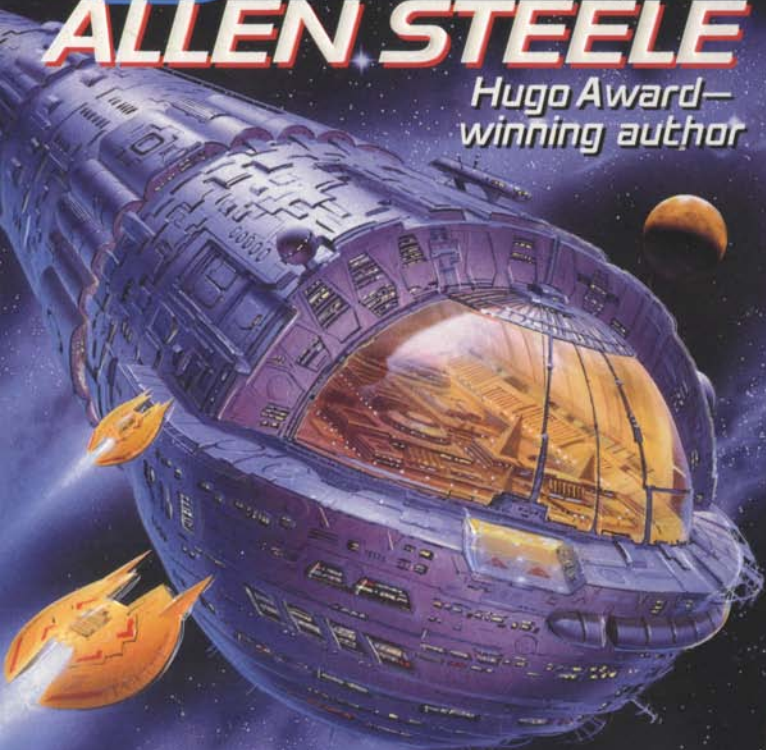


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A NOVEL BY

ALLEN STEELE



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*In memory of:
Rick Dunning,
Claude Gross,
Paul "Tiny" Stacy*

✚ CHAPTER ✚

ONE

LIVE THROUGH THIS

"Why? Why not?"

—Timothy Leary; last words

The night sky always looks the same, no matter where you go: look up, and the universe opens before you. The constellations may be different, the stars in new positions, but it's always the same cosmos: a seemingly endless darkness, broken only by tiny lights that could be planets, suns, nebulae, even entire galaxies. No one really knows how large this universe is, where its true limits are, or how long it may last. . . .

But nothing lasts forever. Not even eternity.

This is the story of the last day of my life, and everything that happened after that.

To say that it's hot is an understatement. St. Louis in mid-July is a perpetual sauna; the temperature only dips below eighty for a few hours between midnight and dawn, and by early afternoon you could probably get a good lunch by scooping the brains out of

your skull, dropping them on the sidewalk, and cracking open an egg on top. Downtown, yuppies scurry from air-conditioned offices to air-conditioned bistros, their business suits and knee-length dresses clinging to their skin like fifty-percent cotton rags, while out in the 'burbs their spouses sit in stalled traffic as they crawl to the shopping mall, there to seek respite from the heat and humidity by buying more stuff they really don't need. At home, little kids stare at cartoons on the tube and chase each other with Super Soakers, while their teenage siblings hang out in the park and smoke the pot they stole from Dad's secret bedroom stash.

It's July 11, 1995, and it's hot all over. The Unabomber has mailed a deranged screed to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, demanding that Western civilization grind to a halt; Western civilization yawns and flips to the funny pages. A NASA space shuttle has just returned to Cape Canaveral after docking with the Russian space station; most people are more interested in catching the new Tom Hanks movie about another space mission twenty-five years ago. Ten Republicans claim that they can do a better job of ruining the country than one Democrat, and no one really doubts their word. Right-wing militia nuts are saying that the United Nations is conspiring to take over the United States, which is a hoot because UN peacekeepers can't prevent Serbs from wiping out Croats in a plot of European real estate little larger than Pennsylvania. The major-league baseball strike has been settled, which means that it's okay to come back to the ballpark and watch your team get stomped by the Cleveland Indians—pardon me, the Cleveland Native Americans. Richard Gere is in *Camelot*, Clint

Eastwood is in Meryl Streep's pants, and Denzel Washington is in a sub; Ben Kingsley battles aliens while Sylvester Stallone fights giant robots, and the best babes in the Cineplex are Batman's new girlfriend and Disney's idea of how Pocahontas might have looked if she had worked out on a Nautilus machine and shaved her pits. Calvin talks to Hobbes, Rush talks to Newt, O.J. talks to his lawyers, and every moron who has worn his wife's clothes, screwed her son's girlfriend, or been kidnapped by aliens is talking to Oprah, Sally, Geraldo, and/or Ricki. Just between you and me, I'd rather have my brains fried on the sidewalk and eaten with a poached egg.

As it turned out, fate has other plans for my gray matter. Fate, my father, and a man named Mister Chicago who hasn't even been born yet, and it begins with a trip out to Riverport for Lollapalooza.

I leave early from my job at a second-hand record store and return to the Central West End apartment Erin and I share, a two-bedroom flat furnished with Pier One wicker stuff, cement-block-and-plank shelves filled with paperbacks and comic books, a queen-sized waterbed, and a life-sized cardboard figure of Captain Kirk adorned with cheap Mardi Gras beads and an earring in his left ear. We watch *Animaniacs* while we roll a few joints and fill our daypacks with bottles of Evian water, sunscreen, spare rolls of toilet paper (in case some kid throws all the asswipe in the toilets), Tylenol (for heat headaches), and extra packs of cigarettes. Shemp arrives around about four o'clock, and then we pile into my '93 Saturn SC2 and head for the show. A long summer afternoon of rock 'n' roll with my girl and my best friend.

I need to tell you about Erin and Shemp.

First, Erin. She's been my girlfriend for the past two years, after we met at the recording studio where she worked as an office manager when the band Shemp and I belong to, the Belly Bombers, came in to record our first and only demo. The Bombers never got a label interested in signing us, but Erin came home with me the night we cut the final track. Shemp was splitting the rent with me at the time, but six months later he moved out and Erin moved in.

It isn't enough to say that Erin Westphall is a babe. She's outright beautiful: twenty-three years old, very slim, small-breasted, with chestnut hair that flows down to the center of her back. Chicago's her hometown, but she moved to St. Louis after graduating from Stephens College in Columbia and kicked around the city before landing a job at the studio. As with my part-time job at Dino Tracks, she really doesn't need to work; like Shemp and me, Erin's a trust-fund kid from a wealthy Lake Forest family who's impatiently waiting for her to get over her dreams of becoming a novelist so she can return to Chicago, marry some dude with an MBA, and settle down in the 'burbs to become a baby machine. That might happen once she gets tired of waterbeds, cinder-block furniture, and cold pizza for breakfast, but for the time being she's cohabiting with a rich kid who works part-time at a record store while working on a novel about cohabiting with a rich kid who works part-time at a record store.

And then there's Shemp, whose seldom-used proper name is Christopher Meyer: twenty-four years old, six-feet-one, overweight by about fifty

pounds, with buzz-cut dark hair and a soul patch under his lower lip. I've known Shemp ever since eighth grade at Country Day School; his German-American genes had been unkind to him, because when puberty hit us Shemp became a teenage reincarnation of one of the Three Stooges, and thus the nickname, which somebody gave him in the locker room after gym class. Our families both live in Ladue, and since the Meyers own the Big Bee Supermarket chain, his dad is constantly on his case about joining the family business.

Shemp aspires to be a comic book artist, though, and after one summer of wearing an apron with a grinning bee on it and asking old ladies if they had any coupons, he decided that he'd rather work on his indie comics creation, *The Slack*, which he eventually hopes to sell to Dark Horse, while playing drums with the Bombers on the weekends. He's a lot smarter than he looks; when Erin started staying over at our apartment every night, he realized that it was time for him to find his own place. Erin and Shemp never really hit it off, but after I made it clear to Erin that Shemp's my best friend and to Shemp that I'd rather see Erin getting out of the shower every morning, they've learned to tolerate one another. Sort of. Getting reserved seat tickets for Lollapalooza for the three of us is one more attempt on my part to get them to be pals.

And then there's William Alec Tucker III . . . but we'll get to him later.

So now it's quarter to five, the sun still high in the sky, and the thermometer standing at ninety-two in the shade. We park the Saturn in the back of the Riverport lot and join the line at the turnstiles as it shuffles through the usual daypack searches

and metal detector sweeps by the rent-a-cops before we get our tickets ripped. No one finds the joints I've hidden in my cigarette pack, and Erin manages to get through the pat-down without being groped by some cop, and in another minute we're through the gate and in the middle of thirty thousand other members of Gen-X and Gen-Y.

Riverport Amphitheater is an artificial hill in front of an enormous open-sided shed, with long asphalt walkways circling the hill to plazas on either side of the stage. You've got your punks, your ravers, your frat boys, your stoners, your teeners, your slackers, your over-the-hill hippies looking for one more summer of love before they finally cut their hair and get a job. Up on the hill, they stand, sit, or sprawl on blankets trampled by countless sneakers and hiking boots, listening to Jesus Lizard thudding from distant speakers; down on the walkways, even more shuffle past tents set up by hucksters touring with the show. T-shirts, jewelry, window stickers, incense, dope paraphernalia, CDs by bands no one has ever heard of, sunglasses, cheap dresses and parachute pants, underground comic books, hemp hats: an open-air mall of the hip and hip-five-minutes-ago, mobbed by kids in search of something that won't look stupid three months from now. It's all loud and crowded and sweaty and hot, just the way I like it.

Closer to the shed, food vendors have set up their tents; our noses are assaulted by the odors of a dozen different kinds of ethnic cuisine. Shemp's hungry, so he heads straight for a Thai concession, where he buys a paper plate of raman noodles and stir-fried yeti. Two places sell overpriced fruit juices—they can't call them smart drinks anymore,

because the FDA determined that you'll still be just as stupid as you were before you had one—but Erin joins the line in front of the Budweiser stand, unhip as it may be. I wander around the plaza while I wait for them, catching a little of this and that. Under a large tent, a San Francisco theater troupe stages a performance in which a gray-wigged, business-suited Republican auctions off the Bill of Rights. Thirty feet away, teenagers impatiently wait their turn to try out the free videogames set up under the Sega pavilion. A fifteen-year-old kid climbs into a Spaceball; after a minute of spinning upside-down and inside-out, he's spewing chunky green stuff all over the transparent plastic sphere. I spot Shemp watching the gastronomic fireworks from the other side of the crowd: he takes his plate of raman-and-yeti to the nearest garbage can.

We find our seats under the shed just in time for Sinead O'Connor. She's let her hair grow out a little since the time she tore up the pope's picture on *Saturday Night Live*, and she's got a four-piece band that backs her up as she does a rap version of the Beatles' "All The Lonely People" (or whatever the hell it's called) and a song about the Irish potato famine. It's really very pretty and Erin is transfixed because she loves Sinead, but Shemp is talking to two dudes sitting behind us. I can't hear what they are saying, but the three of them get up and leave before her performance is half over.

Erin and I wander over to the Art Tent. It's a little cooler in here, but no less humid. There're strange sculptures—a spiked armchair raised on a nine-foot throne, an altar of jeweled skulls illuminated by automobile taillights—but the only thing I wish I had is a signed lithograph of Big Daddy

Roth's Rat Fink. We find Shemp staring fixedly at a Robert Williams silk-screened tapestry of a bare-breasted angel wearing a space helmet floating above a junkyard filled with thirties-style spaceships. He babbles at us for several minutes about the obvious correlation between Stephen Hawking, Gene Roddenberry, Jack Kirby, and God-knows-what; his pupils have expanded into tiny planets. Shemp's found some acid; we make sure that he still has his ticket stub and knows that he can't return to his seat without it, then we go get some more beer.

For dinner music, we get power-grunge by Pavement. The mosh pit on the hill, placid during Sinead, briefly comes alive with flailing arms and legs; everyone else is bowed by the oppressive burden of the sun. Erin and I smoke a joint—the ushers don't give a shit, they're on the lookout for people throwing junk at the stage—then go out for more beer. We find the mist tent and stand fully clothed under the sprayers. Several Deadheads are talking about what happened at a campground in St. Charles after a Grateful Dead show at Riverport last week. A hundred kids were taken to the hospital when a deck at the campground lodge collapsed during a thunderstorm. Everyone agrees that it was a bummer, but at least Jerry put on a good show. Doesn't mean much to me; I'm not into the Dead. The cool spray plasters Erin's shirt against her breasts; I'm beginning to look forward to going home after the show.

I hit the men's room on the way back to the shed. Guys in shorts and sticky T-shirts are lined up in front of the urinals, letting go of all the beer and fruit juice they've been sucking down. The tile floor is slippery with water jetting out from a sink faucet

that's been jammed open; an old black janitor in uniform tries to monkey-wrench the spigot shut. I can't get to a urinal and I've got to take a major leak, so I piss in the next sink over. The janitor yells at me to cut it out, but I ignore him. This is what you're paid to do, man: clean up after people like me. If you don't like it, then go to college and become a rocket scientist.

Cypress Hill comes on at seven o'clock with loud, aggressive rap about fucking and smoking pot. I'm all for both, but Erin isn't into this stuff; she drags me over to the second stage near the front gate, where we catch Beck doing a solo acoustic show. Once again we see Shemp; completely zoned by now, he's standing near the stage, screaming "Loser!" every time the guy takes a break. This may be a request for Beck's big radio hit or an opinion of Beck himself; either way, Beck ignores him, and when Shemp spots us from across the crowd, we turn and hurry away before anyone sees us with him.

We check out the other side of the amphitheater. More hucksters selling clothes and bumper stickers and shit, but there're also tables set up by groups like Greenpeace, NOW, Missouri Public Interest Research Group, and so forth. All these guys trying to save the world; what's the point? I sign a NORML petition so I can get a bumper sticker with a pot leaf on it. There's a large silkscreen tapestry set up on a scaffold: a mushroom cloud exploding behind screaming children and mounds of skulls, titled "August 1945." History, man; it happened a long time ago. Let it go, let it go.

Back in our seats, we blow another joint as we wait for Hole's road crew to finish setting up. It's a

little after eight now, and the sun is finally beginning to go down; the heat is off, and the crowd is beginning to awaken from its collective stupor. Time to do some serious partying.

Yet, as I turn around to look back over the countless bodies crammed together beneath the shed and up on the hill, something occurs to me. In this instant, I see my generation: torn apart by divorce when we were five years old, then told that monogamy or abstinence is the only way to stop AIDS; suckled on a tube filled with bad sitcoms, idiot cop shows, and Saturday morning cartoons with not-so-subtle messages about Peace, Love, Understanding, along with ads for a Barbie's Dream House that looks like nothing we'll ever afford; despised by hippies-turned-yuppies who try to sell us compilations of twenty-five-year-old rock music and reproductions of Peter Max paintings, but won't give us a decent job so we can pay for this shit; numbed by whippits, lousy pot, and gassy beer; dumbed out on Nintendo, the failed politics of both Democrats and Republicans, and *Beverly Hills 90210*. No respect, no hope, no clue, no cigarettes . . .

No future.

It's something like an epiphany.

Realizing this, I say:

(and this part I remember very clearly)

"Y'know, this is the best day of my life."

I don't realize that I've spoken aloud until Erin turns to look at me.

"Really?" she says. "I didn't know you were enjoying yourself so much."

Startled by her voice, I look at her, and it's almost as if I'm seeing her for the first time. God,

she's so beautiful. A warm breeze has caught her long, fine hair and cast it back from her face; the setting sun has highlighted it and made it golden. There isn't an inch of her body that I don't know, yet in this instant she's as new to me as the moment when we first met, and although what I just said was meant to be ironic, I suddenly realize that it's truthful.

This *is* the best day of my life.

This same time next year I'll be twenty-six, and ten years later I'll be thirty-six, and twenty years after that I'll be forty-six; if I'm still alive by then, this stoned summer afternoon will be another faded memory of a middle-aged man who has long since discarded his youth and become the CEO of Tucker Brothers Enterprises, with an ex-wife who now lives in Los Angeles with her third husband and a son I'll see only occasionally, and then only to give worthless presents to. . . .

Like the aluminum dog tag that hangs around my neck on a silver link chain like a weird medal of St. Christopher. My father gave it to me last February, when he took me out to my usual birthday dinner at Tony's. One of the few times I ever see him; most of the time, he's either at the office or in another country, making another business deal. Toaster ovens to Russians who can't buy bread. I smoked a bone in my car before going into the four-star Italian restaurant, so I was pretty stoned at the time and don't remember why he said it was so important that I have this thing . . . but, y'know, it's stamped with my name and the phone number of some company called the Immortality Partnership, and since it looks kinda punk I wear it from time to time, including today. Shemp's dad gave him one, too, and we get a laugh

out of them. If we get killed, these things are supposed to make sure that we have a second chance.

Uh-huh. Sure. And you can grow up to be the next president of the United States. I mean, it's possible. . . .

I can't articulate any of this, though. I've smoked too much, drunk too much; my mind has been turned to mush by heat and loud music and the crush of bodies. All I can do is look into Erin's pale green eyes and say something I've said to other girls before, but never with any sincerity. Until now.

"I love you," I say. "I love you so much."

Erin blinks. For an instant, there's doubt in her face. She has had other boyfriends before me; doubtless they've muttered the same thing as they've tried to get her into bed. But I don't grab at her and I don't look away and I don't make a smartass remark, and finally there's acceptance in her eyes.

"I love you, too," she says at last, then she puts her arms around me and pulls me close.

The house lights dim and everyone rises to their feet. I wrap my arms around her shoulders and duck my head to receive a kiss that makes the world disappear for a moment.

The best day of my life. If someone had told me that I had only an hour and twenty-six minutes left to live, I would have never believed them.

Hole comes on stage beneath a punk galaxy of mirror balls and foil stars. Courtney Love wears a low-cut black babydoll dress, cigarette dangling from her mouth. She plays guitar with her left foot propped up on a monitor speaker, giving the horny college jocks in the front row a flash of her inner thighs. Her lyrics

are unintelligible beneath the raw power of her band's music, but it doesn't matter; for an hour she's the vortex of a tornado that rips through the shed and up the hill. It's good shit. When Hole is through with its set, Courtney hands her guitar to someone in the front row, flips off some puke who'd been verbally abusing her, and marches off stage. Everyone's on their feet and howling for more.

All except Erin and I. Sonic Youth is the headliner; they're good, but we've seen them before, and for the last hour Erin's body has swayed next to mine in a seductive way. If the emcee were to announce that Sonic Youth's bus broke down and that they're going to be replaced by Jesus and the Twelve Disciples, we would have to leave. We've got the urge, that simple.

By now, Shemp has returned to his seat. He's still tripping, but he peaked some time ago and now all he wants to do is go home and catch a *Star Trek* rerun. I know that he really intends to crash on the living room couch, something that I've tried to discourage him from doing after Erin moved in, but this time I don't argue with him. He can always turn up the sound while Erin and I make it on the waterbed.

There's also the fact that, of the three of us, Shemp is in the best shape to drive. Shemp may be babbling about another cosmic revelation he's received, but at least he's able to walk a straight line. I'm wasted; Erin is in better condition, but she doesn't know how to handle manual and my car has a five-speed stick. Shemp has driven my car many times; if we happen to get pulled over by the cops, at least he doesn't have beer on his breath.

All this is discussed while we weave our way through the parking lot in search of my car, our

faces made sickly yellow by the sodium lights. If I had any common sense, I would head straight for the high-rise hotel on the other side of the lot. Screw it, guys, let's get a room. I'd have staggered into the lobby, whipped out a gold Visa or a gold MasterCard or the American Express trump card, rented a single and a double for the night, and forgotten about the car until tomorrow morning.

Indeed, the notion occurs to me, just as we find my Saturn at the far end of the lot. My mind is fogged, though, and Erin is warm and deliciously sweaty. Responsibility has always been something I've tried to ignore, so I toss Shemp the keys, and we now have ten minutes left to live.

We roll down the windows; the night air is warm and dusty.

I'm curled up in the backseat; Erin is riding shotgun. She strains against the shoulder harness as she reaches behind her for the tape box. Shemp has disconnected the driver's seat harness because it pinches his stomach.

Erin switches on the map light to look through the box. Shemp peers at the cassettes as if they're the crown jewels of England. He grabs for *Orb Live* before Erin swats his hand away, insisting that we listen to Pearl Jam instead.

Erin and Shemp get in an argument. The car almost veers off the shoulder right in front of the cops directing traffic to the interstate. I yell for Shemp to keep his eyes on the road. Shemp grabs the wheel and gets the Saturn back in his lane. For a moment I'm afraid that the cops are going to flag us for a roadside check, but their flashlights wave us through.

Shemp makes the turn for the interstate ramp.

Erin slips *Ten* into the deck. Eddie Vedder serenades us with a song about a woman trying to seduce her son as we join a dense river of eastbound headlights: cars, trucks, RVs driven by middle-aged tourists making their way from country music palaces in Branson to downtown St. Louis and points beyond.

A car horn blares just behind us as Shemp swings into the center lane without using the left turn signal. I try to tell him to take it easy, but he's raving about the vapor trails coming from the tail-lights in front of him.

Erin turns down the music a little and tells him to concentrate on the road. Shemp grips the wheel with both hands and stares straight ahead, but a minute later he catches a glimpse of a billboard for the Casino St. Charles riverboat. That cracks him up for no accountable reason. He turns up the volume again.

I lie down on the backseat and stare up at the ceiling. My ears are buzzing, my clothes are sticking to me like day-old chewing gum, my leg muscles are stiff and aching.

It's been a long day. All I want to do is go home.

I scratch at a mosquito bite under my right knee and think about putting some lotion on my sunburned neck.

Shemp abruptly swerves into the right lane. Suddenly the backseat is flooded with harsh white light. A truck horn bellows in rage. . . .

Something as big as God smashes into the rear bumper.

And now Shemp and Erin and I are all screaming at once, and Shemp panics and twists the wheel hard to the right, and I look back just in time to see