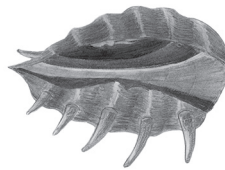


# LOST TIME

*(Preview)*

D.L. ORTON



*Between Two Evils Series*  
*The 2<sup>nd</sup> Disaster*



ROCKY MOUNTAIN PRESS

## CHAPTER I

*Diego: Out on a Limb*



I lie in greenish half-light, my lungs on fire, panic forcing out any rational thought. And then I remember where I am. Or rather where I am supposed to be. I pound my fists against the translucent coffin until I manage to hit the release lever. The lid pops open and frigid air rushes in, smelling of damp, rotting leaves. I gasp for breath.

I lie still for a few moments, inhaling the clammy air and waiting for my pulse to stop pounding in my ears. The last thing I remember before everything went black is Cassie's panicked voice shouting to abort the mission. Stop the countdown because...

*Shit. I can't remember. But it definitely wasn't good.*

I lift my head and a blinding pain stabs me in the forehead. I take a forced breath, pushing down the urge to vomit, and open

my eyes. All my body parts seem to be attached, but my skin is unnaturally wrinkled, like I stayed in the ocean for hours.

I collapse back into the cold capsule and notice the blood spattered across the lid. Now that I think about it, I can feel the cut in my right palm, probably from the sharp spines of the damn seashell.

I wipe my bloody hand on the flimsy towel and shudder. The air is too cold and damp for the beach. Where the hell am I?

I take a deep breath. It doesn't smell like the beach, either. Maybe I missed the target by a bit and landed in the cloud forest?

*At least I didn't arrive underwater.*

I lie still, listening for the sound of the surf, but hear nothing except a low-pitched groan. The capsule is tipping ever so slightly. I gather my strength and kick the lid off. It bangs and crashes as it falls away from the pod, taking a long time to land.

I force my near-sighted eyes to focus. Above me, massive coniferous branches fan out, fog rolling in just beyond the tree-tops. This is definitely not Costa Rica.

I heave myself up high enough to see over the side of the capsule, now shivering uncontrollably in the damp, chilly air. The pod is lodged in the upper boughs of a giant tree, perhaps thirty meters above the blurry fern-covered forest floor.

*God, I hate heights.*

The soft groan becomes louder and the pod shifts beneath me.

*Shit. Let's do this.*

I rush to get out before it gives way, but my muscles aren't working very well, and it's harder than I expect. I manage to wrench myself out on the third try, but as I climb over the edge of the pod, my towel slips off and lodges in a couple of limbs below me.

*Just perfect. Now I'm completely naked.*

I put my bare feet down on the moss-covered bark and grab onto a higher branch, Gus and the boys uncomfortably exposed. I glance down at my shriveled privates.

Given my current predicament, maybe I should say “man-root and the nuts.”

I look up and shiver. There’s a cold breeze blowing and the fog is getting thicker by the minute. If I don’t get down before it gets dark...

*Let’s not go there just yet.*

I shuffle sideways along the slippery branch until I reach the relative safety of the trunk, and then take a moment to look around. The world is green as far as I can see. The only exception is what must be a blue body of water floating where the hills meet the horizon. There is not a person, house, car, road, or other sign of human life anywhere.

Something moves at the edge of my vision, and when I look more carefully, the trees seem to be crawling with giant bugs! I blink a couple of times and realize that they’re not insects, but large, black birds—hundreds of them perched in every tree. I shut my eyes for a moment, pushing down vertigo, and then start climbing down, naked and shivering, trying to figure out how the hell I ended up in Alfred Hitchcock’s nightmare.

I believe the trees are redwoods, but I’m not particularly good with plant identification. It occurs to me that Isabel would know, and a wave of despair sweeps over me. I try to shake it off and concentrate on the problem at hand. In any case, they are definitely not the sort of trees that grow in the tropics—at least not in my time. Now that I think about it, it does look a lot like the Jurassic forests you see in dinosaur movies.

*Mierda.*

I look out across the forest again, dread creeping up my exposed back. My whole body is shaking, and I feel weak. No tyrannosaurs or brachiosaurs; nothing but green—and all those birds! Birds descended from dinosaurs, so I probably don’t need to worry about being eaten by velociraptors, but I can’t remember if there were ever giant, man-eating dodos.

The redwood is huge, and I have to shinny sideways around the trunk to find foot and hand holds, causing my naked front-side to bump and scrape against the rough bark.

Note to self: *The Hitchhiker's Guide* was wrong. When time traveling, shine the towel and wear some boxers.

As I move painstakingly down the tree trunk, the black birds start returning, hundreds of them, and I get an uncomfortable feeling, like something sinister is watching me.

*Why are there so many birds?*

I hear a loud snap and look up to see a black explosion of wings. A moment later, the translucent sarcophagus comes barreling down the tree branches like a bobsled on a spiral staircase, heading straight for me. I force myself to look down for the first time, trying to gauge if I'm low enough to jump.

Before I have a chance to decide, I notice a flash of red moving through the ubiquitous green vegetation. There's an astronaut right out of *2001: A Space Odyssey* standing on the ridge watching me!

*What the—*

"Diego!"

I whip my head around. There's a woman at the base of the tree staring up at me!

*Isabel?*

The damn towel drops over my head, covering my face, and I lose my balance.

*Shit!*

My foot slips, pitching me backwards, and for a sickening moment, I know I'm going to die. Then the back of my head strikes a branch. Pain shoots through my neck and shoulders as I tumble sideways into nothingness.