



THE AMAZING TRUE
STORY BEHIND
THE MOST AUDACIOUS
HEIST IN HISTORY

SEX ON THE MOON

BEN MEZRICH

Bestselling author of *BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE*

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About the Book

Thad Roberts, a fellow in a prestigious NASA programme, had an idea – a romantic, albeit crazy, idea. He wanted to give his girlfriend the moon. Literally.

Thad convinced his girlfriend and another female accomplice, both NASA interns, to break into an impenetrable laboratory at NASA's headquarters – past security checkpoints, and electronically locked door with cipher security codes and camera-lined hallways – and help him steal the most precious objects in the world: Apollo moon rocks from every moon landing in history.

Was Thad Roberts – undeniably gifted, picked for one of the most competitive scientific posts imaginable – really what he seemed?

And what does one do with an item so valuable that it's illegal even to own?

Based on meticulous research into thousands of pages of court records, FBI transcripts and documents, and scores of interviews with the people involved, Mezrich – with his signature high-velocity swagger – has reconstructed the madcap story of genius, love, and duplicity all centred on a heist that reads like a Hollywood thrill ride.

About the Author

Ben Mezrich is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Accidental Billionaires* and *Bringing Down the House*, in addition to nine other books. The major motion picture *21*, starring Kevin Spacey, was based on *Bringing Down the House*. The Oscar-winning film *The Social Network* was adapted from *The Accidental Billionaires*. Mezrich lives in Boston with his wife and son.

ALSO BY BEN MEZRICH

The Accidental Billionaires

Rigged

Breaking Vegas

Ugly Americans

Bringing Down the House

The Carrier

Skeptic

Fertile Ground

Skin (an *X-Files* book)

Reaper

Threshold

SEX ON THE MOON

THE AMAZING TRUE STORY BEHIND THE
MOST AUDACIOUS HEIST IN HISTORY

BEN MEZRICH



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

*To Asher—this one will always be special,
because you came into our world somewhere
between Chapter 1 and Chapter 10. And maybe,
just maybe, by the time you're old enough to read
this, together we'll be watching someone take
those first steps on Mars ...*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sex on the Moon is a dramatic, narrative account based on multiple interviews, numerous sources, and thousands of pages of court documents. I have tried to keep the chronology and the details of this narrative as close to exact as possible. Thad Roberts was generous with his time in helping me reconstruct this amazing story; thus many of the inferences are from his perspective, and I have done my best to describe these events as true to his individual perceptions as I could, without endorsing them myself. Since this is, at its heart, the story of Thad's journey, much of it is from his point of view. I am especially grateful for his permission to quote letters he wrote from prison; they are interspersed throughout the book.

In some instances, details of settings and descriptions have been changed to protect identities; certain names, individuals' characterizations, physical descriptions, and histories have been altered to protect privacy, in some cases at the character's own request. I do employ the technique of re-created dialogue: I have based this dialogue on the recollections of the participants I interviewed, but many of these conversations took place ten years ago, and thus some were re-created and compressed.

I address sources more fully in my acknowledgments, but it is appropriate here to again thank Thad Roberts for his incredible generosity. I would also like to thank Axel Emmermann, Gordon McWhorter, and Matt Emmi for their time, as well as numerous other sources who have asked to remain anonymous.

PROLOGUE

It had to be the strangest getaway in history.

Thad Roberts tried to control his nerves as he stared up through the windshield of the idling four-wheel-drive Jeep. The rain was coming down in violent gray sheets, so fierce and thick he could barely make out the bright red traffic light hanging just a few feet in front of him. He had been sitting there for what seemed like forever; a long stretch of pavement serpentine into the gray mist behind him, winding back past a half-dozen other traffic lights—all of which he'd had to wait through, in exactly the same fashion. Even worse, between the lights he'd had to keep the Jeep at an agonizing five miles per hour—a veritable crawl along the desolate, rain-swept streets of the tightly controlled compound. It was unbelievably hard to drive at five miles per hour, especially when your neurons were going off like fireworks and your heart felt like it was going to blow right through your rib cage. But five miles per hour was the mandatory speed limit of the compound—posted every few yards on signs by the road—and at five miles per hour, once you hit one red light, you were going to hit them all.

Thad's fingers whitened against the Jeep's steering wheel as he watched the red glow, willing it to change to green. He wanted nothing more than to gun the engine, put his foot right through the floor, break the speed limit, and get the hell out of there. But he knew that there were cameras everywhere—that the entire getaway was being filmed and broadcast on more than a dozen security

consoles. For this to work, he had to stay calm, obey the rules. He had to appear as if he belonged.

He took a deep breath, let the red glow from the traffic light splash across his cheeks. Only a few more seconds. He used the opportunity to toss a quick glance toward the passenger seat—which didn't help at all. Sandra looked even more terrified than he felt. Her face was ivory white, her eyes like saucers. He wanted to say something to calm her down, but he couldn't think of the words. She was pretty, with blondish-brown hair; even younger than Thad, barely nineteen years old. Maybe not the ideal accomplice for something like this—but she was an electronics specialist, and she had practically begged to be a part of the scheme.

Thad shifted his eyes toward the center “seat” between them, and almost smiled at the sight of his girlfriend crouched down beneath the dashboard, her lithe body curled up into a tight little ball. Rebecca had jet-black hair, cut short against her alabaster skin, and she was even prettier than Sandra. She had just turned twenty. But as young as she was, she was the only one of the three of them who didn't look scared. Her blue eyes were positively glowing with excitement. To her, this was beyond thrilling—really, James Bond kind of shit. Looking at her, Thad was infused with adrenaline. They were so damn close.

And suddenly he was bathed in green as the light finally changed. Thad touched the gas pedal, and the Jeep jerked forward—then he quickly lifted his foot—making sure the speedometer read exactly 5 mph. The slow-motion getaway continued, the only sounds the rumble of the Jeep's engine and the crackle of the rain against the windshield.

A bare few minutes later, they came to the last traffic light—and again, of course, it was red. Even worse, Thad quickly made out the security kiosk just a few yards to the left of the light. He could see at least two uniformed guards inside. Thad held his breath as he slowed the Jeep to a stop

at the light; he kept his head facing forward, willing Sandra to do the same. He didn't want to have to explain why he was at the compound, past midnight on a Saturday. Thad was counting on the fact that neither of the guards would be eager to step out into the rain to interrogate him. Even so, if one of the guards had looked carefully, he might have noticed that the Jeep was sagging in the back. In fact, the vehicle's rear axle was bent so low that the chassis almost scraped the ground as they idled at the traffic stop.

The sag of the Jeep was one of the few things that Thad and his two accomplices hadn't planned. A miscalculation, actually: the safe that Thad and the two girls had hoisted into the back of the Jeep—less than ten minutes ago—weighed much more than Thad had expected, probably close to six hundred pounds. It had taken all three of them and a levered dolly to perform the feat, and even so Thad had strained every muscle in his back and legs getting the damn thing situated properly. Thad was just thankful that the Jeep's axle hadn't collapsed under the weight. As it was, he was pretty sure that even a cursory inspection of the vehicle would be enough to blow the whole operation.

Thankfully, neither of the guards made any move to step out of the kiosk. When the light shifted to green, Thad had to use all of his self-control to barely touch the gas—piloting them forward at the prescribed 5 mph. Almost instantly, the exit gate came into view. They approached, inch by inch—and at the last minute, the gate swung upward, out of the way. And then they were through. Thad slowly accelerated. Ten mph.

Twenty mph.

Thirty mph.

He glanced in the rearview mirror. The compound had receded into the rain.

He looked at Sandra—and she stared back at him. Rebecca uncurled herself and sat up in the middle of the Jeep, throwing an arm over his shoulder. Then they were all

screaming in joy. They had done it. My God, they had truly pulled it off.

When the celebration had died down, Thad glanced into the rearview mirror again—but this time, he wasn't looking at the road behind them. He could see the dark bulk of the safe, covered in a plastic tarp they had bought in a hardware store just twenty-four hours ago. The sight of the thing caused his chest to tighten—a mix of anticipation and what could only be described as pure awe.

In that safe was the most precious substance on Earth. A national treasure—of unimaginable value, something that had never been stolen before—something that could never, in fact, be replaced. Thad wasn't sure what the contents of the safe were worth—but he did know that if he'd wanted to, he could have just as easily walked off with enough of the stuff to make him the richest man in the world. As it was, he and his accomplices had pulled off one of the biggest heists in U.S. history.

But to Thad, it hadn't really been about the monetary value of the contents of the safe. All he'd really wanted to do was keep a promise to the girl sitting next to him, her arm over his shoulder. A simple promise that millions of other men had made to millions of women over the years.

He had promised to give her the moon.

The difference was, Thad Roberts was the first man who was actually going to keep that promise.

I may never hold you again, my love, I may never again feel the warmth of your touch, the softness of your voice, the adventure in your eyes, but they will always be a part of me. Eternity lives in every true connection, every moment that opens your eyes to something new and deepens your internal spring. My very being soared beyond the horizon with you, Rebecca. Everything that I am will always carry that echo. I cannot abandon that. I cannot cover my heart. I will always love you. I will always remember you.

Five Years Earlier, February 1997

There was something vaguely menacing about the folders. Off-white and three-ringed, row upon row, rising up the skyscraper-like corrugated-metal shelving units that obscured all four walls of the cramped, nearly windowless first-floor room. It wasn't the folders' color that was the problem, exactly; a shade that couldn't be found in nature, even in a place as abundantly natural as Salt Lake City, Utah. Nor was it the black block lettering that ran up the spine of each folder, declaring the contents in language a third grader could understand. It was the idea behind the manila metropolis itself. What the folders represented: a literal way station on the search for the meaning of life.

Maybe not the meaning of life—but certainly its direction. Thad Roberts stood in front of one of the towering shelving units, his hands nervously jammed into the deep pockets of his green, oversized Windbreaker. His windswept, free-form mop of light brown hair cast tangled shadows down across his high cheekbones. He supposed that such a room existed in cities all over the country—maybe all over the world. Probably every university campus had a place like this. No doubt, many were more glamorous than the rectangular, folder-filled box that was the career center of the University of Utah, but the essence of the place was quite probably duplicated all over the globe. A mildly terrifying place where lost souls gathered to seek a future, or at least the sort of future that could be summed up between the covers of a shiny three-ring folder.

It was barely ten minutes past seven in the evening, but Thad was already swaying in his mud-scuffed Timberland

boots as he surveyed the shelves, for what had to be the hundredth time. He had been in the career center two hours already, and by now he was approaching the damn folders almost at random. He'd pulled a half dozen of the folders off the shelves, piling them on one of the small wooden desks that lined the interior of the room behind him: Financial Adviser, Geologist, Air Traffic Controller, Physical Therapist. None of the choices sang to him, and he was truly close to the breaking point. He was fighting the urge to start sweeping the rest of the folders off the shelves with both hands. Close his eyes, make do with whatever landed on top of the pile.

Roll the dice, get a life.

He blinked, hard, trying to push the bleariness out of his normally brightly lit, citrine-green eyes. Or maybe it was time to just give up. He'd been at this way too long. And he wasn't any closer to figuring out what he was going to do with himself.

At twenty, he was drowning in student debt, even though he hadn't even fully graduated from the university, leaving early to take on multiple jobs just to survive. That day, he'd been up since four A.M., spending most of the past fifteen hours running around a backwoods construction site, basically a glorified gofer. He had about three hundred dollars in his bank account: the Windbreaker and boots he was wearing were three years old, and the shirt beneath his Windbreaker was held together by multiple assaults with a needle and thread, courtesy of Sonya, his beautiful but equally broke wife. He had no money, and certainly no safety net: he hadn't spoken to his parents in more than a year, and he was pretty sure he wasn't going to speak to them ever again. In fact, by their own admission, Thad didn't really have parents anymore.

Instead, what he had was in front of him, a skyscraper-high bookshelf lined with three-ring folders.

He wasn't even sure what he was looking for. He'd always been a stellar student, acing courses in everything from business to philosophy. While he was growing up, everyone had always told him how smart he was, and though some bad breaks had derailed him, he knew that he had the capability to learn. Wasn't that supposed to be the most important thing?

He pushed the hair away from in front of his eyes and turned back toward the very first row of folders. As tired as he felt, he decided he would start over and go through them all again.

To his surprise, almost immediately one of the labels caught his eye, about five folders in from the beginning of the shelf. It was a folder Thad had paused at when he'd first walked into the career center, but he hadn't yet pulled it out. He'd discounted it before, because he'd thought it was ridiculous, and probably way out of his reach. But now, a couple of hours later, his inhibitions were dwindling.

He reached for the folder and reread the block letters.

ASTRONAUT.

That there was even a job folder for such a career seemed improbable. Thad had initially skipped over it because he was pretty sure you had to be in the air force to even consider being an astronaut—but at this point, he figured it couldn't hurt to look. After all, he did love the sky. One of the first things he'd done when he'd arrived at the U of U was to visit the school's observatory, and he'd dropped by the small hilltop facility a few times since, usually when he needed space to think. Literally.

He began to leaf through the folder. To his surprise, it was divided into two parts: Pilots and Mission Specialists. The pilots were almost exclusively military, because they were the ones who flew the equipment. But the mission specialists could come from a variety of fields. These were the people who got their feet dirty, who went out into the different environments and conducted experiments. Thad

figured that during moon landings, the two guys who walked around hitting golf balls were mission specialists. The guy who stayed behind in the spacecraft was the pilot. Thad wondered how jealous that would make you, going all the way to the moon but never getting to step outside. If Thad were an astronaut, he wanted to be the guy who walked on the moon.

As he read deeper into the file, he felt his mind snapping into focus. He realized right away that if he really was going to do this—and it was a crazy thought, but still—he'd have to go back to school. He'd have to get a degree in something that NASA would be interested in. Biology, astrophysics, maybe geology. He would also have to gain expertise in a variety of other endeavors. Scuba, because the astronauts trained underwater. Languages, because space was international now, and there would be plenty of exchanges of people and machinery. A pilot's license—even though he wouldn't be able to compete with the military kids, he'd need to know how to fly.

It all seemed so fascinating, so romantic. Growing up, he'd never really dreamed about the stars—he was too young to remember anything significant about the first steps on the moon. But he was instantly engaged by the idea because it seemed to fit him in so many ways. He was a dreamer, but he knew how to get dirty. He wanted to learn all these things—scuba, flying, Russian—and here was a reason to do it all.

Shit, who wouldn't want to walk on the moon?

Of course, there was very little about the moon in the folder. The few articles about NASA's current state seemed much more organized around another destination altogether: Mars. NASA scientists were hoping to one day launch an effort similar to the '69 moon landing to try to get to Mars. Thad wondered what it would be like to be an astronaut on that mission. To have a chance to be the first

person someplace new, someplace untouched. Someplace far away from Utah.

To be the first man on Mars.

Thad suddenly realized he wasn't nervous anymore.

...

Legs furiously pumping, the pedals a near blur beneath his feet, his body leaning all the way forward over the handlebars, the frigid air tearing at his bare cheeks and forehead, Thad was moving so fast he could barely see the pavement flashing beneath him. He kept his eyes focused on the cone of orange light spitting out of the little headlamp attached to the front of the bike, ignoring the trees flashing by on either side, the flicker from windows hidden deep between the leaves. He took the last hill at top speed, the rubber tires skidding briefly against the iced road, and then the orange cone flashed against gravel—the driveway that led up to his rented single-bedroom home. He hit the brakes a second too late, but he was still able to take the gravel, his back tire jerking side to side. A moment later, he was clear of the bike, his boots hitting the grass of his front lawn.

The house was little more than a shack, but Sonya was waiting on the front porch, her beautiful reddish-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and her white sweater tight against her curves. Thad ran up to her and held his hands out. She grinned, pulling the bottom of her sweater up to reveal the flat plane of her toned stomach. Then she took his hands and pressed them against her warm skin, shivering as she did so. It was a cute little ritual they had developed over the past few months of living together. Maybe it was stupid and maybe it was sweet, but Thad was certain he'd remember these moments for the rest of his life.

A minute after that and they were inside. The living room was pretty bare: a few pieces of wooden furniture they had picked up at yard sales, a TV that was almost never on, a freestanding radiator that spat arcs of hissing water when it was turned too high. Thad led his wife to the couch by the TV and, sitting beside her, told her that he wanted to be an astronaut. He explained in detail what that meant, the things he would need to do and what they would have to reconfigure to make those things possible. It was going to take sacrifice, on both their parts. Sonya already had a full-time job as a dental assistant, and she had just started modeling in the evenings, had even signed with a local agency. But this would mean he would have to start school again, and take scuba and flying lessons. He would have to fill his résumé with the things that would impress scientists at NASA. It wasn't going to be easy.

"You want to be an astronaut," Sonya repeated, looking at him.

He half expected her to burst out laughing. Instead, she ran a hand through his tangled hair.

"Cool. I guess I'm going to need to get another job."

One year earlier, astronauts, Mars, and NASA scientists had been the furthest things from Thad's thoughts as he huddled, trembling, in the backseat of his parents' oversized gray van, waiting for his father to murder him.

The van was parked in the driveway in front of Thad's family's house, a ranch-style building on the outskirts of Syracuse, Utah. Syracuse was an isolated speck of a place, nearly impossible to find on a map, a pseudo farm town—which meant that everybody there was a pseudo farmer, except for the few families that *actually* lived on farms. Thad's family lived on an acre-and-a-half garden, where they grew their own vegetables, next door to a small cow pasture that provided them with just enough meat to feed Thad and his six brothers and sisters. It was a simple existence, and on paper it might even have seemed pretty and quaint. Thad hadn't seen it that way in a very long time.

It had just started to snow outside the van's windows, an angry whirl of gargantuan white flakes. Thad barely noticed, because he was too busy staring at his house's front door. Any moment, he was certain his father was going to come through that door with a shotgun, march up to the van, and shoot Thad in the head.

Thad hadn't come to the conclusion that his father was about to murder him frivolously. In fact, he was nearly certain it was about to happen. He had watched the seething anger deepen in the redness that splotched across the back of his dad's neck the entire hour-ride home from the Salt Lake City airport. His mother, silent in the front

seat next to his father, had glanced back only once during the ride, and her eyes had only confirmed the thought.

Thad believed he had finally pushed the man over the edge, and now his father was going to do what he believed was necessary.

Thad fought back tears as he stared through the thick snow, wondering if it would hurt, wondering if he'd even put up his hands or beg for forgiveness. In his opinion, his dad was a heartless man, not yet physically aggressive but maybe what he was about to do was right. Maybe that was exactly what Thad deserved.

The truth was, in the back of his mind he had expected this moment since the day he had met Sonya his freshman year of high school. A shy, nerdy kid like him had had no business going after the pretty, popular redhead—but for some reason, she had fallen for him as well. In a normal part of the world, they would have been high school sweethearts, boyfriend and girlfriend—whatever label meant holding hands in homeroom and stealing kisses beneath the bleachers at football games. In the utterly Mormon enclave where Thad had grown up, things didn't work quite that way.

Thad's father had forbidden him to have a girlfriend; so Thad and Sonya had concocted a charade. For three years, Thad had pretended to go on dates with all of Sonya's friends so it would seem he had light and wholesome relationships. He had broken free from his shyness out of necessity—first as a ruse, and then for real. And without that shyness holding him back, he had given in to the impulse to do what felt natural—no matter how wrong his religion had told him it was.

The first time had been intense, tentative, explosive, and more than a little terrifying. In the back of Sonya's father's car, exposed skin sticking to the vinyl seats, condensation forming across the fogged-up back window, their bodies

arching while their minds raced to stay ahead of their Mormon guilt.

From then on, Thad and Sonya had lived in fear. Thad believed that to his fiercely religious father, what he and Sonya had done—it was an explicit sin. Keeping the secret and the guilt pushed deeply away had been excruciatingly hard, but somehow Thad had made it to the day he had left for what was supposed to be his two-year mission—the rite of passage for every nineteen-year-old Mormon boy.

First, Thad had been sent to the MTC—the Mission Training Center—located in Provo, Utah. Dressed in the standard uniform—white button-down shirt, dark pants, sometimes a suit—Thad had found himself cut off from the rest of the world, relearning how to talk, to dress, to walk, to think—while sleeping eight teenagers to a room in a dormitory filled with bunk beds.

Almost immediately, Thad had begun to feel that he was unworthy—that the secret he was keeping was really a lie, to his family, to the church, and to God. But a little after two in the morning his third night at the MTC, he had been lying in his bunk staring at the ceiling, listening to the breathing of seven other teenagers away from their families for the first time in their lives—when suddenly a kid on the bunk directly across from him had broken the nightly silence.

“Guys, you awake? I’ve got something I gotta tell you, but you’ve got to promise you’ll never tell anybody else ...”

And with that, the kid had suddenly begun a confession. Just like Thad, this kid had had sex with his girlfriend before coming to the MTC. Technically, Thad and the other kids in the bunk beds were supposed to be shocked; instead, another kid began talking—and suddenly he, too, was making the same confession. He had had sex with his girlfriend as well.

By the end of that night, every kid in that room had confessed to having sex. And for the first night in years,

Thad slept without guilt. The next morning, he began to wonder if the sin of premarital sex was really as unforgivable as he had thought. Maybe, like the kid in the MTC dorm, it was something he simply needed to confess.

Before he lost the nerve, he had decided to go through with it—making an appointment with his mission president. Meeting in the man's stark office, Thad told the man about Sonya and the sin they had committed. He had truly believed he'd get sympathy at the very least, and a path to the penance he needed.

But the penance wasn't offered; instead, the president had immediately called together the church quorum necessary to kick Thad off his mission—effectively, branding him a sinner in front of the entire Mormon world. The very words the man used would reverberate in Thad's mind the rest of his life.

"You are no longer worthy to serve God."

He had been sent home the next day.

And now here he was: sitting in his parents' van, numb to the snow and the cold. Thad considered making a run for it, but then he'd never see Sonya again, and that seemed like something worse than the shame and the embarrassment—worse, even, than a bullet from his father. So he just sat there and waited. Five minutes became ten minutes became half an hour, and soon he lost track of how long he had been in the van. The snow began to pile up, blanketing the vegetable garden and the cow pasture and even the house, turning everything a brilliant shade of white. The air in the back of the van was becoming frigid, and Thad could see his own breath freezing into little starbursts of crystal on the windowpane—but still he sat there, his mind a jittery mess.

Not until the air outside started to dim, and the snow piled so thick against the van's windows that he could no longer see the house, did he decide that he had no choice but to follow his parents inside. Maybe his dad had decided

that killing him out in the driveway was too public; this was something you had to take care of in the privacy of your own home.

Thad collected his single duffel bag—a couple more white shirts, some toiletries, a handful of copies of *The Book of Mormon*, and maybe a half-dozen ties—and exited the van. The snow stung his bare cheeks and neck, but he barely noticed. He crossed the front yard that led up to his house in a trancelike state.

He found his parents in the kitchen. His dad was sitting at the table, his mother next to him. Neither looked at him as he entered the room. Nobody spoke, and Thad stood for a moment just inside the doorway, listening to the melting snow drip against the porcelain-tiled floor. Then he let his duffel bag drop and took a seat across the table from his parents.

His dad glared at him, and the fury in the man's eyes was so nearly palpable it all but knocked Thad out of his chair. His chest was heaving, but he felt like he couldn't breathe, his stomach churned and the heat rose up his back in vicious twists that truly felt like flames. His mom was staring at her reflection in the glass table, refusing to meet his eyes. This wasn't about his mom, anyway. It was about Thad and his father, and what had to happen next.

"Because we're loving parents," Thad would remember his dad saying, through clenched teeth, "we are giving you two months."

Thad felt the air come back into his lungs. *Two months?* He wasn't even sure what that meant, but it wasn't the barrel of a shotgun. His father wasn't going to kill him, at least not today, and that felt like a good thing.

"Two months," his father repeated. "And these are the rules. You aren't allowed in your old room. You aren't allowed to have any of your old possessions. Just that duffel from your mission."

Thad nodded. So far it wasn't so bad. He was alive, and he was home. But his dad wasn't finished yet.

"You will sleep in the basement. You are not to talk to any of your brothers or sisters. You can't even look at them. No eye contact. No notes. No phone calls. No communication at all. Because you, Thad, are going to hell, and any communication you have with the rest of us will only make us go to hell, too."

Thad opened his mouth but couldn't find any words. It was a hard thing to hear, so explicit and out in the open. Hell, to his father, was not some arbitrary religious concept that you learned about in church; it was physically real, fiery and violent, and forever. And that was where Thad was headed.

"You will leave the house by six every morning," his father continued, his voice even and low. "You won't return until after ten at night. I don't care what you do during those hours, but you will not be here. No one will know you are still living in this home. No one will talk to you, or see you, or think about you. You simply do not exist."

Without another word, his father stood and turned his back on Thad. Thad's mother remained at the table, staring at the glass. Thad was in the room with them, but he was alone.

He didn't exist.

He picked up his duffel bag and headed to the door that led to the basement.

Later that evening, as he was about to take off his white shirt and climb onto the cot his father had left for him to sleep on for the next two months, he was surprised to hear footsteps on the stairs that led to the rest of the house. Even more surprising, the visitor was his mother, quietly coming down to the basement to see him.

For a brief moment, he felt that maybe everything was going to be okay—that she was coming to tell him that he was still part of the family, or possibly even give him a hug.

He watched as she paused on the bottom step, looking at him. There were tears rolling down her face, and the hopefulness in him grew. She was going to give him a sign that she really did love him, that although they were treating him harshly, it was out of love.

And then a hardness came into her eyes, and she turned away as she spoke.

“When you die, are you going to blame how you turned out on me?”

With that, she headed back up the steps.

Thad stood there, watching her go.

...

Two months later, he officially moved out of the house and married Sonya. His parents were there to witness the vows, but they didn't stay for the cutting of the cake. They spoke barely two words to congratulate Sonya and her family, and then they were out the door, on their way back home to Syracuse. Thad was no longer their burden. It was going to be up to him to make a life for himself, whether that meant working as a gofer on a construction site—or something else entirely.

Something meaningful and important.

It was solely up to him.

There was nothing like a two-million-year-old rock to put things in perspective.

Thad grimaced as he took the last few steps across the dimly lit storage room, the oversized plastic crate balanced precariously in his outstretched arms. The crate was much heavier than it looked; it wasn't just one rock he was transporting through the bowels of the University of Utah Museum—the crate seemed like it was packed with a big enough collection to pave a short driveway. It was going to take hours to go through all the samples, entering the details into the computerized archive kept by the geology department—and there were two more boxes just like this one still waiting for him in the upstairs receiving closet. No doubt, he was going to be in the museum all night—which was exactly why he had volunteered for the inventory assignment. Anything to keep him from pacing the floors of his and Sonya's living room, waiting for the sun to rise.

He reached the shelving unit on the far side of the room and heaved the crate onto one of the corrugated shelves. His shoulders burned from the effort, but it was a good sort of pain; he knew he was contributing something, even if it was just a long night of physical labor. Like the anonymous people who had donated the samples in the three crates to the university museum, he was giving something of himself to the geology department; in return, whenever he walked through the brightly lit display corridors upstairs, he would feel a sense of pride.

Although, he realized, these particular rocks would never actually make it into the displays upstairs. When he'd arrived at the museum earlier that evening, he'd been told that the samples he'd be cataloging were donated materials deemed not good enough for the collections upstairs. Though some of the rocks seemed pretty interesting to Thad—a handful of fossils and semiprecious minerals that told stories of deep time, ancient life-forms, maybe even evolution itself—the museum thought of it as mostly junk. These rocks would probably remain in this crate in the bowels of the museum far into the foreseeable future.

But that didn't mean they wouldn't be inventoried, cataloged, and described in detail—as soon as the life returned to Thad's shoulders. It seemed a shame—these items hidden away in a basement—but it wasn't his decision to make. He was a volunteer, and no matter how pointless he thought it was to hide these donated fossils in a basement, he was glad to be the one getting his hands dirty for the greater good of the museum—in no small part because every minute he was in the basement, straining his muscles, was one less minute spent agonizing over the phone call that was now only hours away.

Thad felt a surge of adrenaline at the mere thought of the call, scheduled for eight A.M. He knew that if he was at home instead of in the museum basement, he really would have been burning off the soles of his shoes, circling the cordless phone on the desk in his living room. The day before, in preparation, he'd even pasted a pair of photos to the bare wall behind the desk. One showed a reasonably chiseled, crew-cutted man in his mid-thirties, smiling toward the camera, dressed in a conservative-looking suit and tie. The second photo was of a woman who appeared to be middle-aged; from the style of the picture and the discomfort in the woman's pose, it was obvious that the shot had been culled from a college administration handbook.