

Finalities

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my lovely lady, Maria. Also, my two beloved daughters Hayley and Emma and Emma's husband Shane. Also my four grandchildren, Lewis and Evan (Shane and Emma's) and Cara and Zoe (Hayley's). They stood by me when another walked out!

My thanks to John Hamer for his invaluable help with The Haywain.

Phil Phoenix.

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Something Extra

‘What did you say your name was?’

‘Abra, but I was told never to mention my last name
as it would invoke the end of the universe.’

‘Oh – you mean Cadabra!’

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Foreword

Although this book is primarily science fiction, it also includes one ghost story, although starting out as science fiction Cally refused to obey my commands and ended thus, I hope you find it as enjoyable as the others. The Time Machines I enjoyed writing most of all, breaking my teeth on H.G. Wells Time Machine, I thought it would be fun to do a "number" on it. Red, being yet another story about Mars, is I hope one with a different slant, I certainly hope it doesn't become fact, as man might just land on the red planet within our life time! As far as the other four stories are concerned, I will leave it to your sense of adventure to judge their worth.

Good reading,

Phil Phoenix.

RED

CHAPTER ONE

Chasing his son around the garden his giggles delighted Don, and after catching him scooped him up in his arms. This was the moment when Don would rag his son with a rendition of Danny Boy.

‘Dad - don’t! I’m not Danny Boy!’ he’d protest, as Don knew he would.

‘What’re you gonna do, beat me up, Eh? Come on then tough guy, lets see you in action!’ Going down on his knees nearer his son’s height he followed the same ritual, and pretending to beat him Don would then inexplicably tire, and allow little Daniel to win.

‘Breakfast! Come on you guys, I thought you’d be hungry by now!’ cried Mom from the kitchen window. They didn’t need a second invitation. Sitting down to scrambled eggs and bacon was something Don always appreciated; it was that wonderful moment when he could sit down and be with his family.

‘Dad... why do they call Mars the red planet?’

‘That’s a hell of a question for an eight year old,’ replied Don, ‘to give you an answer, some people say it’s because the surface contains a lot of iron, which oxidises when it meets with moist air... you remember our old car? D’you remember the rust on the wings? Same thing... but others say it’s because the planet’s oceans froze over, and were then covered with volcanic ash that hid them from view.’ Daniel’s little mind pondered the wonder of this for a while.

‘When you go there, can you bring me back some so I can see it?’ asked Daniel.

‘You bet I will son!’ replied Don enthusiastically, and looked furtively at the kitchen clock.

‘My God is that the time, I must get a move on.’ Grabbing his coat he left for the base, where he would undergo his final training that morning, so kissing Cheryl and Daniel goodbye he jumped into his car, then hooting the horn he waved from the car window as he turned onto the highway. One day is a long time for an eight year old who can't wait for his hero dad to come home, and whatever pursuit he was engaged in, one ear would listen for the familiar hoot from Don's car as he turned into the driveway. Suddenly his life took on the ultimate meaning, the horn hooted! Running out to meet him, Don, with his case in one hand scooped up Daniel with the other and carried him into the house.

‘Hi! Baby, everything alright?’

‘Yeah!’ replied Cheryl from the bathroom, ‘I’m taking a shower!’ Walking into the kitchen Don took Daniel with him.

‘Hey! Did I ever tell you about the swimming pool we’ve got?’ Daniel nodded innocently in the negative, ‘it holds over six million gallons! That’s a hell-of-a swimming pool - wouldn’t you say?’

‘Can I swim in it Dad?’

‘Well unfortunately son it’s strictly for guys over nine years old, and you’ve got almost a year to wait yet, but as soon as you’re nine I’ll take you there.’

‘Thanks Dad!’ replied Daniel beaming, his dad was *definitely* a hero, and no one could ever change that!

‘Tell you what son,’ said Don suddenly, ‘why don’t

I take you there on your birthday, as a sort of treat... what d'ya say?'

'Oh brilliant!' Daniel ran out to play "astronauts" in the space ship his father had built him in the tree at the bottom of their garden.

'I'll get the dinner on hon.' said Cheryl walking into the kitchen.

'Great! I'm starving,' said Don patting his stomach.

'Half an hour ok?' she asked him, 'how'd it go today?'

'Really good,' Don told her, 'all simulator work is finished, and we've finished in the Neutral buoyancy lab, and... we heard today the mission is scheduled for the 20th of next month!'

'Brilliant!' replied Cheryl smiling broadly, but underneath wished it would fail through lack of funding, or something similar, she was petrified something would go wrong, the thought of life without him was unthinkable. However, she would show Don - and the world - a brave face, it's what you do when you're an astronaut's wife. Don walked into the garden to look for Dan.

'Where are you... come out brat! Or... I'll come and get you!'

'You can't get me I'm in outer space!' came the decisive answer from the space ship in the tree.

'Ok, I'll get my shuttle and come up there, my space ship's faster than yours!'

'I'm going faster than light now Dad!' replied Dan, challenging his father.

'Well I can't compete with that, I guess I'll just have to climb the tree and get you... it'll be a lot easier!' Shrieking with delight Dan loved it when his father

chased up the tree after him.

‘Supper’s ready!’ shouted Cheryl from the patio, and having just rescued a stricken space station, Dan and Don were hungry, well, even astronauts have to eat!

CHAPTER TWO

The weeks had flown by, and it was four days to countdown, so Don left early that morning for pre-flight checks with his crew. Little Dan was full of it at school, and his teacher apparently learnt more about Mars and space flight from Dan, than he'd ever learnt from text books or general reading matter! How do you silence an eight year old whose dad is a member of the first crew to land on Mars? Answer - you don't! He was also full of it at home, and Don had Hell's own job getting him off to sleep at night. On one occasion he even had to get short with him, something he didn't really like doing.

'Hey! Come on Dan,' he said, chiding him gently 'it *really* is time to go to sleep!' Dan fell silent, never having heard his dad use this tone before.

'Look,' Don tried to explain, 'you must go to sleep son... you see, sleep is where you get your energy from... so that you do well at school. The more you get, the better you do at school - especially if you wanna be an astronaut! It's like recharging your batteries when they get low.'

'Ok Dad,' said Dan, eventually seeing reason, 'I'll go to sleep now.'

'Good man!' said Don, and credited him for being grown up, but leaving the nightlight on he joined Cheryl in the lounge for an evenings TV. Having had no more trouble from a very excited young Dan, twenty minutes later Don found him sleeping the sleep of innocence that only children know. His little face a picture of peace and tranquillity, but Don mentally bet himself all that would all change

around seven the next morning! The day after would be the last time he would see Dan and Cheryl before going in for pre-launch, after that it would be into the capsule, and immediately after that the countdown.

Holding Dan in one arm Don kissed Cheryl goodbye, and didn't want to let either of them go before it was absolutely necessary.

'Getting greedy in your old age!' said Cheryl, chiding him humorously.

'Dan doesn't weigh much,' he said grinning, 'come to think of it - neither do you! If the cheek doesn't stop I might have to put you over my knee before I leave!' 'You wouldn't dare!' she challenged him, 'not in public!' Putting Dan on the sidewalk Cheryl realised that not only could he, but he would - and do it now! Running as fast as she could it wasn't fast enough, and much to Dan's delight Don soon caught her. The little lad shrieked with laughter at his parents antics! Suddenly it was time for Don to report for briefing, so kissing Cheryl once more, he gave Dan a final hug and left for the briefing room.

'I love you both!' he said, then quickly choked back a few tears as he walked away, 'be good while I'm away!' Looking over his shoulder he gave them a final wave, before disappearing through the door.

Sitting on the settee with Dan on her lap Cheryl pointed the remote at the TV, the live broadcast had already started, and the commentator was going through the usual facts and figures as the countdown ran silently on in the background. It was all very much a fantasy come true for an eight year old whose father happened to be one of the crew, and

sitting riveted to the set was not a prerequisite for them, they weren't even conscious of the fact. Having asserted that the window still held, it was all systems go for launch, the countdown continued! An hour later they watched as the Martianis slowly lifted, and breaking free from the pads she spewed smoke and flame in all directions, then gathering speed and altitude started the first leg to her journey. This would be the first time that man had ever set foot on another world, a world that didn't belong to him! Dan was over-awed by the spectacle of seeing his dad's rocket take off; and, leave for another world! His dad - Commander Don Blackwell, Payload Commander - was going to Mars! Their propellant spent, just over a minute later both solid fuel tanks jettisoned as the second stage ignited, and watching intently Dan's face was fixed in awe, as his dad became his biggest hero ever.

Needless to say, Cheryl had Hell's own game getting Dan into bed that night, as she was bombarded with a million questions - and a growing astronaut must have answers - *now!* How close to Mars was he now? Would he be there in the morning? Could he see him on TV before he went to school? There was a thought; Cheryl suddenly realised what his class teacher would have to put up with the following day! Perhaps she should telephone and apologise in advance. As the Martianis had achieved orbital status - it meant only one thing, it was time for Dan to achieve orbital status! Needless to say Cheryl fell pray to a torrent of protests.

'Come on Dan, don't be tiresome... you know what I

said.'

'Yeah but I-

'Yeah but nothing young man - hey! I've just thought of something, how about you check over your own shuttle, after all if Daddy ever needed it to get home, you'd want to make sure it was working properly wouldn't you? And so would your father!' Suddenly Dan found the preparation of his Martianis model of great importance, after all, it was important to him that his dad could rely on him, and his ship - if need be... peace at last!

Leaving a light on for Dan Cheryl returned to the living room, to watch the rest of the programme and make sure her husband was safe. It would be nearly six months before she saw him again, but the evening went slowly without Don, and feeling bored she went to bed early that evening. Time passed even slower the following day, even her rounds of the charity shops and a visit to the garden centre failed to persuade the clock hands to move faster! A visit to the space centre, and a chat with the wives of other crewmembers killed an hour, plus, it allowed her to check on Don's progress. Each day went by slower than the one before, and each day Dan was asking more demanding questions about his father, he couldn't wait to see his dad home. Although his mission was only one week old Dan wanted to parade his father through the streets, and simply couldn't comprehend there were still five months and three weeks to go. Seeing him on TV wasn't enough now, he was tiring rapidly of not having physical contact with him. He missed his dad chasing him up the tree, or around the garden, and

Cheryl found it hard coping with his demands on her as a mother - *and surrogate father*; tree climbing wasn't exactly her forte. The biggest break she'd had was when the mission was in its fifth week, and she and Dan were invited to the Space Centre to talk to Don live for twenty minutes, only then did he relent and dash around at light speed telling his friends where he was going.

CHAPTER THREE

Trying to answer a million questions from Daniel, and think about how she was missing Don, Cheryl felt very cheated as she drove home, but it was mainly the fact that she hadn't had the opportunity to talk to Don alone at the Space Centre. Wanting to talk to him on a personal level, Cheryl felt awkward in the presence of the other wives, and wouldn't dream of embarrassing them, or Don, by talking intimately in their presence. After a month Cheryl was finding it harder to cope, and wondered how she would cope with the remaining five, especially with the knowledge that as time went by Daniel would grow increasingly fractious, and ask her ever more frequently when his father would be home. In the months that followed, Cheryl found herself inexorably more involved with her charity work, which was largely due to her close friend Dianne, who, noticing the fresh lines on her brow had asked certain favours of her regarding jobs she needed doing urgently. For some considerable time she was totally unaware of what Dianne was doing, and time as we are all aware becomes a shadow when we're involved in a subject of interest. Three months had passed when Cheryl had coffee with a few of her charity colleagues, and as the others started talking discretely took Dianne aside. 'That was very clever of you,' she told her with a knowing smile, 'I didn't have a clue, it wasn't 'til this morning it dawned on me how subtly you'd manoeuvred me into doing that extra work!' 'Sorry Cheryl,' replied Dianne starting self-

consciously, 'I thought you looked a little stressed, so I decided to do something about it.'

'Why didn't you tell me? I wouldn't have minded!'

'Oh come on Cheryl, I know you - you'd have protested 'til kingdom come that there was nothing wrong!'

'Yeah, I Guess you're right,' replied Cheryl laughing, and realised that Dianne knew her far better than she'd given her credit for.

Halfway through the mission Cheryl was surprised at how well she had managed, and was far better than she'd expected, but surprisingly Daniel hadn't been as demanding as she'd originally expected, in fact he'd been quite the opposite, and had helped with housework, gardening, and *even* washed the car! She guessed that Daniel had realised having something to occupy him would relieve the long drought until his father came home. Inevitably she got the odd whine as to when Daddy was coming home, but Cheryl handled the situation with consummate ease. Considering she'd seen it as an uphill task as little as eight weeks ago, she had reached the point where one evening while watching an update on the mission, she'd actually gone to the kitchen and made herself a coffee during the bulletin! It was at that precise moment she realised she was becoming blasé. Indeed, the following day at the supermarket, she was propositioned by a young man - obviously single - who hadn't realised she was married with an eight-year-old son. At thirty three it was an ego trip to be told you're definitely no older than nineteen, he was very nice and genuine in the way he made his advance, she not

only found him attractive but also very engaging, and almost fell into the time worn trap. Then, coming to her senses she gently chided the young man, and thanking him for his compliment she headed for the checkout! Remembering her promise to Don at the alter was one thing she would cherish as long as she lived, and would never dream of breaking!

The boredom of months had suddenly turned into a rush of minutes, and what seemed to have taken an age to pass, had suddenly become a last minute panic! Claspig Dan's hand Cheryl sat in the hospitality lounge with the wives and children of the other astronauts. Riveted to the large screen in front of them, it was re-entry time, and this was the moment everyone was dreading, the atmosphere was tense, as just one spark would be enough to ignite an explosion of emotion. They were finally coming home, after six seemingly endless months they would soon be reunited, and Dan was beside himself at the thought of seeing his dad again after so long. One de-brief, and one heroes welcome later Cheryl and Dan finally got to see Don after a span of two hours! Not that that meant much, as the following day Don would be paraded around the town, complete with ticker-tape and the commensurate razzmatazz, so Cheryl and Dan would have to bite the bullet a while longer while the nation enjoyed his company. After two weeks they were almost back in their routine, when Daniel in one of his question-asking modes queried Don over the piece of "Red" from Mars that he'd promised to bring back.

'No I didn't forget young Dan, I haven't got it with me right now,' explained Don, 'you see, like me it has to go through decontamination... but - just as soon as I get the all-clear I'll fetch it home for you, ok son?'

'Yeah ok Dad, how long will it take?'

'I don't know son, it depends on what they find in it, you see it must be declared safe for our world before they can release it... just in case it contains anything that might damage our planet - you understand?' Little Daniel nodded his head silently. Then suddenly, he found a need to fly his shuttle to Mars, and investigate a report that aliens were amassing there prior attacking Earth. Before Don knew it his son was halfway up the garden tree, or as he would put it, well on his way to Mars!

The next morning Don called Daniel for breakfast, and told him that if he didn't get down there real quick an alien would eat his cornflakes! It only served to incite a command of extermination from Dan, who dressed unhurriedly.

'You remember before the mission son, I said I'd take you for a swim at our special pool?'

'Yeah! When can we go?' said Dan beaming.

'I said on your birthday, so - as it's only two months to go I'll book us a slot,' then, looking up, 'Cheryl - you coming with us honey?'

'If you don't mind a girl tagging along!' she ragged them.

'I guess we'll just have to put up with it!' said Don, feigning resignation. Doing frankfurters for dinner, Cheryl reminded Don that if she got any more cheek she would stick a fork in him, and boil him up with

the frankfurters!

'One thing you'll learn pretty quick in life son is know when to keep your mouth shut!' said Don, and gave Daniel a knowing wink, as if Cheryl wasn't there, 'women can get quite grippy if you push 'em too far - can't take a joke you see son!' Suddenly Don found himself running at high speed from the house, and had he been slower off the mark, a large skillet would have made contact with his fully exposed pate! Ten minutes of high jinx followed where Dan's parents would chase each other around the house and garden, a period of fun that little Daniel always counted as very special. It wasn't long before Don came home one day, and purposefully squealed the tires on the driveway as he pulled up; this was always a sign to Daniel that he'd brought something special home with him! Don sat in the car counting.

'Eight - nine - ten - eleven - twel-' Suddenly Dan came hurtling across the front porch.

'Not bad son, barely twelve seconds that time!'

'What have you got Dad? What is it?' cried Dan expectantly, his little face full of wonderment.

'I ain't got nothin' for you.' replied Don gravely, and watched his face change from one of eager excitement to one of disappointment, then, suddenly scooping him up with one hand Don carried him into the house under his left arm, and told him quite definitely he was going to put him in the waste-disposal unit. This always had Dan crying with laughter, he knew his dad had no intention of putting him down there, but it was the madcap way he did it that lit little Daniel's fuse.

'Hey! Haven't you forgotten something?' asked Don, quizzing Daniel when things had quietened down.

'I washed my hands already Dad - honest!'

'No! I wasn't referring to that... what did you ask me when you ran out the house just now?' Little Dan's face lit up again. Opening his attaché Don lifted the lid and sneaked a glance inside, then suddenly shut the lid tight.

'I think there's a "Moon-man" in there!'

'Oh Dad! Come on, I want to see what you brought for me!' he pleaded. Unable to rag him any longer Don opened his case and retrieved a clear plastic box containing 1 x section of the red planet! Staring in amazement Dan couldn't believe his eyes at first, then eventually asked his father if it was alright to open it up.

'Course it is son, you go right ahead.' said Don grinning like a Cheshire cat! Opening the case slowly Little Dan placed the top on the floor, then gently picked up the piece of Mars that was *all* his! Holding it in his left hand he stared at it for over a minute, as if waiting for the odd Martian or two to leap out and say HI! Eventually passing it to his dad Don took the rock, then looking at it carefully for a few seconds he remembered his time on the Martian landscape; placing it back on its pedestal he closed the case and put it on Dan's dressing table.

'Come on,' he told Daniel, 'dinner should be ready about now... let's go see if those frankfurters are worth eating, but don't tell your mother I said that ok?' Laughing as they entered the kitchen Cheryl asked them what they'd found so amusing; and

looking down at little Dan, Don tapped the side of his nose with his finger.

'That's for us to know... and you to find out!' The pan holding the frankfurters was raised, and aimed in the general direction of Don.

'Ok! I see what you mean baby!' he told her, caving in under her threat to annihilate him with its contents.

'So tell me what's so funny! she demanded.

'I cannot!' said Don with eloquent precision.

'Oh? And why not?' she asked, demanding to know.

'It's a secret!' said Don already running for the door.

'Can I keep it in my bedroom Dad?'

'Yeah, you keep it where ever you like son!' said Don striding at speed across the patio, and happy that his son was pleased with the present he'd brought across the Solar system for him. Cornering him behind the tree Cheryl tried gauging which way he would go next, and little Daniel shrieked with laughter as he ran to join them. Feigning to the left Don made a sudden dash for freedom to the right, although Cheryl chased after him as fast as she could she had no real chance of catching him.

'Oh! I've had enough,' said Cheryl gasping for breath, 'come on, or the dinner'll get cold!' Remembering how hungry they were Don and Dan followed close on her heels.

'That was absolutely awful!' said Don placing his knife and fork on the edge of the plate, then waited for Cheryl's reaction, 'I had to eat it as fast as I could just to get rid of it!' As they dined she laughed at his schoolboy style humour, and this was what Don loved best, and now dinner was done it was time to

enjoy his family. It didn't matter to him whether he was helping Dan with his homework or watching TV, it was quality time for him, and having spent six months away he wanted as much time with them as he could get.

'I've been thinking...' he said suddenly, then deliberately left it hanging in the air .

'What?' asked Cheryl screwing her face up, 'Oh come on - what have you been thinking?'

'I'm due some time off now,' he began slowly, 'how about... '

'Don! Will you stop messing around and get to the point!' demanded Cheryl impatiently.

'How about we take a holiday... in the Bahamas!' he said, and dropped the suggestion suddenly like a ton weight.

'What?' asked Cheryl, and was genuinely surprised by Don's offer. After buying the house she thought it would be a couple of years before they got a holiday, and like most young couples their mortgage was their number one priority.

'We can afford it.' said Don casually; 'we could go for a fortnight if you like!'

How about the mortgage?' she asked him, concerned at getting behind with repayments.

'No longer a problem!' announced Don confidently.

'Well! Yes! Ok, let's go to the travel agents, and find out when, and how much!' said Cheryl excitedly. Sitting down to watch TV their stomachs knotted with excitement at the thought of their pending holiday.

CHAPTER FOUR

Getting up at six thirty Don had beaten the alarm clock by more than fifteen minutes. Sliding out of bed he crept downstairs, then making two teas he toasted two slices of bread and buttered them heavily. Applying downward pressure with his elbow, he managed to open the door without putting anything down, or having to disturb Cheryl.

'What's this?' she said smiling sleepily.

'Room service Ma'am... make the most of it, this hotel is closing for two weeks, so we're kicking you out!'

'I'd like to see you try!' she said threatening him with a clenched fist. Grinning broadly Don knew she was trying to get him going, and would take his revenge when she was least expecting it, he had a knack of taking her by surprise in more ways than one! Eating their toast they drank tea and chatted about their forthcoming holiday, but Don hoped that he and Cheryl would get it on before they got up, but his hopes went out the window, due to an eight year old boy suddenly opening the door to tell his father the exciting news!

'What is it son?' asked Don, amused at Daniels enthusiasm for *items new!*

'Come and see Dad! Come on, it's spreading!' he said eagerly. Knowing he would get no peace until he'd looked at Daniel's piece of Mars, so pulling on his dressing gown Don followed Daniel to his room, who was already pointing at the Martian culture.

'Look Dad! It's growing!' he said eagerly, so walking over Don stared at it intently.

'Yeah, you're right Daniel,' he said, reservedly, not quite sure what to make of this development.

'Ok, don't take the lid off it 'til I get back son,' he said emphatically, 'I'm gonna ring the lab and ask them if there's anything to worry about.' Walking to his office Don immediately rang his friend Cass, and asked if it could be dangerous.'

'Yeah... yeah, so in your opinion it's quite safe.'

'Don, all samples were tested before they were allowed out of quarantine as you know,' said Cass reassuringly, 'but if you want to bring it in and let me take another look at it - just to make doubly sure, then feel free.'

'I hate to disturb your Saturday morning like this -'

'Hey what're friends for,' she interrupted, 'it's better to be safe than sorry!' Slipping his jacket and shoes on Don returned to Dan's room and picked up the case, then walking back to the office he sealed the sample with parcel tape.

'Are you taking it away Dad?' asked Daniel concerned he'd never see it again.

'I'm taking it back to the lab, Cass's gonna take another look at. It'll be alright, we just wanna make sure it's ok,' he told his son, then leaning back through the door he shouted to Cheryl he'd be an hour or so. Twenty minutes later he pulled up in the car park at the laboratory, and was temporarily dazzled by its glass walls reflecting the mid-morning sun.

'I'm sorry about this Cass,' he said seeing her sat at her bench, 'as it's Dan's I just want to know it's ok.'

'Not a problem,' said Cass with a winning smile, who was extremely attractive for a forty eight year

old, and having fancied Don from the onset had secretly envied Cheryl ever since she started work for the company. Putting the sample under the electron beam microscope she studied it for over five minutes, then, running a series of chemical and biological tests she announcing it was inert.

'Thanks for that,' said Don gratefully, 'Dan will be extremely pleased to hear it's not been impounded!'

'Not at all,' she replied, 'I'm fascinated by the fact that it's grown, but... I can't find anything wrong with it.' Smiling warmly she secretly hoped that Don would one day make a pass at her, but as there was a twelve year age difference she didn't hold out much hope of that, and Cheryl being very beautiful, *and* two years younger than Don; if nothing else Cass was a realist.

'Anyhow,' she said getting up from her seat, 'I had nothing else to do, so...' Picking up the sample, Don drove the twenty minutes home to tell Daniel his trophy was safe.

Little Daniel jumped for joy as Don returned with his Martian, and having just put on fresh coffee, Cheryl poured him a cup as he walked in.

'So - are we gonna look at brochures this morning Babe?' she asked, placing his coffee on the table.

'You bet! Just give me enough time to finish this,' he told her, and raised his cup to indicate his intention, 'and I'll be ready to go!' Cheryl smiled, her face was radiant with excitement at the prospect of holidaying in the Bahamas. Being the popular haunt of holiday bargain hunters they stopped at Bullimore's first. Telling the travel agent they'd like to leave at the earliest opportunity, Don was offered a cancellation

package at an unbelievably low price.

'I am tempted to take this.' he told Cheryl studying the price, 'it's too good to miss!'

'I guarantee you won't find cheaper in any part of town.' said the travel agent overhearing Don's comment.

'I'm going to put you to the test,' said Don laughing, 'if you're right we'll be back!'

'Ten dollars says you'll be back!' said the agent grinning.

'All bets are on!' said Don walking to the door. Dragging Cheryl and Daniel through the other four travel shops he went back fifty minutes later and slapped a ten-dollar bill on the counter.

'Book us!' he said decisively, and laughed at his foolishness. The clerk took the ten-dollar bill and put it in his uniform waistcoat pocket. Filling in all the necessary forms he placed it in front of Don with a ballpoint.

'Don't I have to fill anything in?' he asked, feeling cheated.

'Nope! We do it all for you, it's a wipe-your-nose service here, you like work or something?'

'Not really,' said Don laughing, 'I'm impressed, we'll come here next time.'

'Anyhow I get paid to do this, I might just get the idea you're after my job!' said the clerk ribbing him.

'I don't mind swapping... if you're interested.' said Don, tongue in cheek.

'No fear - I'll leave that to you and this young astronaut here!' he said ruffling Dan's hair. Being called an astronaut Daniel thought that was great, 'and - I think you ought to have something to spend

when you get there, after all... I've heard those Martians have some *real* bargains!' he told young Dan, then slipped the ten dollar bill he'd won from Don into his little hand. Paying cash Don left with their tickets to pack their cases with the usual holiday items, as their heads spun with a million things to remember! Deciding his Martian was feeling lonely, as soon they got back Daniel ran straight to his room to keep it company, plus, it had to know he had ten dollars to spend when he went to Mars!

'Dad? Dad? It's grown again! Dad!'

'Sorry son - what's that you say,' replied Don checking his passport.

'It's grown again - my Martian, it's pushed the lid up and it's growing underneath!' Just to put his mind at rest Don thought he'd better look at it. Sure enough, when he walked in he saw that it had grown under the bottom edge of the case, and had spread almost an inch across the window sill.

'Not much we can do about it now son,' he reasoned with Daniel, 'we're off tomorrow, we'll take a look at it as soon as we get back - ok?' Although Daniel seemed happy with that, to take his mind off it Don told him his mother needed some Martian potatoes for dinner, and asked if he could fly up there in his spaceship to buy some. Before he knew it Daniel was climbing the tree, where in his years of innocence his imagination ran riot.

Touching down at Nassau; the 747's tyres filled the air with acrid smoke as rubber resisted tarmac. Passport control was a fairly quick affair, and they were soon on their way to the hotel, At seeing their

hotel room Cheryl hid her excitement, to her this was a holiday of a lifetime, and she would show Don her gratitude when they had a moment to themselves. The desk clerk gave them the key to room 244, a luxury suite on the third floor that had a balcony overlooking the sea. Thankfully the hotel was only fifteen minute drive from the airport, and as Don threw the cases on the bed Cheryl started unpacking. Meanwhile Daniel went to the balcony to see how far up they were, and marvel at the tropical splendour of their surroundings.

'Dad! Come and look at the boats down in the harbour!' Making his way out to join his son Don and Cheryl laughed at his enthusiasm.

'I'll bet they cost a few dollars!' he told Dan, whistling at the plethora of million dollar yachts below. Joining them a few seconds later Cheryl was curious at how the other half lived.

'Good God! Wouldn't it be nice if we could afford one like that.' she said, as her mind conjured pictures of Don standing on the bridge in an open-necked shirt and peaked cap, then laughing at the absurdity of it Don asked her what she'd found so funny.

'Oh nothing,' she replied, letting her dream die in her mind, 'just one of my silly notions.' Shaking his head Don wondered why she couldn't tell him about her "silly" notion.

'I think you need a shrink!' he told her, pointing his finger at his left temple. Picking up a feather-filled missile from the bed she hurled it at him, and her aim, being better than Don had given her credit for, caused him to duck as it flew over his head.

'Hey! You're getting too good at this, I'll have to

teach you a lesson young lady!' he ragged her, as Don chased her 'round the room she shrieked with delight as he eventually caught her and threw her on the bed, then as he pinned her down he suddenly noticed she'd gone limp, as her brow furrowed with concern.

'What is it honey?' he asked getting up immediately, 'is there anything wrong?'

'I don't know,' she replied hesitantly, 'I feel a bit cold... inside!'

'In this heat?' asked Don incredulously, 'I don't get it - how can you be cold?'

'I don't know Don,' she replied slowly, her voice suddenly weaker, 'I feel tired as well.'

'I'll call the hotel doctor,' he reassured her, 'you lie there and take it easy, it's probably the heat, he'll have something for that, so don't you worry!' Putting the phone down he ran back to her side, and arriving three minutes later the doctor went straight to Cheryl. Listening to her chest for almost a minute he finally put his stethoscope down.

'How long have you been here?' he asked Don, as Cheryl's breathing suddenly became laboured.

'We've only just arrived,' he told the doctor worriedly, 'literally ten minutes ago!'

'Why has she got a tan, and you - and I take it this is your little boy - haven't?' He hadn't noticed that Cheryl's complexion had changed, and now looked as if she'd arrived at least two weeks before them! Suddenly her breathing rasped like someone sawing wood, then looking at Don and little Dan she closing her eyes as her head rolled slowly to one side. In a desperate attempt to start her breathing again the

doctor tried resuscitation, but realising he was getting nowhere ran to the phone and called the ambulance service. Hardly able to comprehend what was happening Don was frantic, and was beside himself with worry as to what was happening to his beautiful wife! By the time the ambulance had arrived Cheryl's body had crystallised, and the transformation from life to death was so rapid, so astounding, that no one could take it in. Her poor body still lay on the bed had now mysteriously turned anhydrous, then five minutes later all that was left of her vibrant being was a reddish-brown powder. Beside himself with grief Don suddenly grabbed little Daniel and hugged him tight as tears streamed down his face.

'Oh my little Daniel, my dear little boy,' he cried bitterly, '*you must go to your grandmother - do you understand?*' But Daniel was in no state to listen to his father's words, and was hysterical at the loss of his mother, the woman who'd been the centre of his little world. Don now realised the sample he'd brought back for Daniel *was* contaminated, and had somehow evaded detection in the laboratory.

'Why hasn't it affected your son yet?' asked the doctor, unable to comprehend the mystery.

'I don't know,' said Don dialling urgently, I must make a phone call, but Cass didn't answer; Don hung up.

'Christ doc, it's happening to me... I feel cold now just like Cheryl,' he said tearfully, and suddenly realised he would now suffer the same fate, 'please look after Daniel for me,' he pleaded; the doctor nodded in grim agreement, with a tear in his eye at

the sudden loss of life, life he was powerless to save with his meagre skills. Falling on the bed Don watched as his pigmentation turned reddish-brown. 'I feel... so... cold...' were the final words he uttered, his mouth moved, but the words he uttered died on his lips; his eyes closed and he joined his beloved Cheryl in eternal harmony. Realising quickly that he also would not escape this weird illness, the doctor gave Daniel a sedative to relieve him from his trauma! Having precious little time he rang reception, and attempted to tell them what had transpired, but the receptionist was unable to understand his incoherent message. Feeling intense cold in his stomach he attempted to write a note, but after just two words his grip failed, and dropping the pen he fell to the floor semi-conscious. By the time the porters had reached room 244 the doctor was dead; the head porter found the doctors half scribbled note.

'Quarantine this b-?' he asked his colleague, 'what does that mean?'

'I don't understand that,' said his colleague, 'hang on... could it mean, 'Quarantine this boy?'

'Christ! Yes... looking at it I think that's all it could mean,' replied the junior porter, panicking at the sight of the doctors deteriorating body!

CHAPTER FIVE

Collecting his post from the mailbox at the end of the drive Deke Marston returned to the house, then noticed something odd by the side of his neighbour's car in the driveway. It was odd as far as he was concerned as he knew Cass *always* garaged her car when she got home.

'Vanessa?' he shouted through his front door, 'come out here will you?' Walking over the low dividing wall he walked slowly to the Chrysler Neon, and lying by the drivers door was a pile of red dust and clothes, with her ignition key on the floor beside it. In less than ten minutes the police had arrived, and looking through her purse the officer found Don's number, breaking into Cass' house he dialled the number, but got no reply.

'I guess we'd better ride over and pay them a visit,' it's only a twenty minute journey.' Cruising slowly down the road the police searched for Don's house, then clapping his eyes on it pulled over the road and parked.

'Glad you're here officer,' piped up Don's next door neighbour, 'take a look at this!' Leading the officers down the path he pointed at the front door, then the windows. Both officers stared in disbelief, behind every window was a blanket of red, and trailing under the front door, was a trace of red dust.

'I've been watching that,' said Don's neighbour, 'it's getting larger... it wasn't that big ten minutes ago!' Going back to the car the officer switched on his loud hailer.

'Attention! Attention! I want everyone in this

neighbourhood to pack a few things in a bag, and get out of your homes as soon as you can, I'm declaring a state of emergency!' People suddenly appeared from nowhere wondering what the commotion was about. Arguments ensued as the officers attempted to explain why they were instigating an evacuation. 'Will you please just do as I ask?' His question more of an order than a request, and one that he directed at a particularly obnoxious individual. Warning the Public Health department they took a head count and set about sealing off the road, as the state militia arrived to take up positions at both ends of the road. 'I can't get an answer from anyone!' said Phil Bowers angrily, 'isn't anyone awake in that damn lab? I'm going over there... someone's gonna get a rocket up their ass for this!'

Storming through the main doors, Phil Bowers strode menacingly up to the security desk, and was about to give them a roasting when he saw two caps, one on the floor, and one on the stool behind the semi-circular desk, underneath each was a pile of red dust accompanied by two pairs of trousers, jackets, and shoes!

'What the -' Turning abruptly he went straight up to the labs on the first floor.

'Anyone awake in here, this is getting on my - shit!' The lights were on and equipment whirred and clicked as if it were business as usual, even a centrifuge hummed on one of the benches, as it separated solids from some unknown substance and waited for someone to switch it off. All Phil Bowers saw was four more piles of red dust half covered by clothing.

'This is the BBC nine o'clock news, I'm Peter Swann - I've just received a report from our political correspondent in America, who says that astronaut Don Blackwell and his wife Cheryl, have died mysteriously while on holiday in the Bahamas, early reports say its the result of what has been described by some as mystery disease, we'll bring you more on that as we get it!' Ian James switched off the TV, and running to the phone dialled international to the USA. He had to find out if it was true about his crewmate on the Mars mission, surely it was some kind of mistake!

Having sealed the road outside of Don's house the state militia were getting uneasy about the growing threat from the red dust, which through sheer pressure had now ruptured the windows and doors in Don's house, even the house itself had all but been destroyed! The gable ends of the roof had lifted as the deadly red growth oozed beneath the eaves. Having reported that the growth was inorganic the public laboratory were said to be totally baffled by this mysterious red growth, but would investigate further. Six hours later every one of them was dead! Pete Ritter, who'd booked Don's holiday had also died, and had booked holidays and foreign travel for thirty six other people since booking Don's, and they had gone as far afield as Tokyo, London, Pakistan, Rome, and Rio de Janeiro. Daniel, by now was living with his grandmother in a state of constant turmoil, and apart from her own grief she had to deal with his loss as well.

CHAPTER SIX

By now Don's hometown was overrun by the insidious dust, and had suffered a total loss of population, but showed no signs abating. World leaders were now concerned with the spread of the "red" disease, and having stated it appeared there was no way to combat the threat let alone contain it, the scientific community also expressed their concern! Already established as inorganic matter they said it might contain organic properties unknown to our scientists, which would make it impossible to analyse, let alone find an antidote. Reports funnelled in from all parts of Europe, Asia, and South America, but no one appeared to have an answer to the growing menace. Don's home town had all but disappeared under the ever-growing menace from their solar neighbour, and the state militia had asked the president to declare a national emergency, then following a brief investigation by the White House, the president heeded his advisors and immediately declared it a military affair. Priority orders were issued for the air force to carry out a missile strike in the hope they could blow it out of existence. Critics heckled the president for his short-sightedness in wasting taxpayer's money, without first thinking of what they would have done in his position!

The blast trajectory of many missiles had tragically only succeeded in spreading it further, and people now ran scared as panic broke out in countries affected by the red onslaught, and worldwide an ever growing number were now afraid

it would reach their shores. Religious factions predicted the end of the world, and made their way up various mountains to pray to their God for forgiveness. Accusations of crass ineptitude were levelled at respective governments by prominent members of differing societies for not tackling the menace. Japan, the UK, Italy, and South America were now in serious trouble as their infrastructures had completely broken down, as people looted and ran riot in a frenzied panic knowing their time on this planet was now - finite!

'Our laboratories cannot cope,' said the president of the "once" most powerful nation on Earth to world leaders at a UN summit, 'every time a technician touches the damn stuff; after a maximum of six to eight hours he - or she- is dead! I regret to inform you I think our world is doomed... I wish I had better news to tell you... but,' the president paused as he fought back tears of regret, 'I'm afraid it has come to a situation where... it's every man for himself, I don't know what else to tell you, God bless the world - God bless America!' The whole world knew now it now faced *the* Armageddon on a scale no one could have foreseen! Most countries in the western world had looked to America for answers to world problems in the past, but this time their big benefactor had no answer to the problem, but the red killer crystals from Mars that turned everything to dust were rapidly becoming omni-present, and killing *everything* in its wake! Devouring all organic matter in its path every ocean and sea had long since crystallised, and was now in an anhydrous state, there was no re-growth, as plant, animal, bird,

reptile or insect - had been wiped out, and Earth was rapidly becoming a barren waste!

After five months the globe was almost dead, and little Daniel's grandmother had died six weeks earlier leaving him to fend for himself in a world now hostile to life. Where once there was noise, buses, cars honking horns, trains blasting their way across country, airplanes taking off and landing, now there was nothing! Where once there was the drowned songs of birds, the noise of animals hunting and mating, people shouting, laughing, screaming, crying or dying, doing the multifarious things that humans used to do, now, there was nothing! As the last of his kind Daniel wandered the streets; he was alone.

'Mum... Dad... please come back,' he cried, 'I'm frightened, there's no one left, I can't find anyone!' His last few words were shouted in anger, anger at being left alone in a world devoid of life, there no one to comfort him, no one to tell him everything would be alright. His voice echoed, an echo that seemingly went on to infinity, which cannoned forever down the deserted street, and bounced from the facade of every empty building. Every building reflected the colour of the dying planet, and bled crimson in the evening sky. Daniel's voice was alone, no one, or any *thing* answered him, but still he craved an answer, begged an answer! Nothing came. Silence - total silence! Crying out again, a long harrowing cry, his loneliness was heartbreaking, but no one was moved to tears by his plight.

Again his cry rent the summer air, like a knife

cutting the ether to contact anyone, or anything, but again there was no reply.

‘Why?’ His cry was charged with emotion loneliness and panic, but most of all he needed to be loved, to give love! The echo, like the last one, reported a million reverberations, and as the last echo died, he waited for an eternity in hope of a reply. A distant voice carrying on the air? Nothing! Why had this happened? What had happened? Tears fell freely from his reddened eyes, he yearned to return to his home to his mother and father, to find them once again, to hear them tell him there was nothing to worry about. Still no one answered as Daniel turned a corner, a different street, might an answer be forthcoming this time? Once again he cried out, and once again his loneliness tore into the atmosphere like staccato gunfire in battle, again, no one except Daniel felt his sadness and loneliness; he was desolate. Crying in desperation, the scimitar of his voice cut through the evening air with its plea for a response. Again nothing! Empty buildings looked down; indifferent to his plight.

Realising he was quite alone Daniel grew ever more despondent, and the full impact of his loneliness bore heavily on his little mind, as this was a new experience that he was unable to cope with. His little frame collapsed under the weight of a companionless world, and falling on both knees he cried out once more, in a last desperate attempt to hear another human voice. It echoed around the world, it echoed in the present and the past, but not in the future! The awesome silence magnified his loneliness as futility became omnipresent, but still

no one came. He cried one last time in total anguish. Why was he alone? Where had everybody gone? No longer able to stand his involuntary seclusion, he turned in on himself as his mind began to die, and casting his last glimpse at an empty world through eyes of resignation they faded with sadness, as tears of regret distorted his last vision of a world without meaning. If there was no meaning, there was no point. No point in going on... his cry unanswered, he relinquished his hold on life. It was *the* end.

THE END

META

CHAPTER ONE

It wasn't that he couldn't remember, it was more a case of struggling to remember that he'd once had a memory. Even trying was dangerous, as his day was mostly taken up with survival, which wasn't something he could take lightly. Lack of care through preoccupation even for a second or two would more than likely mean instant death, and survival meant avoiding *that* every minute of his waking life, and often meant sleeping with one eye open! His world was weird, and to put it mildly one filled with extreme danger, but he'd known that since he'd arrived. That was another thing he struggled to remember, when *had* he arrived. If only he could have one day to himself, to ponder things, to try and remember if he'd had a memory, and if that was the case, what was it he had to remember? Another large beast roared passed, then suddenly he heard the awesome blaring noise that some of them issued, so loud! So frightening! The beasts came and went at such speed, it was almost impossible to avoid them unless they were moving very slowly. Only at night was there any respite from their bombardment, although a smaller a number of them still trundled passed, snarling and baying with their eyes blazing. He would be glad to see the back of this desert, he'd been crossing it forever, or so it seemed! After travelling for so long a period he began to wonder if he would ever see the end! The desert was black and rocky and although reasonably

level its surface was a bit sticky, but personally he followed the white mini-deserts that were far less risky! They offered a modicum of relief from the boredom of the black desert, and there was a bonus travelling this way, their monotony was broken by curious temples at regular intervals in between. The only reason he followed the white deserts was simply because others of his kind had travelled the middle of the black desert and had been crushed by the snarling beasts, and having no respect for life they trampled over anything without so much as a "by your leave!"

No one could be accused of stretching the truth if they'd said his was a perilous existence, but knowing nothing else he could only go on. Almost certain he'd once had a memory his problem was remembering what there was to remember, and how much was there to remember? What was the nature of these memories? If only he could remember, and how long would it take him to remember all of it? Suddenly aware of his lack of concentration he realised the danger he'd put himself in, and if he went on like this he would end up dead! He would have to put the problem of his memory to the back of his mind for now, as he hadn't seen many of the beasts for a while this time he knew he'd been lucky, or it might have been a very different story! Another white desert, another temple! Why were there so many? Realising he should have counted them it then occurred to him there would have been no point, there were too many of them anyhow! How long had he been travelling? He'd certainly seen ninety-two light periods, and ninety-one dark.

So, where was he headed? He simply didn't know! The only thing he knew for certain was that he had to get to the end of the desert; once there, everything would be alright. But how much longer would it take? His fatigue was beginning to tell, but he would not let deter him, after all, what was the alternative? Die in this inhospitable desert? No! He had to go on. There was also another peril waiting for the unwary, the flying monsters that swooped from the sky, who gave little or no warning of their approach, although when a beast approached even they flew off in fear, and so it appeared the beasts were unchallenged by anything! All this on top of his monotony was almost too much to bear. Tired? Yes, he'd known for some considerable time he was physically and mentally drained, and still the end was nowhere in sight!

It was no good, he would *have* to rest, and considered the blind side of one of the temples, but dismissed that immediately as too dangerous, as periodically the beasts ran over them from both directions; it wasn't worth the risk. He would have to get to the edge of the black desert, he'd seen it on odd occasions as the ground inclined upwards, and knew it had an edge, but he'd have to listen carefully, to cross without care would almost certainly spell disaster, for certain a beast would get him! It was late in the dark period, and he'd been listening for some time; it was very quiet. If he *was* going now was as good a time as any, as further delay would spell certain suicide! Turning sharp left he ran as fast as his tired legs would take him, but the black desert wasn't nearly as wide as he'd

originally thought, and after a few moments he could see the edge. The sudden rumbling under foot was a tell-tale sign, and he knew instinctively a beast was coming! Feeling like lumps of lead his legs simply refused to obey his brain, and the beast was getting closer and louder by the second! He could sense its eyes now, white, piercing, glaring at him across the desert. Would he make it? Perhaps this venture had been foolhardy, and in retrospect *should* he have stuck to the white desert? Reaching the scrub at the edge of the desert he quickly scrambled out of the way as the beast snarled passed at lightning speed; he'd made it! Stopping for a while to recover from his fright, he continued along the edge of the scrubland looking for a safe place to rest. After a short while he found something, it wasn't perfect but it would do to re-charge his batteries, and hopefully he would find food, but sleep had to come first. The unusually large piece of bark was warm and dry, and one edge had buried itself in the ground forming a natural windbreak; sleep came rapidly. Waking suddenly he heard many beasts snarl passed, and blaring loudly as they went. His insides were tight with hunger, and were telling him the next thing he had to do was set a trap in the hope he'd catch something. As his stomach wasn't about to let him forget it's presence he also hoped it wouldn't take long! A few minutes later his trap was set, however, exhaustion hadn't finished with him yet, and sleep overtook him again. Suddenly he was awake, something was in his trap - food! Yes! This would make a good meal; he would eat well! Removing it from the trap he prepared and gorged

himself with relish, it was good to eat again. A rest period after eating was always something he'd done as a matter of course, but continuing to his mystery destination was of tantamount importance. Remembering if he'd had a memory was difficult, but he was reasonably certain he'd had a memory at one time, and had given it much thought during his rest period, but his arguments made sense, and were logical - *he must have had a memory!* Assuming he had, what was in it? The same questions cropped up every time, but being unable to remember was a barrier that was seemingly impossible to break!

CHAPTER TWO

Another thirty-eight dark periods had passed, and still he was travelling to reach his goal, and every time he felt like giving up something inside kept him going. Was it will power, if so things were looking up, as this meant the existence of his “theoretical” memory had gained credence! More beasts roared frighteningly by, but a close shave with a flying monster had frightened the living daylights out of him, and ironically it was one of the beasts that saved him from certain death! Seeing the beast approach the monster flew off before had a chance to swoop and pluck him from the desert, and for certain would be smashed into oblivion by the larger predator. The flying monster circled above, and watching it he knew it was waiting for a chance to swoop again, but thankfully many beasts were passing, that gave him a chance to take refuge in the recess at the corner of one of the temples. Prudence told him to stay there 'til the next dark period and resume his travels nocturnally, and it proved to be a wise decision as there were far less beasts and no flying monsters! Lessening the chances of ones death was a prerequisite as far as he and his kind were concerned. Although hating to admit it hunger reared its ugly head again, which meant he would have to run the gauntlet of the black desert again, would he be lucky again? Or would he end up like so many of his kind? Crushed by one of the beasts! Lucky! That was the only way he could describe himself, if the others had seen him cross that desert twice, and retain his life, he'd have been seen as a

"Super" or a "Mega"! Alas! They were dead, all of them crushed by the beasts or taken by the flying monsters, and he would never see them again. Asking himself if he was the last of his kind he dismissed the thought as crass stupidity, *of course* there were others of his kind still living!

Setting his trap he returned to the culvert he'd found, and where he would sleep until his trap told him he would eat again. The culvert was a good find, as luck would have it he almost fell into it, and the beauty of it was it was dry! Having slept well he felt refreshed, and went to check his trap, but as he thought, it was empty! As it hadn't woken him he knew he wouldn't eat this time. The light period was coming to an end, and feeling desperate he hoped his trap would produce something soon, as to resume his journey bearing the pangs of hunger was not something he looked forward to. With the light now fading fast it wouldn't be long before he'd have to continue, but still nothing had obligingly fallen into his trap. His hunger now was such that he considered delaying his journey for one more light period, but there again, he didn't want to do that either! What a dilemma! Oh sod it! He would delay for just one more. Feeling better now he'd made that decision his first task was to get back to sleep, although he'd slept well previously he felt he that another spell of slumber wouldn't go amiss. Feeling drowsy, and having the culvert for protection he eventually drifted off. The tug woke him suddenly - food! Dashing out at break-neck speed to inspect his catch, there were two! This would be a mega-feast! Having only felt a single tug he deduced they'd

fallen in at the same time! Killing his prey he ate immediately, as there was no time to waste, and as the dark period was upon him making good use of his time was of paramount importance. His appetite sated he started off at a steady pace, and was aware that a fast pace would only result in a severe bout of indigestion. Again he'd made it back to the white desert without so much as a whisper. A quarter of the dark period had gone, and he now increased his pace, but apart from the monotony and plethora of white deserts the going was good, and the temples, just as many - just as bad! How much bloody longer would this take? His patience thinning rapidly as each dark period came and went, he still felt a driving urge, a *need* to finish the journey! *Why?* Freezing on the spot he sensed the lights first, then suddenly a beast's foot landed right on him, by some sheer fluke he'd slid in the gap between the massive tread, which undoubtedly had saved him from certain death! This was the most frightening experience so far, a beast that didn't roar, they *all* roared! This one however hadn't! His heart pumped wildly, but this time he'd got away with it, although he would have to be on his mettle now, for if he couldn't hear them coming it would mean he'd have to rely on sensing their light. That would make it very awkward, very awkward indeed! Awkward? What the Hell was he going on about? It would be *bloody dangerous!*

Was it time to travel in the jungle? No! That would take far too long, that was a thought he could definitely not entertain. It was just a matter of applying his mind, but as long as he was travelling

he would have to be on his mettle! Knowing this he realised it would also mean more frequent breaks, as concentration at this level would tire him quickly. Maybe it would be better to travel in the jungle, but there again would it be slower? Making one's way through all that undergrowth, versus concentration and *more* frequent breaks, no, the jungle would take infinitely longer. What the bloody Hell was he supposed to do? No! He would stick with his original decision, concentration it was, and more frequent breaks!

CHAPTER THREE

Another seventy dark periods had passed, and although he was more than pissed off, he did feel he was nearer to something, but not sure what. Hunger was an issue again this night, and not having caught a thing the dark period had come too soon, and his luck had run out. Thankfully he'd seen no more of the beasts that didn't roar, although maintaining a higher modicum of alertness he'd been able to relax a little. Whether that was a good thing he wasn't sure, however, it had afforded him the ability to travel at a much faster pace.

Meta! What was Meta? Why had this idea entered his mind? No, not an idea, it was... well he really didn't know. What was Meta, and what did it mean to him? The answer he required was clearly beyond him, especially as he was unable to remember if he'd once had a memory, let alone store anything in it! Meta! There it was again! Something, or someone was saying it to him, weren't they? Maybe it wasn't that, perhaps he'd thought it? Meta! There it was again, and knew now he hadn't imagined it, yes, it was coming from another source! He'd have to ignore Meta, and it wasn't open to question, especially having realised he'd been travelling for some considerable time with no concern for his safety! Ok, there were no flying monsters, but there were still plenty of beasts, and he considered himself extremely lucky that not one had passed since Meta had entered his... whatever it was. Meta! Christ! It wasn't giving up, but why him? Why did he have to put up with this shit? For reasons

unknown he automatically turned in the direction of the jungle. Stop! Stop! Somehow he was unable to stop, and dangerously he entered the black desert without even quest for beasts! Wondering what was going on he also knew that that was unthinkable lax of him, you just *didn't* do that, well, not if you want to stay alive! Had something had overridden his memory, but surely that wasn't possible as he didn't have one!

This "Meta" thing was the problem, and it was taking his mind off something of paramount importance, his survival! Meta! Someone was definitely trying to tell him something, then changing direction again he began to suspect something, and having heard Meta five times now he'd also changed direction five times! Shit! That was close! Reaching the very edge of the jungle a beast screamed passed so close the wind from it nearly blew him off his feet! Meta! There it was again. Yes, he knew now there was a definite pattern to this, and again he changed direction, and was now heading north into the jungle, but surely this couldn't be right? Well, he'd have to go, it was *his* journey and only he could complete it, and *knew* he'd have to finish what he'd started. This was much harder going than in the black desert, as the dense jungle was impeding his progress considerably. Meta! There it was again, right on queue. It didn't ask him to change course this time so he continued straight on, and sensed it was more like a feeling rather something he obeyed or followed. As if it hadn't been bad enough back in that cursed desert the going was slower now, but this, this would take

forever! Then suddenly he had the strangest feeling, he felt close to something, but close to what? This was the question that concerned him now. Meta! Straight on again, but with the undergrowth getting progressively thicker he wondered if they were doing it on purpose, just to make things difficult for him. Hang on a minute, who are "they"? Why did he now consider that a "they" existed? What was going on? This incredible journey, yes, it was incredible, and he'd spent a lifetime making it! Meta! It felt almost like a guidance system! Although he'd only been conscious of it in the most recent part of his journey, he was now certain it was Meta that had brought him all the way! His conscious mind was now challenged by the thought of something called a memory. So, he had "Meta", "they", and this "memory", three things that were baffling him, but for some unknown reason he now felt easier in his mind and sensed he would soon have an answer. Another ten dark periods had passed, and he was still fighting the undergrowth, although he was definitely closer to... something, but he had to go on, and was too close to give up now. That was it! He was close to his *destination!* So, with the count now standing at nine Meta, he realised he *did* have a destination. Was it that "they", the "memory", and "Meta" might be linked to his destination, and also have some higher purpose in all this? How much more of this shit would he have to take before he'd find an answer? A higher purpose, something else to tantalise his conscious mind, and pondering this for a moment or two he was suddenly aware his mind wasn't concentrating on survival - again. It then

occurred to him he wasn't that bothered about survival anymore, his consciousness was definitely changing, he was considering other things instead of watching for danger, which he grudgingly admitted was now of secondary importance. A short while back he remembered being unnerved by these thoughts, but as time went by he was beginning to care less, Meta! The signals were now much stronger than when he'd left the black desert, and their frequency had increased by the same margin. These thoughts he asked himself, were they random, did they mean anything, would they mean anything in the future, and why hadn't he seen a flying monster recently? One thing he had noticed, the light period had darkened slightly, although that was nothing to worry about, he'd seen this before, with or without the falling water, but there again this was a different shade of subdued light than usual!

Suddenly aware of something to his left he sensed movement, not hostile, but movement none-the-less. Shit! It was one of his own kind! Contacting it, he discovered his newfound companion had made an identical journey to his, albeit from a different place than he, and had found out that his goal also was to follow Meta to a conclusion. So he wasn't alone! Asking him if there were others his companion replied that it was possible, but he wasn't sure. Meta! Both had seen the wall either side of them, and as they travelled toward their destination it also converged and became higher. Contacting his travelling companion again he pointed out another of their kind, a handsome female, she was "large"! They both

agreed - a prize to behold! Feeling it was his duty, he duly warned his companion to be careful after mating, if that was his intention, as he might just end up as her first post-conceptual meal! She hadn't appeared to notice them anyhow, so feeling more comfortable they let her go ahead, plus, they got to have a good look at her from behind - Yes! Suddenly their attention was diverted, as more of their kind appeared, and suddenly they poured in from all sides, as well as from behind. Meta! As it turned out they were all achieving the same goal, apparently they all "knew" what they had to do before leaving, but their biggest problem was that not one of them could remember leaving. However they all agreed that it was of little importance now.

CHAPTER FOUR

The walls now towered above them, and they were now accompanied by many of their kind returning from similar journeys, then suddenly they were jostling for position. He'd lost contact with his earlier travelling companion in the surge forward, and for a while now he'd noticed a roof over their heads. Their return had suddenly become a free-for-all, as everyone looked out for number one. Without warning a partition suddenly came down in front of them, almost catching the legs of a few who'd just passed through, but as that one closed another to their left had opened, Meta! Surging forward again he was carried along with the crowd, then another partition slammed down, and again the last few were lucky not to lose their appendages! Then another opened. Meta! Again they surged forward, and continued on to their destination. Crash! A partition suddenly crashed to the floor behind him, and was so close he felt the wind from it. What the bloody Hell was happening? Suddenly a large long object that he was powerless to resist forced him into a sort of ante-room. Yet another partition slammed shut and he was on his own, but only having had a brief glimpse of the others outside he felt himself slip rapidly from consciousness. Meta! A dark veil addressed his eyes.

As consciousness returned he felt worse than the worst bout of flu he'd ever had, and with it the discomfort of a severe ache in his joints, the like of which he'd never experienced in his life!

'Hey, look lads, number eleven's come 'round,' said a

voice from his left, 'he's made it, that's three so far isn't it?'

'Yes, I think you're right Barry,' replied a disinterested voice further down the room, 'better put him in recovery with the other two.' Not too sure of what was going on, and suddenly realising the distinct possibility of being usurped into something clandestine, a veil of fear descended on him. Would he actually survive this ordeal? In this position he was totally vulnerable, and had to assume they might well consider him expendable!

'What have they done to me?' he said slowly, then, like a cancer out of control anger and hate welled inside him. The metal bands bit into all four limbs as he suddenly surging upwards, and found to his painful cost that he'd been restrained.

'Watch number eleven!' said another unseen voice, 'he's starting to spasm like number two.'

'Yeah... alright,' replied the tired voice again.

'Should I sedate him?'

'No ya daft bastard!' replied the other voice, 'you'll ruin everything if you do that, just increase his pain level if he does it again, that always shuts them up.' As there was no reply he assumed the other person was satisfied with his answer, but he didn't like the sound of this at all, and realised he'd better not give them an excuse to increase his pain level, particularly as he didn't really understand exactly what they meant by "increasing his pain level". Scared would be putting it mildly, he didn't like the smell or the sound of this place, or the *sounds* of this place, an unsavoury odour pervaded it, and it was one he found very unnerving. Lying still he tried

gathering his thoughts, but fright coupled with rational thinking was something most normal people found difficult, as the “unknown” factor always dampens the thought processes. So lying helpless he wondered what was *likely* to happen, what was *going* to happen to him, and *when!*

'Why does it ruin the experiment if you sedate them?' asked the idiot, as he now identified the voice, and then heard "tired" blow impatiently through his lips, then followed that with an intimidating silence for maximum effect.

'Because... if you sedate them you destroy the physio/chemical condition... the very thing we're trying to examine, does that clear up the mystery for you?' asked the tired voice sarcastically. Again the idiot didn't answer, so he assumed the idiot had been suitably admonished and was not seeking further humiliation. That however was secondary to what they'd been talking about, why were they trying to examine his physio/chemical condition? The more he heard, the more he disliked being in this place, and decided right then that he would listen, build up a picture and make a plan, then make his escape! Something suddenly occurred to him that scared him shitless! Who was he? Physically trembling he knew he'd have to be careful now, as a low profile was of paramount importance they must not see him like this, especially if he was to discover what had happened to him and find his identity. Except for the noise of the two gooks movements the place was relatively quiet for more than an hour, and as there was little conversation between them he sensed a mutual dislike for each other. That was something in

his favour, and he would play on it until it opened it like a sore and festered! Lying in the infernal cot that was his prison he hoped it wouldn't be long before they released the bands on his wrists and ankles, as if they stayed on much longer they would surely drive him passed the point of lunacy! Identifying the two unseen voices was paramount, so seeing that he'd already branded them thus, they would now be known as Tired and Idiot .

'You'd better do the readings,' said Tired suddenly, 'you know what he's like if you miss them.'

'Sometimes I feel like ramming them down his throat!' replied Idiot, 'I get pissed off with his high and mighty attitudes, although sometimes I wish he'd just sack me!'

'And exactly what would you do without a job... eh?' replied Tired cynically. 'No money! No social life! Sod off, and get on with it ya stupid bastard!' Idiot didn't answer. It was clear that Idiot was very resentful of Tired, and he decided to exploit the obvious dislike between them - *that* was what would keep him sane! He could hear idiot moving about, presumably taking readings, and it was obviously a relatively simple task for them to trust him to carry it out. Listening intently he could hear Idiot's feet shuffling around the room, then stop at regular intervals as he checked another reading, then move to the next. As he got closer with each subsequent reading he was aware that Idiot would soon be taking a reading at his cot.

Closing his eyes before he arrived, he thought it prudent that Idiot shouldn't know he was conscious yet. Picking up the clipboard things were quiet for a

while, but he could sense Idiot's presence, and sensed his staring eyes. Had he seen something in the readings that had given him away? Did Idiot know he was conscious? Just in case he kept his eyes firmly shut, and if challenged he would call his bluff in the hope he'd get away with it. Allowing him to relax a little Idiot moved to the next cot, and he listened as Idiot moved further along the room, then another thought occurred to him, there were obviously others of his kind in this place, so if he could recruit their help it would solidify everyone's chance of escape! The next time Idiot took his readings he would count the number of stops he made, and that might just give him an idea of how many others were incarcerated in this place. Fifteen minutes had passed before Tired got up from his desk, then walking over to Idiot he stood purposefully in front of him, and placing his hands wide apart on the edge of his bench leant menacingly over him.

'All done?' he asked sarcastically.

'You saw me do it,' answered Idiot testily, 'you should know I've done it!'

'Yeah, sure I did,' replied Tired throwing back at him, 'but have you done it properly pond-life?'

'Piss off!'

Oh, alright then - I'll have a pint of bitter!' replied Tired, thinking he'd have a joke at Idiot's expense. 'If you haven't done those readings right you'll be pissed off tomorrow, when Barton sacks you!'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah!'

'Go on then, bugger off!' said Tired finally, then hearing the feet of his chair scrape across the floor

he knew Idiot had got up. This was followed immediately by the rustle of papers being put into a case.

'See you tomorrow then.' said Idiot reaching the door.

'If my luck runs out!' said Tired contemptuously, but there was no reply. After their little exchange he knew he'd have little trouble in recruiting Idiot to his cause. Switching off all the lights ten minutes later Tired left for the night, presumably happy with his days cynicism.

Lying still for an estimated twenty minutes he then made an attempt to free himself from the shackles that imprisoned him, but it was to no avail, and resignedly lay back to listen to the noises of the building. Apart from the odd inexplicable creak or crack the building was quiet enough, so it was time to start investigating. The first thing he realised was those shackles would not come off easily, as they were either fastened with a key or electronically controlled. The sides of his cot being too high rendered him unable to see the cots either side or opposite, and the only things visible were the steel bands on his wrists and ankles holding him captive. Applying upward pressure to test their resistance he detected a small amount of give in the straps, was this a weakness he could exploit? One thing he'd noticed since testing the straps was a red light or neon glowing at the bottom of the cot, but was it a part of the control panel for the cot, and did it mean anything to him, or was it glowing because he'd applied upward pressure on the straps? As the light went out he applied pressure again, and the light

came on immediately! So the neon was a visual warning, but did they have an audio warning? If so they'd been switched off by Tired or Idiot, or they were not within his earshot, but that was to his advantage. Obviously he would have to free his wrists first, but his next problem was how, straining his neck as far as he could, there was nothing within reach he could employ as a tool to assist his escape.

'Hello!' he shouted, but it came out as a hoarse whisper, and suddenly realised his throat hurt abominably.

'Hello!' came a hoarsely whispered reply a few seconds later, so there *was* someone else awake!

'Do you know who you are? Sorry if it sounds like a stupid question.' he asked the other voice.

'No... I don't know who I am, and it's not a stupid question... I think we've been conned.'

'Yeah?' he replied eagerly, 'so do I, but I don't know how, why, or who by!'

'I only remembered I had a memory a while ago.' said the other voice bitterly.

'Yeah, me too... although, I was aware of *something* before we got in here.' he told the other voice. 'Do you think there's an chance we could escape?'

'Not at the moment... I think we'll have to recruit someone.' said the voice.

'That's what I've been thinking.' came another voice from the other side of the room.

'Are you devoid of memory as well?' he asked the second voice.

'Yes, all I remember is being lucky to get here alive!' replied the second voice.

'Look,' he started, then paused to make sure he had

their attention, 'as our memories are scant I suggest we address each other by number, what do you think?'

'Ok, good idea... as you thought of it, you can be number One, I'll be number Two, and you over there... you can be Three, ok?' Having agreed that, Three then added an important footnote, 'I think it might be wise not to talk until they've buggered off for the night, during the day we'll keep our mouths shut.'

'Good thinking Three,' said Two, 'but how are we going to get out of these manacles?'

'As you said just now,' replied One reminding him, 'we'll have to recruit someone.' There was a pause for half a minute before Two replied.

'Yeah, that's it alright... well, I think we should get some sleep.'

'Yeah, who knows what we'll have to face in the morning? 'Night!'

CHAPTER FIVE

although sleep wasn't bountiful there was so much was going on in his head, but insomnia ruled the roost for most of the night! It seemed no sooner he'd dropped off than Tired walked in, and for someone who only had to sit at a desk and take a few things from his case, made more noise than normal. He was about to ask Two if he was awake when he suddenly remembered that would have been fatal, he, Two, and Three would have to remain silent for as long as Tired and Idiot were in the building, or until such time as they were released from captivity, and it was almost twenty minutes before he heard Idiot come through the door.

'Early again I see!' shouted Tired pointing at his watch.

'Very funny! I wonder why I come in some days with your attitude.' replied Idiot with a deal of sarcasm.

'Oooh, pissy are we? And this early in the morning!' said Tired aggressively.

'Bollocks!'

'What did you say?' replied Tired, with rasping hate. There was no answer, then hearing Tired get up he listened as his footfalls moved across the room, and presumed he'd walked to where Idiot was standing.

'I *asked* you a question - I *expect* an answer!' A short silence ensued, followed by a slap.

'You'll pay for that you shit!' said Idiot vehemently then spat at him, 'don't leave the building tonight if you know what's good for you!'

'What are gonna do... eh? Jump out and shout *Boooh*

when I walk out the door!'

'You'll see when you go home.' said Idiot somewhat subdued. Obviously fed up with listening to someone he'd classified as a halfwit, Tired walked back to his desk and wondered how long he'd have to wait before it was safe to contact Idiot again. The place was silent for over an hour, and he was sore to the point of lunacy, and also aware of having to control his inner panic! However his need to talk to Two and Three he found to be a nuisance, but knew that if he did there was a real danger of repercussion. Thankfully a disturbance some way down the room distracted him from his malady, as another of their kind had started shouting and gagging severely.

'Fourteen's fitting! The same as seventeen yesterday,' shouted Idiot, 'that makes five so far.'

'You know what to do,' said Tired acidly, 'do you have to bother me? I've got to see Barton about the monthly report, I'll be about an hour. I wonder what he'll make of your report this month!' said Tired taunting him as he left. Presumably the extra pain had induced number fourteen settle again, and for fifteen minutes things returned to the norm, but he began feeling sore again, but when Idiot suddenly appeared at the foot of his cot he was almost glad his eyes were open.

'Hello then, what've we got here?' he said grinning cruelly. Wearing a pitiful expression One hoped he could appeal to his sense of justice. Particularly after the way he (Idiot) had been treated by Tired.

'You got a tongue then or shall I talk among myself?'

'Yes, I have got a tongue,' said One hoarsely and

smiled, 'I don't know what's happened to me... I need help.'

'Do you now?' replied Idiot; not sure how to take that remark, had he detected something sinister in his voice?

'Can you help me?' he asked directly.

'Well... that depends... would you be willing to do everything I say? And I mean - *everything!* Can you do that?'

'Yes, I can,' he replied, remaining silent. Idiot appeared to be in deep but careful thought, 'there are others in here who need help as well, they would also be willing to do what you say.'

'Oh really? Well... things are indeed looking up!'

'What happened to us?' he asked, daring one further question.

'Of course you wouldn't know would you, you poor bastard?' replied Idiot cynically. 'Let me enlighten you... do you remember coming into this building?'

'No, all I can remember is waking up in here.'

'Yeah, that figures.' replied Idiot, nonchalantly.

'What d'you mean?' he asked, and hoped he hadn't sounded over-zealous, then, as if considering the burden of disloyalty to his employers, Idiot didn't reply immediately.

'Sod it! Why should I worry,' he said under his breath, 'look! What you've been through is something that could drive you insane when I've told you.' Breaking off his conversation Idiot suddenly walked to his desk just as Tired walked in looking flustered, and throwing his case on the floor he sat at his desk without saying a word.

'You look happy,' said Idiot, thinking it would be a

good time to take the piss, 'I take it everything *didn't* go your way!'

'Shut your fuckin' mouth you *Twat!*' replied Tired emphasising the noun. Like the others One heard all this going on from his cot, but could only guess at what was happening, then hearing a dull thud followed by an anguished squeal, it was obvious to all that a case of industrial misconduct had taken place.

'I'm gonna get you the sack for that you fuckin' bastard!' squealed Tired. One assumed Idiot's patience had finally run out, and had decided that Tired needed a pasting.

'Yeah? It's only your word against mine shithouse!' replied Idiot factually.

'You reckon? My nosebleed is all the evidence I need.' shouted Tired angrily.

'You big-mouthed shit, you fell against that cot, *I saw you!*' replied Idiot laughing.

'We'll see about that,' replied Tired angrily, 'I'm going up to see Barton right now!'

'Give him my regards!' said Idiot, giving Tired a taste of his own medicine. 'Oh by the way - where *are* your witnesses!'

The second that Tired had left Idiot returned and continued where he'd left off, and giving the chart a quick glance at the foot of the cot he turned his attention to Number One.

'Right, where was I?' he said, sighing heavily, 'oh yes, are you ready for this?'

'Ready as I'll ever be.' replied One.

'Ok, so you can't remember a thing... Ok? You... and the others in here were part of an experiment in

metamorphosis!' Pausing for effect it was just as well he didn't wait long, as it was lost on number One. His mind couldn't grasp the enormity of the statement in his present condition, 'it was carried out purely to see if it was possible.'

'How many?' asked One.

'Four thousand two hundred and fifty!'

'Quite a lot.' replied One showing no emotion. As mind erasure was part of the experiment Idiot wasn't surprised at his lack of emotion, and knew it was merely one of the side effects.

'Listen, I can't say too much now, that Pratt Neiman will be back soon, so I'll have to keep my mouth shut.'

'One last thing... can you help us?'

'Yes, I didn't like this project from the start.' replied Idiot, and One was more than pleased to hear that!

'By the way, I'm known as Number One, next to me is Number Two, and somewhere over there is Three.'

'To this lot - you're known as eleven, he's twelve, and him over there is thirty four, listen it'll be your turn to-' suddenly Idiot stopped talking, Number One, or fourteen, assumed that Tired, or apparently Neiman was returning. Hearing the door slam against the wall, it was obvious that someone in a bad temper had barged into the room.

'Barton wants to see you - *now!*' said Neiman curtly without even looking at Idiot.

'Ok, watch your blood pressure,' said Idiot grinning, and knowing he'd gained the upper hand, then hearing the door open and close again One assumed that Idiot had gone to see this Barton, who was

obviously the boss. It occurred to him that if Idiot got the sack their chances of help would be non-existent! It also occurred to him that if Idiot was going to help them, it was high time he found out his real name, and it was blatantly clear that Idiot was really no idiot at all!

Ten minutes later Idiot returned wearing a grin as wide as the English Channel, and putting his feet on the edge his desk he folded his arms and stared at Neiman without blinking. Pretending not to notice at first, after five minutes of this most unwelcome and unusual treatment Neiman was clearly rattled, especially from one who was supposed to be his subordinate.

'What the bleedin' Hell are you looking at?' shouted Neiman eventually snapping under the pressure, and at the same time trying to re-assert his authority.

'I don't *really* know... is it a turd? *Noooooo!* Is it a prick? *Nooooooo!* Is it a Neiman? *Yeeeesss!* Is it important? Is it fuckin' Hell!' said Idiot with as much snide as he could muster.

'Fuck off!' replied Neiman, Number One detected that Neiman was more subdued since Idiot's return.

'*Ooooh!* Don't forget... watch the blood pressure!' said Idiot sarcastically, and was clearly taunting him now, this, One assumed was pay back time for a long period of oppression by Neiman.

'So! When are you leaving?' asked Neiman, with as much bravado as he could muster.

'I'm not!... You are!'

'Bollocks!' spat Nieman vehemently.

'You don't believe me? I'm hurt! Why don't you go and have a word with Barton, you might just save

your ass!' replied Idiot with an easy air.

'Ha, fuckin' ha! You make me sick!' said Neiman testily.

'*Awwwwrighty!* We'll leave it like that then,' said Idiot expressing much irony. That did it, his temper having got the better of him Neiman stormed out, and again the door slammed against the wall as he left. After a few seconds Idiot's face loomed over his cot again, and looked at him as if he was about to consider carrying out an experiment of his own, and unnerving him momentarily he knew that in his present position he was completely at Idiot's mercy.

'Now then, where were we before we were rudely interrupted, 'said Idiot smugly, 'ah yes, metamorphosis... oh uh, something you should know right away, you won't be getting your memory back - none of you - at least, not for the present!'

'What does that mean exactly?' asked Fourteen struggling to make sense of it all.

'You're still in your "Meta" state,' he told him, 'you're to be put into a new "Meta" the day after tomorrow, so I'll have to be bloody quick if I'm going to get you all out of here!'

'I don't know your name by the way.'

Barry... Barry Smithey,' he replied slowly, 'I'll be back tonight after they've gone, I'll do something to make you "compos mentis" again... then we can talk! Your name is Jerry by the way, Jerry Valletta.'

'Thanks Barry,' said Jerry gratefully, 'I didn't know I had one, what are the names of Twelve and Thirty four?'

Mike Grey opposite, and Terry Britton,' he said hurriedly, 'now - I must go, it's nearly five o'clock!'

'Talking to yourself now Smithey are you, you fuckin' shit! You must have a split personality.' Barry hadn't heard Neiman return.

'What's it to you fuck-face,' countered Barry, 'I was just discussing with myself what a lovely day it's been.'

'You could've fooled me, mines been a fuckin' disaster!' confessed Neiman.

'That's why mines been *so good*,' said Barry taunting him again, 'and "we" both agree, and we laughed, and laughed, and laughed - 'night!'

Hearing the obscenities Neiman had hurled down the corridor at Barry, Jerry decided his eyes were better off firmly shut until he'd gone, only then would he be able to open a conversation with Mike and Terry. Listening to the various noises Neiman was making he thought about how much longer he'd have to stay in this cot, trapped by these unbreakable tethers! It was some thirty minutes before Neiman finally left for the night, and Jerry had to wait a good fifteen minutes before he could contact Mike and Terry.

'You both ok?' he half whispered, as if expecting Neiman to walk in the room again.

'Yeah,' replied Terry from his right.

'What's happening?' asked Mike, sounding desperate.

Barry's coming back later to tell us what he's gonna do... Mike, you ok?'

'Yeah, I guess so, I'm feeling sore as Hell from lying here so long!'

'Yes, I know what you mean, we're all suffering from "cot" syndrome!' answered Jerry, attempting to

console him. By the time Barry finally returned they felt they'd spent another year in those damned cots, and as he hadn't spoken since his return they could only assume it was him, and just in case, kept their mouths shut!

'Right lads!' said A chirpy voice suddenly, 'are you ready for the revelation of a lifetime?'

'I suppose that depends largely on what it is!' joked Terry.

'You'll like it, I can assure you of that! Look... I've gotta go to another part of the building for about half an hour, but don't worry, I haven't abandoned you - ok?' said Barry reassuringly.

'We're glad to hear that, I'd hate to spend the rest of my life here.' declared Mike.

'In that case you'll be glad when I return, 'cos that's exactly what they've got in store for you, spending the rest of your lives in here - as experiments!'

CHAPTER SIX

Considering their pending freedom half an hour more in these infernal cots wasn't too much to put up with, but that was assuming Barry was as good as his word! Half an hour came and went, and an hour more had passed before they heard his footsteps approach the ward.

'We'd almost given up on you!' announced Terry as Barry walked passed his cot.

'Yeah... sorry guys, it took longer than I thought, never mind, I'm here now so we can get things cracking.'

'Thank fuck for that!' said Mike emphatically.

'Why, was there a problem?' asked Barry, genuinely surprised.

'My back, my ass, my heels and my elbows are as sore as fuck!' said Mike categorically.

'Oh right - shit! I suppose it's the same for all of you?' There was no surprise on Jerry's part when a chorus of voices sounded on the night air.

'Ok we'll have you out in no time... I'm waiting for the security programme to download at the moment, as soon as it's ready I can release you all - *and give you back your memories!*'

'Is there any chance of Neiman coming back?' asked Jerry, realising he could scupper the whole thing for them.

'No, I don't think so... if he does I can take care of him, don't you worry your little heads about that!'

'So we're safe then?' asked Jerry, hoping for an affirmative.

'Sort of... the only gits that might cause us grief are security, but as far as they're concerned I'm here strictly legit!'

'Right then, I've got to go and see how my programme's coming along, I shouldn't be too long, perhaps when I get back I'll have some good news for you!' and with that he disappeared again.

'What d'you think Mike?' asked Jerry as soon as he'd left.

'At this moment I think we only have one option - trust him!' answered Mike truthfully.

'If you think about it, if he was going to do us any harm he'd be better off keeping us in these cots, instead of letting us out!' reasoned Terry.

'We *are* still in them at the moment!' added Mike earnestly, summarily smashing Terry's reason into the dust!

Ten minutes later Barry returned, and sticking his head in Jerry's cot asked how he was, and Jerry noticed he looked too happy, and the look on his face was one of smug satisfaction, like a small boy who's successfully sneaked the last piece of fudge. His expression concerned Jerry, as he couldn't help wondering what Barry had achieved, and mentally prepared himself to die; was genocide his intention? 'Right! Listen everyone,' boomed out Barry's voice, 'in a few seconds you will *all* have your memories back, I must tell you one thing - when you feel your mind come "alive", don't panic if your wrist and ankle straps don't release, there is a time delay on them and they won't open for one minute. This is a simply a safety measure put in by the clinic to stop participants - *participants? Fuckin' great* - from

panicking and damaging equipment, should they decide to run riot! So here goes.' A short silence ensued, then suddenly their memories returned, as Mike and Terry suddenly became verbose Jerry still waited, and wondered if he was being held back for some reason. Without warning his mind suddenly exploded with what seemed to him like cascade of untold knowledge, and felt as if someone had bestowed a fortune in his care. It was as if he suddenly knew everything, and his mind raced with a thousand thoughts, so much so that for a few seconds he thought he was experiencing a mental breakdown! Again without warning he rationalised, and within a few seconds a strange calmness had settled his mind. Hearing two clicks in rapid succession the wrist and armbands relaxed their hold, *he was free!* Suddenly afraid, he wondered if he dared to look out. Supposing death awaited those who were stupid enough to stick their head over the side of the cot! A smiling, red-bearded face suddenly appeared over side of his cot.

'Mike Grey!' said the smiling red-bearded face, 'come on, time you were out of there!' he said offering Jerry his hand, returning the smile Jerry took the offered hand, and stood for the first time in - well it was hard to say after metamorphosis - a long time? Stepping down from the cot his legs wobbled.

'Steady mate,' said Terry, lunging forward to catch him, 'we were the same.' he said grinning.

'Hello everyone,' said Jerry greeting his fellow "participants", as Barry came over and handed him a piece of paper.

'As there are many of you there's a chance that some of you may get lost, so here's an address and *your number* on here, when I give you the word to leave I want you all to go to this address - everyone ok with that?' as no one dissented so he continued, 'this is the tricky part of the operation, I have to time this right or we'll all die! My return will be the signal for you to leave... when you leave - *don't* panic - just run swiftly but safely, or many of you will die! *Make sure you go to the address on your sheet of paper - and don't lose it!* Ok, see you there!' With that Barry left for destinations unknown. Looking at his sheet of paper Jerry saw that Barry had drawn a small map on it to accompany the address and directions, and had photocopied as many as he'd need.

'What's going on,' asked Jerry, 'does anyone know?' 'Haven't got a clue mate.' replied Mike, slightly frustrated.

'Perhaps we should check this out for ourselves,' suggested a man from the bottom of the ward.

'No!' said Terry firmly; 'Barry wouldn't have gone to all this trouble if he wasn't genuine - *think about it!*'

'Yeah you're right,' agreed Jerry, 'we wait here 'til he gets back, taking matters into our own hands at this stage could be fatal, remember, we don't know this building like he does!' They didn't have long to wait, when slightly out of breath Barry returned, then studying his little group for a couple of seconds he then appeared to make a mental decision.

'Right! Get as close to the door as you - no! Go to the end of the corridor and wait for me, and for Chris'sake stand to one side so I can get through!'

Walking through the door he disappeared to the other end of the ward, at which juncture it formed a T shape with their own, although they could hear Barry's voice he was too far away for clarity, and so assumed he was telling the others down there what he'd just told them. Sweating profusely he suddenly appeared from the gloom.

'I'll tell you what I've just told them,' he started, then pausing for a second, presumably to make sure he'd made no mistakes, he went rapidly through his speech, 'when you leave here turn right, and go to the end of the building, then turn right again, and head towards the road going to the top of the site, when you reach the gate there won't be anyone there, so don't hesitate - go straight through, and.... well, you've got the address! I know you're all hungry - but there will be plenty of food when you get there - compliments of the company!' Putting his hand in the air palm forward as a caution he looked out of the window, then fumbling in his pocket he retrieved a small black remote. Waiting a few seconds he motioned them forward and pressed a button on the remote, a massive blast from the other end of the complex suddenly lit up the night sky, and red-orange flames suddenly leapt two hundred feet in the air! Following their instructions everyone thankfully ran at an orderly pace, and all escapees got through the gate without a hitch, eventually arriving at their predetermined address, which as it turned out, wasn't that difficult to find. It appeared Barry had planned their escape well, for which they would all be eternally grateful, and Jerry had already thought about a gesture to thank him for his

consideration. Hearing screams to his right Jerry saw fire running down the road, and a few poor unfortunates further back had been caught in it! Hoping that by some miracle the fire would extinguish itself they were still running; trying to retain their precious lives. The explosion had released some sort of volatile liquid from a storage depot in the building.

Phlegethon! thought Jerry running on, but there was nothing anyone could do for those poor souls!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Seeing Mike twenty feet ahead Jerry quickened his pace to catch him, and realised they were almost there, so following others they filed through a set of double doors. The building was Georgian and probably listed, although it was also very dilapidated thought Jerry. Following Mike through the doors they came into a large hall, but how large he wasn't sure in the gloom. Having found Terry they inevitably started talking about the explosion, and subsequently the river of fire that ran along the road. The doors slammed shut behind them, then as the hubbub of voices died away someone switched on the lights, and their eyes beheld a hall big enough to hold two thousand people. The windows had been dressed with heavy black curtains, and at one time it had obviously been a very grand municipal building, but for one reason or another it had fallen into disrepair, and Jerry guessed it was most likely through lack of use or funds. Making his way to the front of the hall Barry walked onto a stage, then motioning everyone to move closer he waited patiently while everyone had complied.

'Ok, he said, still slightly breathless, 'apart from a few regrettable fatalities most of you made it, have you all had enough to eat?' Before anyone had a chance to answer he continued. 'Now, before we can release you back into the real world we have to do some minor surgery on you to remove the radio implants from your necks, that will be carried out by me, and my friend Victor.'

'Why didn't you take them out back there - before we

left?' shouted a voice from the assembly.

'Good question my friend,' answered Barry sincerely, 'it's quite simple - there just wasn't time!' His answer seemed to satisfy everyone, and looking back it was obvious, they couldn't have removed every single implant before morning, as without doubt the game would have been up, and Neiman would have had a field day!

'Because the authorities are now officially *looking* for you, I would ask you to be patient and wait 'til everyone's had their beacons removed before we let anyone out, are you all ok with that?' A few voiced their assent, but after all, having come this far it would be sheer lunacy to leave too soon and risk recapture, and end up back in there again!

Making ready to remove his implant Victor called out Jerry's number, who was amazed at how easily and quickly he'd remembered it, as he hadn't even thought about it since leaving the building! Although since then his mind had been ultra-busy with the escape, he realised it was normal to have random thoughts, even with what one considered trivia.

'Why have we had these beacons implanted in us?' asked Jerry, and Victor then passively imparted his knowledge.

'You've been used in an experiment of "Metamorphosis" - all of you! That is why we can't let you go straight away, you will need new identities as well as having your beacons removed... if we left them in the authorities would track you down inside an hour.'

'How come we didn't feel their presence when we

metamorphosed, surely they would have been huge and weighty on an insect!' Walking towards them Barry grinned.

'It's a reasonable enough question, the beacons are made of "Smart metal" and are designed to metamorphose with you! So, no - you wouldn't have noticed them.'

'What exactly were we?' asked a voice from the rear of the hall. 'I mean what did we metamorphose into?' 'As we have no records to go, on it's hard to tell which of you were which now, but I'll tell you what I do know... some of you were spiders, others were moths, some were centipedes... and some were ants. Not all of you made it back, as you can imagine in our world insects fall foul of many things. Some were hit by cars, trucks, and buses etc., others fell prey to predators of their particular species, and a number of other incidents.'

'How come we can't remember any of this then, surely we should remember something?' shouted a swarthy looking man standing next to Mike.

'No, you won't,' replied Victor calmly, 'you see when you get your original memory back, your "Meta" memory is retained by the computer, and unfortunately we didn't have time to retrieve them, had that been the case I'm certain you'd have found it very alarming.' Barry shot Victor a glance after that last statement, as Terry looked at Mike who had also noticed it.

'You know,' added Victor as an afterthought, 'you have a lot to be thankful for... they weren't going to release you - ever! We, that is Barry and me, know of plans to send you out again, only this time you

would be something different, spiders would be centipedes, moths would be ants and vice versa, a kind of musical metamorphosis if you like, after that? Well...'

Some hours later Barry and Victor had finished removing the last of the beacons, and wearily lay down their instruments Barry made his way back to the stage.

'Right gentlemen,' he announced tiredly, 'that's it, we'll have to lock you in here for forty eight hours, that's not to keep you in - but to keep nosy those bastards out! After that we'll give you your new ID's... and you will be free to go!' Walking off stage he joined Victor at the door.

'Food!' he announced with his hand on the door knob, 'go to the back of the stage, turn left, and in the first changing room you'll find more, and it's enough to feed you for two days, oh uh... there's also a few beers each.' The door squeaked slightly as it closed on the happy faces it would hide from the world that night, and for a few seconds after they'd left there was brief silence, but inevitably one or two voices started conversing, then someone pulled the ring on a tinnie, and that started it, the ring pulling that followed was prolific enough to be declared a musical extravaganza!

Pulling on the handbrake Barry and Victor got out and shut their respective doors quietly, and walking to the large Georgian door Barry stood to one side while Victor pulled a ring full of keys from his pocket. Selecting one he opened the door, and taking a furtive glance up and down the road shut it silently behind them.

'Are you gonna do it... or shall I?' said Victor lighting a cigarette.

'No! I told you - I'll do it!' replied Barry testily, 'I want to make sure they understand.... *everything* depends on that.' Walking into the room for a few seconds Barry looked at the chair as if it was going to execute him, then sitting he clapped his hands twice at Victor who in turn threw him a cigarette, and catching it he put it in his mouth and caught the lighter that followed it. Picking up the receiver he drew heavily on his cigarette and dialled a number. The phone rang for almost two minutes before someone answered.

'Hello? Who am I talking to?' asked Barry.

'I'm Wilkins!' said the voice, 'I'm the cleaner, there's been a big explosion here-'

'Yes I know that, that's why I'm ringing,' interrupted Barry, 'get Neiman on the phone - *NOW!*'

'Ok sir,' said Wilkins, thinking he was talking to one of the bosses. Having waited for several minutes Barry wondered why Neiman was taking so long to come to the phone.

'Neiman!' shouted the head of department.

'Listen you shit fuckin' creep, this is Barry, I'm go-'

'Smithey? What in fuck's name are you doing?'

'Where are you, and why aren't you in-'

'Shut the fuck up you fuckin' idiot - *and just listen*, that's all you've gotta do.... *right!* Do I have your *full* attention?'

'Yes - you have my *full* attention.'

'Ok, now we're getting somewhere... I'm gonna give you some instructions, and I want you to follow them to the letter - ok?'

'Ok?'

'Go up to Barton's office and tell him that we have *all* the escapees, and you tell Barton that we want ten million in used notes! I'll give him instructions where to leave it later. Also - tell him this - *if I get the slightest whiff of "old Bill" I'll release all the prisoners - do you understand, and make sure Barton understands!* You know what they're carrying, so you know it's in your interest as well as the world's to do everything I say.' Returning the phone to its cradle Barry looked at Victor.

'Let's open the bubbly, it's time to retire!' he said popping the cork..

THE END

CALLY

CHAPTER ONE

For twenty eight years Brian had been used to having a caring and attentive wife, and now all that was gone he was lonely for that fact alone, through his own doing she'd turned out to be not so caring and attentive. During the week things weren't so bad, and he was out and about researching for one story or another, although he never followed up on his labours. It was weekends Brian feared the most. Invariably if he couldn't think of anything to do he'd go down to the supermarket and buy a bottle of wine, usually large. He'd wander up and down the aisles pretending to look for something, just so he could see and hear other people, anything to combat the loneliness he felt. After an hour he would pay at the checkout and walk the ten minutes home. Saturday would mostly be spent listening to music or watching a good film on TV, however, it wasn't that people didn't want to know Brian, in fact it was quite the opposite, although craving company it was Brian who didn't want to mix with people, but felt confused and out of place since Lynn had left. Never mind, Johnny was coming over tonight, and Brian had always considered him to be his best mate, although they hadn't met years ago they grew up in the same era, and shared a common interest and past they could both relate to, so he would cook a good dinner for them tonight, and with a bottle wine it would be a good evening. Shutting the front door he

realised he needed to get out of the house, the only problem was, where could he go? Brainstorms were minimal to put it mildly. He picked up the local freebie while the kettle was boiling and started browsing through the myriad line ads assaulting his vision, then suddenly from the corner of his eye he noticed a quarter page advert for a local reclamation yard, it was one he'd seen a couple of times and knew where it was. Studying a few items in the advert it suddenly occurred to him that his garden could do with a bit of a face-lift. Pouring his coffee he decided he would go there that morning, and hopefully he might pick up a bargain. It wasn't as if he was short of money, as being a successful writer had given him financial security for the rest of his life, with plenty to will on to his son and both his daughters.

The Jaguar purred to a halt on the patch of waste ground that doubled as a car park, lighting a cigarette Brian locked the car and walked over to a shack he assumed was the main office.

'Good morning, is it alright if I take a look around?' he asked politely.

'We'll be glad if you do sir, perhaps you'll see something you like... if you need any help just shout!' In most trades today it wasn't very often you found people that were genuinely helpful, so Brian thanked him for his kindness and humour, and if they were polite it was contrived, the sort that comes out of a bottle! Brian walked slowly around the compound looking at this and that, and noticing one or two items he logged them in his memory as he went. There were various planters, fountains,

gazebos, garden seats, even a Russian tank complete with its identity markings! It was then he saw two huge pinnacles, it obvious they were from the same building, however one was priced cheaper than the other. Although a little the worse for wear after a five minute study Brian decided they were not beyond repair. An idea suddenly popped up in his mind, he smiled, it wasn't often that happened since Lynn had walked out. Turning abruptly, he headed for the site office.

'Excuse me,' he asked poking his head through the door, 'those two pinnacles over there, can you deliver them?'

'If you live close by we can deliver them for you free sir!' said the man he'd spoken to earlier.

'Four thousand five hundred pounds,' he said reflectively, 'would you accept four thousand for the two?'

'I'll ask the boss,' he replied, then disappeared through a door at the rear. Returning a few minutes later he informed Brian that the boss had accepted his offer. Brian wrote him a cheque.

'We'll have them to you on Friday if that's convenient?' said the boss suddenly poking his head through the door. Happy with the arrangement Brian would need a few days to choose and clear a site for them anyhow. Leaving the office he walked over to have one last look at them before leaving. Both pinnacles had been removed from the main roof at the leading which was excellent as far as he was concerned, and meant restoration work would be minimal, although the paint was old and would have to be burnt off he would repaint using the original

colours, being maroon and white both were finished in lead at the crown having rails on all four sides.

CHAPTER TWO

Apologising profusely Johnny arrived twenty minutes late, but Brian brushed it aside saying he was glad that Johnny had turned up! Producing a bottle of red wine he listened as Brian told him he had already bought one.

'Looks like we're in for a session tonight then!' said Johnny making them both laugh.

'A bottle each!' proclaimed Brian turning the corkscrew. 'So, how's the music industry these days?'

'Oh... so so, I've been offered a six month tour with a quartet, my manager says it could be quite lucrative... *and* it's in the U.S!' said Johnny enthusiastically.

'Good for you! You'll take it obviously?' replied Brian, then realised he wouldn't see his mate for a long while.

'Brenda doesn't much like the idea... but you have to go where the money is today.'

'You're absolutely right, who can afford to turn down that sort of money?' added Brian, although his question was more of a profound statement. With the small talk over dinner was served, so sitting in the lounge they watched a movie while consuming their food and wine. The film they were watching turned out to be fairly banal, and Johnny started talking over the dialogue.

'Sorry Brian,' he said suddenly, 'I'm forgetting my manners!'

'No, not at all Johnny, it's a load of crap... I'll switch it off.' The room went quiet for a couple of seconds,

then describing them in detail Brian told Johnny about the two pinnacles he'd bought earlier that day. 'So when are they delivering them?' asked Johnny, intrigued by Brian's purchase.

'Friday, come over and see them if you 've got time.' invited Brian.

'I'd love to, I must warn you though, it's shopping day and Brenda doesn't like waiting!'

'Well... can't blame her, she's got things to do as well.' replied Brian politely. Ten thirty and Johnny looked at his watch.

'I'm afraid I must go.' said Johnny with a heavy sigh, and knowing Brenda was a demanding woman he sensed Johnny was reluctant to go, and it was more than possible that Johnny was glad to get away from home whenever he could. However, he wouldn't say anything to Johnny, as insulting his best mates wife wasn't something he would even consider.

'Yes of course,' replied Brian getting up from his armchair, 'well it's been a bloody good evening.'

'Thanks Brian, I've really enjoyed myself... we'll do it again before I go Stateside.' Brian readily agreed, then let Johnny start his twenty minute walk home.

As Brian shut the door another one opened, a door of silence he couldn't help but notice. Giving himself a mental boost he decided to give his daughters a ring the following morning, and invite them over to see the pinnacles as soon as they were finished. By eleven thirty he'd washed up and put everything away, and looking quickly at the TV guide there was nothing that particularly grabbed his attention. Freshening his mouth with a gargle he replaced the toothpaste and mouthwash in the

cabinet, then jumping into bed he checked the alarm clock; eleven forty five. He lay there for hours staring at the ceiling, as a million thoughts raced through his mind, Lynn! Once or twice he drifted off, and dreamt of her coming home. Feeling a tear run down his cheek he brushed it away and turned on his side, and hoped that this time the sandman would be more benevolent.

As it always did the alarm went off at six, and Brian lay there for ten minutes listening to the inane babbling of some early morning dj without hearing to a single word. Hitting the snooze button he turned over and dozed off, but nine minutes later it insisting he got up, then deciding the clock was out of order he switched it off; bad manners to wake someone up at that time of the morning! Ten to nine... *ten to nine!*

'Shit!' a post-expletive shower would hopefully prepare him for another day, but what would he do today? He wasn't into writing at present, and hadn't written much since Lynn had gone, even his agent had all but given up on him. Jumping out of the shower he towelled himself dry and shaved. He wasn't feeling good this day, and shaving didn't help matters either as the razor wounded him twice! Down in the kitchen he studied the contents of the fridge and cupboards, cereal was out! Muesli a definite no! no! Comfort food! Yes, that was it, a fry up, a full English breakfast! Fifteen minutes later he buttered a piece of bread, and swallowed the last of his orange juice, then sat to consume his masterpiece. Lighting a cigarette he downed the last of his coffee and still felt no better! God he was

missing Lynn, life was now one big void, and he hated it. Inexorably dragged into a pit of despair a tear rolled down his cheek, and his shoulders jerked involuntarily as he burst into tears as Lynn's face haunted him. Running upstairs he grabbed a handful of tissues and dried his eyes, then walked into the bedroom and sat on the bed, this was no good he thought, he would *have* to pull himself together!

The owner of the antique shop eyed Brian suspiciously, as he'd been looking at the grandfather clock for over fifteen minutes, and his scrutiny of the piece had been more than close.

'Can I help you sir?' inquired the well spoken owner. 'Yes, I'm surprised to find you open on a Sunday... this is a *genuine* Harrison is it?' asked Brian, who'd never bought a clock of this value before.

'Of that I can assure you sir! And uh... this town is a tourist attraction, we must make the best of it in this day and age.' he replied loftily, and felt insulted by the mere thought that merchandise in his establishment might be other than genuine. Well, a thousand and fifty pounds wasn't bad for a clock with a good calibre, and it *had* got him through the morning! The afternoon was something he would face later. Anyhow, he'd always fancied a grandfather clock but until now had never got around to it, as his writing had always got in the way.

CHAPTER THREE

Pulling back the curtains Brian looked out to see that Monday was going to be another beautiful day, and he felt guilty feeling low; surely he should be happy. God had not smiled on him recently, but after that thought he felt more guilty than ever. It wasn't God's fault Lynn had left him, it was his, and he only had himself to blame. If only he hadn't gone off with that Jeanette... what-ever-her-name-was! One mistake had cost him his happiness! Apologising to God for his behaviour he went down to breakfast and opened his mail, there was always something on a Monday, and there might just be a letter from Lynn... telling him she wants to come home. Two bills, a demand from his insurers strongly advising he upgrade his life policy, and that was it! lighting a cigarette he walked out through the conservatory onto his expansive patio, that stretched beyond the length of the house! Seventy feet in length and tiered down with the lawn it sloped away at slightly more than thirty degrees. Blackbirds competed with song thrush - and cuckoo! Putting his coffee down on the Cotswold stone barbeque he soaked up the wonder of it, and pondered as to how anyone would want to live in a city. Still, but having no time to waste he chose a site for the pinnacles that was now his immediate priority, as everything had to be ready for Friday. Five minutes later he was standing at the lower edge of his garden, and the thick deciduous wood to the left was awash with bird song, as was the copse on his right. His garden was the envy of most who visited, it was cottage style on a massive

scale, and deliberately designed for children, his grandchildren. Sadly he'd never "made it" early enough to give his own children the benefits of a garden like this, but he'd made damn sure his grandchildren wouldn't miss out! His eyes surveyed the beautiful pastoral scene in front of him, and it was then another idea sprang to mind. Thinking about it for a couple of minutes, he turned and walked briskly back to the house.

'Good morning Tanner and Breasley, can I help you?' said a polite young voice.

'Yes, I hope so, I'm Brian Masters, I was wondering if you could tell me who owns the field abutting the rear of my property?'

'Hello Brian, nice to hear from you, as to who owns that... um, I know there's a tenant farmer on the land, but I'll make some enquiries... can I ring you back later today?'

'Paul, sorry, I didn't realise it was you, yes this afternoon will be fine, if you can't reach me on the landline call me on my mobile, I'll be spending a large part of the day at the bottom of the garden,' Feeling a bit sheepish Brian rang off, it was Paul who'd found him the land for his house, and he hadn't recognised his voice! Feeling better now he'd involved himself in something he went back to the garden, and taking another look at that field he clarified the picture in his mind. Fifteen minutes later he'd decided what he was going to do, and reckoning the field was about four acres it was certainly big enough for what he wanted. It wouldn't matter that he wasn't able to buy the field before the pinnacles arrived, that was an idea he could develop

later. By late afternoon Paul hadn't rang him, and Brian pondered as to whether he should ring and see if he'd had a problem, but knowing Paul he knew he would do his best, and the information he received would be genuine. Tuesday morning and Brian's thoughts were again on the garden, and his mind was at fever pitch thinking about this project. On his way to the kitchen for a cup of tea the phone rang in the hallway, so picking up the receiver it was Paul on the other end apologising profusely for not getting back to him as promised.

'We had a bit of a panic on yesterday, a sale nearly collapsed, there was a fault with one of the properties we're handling... anyhow, enough of that, the field you want is owned by a Mr. Claud Billingham, and he owns several farms around here.'

'Yes, the name rings a bell,' replied Brian, and wanted to clarify his needs to Paul, 'the thing is I want to buy that field, can you find out its size, and the price he'd sell at? Oh, also... although money is no object, I would appreciate it if you didn't let on who I am, I don't want him thinking he can "clean up"!'.

'The thing is it's prime land and he'll know it, but don't worry Brian, discretion is our watchword, I'll make some tentative inquiries and get back to you.'

Putting the phone down Brian grinned - so far, so good!

Tuesday and Wednesday went by in the usual lonely manner, although attempting to start on a story he'd had in mind for about a week, but in his current state of mind he wasn't doing it justice and abandoned it after two hours. The builders had

finished putting in the footings for the pinnacles, and the "boss" waited in the hallway while Brian made out a cheque to pay him. The "boss", another Brian, Brian "Paddy" Jones if there could ever be such a name, was a rough and ready sort, but Brian liked him, and he'd always done a first rate job. Friday morning went slowly, and he was just beginning to think the reclamation yard had forgotten his precious delivery when a hiss of air brakes at the end of the driveway alerted him, there was no mistaking it, they were here! Seeing the driver make his way up the driveway Brian walked out to meet him.

'I'd almost given up on you!' he said grinning.

'Sorry, hell of an accident at the traffic lights... someone turned right when they shouldn't have - I think!'

'Oh Christ!' answered Brian alarmed at the news, 'well you're here now, that's what counts.' Directing him down the lane that ran the length of his property, Brian said he could drop them right on the spot. Lining them up before dropping them onto the footings that "Paddy" had put in for him was a slow and laborious affair, but true to form they slotted straight in, although Brian gave himself a pat on the back, he knew it was his name-sakes accurate measuring that had ensured a perfect fit! All he had to do now was replace the rotten woodwork and build a staircase on the side of each pinnacle and paint them. Signing the delivery note Brian walked back to the house, and hearing the phones demanding ring he snatched up the receiver and asked who was calling. It was Paul from the estate

agents, and he'd been successful in contacting Claud Billingham about the sale of the field.

'He's a greedy man Brian,' Paul told him, 'Yes! He's willing to sell, but... he wants two thousand six hundred an acre!'

'No sale!' was Brian's firm and immediate answer.

'I agree.' Paul agreed, 'I think we'll let him stew for a while, I won't reply, we'll let him come to us. Personally I think you could get away with offering eighteen hundred, he'll have to come down, his price is way over the top!'

'How many acres are we talking about?' asked Brian.

'Six, his price would bring your bill to fifteen thousand six hundred, two thousand four over the top!'

'I'll leave it with you then Paul.' said Brian in conclusion. Ringing off he realised it wouldn't be easy, and knowing greedy people as he did it would be a long wait before he'd hear from Paul again.

CHAPTER FOUR

In bed that night his companion loneliness crept in as usual, and he lay for hours thinking of Lynn, and as he lay there in the dark a tear rolled down his cheek. It was at that point between sleep and consciousness, when the slightest of noises brought him back to full consciousness with a start, although uncertain of what he'd heard, it had sounded like an organ, and listening carefully he hoped to hear it again, but it wasn't forthcoming. Putting his head back on the pillow he prepared to go to sleep once more. Suddenly he heard it again, but it *was* an organ! A few minutes later he heard it again, but this time it was clearer. He wondered what, and more to the point, where it was coming from at this time of night? The clock read two minutes past midnight; was there a fair in town? If so he hadn't heard of one! Awake early the next morning he remembered that eerie organ music as he walked to the rear bedroom, as from there he had a good view of the fields adjacent to his garden, and if there was a fair in town it was always put in farmer Clegg's field, but there was nothing, just a herd of Jersey's grazing as usual. Thinking no more of it he went down for breakfast, another lonely affair as he craved Lynn's company, and silently asked why she hadn't come home? like a tape recorder out of control the thought went through his head repeatedly. Another lonely day slipped quietly by, nobody phoned, nobody called at the house, and regarding his little plan, by mid afternoon he'd decided to take things a step further. Picking up the

phone he dialled a number, and after what seemed like a lifetime to Brian someone eventually answered the phone.

'RSPCA - can I help you?'

'Yes, I would like to know if you can point me in the right direction to purchase three donkeys?'

'Have you got proper facilities to care for them?' asked the officer.

'Not yet, but then I don't want to buy them yet, I'm waiting on the purchase of some land to the rear of my property, so it won't be for a while yet.'

'I see, how much land will you be buying sir?' inquired the officer.

'You want to know a lot don't you?' said Brian in rebuke.

'Well sir, we can't be too careful,' replied the officer, 'we get many complaints about animal neglect and cruelty so-'

'Oh God, yes of course, please accept my apologies, I was forgetting.' added Brian regretting his outburst.

'Not at all sir, it's an easy mistake to make if you're not in the business so to speak.' replied the officer patiently. 'However, we can certainly help you... can I make some enquiries and get back to you?'

'Yes - please, my name is Brian Masters, and again, I am so sorry for my rudeness.'

'The Brian Masters,' inquired the officer, 'apology accepted Brian, I loved your last book, The Life and Times of Jason Cane, very thought provoking!'

'Thankyou, it's very kind of you to say so.' giving the officer his phone number Brian rang off, and was touched by the mans reference to his book, as

he was more emotional since Lynn had gone, so it upset him for a while when people were nice to him. The same question loomed up in his mind again for the millionth time. Why had he been so dumb? Why had he gone off on a fleeting fancy? Sure she was extremely good looking, but then so was Lynn for that matter, but he didn't know this Jeanette half as well! She could *never* replace the companionship that he had with Lynn, and he was now finding that out to his cost. Another day over, another day done! Cleaning his teeth - once more, washing his face - once more, suddenly it all seemed so futile! In bed his mind drifted inexorably to thoughts of Lynn, and again he cried in desperation, but there was no one to console him. Eventually he tired and drifted into sleep, but suddenly he was awake; it was that music again! This time he knew he wasn't imagining it, and would have to investigate. Putting on his jeans and a T shirt he ran down stairs two at a time, then opening the back door he suddenly remembered the alarm, and ran back quickly to switch it off. Running out of the house he grabbed his torch from the worktop on the way out, but out in the open he could hear it distinctly as he ran down the patio steps, although the torch beam showed nothing the sound was clearly coming from the bottom of the garden. As he approached the fence the music died away, as he shone his torch around the night was still, then startling him for a second a small creature suddenly darted through the bushes! Staying there for a few minutes he heard nothing, and the night was as quiet as the proverbial grave. Returning to the house he undressed and climbed back into bed, and lay awake

for almost two hours thinking about that music he'd heard; the tune seemed strangely familiar.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hearing Johnny's voice on the phone he was dumbstruck for a few seconds, and Brian couldn't believe six months had gone by so quickly!

'Hello? hello? Are you there Brian? Is that you?'

'Sorry Johnny, yes, I didn't realise you were back.'

'Yes. I'm amazed at how quickly the time has gone, I was wondering... would it be an imposition if I invited myself over tonight? I've got so much to tell you about the tour.'

'Of course, think nothing of it, I'll be glad to see a friendly face again... I'll cook that meal again if you like, as I remember you enjoyed it last time.'

'*Yes please,*' replied Johnny gratefully, 'I'll certainly look forward to that!'

'Good, because I need your advice on something, nothing serious, it's just something more in your line of work, well... sort of.' Ringing off Brian went straight to the cellar, yes, an Oak aged Bulgarian Merlot, it wasn't a particularly expensive wine but he liked it, and he'd never been a wine snob, his philosophy being "if you enjoy it - drink it!"

Johnny arrived at seven thirty, and taking his coat Brian showed him into the morning room, then pouring two large whiskies they sat on the long low sofa while.

'Sorry mate,' opened Brian after an embarrassing silence, the silence that people experience after not having seen each other for a long spell, 'I'm afraid I'm a bit late tonight, it should only take another twenty minutes. Still, it'll give us more time to enjoy

a few of these.' Johnny laughed.

'I can't argue with that, cheers! Well... tell me about this problem of yours.' said Johnny, intrigued by the mystery.

'Well, to tell you the truth I feel a bit silly,' replied Brian, and hoped Johnny wouldn't laugh at his account, 'you see for quite a while I've been hearing this sound... no, sorry, not a sound, music! It sounds like an organ, I can't quite put my finger on it... it reminds me of when I was a small boy,' but Johnny was not laughing, so he continued, 'I really can't tell you anymore than that, I was hoping you could shed some light on it.'

'I see,' said Johnny after a few seconds, 'when exactly do you hear this "music"... and how often?'

'On average... about twice, maybe three times a fortnight.' answered Brian uncertainly.

'The only difficulty I have in identifying it is that I will need to hear it, how will we get 'round that one?'

 asked Johnny sounding interested.

'Ah, now what I was hoping was that maybe you could stay here for a week, or ten days, what d'you think?' Carefully considering Brian's request Johnny sat in silence for over a minute.

'Ok, I'll do it,' he answered eventually, 'but! I will have to ask Brenda first.' On the understanding that he would have to make sure it was alright with his wife Brian readily agreed. They talked for an hour about Johnny's tour with the quartet, and Johnny eventually told Brian there was a spill-off from this tour, and he'd been offered another one in Australia in four months time!

'I should be able to make it Monday evening, I'll

bring a change of clothes with me and uh...'

'Don't worry about a thing mate, I'll take care of everything.' As Johnny started his walk home Brian closed the door. Monday afternoon the door startled Brian from an involuntary nap, and opening the door he was delighted to see Johnny standing there, case in hand.

'I hope I'm not intruding,' he said, 'as I had nothing else to do I thought I'd come 'round early.'

'No, of course not,' replied Brian readily, 'I'm glad to see you... so it was alright with Brenda then?'

'Well, not exactly, she thinks I'm going off with another woman... if you get a call it'll be her checking up on me, so don't be surprised.'

'Look, if you'd rather not go through with it I'll understand... I don't want to make things difficult for you.'

'No, it's ok... really,' replied Johnny quickly, 'I'm glad to have the break.' Wondering what he meant by that, if it was what he thought he meant, then his assumption was right about Brenda thought Brian, then showed Johnny the room adjacent to his own.

'I thought it better to put you in here, if either of us hear anything it'll be quicker than running the full length of the landing!' explained Brian laughing, 'well, I'd better go and see to the dinner while you unpack. An hour and one bottle of wine later dinner had been eagerly consumed by both, and for more than an hour Johnny related more of his tour experiences, as Brian opened another bottle to accompany them. There was another silence for a few minutes.

'You know,' said Johnny suddenly breaking the

silence, 'secretly I've always envied you your garden, it really is quite incredible.'

'Christ Johnny, you can come and see it any time... you know that!' replied Brian openly.

'It's very kind of you to say so... I don't know whether I can come all that often though.' said Johnny thoughtfully.

'How do you mean?'

'Well... this is difficult, I don't want to offend you, you see-'

'You could never offend me!' cut in Brian quickly, 'tell me what's wrong... perhaps I can help in some way.'

'It's Brenda,' started Johnny tentatively, 'she sees you as, well... competition I suppose, she has this crazy notion you're trying to lure me away from her!'

'Good God!' said Brian laughing, 'that's the last thing I'd do, look, would it be prudent for me to have a chat with her?'

'Uh, no, no, I think that would be detrimental to put it mildly.' replied Johnny, obviously puzzled as to how he could solve the problem.

'I'll tell you what,' suggested Brian suddenly, 'impress upon her the need to get to know me, invite her over for dinner next Saturday evening... the three of us can eat, drink and chat about... anything we like!'

'I'll give it a go, but it may be some time before I can convince her to come.'

'I'll wait 'til I hear from you then.' said Brian finally. As it was eleven thirty, and they hadn't received a call from Brenda, Brian suggested they retire for the night. Midnight came and went, but no music came

forth, and Brian wondered if it was like going to the dentist, as you sit in the chair your toothache mysteriously disappears! Had his music disappeared now that Johnny was here, only time would tell. The morning sun was very hot on the patio, so sitting under the pergola where it was dappled and cool Brian and Johnny ate toast and drank tea.

CHAPTER SIX

Taking Johnny to see the pinnacles Brian explained his plans for the bottom of the garden, and Johnny listened to the water fall as he and Brian descended through the garden accompanied by the trickling waters of the stream that ran the length of the garden.

'I'm impressed!' said Johnny with obvious delight at Brian's cleverness.

'Thankyou,' replied Brian gratefully, 'it all depends on how soon, or even if, I can get my hands on that field.' Returning to the house Johnny realised it was a mock Tudor affair, although by appearance no one would have guessed, as it was expertly built and professionally appointed with six bedrooms, a gigantic lounge, three bathrooms, and one of them en suite. Being a large house he wondered if Brian would stay here much longer now that Lynn had gone, and Johnny asked Brian if that was the case.

'No, I'll never leave here, even if Lynn doesn't come home... it took me many years to achieve this, and I'm not going to give it up - ever!' Tuesday and Wednesday night came and went without a murmur from the mysterious organ. Sleeping at the back of the house it was midnight on Thursday when Johnny heard finally it, but knocking on Brian's door he found him dressed and ready to go.

'I'm surprised you heard it at the front of the house.' he said in a whisper.

'I always sleep with the windows open.' replied Brian yawning. They left the house via the conservatory, and to light their way through the

winding paths of the lower garden Brian switched on his torch.

'I know that song, it's... uh, The Music Box Dancer, it's a very old tune, as for the instrument I feel certain that it's a calliope, although it's strange hearing one nowadays, they were *generally* associated with the seaside.'

'Really,' replied Brian, admiring Johnny's knowledge of music, 'I've never heard of it, but what I can't figure out is where it's coming from.'

'Basically it's a steam organ, all self respecting piers had one a century ago. Hang on a minute,' said Johnny suddenly, 'where do these pinnacles come from?'

'I've no idea, I got them from the local reclamation yard as you know, why, what are you saying?'

'I'm not sure yet... but do you believe in ghosts?'

'I don't pooh pooh the idea, but then I've never met one.' replied Brian, and curious at his companions question.

'I think we should find out where these pinnacles came from, I think they might have something to do with it!' blurted out Johnny suddenly.

'You mean the pinnacles are haunted, surely not!'

'It could be... I have a friend who's an expert of sorts on these matters, he's told me countless tales of haunting that have nothing to do with houses at all! Would you like me to ask him about this?'

'If you think it'll help unravel the mystery, yes, thanks Johnny.' replied Brian gratefully. The music grew more faint as they approached the house, so returning to their rooms they slept soundly for what remained of the night.

'Brian!' shouted Johnny excitedly as he walked into the hall, 'I've just been on the phone to Brenda, she's agreed to come on Saturday night!'

'That's good! I'm glad, well I'll have to see if I can rustle up something extra special for dinner!'

'She'll appreciate that, I know she will.' said Johnny gratefully. Saturday was a great success, and Brenda took to Brian within ten minutes of arriving, then, he was a likeable sort of chap. At midnight Johnny and Brenda left, and he promised Brian faithfully he would get in touch with his friend about the pinnacles. It was Brian's turn to envy Johnny, at least he was going home with Brenda. A nice garden is all very well, but it's no substitute for companionship!

Sunday came and went without much ado, but it was Monday morning whilst having his breakfast Brian was interrupted by his mobile, and it was Paul from the estate agents with news of his offer on the field.

'He's dropped his price surprisingly, I didn't expect to hear so soon, but... anyhow his latest compromise is £2300 and acre, but I think it's still too high!'

'I'll tell you what Paul, tell him my final offer is £2250, if he accepts that we'll do a deal!' Wanting that field for a very important purpose Brian didn't mind paying a bit over the odds, but he wouldn't be bullied into paying an extortionate price! Promising he would get in touch with Brian as soon as he had a result Paul rang off. Phoning his children he asked them over for a visit, as long as they all came at the same time on the same day, and needless to say they were suitably intrigued, as Brian refused to give

anything away! The following Sunday his children, their spouses and grandchildren all arrived at eleven o'clock, and he thanked God he'd brought them up to be punctual. Coffee and copious biscuits consumed Brian proceeded to tell them of his plans. Having finished rebuilding the pinnacles two days earlier, a staircase on both at opposing sides were freshly painted in their original colours, and hanging baskets had been added to all four corners to give them that final touch, and marry them in with the rest of the garden.

'Do you think you would like a donkey each?' he asked his grandchildren. His granddaughters shrieked a resounding yes, but his grandson made it perfectly clear he would rather have a motorbike!

'Don't be rude Peter!' said his mother, and rebuked him for refusing his grandfathers generous offer.

'No! Please,' cut in Brian quickly, 'I think it's a splendid idea! I don't know why I didn't think of it!'

'Dad, you can't spend money like that on him!' challenged his eldest daughter grinning all over her face.

'Why on Earth not?' replied Brian seriously, 'are you denying my rights as a grandfather to spoil my grandchildren? That's tantamount to cruelty you know!' They laughed at his joke.

'Well, aren't you lucky, I think you should say a big thankyou to Grandpa for that.' Three granddaughters and one grandson saying thankyou was almost more than he could bare, choking back tears he swallowed a lump in his throat, and his eyes moistened embarrassingly as he listened to their dear little voices. Then going to play in the garden they

considered to be "wonderland", his youngest daughter had noticed he was close to tears.

'You're still missing her aren't you dad?' she asked in her usual soft tone of voice.

'How did you guess?' said Brian trying to make light of it, 'oh, yes, I suppose I always will, I was so dumb!'

'Quite honestly Dad I think she could have been a little less histrionic, after all it was only one mistake.'

'It's nice of you to say so, but... I've only got myself to blame!'

'Well Dad, we're all behind you one hundred percent!'

'That's very nice to know, but don't forget she is your mother, anyhow, let's talk about something more cheerful... come and see what I've done at the bottom of the garden!' he invited her, and smiled again.

'I hope you've cleaned up the mess!' his daughter joked, but he looked confused for a moment, then the penny dropped, and they laughed loudly as they walked down the tiered terraces to the lower garden. Bees buzzed lazily around them as the waterfall slowly wore away the rocks beside them, then taking in the scent from the roses, surfinia, and lilies they watched a million butterflies going about their business.

'You know I love you and your sisters very much.' said Brian as they sat in the gazebo halfway down the garden, and watched the children play at pirates in the wooden galleon he'd built for them.

'There was a time when we wondered,' replied his

daughter, 'Mum always said you'd rather write than come and see us.'

'Yes... I know, that was before I made any money at writing, we were poor then. She refused to help me bring more money into the house, so I had to do it myself... as well as my job, anyhow all that's history now, but maybe that's why I had that stupid affair, perhaps I was looking for... oh, I don't know, it's all so confusing!'

'Well, it's nice to know you do love us, and it was unfair of Mum to tell us that if it wasn't true.'

'All I wanted was for *us* as a family to be financially secure, so that if any one of us had a money worry I would be here, it wouldn't matter how big the problem, all you'd have to do is call me.'

'Thanks Dad.' said Ruth gratefully, then putting her arm through his they sat in silence and watched the kids play, laughing occasionally at their antics.

'All this will belong to you, your brother and sisters when I go,' said Brian suddenly, 'I've made provision for all of you, the estate will be shared equally three ways... as for this place, you can do what you want with it. Sell it and use the money, or use it for your own ends which ever you see fit... your mother will get - *nothing!*'

'Well I can't say I blame you Dad,' said Ruth, 'I think what she's done is a bit OTT!' Taking Ruth to the bottom of the garden Brian showed her the pinnacles, and explained his plans for the field. She thought it was a great idea, and asked again if he minded buying a motorbike for Lester, but Brian reassured her it was a pleasure he was looking forward to.

'Come on kids!' said Ruth suddenly, 'we've got to go now... well Dad, got things to do, you know, vacuuming, ironing etc.'

'Yes, I know,' replied Brian smiling, 'I have to do all my own now.' Ruth laughed, she was glad to see her father was coping. The children made the usual protests about having to go home; not having finished their game etc. etc.

'Grandpa says if you're good and go home now without any fuss you can come again soon!' said Ruth persuasively, and persuasion is always an effective tool for parents when kids become unreasonable!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ten minutes was spent tidying up after the kids, but he didn't mind, and loved to see toys lying around, it made the old place look more like home. Walking through the conservatory he lit a cigarette and continued on to the patio, where he watched a pair of moorhens on the pond, then to his delight the swans who'd done him the honour of making their home there swam toward him with five cygnets in tow. He was spellbound; it was a sight to see!

'You're a bit late,' he told them as they reached the bank, 'they've gone home now!' Suddenly it dawned on him that swans mate for life, not so the human race! The old values had long gone, and marriage was no longer the institution is used to be, but if for the slightest reason you got fed up with it, nowadays you could discard it like so much trash! So much for the consumer society! Phoning that afternoon Paul told him his offer had been accepted by Claud Billingham, and their solicitors were processing the contracts.

'Thankyou Paul,' said Brian gratefully, 'he took the bait then? I can't thank you enough for the way you've handled the whole thing, it's very much appreciated I can assure you.'

'My pleasure.' replied Paul. Now he could get on with the real business, of buying the donkeys and a motorbike! Ringing Paddy Jones he left him instructions to build a stable and paddock on one half, and the other he wanted him to design and lay a tarmac track for Lester to ride his motorbike around. He felt strangely fulfilled somehow, and that his life

had purpose again. Before realising it he'd closed down the file he was working on, and it suddenly dawned on him he'd been writing, for the first time in months! Things were definitely looking up, so that evening he invited Johnny and Brenda to dine out with him at a local restaurant, and accepting they and had what can only be described as a Hell of a good time!

'You seem a lot more relaxed lately Brian, are you getting back in the swing of things again?' asked Johnny politely.

'Johnny! you can't ask a question like that, it's a *bit* personal!' said Brenda disapprovingly.

'Not at all,' said Brian hastily, 'I don't mind really, Johnny knows the whole gambit from beginning to end... and yes, I am feeling better... a lot better!' His smile embraced them both.

The following morning the duvet flew back, and Brian was ready to take on the world again. Breakfast on the patio was the best way to start the day, a glass of Florida orange, a bowl of cornflakes and two rounds of toast, then sitting back with a cup of tea he lit a cigarette. This was heaven, the birds were singing, as bees swooped on unsuspecting Foxgloves and other flora. For half an hour he sat listening to one particular blackbird who sat in the old oak tree to the right of the waterfall, and found it difficult to tear himself away. All good things must come to an end as they say, so he resigned to take a shower and dress. Stopping by to tell Brian he'd start building the stable and paddock in a couple of days, he thanked Paddy and went to the phone, and ring the RSPCA again about the donkeys.

'I thought we'd heard the last of you sir, it's some weeks since you last phoned!'

'Yes - sorry, I had a problem buying the land.' replied Brian to satisfy the officers concern.

'As I remember you wanted to buy three donkeys, at this moment in time I can put you in touch with a sanctuary that have two available, but... no, I can't see any others available, oh, wait a minute, yes, I can get you another one, but it won't be for a fortnight, would that be ok?'

'It sounds ideal, the builders are starting the stable block in a couple of days so by the time he's finished that and the paddock it should work out nicely.' said Brian cheerfully, 'so if you would secure those for me I would appreciate it.'

'I'll do that,' replied the officer, 'I'll let you know as soon as the deal is done.'

'Thankyou,' said Brian, 'oh, by the way if you or the sanctuary wish to inspect my stable let me know when, and I'll be glad to show you around.' The officer thanked Brian for his thoughtfulness and rang off. Unable to resist the feeling of excitement Brian went to the pub for a quick one! Which then became two, three, four, five, and resulted in him feeling considerably inebriated! Walking home he realised his foolishness, as one leg wasn't going one in front of the other as it should do, and he wasn't used to drinking - plus, it was real ale!

Opening the front door, surprisingly, he had little or no trouble inserting his key into the lock, although wobbling slightly he went slightly sideways to the kitchen and switched on the kettle. Taking his coffee into the lounge he sat down to

watch TV, then lighting a cigarette he flicked through the channels, but the best he could find was one of those American chat shows where the guests get violent when confronted by the truth! Finishing his cigarette he emptied his cup and switched off the TV in disgust. The next thing he knew it was five thirty, and realising the ale had got the better of him he'd been asleep for nearly two hours! There was nothing he could do now, as everyone would be shut for business at this time. Dinner! The ale had done one thing for him, it *had* given him an appetite. Cupboards open, food and utensils were flying everywhere, and the freezer was the next to get the "emergency" treatment. Eventually Brian decided what fate awaited his stomach, a balance between his taste buds and culinary skills. It was however edible, but being hungry it went down like the leftovers in a hotel waste bin! Nobody had phoned that afternoon, at least if it had rung he hadn't heard it, and put it down to the ale. Feeling a little better after his meal the ale had also had an effect on his morale, and he suddenly felt lonely again. Wondering if he should ring Johnny he thought better of it, it wouldn't be fair to take him away from Brenda just because he was down. Switching on the TV he looked through the paper to see what was on, but the viewing was lack-lustre to put it mildly, and for half an hour watched it just for something to do, but finally getting fed up he pointed the remote at the set and put himself out of his misery. His mind drifted back to writing, an idea for a story had entered his head and had him running to the study to get it on file. He'd left ideas unrecorded before, and

having forgotten the storyline had bitterly regretted it! This was a story about a woman who leaves her husband and ends up regretting it.

Aiming it specifically at his wife he wondered if he was being a bit hard on his, then after all it was his experience! *That* was always a good source of material. He was happy now, and for one reason alone he could now develop the story in his mind before putting it down on paper. Leaning back in his chair he stared at the screen for a while to clarify the story, then feeling a tad thirsty he switched on the coffee maker, and five minutes later lighting a cigarette he sat back to think and sip his coffee. His thought processes had been stimulated, and before he knew it his hands were on the keyboard. After three hours he needed a break, writing about his own experience had upset him considerably, the rows, the silences, the accusing looks - the tears!

It was the first time Brian had broken down for a while, wiping his hand over his face he remembered his cigarette, but retrieving it from the ashtray proved an impossibility as it had burnt away hours ago. Lighting another he turned to the screen, intending to continue his writing, but being distraught he decided bed was the best option, especially as the clock informed him it was the witching hour! Getting undressed Brian chose option "A", dump 'em on the floor, because at that time of night he couldn't be bothered with tidiness! The room now dark he hoped the sandman would be benevolent, but it wasn't to be, as Lynn played on his mind like a video on loop. Then just as he was drifting off he heard the Calliope, and it was quite

distinct, so lying there for a minute he tried remembering the name of the tune. 'What was it Johnny called it?' he whispered in the dark, but his mind was blank. For some reason he felt compelled to go down there, as if by doing so he would remember the name of the tune. It was one of those balmy nights as Brian walked through the garden, when one doesn't need a even a light jacket, Night scented stock sent him reeling as he picked up on the tune that haunted his every waking minute, and which he now hummed.

Rounding the last turn in the winding pathway he suddenly came face to face with a strikingly beautiful young girl with loose blond ringlets and piercing blue eyes, her dress was a thin white empire line affair, which Brian noted seemed more like a night-dress. She smiled at him, a flirty smile, looking up at him under her eyelashes, then without warning ran she toward the woods to the left of Brian's garden laughing lightly as she went. As it dawned on him what had just happened Brian shivered involuntarily, or more to the point, *what he'd just seen!* The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and he ran full tilt back to the house, and didn't stop until he'd locked and bolted the doors! As the image of that young woman he'd seen haunted the darkness around him, he didn't sleep much for the rest of the night, and that calliope played Music Box Dancer to accompany her. The following morning he felt as if he'd been drugged, and wasn't sure if he was fully awake, then realising he was suffering from a lack of sleep, he turned over he slept for another hour. It would have been a great

morning but for one thing, he didn't wake up until nine thirty!

'Shit!' said Brian, and was out of bed before he'd finished uttering the expletive, running the shower he was under it before the water started falling! Breakfast on the hoof! isn't life great? A cup of coffee and a cigarette, and he was still trying to get his head around the day. It was almost an hour before he remembered the previous night, and made a mental note to ring Johnny and ask him if he'd heard from his friend, the "expert".

'Oh, hello Brenda... yes if he's th... oh, I see, oh well never mind, money has to come first doesn't it. Tell him I called when he gets back would you? Thanks - bye!' Ringing he didn't know Johnny had an engagement for this week, so it would have to wait. Setting about his writing with a good deal of enthusiasm before he knew it he was in the kitchen making lunch, and like all writers time is irrelevant when you're working, indeed - it doesn't even exist! Lunch involved slapping a few things in between two pieces of bread and swallowing! Just like the old days! No sooner had he finished than he was back in the study. Hunger told him it was way past dinner time, but he just *had* to finish this chapter! Twenty to eight and he was in the Jaguar, this evening a takeaway was in order, a mushroom chowmein followed by two banana fritters, YES! That would satisfy his hunger. Although tired Brian worked 'til one thirty that evening, and was happy that he'd finished the book, and for once he hadn't had to do much remedial work. Feeling hungry again he did something that took him back to his

childhood - he raided the fridge! Too tired to prepare and cook anything, a hunk of cheese with two dry biscuits and a glass of milk - then bed! He was almost asleep when he heard the calliope again, and lying there for a while he wondered if it had played the first few notes loudly on purpose, just to wake him up! At first Brian tried ignoring it, but found himself drawn to the music, then suddenly he remembering the image of that young lady.

Walking through the winding pathways he listened as the music grew ever louder, and as he approached the pinnacles he switched off his torch, then standing in the darkness he hoped he would see that young woman again. After twenty minutes he turned away in disappointment, intending to go back to bed he shivered suddenly, as the hairs on his neck suddenly stood on end, his skin crawled with goose bumps, and he knew she was there. Spinning around he saw her skipping lightly between the pinnacles, and as she danced toward him her firm breasts almost spilled over the low-cut neckline of her empire dress. Standing transfixed Brian's heart thumped to the point where he thought it would burst, and he watched as the apparition smiled at him mockingly, flirting with him, as she had the night before.

'You still miss her don't you?' she said smiling, and looked up at him under her eyelashes. Standing speechless he watched in amazement as she raised an eyebrow at him. When after some time she hadn't received an answer she looked directly into his eyes and smiled broadly, and again ran off in the same direction as the night before.

'Yes I *do...* miss... her, what is your name?' blurted out Brian as he watched her run away.

'Cally!' she replied looking over her shoulder, then with a childlike giggle disappeared into the woods. He thought it curious that this time he hadn't feel scared as he had the previous night, although he wasn't sure why felt saddened instead. The only thing that remained the same was the fact that like the previous evening he couldn't sleep! His mind couldn't rid itself of the apparition of Cally, and that tune still played incessantly.

Waking suddenly Brian looked at the clock, it was nine twenty two! Getting up didn't seem so important today, so he lay there for an hour before getting up to shower. Even after breakfast he still felt lethargic, and hadn't the will to work on a new story, as his mind just wouldn't focus. Drifting through the day aimlessly he mostly sat around thinking of Lynn, and about that apparition, how was it that this "ghost" knew about Lynn? How did she know Lynn had left him? Hardly noticing he'd eaten lunch was such a dull affair, and the evening was meal merely a repeat of lunch.

'I don't suppose Johnny's home yet Brenda?' asked Brian, hoping against hope.

'No Brian I'm afraid not, as I said he's away for the whole week,' she said apologetically, 'why... is there something wrong?'

'No, no, not at all... I just wondered... well anyhow I'm sorry I bothered you.' said Brian finally. Putting down the phone Brenda wondered if she should have pressed him further, then thinking she'd been foolish dismissed the thought. Of course he was

alright, what could be wrong anyhow? Sitting down to watch TV Eastenders was on, that the only soap he allowed himself to watch, so eight o'clock he perused the paper twice but couldn't see anything worth watching. By nine he'd listened to one track by Lighthouse Family followed by Mahler's fifth, so now it was the study's turn to suffer his boredom; he would start a new story! Switching on his computer he opened a new file and sat there for half an hour, but it was to no avail, he simply couldn't focus. Just after nine thirty he'd had enough, and so he decided he would be better off in bed! Seeing the point in torturing himself further, and he was knackered anyway! Being that tired he didn't even bother to smoke with his cuppa, and in less than ten minutes he was asleep. Awake again Brian looked at the clock, it was five past twelve! It was that damned music again, but not wanting to go down there tonight he lay there for twenty minutes listening. Perhaps if he didn't go it would just stop! Another thirty minutes and the Music Box Dancer was still invading his ears. No longer able to stand it he pulled on his shirt, sandals and shorts, and made his way downstairs. Another balmy night, and his torch beam gave the trees an eerie look, and again the music drew him to the bottom of the garden. Standing between and facing the pinnacles, Brian waited for over half an hour with no sign of Cally. It was no good she wouldn't come now he decided, and started back to the house. After walking a few feet he felt his hackles rise, and he knew she was here! Again he shivered involuntarily as he turned to see her standing in front of him, as that same

mocking smile played on her lips.

'I didn't think you... you uh, were coming.' said Brian feeling a bit stupid, here he was, a middle aged man talking to a ghost! Or was it? He really couldn't make his mind up. He wished Johnny was with him.

'Come with me,' said Cally, suddenly stretching out her arm, 'I will take you to her.' Reaching out hesitantly Brian took her hand, it was ice cold!

'Don't be afraid.' she said laughing as she led him toward the wood, and Brian followed, still holding her ice-cold hand.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It's always a worry when you repeatedly phone someone who doesn't return your call, and such was the case with Johnny, three messages he'd left and not a murmur from Brian!

'Hello Dad, if you're there can you pick up the phone? I want to know if I can come over with the kids this afternoon.' Ruth got the same treatment as Johnny. Three hours later Ruth still hadn't heard from her beloved dad and was getting worried, so stuffing the kids into the car she set off to see why he wasn't answering the phone. The gravel crunched under the tyres as she pulled up, and was mildly surprised to see Johnny's car already there, but as the engine died he walked out the front door to meet her.

'Hello Johnny,' she said pleasantly, 'Haven't seen you for ages!' He didn't smile, and Ruth caught the significance of his look.

'What's the matter?' she asked with urgency in her voice.

'I'm not quite sure Ruth,' he replied hesitantly, 'it may be nothing, but when I got here the house was open... but there's no sign of your father, I've searched the grounds... but...'

'Christ! what's gone wrong?' said Ruth suddenly feeling panicky, 'he hasn't said anything about going away, and *always* tells me when he goes on a book signing.'

'I'm sure it'll all be sorted out alright.' said Johnny noticing Ruth was near to tears.

'I'm going to ring the police!' said Ruth suddenly.

Forty minutes later a constable arrived, and asked who had last seen Brian, then, deciding there was nothing to worry about he assured them Brian would turn up, in his experience they nearly always did! Three hours after the constable had left there was still no sign of him.

'Hang on,' said Johnny suddenly, 'I've just thought of something. He dialled a number.

'Hello Charlie, it's Johnny... uh, did you ever get a chance to look at that "pinnacle" case I asked you about?'

'Yes I did, fascinating, I must come over and show it to you some time.'

'Could you tell me over the phone - *now!*' said Johnny decisively.

'Why... has something happened?' asked Charlie gravely. Johnny hesitated for a moment.

'Uh... yes, my friend Brian is missing... he owns the house... to our knowledge he's been missing for at least six hours! God knows how long he was missing before we got here!'

'I think I'd better come straight over,' said Charlie urgently, 'give me the address... ok I've got that, I'll be with you in about thirty minutes.'

Running to answer the door bell Johnny let Charlie in, who walked into the lounge wearing a tightly drawn expression.

'I don't care much for the look on your face.' said Johnny adamantly.

'You'll like even less with what I've got to tell you!' replied Charlie emphatically. As if searching for the right words he Paused for a moment, as Johnny sat waiting on the edge of his seat.

'When you said - uh, who's this?' said Charlie, then seeing Ruth stopped suddenly, as Johnny quickly introduced them, 'I'm afraid you're not going to like this...those pinnacles you referred to come from a pier at Cleeve Sands, or I should say a pier that *was* at Cleeve Sands! The story goes that it was washed away in a horrendous storm in 1871, and the pinnacles were the only part of the pier to survive, so I decided to ask the proprietor of the reclamation yard where Brian had bought them if he could remember where he got them, but he told me they were there when he bought the yard thirty four years ago! All three sat in silence for a couple of minutes after Charlie had finished talking.

'So is that it?' asked Johnny, unable to believe he'd heard everything.

'No,' said Charlie finally, 'that's the reason I wanted to come down rather than tell you on the phone, you see... the night the pier was washed away they were having their annual town ball - *on the pier!* Amazingly everyone got off in time except for one young girl. I've seen a newspaper report from the editorial on that fateful night, which incredibly still survive in the local rags office - the Clarion - to this day. Their reporter at that time who was on the scene, recalled seeing a young local girl in a white evening dress being swept into the sea!' He stopped talking for a short while.

'What was her name?' asked Johnny out of interest.

'Cally!'

THE END

THE HAYWAIN

CHAPTER ONE

Devastated by his untimely dismissal Tim Gibson reversed into the driveway, then pulling on the handbrake he switched off the ignition and sat there for a full minute. He'd given that company more than twenty six years of his life! The injustice of being paid off drove him mad, but with a mere twenty eight thousand pounds for his now spent services he felt discarded like the old office furniture.

'What the Hell am I worried about?' he muttered under his breath, then pulling the keys from the ignition he opened the door and slammed it shut - hard! That was something totally irrational by his standards. Selecting a key he walked to his front door, and inserting it in the lock turned it slowly, then stepping in he put his hand on the back of the door and shoved it as hard as he could; the floor shook as it slammed shut. He hadn't experienced feelings of violence like this since his teens, and felt distinctly like punching something - or someone! Walking to the kitchen he switched on the kettle automatically, then walking to the lounge sat heavily on the sofa as his mind returned to the events of that morning.

'Sorry Tim,' his ex boss Darren's voice haunted him again,' you know how it is... we must inject young blood into the company to stay ahead of the game!'

'Little tart!' Thought Tim as the kettle boiled.

'Tim Gibson... highly successful advertising

executive - Hah!' This'll give the neighbours something to laugh about!' His wife Cindy was still at work, and wouldn't learn of his loss until she returned home that evening. The clock on the mantle read eleven thirty so it would be six hours before she got home; it was time for a lonely coffee. Ambling back to the kitchen he looked in the fridge for something to nibble, then realised he wasn't really hungry, but merely looking for something to do, he'd never been one for idling his time away, and preferred to occupy his mind rather than watch television. Picking up his cup from the breakfast bar he walked back to the lounge, then in an attempt to clear his mind he sat on the sofa and stared at the wall in silence.

CHAPTER TWO

Kicking off his shoes he felt another bout of rage welling up, so counting to ten he decided would be less stressful this time, and instead took another sip of coffee, then placed the cup carefully down on the wine table next to sofa.

'Bastard!' shouted Tim at the top of his voice, then suddenly felt rather stupid, supposing a neighbour had heard his outburst! Peering sheepishly through the curtain he wondered why he'd concerned himself with what the neighbours' thought. Never having worried about it in the past he guessed it was because he hadn't felt this low for years. Finishing his coffee he gave thought to his future; get another job of course! After all he was highly skilled at what he did, and everyone would want to employ him - wouldn't they? Despite his attempts to look to the future his mind repeatedly wandered back to his current situation, and pondered as to how the company could morally, let alone legally, do that to him! The contracts he'd won for them, the millions of pounds that he alone had made for them! Resting his head on the back of the sofa he made another attempt to clear his mind, after all he still had Cindy to think of, and their future! Resolving to get another job, whatever it took Tim decided he would redeem his self-respect!

Suddenly feeling tired he closed his eyes for a few moments, and hoped he'd feel better when he awoke. Having dozed for forty minutes a car horn eventually woke him with a start, and opening his eyes he stared blankly at the wall, then the

realization of his situation hit home like a sledgehammer, *he was now unemployed!* His favourite picture hung on the wall opposite, he called it *his* picture for the very reason that Cindy had no interest in art, and Constable's Haywain had always been his idea of what art should be, even if it was only a print! It served as a constant reminder to him of how tranquil life used to be, but being a romantic at heart he rarely gave thought to the poverty and deprivation that most suffered in the early nineteenth century.

'The Haywain, by John Constable.' said Tim aloud, then noticing his vision had blurred rubbed his eyes in an attempt to focus them, but try as he might they blatantly disobeyed his command, but strangely it was only his peripheral vision that was affected, as the picture itself remained crystal clear, but the ornate frame in which it was mounted refused to come back into focus.

CHAPTER THREE

Starting from the faintest whisper, the noise grew rapidly in pitch and volume to a deafening roar. To say he was frightened would be an understatement, and his heart thumped to the point where he thought it would explode, and when his throat suddenly constricted it was as if an invisible pair of hands had closed around it! While his primary concern was for what was happening to him physically, he sat transfixed as the picture itself grew out of all proportion; the wall on which it hung had all but disappeared! Scared beyond reality, Tim's head ached as if someone had connected a high pressure pump to his skull in an attempt to cause him a haemorrhage, and he screamed in agony at the level of pain inflicted upon him. It was then he noticed something that scared the living daylights out of him, the picture had changed its perspective, and having grown in depth the distant horizon across the field was now three dimensional!

A sense of levitation suddenly overtook him, and he was no longer able to feel the sofa under him, and as the roaring in his head had now changed to a high-pitched whistle, it was with great relief when it imperceptibly started ebbing away, as the pain and pressure in his head subsided with it. Thanking God it was over he sat for a couple of minutes completely drained, and wasn't really aware of what had happened. Then regaining his faculties Tim noticed the sofa felt extremely uncomfortable, but to his horror it dawned on him he was no longer sitting on the sofa, and it suddenly occurred to him that

something was *very* wrong!

Puzzling him for a second the muted sound of horse hooves in water pervaded his ears, then a dog barked a few yards away and as he looked up his eyes met with a reality they refused to believe. Thinking he'd fallen asleep and had a nightmare he rubbed them again, maybe it was a reaction to being sacked, psychological stress or something, but try as he might the image refused to vacate his vision. It was just so real! Surreal was the word that flashed poignantly through his mind.

'Shut your noise,' said the man leaning over the side rail of the Wain, 'you're a noisy mutt for certain!'

'You leave 'im alone, he's entitled to 'is voice the same as you're entitled to yours old Jed!' looking toward the source of the voice, Tim saw a woman leaning over the end of the jetty on the river side of Willy Lott's cottage, with one hand submerged in the water. Surely this whole scene was pure fantasy? This could not be happening! How did he get *here*? Remembering the pain he'd suffered, by some quirk of fate he realised he had somehow travelled back in time! Pure panic set in as it occurred to him he wouldn't be able to let Cindy know where he was, and how could he contact her now? Was he trapped here forever, would he *ever* see her lovely smile again?

'Yer old Jed,' Tim's head spun around to see the other player in this charade, 'I reckon thee be right, 'e is a noisy mutt, don't take no notice o' that Mary... she always got to 'ave somethin' to gripe about!' he said with ribaldry, then laughed loud and long at his terse quip. It was simply beyond belief, and Tim

wondered how this could have happened, then remembered wishing for a more tranquil life as he studied his favourite picture on the lounge wall. Could it be that his wish had somehow come nightmarishly true, and it was then he remembered something his grandmother had told him as a boy.

'Remember Tim, be careful of what you wish for, it may not be exactly what you want!' Recalling her voice he saw her kind smiling face before him, how he wished he could talk to her now!

This was a place he realised quickly he didn't want to be in! Despite his yearnings to enjoy the peace of a more gentile life, whilst looking at the picture on numerous occasions in the past, the absurdity of this situation was wholly unacceptable to him. Surely all he had to do was turn around and walk out! In blind panic he turned to run back to his own world, and nearly collided with a young man painting at an easel! The man was obviously fairly well off, and his clothes were those of a country gentleman. Although Tim's first thought was to get out of this Hellish place, he was inconveniently interrupted by the artist.

'Good day sir, you appear to wear strange attire? What is your name... and where do you come from?'

'Tim Gibson,' he answered sheepishly, 'although I don't really belong here.' It wasn't the answer he would normally have given, but in his state of mind he was not thinking rationally.

'Hello sir, my name is John Constable.' said the artist offering Tim his hand, and taking the offered hand he shook it. The man seemed pleasant enough, and Tim being well mannered could hardly refuse, then

his legs then turned to jelly as a feeling of nausea hit his stomach.

'I need to get out of here in a hurry, I'm sorry if I appear rude.' said Tim hoping that John Constable would somehow produce a miracle and release him from his predicament, but instead he kindly informed Tim there was a stagecoach leaving for London in ten minutes from East Bergholt.

'I would invite you to join my fathers ship the Telegraph, which sails from Mistley tomorrow, but of course if you are in a hurry...' offered the artist kindly, and then added, 'it is also bound for London.' 'No... uh... you don't understand,' replied Tim, his voice now weak and breaking. Mostly pre-occupied with his work the artist gave Tim a quizzical smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

His mind now in total disarray Tim turned and ran in blind panic, not knowing or caring where, all he wanted was to get back to Cindy and his welcoming home. It was then that the man sitting on the opposite side of the Wain from Jed saw Tim run, and shouted at him to stop.

'I thought 'e looked a bit strange, 'e's a thief if ever I saw one!' said the man turning to Jed. Suddenly Tim saw two men running from the opposite direction; the men in the Wain had alerted them to Tim's presence.

'Stop 'im, stop 'im!' he shouted. Giving chase they rounded the corner of Willy Lott's cottage, although Tim had a head start on them, the call had alerted other members of the community in the form of a gnarled, red-faced old man brandishing a pitch fork! 'Now you - stand still!' shouted the gnarled old man, whose face reminded Tim of a boiled sweet, although he was at least a septuagenarian Tim thought better of tackling him! Recalling his lessons at school about the suspicious nature of country people in these times, he remembered that even a person from the next village was considered a foreigner! His heart beat like a blacksmith's hammer, as if getting trapped here in this alien time wasn't enough, now he was about to be apprehended by the local population for a crime he knew nothing about, let alone had committed! Wondering if things could get worse he thought that surely once he'd explained what had happened, they would understand and release him. Within a few seconds

they'd surrounded him; there was no escape.

Suddenly relenting Tim realised the futility of escape would more than likely result in them lynching him there and then, and Tim didn't fancy becoming a martyr to heroism. Approaching him from behind, two of his assailants grabbed an arm apiece, and wrenched them both up his back with such force he cried in pain! Unceremoniously tying his hands behind his back they shoved him roughly around the corner of Willy Lott's cottage.

'Old Jed!' shouted the gnarl-faced man, 'we'll be needin' your cart to take 'im to the jail in Colchester!'

CHAPTER FIVE

Man-handled into the back of the Wain, which until now Tim had considered the most romantic form of transport devised by man, it was now merely part of a nightmare Tim wanted no part of! His captors then warned him that any attempt to escape would be detrimental to his health, so Tim thought better of it.

'Now what we'd like to know is what you've stole... and where you've 'idden it?' asked Jed.

'I haven't stolen anything.' replied Tim, his voice filled with defeat. One of the others then brutally kicked him in the shin, forcing him to cry out.

'Well you'll talk to the constable when we get you to Colchester!' said Jed with conviction, then cracking the reins he clicked his tongue to start their six-mile journey. As the Wain bumped and rattled over the rough track Tim felt every one of them, and their forty five minute journey seemed to him like an eternity.

Arriving in Colchester he heard Jed ask a local the way to the constable's office, and having been given directions Tim felt the cart lurch in two different directions, which told Tim they'd turned a couple of corners before coming to rest outside of the office. Dragged bodily from the Wain, they pushed and shoved him into the constable's office, where a lean-faced man with a large bushy beard arose from an old battered desk, and walking slowly around it he adjusted his tunic as he eyed Tim with suspicion.

'What 'ave we got 'ere then, this is bloody queer attire for a man to be dressed in?' said the constable

in a monotone, his eyes cold and humourless.

' 'e was caught stealing!' lied Jed, proudly proclaiming his successful civic duty.

'What's 'e stole' then?' asked the stone-faced constable.

'We 'aven't found out yet, but when we saw the clothes 'e was wearing we thought 'e was suspicious straight away.' replied Jed.

'Well... we'll 'ave to find out what 'e's done with 'is booty won't we?' announced the officer menacingly. Tim had a distinct feeling he was in for a rough time, and the other man with Jed, whose name apparently was Zachariah pointed at Tim's left shin, and without saying a word the officer walked forward two paces, then, before he realised what was about to happen he received another swift kick to his shin bone! Collapsing in pain he gritted his teeth as he fell, although his inward scream would have deafened Hell, he refused to show them his hurt, but pain was now the centre of his world. It was all he could do to stop himself from screaming out, and as if that wasn't enough a few moments later another swift kick caught him in exactly the same place, which this time resulted in a cry of anguish from Tim. Seeing the defiance in Tim's eyes the constable realised he wouldn't be easy to break.

'Ah, 'tis of no matter, the judge will get to 'im!' he told Jed, then, dragging Tim to a cell threw him to the ground and walked out, then slamming the heavy oak door behind him he turned the key. Unable to move Tim lay there as an unsavoury odour reached his nostrils, a rancid stench that he quickly identified as vomit was plastered down the side of

his face. Unfortunately he'd landed in something that a drunk had deposited the previous night, and the cell stank of urine, excrement, sweat, and ale, then throwing up suddenly seemed a good idea, however he managed to contain his desire to add to the liberal deposits already in existence! Praying seemed a better idea, which he did for quite some time, and hoped that God would release him from his predicament, but no succour was forthcoming. His prayers however appeared to give him what would be vitally needed fortitude for times to come. Tim spent two days in that cell, and was fed only once with a bowl of vile tasting vegetables and a cup of stale water.

CHAPTER SIX

Dawn broke on his third day in that Hell-hole, and vaguely aware of noises at the front of the jail, he looked at his watch to see it was a little after six, then it suddenly occurred to him he should secrete his watch, as if any one of them saw it they would undoubtedly procure it as a souvenir, which would leave him no way of telling the time! The key turned in his cell door, and he hoped that now at last they would release him and apologies for his wrongful arrest, but his thought was short-lived, as two swarthy looking men he'd never seen before dragged him from the cell and hauled him before the constable.

'What d'you reckon to 'is clothes then?' asked the constable of his two new companions.

'Never seen nuffin' like vat before!' said the taller of the two men. Recognizing their accents straight away as Cockney, Tim didn't understand what they were doing here in Colchester, but it wasn't long before his unspoken question was answered!

'Well mate,' said the shorter of the Cockneys, 'highly suspicious togs are those, and as we've got a long journey ahead of us we'd better be on our way, eh?' Confronted with the problem of why they were taking him to London, Tim's fears had now doubled, and pondering them briefly he was brutally handcuffed and bundled into a waiting stagecoach. The tall Cockney followed in quickly behind him, and with both hands shoved Tim in the chest, forcing him into the middle seat, meanwhile the other man had walked around the coach and entered

from the opposite side, just in case Tim got the idea he would run through the coach and out the opposite door. Taking the seats opposite his captors then gave him a sinister grin, but Tim was now too weak to think, and just wanted to return to his own time; something niggled at the back of his mind.

Through sheer exhaustion he slept for most of the journey, and it seemed a very short time before they arrived in the capitol city. Suddenly aware of extreme pain, he was viciously yanked from his thoughts by the taller of his two captors, who, having grabbed a handful of Tim's hair, had hauled him from the coach and thrown him to the ground. As he fell Tim Caught his head on the corner of a wooden crate resulting in a small cut to his head, then placing one hand on Tim's shoulder The Cockney grabbed his left arm and dragged him to his feet. Not having heard either of them call each other by name, Tim decided the taller of the two would be known as "Swarthy One", and the other, who he hadn't seen since their arrival would be known as "Swarthy Two". Swarthy One then shoved Tim into the corner of an inn, then letting go of Tim's arm he walked through the door and called to Swarthy Two to give him some help with their charge. Realising he hadn't seen Swarthy Two since their arrival, Tim assumed he'd headed straight for the pub on arrival! Without wasting a second Tim turned and slid into the crowd, then taking the first available corner found himself in a cobbled alley dragging his injured leg as fast as it would allow, but it was less than thirty seconds before a cry went up heralding his escape. Limping on, and his

stomach knotted with anxiety, the urgency to escape had overcome his agony, and he knew that if he was caught now he would probably not survive the next beating.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reaching the end of the alley Tim heard the two Swarthies shout a warning from the direction of the inn. Pressing on quickly he didn't even dare to look 'round, as it was vital now they didn't discover his whereabouts, so reaching the end of the cobbled alley he negotiated a right turn followed immediately by a left. Rounding them both gave him instant cover, but his injured leg continued to impede his progress, then suddenly he saw a gate in the wall to his left, and blessing his luck he crept quietly through and closed it behind him. Something suddenly caught his eye, and from here on perhaps his luck would change for the better! Items of clothing hung out to dry on a crude washing line; men's clothes! A shirt, two pairs of trousers and a frocked coat, but having no time for honesty Tim pulled the items from the line, and donned his new outfit in double-quick time. Although slightly on the small side, he was glad to discard his twentieth century clothes, and could no longer afford to stand out like a sore thumb. The shouting had died away, luckily his pursuers had taken a different direction, so thankful for small mercies Tim opened the gate and peered into the lane, he'd have to get out fast now, otherwise he could, and would be rightfully accused of theft! The only threat to his validity was an elderly couple walking near the end of the lane, but fortunately they were facing in the opposite direction, so adopting an air of normality he quietly left. Following the couple to the end of the lane he found himself in a more affluent area, it was time to

slow his pace, the cries of "Stop thief!" had long since abated, so his clothes and a sedentary gait would authenticate his existence in this alien time. His immediate problem was what he would do next; something still nagged at the back of his mind. He had to get back to Colchester, and subsequently Flatford Mill, although he was less likely to be recognised in these clothes, but having no money he would have to run the gauntlet and beg a lift from someone, which would render him somewhat vulnerable. He had no alternative but to walk, but then his leg definitely ruled that out. If he could just get back to Colchester, maybe he *could* return to his own time and place, alive, and hopefully well!

Hobbling along the affluent street, he was aware for the first time of a warm, pleasant, and sunny day, and even though his leg hurt with every step his heart lifted a little as birds sang their daily overtures, and the odd butterfly fluttered by, or a bee buzzing overhead. Feeling slightly better Tim half hoped he would find someone who would show him the milk of human kindness, as so far in this time of brutality he hadn't experienced any, but had made up his mind to maintain caution. Again his subconscious nagged him, if only he could clarify it! Whatever it was, he knew it had something to do with returning to his own time! Crossing the street his feet found a pavement, and having put some distance between himself and his captors he felt a little easier, although he couldn't however afford the luxury of relaxing. Turning another corner he found himself in a cobbled alley slightly wider than the last, and following it to the end he found himself in front of

an affluent livery stable containing eight coaches, although no horses were visible the occasional whinny from behind the coaches told him there was a strong possibility a coach might be due out that morning.

'May I be of assistance to you?' said a voice from behind, which startled Tim from his preoccupation, but as he spun around he was confronted by a well dressed gentleman with an aquiline nose standing in the doorway of an office.

'Have you a coach heading for Colchester?' inquired Tim, attempting nineteenth century linguistics.

'Not until nine o'clock tomorrow morning sir,' replied the top hatted gentleman, 'if you require a ticket you will have to walk around to the front of the building, where my clerk will be glad to furnish you upon receipt of your fare.' Thanking him Tim walked away, but couldn't help noticing several rolls of tickets lying on the proprietor's desk, so walking out he feigned his intention to visit the ticket office, then once outside he listened until the proprietor's footsteps had disappeared into the stable. Walking quietly back in he made his way to the office, and with his heart beating like a drum he listened for a few seconds, but the continuing silence told him there were no threats to his pending clandestine action. Casting his eyes to the desk he saw the tickets, and his passage to safety! Finding the roll stamped Colchester he quickly tore one off and secreted it in his pocket. He was a few yards from the office when the proprietor re-appeared from the stable.

'Ah there you are,' said Tim quickly, 'I don't appear

to able to find your ticket office, would you be kind enough to direct me there again?'

'Ah yes, of course sir, you need to keep turning right all the way around the building,' replied the gentleman politely, 'you cannot miss it.'

'Thank you very much, silly of me to get lost... I'm not familiar with these parts you see!' Mercifully he didn't appear suspicious at Tim's reappearance, and as he returned to the rear of the stable Tim thanked him once more for his indulgence. Hoping his limp wasn't too obvious he prayed he'd get away from London before word got around that there was a dangerous criminal on the loose, but given what had happened so far anything was possible!

A new problem now faced him, where would he to spend the night? Following the proprietor's instructions to the ticket office Tim glanced through the window, and quickly took stock of the office layout, but shelter for the night was his immediate priority, and he didn't know exactly what, or where he would find it. Suddenly it occurred to him it would not only be a difficult task, but if he had to make do with an outhouse it would also be very cold! Realising his dishonestly procured ticket could be numbered he took it from his pocket, but the fading light made it difficult to see, then, noticing a pub further up the road, he walked up to catch the light from its window. The light was just sufficient to show him that thankfully no number existed. His attention was briefly drawn to the bar by the bawdy noise from within, and he smiled briefly at two women screaming with delight, as they were encouraged by the lusty sounds of encouragement

from the male clientele. Right then he would have loved nothing better than to go in and buy himself a glass of strong ale, but stopping himself he remembered he had to keep a low profile, in case some diligent citizen decided he could do himself a remunerative favour by turning in a notorious criminal! An alleyway to the side of the pub suddenly caught his eye, so walking casually over he checked it out. Through the gathering dusk it appeared empty, so glancing quickly up and down the road, the only people visible were two men and a woman, who were staggering under the weight of what was obviously a considerable intake of alcohol, but they weren't aware of Tim.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Whispering a heartfelt thank you to God he took the bull by the horns, then creeping down the alleyway he found a dark outhouse with its door ajar. This was where he would spend the night. Provided he was out by dawn no one would be any the wiser, and to ward off the chill night air a pile of Hessian sacks lying in the corner were commandeered as makeshift blankets, but the dust in his nostrils told him he'd disturbed a pile of coal sacks. Spending most of the night awake with chattering teeth he hadn't counted on the temperature dropping to freezing, and the extra sacks he'd found afforded scant comfort, but it was sheer exhaustion that finally put him to sleep in the early hours.

Running through the poppy field Cindy laughed as Tim clowned about, first letting her catch him he would run ahead again. It was high summer, and they were on a day trip to the country they both loved so much. Sitting under an old oak heavy with leaf they caught their breath, he smiled at her, and she at him. Waking with a jolt Tim realised he'd been dreaming, and realising it was just a fond memory his heart sank as tears of wretchedness filled his eyes. Hunger quickly came to his rescue, and realising he hadn't eaten for nearly twenty-four hours, the burning question now was what and how would he eat? Having no money that was of any use to him, although he had certain coins were of relevant value should he attempt to use them the minted monarch and their monetary value would be

a dead giveaway. His thoughts again drifted briefly to Cindy frying him breakfast, which resulted in him feeling even worse!

Any thought of food was out of bounds for the time being, so deciding it would be some time before he ate Tim put it out of mind. Apart from that sounds of civilization were now reaching his ever-sharp ears, and he knew instinctively it was time to move on. To linger now would be a grave error on his part! Wiping the palms of his hands across his eyes he stood up and allowed his bedding to fall to the ground, then, peering tentatively around the door he saw no signs of life. Shivering violently he moved quietly up the alley and passed the flank wall of the pub, and back on the road he headed toward the ticket office when something glinting in the road caught his eye, upon investigation Tim realised it was manna from heaven, a guinea piece lay staring at him, it had obviously been dropped by a well inebriated person of unknown origin, and he couldn't believe his luck! Before retrieving it he glanced warily up and down the road as caution had to be his watchword, but the coast was clear, so putting as much weight on his good leg as he dared he bent carefully down and lifted it from the ground, and from there it swiftly found its way into his pocket. That guinea would buy him a breakfast, and now all he had to do was find somewhere to eat, so pulling out his watch he saw it was a little after seven o'clock, and a quick glance at the morning sky verified it's accuracy. Standing for a few minutes he pondered which way he should go, then suddenly the sound of cartwheels and hooves on cobbles

brought his attention to a beautiful black Shire horse, as it diligently hauled a coal-laden cart from an alley on the other side of the road. Turning left in Tim's direction it eventually pulled up outside the pub, where a large-boned man with a bushy moustache tied the reins to a rail above the footboard and jumped to the ground.

'Excuse me sir,' inquired Tim, 'have you the right time please, my piece appears to be unreliable.' Taking a silver half hunter from his waistcoat pocket he informed Tim it was exactly fourteen minutes past seven, thanking the man for his kindness he walked on to the ticket office. Now desperate for something to eat, he wasn't even sure there would be any shops open this early. As he Passed the ticket office he glanced at the board, which informed him they wouldn't open until nine, and having the best part of two hours to kill before his coach pulled out Tim could only assume it would leave on time!

In his quest for food, instead of turning left he took a right, and decided anything would do, and wasn't fussy as long as something filled his belly! Turning the corner he crossed another cobbled street, when suddenly a whiff of hot bread caught his nostrils, his stomach churned, as his nose followed the scent of the greatest smell on Earth, and he felt ready to kill for food! His eyes latched onto a small fronted shop with a bow window, which contained various types of bread from crusty cobs to large loaves and baps. The shop door was low enough to give the unwary a nasty crack on the head, and being over six feet tall Tim had to duck as he entered the shop, where a small pleasant faced woman with rosy cheeks

inquired as to his needs.

'Have you anything other than bread?' he asked, hoping the woman didn't detect anything unusual about his style of English.

'Why sir, you should try some of my famous apple bread, I also have some excellent bread cobs, treacle tarts, egg cust-'

'Look, if I may apologies for my rudeness, could I have the apple bread, two cobs, an egg custard pie, and uh, how much would that amount to?'

'Why thank you sir, that will be... three pence three farthings sir.' said the woman kindly. By the look on her face Tim knew she'd taken him for a gentleman when he'd presented her with the guinea piece.

'I'll have to see about your change sir, I haven't enough in the till.' said the little lady, then excused herself and disappeared to the rear of the shop, and it seemed like an age before she returned with the balance of his guinea, then pocketing the change he thanked her and hurried from the shop to devour his fresh comestibles. Considering the adage that gentlemen don't eat whilst walking along the street, given his situation Tim excused himself without reprimand! With ravenous cravings he tore into the apple bread like someone possessed, and swallowed whole lumps to get something in his stomach at the earliest opportunity. Returning the way he'd come he found himself facing the ticket office once more, where hopefully he would start his journey back to Colchester. Having crammed half the apple bread down his throat, he was crossing the road to the ticket office when he trod awkwardly on a cobble, and badly twisted his left ankle. Wincing in agony

he wondered if that leg was doomed, and with the time at seven thirty he still had an hour and a half to kill. Not really sure why, Tim decided he'd walk back to the pub where he'd spent the night, and approaching the inn he was amazed to find the doors open, with a dozen or so people already at the bar imbibing their favourite tipple, and he assumed that they obviously had no respect for the licensing laws, or, there simply weren't any! Finishing off the last of his food he considered a drink, although not one for drinking this early in the day, having had no liquid for over twenty-four hours, in this case he was prepared to make an exception!

Even if it was alcohol, in his condition it was vital to have something to ward off dehydration! Walking in he made his way to the bar and ordered a bitter ale, and paying the barman three farthings for his drink, he kept to himself and sat on a settle in a corner of the bar. It was clear the others were locals and probably wouldn't bother him, so sipping his drink he listened to their idle chatter, and realised there was little difference between people from this time and those of his own. The ale was strong and somewhat dulled the pain in his leg, but it also tasted good, so making his way to the bar he ordered another. His anaesthetic duly served Tim thanked and paid the barman, then returned to his seat to drink in silence while the others made merry in the early hours. Tim considered their constitution, but given their short and dull little lives - he understood. 'Not from around these parts are ya?' came a question from the bar.

'No... I'm from Colchester,' lied Tim, 'by the way this

is excellent ale.' he added hoping to stem the tide of questions.

'Blimey we've got a foreigner in 'ere!' cried one of the locals. Not wanting to offend anyone Tim laughed politely, but at the same time didn't want to get embroiled in a conversation, where one question too many might be asked! Sensing he wanted to be on his own they eventually returned to their own amusement, which made Tim feel easier. Draining the last warming dregs from his glass he left quietly without saying goodbye, although to Tim that was normally anti-social behaviour he felt better keeping a low profile. With the morning sun on his face he felt good, and coupled with effects of the ale he felt almost human again as his thoughts drifted briefly to Cindy, and that he might soon be back in her loving embrace. Oh how he longed for that! Aware he hadn't checked the time for a while he plunged his hand into his coat pocket to retrieve his watch, and it was two minutes to nine! Hurrying down the road he arrived at the ticket office just in time to see the clerk open the front door, and following him in asked the clerk how soon his coach would be leaving.

'Abou' 'alf an hour sir,' replied the clerk, 'sorry for the delay, one of the mares shod a shoe, an' we 'ad to ge' the farrier out - do you wan' a ticket' sir?'

'Uh... I uh, yes I'll be back in a minute,' replied Tim, who taken aback by the unexpected question stammered slightly, 'there's something I have to do, I won't be long.' As Tim made his way to the door the clerk smiled his acknowledgement. Realising that was the closest shave he'd had for quite a while

he reprimanded himself, but resolved to be more vigilant in future! Not knowing what he'd do for the next thirty minutes he walked back in the direction of the pub, as his thoughts drifted back to Cindy again, and his morale dropped to an all time low, here he was, stranded, wandering aimlessly through streets and a time he didn't know, and feeling watched and hunted. Redundancy with twenty eight thousand pounds didn't sound so bad after all! Time dragged, and looking at his watch repeatedly Tim realised that impatience was futile, and knew he'd have to wait the commensurate thirty minutes, whether he liked it or not. Tears clouded his vision as his thoughts drifted to Cindy once more, and the loneliness he felt multiplied his anguish. Not knowing where he was, or how long he'd been walking, again he'd forgotten to check the time, and seeing that it was twenty five past nine his heart took a leap of sheer panic! Suddenly aware he was in unfamiliar surroundings, he had just five minutes to get to the ticket office, but knowing he'd have to think rationally he took stock of his situation. Twenty yards up the hill on which he was walking there was a junction, so making straight for it he peered up and down, at first he was unable to see any familiar sites, then looking left again his heart suddenly lifted, as the ticket office appeared like magic at the bottom of the hill. It was with a grin he realised he'd just walked up the same lane the coal merchant had emerged from earlier that morning.

Having always possessed a bent for wry humour Tim limped down the hill as fast as he could, and suddenly considered a new sport - speed limping!

Dare he even think of taking it to Olympic status? The thought put a big smile on his face for the first time in days. With four magnificent black mares in harness, the coach was already outside waiting to take him and his fellow passengers to Colchester. Passing the office Tim looked in, and seeing the blind was down on the ticket window pleased Tim, as it meant there would be no more bookings for a while and the clerk wouldn't be around. His fellow passengers waited by the coach, two women and a man, so limping slowly down he joined them, but hoped they wouldn't take much notice of him. The coachman then appeared from the office, with a small book in one hand and a whip in the other, checking everyone's ticket he took Tim's from his outstretched hand, and checked it.

'Four tickets in all!' he shouted into the office.

'Yeah, that tallies, off you go!' replied the clerk from inside. Tim's heart nearly leapt from his chest, and realised the clerk hadn't yet checked the tickets against cash taken. Supposing he was doing that right this minute! Wondering why it was taking forever to get under way he tried looking up to see what the driver doing that was taking so long, but suppose the clerk remembered something - *anything* - and came out to inquire, that would spell disaster for him! Sitting tensely he willed the driver to get moving, but as their was taking too long in starting something had to be wrong! Then suddenly the driver's grip tightened on the reins, and Tim let out an inward sigh of relief as they swished as leather against leather.

'Ey-yup!' went out the command, as the team obeyed

the coach lurched forward. and they were under way! The clatter of iron-clad wheels on cobble and the rattle of the harness seemed alien to Tim, and he realised there wouldn't be much chance for sleep with that din constantly in his ears. The two women didn't return his greeting, but the man smiled and nodded silently in his direction; Tim noted his penetrating eyes, and decided he would have to be watched. After that it appeared everyone was content to look in different directions, as the sound of the harness, hooves, and wheels, played strange almost musical tricks on his ears. At one thirty they stopped briefly for lunch at a roadside inn, and needing to wash down the dust from the Macadam road Tim's throat was parched and ready for a beer.

Having eaten sufficiently they were summoned back to the coach, and feeling a good deal better his spirit was up again. Colchester, and eventually home, was seemingly that much closer now, but the afternoon was a repeat of the morning as the countryside rattled slowly by, and apart from an odd comment or two between Tim and the other male passenger, little conversation was exchanged between the occupants of the carriage. Finally pulling into Colchester the driver heralded their arrival, and reined in the team outside the local terminal. Glad he'd reached journeys end Tim's leg had swelled again, but it was now accompanied by his aching backside, which, as he alighted from the coach further increased his agony. Seeing him wince the other man on the coach noticed Tim's difficulty at setting his foot on the ground.

'Excuse me,' he asked, then placing his hand on Tim's

shoulder startled him momentarily, 'I am sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, have you far to go?'

'Not at all, it's I who should apologise, I didn't realize you were there.' he told the man, trying not to be over-courteous, and ever cautious Tim was loathe to let anyone close to him.

'I have to get to Flatford Mill.' Not knowing why he'd imparted his destination to a man he'd never met he'd sensed a benign ambience about the man, and inherently knew that he meant him no harm.

'I don't wish to sound forward but you look as if you could do with a shave, some food, and a comfortable nights sleep,' there followed an awkward silence for a moment, but having observed the vacant expression on Tim's face the man wasn't sure he'd heard him, and continued hesitantly, 'I... I can take you there myself in the morning in my own carriage, as I uh... have to go there myself you see.' This was too much for poor Tim, this man's kindness had touched a nerve and suddenly breaking down he wept openly.

'I say look here my good fellow,' said the man kindly, 'let me get you indoors immediately, we can't have people seeing you in this state can we?' Putting his hand under Tim's arm he took him across the street, then turning right at the next corner they walked for about two minutes. Turning right again Tim suddenly saw a magnificent half-circle driveway flanked by two large stone pillars at either entrance, both dressed with cast iron gates. The garden was the epitome of what a country gentleman in that period would own, Hollyhocks, Roses, Lily of the valley etc., not having time to take everything

in, Tim knew this was obviously a man with considerable wealth and power.

'I'm sorry I broke down like that.' said Tim, having finally regained his composure.

'Please don't mention it.' replied the man, which made Tim feel a lot easier.

Turning a large key the grand Georgian door swung heavily on its hinges, and entering the hallway he called out a greeting to his wife, whose name he heard was Lily, so Tim quickly pulled himself together for the occasion.

'This is Mr. uh...' then realising he didn't know Tim's surname the man's voice trailed away.

'Gibson, Timothy Gibson,' he quickly informed the gentleman and his wife.

'My name is Marsh my good fellow, but I insist that you call me Walter. Now, I wonder if you would be kind enough to run a hot tub for Mr. Gibson my dearest.'

'Please... call me Tim.' he quickly corrected the man.

'Well Tim, there is a sharp razor in the bath chamber, and meanwhile I shall find you a change of clothes.'

'You're too kind,' said Tim thankfully, 'it really isn't necessary.'

'Come, come, we must get you looking ship shape and Bristol fashion.' he replied. Climbing the stairs of nineteenth century affluence Tim went to make himself feel human again, for what seemed the first time in an age, yet strangely, it was barely three days since the onset of his strange, and weird affair.

CHAPTER NINE

Having bathed and shaved Tim felt a good deal better, although a few nicks on his chin gave away the fact he wasn't used to shaving with an open razor.

'Are you ready to dine?' asked Walter, as Tim entered the room.

'Yes, I have to admit I am feeling rather famished!' he replied, and cast his eye over a table laden with produce of the wealthy. He began to wonder if this couple had some ulterior motive, Walter, or Lily for that matter, hadn't once questioned his credentials, but then admonished himself, and realising they weren't those type of people immediately regretted his twentieth century cynicism. Especially as they had shown him nothing but kindness and charity, after all, when they were on the coach Walter could have simply ignored him! Finishing the first course of home-grown mushroom soup those thoughts were quickly dispelled, Walter poured them all a large glass of claret as Lily brought in the main course, which was two brace of pheasant on a large silver platter accompanied by a silver boat containing a piping hot bread sauce. Forty-five minutes later they had eaten and drank their fill, and retired to the lounge for coffee and brandy, where Walter produced two large Havana cigars and handed one to Tim with a small silver knife. Cutting the end Tim placed the smoke in his mouth, and allowed Walter to light it with a match struck from a small silver container on the sideboard. Drawing on the cigar with gusto it seemed an age since Tim had

enjoyed such hospitality, so taking a sip from his brandy he placed it on the table and looked directly at Walter.

'Please don't think me ungrateful Walter, but I would like to know why you have shown me such kindness, when you don't even know me?'

'Oh my dear fellow,' replied Walter immediately, 'I sensed on the coach that you were afraid of something, I didn't know what form your ailment took, but to put it mildly I could also see that you were a little upset as well' Taken aback by the man's sensitivity it prompted Tim to make a decision; he would tell Walter the whole story from the beginning.

While relating his story he watched Walter's face change from one of interest to one of complete incredulity.

'So you see Walter I'm not even from this time, let alone from this locality!' said Tim finally, and finished his oration with a sigh of relief at finally being able to get it off his chest.

'Your story is true, of that I am sure, you do not appear to be a histrionic fellow to me, but... how do you propose to return to your own time?' asked Walter of his guest, and even if it meant never seeing him again he hoped he'd be able to help his new friend!

'That is something I haven't been able to work out as yet.' said Tim ruefully.

'What of your good lady? Uh... Cindy I think you called her, will she not be in a state of worry?'

'Yes, she will, we're very close, I only hope she isn't worrying too much, but knowing her like I do... she

probably is.' The evening went quickly, and producing a beautiful gold fob watch from his pocket Walter studied its face, and declared he was ready to retire, then thanking Tim for his frankness showed him to his room, after which he and Lily then retired.

Considering that food, wine, and three brandies should have been an excellent sleeping draught Tim didn't sleep well that night. Several times he woke in a cold sweat, and had dreamt he was still in London, and what was worse, during a second nightmare, he'd re-lived the experience at the police station in Colchester at the mercy of his tormentors! At breakfast the next morning Walter commented on Tim's quiet demeanour, but he explained it was due to the problem of figuring out a way of getting back to his own time.

CHAPTER TEN

After breakfast Tim excused himself, and asked Walter if he could walk in their garden for a short while.

'You wish to be alone for a while.' stated Walter agreeably, 'there is plenty of time, the rate at which poor Harris works these days, I doubt if he'll have horse and harness as one for quite some time!' Thanking him Tim walked into a very private walled garden, he sensed an air of tranquillity and enchantment there, it was a very serene and beautiful place. Feeling relaxed for the first time in what seemed like ages enabled him to think without fear. Thoughts of Cindy made him feel good rather than sad, then, finding a small arbour he sat and pondered the possibilities of returning to his own time. Then suddenly it hit him, and he realised that location and time were the key to how he'd got here in the first place, but it was how he'd find the information he'd need to make his escape that baffled him! Suddenly it was clear, and he likened it to when someone has given you the answer to what seemed an unsolvable problem. The answer lay in returning to the scene of the painting! If he could get back to the exact spot and time where he came through, and face in the same direction, surely there could be no reason why he shouldn't be able to return! Walter's voice broke through his thoughts.

'Are you ready to leave Tim?'

'Sorry... yes, I was deep in thought.' replied Tim limping as fast as he could. Entering the kitchen Lily walked directly into his path.

'You are not going anywhere until I have had a look at that leg of yours!' she told him, and pointing at one of the kitchen chairs issued a silent order for obedience, so Tim felt he'd best not disobey.

'I really don't want to be a bother.' he protested, and wanting to be on his way.

'I should do as you are bade.' interjected Walter; 'you will get no peace until you do.' Tim resigned himself to the forthcoming medical attention. Upon seeing Tim's leg they gasped in horror, but apart from the swelling, his shin was considerably bruised and lesioned, and were the results of the kicking's he'd received from Zachariah and the constable in Colchester. Opening a cupboard Lily pulled out a small chest and removed a bottle of Wych Hazel, then pouring a little onto a piece of linen, and taking care to avoid the open wounds she gently applied it to the whole area, then finally dressing it she pulled down the leg of his pantaloons.

'There, that should take care of your aches for a while.' she told him; proud of her medical prowess.

'I can't thank you enough Lily.' replied Tim genuinely, who was grateful for her attention. The treatment had certainly reduced the pain in his leg, and it was time to start his journey home. Saying a fond farewell to Lily, and knowing he would probably never see her again, Tim then Turned and walked through that beautiful front door, and along the magnificent driveway for the second and last time.

As he stepped into the Landau Tim waved goodbye to Lily standing framed in the doorway. Sitting opposite Walter Tim watched as Harris

cracked his whip to begin their journey to Colchester, and informed them that at a steady gait, it should take about forty minutes in a two horse Landau. Looking about the carriage it appeared fairly new, and still smelling of lead the paintwork resisted moisture as it does for the first few months of its life. Walter smiled at Tim's curiosity, as he in turn noticed Walter's amusement.

'Please excuse me, it's just that I've only seen one of these before, and that was in a museum.'

'It is indeed an excellent way to travel would you not agree?' said Walter proudly.

'You'll never know how.' replied Tim.

'I don't understand what you mean.'

'It would be difficult to describe the mode of transport in my time to you Walter, but believe me, you wouldn't like it!'

Walter seemed bemused but satisfied with Tim's brief resume. Riding in silence for most of the journey both were content to admire the April morning sun. Although the air held a slight chill it was one of those English spring mornings that were somehow enchanting in their entirety, there was a stillness, a timelessness about this particular day, the sort of day you hope and pray will never end. Tim would normally have relished this, but today was different, and wanted time to pass quickly for one very good reason. Being in such company he'd forgotten to check the time, and without thinking pulled out his watch.

'You have a very unusual time-piece Tim.' said Walter, gazing curiously at the LCD display.

'Oh, uh yes, it's another piece of junk from my own

time.' replied Tim, and attempted to explain the technicalities of the timepiece, although Walter had difficulty in grasping how it worked, Tim was surprised at how quickly he learned to read it!

'Incredible, may I?' asked Walter holding out his hand'

'Of course, here, take it, it's yours to keep!'

'Oh no, I couldn't accept it as a gift, it's far too valuable!' protested Walter.

'No really I insist, as a matter of fact in my time they are not that expensive.' explained Tim readily, and Walter eventually accepted it with very profuse thanks.

'The end of our journey is nigh.' said Walter suddenly, observing a milestone on the grass verge.

'Maybe it won't be long before I see Cindy again.' replied Tim in a monotone, not forgetting that things could still go awry, and if they did, he might never see Cindy again! Those thoughts returned to his subconscious as they entered Flatford, on the very road that had taken him in the opposite direction, five very long days ago.

'Where shall I set you down Mr. Gibson sir?' asked Harris obligingly. Given precise instructions to Willy Lott's cottage Harris proceeded, and knew exactly where Tim had to go. Pulling sharply on the reins the carriage came to a halt, and followed by Walter Tim alighted from the Landau, then turning to face him they shook hands firmly.

'Hopefully, for your sake Tim, and Cindy's, we shall never meet again!'

'I can't begin to thank you and Lily for all your kindness and help.' said Tim genuinely as tears

welled in his eyes. It seemed almost inconceivable that he should feeling emotional at parting with someone he'd met less than two days ago. It seemed as if he'd known Walter far longer, and felt he was saying goodbye to an old friend rather than a relative stranger.

'Thank you for a pleasant journey Harris, it was most enjoyable.'

'Why thank you sir, I've been a coachman for Sir Walter for thirty two...'

'Now now,' cut in Walter laughing aloud, 'Mr. Gibson has no time to listen to your life story, as interesting as it is!'

'Not at all,' replied Tim, 'He's right to feel proud of his chosen profession... good God, did you say Sir Walter?'

'Yes sir,' replied Harris proudly, 'Sir Walter Marsh no less! And thank you for the compliment sir, 'tis gen'rous of you to say so.' Saying a final goodbye to them both, and wishing he had time to ask how Walter had become a knight of the realm Tim headed for the bank of the River Stour, .

'Good luck!' shouted Walter and Harris after him. Reaching the riverbank Tim turned to watch the Landau drive away; he was alone once more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For a full five minutes he studied the whole area, then clearing his mind he recalled the whole sequence of events that had brought him here in the first place, but something still bothered him about it, if only he could remember what, and was certain that what ever it was it had to be the key to returning to his time. Looking about him he noticed something missing, an error, suddenly the exact information he needed dropped into place, there was no Haywain! After that everything else fell into place, also, the dog was missing from the riverbank, and Mary, as he'd heard Zachariah call her, was not on the jetty. Of course, that's what was missing! The final pieces of the jigsaw had finally fallen into place! Everyone who was there when he'd arrived, had to be in the exact positions the same time in order for him to depart, including himself! Then Tim's heart sank, as the probability of that happening again could be millions to one, or a total impossibility! Growing disconsolate he began to think he'd never see Cindy again, and it suddenly occurred to him that the most important person of all was also not present, that person being John Constable! It was hopeless, there was no way back for him now, and Tim knew he was trapped in this time forever! Hope springs eternal in the human breast, and even as his despondency grew he continued to calculate the possibilities of his return home. There had to be a way, and if so he would find it no matter what! He had to get back to Cindy at all costs, and couldn't contemplate the idea of spending

the rest of his life here, apart from Sir Walter, Lily, and Harris, he knew no one, but being without Cindy was inconceivable! A seed of hope suddenly crept into Tim's mind, if it could just be done... if it was just possible? It was a risk, a large risk, but if he could make it work he would be home and dry! All he had to do was get hold of everyone involved, and position them as they were at the time he came through, and surely that would enable him to return the same way? Walking though the village as fast as his gammy leg would take him, he called at various dwellings asking the whereabouts of John Constable, Jed, and Zachariah. Mary he assumed lived in Willy Lott's cottage, as to whether she was Mrs. Lott, or just his house keeper he knew not, and cared even less. All he wanted now was to get them there by noon to take up their positions, as only then would he be able to return home! By the time he'd located John Constable It was already ten past eleven, and as Jed and Zachariah were his next two calls he dreaded the thought of making them. They would be tricky, there again would they even listen to him? Or would they try and re-arrest him as an escapee? It was a risk he'd have to take! Following the directions given him by a neighbour he arrived at Jed's cottage, so giving the door a loud knock Tim knew he'd have to appear confident if nothing else. Mrs. "Jed" answered the door, and immediately called her husband to come and talk to a gentleman.

It took him ten minutes to calm Jed down and get him to listen, but he eventually relented as Tim told Jed of his plight, then five minutes later grudgingly agreed to help. Zachariah apparently lived two doors

away, so heaving a sigh of relief Tim knocked on his door, and swinging open suddenly it was obvious he wasn't in a good mood. It was now eleven twenty five, and Tim had to explain it all again, then, at eleven thirty five Zachariah finally agreed to help. The three of them headed for Willy Lott's cottage, as Tim had to ask Mary if she would also join his quest. As they walked up the road Zachariah made an excuse to return home for something he'd forgotten, and now intent on getting it organized Tim didn't argue the toss, but had procured a promise from Zachariah that he would return in time to take part. Explaining to Mary exactly what he wanted her to do she readily agreed, and Jed left to get the Wain as Zachariah arrived back on the scene. It was eleven forty five and Tim was ready, the sound of hooves and iron-clad wheels once again rang in his ears as Jed returned with the Haywain, then asking where he should position himself John Constable dutifully carried out Tim's instructions.

'Alright lad's,' announced Jed suddenly, 'let's get 'im, he won' ge' away this time!' Before Tim knew it the gnarl-faced old man appeared with his three sons, complete with pitch fork *and guns!* Realising he'd been duped his heart pounded with fear and anger! It had been a ruse, and he could see now why they'd agreed to help, which was the reason why Zachariah had made an excuse to return to his cottage. A rifle butt caught Tim on side of his head and sent him spinning to the ground, then before he knew it the pack were on him .

'In the back of the cart with him,' shouted Jed, 'this time we'll make sure 'e don't escape!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

The rifle-like crack of a whip sounded on the spring air, and startled by the suddenness of it everyone stopped what they were doing.

'Unhand him!' Came the order, it was a voice used to giving orders, 'let him go I say!' Feeling four sweaty hands relax their grip on him Tim looked up, and was more than pleased to see Sir Walter and Harris standing in the Landau glaring at Jed and Zachariah. With a rifle to his shoulder Sir Walter aimed it directly at Jed's chest, then thinking it had run out permanently Tim was unable to believe his luck, and was at the point of fighting to the death rather than give in to them again!

'What's it to you?' asked Jed in a surly manner.

'This gentleman is a very good friend of mine, and he is certainly no criminal, so you will kindly release him from your custody sir!' Realising Sir Walter was not to be trifled with they did as they were bade, and as Tim walked over to the Landau Harris asked if he was alright.

'Now, we'll see who does what here!' announced Sir Walter in a commanding voice. 'What is the situation Tim.' Explaining his theory, and why he had to set it in motion at exactly twelve noon Tim was pleased to see Sir Walter jump into action.

'Right!' barked Sir Walter, 'all of you, go to the positions to which Mr. Gibson has instructed you.' Again they did his bidding, and no one uttered a sound as Sir Walter handed the rifle to Harris, who in turn looked as if he would use it if someone so much as sneezed! With everyone in position,

including John Constable, Tim now took up his own position in front of Constable, and with his back to him.

'What is the time Walter?' asked Tim.

'One minute to twelve Tim.' proclaimed Walter proudly from the watch Tim had given him. Waiting for the transition to happen he soon realised that for some reason, it wasn't!

'What is the time now?' asked Tim again, his voice filled with fear.

'Exactly noon.' came Sir Walter's reply. It was then Tim heard the feint hiss, it was starting, a corridor of pain would soon be his to endure, but this time he would willingly go through it just to be with Cindy again!

'I really *don't* understand this gentlemen!' declared John Constable. Hearing his question Tim turned, but hadn't realised the artist's easel was so close, and in his attempt to avoid a collision lost his balance.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In reverent silence they admired the new find. No one had suspected Constable had painted another version of *The Haywain*, but who was the new character on the canvas?

'In the original, Constable is alleged to have painted out the figure of his father, do you suppose this could be the long lost painting?' asked an expert from the Tate.

'I don't think so,' replied his senior colleague, 'for a start he looks too young, and his stance certainly puts that in doubt as he looks off balance, as if he's about to take a tumble... most curious!' Knowing exactly who it was Cindy dared not say, as telling *anyone* would make her the laughing stock of the country, if not the world! Year after year nightfall brought only tears of bitterness, and Cindy knew that all she had left of her beautiful marriage, and Tim, was that picture on the wall!

THE END

DOOR TO ETERNITY

CHAPTER ONE

Although Alison had informed him of his lack of taste, as far as he was concerned it was Victorian rubbish, and Ian was adamant, he didn't like the door! Oh whoops, another row! Sitting on a rusty old garden seat they discussed it for more than ten minutes. Well they tried, but try as they might they ended up rowing again. Having bought a Victorian house Alison was at a loss to understand why Ian preferred a modern door instead of the one she'd chosen, which after all was sympathetic to the house. The door in question was a perfect fit, but having measured it Ian still objected to the fancy bits as he called them.

'Oh come off it Alison, it's gross for Christ's sake! Look at the letter plate, it's brass... or should I say "brash"! As for the letter box on the other side, well... cast iron filigree dross!'

Pleeeeeease?' she begged, trying to get around him one last time, then resorted to her speciality move - the handdog expression. It worked, and Ian knew he was on a loser, and it was rare for anyone to win an argument with Alison, and it was the same with her father, she was always able to wrap him around her little finger. Maybe that was the root of the problem, but Ian didn't have time to speculate, as Alison was intent on getting the door home. Paying at the site office he loaded the door into the estate car, and complained about the bottom of the door protruding from the rear of the car, which stopped him from

shutting the tailgate. The journey home was fraught with atmosphere, and Alison sensed Ian's mood at having to give in to her, but give in he had, and Alison was feeling pleased with herself. Not for the fact that she'd outmanoeuvred Ian, but purely for the fact that she'd got the door she wanted. Once indoors he started slagging off her choice in exterior decor, but Alison simply smiled and switched the kettle on for coffee.

'I suppose I've got to strip off the old paint, prepare and brush on the new colour?' asked Ian sarcastically as Alison put his coffee on the table.

'No... I was thinking of doing it myself *actually!*' replied Alison confidently.

'Oh yeah, until you find rubbing it down is getting too much like hard work!' countered Ian.

'No, I won't bother you, if that's what you're thinking!' declared Alison, and walked back to the kitchen.

'I'll bet you do!' he shouted after her, but thinking it prudent not to provoke another argument she didn't reply.

That afternoon getting down to brass tacks she started removing the fittings. Unfortunately many years and coats of paint had sealed the nuts securing the letter box to the door, and she was unable to shift them, so marching through the back door she asked for Ian's help, where he immediately expostulated his earlier argument, but eventually with a good deal of humour he wielded his adjustable!

'There you are,' he declared ribbing her, 'it needs a man to do a mans work!' Grinning broadly Alison

told him she may require his assistance from time to time. Laughing at her rejoinder Ian watched her plug in the sander only to find they were out of sanding pads, and informed her they'd run out a few months ago after he'd done the floor in the lounge. Another argument ensued as to why Ian hadn't replaced them when he'd finished, especially as he was the last one to use them! Eventually having to admit his error Alison promptly despatched him to the DIY to get a new pack! It was a full hour before he returned.

'Where have you been?' asked Alison concerned, 'I thought you'd had an accident or something!'

'No of course not!' replied Ian curtly, 'you ought to see the traffic this morning!' Taking the pack from Ian's hand Alison tore it open and removed a pad, and a few minutes later was sanding away to her hearts content. She'd been working for over ten minutes when suddenly she aware of a presence, and looked up to see Ian laughing.

'You look like a Panda with that mask on!' he declared, and laughed again.

'Well I'm glad you find it amusing,' she told him smirking, 'as I'm busy out here you can cook the dinner to save time!' Ian protested vehemently.

'Well... if you want to eat tonight...' she said, and let it hang in the air. Ian got the message. Over a hundred years, and several coats of paint had used most of the pads, and after three hours hard labour she was exhausted, but had done three quarters of the outside face. As the buzz of the sander died away she lit a cigarette, and taking in a lungful exhaled noisily. Ian suddenly stuck his head through the back door.

'Dinner!'

'Ok, I'll just finish this smoke and I'll be in.' she replied feeling tired and hungry.

Ian had almost finished eating when Alison sat down, but neither of them spoke as she started her mastication process. Gratefully for her meal Ian sat and smoked as he listened to the clatter of her knife and fork.

'Hard work?' asked Ian with a trace of sarcasm.

'Yeah, I'm knackered!' she declared removing her dungarees, then flopping on the sofa she had no intention of moving again for the remainder of the evening.

'If I was doing the job I would have used a blow torch first before sanding it!' he said triumphantly.

'Oh great! Why didn't you tell me before?' shouted Alison, and then accused him of withholding important information.

'Well you were so confident I didn't think you needed me!' said Ian, throwing the challenge straight at her.

'Well just for that you can go down to the DIY again tomorrow and get some more pads!'

'What did your last slave die-' seeing the look on her face halfway through his reply, he shut his mouth!

'Not a bad cook - you, even if it was only sausage egg and chips!' declared Alison, he grinned broadly.

CHAPTER TWO

Looking stressed at having to get up before nine on a Sunday morning Ian handed Alison the new pack of sanding pads.

'Thankyou darling!' said Alison histrionically, and knew immediately she was mocking him, but decided he wouldn't say anything at that moment, and knew eventually she would ask him how to use the blowtorch.

'Darling?' came her cry, he grinned, and realised she needed a favour, 'would it be possible for you to show me how to use the blow torch?'

'Oh alright, I don't suppose I'll get any peace 'til I do!'

'No - you won't!'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'No, you said something, I wanna know what it was!' said Ian curtly.

'Oh it's not important, just let it go will you?' replied Alison, as her temper got shorter. Ian went quiet, and snatching the blowtorch he attached the burner and screwed it down tight, then lighting it he yanked a scraper from the rack and turned up the flame until it roared blue and hot. Saying nothing Alison just let him get on with it, and knew he'd forget about it fairly soon. She watched carefully as he blistered the paint, then inserting the scraper underneath, lifted it clear from the door.

'There you are,' he said curtly, 'do you think you can manage that?' Smiling again Alison thanked him for his time. Considering it was her first attempt she did

however manage it fairly well, and Ian returned an hour later to see how she was coping, and expecting to see her sat there in tears he was surprised to see she'd almost finished!

'Not bad!' declared Ian, 'although you dug in a bit deep there.' he said pointing at a mark near the edge of the door.

'Thank you kind sir!' she replied, and was grateful he'd taken the trouble to look at her work.

For reasons known only to Ian, while Alison was finishing off the door he picked up the letter plate and found himself cleaning it. Over the years various clumsy decorators had deposited different coloured paints on the brass plate, so carefully scraping it off he rubbed it down with fine emery paper, then polished it on the buffing wheel to a brilliant shine. The noise of the motor died, and turning to examine his handiwork he saw Alison watching him from the doorway.

'What d'you want?' he asked her abruptly.

'Nothing, I was just watching you, that's all!' she replied smiling at his metalwork skills. 'It's very good... actually I was a bit surprised to see you working on that, remembering your comments at the reclamation yard.'

'That doesn't mean to say I can't do a bit of work on it if I want to!' he replied justifying his position. Applying a protective of cover lacquer the letter plate gleamed when Ian had finished.

'I'm not sure what to do about the letter box,' declared Alison, 'all this fancy work makes it difficult to clean.'

'Let me have it,' said Ian holding his hand out, 'I'll

show you what we do.'

'Oh... thank you love, that's really thoughtful.'

'I know, I'm that kind of guy,' replied Ian grinning. Taking the cast iron filigree box he put it on the floor by an old porcelain sink, as he put it down a piece of paper fell out, it had been folded twice and from a brief perusal appeared to be quite old. Putting it in his pocket he would look at it later, and then poured a measured amount of sodium hydroxide pellets into the sink and filled it with water.

'All we do now is wait a while 'til the crystals dissolve, and the heat dies down.' he told Alison as she returned with two mugs of coffee.

'Heat?' asked Alison looking confused.

'Yes, it's a chemical reaction... when the pellets are mixed with water it creates heat.'

'How?'

'I don't know, you'll have to ask a chemist... or someone who knows about these things.' With that he got up and lowered the letterbox carefully into the caustic soda.

'Why did you put it in so slowly?' asked Alison naively.

'As the actress said to the bishop!' cut in Ian quickly. Laughing at her stupidity, Ian explained why dropping it in fast would be dangerous to their health!

Half an hour later Ian donned his leather apron and boot protectors, then retrieving the letterbox from its caustic bath he balanced it on the drainer. Pulling on his goggles he wire brushed it until the old paint had completely disappeared. Hosing it

down he removed all traces of caustic soda, and seeing every remnant of paint had disappeared Alison stared in disbelief!

'All we have to do is let it dry... then we can paint it.' said Ian victoriously. Throwing her arms around his neck Alison kissed him hard on the lips, then relaxing slightly she pushed her pelvis in close to his, and - when you're on a promise it doesn't take long to wash your hands, however, Ian had the added task of removing his goggles, apron, and boots. A task he found to be a bloody nuisance at that moment in time! All things being equal he managed it in double quick time. Trousers off, he leapt onto the bed where Alison waited for him in her bra and panties, and those sexy suspenders! Hard? Yes - he was! So - it had to be done! Her breasts spilled over the top of her bra, and wanting to see them in their full splendour Ian's hands were eager to remove the garment. Feeling her hand snake into his underpants he got even stiffer, and pulling out his member she caressed it gently, feeling its hardness. His hands tugged eagerly at her panties that before long were off, along with his underpants! Rolling over between her legs, he felt his member against her slit, it was moist, warm, and inviting, and looking up at him Alison smiled, as he placed his member against her entrance Ian pushed forward, then feeling him enter she moaned and moved rhythmically up and down; wanting the rest of it in her.

'Is that good?' asked Ian, as she whispered her answer he thrust himself in, so wrapping her legs around him she held him tight while they f---d.

With her arms wrapped tightly around his neck he almost lost control as he felt her breasts against his chest! Letting go first Alison felt Ian come a few seconds later, as he'd felt her come he was unable to hold back any longer. Rolling off he reached for the cigarettes, then lighting two he handed one to Alison. Lying on the bed for half an hour they caressed each other, and talked about their dreams for the future.

'Come on, it's time we got something to eat.' said Ian spanking her playfully.

'I'm not sure what to cook tonight,' she told him earnestly.

'Ok, let's not cook!' he said jokingly.

'We've got to eat!'

'Absolutely right!' he said, praising her astuteness, 'but... there does happen to be a restaurant not too far away!'

'Can we afford it?' she asked, worried about overspending, especially as they'd taken on a mortgage that was a little more than they could afford. As long as they weren't overzealous Ian assured her it would be alright.

The local restaurant was a cosy little place, not swish by any stretch of the imagination, but had more of a homely atmosphere with an excellent cuisine. Two good servings were laid before them, and straight away they knew their meal had been chef cooked, rather than being cooked in a microwave like some pubs they had frequented. Affording a glass of house red they followed their meal with an ice cream sundae, and finished with black coffee. Saying goodnight to the proprietor

with whom they were on speaking terms, Ian and Alison dawdled home and finally got to bed at half past midnight. Unable to sleep just before one o'clock Ian got out of bed and lit a cigarette, then pulling back the curtain looked into the street; it was very still. Just the sodium street lights, Ian, and his cigarette! Half smoked he stubbed it out and slid quietly back into bed, but was still unable to persuade the sandman to smile on him! By twenty to two he was out of bed again, and frustrated at being conscious in the early hours, plus, the following day knew he would feel like death. Oblivious to his insomnia he saw no point in disturbing Alison, so pulling on his trousers and a T shirt he slipped quietly out. Closing the door Ian walked down the path and onto the pavement, then turning left although didn't know why, he walked just for the sake of it, and hoped it's effect would be anaesthetic. On his return he opened the front door and looked at his watch, but it was to no avail, although he'd walked for more half an hour he was still wide awake! The kettle boiled, and making his tea in the cup he took a sip and lit another cigarette, then returning the lighter to his pocket he felt something against his hand, it was that piece of paper he'd found in the letter box. Taking it out he opened it up, although the ink in some places had been obliterated by a stain of some description Ian started reading. It was clearly a love letter, and the curious thing was it was addressed to someone called Ian. Obviously it was some other Ian, and not him. Looking at the postmark the date of posting was 2nd March 1886, but it was the last line of the

letter that puzzled him, as the writer begged Ian to write back as soon as he could.

'Bit late now love!' said Ian dryly.

Thinking no more of it he decided to give sleep one last chance, so slipping the letter into his pocket he silently climbed the stairs to find that elusive thing called sleep. He wasn't sure how long he slept, but was suddenly aware of Alison standing by the bed holding a cup in her hand.

'Thanks love,' he said rubbing his eyes, 'that's a nice thought... bringing me a cup of tea I mean.' Smiling at him she walked around the bed, then stopping by the door leaned back to look at him.

'Just a little reward for last night.' she said sweetly, and returning her smile Ian took a sip of tea.

CHAPTER THREE

Breakfast the next morning was another treat, egg and bacon, with mushrooms, sausages, and fried tomatoes. Buttering a piece of bread Ian relished every mouthful, and finished with a cup of Earl Grey. Lighting a cigarette each they sat back to enjoy a few minutes respite, before continuing with their precious door. It was then Ian admitted to Alison that he was beginning to like the door, although he would reserve judgement until it was finished and fitted. Out in the back garden Alison struggled to pick up the massive door without much success, and running over Ian admonished her for taking on something that might have caused her a serious injury.

'We'll have to paint one side at a time.'

'Not so,' replied Ian quickly, 'I'll show you a little dodge.' Going into the shed he rummaged around for a few minutes, and returned with two eyehooks and a long piece of wire. Drilling two holes at either end of the door he screwed in the eyehooks, then twisting the wire around the eyes he strung the door between the two shed door handles.

'Clever you!' cried Alison with delight, 'I would never have thought of that!' Feeling uncomfortable at having praise heaped upon him Ian brushed it aside. A few hours later the first coat of primer had dried and was duly rubbed down, then having cleaned the dust from the surface another coat was applied. Pleased with their progress by lunchtime, they decided on a quick sandwich and get back to the job in hand, it would be cheese, a cup of tea and

a smoke, then back to it! Sitting on the edge of the table they munched gratefully on their meagre meal. Only having one "ciggie" left, sharing it was their only option, and taking two drags Ian then passed it to Alison.

'You finish it, I've had enough for now,' he told her. Leaning against Ian while she smoked, his hand suddenly found itself inside her T shirt.

'We haven't got time!' said Alison smirking, but popping the buttons on her dungarees the front flap fell to her waist, her T shirt was now the only barrier between him - and heaven. Sliding both hands under her T shirt, to his delight she wasn't wearing a bra, and her breasts felt good as he caressed her nipples, but instead of objecting Alison turned to face him, and thrust her hand inside his jeans, he was hard again! As he popped the buttons on the side of her dungarees, she almost had to declare war on his belt buckle as her hands tugged frantically to undo it, but eventually it gave and his jeans obligingly fell to the floor. Studying the curve of her legs Ian silently admitted they were *some* legs! Having successfully removed his jeans Alison cradled his member in her hand, then picking her up Ian sat her on the table, and with her legs in the air Ian thrust himself inside her. He'd only been going for a few minutes when suddenly Alison let go in a frenzied climax, the like of which he'd never known! With her nails digging into his waist it was too much, and a few seconds later he pumped everything he had into her.

'I thought you said we didn't have time?' said Ian quizzing her as he zipped his fly.

'Special concession!' she told him grinning.

'For what exactly?'

'On account of the fact that I was feeling *very* randy!' she declared, Ian laughed. That afternoon they managed to apply the first coat of gloss, and as it had made them half an hour late for dinner Alison cooked up something quick. They were hungry, but not just for food, because the contents of their plates were fairly irrelevant. They did again, on the drainer! After that their evening was fairly run-of-the-mill, a bit of TV, a read of the papers, and then to bed. The following morning they were intent on finishing the door, just one more coat and the fittings could be replaced, and the only job left then would be to hang it. By ten they'd finished the final application, and had dropped the brushes into the jar of turps - with all the others!

'There isn't much more we can do now is there?' asked Alison.

'No, we'll have to wait 'til it dries.' replied Ian matter-of-factly, and suggested they go back to the reclamation yard and find something for the garden. Although Alison liked the idea she reminded Ian they were short of cash.

'Well as long as they don't cost the earth it won't seriously dent the bank balance.'

'Ok, you've got a date,' she told him smiling, 'if it means we get to go out more I can see I'm gonna have to screw you more often!' Although Ian laughed he considered the implications of her statement. After an hour at the reclamation yard they'd spent the best part of two hundred pounds, but had acquired two stone mushrooms, and a genuine antique statue of the three graces. Having

unloaded the car and put the ornaments in a corner of the garden, Ian remembered the door and went over to test the paint, although it was still slightly tacky it wouldn't be long before they'd be able to refit the letter plate and box. After that he checked the paint on the letter box, but being cast iron it hadn't dried as quickly as the door. Then running his eye over it he noticed something in the bottom of the box, it was an envelope addressed to "Ian". The postmark this time however was only two days old! Checking the name on the envelope he saw something that had escaped his eye the first time, a chill ran through him - Ian Bannerman! How could this be? That was his name! As the handwriting was identical to the first letter, it certainly couldn't be a mistake. Hearing Alison's footsteps he quickly stuffed the envelope in his pocket.

'What's the verdict?' she asked, referring to the paint. 'Ok, we'll be able to refit the letter plate and box this evening.' he told her nonchalantly. In case it was some crank he didn't show Alison the letter, and wanting to find out what it was about he didn't want her worrying unnecessarily. Every few seconds or so it seemed Ian's mind wandered back to the letter, and was aware he was behaving oddly. With Alison throwing him odd glances ever more frequently, he'd have to conceal his secret better if he was to keep it that way. Every time Alison disappeared for one reason or another, Ian thought he'd have an opportunity to study the letter, only to see his chance evaporate as she returned before he'd managed to pull it from his pocket.

Lighting two cigarettes, Ian handed one to

Alison; and taking it she took a few puffs and stubbed it in the ashtray.

'I'm feeling tired,' she told him yawning, 'I'm for bed... are you coming?'

'No, I did that earlier.' he replied in a monotone. His joke appealed to Alison's sense of humour, and reaching the landing her laughter still boarded hysteria. Knowing her capacity for coming back down to retrieve something she'd forgotten, Ian gave it ten minutes before pulling the letter from his pocket. The landing light went out, and hearing the bedroom door shut he unfolded and read it carefully from beginning to end.

Dear Ian,

I know that we have never met, nor have we been formally introduced, and I beg your forgiveness for being forward in writing to you. You must think me uncommonly bold, but I assure you sir I am not usually this forward. Please allow me to explain, I have seen you in the house, and from the first moment I saw you I fell in love. I hope we can meet in the not too distant future, I also hope that one day you will have the same feelings for me, as I for you. Please reply to my letter, not to receive an answer from you would indeed leave me broken-hearted. I am yours in waiting.

Your true companion,

Felicity burrows.

Intrigued, and feeling a little egotistical he returned the letter to his pocket, and was puzzled as to how Felicity had seen him in the house, as he certainly hadn't seen her! The only answer he came up with was that she was a ghost, and then promptly questioned his sense of logic. 'It's time for bed' said Zebedee, the quip from the children's programme ran automatically through his mind, and he now knew why he'd questioned his logic! Lying on the cool sheets for over two hours he pondered the mystery of Felicity Burrows. Who was she, and how had she seen him? Her letters were written in a style of English at least a hundred years old, but if they were written that long ago, how were they reaching him? Like a ride at the fairground the questions went 'round in his head incessantly, and by four am he'd still not reached a conclusion. Keeping the letter in his pocket he hoped to forget about it, and hadn't done anything about it for three days. Friday morning after breakfast Alison asked him if he intended to hang the door that morning. Ian replied in the affirmative, as the door was now finished there was no reason not to.

'I'm surprised,' Alison told him, 'I thought you'd have found every excuse under the sun not to hang it.'

'Oh ye of little faith,' he replied, chiding her gently, 'as a matter of fact it has grown on me since we've renovated it.'

It took surprisingly little fettling to fit it into the frame, and the hinge plates practically fell in the cut-outs. The only modification he had to make was to fit a more suitable lock plate, as the present one being modern looked very out of place. Opening and

shutting it a few times to make sure it operated properly Alison jokingly accused him of trying to wear it out.

'You just had to have a go didn't you!' he snarled at her, 'you've got the door you wanted, but that isn't good enough is it, you just have to make a snide remark!'

'Hey, hey,' she cut in quickly, 'I was *only* joking, why are you having a go at me all of a sudden, have you lost your sense of humour?'

'No I have not!' he shouted at her, 'I know I gave you a hard time over the door, but I thought that was all in the past, my mistake obviously!'

'Oh come on, let's forget it,' pleaded Alison relenting, 'lets not argue over something as trivial as this.'

'It might be trivial to you, but it's not your feelings that have been hurt!' he shouted. After a couple of minutes Alison apologised, and after repeating her repentance still got no reaction from him.

'I'm sorry love,' he said eventually, 'I don't know what came over me, that was stupid.'

'Oh it doesn't matter,' she told him wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, 'it's in the past now... yes?'

'Yes.' whispered Ian, her lips met his softly, and as her tongue slid into his mouth Ian mimicked her. Undoing the buttons on her blouse she dropped it on the arm of the sofa and resumed their passionate kiss. Wondering for a moment if he was a sucker for punishment he soon dispelled the thought - he was hard again! So... Alison's hand hurriedly pulled out his member, and their lovemaking suffered the

impetuosity of youth. Lifting her skirt Ian yanked her panties down, then, as they lay on the sofa Alison sat astride him, and guided him into her soft warm channel, then pushing himself up as far as he could he held it there for several minutes. Moaning huskily Alison couldn't hold on, his hard cock was giving her spasms. Screaming as she came Ian felt her fluid run, and seconds later pumped his juice into her as she collapsed exhausted on top of him.

'That was great,' she told him, 'we seem to get better and better, if we practice more often it won't be long before we're perfect!' Ian laughed and offered her a cigarette, although the idea appealed to him it was the way she'd put it that made him laugh. As they hadn't been out for a while Ian suggested they go down to the local that evening, and the idea was a hit as far as Alison was concerned. Getting more than inebriated that evening, by ten o'clock Ian was suffering from a definite wobble, and Alison had spent the last hour in the bar swaying to and fro on her stool.

'Fanshy another shag?' asked Ian, speaking fluent Slur.

'No,' replied Alison giggling, 'you're disgusting, we only did it a few hours ago!'

'weelll,' slurred Ian again, 'it wash you who shaid we should practish more!' Falling sideways from his seat Ian made his way swiftly to the floor. Neither of them had trouble sleeping that night, in fact neither could remember getting in to bed! Ten to ten the next morning found two bad heads slowly and painfully rise from heavenly pillows, and four bleary eyes then staggered slowly to the bathroom cabinet.

Two right hands reached shakily for the liver salts. Ian apologised realising he'd crowded her.

'No really... you first.' he told Alison, playing the gentleman.

'Are you sure?' she asked him, not wanting to seem pushy, 'I don't mind waiting.'

'No, no, I insist,' said Ian fading fast. Turning slowly he made his way back to the bedroom, and another state of unconsciousness came quite naturally, *and automatically!* By lunchtime Ian had emerged again, and nursed a sack of spuds that for one reason or another, was attached to his neck. It was five in the afternoon before either of them had recovered sufficiently to think about food.

'Dinner?' asked Alison in a monotone, although her question sounded akin to a declaration of independence!

'Possibly!' replied Ian, although his vocal chord struggled to be - vocal, but the effort was too great, so without saying another word Alison retrieved various items of food from the freezer and attempted to cook them. A plate appeared in front of Ian's semi-conscious eyes, and sitting round-shouldered he slowly surveyed the items it contained. Two fried eggs (hard), cabbage (limp), baked beans, and a chop! Nice! It was fortunate for them both that their taste buds were dormant, had they been anywhere near normal, they'd have both screamed at the pile of crap that was theirs to relish! By bedtime they felt - almost - good. The next morning Ian swore that was the last time, no way would he get like that again! Alison agreed!

'I've got some work to do in the office love, ok?' said

Ian nonchalantly, and as he hadn't heard her reply he left assuming she had. Staring at him from the desk the letter defied all logic, and he read it again to make sure he hadn't missed anything. Something then occurred to him he'd previously overlooked, and taking the stairs three at a time he landed heavily on the hall floor. Yanking the lid of the letterbox open he thrust his hand inside, and it touched paper. Lifting it out he guessed it was another letter from Felicity, so returning to the office he tore it open to find his that guess was correct, it *was* from her! It was dated the day before yesterday; again it was addressed to Ian Bannerman.

My darling Ian,

I was most upset not to have received a reply to my letter, I had hoped and prayed most fervently that you would write to me, to tell me that you feel as I do. Maybe I don't please you physically, although I have seven admirers, all of whom tell me that I am fair of face.

Oh my dearest, I hope that within a few days I might receive a communiqué from you, and will also pray that you will tell me of your feelings for me.

Your true companion,

Felicity.

She'd used the same endearment to finish her last letter, "your true companion". Ian wondered what she meant by that; how did she know he was her true companion? Or was it a case of *what* she knew? Switching on his computer Ian decided right there and then that he would reply, so opening a window he typed his reply.

Dear Felicity,

Thankyou for writing to me, I don't quite know how you've seen me, or how you think I am someone you find attractive. If as you say you have seen me in the house, you must have also seen my wife Alison, and know that I am happily married. I am of course very flattered to think you find me attractive, but I feel I must tell you that I am not available. If you wish to continue writing to me, I would very much like to be your friend, and would look forward to receiving your next letter as such.

Your friend,

Ian Bannerman.

Placing it carefully in an envelope, he licked the stamp and ran to the post box to catch the 5.35 collection. A week went by without a reply from Felicity, so putting it down to the content of his letter, Ian assumed she'd obviously taken heed of his written word. Another week had passed when to his surprise he found another letter from Felicity,

pocketing it quickly before Alison saw it he dashed to the office. The postmark was three days old.

My dearest Ian,

I was distressed to the point of depression not having received a letter from you, I was hoping and praying that you would tell me that you loved me also. It appears such is not the case, and I am distraught. I cannot begin to tell you how much I love you, I saw you in the back bedroom yesterday, and you looked so handsome! I am lonely without you; if only you would come to me, I am certain you would not be displeased. I have already confessed that many suitors have told me I am fair of countenance, if after seeing me you do not wish to pursue a lasting relationship I will understand, although I will be heartbroken, and I fear I shall never marry, I could not give myself to another knowing my feelings for you.

Your true companion,

Felicity.

P.S. Please put your reply in the letterbox on the back of the door, not in a royal mail post box. I hope fervently that that is the reason why I have not received a reply.

Intrigued by the letter Ian was also a bit frightened, as she appeared to be totally infatuated with him. What baffled him most was that she'd

stated that, "If he went to see her she was certain he would not be displeased". How could he get to see her? This, as far as he knew was a physical impossibility! He was however drawn to write to her again.

'How long are you going to be?' asked Alison curtly, 'you seem to spend more and more time up there these days!'

'Sorry love,' replied Ian hurriedly, 'I'll be as quick as I can.' He couldn't believe what his sub-conscious was thinking, and was beginning to see Alison as a nuisance, as all he wanted was to write his reply to Felicity. He would have to make his reply quick, as in her current frame of mind Alison might start getting suspicious!

My dear Felicity,

I have received all your letters, but it appears you've received none of mine. What you said in your last letter about me posting my letter in a post box was quite correct, this one however I have left in the letterbox in the front door as per your instructions, I trust that is the door you were referring to. Please let me know how I can meet you, as you live in 1886 I feel that will be impossible. However, I am intrigued at your self-appraisal, if you are "fair of countenance" as you put it, that would certainly please me. I will follow any instruction you send me, perhaps when we meet, we can get to know each other and take it from there. As you have obviously seen me, I don't need to tell you much of my appearance, as it would be rather pompous of me to

do so.

Yours in anticipation,

Ian Bannerman.

Placing the letter tentatively in the box he walked quickly away, afraid Alison might see him, or the letter! All he had to do now was wait for her reply, and undecided on what to do next he wondered why he'd even started all this! Curiosity, he recalled *had* killed the cat! Getting progressively jumpy his nerves played a major role in unsettling him.

'What do you want for your birthday?' asked Alison, 'have you got something in mind, or shall I surprise you?'

'Oh... uh... I don't know,' he replied, then noting her expression he knew she had sensed his pre-occupation, 'surprise me!' Having sensed his lack of attention to her in recent weeks, Alison hadn't exactly found it hard to detect.

'Is there something wrong,' asked Alison hesitantly, 'have I said, or done something wrong? You seem rather distant these days.'

'Wrong?' asked Ian looking at her incredulously, and hoped it would cover his reticence, 'of course there's nothing wrong, what could be wrong?' Staring at her for a few seconds he hoped his expression of ridicule would allay her fears.

'Oh, well... that's alright then,' she replied, 'I just thought... well, you know... as long as everything's alright.' Breathing an inward sigh of relief his ploy

seemed to have worked, but Ian suddenly realised he was protecting his assets, and hedging his bets! If it didn't work out with Felicity at least he would have Alison to fall back on! Aware of an intense feeling of dislike for himself, he wondered what was becoming of him? Surely he *still* loved Alison?

CHAPTER FOUR

Knowing he'd dare not take a chance on Alison finding out what was going on Ian tried hard to be more attentive toward her, even though he still considered meeting Felicity an impossibility! Saturday morning Ian turned over in bed, and although Alison was still asleep, he put his arm around her waist, and pressed home his attack! He was hard - again! Stirring from her slumber she slid her hand between his legs, and as she opened her leg she gently stroked his cock, inserting himself from behind Alison groaned with pleasure as he rammed it in hard. Putting his arms around her he fondled her breasts, as her gorgeous bum moved back and forth Ian pumped her hard and gave her the best climax she'd ever had. As her head tilted back, a scream stifled in her throat as she let go like a woman possessed. Lifting himself up Alison preempted him, and moved onto her back, pushing her pelvis towards him she arched her buttocks, and Ian shafted himself into her, then coming like a stallion he filled her with his love juice. Turning over she smiled broadly at him, then stroking her hair Ian played at the loving husband, but, at the same time found himself thinking of Felicity. At the earliest opportunity Ian checked the letterbox, but finding it empty he was certain Felicity should have replied by now. The best part of the day he spent with Alison, trying out different positions (for the garden ornaments they'd bought!), first it went here, then it had to go over there, then the light wasn't complimentary, but much to Ian's relief they

eventually agreed on a position for all three. What he now found hard to understand was that he still enjoyed sex with Alison, and there was no denying it was better than ever. It was just that he found it difficult to pay her attention at other times. On Saturday evening Ian's heart sank, and suddenly realised there was no post on Sundays, it would be Monday before he heard from Felicity, possibly even longer!

For reasons unknown Ian woke at quarter to six Sunday morning, and lay there for while thinking about Felicity, wondering what she would be like. Would she be as beautiful as Alison, was she taller, shorter, plumper, slimmer? Like the proverbial brick on the head something suddenly occurred to him, Sunday post, or the lack of it was totally irrelevant, and he kicked himself for being so stupid, a letter from her might be in the letterbox now! Taking a brief look at Alison she was still fast asleep, however, making a mental note to tell her she snored he slid out of bed and crept downstairs. As he lifted the flap on the back of the letterbox it squeaked loudly, and Ian's heart raced, so listening for a moment he wondered if it had woken Alison, then hearing nothing he continued; it was there! His heart beating faster than ever he lifted it out, and closing the flap slowly crept back upstairs. Once in the study he sat at his desk and opened the letter he'd been waiting so long for.

My darling Ian,

I was ecstatic when I received your letter, I will be

pleased to receive you as soon as you are able to come to me. As to our meeting, we can, and we will! I believe it is your birthday soon, the eighteenth of this month if I am correct, so this is what you must do. On the morning of your birthday at nine fifty two, (the time you were born) place your hand through the letterbox from the outside; you will feel my hand take hold of yours from the other side. From then on in just let nature take its course, then we can be together for eternity. I truly love you.

Your true companion,

Felicity.

Realising the eighteenth was four days away he now wondered if could he wait that long? He'd assumed he would meet her sooner than that. If and *when* they met he would have to ask her how she knew what time he was born, as this one fact unnerved him a little, but not enough to put him off. Somehow he knew those four days were going to be the longest of his life, as time now couldn't go fast enough all he wanted out of life was to be with Felicity, and realised that without even having seen her let alone met her, in some strange way he *was* in love with her! A thought dawned on him suddenly, and Ian knew he'd have to spend as much time away from Alison as possible, but the only excuse he could think of was to tell her he'd had a sudden influx of work.

'Oh, I uh... forgot to tell you, I've had an order in for some fliers, letterheads and business cards,' said Ian, and couldn't believe he was lying to her, 'I want to be disturbed as little as possible... if you don't mind love.'

'No, that's alright, if it means money, it's important, I'll try not to disturb you.' said Alison agreeably. Her ready acceptance of the situation made him feel worse, he was hoping she'd take umbrage and argue the point, but instead she'd been a model of compliance. Once in the office he switched on his computer and opened a paint file, and put up a bogus address to make it look as if he was starting a job. It was then his brain got in to top gear, if he did a "proper" job and printed it, he could tell Alison he was going to show the customer his proofs. It worked, she was very enthusiastic and wished him luck, so now he'd able to spend the time away from Alison that he found so necessary. Feeling really guilty his stomach knotted, unable to believe how devious he'd become he really wanted to crawl into a corner and die! He could now stay away from Alison for a few hours without raising any suspicion, so going to the coast twenty miles away he found a pub, and ordering a ploughman's with a pint of local real ale to wash it down, he'd overlooked the strength of the ale which had had quite an effect on him, and realised he would have to go for a walk until he'd got it out of his system. It was a very long walk! Two hours later feeling able to drive, he sat in the car and purposefully made a few corrections on the proof copies, then headed for home.

'How did it go love, any luck?' asked Alison as he walked through the door, 'did he give you a big fat cheque?'

'No such luck,' replied Ian laughing at her quip, 'I've got to do a few alterations, then I might just have a sale.' Alison was genuinely pleased for him, and kissing him passionately she threw her arms around his neck, so returning the kiss briefly he broke away, then telling he didn't want to keep the customer waiting made the excuse he'd have to get on with the alterations. Looking disappointed for a few seconds she saw the reason in his argument, then smiling suggested they might get something on that evening. That put him on his mettle immediately, and knew he would have to find an excuse to work that evening! Back in the office he put the file back on screen, and his guilt having increased considerably now churned his insides.

Not really sure of what was happening to him, he found himself questioning his love for Alison. Did he really want to be with her now? Thinking about this for a while the answer was something he already knew, and having faced the question and answered it honestly he now felt better in himself. However, he also realised that for the next four days he'd have to play-act when he was with Alison. Ten minutes later Ian heard her call him for dinner.

'I've done you a fry up,' she told him smiling, 'I know it's your favourite.'

'Oh, thanks love,' he said weakly, 'that's nice.' Sitting at the table he ate the meal that was meant to please him. Sensing he hadn't been happy of late, Alison wanted desperately to remedy the situation, but

sitting opposite she couldn't help notice his lack of response. Saying nothing for quite a while Ian realised he'd let the duration of their silence go on too long, and it was Alison spoke first.

'You're very quiet love, is there something wrong?'

'No, that's the second time you've asked that, why do you think there's something wrong all the time?'

'I don't, and I've only asked you once.'

'Well... there's nothing wrong, I've got this contract on my mind, I expect that's what it is.'

'Oh, of course, I'm sorry love... that was insensitive of me, there you are with all these worries and all I can do is nag!' Walking 'round the table she put her hands on his shoulders and kissed the top of his head, then catching her arm Ian gave it a squeeze, which appeared to allay the situation for the time being. Having finished his meal Ian made them a drink, then sitting in the lounge they watched the news and drank their coffee. Half an hour later the news having finished Alison made a move on Ian, but pre-empting the situation he got up and made for the door before her arms could reach him.

'Look, I'm sorry love, but I think I should get on with this contract, I don't want to chance losing it.'

'Yes, ok love... I'll uh... just wash up, you go on, *I know* it's important to you.' Sacrificing her need to make love she reasoned they could always do it another time. In the office Ian sat at his desk and put his head in his hands, then cried openly at *this* mysterious contention that taunted him. However, he suddenly realised he'd better dry his face, if Alison saw him like this it would almost certainly cause a rash of awkward questions. After three

hours in the office messing about with his theoretical contract, it was beginning to tell on him, boredom wasn't something Ian wore well, and lighting another cigarette he realised his throat was raw through smoking. After three drags and he'd stubbed it out and looked out of the window, although he wasn't really sure why, it was probably his wish to be out there instead of up here in his self-imposed prison. Oh how he wanted to be with Felicity, but he still had three days to wait 'til his birthday! Needing of some fresh air, he decided he'd tell Alison his mind was stale, so closing the office door he pulled on his jacket and walked downstairs. Reaching the first landing he caught a distinct waft of perfume on the air, it was a musky aroma, and immediately he knew it was Felicity, she was close to him. Having almost called her name he quickly checked himself, and realised that Alison might be within earshot.

'I'm feeling a bit stale in the brain love,' he lied to her, 'I must get some fresh air.' Smiling her assent Ian wasted no time in getting out of the house, and thanked God she hadn't decided to come with him. Walking aimlessly was as almost bad as being trapped in the office, so lighting another cigarette, this time Ian smoked the whole damned thing in an attempt to relieve the boredom! His mind inevitably returned to thoughts of Felicity, and the smell of her perfume which haunted him, it was a curious aroma, and for some reason realised it had an "old" smell about it, he hadn't realised how long he'd been thinking about her, when, looking at his watch he was horrified to see he'd been gone for almost two

hours! As soon as he got in the front door Alison would ask questions. What would he tell her? His mind numb with guilt and worry, and he was unable to think of a rational excuse for his long absence, and knowing it was his fault was his dishonesty about to turn the tables on him?

Closing the door he looked at his watch, it was ten to eleven. The kitchen and lounge were both in darkness, so calling her name he waited, but there was no reply. She'd obviously gone to bed, but that was not a good sign, so with his mind still frozen in limbo he climbed the stairs, and prayed he could think of some excuse before opening the bedroom door. The light was off, so creeping in he tried not to wake her, and left his clothes on the chair by the bed. He slid under the duvet as quietly as he could, then with his back to her he settled down. He was almost asleep when Alison's hand arrived at his member, and for ten minutes he tried in vain to switch his mind off, but try as he might eventually he gave in to her persistence.

'I'm very tired love.' he lied again, feigning weariness.

'You're not that tired... are you?' asked Alison, pressing her breasts into his back, then he felt her pubic hair rub against his left buttock, that was the last straw, and he was the camel! He was hard again, and Alison knew it! Holding it in her hand she pressed home her attack, and like any red-blooded male Ian eventually turned to face her. Kissing him long and hard, she sensually rubbed her body against his, as his hand gently stroked her wet slit, she moaned deep in her throat and slithered head

first down the bed to kiss his member, then lifting her leg over thrust her crutch in his face. Sliding his tongue into her slit she in turn licked the end of his piece, then slowly sunk her lips over his member 'til she reached the base. Feeling his tongue inside her, his thumb caressed her clitoris as he worked his tongue around inside her. Giving him several short deep throat pumps Alison then came up and slowly flicked her tongue around his end, and sensing he was about to come, knew she was getting close herself! Lowering herself down on him again she sucked hard; Ian cried out as he came, and Alison stayed there until he'd finished. Suddenly she felt herself come in a cascade of ecstasy, and feeling her juices flow over his tongue he caressed her nipples. Her appetite was insatiable, and turning around she lowered herself onto him, and moved sensually up and down, every time she moved up she would tighten her muscles, and squeeze his piece in a delicious sensual frenzy, and a few minutes later Ian came again. Turning her on her back Ian then screwed his shaft into her until she gushed another delicious climax.

The next morning Ian was sullen, and giving him a long sideways glance Alison was at a loss to know what was wrong with him, but something was *definitely* wrong!

'That was great last night,' she said lovingly, 'I don't think I've ever enjoyed it more.'

'Yes, ok,' replied Ian, his response was short and blunt without even looking at her. A long silence ensued as they dressed, as Alison wondered what she'd done wrong Ian worried about what he would

tell her when she asked the inevitable question.

'Are you going to tell me then?' asked Alison, finally breaking the deadlock. Ian didn't answer.

'Are you not speaking to me then?' she asked finally throwing down the gauntlet, 'I guess I must have done something very bad.'

'No, nothing of the sort,' replied Ian reluctantly, 'there you go again, thinking there's something wrong!'

'Well you've been very pissy lately,' she said challengingly, and pressed home her attack, 'you can't deny that!'

'I told you... I've got this contract on my mind.'

'As long as that's *all* it is!' she said testily and walked out. It was killing him to see what she was going through, and he felt more guilty as each day went by, especially after all she'd done for him, and all they'd been though. After breakfast Ian told her he had to go and see his client again, anything to get out of the house, at that moment even boredom was better than facing Alison, and the atmosphere in the house was far too stifling. It was time to grit his teeth, but in the knowledge that after today he'd only have two days to wait, then he would be with his beloved Felicity. Driving aimlessly from town to town, the memory of her perfume came back to him, then fancying a coffee his watch was surely giving him bullshit! It was eleven thirty! Seeing a transport cafe on the opposite side of the road he decided it would do in an emergency. Although Ian didn't like the sort of coffee that transport cafes usually served up, he had to admit it was quite good compared with past experiences. Having told Alison his destination

was only fifteen miles away he'd have to get back soon, as if he was gone too long she was certainly clever enough to detect any discrepancies! Walking through the front door he realised quickly that she was out, so going straight to the office he made another alteration to the proofs that his fictitious client had requested. Should she make a surprise return he put the job on screen to lend it an air of authenticity and played Solitaire on his computer. Trying to beat the computer he was lost to the world for an hour, however it appeared he was not to win at Solitaire that afternoon.

'Hello!' called Alison from the hall, and Ian realised that her voice now antagonised him, and he now resented her presence.

'I'm up here!' he replied curtly, then hearing her footfalls he knew she was on her way up.

'Hi... ok?' she said cheerily, 'what do you think?' said Alison twirling in front of him to show off her new hair-do.

'Yeah... very nice.' replied Ian without looking up from the screen. Angry at his snub she walked out in a huff, she'd done her best to make things right, and all he could do was ignore her! He let her stew for half an hour, then feeling a twinge of guilt he closed the file and shut down his computer. Walking into the bedroom he found Alison with tears streaming down her face lying on the bed, and seeing the state she was in gutted him, but it *was* his fault after all, who was this Felicity to think she could come between him and Alison? Putting his arm around her she wept bitterly as her head fell on his chest.

'I am *so* sorry love,' he said quietly, 'I've been a real

bastard lately, I don't know why... it's just... well, this contract as you well know.'

'I was beginning to think you don't love me anymore.' she told him sobbing. That stung, and Ian now felt like a *real* shit!

'I feel so low now, I think I could limbo under the double yellow lines in the road!' Suddenly Alison burst out laughing.

'You silly sod!' she said, wiping her tear-stained face. Purposefully doing the Limbo across the bedroom he went lower and lower until his head touched the ground, and inevitably sprawling across the floor caused Alison to go into hysterics. After that the atmosphere improved one hundred percent. Picking up a tissue Ian dabbed her eyes gently as she squeezed his left hand.

'I'll go and make a cuppa.' he told her suddenly. She smiled at him as he reached the bedroom door.

'Oh, by the way - your hair looks gorgeous... just like you!' Having made the tea he picked up the cups to return the bedroom when Alison suddenly appeared in the kitchen.

'Here!' said Ian throwing her a smoke, then lighting his he tossed her the lighter.

'Ta!' she said and threw it back. Looking at each other for a moment or two Alison thought about Ian's absurd limbo dance, and burst out laughing again.

'You're not expecting me to limbo next time we make love are you?' asked Ian, and caused her another bout of hysterics. 'There again that depends on who goes on top, perhaps we could take it in turns, 'til we end up going 'round so fast we could

fly to Spain!' Her face turned crimson as she fought to regain her self control, and panted in short staccato breaths.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dinner was a more agreeable affair that evening, and Ian opened a bottle of wine he'd been keeping for some reason or another. Being slightly sozzled they sat on the lounge floor to watch TV, then at ten o'clock Alison declared she was tired and was going to turn in, and feeling similar Ian said he'd joined her. Climbing the stairs Alison was four steps ahead of Ian when he caught a whiff of Felicity's perfume again.

'Did you smell that?' asked Alison. Unaware Alison had also smelt it Ian quickly realised his answer would have to be guarded.

'Smell what?' he asked feigning ignorance, but it had triggered his memory into action, and suddenly he was thinking of Felicity again, his mind was now completely fixed on her, and as they got into bed Alison put her hand on his shoulder.

'I thought you said you were tired.' Ian reminded her. 'I think I've just got enough in my tank to get us to the end of a shag!' she joked.

'Sorry love,' Ian replied coolly, 'I *really* am whacked!' Her smile suddenly disappeared, and without saying another word she turned her back on him, and instead cuddling into him as usual, having switched off the light remained there. Ordering them to wake up Ian lashed out at the alarm clock and missed! Reaching across him Alison switched it off without any drama.

'Why did you do that?' asked Ian curtly.

'Do what?' asked Alison, her face contorted with anger at finding him stropky again.

'I am quite capable of switching it off myself, ' replied Ian, emphasising every word, 'there was no need for you to reach over me to switch it off, *trying to show me up, were you?'*

'No I was not!' she protested angrily, 'I just thought I'd save you the bother... sod you! Next time you can do it yourself!' Throwing back the duvet Ian marched into the bathroom, and returning ten minutes later he dressed. Throwing back the duvet Alison marched into the bathroom, and returning ten minutes later she dressed. Going downstairs she saw Ian in the office half way through a cigarette. She had made and consumed her breakfast before Ian realised she hadn't called him.

'Why didn't you tell me breakfast was ready?' he said acidly.

'I thought it better not to, I thought it might be the wrong thing to do!' she replied acidly, giving him a taste of his own medicine, then lit a cigarette. Going to the cupboard Ian snatched a packet of cornflakes from the bottom shelf, and pouring some into a bowl, he plastered them with a liberal helping of sugar.

'That'll rot your teeth.' she told him coolly as he drowned them in milk.

'Fat lot you care!' said Ian, and his words hit her like a Scud missile.

'Fuck you!' she shouted and stormed out, Ian had never known things this bad and knew he had to shoulder the blame. Suddenly aware he had only one day to wait, he took a cigarette from Alison's packet and returned to the office, as he reached the top of the stairs he caught another whiff of that musky

perfume. Having now become totally obsessed with it, all he could do now was think of Felicity, but on his way to the office he couldn't help hear Alison sobbing in the bedroom. Just to let Alison know he was doing something he printed off the first two or three documents he'd opened, and picking up his attaché case he placed the documents in and closed it as noisily as he'd opened it.

'Are you going out then?' Ian hadn't heard her come in.

'Yes!' said Ian going monosyllabic.

'How long will you be?' asked Alison.

'Why?' asked Ian, answering her question with one of his own.

'Why what?' she tore into him, 'what *is* the matter with you!'

'I haven't got time to argue,' he said excusing himself, and knowing he was running out of answers, he also knew he'd have to make a tactical withdrawal, 'we'll resume this *discussion* when I get back!' With that he walked out without saying another word. Another few hours was spent driving aimlessly around, and more cups of coffee in the transport cafe. At lunchtime he calculated that it was probably safe to go home, but as soon as he got through the door he went straight to the office.

'Did he pay you?' asked Alison startling him, again he hadn't heard her come in.

'No, he wants time to pay... he's got a temporary cash flow problem, it's nothing to worry about.' Her question had taken him by surprise, and in the circumstances that was the best he could come up with, but it wasn't good enough. 'I gave him thirty

days.'

'Why in Hell's name did you do that?' she fired at him, 'how do you know he will pay you?' Ian didn't like being questioned like this, and feeling his authority had been undermined another row ensued, and again Alison ran to the bedroom in tears. Downstairs Ian made a cheese and onion sandwich and ate in sullen silence, but he was angrier than he could ever remember. The remainder of the day was strained to put it mildly, and passing occasionally in the house neither of them said a word, and as tomorrow was his twenty eighth birthday Alison was desperate, and didn't know what to do about their situation. Should she just come straight out and wish him a happy birthday, or should she leave his present and card on the kitchen table and say nothing. Given his present mood anything was likely to upset him, and she worried sick in case she did the wrong thing! Staying in the office for the remainder of the day Ian pretended to work on a new contract. At half past three he stopped to think about his situation with Alison, and suddenly that almost hypnotic perfume was in his nostrils again. His mind was reeling, and all he could think about was his beloved Felicity. What did she look like? His minds eye conjured up a picture, his vision of her was that of a smiling face with piercing blue eyes, and framed by blond ringlets either side. His image of her was the exact opposite of Alison's dark mysterious allure. Would Felicity look like he'd imagined, or was his imagination working overtime? In less than twenty-four hours he would know!

Guessing she might not call him for dinner, Ian

arrived in the dining room two minutes late, and knew Alison's mindset was bloody minded! Neither said a word through dinner, and pouring a cup of coffee Alison went into the lounge; and saying nothing Ian watched her, then pouring himself a cup he went back to the office to drink alone. If she insisted on being stupid he didn't want to know, and would keep his own company! Knowing he was in the wrong made him felt terribly guilty, but something inside stopped him from doing anything about it. He was now totally drawn to Felicity, and that was that, he *had* to, and *would* go to her tomorrow! Lighting a cigarette he drew heavily on it and exhaled noisily, and felt this expostulation would vindicate his position. By half past seven he was bored out of his mind, and would have to do something - the pub! Yes, he would go for a pint at the local, Bill might be there tonight; he was always good company, and didn't asked too many questions. Donning his coat, and without saying a word to Alison he left the house. He didn't feel at all disposed towards her after the episode at dinner, as she was pouring a coffee for herself she could have also poured him one! Getting in at twenty past eleven he thought Alison would be in bed, but closing the front door he realised that that was not the case, when he walked in she was sitting in the lounge reading. It was obvious to Ian that she'd waited up purposely.

'Did you have a nice time?' she said ironically without looking up.

'What's it to you?' he asked curtly, and his question clearly warned her against invading of his privacy.

'There *is* something wrong,' she said firmly, risking another row, 'and I want to know what it is!'

'I told you th-'

'I know what you told me, and I am not swallowing that story again! I've had enough... I want to know what is going on - *and I want to know now!*'

'I'm going to bed.' said Ian and walked out. Ten minutes later with his head on the pillow his heart was pounding like thunder; and the plain fact was he was risking his marriage for a woman he hadn't even met! Plus the fact that he didn't even know if she really existed!

Deciding he would apologise to her when she came up he lay in bed and waited for Alison, but was asleep long before she came up. On waking he found the space next to him empty, and with the cancer of worry now numbing his mind he wondered where she'd slept last night. Foolish pride stopped him calling her, and he was *not* going to lose face when it was clearly her fault, but in the next instant he remembered the fault was *his* - not Alison's! Something in him still wouldn't let him call her, but knew if he wanted to save his marriage he would have to make the first move, or maybe it was already too late! Without bothering to shower he dressed and ran downstairs as quietly as he could, at the bottom stair he slowed to a walking pace and sauntered into the kitchen expecting to see Alison sitting at the table, but she wasn't there! One thing caught his eye, and that was a square box in fancy wrapping paper accompanied by an envelope. His birthday present, but suddenly that wasn't important any more, all he wanted now was to find Alison, and

tell her how sorry he was. At that moment he wished he'd done it last night when he'd first thought of it. Near to panic he looked at his watch, and could scarcely believe the time was ten past nine, how could he have slept so late? Especially on his birthday! Checking every room in the house there was no sign of her. Where in Hell could she be? It wasn't like her to walk out without saying anything. Knowing this time he'd pushed her too far he opened the front door and ran down the garden path, then looking up and down the road he saw no sign of her. His heart was hammering in his chest, had she really walked out?

'Shit!' he said vehemently, supposing he never saw her again!

His mind numb with fear he slammed the front door, and thought about his next move. Ring her parents, yes that's what he should do next, and took the stairs three at a time, but reaching the top he suddenly caught another whiff of Felicity's perfume! Suddenly he knew she was close by, and he was in the middle of a marital crisis; it was nine forty four. 'Shit!' came Ian's expletive, he had to be at the letterbox in less than ten minutes! Snatching up the receiver he frantically phoned Alison's mother, but the only answer he got was message service. Tripping over his words through sheer panic the message he left was somewhat garbled.

'Hi mum, it's Ian... uh, we've um, had a blazing row, Alison's gone... I mean I uh... can't find her, if you know where she is... could you give me a ring... soon?' Putting the phone down the time was now nine fifty, so dashing downstairs again he opened

the front door and placed his hand through the letterbox; he waited. Nothing happened for a few seconds, then suddenly a small warm dry hand took hold of his. Feeling suddenly giddy his body shook like he'd been incarcerated in a vibro-massage belt, and finding the experience disconcerting his fear was more than apparent.

'Don't be alarmed,' said a sweet delicate voice from behind the door, 'it will soon pass.' Knowing the human frame can't pass through solid matter a sudden nausea overcame him as his body passed through the door! He heard her voice again.

'It's alright my love, don't worry,' said Felicity calmly, 'we'll be together forever quite soon now.' Feeling his head would explode with a force great enough to blow it across the universe white noise then filled his head! Then as suddenly as it began it stopped, and except for the slow tick of a grandfather clock near the door there was total silence again, then looking to his left he saw Felicity standing in front of him. She was staggeringly beautiful, and Ian couldn't take his eyes off her, but what unnerved him most was her likeness to the picture his minds eye had conjured up. What she had said in her letter was right, and he was not disappointed!

The hallway was different, and apart from the decorations the place also smelt different, musty, or dusty, he wasn't quite sure, but it was a strange sensation. Knowing he was fully conscious he was also aware of being in a dream-like state, and had to touch the banister rail to check its solidity; nothing wrong there.

'Do I please you?' said Felicity in wide-eyed expectancy; 'am I what you envisioned?'

'Yes, uh, you are... very much so, that I cannot deny.' he told her truthfully, 'look, I don't wish to be rude but I must get back, my wife has gone missing, and I must find her!' The way that Felicity smiled at him Ian thought she hadn't understood him.

'Do you understand? I *must* go back!' he emphasised.

'You can't go back,' she told him, her voice quiet but firm, 'now you've crossed over we're together forever... you can never... return!' Looking at her in disbelief Ian wasn't having any of that! Running out through the front door he stuck his hand through the letterbox, and waited to be transported back. A hand caught hold of his.

'Thank God!' he thought, then suddenly his mind chilled, as did his body. The hand he was holding was Felicity's! Pulling him through again, but this time much faster. The pain wasn't as severe as before, and Felicity laughed as she tugged at his hand.

'Together forever my love!' she taunted him, 'we will be together for eternity!' Breaking loose Running back to the door again, Ian rammed his hand through the letterbox for a second time skinning his knuckles in the process! Again a hand caught hold of his from the other side, and again he was summarily dragged through the door at high speed, and Felicity giggled like a little girl playing her favourite game.

'Together forever my love!' she repeated. 'We will *always* be together!' Without warning Ian sensed he was falling, and all he could see was Felicity's

mocking smile as she dragged him into the abyss.

Having lived with Felicity for over ten months he was walking downstairs as Alison came up, and as he reached out to touch her his heart leapt! '*ALISON!*' he cried in desperation, but she hadn't seen him, and was far too busy concentrating on the new man in her life!

THE END

THE TIME MACHINES

CHAPTER ONE

At the professor's request the hubbub died away, and students began listening diligently to their tutor Prof. John Puttman. Well, most did, but there are always a few who think they're there for a couple of hours of fun, however, one or two of the serious students soon put them in their place.

'How many of you here believe that science will one day crack the bogey of time travel?' asked the professor. Disappointingly less than a third raised their arms, which included one who stuck his finger up his nose and proceeded to exhibit the produce he'd extracted from its dark recess. Like most the professor ignored it.

'What are you doing here then?' he challenged them. Their response was muted, not one voice could be heard clearly. Not being one to suffer fools gladly the Professor looked at them disapprovingly.

'Those of you who raised an arm... come and sit at the front, and change places with the disinherited - yes?'

Doing as they were bade the professor went ahead unchallenged; his authority suddenly genuine!

'Excuse me professor,' asked Tony Williams, and after a prompt from the professor he continued his question, 'what exactly do you mean by "disinherited"?''

'Well young man,' answered the professor with a wicked glint in his eye, 'it would appear they haven't inherited any brains from their forbear's - wouldn't

you agree?' As the auditorium erupted in laughter many moans were issued from the disinherited at the direct jibe, and their suitable admonishment had had the effect the professor intended!

Professor Puttman started his lecture on the merits and demerits of time travel, and eventually even the most hard-bitten dropouts were listening intently. The professor then made a thought provoking statement.

'Just supposing it were possible to build a machine like that of H.G.Wells.' then paused for effect to gauge their reaction, 'how would we use it I wonder?' Although a modicum of answers came forth most weren't worth listening to.

'What's the date today?' he then asked.

'The nineteenth of April 2000!' answered a keen voice from the auditorium.

'How would we react if we could go to tomorrow - the twentieth - in one minute! No one answered, it was going to be one of those lectures!

The rest of the lecture however passed without interruption, and the professor was allowed to continue until question time, although he would have welcomed interruptions of the right kind!

'How do we know H.G. Wells' machine didn't exist?' asked Tony Williams. Again the auditorium erupted, and clearly unnerved by the question the professor laughed lightly. Two hours is a short space of time when you're involved in a subject so intriguingly enigmatic, and looking at his watch the professor stared at it for almost a minute in case it was lying.

'Well,' he said finally, 'the hands of the clock have reached the time that a lot of you have no doubt

been waiting for... off you go!' They filed out in their usual noisy manner as students do, but one remained seated.

'Was there something you wanted?' asked the professor politely.

'Well yes, I uh... when I asked about the likely existence of H.G.'s time machine, I noticed you weren't really laughing with others, and I wondered why, and you didn't answer my question!'

'You're right, I didn't answer, but I'll tell you this,' replied the professor pausing for a few seconds, 'thirty two years ago I asked the same question - almost word for word!'

'Why did you ask the question professor?'

'I thought naively it might just be a possibility... I suppose in a way I still do'

'Just suppose I could prove to you that it did exist... and still does - in time!' The professor looked at him, long and hard.

'You're serious aren't you?'

'Deadly!' answered Tony decisively. 'I have some papers at home I think might interest you.'

CHAPTER TWO

Sitting silently at his lectern for more than two minutes Professor Puttman grunted once or twice as he fiddled with some course papers, and sitting opposite Tony could only wonder at what was going through his mind.

'You'll need to prove to me that these papers exist, can you do that?' asked the professor finally.

'I'm going to tell you something... you probably won't believe this for one minute, but the thing is... my great, great grandfather was H.G.Wells! His book *The Time Machine* was actually a fictional account of a factual event, I have some papers at home... given to me by my grandfather just before he died. I have studied them very, very carefully and-'

'Pardon me for interrupting,' cut in the professor, 'but why haven't you brought them with you?'

'For one simple reason,' replied Tony honestly, 'I don't want them going astray, or falling into the wrong hands.'

'That's fair enough, but surely they're safe enough... considering everyone's going to think they're bogus.' 'Yes, but all the same, being "one-offs" they're valuable to me - and you... he wrote the book with the purpose of selling it as a fund raiser to develop the machine, but when his financiers pulled the plug on him he uh... he also ran out of money, you see they'd found out what he was doing... and as he hadn't told them their money was being spent on this project, they were understandably a bit angry. All he needed was a little more time and money, and he'd

have designed and built a public service vehicle that would have been a "crowd puller" to put it in its true context. That is how he intended repaying his investors!

'I see!' said the professor after Tony had finished, 'and on top of that he would have made a packet for himself as well... can you bring these papers to me? Or will I have to come to you?'

'I would prefer it if you came to my house.' answered Tony seriously.

'And you live in Connecticut?'

'Hartford!' replied Tony cautiously.'

Long way from California isn't it?' replied the professor sardonically. Tony grinned, that comment told him the professor had already decided he'd come; it was just a question of - when!

'I'll get someone to cover for me while we're away, I won't miss those lectures, most of them are dead-heads anyhow.' said the professor, and to emphasise his distaste waved his arm in the general direction of the auditorium.

Seeing the professor walk through the main doors the following morning Tony ran to meet him.

'Any luck in getting cover?' he asked expectantly.

'Of course, when I go out to get something I always get it - well nearly always.' Tony laughed, more from relief than anything else.

'Collingbourne's gonna do it... I told him it was a matter of great urgency - well it is - isn't it!' Tony laughed again, until now he hadn't realised the professor had a sense of humour.

'How do you know I'm telling the truth,' said Tony hesitantly, 'I mean, you made your mind up so

readily.'

'Remember I told you yesterday... about asking the same question thirty years previously? I too heard rumours that papers existed - from a relation of mine, that's how I knew you were telling the truth, too much of a coincidence don't you think?' said the professor profoundly.

'So when do we leave?' asked Tony, hoping the professor didn't think him too impatient.

'Now - seems like a good time!' replied Professor Puttman, and Tony's chin dropped a mile, however he didn't argue. Ringing the airport the professor booked two seats on the next flight to Hartford.

'Are you sure about this?' asked Tony as soon as the professor had finished on the phone.

'Look, I've buried my feelings on this subject since I was your age... basically I was prone to peer pressure back then, so I'm not going to lose this opportunity!'

'I guess that's ok then,' replied Tony, still unsure the professor wasn't pulling his leg on a grand scale. 'I've packed a bag.'

'Good, then there's nothing to stop us from leaving right now, is there?' added the professor. Tony grinned, a grin that lit up his face, it was an engaging smile and one that usually netted him very attractive females whenever he went out for a drink. The flight was long and boring, and after they had landed both felt the vagaries of long haul.

'Well, I'd better grab a cab and find somewhere to stay.' said the professor turning to the edge of the sidewalk.

'Oh no! You're staying with us!' protested Tony. The

professor started remonstrating, but Tony took the professor's arm and led him to the taxi rank.

Hearing the front door open, and thinking her husband had come home early from work, his mother's jaw dropped seeing her eldest son standing in front of her.

'Tony, what's going on?'

'Hi Mum, you've got a massive question mark above your head,' said Tony quickly, 'anyhow I'd like you to meet my professor, John Puttmann... is it alright if he stays for a while?'

'Hello professor, uh, well... yes... of course, but shouldn't you be at uni now, you ain't got into trouble?' asked his mother, worried that her eldest son had had to visit the Dean.

'No, it's nothing like that Mum, it's uh... '

'Some necessary research we have to do,' said the professor, quickly stepping in to rescue the situation, 'we need to be away from the distractions of the campus, if you get my drift!' Tony's mother accepted the professor's explanation, and after all it *had* come from the horse's mouth. Having unpacked Tony and the professor left for the library, borrowing his mother's station wagon for their journey! Tony's claim that the library was little used was true, and there being only four people there most were at the reference and popular fiction end, thus leaving them in peace to study their priceless treasure. Studying the papers without saying a word Professor Puttmann bent over the table, it as if he was in another world, and in all there was almost a ream of paper covered in hand written calculations! Then there were the engineering and technical sheets they

had to spread over the table. Two hours later the professor put his glasses gently on the table in front of him, then looking slowly up at Tony he blew thinly through his lips.

'My God! I'm having trouble grasping this, you're right Tony, I don't understand some of it,' he continued, 'also, there are some papers missing, this old photo, is that the great man?'

'Yes, that came with the folder, but how do you know there are papers missing?' asked Tony, concerned at the shortfall in his bequest.

'Your ancestor was very methodical... he took the trouble to number every page sequentially, but as you can see there is a gap between page twenty eight and forty one.'

'What a piece of shit!' declared Tony, and felt defeated at their first obstacle, 'what the Hell do we do now?'

Suddenly pursing his lips the professor put his arms over the papers and requested Tony's silence, looking for a book someone walked in their direction perusing the shelves close by. Eventually selecting his book the man then thankfully returned to the front desk.

'It would appear we have to build a machine to travel back to 1899 to retrieve the lost papers, in order to build the machine we need to travel through time - quite a paradox!' concluded the professor.

'But that's impossible, besides, why can't we use my ancestors machine?' answered Tony, frustrated at their second major obstacle.

'Do you know where it is?' asked the professor obviously, Tony nodded dejectedly, 'I thought not,

even if you did we'd still need to build a machine of our own to find it.' Noting Tony's look of dejection the professor then added, 'and it's not necessarily impossible, we'll have to build a machine that... although primitive will enable us to find the missing papers... and when we've found them, we can build a full sized machine in order to find your ancestors machine... which conceivably could be almost anywhere in time! We can pool our current knowledge and resources as a basis on which to start, and take it from there - but those papers we *must* have!' stressed the professor.

'Come on,' said Tony suddenly, 'there's a cafe 'round the corner, let's grab a coffee!'

'Ok, what's our first step?' asked Tony, setting the cups on the table, and heartened at the professor's doggedness.

'We'll need somewhere to work, somewhere quiet and out of the way where we won't be disturbed, and people don't ask questions. Also, we'll need to list all materials we'll need, we don't want to journey back and forth for this, that, and the other!' It dawned on Tony this would be an undertaking of gigantic proportion; it would not be an easy assignment! Sitting at the rear of the cafe they each took a sip from their cappuccino as the professor produced a notepad from his pocket, and Tony a pen from the breast pocket of his shirt. Totally unaware of the time they talked and discussed for nearly three hours, first Tony would think of something, then the professor, and so it went on until the professor noticed it was getting a just a little bit dark.

'I think it's time we got back to the house,' he said,

looking pensively through the steamy window, 'finally though, going back to where we're gonna work, any ideas?' Looking blankly at the professor, it was obvious he hadn't a clue, then a split second later Tony's face lit up like searchlight.

'Yes of course!' he declared, as if he'd seen a vision, 'my dad's got a summer house at Old Say Brooke, it's right on the coast and the nearest neighbour is a quarter of a mile away! That's not all... guess what else he's got up there?' The professor raised an eyebrow and smiled at his youthful inquisitor.

'A workshop... and it's huge! I'll bet you could get six cars in there!'

'Then that's where we must go, but will he mind us using it?'

'Not if he knows it's for my education!' answered Tony grinning from ear to ear. After dinner Tony tentatively broached the subject of his need to go to the summer house for his project, Professor Puttmann had already hinted it would assist him greatly in his course work. His father smiled, then looking slowly at Tony expressed his admiration at his son's enthusiasm for his studies.

'Ok son, if it means that much to you go right ahead, but you take care of the place now, ok?' Before they got his feet back on terra firma, Tony had thanked his dad a million times!

CHAPTER THREE

The last vestige of luggage was packed tightly in to the rear of the station wagon. Before he left for work Tony thanked his dad once more, then saying goodbye to his mother he and the professor set off for Old Say Brooke, and the house that would witness not only their efforts, but hopefully their ultimate triumph! Once they'd escaped Hartford's boundary the roads were quiet, and although the professor hadn't been keeping an eye on the time he guessed they'd been travelling for about an hour. The house at Old Say Brooke was typical clapboard and fronted by a veranda, the outer walls were pale blue emulsion, and its paintwork picked out in white. Well maintained it was very appealing to the eye, so taking a bunch of keys from his pocket Tony selected one and inserted it into the lock. Once indoors they hurriedly unpacked, as getting the experiment underway was their number one priority. Their voices echoed slightly as they do in houses that have been empty for a while, but once inside Tony switched on the power as Professor Puttmann stood watching a dinghy happily dance up and down on small choppy waves, occasionally straining at its mooring as the wind gathered momentum.

'Coffee?' asked Tony, his voice cannoning into the professor's thoughts.

'Sorry, miles away... yes, please.' answered the professor, his expression still vacant. The hot coffee was welcome after their journey, as Tony had taken

the trouble of bringing half a dozen doughnuts they sat staring at the open sea while they ate.

'Come on,' said Tony having finished his coffee, 'come and have a look at the workshop.' Another key saw them standing on a concrete floor with benches around three of the four walls. It was indeed very large.

'Right,' started the professor, 'as these benches are clear of vices and machinery we'll put all the papers here, if we spread them out in numerical order we can get started on a basic plan.'

Helping the professor lay them out Tony took care not to mix them up, sitting down on a couple of old wooden stools they started going through their equipment, and checked out the available tools in the workshop, Tony's father had a well equipped workshop, with his tools methodically hung on boards along the length of the bench.

'I'm impressed, this is how I would have laid it out.' said the professor admiring the skill his father's skills.

'I guess we have to think about what we're gonna use for a chassis.' said Tony suddenly.

'Oh dear,' exclaimed the professor, 'clanger number one, we don't have one!'

'Aren't we going to make our own?' asked Tony naively. The professor laughed.

'I'm sorry Tony,' he quickly explained, 'it would take too long... we have to find something we can adapt... any ideas?' Tony confessed he was stumped, and sat for ten minutes staring out of the window, but nothing jumped readily to mind. Sitting on their respective stools for over an hour they tried

thinking of anything they could utilise, should it be metal or plastic, glass fibre or wood? Eventually they decided on steel, as it would be easier to work, and would allow them to cut and fit pieces as and where necessary. Their next problem was where would they get this metal "base", but first they'd have to quantify the size, and having studied the drawings for fifteen minutes the professor then turned to Tony in resignation.

'This is hopeless,' he declared, 'we're gonna have to think of something we can adapt, something that already exists!'

'Like what?' countered Tony, now very confused!

'I don't know,' replied the professor sounding frustrated, 'an old industrial water tank... something like that!'

'How about an old car chassis?' asked Tony suddenly, 'surely that would fit the bill!'

'Yes, yes of course, the only trouble is... but where can we find one?' said the professor seemingly dejected again.

'No worries there!' declared Tony quickly, 'there's a scrap yard half a mile from here, and they're bound to have something!'

'Let's go then, the sooner we get there the better!'

'It's after five, they'll be closed now, we'll go first thing in the morning.' said Tony finally. Opening his laptop the professor started his calculations for the vehicle that would convey them into the fourth dimension.

'Why did you bring that?' asked Tony, 'there's a computer in the office!' The professor was dumbfounded.

'I didn't know that,' he declared, 'but since you've told me I'll be glad to avail myself of its services.'

'Sorry, my fault.' said Tony, apologising for his oversight. At eleven forty the professor was still at the computer working like a man possessed, but Tony eventually broke the spell by yawning loudly.

'Good God! Is that the time?' asked the professor, staring at his watch as if willing it back a few hours.

'I don't know about you,' declared Tony, but I'm ready to hit the sack.'

'Yeah, me too... it's funny, from what I can see so far it is possible to build this machine, but it's also improbable!'

'So it's an improbable possibility then?' asked Tony grinning. They laughed loudly as Tony headed for the bathroom, and the professor straight for his bed and oblivion!

Being stacked seven and eight high the scrap yard was visible for miles, and gave it the appearance of a rusty derelict building. The fact that Tony knew the proprietor was to them a distinct advantage.

'Well young Tony,' said the middle-aged powerfully built proprietor, and appeared to be tailor-made for his line of work, 'it's unusual for us to see you at this time of year!' Explaining about his course work with the professor Tony then hurriedly asked Ron if he'd be able to help.

'Let me see now,' said Ron Richards looking around the yard, he eyed the wrecks for anything suitable for their requirements, but most of the wrecks in the yard had been cannibalised and were only fit for the crusher.

'I've torched most of them by now see,' he said, scratching his forehead as if that action would find an answer, 'hang on, I'll just go around the back... I think there's a little English "sports" job that might suit you!' Having been gone for over five minutes Ron returned grinning, looking a little more dishevelled than when he'd left.

'Yeah, it's a Mini, a Moke I think they called them back in the sixties... shall I get the crane on it?' At Tony's recommendation the professor agreed they would take a look at it, so jumping into the cabin Ron swung the jib through a hundred and twenty degrees, then lowering the ramhead he jumped from the cabin and ran to the little car, hooking up the ram he returned to the cabin and pulled a lever, then watched as the carcass rose slowly in the air.

'We'll take it!' shouted the professor as soon as he clapped eyes on it. Tony asked the professor how they were going to get it back to the workshop.

'Ah... yes, I'm glad you spotted that!' he joked.

'You guys don't have any transport I take it,' remarked Ron hearing Tony reply in the negative.

'How about I run it up there for you?' suggested Ron, 'I gotta run an old Cherokee down to Cap' Ferrow's place this afternoon, if that's ok?' he told them and waited for approval.

'That'll do fine Ron - thanks!' said Tony, he and the professor then returned to the station wagon. Back at the house the professor wasted no time clearing a space for the shell of their new machine. After lunch they sat on the veranda for a while, watching the water lap the shoreline with its mesmeric melody. Awoken them from their stupor by a honking horn,

they saw Ron arrive with their Mini Moke time machine! The airbrakes hissed as Ron killed the engine, then jumping from the cab he ran over to meet them.

'Hey, you guys gotta hell-of-a-good-job, got any vacancies?'

'Yeah sure,' replied Tony, 'you gotta CV? We don't take on anyone you know!' the professor and Ron laughed at Tony's jibe.

'What is it you're doing?' asked Ron innocently.

'We're building a time machine!' announced the professor pompously. Ron laughed 'til tears rolled down his cheeks.

'Come on,' cut in Tony quickly, and was clearly worried Ron might ask questions they didn't want to answer, 'let's get this little crate off the wagon.' Operating the crane from the flatbed with a remote control five minutes later Ron had it sitting on the ground outside the workshop.

'What do we owe you?' asked Tony.

'How does thirty thousand dollars sound?' asked Ron smirking. 'Hell - I meant thirty dollars!' They laughed, but knowing they were getting a bargain Tony took three ten dollar bills from his pocket and thrust them into Ron's hand.

'I'll take a ride in your time machine when it's finished, I'd love to visit the Roman empire – peel me a grape!' joked Ron, and laughed as he got back into his cab.

'That was close,' said Tony angrily after Ron had driven away, 'why did you tell him we're building a time machine?'

'I don't think he believed me,' retorted the professor

dryly. but after thinking about it Tony agreed, and apologised to the professor for his untimely behaviour. Taking his father's spray gun from the cupboard with a tin of spruce green for the top colour, the rest of the day was taken up with straightening bent metal and preparing the surfaces for painting. By ten thirty they'd applied the first coat of primer, and it was time to call a halt and let the paint harden overnight.

The next morning the professor was surprised to find Tony already in the workshop, and repairing the seats from the Moke.

'I must have overslept,' he said groggily, 'I'll make some breakfast, egg and bacon alright with you?'

'Just fine professor - thanks! I'll be in soon.'

'I think it's about time you called me John, don't you?' Realising they'd spend a lot of time together Tony agreed. Eaten with gusto breakfast was washed down with black coffee, and no sooner had they finished than they were back in the workshop!

'We'd better bench test that engine, see if it runs.' said the professor after a long spell of silence.

'I threw it out,' said Tony suddenly, 'I didn't think we'd need it!'

'Oh shit! Where is it?'

'It's outside the workshop.' replied Tony with a large lump of guilt, and the professor then commandeered Tony into helping him retrieve it. 'What do we need it for, we're travelling through time not space!'

'Although your ancestor knew of the internal combustion engine he was unaware of its usefulness, we on the other hand do know of its usefulness, do you remember in the book where the machine is

dragged into the Sphinx? Should we find ourselves in a similar situation we *will* need to move through space... what better than to be automotive!" Realising the professor's words made sense Tony decided he'd do the remedial work to make up for his short-sightedness.

By the end of the week they had applied and rubbed down three primer coats, and had prepared the surface for painting. Tony's attempt at starting the engine failed miserably, having stood idle for too long it was beyond movement in its present condition. Dismantle and rebuild was their only hope, so stripping the unit Tony found the block and pistons in good fettle, and the head, rocker cover and sump lay on the bench beside it awaiting re-assembly. One more week and they'd inspected the sub-frames and mounts, which were in amazingly good condition for a Moke of that age, and Tony reckoned they'd been replaced late in the vehicle's life. All parts were then duly painted and re-assembled into the chassis. By this time all four wheels were now back on the ground, and by the middle of the following week Tony had finished the engine, and was preparing to refit. Inspecting the CV joints he realised they were badly worn, and didn't know of a mini specialist in his part of the world, but with his mind now in top gear the Internet sprang to mind. Online he very quickly found the parts he required, a guy in England who specialised in minis had two he would send immediately on receipt of payment. Tony didn't trust his card number over the wire, and had to resort to snail-mail which delayed them longer than

they'd hoped; so be it, he would get on with something else. Meanwhile the professor had been pouring over the calculus, and tried understanding the workings of a genius who'd lived a hundred years before his time. The going was slow, but now and then his pen-hand would write something down, then hover expectantly over the paper for an hour! It appeared things were grinding to a halt. Three weeks had gone by when making mid-morning coffee Tony heard the professor suddenly shout his name.

'What is it John?' replied Tony, 'is there something wrong?'

'No, no no,' replied the professor impatiently, 'look at this, come and see, I've got it! I understand now, look - the quartz rods actually energise the air around the machine, I'm not sure why that is necessary at this precise moment, but all will be revealed - I'm sure!'

'Well I've nearly finished the car, so I'll be with you soon.' replied Tony, and had a feeling he was missing out on the real action. The following morning he tightened the last cotton reel mount on the rear exhaust box, and that was it, she was finished, well mechanically anyhow.

Connecting the battery he turned the key, and the engine fired first time! Having run the engine for ten minutes nothing untoward had happened, and he was happy with it. Now he could help the professor tackle the interesting work - on the machine itself. Washing the grease and dirt from his hands, he dried them in a paper towel while walking over to the professor's bench.

'How's it going now?'

'Not brilliant, his calculations are extremely complex... but I think - wait a minute... shit! Bloody Hell!' It wasn't often the professor used expletives, but something profound had obviously prompted this outburst!

Sitting in silence for almost a minute John stared into space as Tony nagged him for an explanation, it was obviously something of such magnitude he was unable to comprehend it!

'For Christ's sake John,' urged Tony, 'will you tell me what it is?' pleaded Tony, and with his eyes full of wonderment the professor suddenly looked at him, .

'You're not going to believe this!' said the professor slowly, 'but your ancestor was indeed a genius, no wonder it took me so long to make any sense of his calculations... over a hundred years ago - he not only discovered the existence of the Tachyon, he was using it!'

'You're joking of course!' came Tony's immediate reaction.

'No - *I am not!*' insisted John, 'look, here he breaks down the second into nano-seconds, then pico-seconds, after that, look here.... see! *The Tachyon!* Time and space are as one!

'I don't follow,' said Tony frowning.

'Look, the Tachyon as far as we know today is merely a theory, a mathematical possibility... but according to your ancestor it exists in time *and* space - having studied his calculations I have no reason to doubt him!'

CHAPTER FOUR

An hour later Tony had to come to terms with his ancestors calculus, although not as knowledgeable as the professor his ability to pick things up impressed John, especially considering the magnitude of what he'd taken on board in such a short space of time!

'Do you realise the enormity of this Tony?' emphasised the professor, 'if we can crack time travel it'll be bigger than man going to the moon, however, we must temper it with humility, after all it's thanks to H.G.Wells that we've even got this far!' 'Yes, I guess you're right,' answered Tony, and his liking for John was growing day by day. 'It will be staggering when we tell the world what we've discovered, and how! So it's safe to say we now have a "probable" possibility!' The professor laughed at Tony's ability to recall a remark he'd long since forgotten.

'There is one snag however,' cautioned John, 'the papers relating to the Tachyon are the very ones we need!'

'Are you saying we won't be able to build this thing?' asked Tony with a furrowed brow.

'No... what I'm saying is we won't be able to travel very fast... it will take us a year to get back to 1899 according to my reckoning anyhow.'

'We can't sit in this for a year!' exclaimed Tony, getting exasperated, 'what about going to the loo?' The professor laughed, it was something they would have to consider, but Tony's slight naivety hadn't

allowed him the privilege of linking things together - yet!

'We can stop on route you know!' said the professor, mocking Tony's short-sightedness.

'Ok, ok, I get the message!' replied Tony grinning at his own stupidity, 'we can't all be geni' you know!' They laughed together; it was a good feeling, a comradeship, and their understanding of each other increased day by day, and despite their age difference they worked well together.

'I've been giving some thought to what we should take with us regarding *other* equipment.' said Tony out of the blue, and putting down his pen John turned to Tony.

'What had you in mind?'

'A photocopier, we can't keep the missing papers once we've found them... a camcorder, we'll be able to record where we've been as proof, and, a small audio recorder to make notes in case we don't have time to write them down.'

'Excellent thinking!' replied John, and was suitably impressed by Tony's innovation.

'And?' said the professor. Tony looked puzzled at John's singularity.

'Would it be a good idea to take a transformer to power the copier? And a charger for the batteries of the other two units!'

'Oh... yeah, I reckon that might be worth while.' replied Tony grinning again. 'Something else just occurred to me, if we've got an engine under the hood... where do we put the time drive?'

'Well, for a start, you're going to take out the front passenger seat and refit it facing the rear, then you'll

remove the rear seat altogether... and that's where we'll put the time drive!' said the professor definitively, and suddenly Tony knew why John was a professor!

It was time to start making their time machine. Not a job for the feint-hearted John started turning the quartz bars on the lathe, but being brittle even a qualified engineer would have had trouble, and John had smashed several bars before he got the cutting angle right. Quickly realising that what was more important than the angle was the amount of pressure put on the cutting head; something he'd almost overlooked! Knowing they'd need twenty four *time* was indeed - all important! Meanwhile Tony was busy making the housing for the quartz rods, every now and then he would go over to John's bench and refer his work to John's, to make sure everything lined up properly. It was now six weeks since they'd started building the machine, and just before lunch on Friday the phone rang, Tony picked up the handset.

'Hi Mum, yeah, I'm fine, and so is John, I-' Tony's mother interrupted him and asked the inevitable question.

'I can't say at the moment Mum, it could be a lot longer before we've finished down here.'

'It must be very important if John's taking that much trouble over one pupil, does he do this for other students?'

'I don't know Mum, you should really ask John, look I've gotta go, we're very busy... ok? I'll see you soon - ok? Love you, 'bye!' Sensing his mother was getting suspicious he talked to John about it at

dinner that evening, but John assured him it was insignificant.

'I'll take care of any awkward questions if and when they arrive,' he said firmly, 'don't worry about it Tony, they'll feel guilty as Hell if they ruin your course work won't they?' The professor's deviousness made Tony grin. The following morning they started their initial assembly of the main drive, so fitting the rods into their slots the professor suddenly made another declaration.

'I see what happens now!'

'What are you talking about?' asked Tony at John's sudden outburst.

'Sorry, I'm not making myself clear,' said the professor apologising, 'the quartz rods excite and accelerate light particles, ok? So, by exciting the Tachyon particles he could move them forward in time... this then excited the picosecond, then the nanosecond, the second... and so on!' Seeing the blank look on Tony's face he continued, 'look, the Tachyon is negative and positive! Don't you see? The negative particles allow you to travel back in time, and the positive ones forward! The condensers can accelerate the Tachyons in either direction. Looking at the professor as if he'd seen God Tony stood stock-still for a full minute, unable to believe what John had just told him.

'I can't believe this... it's simplicity itself!'

'Exactly!' replied John enthusiastically, 'one thing I think we can modify is the accelerator and stop/start levers. We have the equipment to make one unit that does both jobs!' Unlike H.G. Wells, they had modern technology to build their onboard computer,

which by now was now almost complete, and John's only remaining job was to slot the boards in and connect it to the main drive. They'd been at it now for eight weeks, and during that time had had two more calls from Tony's mother, which had proved rather difficult when she'd repeated the inevitable questions on both occasions. With increased difficulty Tony had managed to allay her fears on both occasions.

'My great, great grandfather built a test model,' Tony told the professor, 'shouldn't we do the same?'

'No!' replied John, 'we don't have the time to test theories like he did, besides, we know it'll work once we've got it assembled, he had to contend with non-believers, but we don't have that problem - yet!' Accepting his reasoning Tony realised the futility of building a model just to watch it disappear into oblivion!

CHAPTER FIVE

A mercy dash to the village for food was necessary, they had been so wrapped up in their work they hadn't realised their food stocks had depleted, on the toss of a coin Tony was elected as fall guy, well, breakfast *always* comes first!

'What's the date today?' asked John, finishing his egg and bacon.

'The twenty second of July... why?'

'What's the time?'

'Eight thirty two.'

'Now that we've finished building the machine, it's time to test, to see if what we've been doing for the last two months has been worthwhile!' announced John, and prayed it would work. Ignoring mundane chores such as washing dishes they ran to the workshop.

'We'll open all the windows first, then we'll start in earnest.' said John, keen to get it going.

'Wouldn't it be best to keep them shut,' countered Tony, 'In case anyone gets curious?'

'Considering we're not in close proximity to your neighbours I don't think there's much to worry about, especially as we don't want monoxide poisoning, dead men find it difficult to travel in time!' said John pulling Tony's leg. Laughing loudly he had to confess he hadn't thought of monoxide! Opening the windows he sat in the drivers seat, and thought for a moment about the full meaning of what they were about to do. Then, as if prompted by some hidden force he turned the key and the engine fired into life, the voltmeter he'd fitted showed a charge rate of

over thirteen volts, so far, so good! Satisfied the Moke was on song John switched on the main unit, and sat watching the incandescent glow from the rods.

'I'm going to set the date and time, then we can see if this thing works!' said John looking apprehensive.

'Date - Saturday, July 22nd 2000... time - nine ten and fourteen seconds, synchronising "travel" and "normal time" clocks. That's it! Are you ready?'

'I guess so.' replied Tony ready for anything. Professor Puttmann pushed the lever forward half an inch as Tony turned around in his seat to watch the event, at first the time clock moved slowly, and had John thinking it wasn't working, but on checking the normal time clock he noticed ten seconds had passed. It had taken them a full minute into the future!

'This is no good!' said John, disappointed at its inability to travel faster.

'What's causing it?' asked Tony feeling drained.

'Ah, I think I know what's wrong; the light in the rods isn't pulsating... and its probably because we haven't got Tachyon acceleration. Wait a minute, no it can't be that... the damned thing's running! It must be something else.' The professor removed a panel at the rear of the computer, and fiddling around inside for a couple of minutes he then replaced it, and pushed the lever forward again. This time they travelled forward six days stopping on the twenty eighth of July.

'We've done it!' declared John as he and Tony shook hands firmly.

'My fault!' said John ashamedly, 'I forgot to connect

the relays!' Tony couldn't stop laughing.

'So, you do make mistakes sometimes!' he told John after regaining his composure. 'So we're now in the future, it doesn't feel very different.'

'No, although that might be because we've only travelled a few days, but when we've gone back in time, and travelled faster, *then* we'll see real a difference.' Returning them to the present day John pulled back on the lever, but as their travel speed was nothing better than abysmal they didn't even have to slow down on the approach to time-synchro. 'Timed to the second!' declared John proudly, 'and less than 0.00007 percent of a picosecond displacement!'

'Not bad!' agreed Tony, grinning widely.

'It's time to box up the Moke, we're off to England!' announced John, 'so... you'd better lock up the house, the workshop, and switch off the power.'

'If you'd have asked me a couple of months ago if we'd be making this trip, I'd have said it was impossible!' admitted Tony, 'and I've just thought of something else we've forgotten,' then watched the John's face to see if he'd guess their very basic mistake, his face however remained vacant, 'how about a trailer, we'll have to tow it to the wharf, unless you plan on driving to Boston!' It was John's turn again for a crimson complexion! Tony said he'd go and see Ron in the morning, he was certain he'd seen an old trailer behind the site office, and hoped that for the right price he would part with it.

'You're up early!' said Ron, shocked at seeing Tony as he unlocked the gates to his compound, 'no lie-ins for you now then?' Tony laughed, and asked if it

was possible to buy the trailer, Ron however wasn't keen on the idea at all!

'The thing is Ron, we *have* to get to Boston as soon as possible!' pleaded Tony.

'Tell you what I'll do,' said Ron compromising, 'Tomorrow being Sunday, if you can wait 'til then I'll drive you there myself, how does that sound?'

'Brilliant!' replied Tony happily, 'how much?'

'To you?' asked Ron giving him a sly grin, '\$50,000! No, seriously... as it's you I'll do for \$150!' Thanking Ron for his kindness Tony jumped in the station wagon, and driving back to the workshop informed John of what had transpired. More than happy with the arrangement John realised it relieved them of the problem of what they'd do with the trailer after they'd arrived in Boston. Spending the rest of the day going over their work, they checked and re-checked to make sure everything was as it should be. Early evening saw Tony drive to the takeaway for an evening meal, then after dinner he went around the workshop and checked that everything was locked and switched off. Everything except the papers had been packed, so taking no chances Tony put them in his case.

That night Tony wrote a short letter, explaining to his parents why he couldn't tell them where he'd was going, but promised that when he and John returned they would not only be famous, but probably regarded as heroes! Locking the station wagon he took the keys into the house and tossed them on the coffee table, then taking a last look around he shut the front door. This was it, the next phase of their incredible journey was about to begin,

and he was ready! Although he didn't hang about Ron was a good driver, but didn't suffer fools gladly. Approaching the outskirts of Boston one guy cut into his traffic lane and almost caused them an accident, so Ron made a sign which the other driver promptly returned, then unfortunately the traffic in front ground to a halt hemming him in! So Ron, being the sort of guy who believes in homespun justice put his foot down and rammed his wagon into the cars rear fender! Pulling over the incensed owner got out of his car shouting a string of obscenities at them, so Ron did likewise. Seeing the size of Ron the other driver decided it would be prudent on his part to forget the whole thing, so getting back into his car he drove away to fill the gap left by the now moving traffic in front of him!

Once on the wharf John went to the shipping clerk to get their crate checked in, and checking the ships manifest the clerk then gave them a receipt for it. Paying the freightage John dashed back and jumped in the truck where Ron waited to take them back. Hearing the phone ring as he opened the front door Tony walked straight passed it and into the kitchen, it was a hard thing to do considering it might be one, or even both his parents.

'A wise decision!' offered John taking an arm chair, 'we dare not entertain any sort of inquisition now.'

'Yeah, we could never explain it away at this stage,' replied Tony, 'they'd ask too many questions.' Sitting in the lounge they ate scrambled eggs on toast that Tony had rustled up, and half watched some inane quiz show on a local channel. The following morning Tony parked his mothers car in the

workshop, and locking up he checked around the place again, satisfied all was well he went back indoors hoping John had arranged a taxi to the airport. All was in order; a cab would be with them inside the hour, so all that remained was for them to have a last coffee and wait. Breaking the silence a horn tooted outside, so jumping to their feet Tony picked up the letter to his parents as they grabbed their bags and ran to the door.

'Can you stop at the nearest post office?' he asked the cab driver, 'there's one in the town on our way through if that's ok.' The driver stopped outside while Tony ran in to buy a stamp and mail the letter, then a few minutes later they were on their way to the airport. While John paid the cab driver Tony retrieved their bags from the trunk, then making their way to the flight desk they collected the two one way tickets that awaited them, so all that remained now was to wait for their flight announcement. Two more coffees and Tony heard the announcer call their flight number, hurrying to gate five they boarded the 737 for Heathrow, UK.

CHAPTER SIX

The food on board was diabolical, and leaving half their meal on their plates they duly complained to the stewardess they were *not* happy.

'I don't suppose it's done any good,' said Professor Puttmann, using the muddy excuse for coffee to wash the remains of the garbage down his throat, 'they won't do anything about it!'

'Oh well, I guess we could always travel back in time and give them a cookery lesson!' said Tony joking.

'I hope all's well with are little crate.' said John suddenly.

'Me too!' said Tony feeling sleepy, and found it somewhat annoying that John continued to talk incessantly.

'We'll have to get the vehicles documents from customs when we get to Heathrow, we must make sure it's properly taxed and insured for British roads.'

'Yeah,' replied Tony. There followed a brief respite, where Tony thought John had got the message, not so!

'How come you're American, did your ancestor come to America?'

'It was my great grandfather!' answered Tony testily. 'How did you come by the papers?' asked John, still unaware of Tony's need to sleep; a silence followed for about twenty seconds.

'My great grandfather, at the age of twenty-seven brought a bureau with him to America - in 1919!

The papers were in one of the drawers, and no, he was not on the Titanic! Now, *can I get some sleep?*' 'Sorry Tony, I'm rambling on a bit... I'll shut up!' John understood!

The tyres screamed as they hit the runway, and they were glad to get off the plane. All they wanted was to find the missing papers and finish building their time machine! They did a lot of sightseeing while awaiting the arrival of their valuable cargo, and there is no shortage of sights in London! The day finally came for them to collect the crate from Southampton, but the train journey was more than frustrating, and apart from the fact that the train was half an hour late, the food in the dining car was actually worse than the airline! Disappointed, they returned to their seats, where an English guy then started making snide jokes about the railways. 'Perhaps I should buy them out and run it myself!' he said laughing.

'This train *is* running half an hour late!' agreed Tony. 'Only half an hour!' replied the their fellow traveller raising his voice slightly, 'you're lucky, last week it was cancelled!'

The brakes squealed as the train slowed and came to a halt at the platform, as Tony and John said goodbye to their travelling companion they looked for the nearest taxi rank. Ten minutes later they stood in the freight office on Southampton docks, and waiting for the clerk to verify the arrival of their crate seemed to be taking forever, but after twenty minutes Tony asked one of the office staff if they'd forgotten he was here!

'No, it always takes a while to locate things in a

bonded warehouse... don't worry.' replied the clerk tiredly. Eventually their clerk returned with a tired smile on his face.

'Sorry, I couldn't find it earlier, I had to check the ships manifest to make sure it had been loaded - but! I've found it!' he declared triumphantly.

'Well I'm sure glad to hear that!' replied John blowing through his lips.

'Something else you'll be glad to hear,' added the clerk, 'customs don't seem interested in it either.'

'There is a God!' said Tony gratefully.

'Is it precious cargo then?' asked the clerk.

'A vintage car actually, you could say we've spent a lot of time on it... and we'll be spending a lot of time in it - soon!' said Tony acidly, then looked at his watch. The clerk showed them to an area in the compound where they could uncrate the Moke and make it roadworthy. While John checked the details on the documents Tony drove it out of the crate, and with its tax disc in a little plastic wallet firmly attached to the windscreen they returned to London. As they drove through Andover it rained briefly, and cursing the weather Tony worried about the effects of a precipitation on the time drive, however light!

'Of course!' said John out of the blue.

'Of course what?' asked Tony, 'what're you going on about?'

'Sorry, I've just realised why the air has to be energised around the machine, it's a safety feature! Your ancestor was indeed a genius... the machine repels the static air around it - *so it's impossible to stop in solid matter!*'

'You're right,' replied Tony, 'I only wish I had half

his brain, but that's contrary to the book, in which he expresses a fear of stopping in solid matter!"

'I suspect he put that in to "spice up" the story,' replied John, 'a sort of artistic license if you like, just to add a bit of excitement.'

'Although... ' replied Tony ponderously, 'if you remember in the film, he actually did stop in solid matter, but it was confined to the space outside the machine, but that doesn't tally with your theory!'

'No, but it does vindicate it!' said John grinning widely, then a second later Tony also grinned! By the time they'd left the M3 for the A316 they were both in need of a visit to the porcelain parlour. As they drove in search of a public loo they received odd looks from a lot of people, but finally their luck was in and they stopped for a dash 'n' splash. Having stopped near a rank of shops the Moke nearly caused a riot, being a bit rare nowadays a Mini - Moke can still raise the odd nostalgic eyebrow, but one with a time machine installed in the rear is something else!

Having relieved themselves, they returned to their vehicle to find over thirty people staring at it, complete with an officer of the law! Asking the officer if everything was alright he in turn asked John if he was the legal owner.

'Yes I am,' replied John in his Californian accent, 'I haven't broken any laws have I?'

'That remains to be seen sir... American are you?' asked the policeman, then hearing John answer in the affirmative, 'ah, you can always tell!'

'Can you indeed!' interjected Tony taking offence at the constables remark, 'well, that's amazing isn't it

John.' nodding in agreement John noted the look on the officer's face, which wasn't exactly friendly! Who then proceeded to check the documents John had furnished him with.

'They appear to be in order sir,' said the constable eventually, and returned the documents, 'however, I will have to contact my sergeant to see if everything is indeed - *alright!*' Another hold up, John's heart sank! Leaning on a nearby waste bin the constable turned to make a note of their license plate, then quickly tapping Tony's shoulder John pointed at the car, but Tony didn't need telling twice, and before the officer had turned 'round again they'd disappeared – just in time!

'I know Serg, yes... yes! I know, but... no, no, it was all a bit odd serg, I rested on the bin to write their registration number in my book, but when I turned 'round they were gone! A bloke passing by said he saw them disappear in front of his eyes, mind you I think he was pissed... ok Serg, I'm on my way back!' Having driven 400 yards up the road John and Tony had stopped, and having returned to “their” present time continued their journey, thus leaving local inhabitants to ponder on the weirdest machine they'd ever seen - or not!

'Do you think we gave that constable the slip?' asked John.

'We most certainly did... a time slip!' replied Tony, they laughed 'til they almost cried, it was one of those silly moments where a comment that isn't really that funny just seems to grab your sense of humour. Having misread their map they'd gone too far, and had ended up somewhere off Upper

Richmond Road, but having asked a local discovered they were in Mortlake rather than Richmond. Now considerably confused the local then informed them they'd have to turn around. However, everything comes to he who waits, and sure enough forty-five minutes later they'd found Richmond, and having asked half a dozen people the whereabouts of Apollo Road they eventually found it. There was however another problem, the house in which his ancestor once lived no longer existed, and explaining to Tony that it was of no consequence John said it was necessary to travel further back in time to find the papers anyhow. The important thing was they were there, but another rash of queer looks suddenly ensued, which included a group of teenagers who remarked that their machine was definitely "cool".

CHAPTER SEVEN

After dark John informed Tony it was safe enough to start their journey into the unknown, and asking Tony to reverse into a driveway hoped it would minimise the risk of being seen. At first Tony objected, and only agreed after John pointed out they would only be there for a few minutes! The ensuing situation however proved Tony right, whilst setting up the machine the house owner had heard them reverse in and asked them "*what the hell they thought they were doing with their weird contraption in his driveway!*" Smiling inanely Tony and John suddenly transmuted into iridescence, then becoming ghost-like disappeared before his very eyes! The house owner proceeded indoors screaming at his family to come and see the weird machine that had just disappeared from their driveway, but it wasn't until he'd dragged them to the front door that he realised what he'd asked them to come and see!

'You really should lay off the whisky Peter!' commented his wife dryly.

'You're beginning to hallucinate Dad!' his eldest son told him, and recommended a visit to the doctor. 'Sorry Dad, I was wrong... you really should come and see the flying saucer in the back garden!' Purely for the fact that they were moving slowly John kept a careful eye on the travel clock, and worried in case they became complacent and took their eyes off it for too long! Considering their current rate of travel, to and pass their point of rendezvous and have to

make a correction to their journey would not please either of them!

'How do you feel?' asked John, 'any side effects?'

'No, nothing,' replied Tony, 'it's odd... in the book he talks of a sensation of "falling", I'm wondering if that was another case of embellishment for the sake of the story.'

'You could be right,' added John, 'or... it could be that we simply aren't travelling fast enough, so maybe we won't experience anything until we increase the speed of this machine.'

'It's too damned slow,' complained Tony, 'is there nothing we can do to speed it up?'

'What?' asked John, 'how do you propose we go about that, we haven't got the papers yet!'

'Yeah, you're right,' said Tony relenting, 'we'll just have to put up with it!' It then occurred to Tony that if he was gone for a year his parents would think he'd left home, or was dead! John then reminded him he'd sent them a letter of explanation, so everything would be alright.

'Yeah sure,' replied Tony, 'but a whole year, not quite the same is it?'

After three months of travel they realised time really did go slow when you're in a hurry! 1975 was good year as far as John was concerned, and recalled his time at Harvard when everything was laid back, *and the music was great*, and clothes had *style!* Although genuinely interested Tony took umbrage at John's reference to style! All good things must come to an end, and having relieved themselves for what seemed like the millionth time they continued their journey into yesteryear. As well

as Tony nineteen fifty was unknown territory for John, and explained it was the year before he was born. Except for bomb craters here and there Apollo Street didn't look much different from the year they'd left, although a few bombed out dwellings were being rebuilt by their more affluent owners. As history unfolded before them they watched fascinated for a while, and it was like watching old news footage, except in their case they could smell the different odours surrounding them. By the time they'd got back to 1925 John was glad that three quarters of their journey was done, and they'd broken the back of it! Obviously brand new Tony pointed out a Packard V12 rumbling along the road, the proud owner obviously showing it off to his passengers, that Tony and John assumed were his family. It was time to go, as a woman was now staring at them from her lounge window, with a very angry look on her face!

'It was there darling honestly!' she told her frowning husband, 'it was strange little car, painted dark green, there was a curious contraption in the back.'

'Are you sure you are alright my dear?' asked the husband out of genuine concern as his hand felt her brow, although her temperature was normal she decided discretion was the better part of valour and said no more. Skipping through the first world war, which, by all appearances hadn't affected England as much as the second, they continued back another fourteen years to 1900. The real time clock now read 5th July 2001, and their family and friends would have long since considered them missing persons, and more than likely were two more forgotten cases

stuck in a precinct filing cabinet.

'We've missed Independence day!' declared John, looking genuinely annoyed.

'Did it mean that much to you?' asked Tony, 'I wouldn't have minded if you wanted to delay the trip!' Suddenly John burst out laughing, then seeing the funny side of it few seconds later Tony grinned.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The date was set for 10.00 pm Wednesday April 4th 1899, and John began the final leg of their journey, albeit shorter than the one they'd previously undertaken. Setting the lever back to its stop they sat back to enjoy the ride, and both agreed they still hadn't experienced the "falling" sensation H.G. Wells had mentioned when accounting his story, and wondered if it was as severe as the great man the great had described. A few weeks later they were relieved to see the chronometer had only two days left before it synchronised with the preset, and they would soon be able to retrieve the papers they so desperately needed!

'The displacement meter is showing a shift of twelve feet!' announced John suddenly.

'Why is that, we haven't changed position!' said Tony, suddenly alarmed as to why they had moved at all. The chronometer synchronised, they had arrived, and it was plain to see why their vehicle had been displaced by twelve feet, John suddenly remembered they'd reversed into the driveway of a house, and had received an angry look from the house owner; and because of that they'd tried to materialise inside a 1898 open topped Stewer!

'At least it proves our meter is working - thank God! Imagine being stuck inside that thing!' commented Tony.

'I don't suppose the owner of the Stewer would be too happy about it either!' replied John dryly.

'Lovely old car,' said Tony casually, 'just look at

those artillery wheels!

'Not as technically advanced as ours though.' replied John; subtly pointing out to Tony they had no time to waste on trivia! Walking casually along the road they glanced through the window, and Tony caught a glimpse of Mrs. Watchett carrying what appeared to be a tray containing a meal, complete with a glass of wine, napkin, condiments, and a knife and fork. Feeling giddy with exhilaration it was at that point he *really* believed it was happening!

A few seconds later whispering his experience in John's ear, he in turn understood Tony's feelings.

'Really? Incredible! I think we'll have to wait until he's either gone out, or gone to bed. It seems really bizarre though, here we are breaking into a house that belongs to one your ancestors!' said John, his faced fixed with prepossession.

'His weekly meetings were always on a Thursday - right?' asked John.

'Yeah, that's right,' replied Tony, 'why?'

'That's the very night we can't break in! It'll be too risky, we'll have to do it... tonight!' said John realising it was Wednesday.

'Shit! You're right.' agreed Tony, 'tonight, after he's gone to bed then.' To determine who would break into the ancestral pile, they sat in the Moke in a blind lane just the other side of the old castle gate, and hoped it would lessen their chance of being spotted by a "pillar of society", as they didn't a visit from the police for loitering with "sinister" intent! Tossing a coin Tony and John watched it land heads up, so it was down to Tony to do the dastardly deed! He would have to retrieve the papers, bring them to

the Moke, where John would copy them, after which, Tony would have the pleasure of returning them to H.G.'s laboratory! Considering the possibility of getting caught in the act Tony was not happy about it, and what would his ancestor say? For certain if Tony had to resort to telling him they were related, there was no way he'd believe him! After all it was H.G.Wells who discovered time travel, not some young upstart claiming to be his descendant! The very thought of it! Never the less, having chosen the wrong side of the coin it was his burden. Watching as the last lamp dimmed in the front upstairs bedroom window, John put his thumb in the air as a signal that the coast was clear, but giving Tony a nudge only served to make him feel more guilty. Having decided to do it the old-fashioned way he picked up his jar of treacle, some brown paper and glasscutter.

'Wish me luck!' he said with a great deal of sincerity.

'You bet!' replied John. Setting off he quietly made his way through the empty yard adjacent to H.G.'s property, but the curtilage wall leant precariously outward which gave Tony a million nightmares, plus, being deathly quiet, the slightest noise was amplified to the point where he almost abandoned the attempt. Then suddenly he was in! Now the real test would begin, how good a burglar was he? Taking the glass cutter from his pocket he described a deep circle in the pane, then smearing the treacle onto the brown paper he applied it to the pane and gave it a gentle tap, nothing happened. At this point he almost gave up again, surely if he hit it harder it

would wake up the neighbourhood, let alone H.G. himself! His palms sweated profusely, but looking carefully around all seemed quiet, so steeling his nerve this time he put his elbow into it with a "shit or bust" attitude, but, knowing his luck it would almost certainly be shit! The pane gave suddenly, but as the surface tension between the glass and paper had relaxed, it almost slipped from Tony's hand. That could have spelt certain disaster for him! Pushing his arm gingerly through the hole a few moments later his fingers found the latch, so lifting it carefully he pulled it gently upwards until it gave, then his torch beam found a bench on which stood a few quartz bars. His heart beating like a hammer he perched on the sill and listened for any threatening sound, and his sweating palms didn't help much either. Then suddenly almost losing his balance he just managed to retain his grip; scared stiff he froze for a few seconds, and wondered why they hadn't employed the services of a professional.

Once inside Tony listened for footfalls, maybe those of H.G. himself coming to make a citizens arrest! Supposing he had a gun, but remembering he had a job to do decided it was time to pull himself together, and, do it he would! His first stop were the benches, and knowing inventors as he did, like his father, he knew they invariably left things lying around; he was not disappointed. Lying next to the quartz bars were the papers he required, working quickly he found pages twenty-eight to forty-one, stuffed them in his jacket, and returned to the Moke. Waiting patiently for him John had the copier lid up ready to swallow the first sheet like an electronic

predator. Thirteen pages later Tony crept back to H.G.'s place, but this time it was a doddle, and went straight through the French windows and over to the bench - easy! Carefully replaced the papers he turned then tripping over something on the floor made a *very* audible clatter; Tony froze! He wasn't sure if he'd been there a minute, or a thousand years, although it felt like a thousand years! No lamps or footfalls, thankfully, came from the direction of hallway. Getting out as fast as he could he ran through the French windows as if the devil himself was dragging at his coat-tail!

Once outside he listened again, but it was deathly quiet. Swallowing a large lump he let out a silent sigh, and hurried back to the Moke where John was having kittens.

'What the Hell was that bloody racket? I heard it from here!'

'Sorry John,' explained Tony quickly, 'I kicked something, I don't remember seeing it there the first time.'

'Christ! I thought we'd had it then! Ah well... let's find somewhere we can work and get stuck in.' said John, who was very relieved. Pushing the lever forward John took them to nine o'clock the following morning, and on seeing them materialise a police officer shouted at them. John pushed the lever forward again, and left the perplexed constable to figure it out for himself. Although having the benefit of daylight it had started raining, and they were forced them to put up the rag-top, but not having the luxury of side flaps the wind howled straight through! As Tony pinned the papers down to stop

them from blowing away, John got to work sorting the missing pages in numerical order, and having seen pages twenty-eight to forty-one he realised why their machine was slow! Now at least he'd be able to adjust the machine to use the Tachyon and make it run infinitely faster. As darkness fell he spread his tool kit out in the Moke, then placing any tools not required immediately in the nearest convenient space. Meanwhile, feeling like an assistant in an operating theatre Tony handed John various tools as and when he called for them. Needing to get the job finished before dawn they worked feverishly throughout the night, and neither of them thought of food or drink, as each precious minute took them closer to day break. Then in the early hours Tony warned John he could see a trace of luminescence on the horizon.

Refitting the front panels, in went the final screw and she was ready, then looking at each other in anticipation their next question was, would success be theirs?

'If it doesn't work I'll complain to the manufacturer!' protested Tony, and caused John an instant outbreak of mirth. As his laughter abated he pushed the lever forward a fraction, and the difference was immediate, in the space of one minute they'd travelled six hours at the slowest accelerate. Pulling back on the lever he returned them back to the time they'd just left, and their total time was two minutes! 'My God! If we were to push it to its limit I wonder how far we would travel in the space of one hour?' pondered John.

'Shall we find out?' asked Tony, who was keen to try

the new challenge, for a brief moment they looked at each other, the look that says, "If we don't get out of this alive, it's been good!" Pushing the lever forward they were immediately buffeted around like a fairground ride. Snatching at their seatbelts they secure themselves as the chronometer blurred before their eyes, which including the "annual" readout! From time to time John would check his watch against the normal time chronometer, and noticed there was little difference between the two, and that pleased him immensely as any inaccuracy would cause a time-slip they didn't need. Too many corrections could be very time consuming as well as dangerous! Complaining of nausea John sympathised with Tony, and admitted a similar malady, and both agreed it was due to buffeting. Fifty-nine minutes later John pulled slowly back on the lever, and as the machine decelerated, their nausea dissipated accordingly.

'Bloody Hell! Look at that... 11.05 am 23rd April 8624! Without warning a loud noise reverberated around them, but apart from interrupting their concentration it shook their internal organs and caused them considerable pain. Looking up they realised if they didn't move damned quick, they'd both be wearing brown trousers! They were in the middle of some kind of war! Intrigued by the low frequency bellow John watched for a moment, and its pitch was far deeper than was comfortable for the human frame, and he likened it to a sick cow. It was then he saw something that scared him witless, half a mile away on the side of an adjacent hill he watched in horror as a crowd of people fell to the

ground, although their number was too great to count with any accuracy he estimated around a thousand, but it was a ball-park figure.

'Tony,' he said in a low voice, 'I think it would be wise if we got out of here yesterday!'

'What's happening to them?' asked Tony, watching in horror.

'This is a war of sound!' said John with urgency, and pushed the lever forward at the same time, after travelling forward another eight hundred and ninety nine years they stopped again, and immediately heard another deep bellow, and more people fell.

'I don't think we need to hang around here - do we?' said Tony rhetorically, but no sooner had he said that than a gigantic machine crested the hill where they'd watched the massacre. It was charcoal in colour, and as near as damn it seventy feet high! A hundred feet wide its length was near to one hundred and fifty, but what was curious was that it appeared to have no windows, and was running on what looked like rubber caterpillar tracks. Save for the binding and squealing of the rubber tracks, it made very little noise as it eschewed and churned the ground beneath it. Baring a slight resemblance to a military tank, they saw a flared horn protruding from what was obviously the front of the vehicle.

Twelve months further on John stopped again, but this time all was quiet so he and Tony listened for several minutes before relaxing.

'At last! I think it might be safe here.' said John finally.

'What did you mean by a "war of sound"?' inquired Tony.

'Ultra-low frequency sound - we experimented with it for a while... but it looks as if these people have perfected it into a devastating weapon!'

'What I can't understand is why those poor bastards had no visible signs of tissue damage!' said Tony, still frowning in horror at the genocide he'd witnessed.

'I don't know a lot about it, but I think low-frequency sound destroys internal tissue.... in other words it melts your insides!' replied John with a look of disapproval. Before Tony could register his own disapproval the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, as did John's. One short blast frightened them beyond reality, although some distance it away was promptly followed by another a few seconds later, then two more in close succession, and a fourth about twenty seconds after that. A short pause ensued for almost a minute, then suddenly the air filled with cacophonous trumpeting from near and far, and John guessed the nearest "tank" must have been issuing at over two hundred decibels, and was more than thankful it was over than two miles away. As far as John could tell, to destroy their enemy more effectively the frequency appeared to be channelled into a concentrated cone, although it was still ear-splitting even at that distance!

Without warning Tony and John were surrounded by forty or fifty gray skinned creatures, their faces were gargoyle like in appearance and no more than five feet tall on average, although for their height they looked physically athletic. Asking them what they wanted Tony's question appeared to antagonise them, and all were armed with handguns

which were promptly aimed at John and Tony. Suddenly stepping forward one of them, who John assumed it was their leader made a grunting noise, then using his gun gestured at them in the direction of the "tank". Not wanting to be a hero he glanced at Tony, who immediately understood his expression, and decided they'd best do as they were bade. Having had the presence of mind to snatch the ignition keys without being seen, Tony secreted them in his pocket. As John entered the tank Tony paused momentarily outside, and received a nauseating blow to the back of his head that sent him reeling to the ground! The creature grunted, and again gestured at the door, it was plain to see these creatures meant business. Inside it was cathedral like, and was open-plan all the way to the roof, and had at least six galleried floors over looking the central interior. Sitting at various controls were scores more of these little gray creatures, that Tony and John agreed were far from friendly. They were then taken to a small dingy room and manhandled inside; the door was slammed behind them and locked. A few seconds later they felt the machine move off, and looking at each other both knew they were in serious trouble!

'I hope to God they don't drive over the top of the Moke!' said John apprehensively.

'Even if they don't I'm beginning to wonder if we'll ever see it again!' said Tony resignedly.

'I wonder where they're taking us?'

'Let's hope it's not too far from the Moke,' said Tony, now feeling desperate. 'that is assuming as you just said, that they don't drive over it!'

'We'll get out of this somehow,' said John sensing his mood, 'like in a film plot... remember when they look for their chance to escape, that's what we've gotta do - it will come!'

'Yeah.' came Tony's monosyllabic answer, but with his head bowed he felt his life was in grave danger!

CHAPTER NINE

Travelling for almost fifteen minutes in that infernal machine it suddenly stopped, and looking at each other Tony and John thought the same thing, this might be their opportunity! Would they make their getaway, or would they die in the attempt? For over ten minutes an oppressive silence pervaded their mobile prison, then suddenly the sound of footfalls came through the gloom, a key turned in their cell door, and suddenly it swung open. Motioning at them with his gun the small gray creature obviously wanted them to follow him, so walking warily passed him they left the cell thinking it might be the last place they'd see on Earth. Walking behind them the creature prodded John's back with his gun, then leaving the small companionway they returned to the main gallery, where the creature indicated they were to stand in front of a large oblong table in the centre of the machine. Behind that table sat six more of the creatures facing them. They were ordered to stand and face the "committee", whilst in a strange tongue one of them read from a piece of paper, then having finished his declaration he looked at the others, who readily nodded their agreement with whatever it was he'd read out.

'We are friendly,' said Tony smiling, 'we mean you no harm.' His answer came swiftly in form of a gun butt, and Tony's head reeled, staggering slightly he refused to go down, but he was damned sure he wasn't going to let these insidious little bastards get

the better of him! Regaining consciousness a black rage suddenly consumed his mind, and as he 'rose he spun swiftly and launched his right fist at his little protagonist and caught it flush on the chin; it slumped to the floor unconscious. It was the worst thing Tony could have done, and before he knew it he was surrounded by ten of the gross little excuses for what remained of the human race. The "judges" as Tony and John had dubbed them now talked among themselves, and it was plain to see that both of them were under discussion, a few angry words were exchanged, and then more discussion, until it appeared they'd finally come to a decision. The head of this fine little committee appeared to be giving instructions to the guards in his guttural tone, and with a final wave of his arm it would seem they were dismissed. The guard that had felt the full force of Tony's fist had been taken away, presumably to a medical centre, as the other guards motioned with their guns for them to go toward the door. As it opened one of them keeping his gun trained on John walked quickly in front of them. Obediently stopping at the door John and Tony waited as the guard stuck his head through to check that the coast was clear. Going out ahead of them he then motioned at John and Tony to follow him out. Walking down the steps John noticed a small blond figure crouching in a bush almost a hundred feet away, and was motioning to them to cover their ears, realising quickly this could mean only one thing John turned slightly toward Tony and looked at him purposefully. Noting his look Tony followed John's gaze and nodded, then covering their ears another

bellow hit them, their little gray captors dropped like flies around them. Feeling their insides tremble Tony and John likened the sensation to a surgeon's hands rummaging inside their stomachs, while they were still conscious. Suddenly extreme fatigue overtook their bodies as nausea and giddiness suddenly swept over them, then deciding it was time to make a break Tony tugged at John's shirtsleeve and signalled toward the bushes. It was as much as they could do to move let alone run, and only their will to survive spurred them on. Although the noise itself was louder, but now they were fifty feet from the tank Tony noticed the effect was lessening. As the effect of the frequency diminished they noticed they were able to move faster, and it was then that the blond man John had seen seconds before jumped out in front of them. Having ducked into the bushes the blond man motioned for them to follow him, and they ran behind him for almost half a mile, and then they saw the tank that had attacked the aggressors, as they apparently were. The blond man held the door open for them, and they ran straight in without even considering it could be another trap, however, any fears they may have had were quickly dispelled. 'Hello,' said the blond man, as they turned to meet their rescuers for the first time, 'my name is Teera, we are known as the Ell. You are lucky we spotted you, the Morls are cannibals, but fortunately for us their eyesight is poor above ground, as they spend much time in their stupid underground factories. It was then that Tony and John realised their eyes had grown evermore accustomed to the dark over the years.'

'Well,' started John, 'thankyou for the history lesson, I'm John, this is my friend Tony, and thankyou also for rescuing us... especially as it now seems we were probably the main ingredient in their next Hotpot!' Everyone laughed as they were introduced to other members of the tank crew, and had noticed these people were no larger than the Morls, who were definitely not friendly enough to take tea with.

'Our next task is to return you to your vehicle,' said Teera, 'a very strange looking contraption!' Wondering if he should tell them who they are and where they'd come from, John hesitated for a moment, then throwing caution to the wind he sat on a nearby seat barely larger than a child's.

'We do not come from this period of time,' said John, then looked around to assess their reaction, 'we travel in time looking to see what man has done since our period back at the beginning of the twenty first century.'

'What is this you say,' said an old man pushing his way to the front of the congregation, 'you came here from the past?'

'Yes!' said Tony emphatically; 'we wanted to see what life is like at different periods in the future.' The old man rubbed his chin, and considered the credence of John and Tony's words.

'In our history,' recalled the old man, 'two hundred years ago maybe, our scientists were trying to invent a machine that would travel in time... what I would like to know is how did you succeed where they failed? Given that you come from a much earlier period in time, do you see what I mean? You have to ask; why technology was kind to you, when it

appears it frowned upon us!

'I understand what you're saying,' answered John, 'in our time also similar things happened, indeed, our machine is built purely from calculations and a design draughted by someone who lived a hundred years before us!'

Thinking deeply the old man frowned, and John decided it was time to circumvent this conversation if they were to continue their journey.

'How long have you been fighting this war?' asked John, deliberately changing the subject.

'About nine hundred years now,' replied Teera, and hearing that John's eyebrows suddenly shot five feet above his head, 'but we are winning, it's only a matter of time now before our superior forces drive the Morls back underground where they belong!'

'We wish you luck and victory,' said John diplomatically, but this was something they would have to investigate, as their names were too close to Eloi and Morlock to be a mere coincidence! 'It's time for us to leave, but thankyou again for rescuing us from the Morls, we are forever in your debt.'

'You are welcome,' replied Teera, 'should you ever come this way again we will give you a welcome to remember.'

'Thanks,' said Tony smiling, and sat gratefully in the Moke again.

'This is something I thought we'd never see again,' said Tony, 'and - we owe a lot to the Ell.'

'Yeah, you can say that again,' replied John emphatically, 'what year is this?'

'792,004, 4th June, why do you ask?' inquired Teera. 'I think I know how your race turns out in the future,

but that, as they say... is another story!' replied John. Struggling to comprehend his statement Teera frowned as John pushed the lever forward.

'According to H.G.Wells he travelled forward to the year 802,701, but unfortunately his precision didn't extend to the exact date and time, that we'll have to guess and adjust as necessary. The Ell and the Morls eh? I take it you noticed the significance in that, more than a coincidence - I think!'

'It's obvious we'll have to follow this up, that is assuming HG is there when we arrive!' said Tony suddenly.

'I doubt it,' replied John analysing the situation, 'it's a chance in a million we'll arrive at exactly the same time.'

CHAPTER TEN

The date was perilously close to their destination, so John quickly pulled the lever back to its neutral position, and obeying his command the machine slowed like a train arriving at a station. As the machine decelerated they watched with amusement as a group of Eloi darted back and forth like an old movie playing at double speed, as the machine finally came to rest in 802,701, the date was, July 29th, the time 2.37 p.m. It was just as HG had described it, the Eloi, who hadn't seen them yet were running to and from the river, and it was then they noticed three of the wells that HG had described, that lead to the underground workings of the repugnant Morlock; they had arrived! Seeing the Moke by the bushes a group of Eloi who were heading for the river looked quizzically at them. Waving to them Tony could see they were unsure, who were these strange beings sitting in their even stranger vehicle, at first they were cautious, then as if recognising them ran toward the Moke. Their tongue was also as HG had described, in just over ten thousand years their language had changed from the perfectly understandable English, spoken by the Ell, to the sweetly incomprehensible tongue of the Eloi!

'If anyone ever needed *more* proof... ' said John, letting his voice drift away; Tony nodded his agreement.

'Hello,' said Tony pointing at himself, 'I am Tony.' Then pointing at John did likewise. The Eloi

Laughed playfully, but Tony and John felt somewhat detached, as if some grand dream-like masquerade were playing in front of them, although the reality was they had travelled through time to prove H.G.Wells' Time Machine *was fact!*

'Where is Weena?' asked John remembering HG had mentioned her in his book, 'is she here?' The Eloi however stared at them with vacant expressions.

'Weena!' he repeated again, in case they hadn't heard him the first time. No change, their faces remained blank, and John wondered if they should take a look at the museum, in the hope it might tell them what had transpired. When HG had come here technology wasn't as advanced as it was in his time, and things like CD's and a player HG would have struggled with!

'Have we got time?' asked Tony, 'if we're going to the end of time we've got a Hell of a journey in front of us, and complications are something we can do without!'

'True!' declared John comically, 'that I cannot argue with!' Besides that they couldn't risk an accidental meeting with HG! Waving goodbye to the Eloi, Tony and John watched in fascination as they disappeared into the future. The lever had been pushed to maximum as Tony and John sat back to enjoy the ride - or try!

'I know what this buffeting is now,' announced John suddenly, 'it's the ground undulating as it changes contour over time, normally one wouldn't be aware of it, but as we are travelling at a far greater time-speed than usual, we're being jostled about!' This was something they would have to get used to, even

going to the far reaches of time wouldn't afford them any let up, and they were about to go where even HG himself hadn't been - *the end of time!*

'This'll be a great commercial pull, everyone will want to see what it's like at the end of time.' said Tony. Thinking of his and John's future he didn't consider it a sin to be financially secure, and as far as he knew neither did John.

A warning light suddenly flashed on the control panel, and John immediately pulled back on the lever. The clock now read 493,381,015, 1st December, 10.01 am.

'My God - look!' said John suddenly, 'I don't believe it!' Standing a few feet away was HG's model, the one he'd sent into the future to demonstrate the machine's capabilities to his listeners on that famous Thursday evening.

'Shit!' said John suddenly, and looking 'round quickly Tony wondered what he was swearing for, but John didn't elucidate.

'What in Hell's name is up John?' asked Tony, and didn't care much for the look on his face; a look he hadn't seen before.

'We've gone three seconds too far!'

'How d'you mean, too far?' asked Tony looking alarmed.

'We've gone past the end of time! We can't go back, I didn't realise - we've gone over the threshold!'

'What do you mean we can't go back?'

'We've reached the end of the universe, time is fragmenting, we're now being pulled into the centre of the universe where we'll be compressed into matter so dense... it's beyond human

comprehension.'

'SHIIIT!' said Tony, still not having fully taken it in, 'you mean we're gonna die?' John merely nodded, so all they could do now was wait for the end. Suggesting they at least try and get the machine in reverse, John insisted there was no point, and then a row ensued, the first real row they'd had, but seeing what was at stake it was hardly surprising. On the basis that if they didn't at least try they would never know Tony won the argument. Being who he was John couldn't argue with Tony's logic. Slamming the lever back as far as it would go the motion clock hardly moved, but as any time they could gain was better than nothing Tony insisted they keep going! Grabbing HG's model Tony set the clock to 10.00 pm Wednesday, 4th April and slammed the lever back, the model glowed incandescently for a few seconds then disappeared.

'How come HG's model just went back?' asked Tony, realising fully this predicament meant their certain demise.

'Because it only went as far as the last second of time, we could see it simply because was in the same time frame; and I didn't see it come up on our clock until it was too late!'

'How much time have we got left?'

'As long as we can hold the machine like this I would say, maybe... four hours, of course if the gravitational vortex increases - which it will do - it could be shortened considerably, then we'll be drawn inexorably to our death at an ever increasing rate!' Sitting in the Moke they stared unbelievably at the motion clock, and hoping against hope that by

some miracle it would break away and allow them to return to their own time, but they'd only managed to pull back an hour and a quarter with the machine on full power! The travel clock however hadn't moved, after an hour and twenty minutes they watched as the clock started steadily sliding forward toward the timeless abyss. Then something, or someone caught the corner of Tony's eye, and it wasn't John, but he already knew who it was before looking up.

'Who are you?' asked the great man.

'I'm Tony Williams, and this is my tutor... Professor John Puttmann.'

'All very laudable I'm sure my good fellows, but it tells me nothing about you!' answered HG.

'I am your great, great grandson,' said Tony, and realised at this juncture he had nothing to lose, 'the reason we're here is because we believed you actually travelled in time - and wanted to prove it!'

'Well! On that point you are certainly right young man, but as for being my great, great grandson... I think you are mistaken.' replied the great man confidently.

'I can prove it!' insisted Tony, forgetting the futility of their situation.

'Never mind that,' cut in John, then addressing HG, 'Do you realise you have just done as we have? You've passed the point of no return!' His chance to answer them however was snatched away, as John and Tony watched his image begin fragmenting, then slip to the right his image of them did likewise. Frightened out of their wits the three of them stared at each other, secure in the knowledge they would soon be dead! A few seconds later their speech

fragmented and conversation became impossible, and soon after that their images extruded, and their spoken words dragged into the abyss before them; followed after by their bodies. After that they became distorted, distended, and laterally compressed as universal gravity drew them inexorably to their deaths. There was now only one certainty, they would be locked together in a place where time didn't exist, and with certainty would move to a shorter, denser, and more finite future.

THE END