drawing some basic layout lines on the first sheet. He decided to ask a different question.

“Dad, why didn’t Will tell me any of this when we were together? Why make it so hard to find you?”

William sighed, looking at his son.

“Can you focus on the drawing if I’m talking?”

Jeremy nodded and to his Dad’s silence he added, “Yes, Dad. I promise it won’t distract me.”

William listened closely to his son’s voice and heard the truth in his words. He leaned back in his chair, motioning for Jeremy to continue drawing.

Chapter 3

“How do I get out of here?”

“Part of the explanation,” William began, “revolves around the nature of the collective unconscious and the power you tap into, but we don’t have enough time to explore that concept just now.

“When you arrived in the room from your drawing, you were actually within the collective unconscious, in other words a place of pure thought. You probably sensed some of its unreality as soon as you appeared.”

Jeremy continued to work on the sketch, but he nodded his head. He remembered that, even after he had touched the hard stone walls, the room had a feeling of not being “real”. He shook the thought from his mind and refocused on his drawing.

William caught the motion and relaxed slightly, reassured of his son’s commitment to finishing the sketch.

“Unfortunately, what made that place so effective to contact you also worked to prevent me from meeting you directly. From the moment you appeared, your environment was controlled by your mind, conscious and unconscious.

“What I could do, though, was wait for you to begin thinking of me. Within the reality of the collective unconscious, you shaped an image of me from your thoughts. Empty as it was of any history or memory, I could fill that vision with my knowledge and personality...to the point your unconscious mind allowed.”

Jeremy had moved from penciling to shading in the drawing. Confident in his progress, he risked a look up from the sketchbook.

“I’m not getting it, Dad.” He said sheepishly.

“That’s fair,” William chuckled. “I’ve had 13 years to study the phenomenon and I’m still not sure I ‘get it’.” He saw his son grin while returning to drawing and he smiled as well.

“Let me see if I can simplify it.” William said. “As soon as you arrived within the collective unconscious, you began to shape its ‘reality’ using your power unconsciously. When you thought of finding me, your mind created ‘Will’ out of the fabric of the collective

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unconscious, a place where any thoughts could be made real. Follow me so far?"

Jeremy tilted his head side to side while he drew, suggesting a definite maybe. His Dad grinned, at both his son's confusion and his own attempt to simplify something so complex.

"Your creating that doppelganger of me also created a form of connection between us. It was imperfect. While I could see and hear through Will, his mind and memories were limited by your knowledge of me and that was precious little. So I could not speak through Will, though he could speak as me."

Jeremy flashed his Dad a look of confusion, shaking his head and bent back over the sketch.

"I know, I know. Later, when we have more time, I'll see if I can do better. To sum up, as you came closer to reaching me through your journey within the collective unconscious, the connection between Will and me became stronger. He became more of who I am; the resonance of who and what I am gained strength in him until, at the end, there was little difference between us." Will paused, a thin grin on his lips. "Think of it like a cellular phone. When you first created Will, the signal between him and me was low. As you came closer to my actual location, the signal strength was strong enough for me to get through."

The smile took a sad aspect. "Of course, by then there was no time to tell you anything."

Jeremy swallowed, remembering the chase that ended with Will engulfed in flames. He ventured another question.

"Did...did you feel any of..." his voice trailed off, choked with emotion and surprised at how great the hurt was still.

William leaned forward in his chair and said softly, "No, son. All I felt was his love for you."

Jeremy clamped his teeth to bite back tears. He straightened, took a deep breath and then went back to finishing the figure of his Dad in the sketch.

"That was the reason Will couldn't tell you more about the collective unconscious or about finding me. As your creation, he was limited only to the knowledge you had at the time."

William sat back in the chair again.

"In its way, that helped you find me. If you knew too much too soon, if you had not earned that knowledge, your mind might not have

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developed enough facility and control over the collective unconscious to pierce the unreality and finally find me.”

Jeremy looked up thoughtfully.

“So you’re basically saying it wasn’t you or Will who was making it hard on me...it was me?”

William looked at his son and a sly smile crept to his lips.

“Well,” he said to Jeremy. “Knowing what you are looking for does you little good...”

“...if you don’t know where to look.” Jeremy finished for him. He grunted. “Our family motto. Is that like your ‘get out of jail free card’ every time I have a tough question for you?”

William laughed. “Could be. Could be.” He looked at the sketchbook. “Ready?”

Jeremy turned the sketchbook to let his Dad see the finished work and was rewarded by the look of surprised pleasure and pride on his Dad’s face.

“Fantastic work, son!” William exclaimed. “When this is all over, we’re going to have you do some art for display at the shop.” He paused and winked at Jeremy. “Maybe we can convince your Mom to take up painting again, too. What do you think?”

Jeremy beamed enthusiastically and turned the book back, preparing to sign the drawing, sending his Dad to help his Mom and Natalie. He paused, hand hovering over the sketch.

“Uh, Dad,” he said. “How do I get out of here?”

William stood up and placed his hands on each of Jeremy’s shoulders.

“When your Mom and Natalie are safe, close the book and I’ll be back here with you. Then we can leave together.”

Jeremy’s enthusiasm returned as he imagined their future as a family. His smile faltered only a little as he asked, “How will I know?”

William returned the smile. “You’ll see,” he said cryptically.

Jeremy twisted his mouth and rolled his eyes at his Dad, bringing a twinkle to William’s eyes. Leaning over the sketchbook, Jeremy signed his stylized “JS” in the lower right corner of the drawing. His Dad instantly disappeared; no sound, no puff of smoke, no magic words, leaving Jeremy only with the image of that twinkle in his Dad’s eyes and silence.

Chapter 4

“You’ll see”

Jeremy sat in the quiet room and watched the shadows cast by the flickering candle. The walls seemed to expand and shrink, as if breathing, in the way the light danced across the stones.

Restless, he got up from the large chair and paced around the room. It did not take long, for the room was as he remembered, small and unadorned.

He touched the walls and felt the familiar dampness, snickering at the memory of his first visit to the room, when he thought the liquid might be blood.

Walking to the flat wooden bed, he attempted to lie on its hard, unpadded base. The pillow was barely larger than his head, but even that wasn't the reason he got back on his feet. He was filled with nervous energy, his thoughts racing too fast to rest.

Why did Dad leave me here?

Even though he understood the reason at the time, his anxiousness made the question resurface. Others quickly followed.

When should I close the sketchbook and bring him back? What's happening with Mom and Nat?

Both his pacing and his thoughts brought him full circle back to the long table upon which the sketchbook lay open. He watched the candlelight play across the page and smiled grimly as it made the image appear to move. He gasped.

It is moving!

He pulled at the chair and sat in front of the sketchbook. *No. It isn't moving. Something is missing. What?* He stared at the drawing for seconds that felt like minutes. *Dad! Dad is missing from the drawing!*

Jeremy didn't understand. In all his other drawings in the sketchbook, nothing changed until he closed the book and then the entire drawing disappeared. Never before had one part of the image simply vanished. Jeremy felt an unconscious shiver.

Has something happened to Dad? Where is he?

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The drawing seemed to smear. Jeremy rubbed his eyes to be sure. It lasted only a few seconds and then it refocused...now showing a sketch of his Dad leaning over what looked like the prone forms of Natalie and his Mom.

Fear and excitement battled within him. He intuitively figured out it was his mind that directed the image to his Dad. He now understood his Dad's cryptic "You'll see". He *could* see! He could see what was going on with his Dad!

The image did not change further, forcing him to revise his conclusion.

I can see "glimpses" of what's going on, like snapshots from a camera. But I can't watch it like a video.

He thought that made sense, since it was a sketchbook and not a video player, but that made him laugh aloud, since nothing about this made sense.

Jeremy still didn't know how or why the scene changed to what was on the page now. He thought hard about his Dad, Mom, and Nat, but the drawing remained the same.

He noted, with little surprise, that the style of the drawing was his. The lines, the shading, even the layout was exactly as he would have drawn the scene. He remembered the "echo" sketchbook from the cave that Will had retrieved. Something similar must be at work here.

Jeremy released a frustrated grunt. He needed his Dad for answers but knew his Mom and Nat needed his Dad more right now. He ached at not being able to help them and seethed in helplessness. Taking a deep breath, he tried to relax.

The drawing had not changed, despite Jeremy's fervent wishes. Leaning back in the chair, he wrestled with his emotions, trying to bring them under control. Perhaps by remaining calm he could trigger whatever changed the scene once more. He could only hope, as he stared at the sketchbook. Without knowing how the drawing changed in the first place, he could only wait. And watch.

Chapter 5

“I had lost hope”

Watching where he was standing, William looked cautiously around as he appeared in the cave. The change in place and scenery was immediate and without sensation, but the abrupt change of setting threatened to unbalance his senses. He took a few precious moments to steady himself.

The cave was still cloudy from settling dust and pulverized rock. William found this encouraging, as it suggested the time passed since the explosion was not as great as he feared. *Perhaps a couple of hours; surely not more.*

Whether it was logic or hope driving the thought, William clung to it as tightly as he did the medical pack he had Jeremy sketch into the cave with him.

This was the dicey part, for Jeremy was not sending William into the collective unconscious, where Jeremy could exert direct control on the environment. Could Jeremy create real objects within the real world?

The plastic tackle box is real enough, but does Jeremy have enough power to create the contents?

William didn't bother to check. The point was moot until he found his way to Teresa and Natalie. He flicked the flashlight around that Jeremy had drawn in his hand. The fact that it worked brought him more hope about the box containing medical supplies.

Creeping slowly in the murkiness, he carefully navigated around the debris on the cave floor. Alternating the light in front of him between the silt-filled air and the ground, he moved into the main part of the cave.

Small rocks slid under his feet, constantly attempting to unbalance him, but William was experienced with inhospitable locations and deftly avoided any mishaps.

Dark shapes on the ground ahead of him almost tricked him into increasing his pace, but years of training allowed him to control his speed, protecting his mission from a careless last-second mistake.

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Still, knowing that his wife, whom he loved more than he could ever have imagined, was lying just ahead, made his blood pound furiously. He cursed the need for caution that made him wait even a few moments longer. Had he not waited long enough? Thirteen years had seemed an eternity, but even that felt like nothing compared to these last few steps.

He knelt down beside the two prone forms, brushing away loose gravel and dirt to place the medical box flat on the ground. William's throat tightened and he felt his eyes fill with tears of joy as he gazed at his wife, his beloved Teresa.

He smiled in disbelief. Not just the fact that he was finally reunited with her, but that she was even more beautiful than in his mind's lasting image. Covered with silt, dirt encrusted in her hair and still he marveled at how age had only enhanced her beauty. He moved a dirt-caked strand of hair from her face and bent down to tenderly place his lips on hers.

"Nnnh."

The groan came from the young girl's form draped over Teresa's chest. William raised himself from Teresa's face just as Natalie's eyes fluttered open. In the dim illumination of the flashlight, he could see the eyes were foggy with fear and loss, dark black pools of sorrow that quickly widened in confusion.

"Am...Am I hallucinating?" she asked and then laughed as she thought of the absurdity of asking a hallucination if it was real.

William heard the danger in the laugh, only a small step from hysteria. Yet he was impressed by the will of this young girl, who couldn't be more than 15. He thought about what his son had fought through to find him and he wondered if there was something in the new generation of kids that made them more remarkable.

"No," he answered and then waited to let it sink in.

"You're William," she whispered. "Mrs. Shuttle's...Teresa's husband."

He had known the girl was strong and a protective influence on his son, but still she surprised him how quickly she grasped the meaning of his presence.

"You seem to be taking it in stride," he said.

"She...she said you would come," Natalie gasped. William reached for the half-full water bottle and brought it to her lips. Natalie pulled

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back and shook her head towards Teresa. William smiled kindly, already seeing why Jeremy thought she was so special.

“Drink,” he said softly. “I have supplies.”

At that, Natalie’s shoulders sagged and a small sob escaped her lips, but she tilted the bottle up and sipped some water into her dusty throat.

“I...I had lost hope,” she said, turning away in shame. William reached over and gently took her chin, turning her to face him. His smile washed away her doubts and thrilled her with a more urgent emotion. Yet all she could bring herself to ask was, “How?”

William understood the deeper meaning of the question. Taking her hand in his, he said, “Jeremy drew me here.”

Natalie dropped the bottle and let loose her tears. William moved around Teresa’s body, still holding Natalie’s hand until he could pull Natalie’s face against his chest. He could feel the power of her love for his son in the shaking of her body and he silently promised he would not let Jeremy tarry as he had once with Teresa.

Suddenly, Natalie pushed herself from William, fear and urgency fired her eyes. She moved to Teresa and cried out as her shattered ankle shifted. William motioned her to stillness as he played the light over her leg. He grimaced at the wreckage he saw.

“No, no...” Natalie pleaded, but William held up a hand and turned the flashlight toward him so she could see his face.

“I know.” His eyes held Natalie and in them, she saw his love for his wife. “But we need to do something about this ankle now or you may never walk right again.” His voice softened as he smiled at her. “Do you think I waited this long to ever let her go again?”

Natalie felt fresh tears from his smile, but they were warm and comforting. She managed a shaky smile of her own. *If Jeremy ever looks at me like that...* She swallowed and nodded. She did not need him to tell her that what he was going to do next would hurt.

Taking as much care as he could, William cleaned off some of the dirt from around her ankle. Shivers of pain made her leg tremble, but Natalie only allowed a small squeak in acknowledgement. Inwardly, William spared a thought of admiration while remaining focused on the task.

Slowly he pulled the ankle down, creating space for the bones to move and then he began to turn the ankle. Natalie could no longer keep silent as a shriek of pain ripped from her. William thought to

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speaking words of encouragement, but knew they would sound hollow against the terrible pain so he continued his efforts to straighten the ankle until he could release the tension slowly, allowing the bones to set in something close to normal position.

Flipping open the tackle box, William was overjoyed to find it completely stocked. He would have to ask his son one day how he knew what went in there. Taking bandages and antiseptic, William began wrapping Natalie's ankle as securely as he could. He wished he had something he could use for a makeshift splint, but nothing was nearby.

Working quickly, with practiced hands, he finished and then once again engulfed Natalie until her breathing steadied. Tears made pale trails through the caked dirt on her face, but she presented him a brave smile and said, "Now go save your wife."

He favored her a look of deep affection and kissed her forehead, which made her smile deepen, causing dimples to form on her plump cheeks. Squeezing her hand warmly, he moved over to Teresa.

Chapter 6

“This is the first thing to go”

William hovered over his wife’s body for a moment or two, drinking in the presence of her. Her form, her scent, their shared history flooded back into him and nearly threatened to overwhelm him. He took a short breath, closed his eyes for a second and slowly restarted his breathing. Opening his eyes again, he focused on searching her body for injuries.

The bruise on her forehead was obvious. Although there was some blood, it was caked and dry, the dull red turned brown by the dust. Taking one of the spare water bottles from the backpack Natalie had dragged over previously, he took a small cloth from the medical tackle box and dampened it. Working carefully, he dabbed away the dirt and the caked blood. The wound on her head was small and had already begun to close. Only a dribble of blood surfaced as he cleaned.

Reaching into the box, he brought out some disinfectant, swabbed the area and then placed a gauze patch over the area while securing it with some medical tape. Satisfied, he carefully checked the rest of her body, moving his hands skillfully across her chest, ribs, arms and elsewhere, attempting to determine if there were any breaks or damage to the bones. He patiently kept up his examination, purposefully avoiding the heavily wrapped area around her midsection though his mind screamed at him to check that. Eliminate everything else first. Then work on the big thing.

Satisfied about her condition, he moved to unwrap the belt around Teresa’s midsection. He glanced over to Natalie, who was watching intently through pain-glazed eyes.

“My dear,” he said kindly. “You have my lifelong thanks. Your marvelous ingenuity has saved my wife’s life.”

Natalie closed her eyes, tension running from her body and her eyes watered again from relief. *I didn’t fail!* She opened her eyes and smiled wearily at William.

“Can you...can you help her?”

"She is serious," he said, knowing he should not spare the girl the truth. "But I think I can stabilize her with these supplies until help reaches us."

"Help?" Natalie asked, confused. "Do you mean from Jeremy?"

"Jeremy has done his part," William said. "Our help needs to come from a more normal source." He smiled at her and she simply nodded. His very presence had removed all her doubts about miracles. Though she could still see no rational reason for hope, it burned like a fire within her.

William returned to unwrapping the makeshift bandage Natalie had created. He bit back a gasp as he saw the ugliness of the gunshot wound. He refused to acknowledge how other such wounds he had seen in the past ended. This was his Teresa. He would not...could not...believe that after 13 years they would be reunited only to be parted again.

He worked carefully but swiftly around the wound. It was dirty and blood still leaked from it, though the combination of the rag and dust had helped it coagulate somewhat. He knew that it would start up again as soon as he cleared it away, but the threat of infection was greater at this point than the loss of more blood. If he were right, they would not have to be here much longer.

Working deftly, he cleaned the area of damage, noticing with some longing the beautiful olive color of her skin outside the purpled and bruised area of her injury. He longed to hold her and gaze at her. He found it difficult to see his task for a moment as a vision of her, in their bedroom, came unbidden to his mind's eye. Angrily, he shook his head clear and continued his work. As he expected, the wound started to bleed again.

"Oh no!" Natalie exclaimed as the ground shook. Small rocks fell from the walls, loosened in the earlier blast. The dust stirred and swirled back into the air. "What now?"

William risked a look up from his work and gauged the activity in the cave. He grinned and looked at Natalie encouragingly. "That should be our more normal source."

Natalie looked at him perplexed. She wondered if all the Shuttles had a touch of madness in them.

William finished his work on his wife's injuries. He threw down the last of the bloodied bandages with a sigh and looked at his work. The gauze was already damp with blood, but it would hold for a little bit and

What Now?

Teresa's wound was no longer in danger of any further infection. *Providing she hasn't already succumbed to one.* He dismissed the thought and straightened his now cramped legs. Moving forward, he leaned over his wife's face, wiping away the newly formed dust and placed a more energetic kiss upon her lips. A couple of seconds passed and then he felt her lips responding. Her eyelid fluttered open and in those eyes he saw no surprise or shock, only love so deep he could not have imagined it, but for that he felt the same about her, too.

"Oh!" Natalie exclaimed softly. She smiled through fresh tears and thought giddily that it was just like Sleeping Beauty.

Teresa managed to move an arm to bring her hand up to William's cheek. She brushed her hand across the beard on his face and said weakly, "This is the first thing to go when we get out of here."

William took her hand and lowered her arm back down, admonishing her not to move but not letting go of her hand. Another small trembling in the cave interrupted their heartfelt glances. This one was louder than the first.

Rocks from the front of the cave began to shake. A couple of them fell out of the rockfall that blocked the entrance. Dust stirred even more, forcing them to lower themselves as much as possible to find some clean air. William gently gave a wet cloth to Teresa and Natalie to place over their noses and mouths.

Once more the cave trembled. More rocks fell from the opening and this time a tiny shaft of light poked through the deadfall.

"Madame Shuttle?" The voice was barely audible in the still rumbling cave.

William placed a finger over his wife's mouth and pushed the cloth back over her face. Getting up, he moved carefully to the front of the cave and the small opening.

"Paul," William said. "I am happy to hear your voice again."

"Mr. Shuttle?" a tiny voice replied, even in its low volume the surprise was evident. "William? Mon Dieu, this is a surprise!"

"Well met, Capitaine," William said laughing. "My wife is sorely injured. We will need to get her to a hospital as soon as you can get through."

"I suspected as much," the Capitaine said. "We should be in to you in just a few more attempts. Five more minutes, at most."

"Thank you, Paul. For everything."

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The Capitaine did not reply and William moved back to his wife and Natalie.

“How did you know?” Natalie asked.

William smiled at the girl, taking one of her hands, and one of his wife’s and placing them together in his hand.

“The same way you should have,” he said, still smiling through another tremor and a larger opening in the cave mouth.

Natalie looked confused, but only for a moment. William again was impressed with the active mind of this young girl. He had followed the travels of his son’s group through the sketchbook but only caught glimpses of what had transpired. It was his son’s admiration that he had felt and began to associate with Natalie.

“He followed us here,” she said flatly. “He knew where we were going and knew we would be in trouble.”

“It’s what friends do,” William said, squeezing the hands of the two treasured women.

Chapter 7

“I will take care of this myself”

I have no need of friends.

DaHurst sat in the back of his limo and brooded.

He was returning now with his quest only partly completed. This left him in a black mood. Failure was not something he tolerated. That was for the rabble. Their lives were his to control. His and others like him. Those who understood that the true goal in life is power. Not political or economic, but power to control destiny. His, and by extension, everyone else's.

He stepped from the car without acknowledging his driver. Consumed by his thoughts he gripped tightly to the book. His blood quickened and an edge of excitement now began to drive him almost to a run up the steps to his home. *At last, I will know the secrets of this sketchbook.*

He had spent years collecting various versions of the book, following instructions (not orders, he told himself). All to serve the purpose of somehow overcoming the power of the true sketchbook, should he never achieve ownership of that rare edition. When he had heard (was told) about the Shuttle expedition 13 years ago, he knew the time was right for him to obtain the final copy.

He took the cup of tea from his servant, sipping slowly as he contemplated the events that must now take place. No wine for him tonight, for he wanted a clear head and senses for the events ahead.

Looking around, he frowned.

“Where is he?” he asked in low, ominous voice.

His servant quavered just a fraction. Although used to DaHurst's black moods, he knew nothing caused him greater frustration than the absence of his guest. The servant shivered again as he thought of that bizarre visitor.

“He went out, sir,” he replied, voice steady despite his misgivings. “Out to hunt.”

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DaHurst fried the servant with a blazing look, favorably impressed by his man's ability to withstand the stare without withering. His mouth twisted. *It took some time to break in one this well.*

"When?"

"A few hours ago, sir." The servant ventured a short additional piece of information, "He said you would not arrive for a few more hours."

DaHurst's look informed the servant the additional information was not wanted or needed. He put the cup down and stalked to the back of the home, where the large garden stretched out behind the tall mansion. He had created the preserve years before ever meeting his house guest, stocking it with the equivalent of a jungle's worth of animals, both common and rare. No doubt, a few of the animals he held there would be considered illegal, but he cared little for unenforceable legalities.

He stood on the patio gazing out into the tangled green. Somewhere in there, his unusual partner was acting out some ridiculous ritual. DaHurst snorted. *Hunting like a wild man. What can he possibly gain by such frivolity?*

After a time, the bushes parted to the southeast and there came a figure from within. He was a short man, bulky but not in a bodybuilding way. He was bare-chested, his wiry muscles hidden behind an uncommonly hairy chest. His eyes sat deep in his head, giving his forehead an obscene slant and his head was covered by an unruly mop of tangled brownish hair. He had an ugly mass of hair on his face that approximated a beard.

He strode up to the patio indifferent to DaHurst's impatience. Across one shoulder, he carried a small deer, blood still dripping from the wound in its side. DaHurst twisted his mouth in disgust.

"Off doing your vulgar hunting?" he asked.

The man looked at him without expression, dropping the animal at DaHurst's feet, causing blood to splash up on his pants legs.

The man laughed as DaHurst jumped away, cursing. It was a rough thing, the laugh, guttural and deep, as if it came from a place far away.

DaHurst looked at the man with distaste.

"Go clean up. I have what we need."

The brutish man looked at him with equal contempt.

"Fool! You have nothing but another copy."

What Now?

“Impossible!” DaHurst exclaimed. “I lost two good men obtaining this from the Shuttles themselves and then buried them to protect the recovery. Do not mock me now!”

“Bah!” the man sneered. “You are beneath mocking. The book you have is a copy; I would know. And those you claim buried are now free. You should have killed them. You are weak.”

DaHurst trembled in anger and indecision. In matters of the sketchbook, the man had been uncannily accurate. Yet, how could the Shuttle woman have possibly escaped that death trap?

“I don’t understand,” he said. “If this is not the original sketchbook, where is it? Who has it now?”

The sneer on the man’s face was gone, replaced by a look of finality.

“Where it began...in the hands of the boy.” He looked at DaHurst with a face that was familiar to DaHurst. DaHurst used the same face on all other members of the human race. The man regarded DaHurst as inferior. DaHurst raged inside at the thought of this creature viewing him in that manner.

“What do we do next?”

“We do nothing next,” the man said, shaking his shaggy head. “I will take care of this myself.”

“What are you saying?” DaHurst asked warily.

“My need for you is over,” the man replied. “You were useful for a time, but now your carelessness has caused the book to reach the boy. And he has reunited with his father, which means he will also have knowledge to go with the power. I can waste no more time with you.”

“Don’t you dare leave!” DaHurst raged. “I have done everything you asked in obtaining these sketchbook copies. I have provided you men and resources. I expect to get what I am due.”

The man turned quickly, brandishing a long blade still wet with animal blood.

“Do not tempt me, puny man,” he hissed. “Your kind is worse than any I’ve met over the years. You bark and bray as if you know power but you are nothing, just as all of you infesting and crowding on this world are nothing.”

“I always suspected you were mad,” DaHurst said. “But I never knew how deeply. You are beyond delusional. If you think you can

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walk out now without consequences, you are as foolish as you are insane.”

To DaHurst’s surprise, the man laughed at this, a guttural sound not truly like humor.

“You speak of delusion, but your whole world is nothing but fakery.” He walked to the door, sheathing the knife on his way. “I go to change into clothes you have provided me. After that I will depart.” He looked evenly at DaHurst. “We will not speak again.”

DaHurst boiled after the man left. He could think of a hundred ways to make him pay instantly, but none of those got him what he wanted. If the book truly had the power the man had suggested (and he had begun to sense from the actions of the boy), then he would need to track the man’s travels.

He reached for the phone and began to dial. He hung up. Out of habit, he had been dialing Manny, but Manny would not answer anymore. Cursing once again, DaHurst dialed a different name.

He would have the man followed and he would find the book. If need be he would learn how to use the power himself. But for now, he would have to forego his revenge on the brute of a man.

His mouth twisted in a feral grin, eerily much like the man who dominated his thoughts.

For now.

Chapter 8

“Leave the girl alone”

Now, as William sat quietly beside his wife’s bed, he thought these past few days of peace had been too short. He held her hand in his and watched her as she rested. He had not left her room since she was wheeled in here after having the bullet removed. He had relaxed when told there was no internal damage and she merely needed time to recover. Though he had kept a brave front, there was a shadow of fear deep within him when he had first seen the dangerous loss of blood she had suffered. Now, relieved of that burden, he could only feel love. A love grown fiercer and stronger from years of longing. Forged from heartache and longing, it was a thing like unto the strongest steel, and burned like something just out of the forge.

He had not been surprised to see Natalie when she first hobbled into the room on crutches. She was a remarkable girl, stubborn in her love for his wife and his son. Stubborn to the point of her own harm, he thought. It was not enough that she had gained her injuries through her efforts to protect his family, but now she forced herself out of her room well before it was sensible to see to the healing of Teresa.

He smiled as he looked up at her now, back in the room again despite admonitions from both the nurse and doctor attending her. He saw her wince slightly as she struggled to move closer. He smiled warmly and let loose Teresa’s hand to help her. He brought a chair close to the bed and held her as she slowly sank to the seat. Moving her crutches to the side, he sat down again, first giving her hand a squeeze before returning to hold Teresa’s hand.

Natalie looked at the scene of William holding his wife’s hands and she felt warm tears fill her eyes. The feeling of love in the room was so great she could almost begin crying again. She was so happy for Teresa, a happiness made greater knowing that Teresa would be all right.

“How is she doing?” Natalie asked.

“She is recovering well,” William said. “The doctors say she will be fine.”

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“And how are you doing?” Natalie asked.

William looked at the young girl. *How precious.* He smiled a wide smile that lightened his face. Natalie blushed and she needed no further answer. She nodded. “Me too.”

“Good, because we have some talking to do later,” William said.

Natalie nodded again. They had avoided talking about the events in the cave before now. The concern was all about the rescue and then making sure Teresa was okay. She could scarcely believe the great fortune of Capitaine Chevalier clearing the rocks to free them. But then, she had been so caught up in their loss that she was hardly thinking straight.

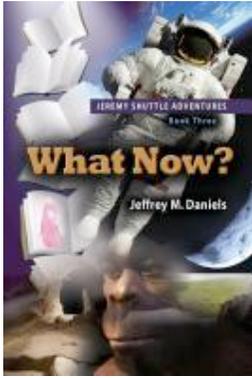
“Leave the girl alone.” The voice was faint but clearly audible within the room. Natalie sat up straight as William whirled around to see his wife’s eyes open and clear. He bent down to kiss her and she raised a hand to hold him back. “I thought I told you to get rid of that.”

He paused, disappointed and then heard a tickle of girlish laughter behind him. He looked to see Natalie quickly put a hand across her mouth and when he returned to gaze at Teresa, he saw the smile on her face. Smiling himself and shaking his head, he bent down and placed a long kiss on her lips. He let his passion and longing flow through him and was gratified and excited to feel her fervor just as hot. He became conscious of the rapid beeping of the monitor beside them as it registered her increased pulse. Sheepishly, he pulled away.

“Maybe we should wait a little longer for the full reunion,” he said. Teresa raised her eyebrows and gave him a look that made his pulse quicken even more.

“Ahem.” Natalie made a little clearing noise and the two adults looked at her. “There are minors in the room, you know.” Teresa and William began laughing and Natalie joined in. The door opened and a puzzled nurse ducked her head in. She seemed to gauge the reason immediately and offered a smile to the group as she moved to the monitor.

“Perhaps we will need to consider disconnecting this when the two of you are awake.”



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