

TILLY TUCKER: TIMEKEEPER

by

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Novel. Time travel fantasy

“An adventure of all of time itself.”

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70 MILLION YEARS AGO (GIVE OR TAKE A FEW CENTURIES)

Imagine a child. A little girl. Petite. Fragile. Eight years of age. And all alone.

Can you picture her? Good. Then we can begin.

The child in question wore the robes of slumber; inappropriate attire, peculiar and out of place on this deserted beach. She'd normally wear shorts, a tee-shirt, flip-flops and a thorough basting of sunblock on such an occasion. Just like any other kid.

But not today.

The little girl found herself on all fours, befuddled, disorientated, both palms flat upon warm sand. Odd. Very odd. She raised herself into an upright posture, slave to an untamed sea breeze intent on ruffling delicate cotton against her petite frame. Her face was blessed with the kiss of warmth from the afternoon sun, the centre of attention in a near-cloudless blue sky. And on her lips, she savoured the unmistakable tang of sea salt. This beach, the breeze, the sun, the sky, the salty air, everything seemed so authentic, so very real. But it couldn't be. Could it? And as the eight-year-old took in her curious new surroundings, her button nose wrinkled, a visual verification of both awe and confusion in equal measures.

This child had two questions on her mind:

1. Where was she?
2. How did she get here?

Before the beach stole her body and soul, she'd been tucked up in bed, not quite awake and not quite asleep. Before the beach stole her body and soul, the middle of the night had reigned supreme, a time of hush, save for the occasional distant bark of a dog, the dull brrrrmmm of a passing car or the eerie yowl of a city fox. Before the beach stole her body and soul, she'd been far, far away from the nearest available seaside.

These very facts prompted two additional questions:

3. What happened to her bedroom?

4. What happened to the flat?

And again, she wondered to herself, how did she get here?

Then oh, a collection of recent memories decided to say hello. She recalled experiencing an odd sensation, difficult to explain, not quite an ache, not quite a twinge, not quite an itch, not quite a shiver. Then sitting up, tossing aside the duvet, climbing free from her bed. She remembered the shadowy room tilting, swaying, then lurching, savage, chaotic and violent, garrotting her stomach, strangling her lungs. Losing her balance then sprang to mind, dropping to her knees, then onto all fours, both palms flat upon the carpet. Oh, and finding herself engulfed in a strange silvery shimmer, like... like rippling water. Her final memory within the four walls of that bedroom, a brilliant flash of light and then...

...a golden plain of sand, a majestic backdrop of mountainous tuffet-peaked dunes, the tumbling flurry of white-crested waves at play and the placid hiss of receding surf.

Oer, this mysterious beach had appeared out of nowhere.

She inched forward, one pace, two paces, a few steps more, journeying through hectic tricklets of water, cool and fresh, busily carving a reunion with the sea after a recent turning of the tide. A million stowaway grains of moist sand clung to the bare feet of their newfound host, refusing to budge, refusing to say goodbye, tickling such sensitive skin.

Leaving the watery oasis behind, it was back to sand so warm and dry, reminding the child of rare seaside happiness, of ice cream dripping down cornet onto hand, of the lobster skin of sunglasses bathers, of the relentless mocking laughter of herring gulls. She looked left, she looked right, struggling to make sense of her current situation. Nothing about this strange location offered any explanation as to how she came to arrive he—

‘Hello.’ A male voice. Adult. Behind her.

The child spun around and was met with the affable smile of a tall man. Oh, so the beach was not so deserted after all. She noticed he wore peculiar clothes. Vintage. Oldy-worldy. The type of attire she'd seen in books or movies about the distant past; a three-pointed hat, a frilly shirt, high leather boots, a long frock coat, all apparel dyed in the shade of soot, oh, and what appeared to be a black eye mask hanging redundant around his neck. He looked like... what was it now? Ah, yes, a highwayman. She recalled almost falling asleep during a recent history lesson about highwaymen and how they robbed horse-drawn carriages hundreds of years ago. So why was this man pretending to be one? Weird. Was he in fancy dress? And more to the point, why was he in fancy dress on an empty beach?

The little girl studied the fresh arrival. He had a kind face, or so she thought. Heh, it was a phrase her mother would use now and then to signify a trustworthy soul. Or at least somebody Mum thought was trustworthy... who would soon move in and become a certain little girl's "new daddy," only then to disappear off the face of the earth (another phrase her mother used) a few months down the line. Oh, but in complete contrast to the kind face phrase, her mother had also warned the girl time and time again never to talk to strangers. Especially weirdly dressed strangers. So... what now?

He of weirdly dressed stranger fame circled the child, curious, intrigued. 'Do you often visit the beach in your nightwear?'

She looked down at her nightie, at its crude cartoon cat design, then at her legs, at her sand-encrusted feet, then returned her sights to the man. No, of course she didn't. What a daft question. At first, she considered remaining defiantly mute, taking on board her mother's never talking to strangers rule. That would teach him. However, needing answers and needing them now, she instead decided to ask, 'How did I get here?'

He tossed a shrug. 'You tell me.'

Okaaaaaay. Not much help there. Another question from the child: ‘How did you get here?’

The man grinned. Annoyingly. ‘Ah, that would be telling.’ He then surveyed the locality, admiring the beauty, the serenity. ‘I visit this place when I need to be alone. When I need to...’ Open finger air quotes. ‘...get away from it all for a while.’ Close finger air quotes.

The little girl sighed. So much for answers. ‘At least tell me where my bedroom disappeared to,’ she risked uttering, even though the request equalled the wannabe highwayman’s recent beach/nightwear question in terms of daftness.

‘Have you mislaid it? Ooh, careless. When did you last see it?’

‘Just now. I was there... but now I’m here.’ Ewww, she grimaced at her own gibberish.

‘I see.’ The man squatted low, gazes levelled. ‘Well, it’s lucky I came along when I did. It just so happens I might be able to help you.’ And then he stood up straight again.

Ooh. Help sounded good. Very good. The child was just about to speak when a bizarre and unexpected cry, somewhere between a wail and a squawk broke the silence of the sky above. She looked up and caught sight of a distant airborne creature, its lean yet substantial form difficult to fully make out, blurred, silhouetted, courtesy of the dazzling sunlight. With huge wings outstretched and a long and slender beak slicing a route through the air, it circled the vicinity with faultless grace. If it was a bird – it had to be a bird, surely. Or a bat. A very large bat – it was not a species she’d laid eyes upon before.

The man followed the direction of her gaze. Out of his smile came a certain air of familiarity and experience, as if he’d witnessed this curious sight a million times before.

‘Breathtaking, isn’t it?’

To which the girl replied, ‘I’ve never seen a bird so big before.’

‘I think you’ll find it’s not a bird.’

The girl made a face. ‘Then what is it, smarty-pants?’ She’d acquired a talent for a splodge of rudeness laced with a splat of sarcasm from her mother, from the way the single parent acted the majority of the time, a big kid.

‘It’s a pterodactyl,’ the man informed her.

The little girl frowned. She knew that word. And what it meant. But eh? It didn’t make sense.

‘Well, technically speaking,’ he continued, ‘it’s a pteranodon. Notably different in both physical features and mass. The pterodactyl, or *Pterodactylus antiquus*, giving it its correct classification, is tiny in comparison. It’s a common misconception that the two are the same species. But, you know, I figured I’d dumb down today’s dinosaur lesson, seeing as I’m in conversation with a young child.’

Ouch. Time to give as good as she’d been given. Yes, another mother trait. ‘I don’t need anything dumbed down. I know a lot more than you think.’

‘Oh? Such as?’

‘I’ve studied dinosaurs at school. They all died out millions of years ago.’

‘They certainly did.’

‘So how can that pteranodon be here right now?’

‘Because this isn’t...’ Again, open finger air quotes. ‘...right now...’ Again, close finger air quotes. ‘...as we know it.’ He gave a wink, then jabbed a thumb skywards. ‘Best to keep a beady eye on our winged friend. It won’t attack me, I’m too big and bulky. But you... well... it probably sees you as a tasty little snack.’

This conversation had travelled way off-topic for the little girl. ‘You said you can help me.’

‘Indeed I can.’

‘Then tell me where I am.’

‘It would be better to rephrase that request as, “Tell me when I am.”’

The statement swept right over the child’s head without stopping to apologise for its blatant ambiguity. ‘What are you talking about?’

The man tapped the side of his nose with his index finger, unwilling to offer any form of enlightenment. ‘Oh, don’t you worry, Tilly Tucker. You’ll find out one day.’

She threw him a concerned double take. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘You told me.’

The little girl who went by the name of Tilly Tucker was certain she hadn’t. ‘When?’

‘When you were older.’

Tilly blinked. And then she blinked again. ‘That doesn’t make sense.’

‘The time will come when you realise it does.’

‘You’re talking silliness. Are you a loony-bin?’

The man laughed. ‘Hah, where did you pick up such a phrase?’

‘My mum. She calls a lot of people that.’

‘Your mother sounds...’ His smile morphed into a disagreeable grimace. ‘...delightful.’

Tilly was fed up with talking to a stranger. Mum would blow a gasket if she found out. Therefore, it was time to unstranger this person. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Oh, yes, sorry, I haven’t fully introduced myself.’ This greeting episode was accompanied by gesticulatus theatricalus, an overblown bow of the head and a wide side-sweep of arms, as if welcoming a superstar to the stage. ‘Sebastian Quickly at your service.’ The statement was more than spoken, it was almost sung.

‘Sebastian Quickly?’ Tilly’s face scrunched beyond recognition. ‘That’s not a name.’

‘It’s got a certain ring to it, don’t you think?’

Tilly shook her head, disagreement overload. ‘No. It’s silly.’

‘Granted, it’s not exactly my true birth name. But discovering one’s inner-self often involves becoming somebody else, somebody stronger, somebody braver, somebody willing to take that risk.’

Once again, the man’s ramblings went straight over her head. ‘I have no idea what you’re banging on about.’

‘Oh, but you will when you’re older.’ Sebastian’s face broke into a warm smile. ‘Tilly Tucker, you are destined for great things. You just don’t know it yet.’

Tilly stared at him. He stared back. Silence prevailed.

Then argh, the attack came without warning, the shadow of the creature darkening Tilly’s sun. One piercing war-cry, two sets of talons gripping the scruff of her nightie, the rabid flapping of colossal bat-like wings and Tilly was lifted into the air.

It was the pteranodon. She hadn’t kept a beady eye on the animal and now it had her in its clutches. It wasn’t a bird, nor was it a bat, it was a monster, its lengthy beak, bulky head and arrowhead skull crest looking bizarrely out of proportion in comparison to its squat body. And oh, its eye-goggling wingspan measured at least six Tilly Tuckers laying down head to toe. Ooer, not liking the way the distance between sky and beach was widening, Tilly wriggled and squirmed, attempting to free herself from its hold. She screamed, she yelled, she hollered, hoping her ear-popping screech-fest would alarm the animal. But no. Undeterred, it continued to make its ascent.

Tilly gawped at the beach below. She spotted Sebastian looking up, running after her. Why wasn’t he doing anything, why wasn’t he saving her? Oh, what was he doing now? She watched as he came to a halt and stooped low, picking up a rock as large as his hand and lobbing it into the air. Whoosh, the rock flew past Tilly’s right ear, totally missing the creature. Who was his target, the oversized chicken or a certain eight-year-old?

Then oh, the pteranodon changed direction, doubling back, sending the girl swinging to and fro like a human pendulum. The bird swooped low, soaring past Sebastian, almost knocking him for six with said pendulum, warning him off, forcing him to hit the deck. Man down and victorious, the beast began to make a fresh ascent.

Oh, Tilly noticed the creature wasn't flying so high this time, flapping its wings hard and fast, struggling to gain further height. Was her body too heavy for the tiring bird to handle? She certainly hoped so. Again, she peered down at the beach. Sebastian was now on all fours, searching through sparse scatterings of rocks and pebbles, in need of another suitable missile. This prompted the child to hope to God he would hit the actual target this time.

It was then when the creature lost its grip, sending the little girl plunging beachwards, landing with a dull plumph onto a massive (and thankfully soft) ridge of sand dunes. Urgh, spitting out a mouthful of golden grains and somewhat winded by the fall, she hastily checked herself, her arms, her legs, her torso, good, nothing broken. Then came a screech from above. She looked up. The pteranodon was circling again, clearly seeking another opportunity to grab its chosen prey.

Tilly struggled to her feet, her eyes fixed on the giant bird, watching it making a fresh approach, talons at the ready, aiming to take the child. Uh oh, she knew she should run. Fast. But she couldn't. Her trembling form refused to budge. The choking grip of terror had her in its clutches, freezing her feet, her legs, her whole body. This was neither fight nor flight. This was statue territory.

The child couldn't bear it, so she slammed her eyes shut. For sure, this was the end of Tilly Tucker. Seconds ticked by. What was happening? She couldn't help herself, she reopened her eyes, then whack, a second and much larger rock slammed into the approaching pteranodon's head with unbelievable force, knocking the airborne creature off-balance, causing it to hurtle out of control towards her. Rediscovering movement, Tilly ducked. The

dazed animal whooshed past the girl, missing her by mere centimetres. Then thud, the pteranodon crash-landed on the sandy beach, the continuous force of momentum sending it tumbling and bouncing and rolling for quite some distance before coming to an awkward halt in an ungainly heap, injured, confused, disorientated, attempting to straighten itself, flapping one wing in vain, struggling to free its trapped second wing from underneath its fallen body, desperate to find its feet, needing to pull itself into an upright position, but failing miserably.

Sebastian galloped over to the child. He squatted low, his left arm wrapped around her tiny frame, his right hand fishing for something unknown about his person, something-or-other fixed to a chain attached to his coat. Then oh, more squawks and shrieks from above. They both looked up. Bird-like silhouettes in the sky. A whole gang of them. Uh oh, company was coming for dinner.

‘We’ve got to get out of here right now,’ said Sebastian, trepidation evident in his voice.

‘How?’

He fumbled with the chain and produced a pocket watch, holding it aloft. ‘With this.’ Before Tilly could say something sarcastic, he added, ‘You need to think about home.’

‘What? Why?’

She clocked Sebastian peering across at the distressed pteranodon and followed his line of sight. The animal was recovering, its trapped wing freed, almost back on its feet. Very soon, way too soon, it would take flight and be ready for another attack. Ooer, then came further shrieks from the sky. The two potential human meals both tossed upward glances at the approaching creatures. Uh oh, prospects weren’t looking too rosy.

‘Concentrate, girl,’ he ordered, ultra-insistent. ‘Close your eyes and picture your bedroom in your head.’

Even though she considered it a strange request, she decided to humour him by slamming her eyes shut. Self-inflicted blackness prevailed. Then she opened them again. ‘How is this supposed to help?’

‘We haven’t got time for dumb questions.’ The intensity of insistence in his voice had now been upgraded to red alert. ‘Just do it.’

‘Okaaaaaay.’ Again, she closed her lookies. In her mind’s eye, she could see her bed, the wardrobe, the horribly childish wallpaper that hadn’t been changed since she was a toddler. She didn’t have a clue why she needed to perform this task. But hey, Sebastian was an adult, and adults knew best. Apparently.

‘Can you picture it?’ he asked.

She sighed. Irritably. ‘Yessss.’

It was then when she once again felt that odd sensation, not quite an ache, not quite a twinge, not quite an itch, not quite a shiver. Urgh, a sudden wave of nausea took hold. She opened her eyes and spotted both the hour and minute hands of Sebastian’s pocket watch spinning at great speed. Eh? Before she could question this bizarre occurrence, the weird silvery shimmer returned, enveloping the two of them. Next, a dazzling sheet of light filled their world and...

SIX YEARS AGO

...a dizzy, disorientated Tilly stumbled and fell, landing on all fours, both palms flat upon the carpet. Oh. The carpet. Her bedroom carpet. Ugh, trying her hardest to ignore her stomach tying itself in knots, she took in the familiarity of her surroundings, the bed, the wardrobe, the awful childish wallpaper. She was home. Not a pteranodon in sight. She was safe. Relief overload.

Tilly didn't realise she still had company until Sebastian spoke.

'Correct destination, well done,' he whispered, so as not to disturb any family members occupying the flat. 'You wouldn't believe some of the places other fledglings have taken me. You're obviously a natural.'

Sebastian returned his timepiece to its rightful place, a side pocket of his coat, then stood up from his squat. 'No need to freak out about the dizziness and the nausea. It always happens to newbies. Once your body grows accustomed to travelling, you'll be fine.'

'Travelling?' she whispered back. 'Where?'

Sebastian grinned. 'Anywhere and anywhen.'

'Tilly?' Uh oh, her mother's voice. Annoyed. Coming from the adjacent bedroom. 'What the hell do you think you're playing at in there?'

Another grin from Sebastian. 'Ah. My cue to disappear.' He opened the window and climbed out onto the ledge. 'Ciao for now.'

Tilly's eyes widened. 'What are you doing? This is a tower block. We're three floors up.'

Sebastian looked back at the child. 'Oh, don't you worry about me, Tilly Tucker, I'm a big boy now.' Again, he produced his pocket watch. 'See you when you're older.' And then he jumped.

A moment later, a flash of light tore through the night, after which the silence of darkness reigned. Tilly raced over to the window and peered out. Not a trace of Sebastian Quickly.

The bedroom door then burst open, the light came on and her mother stormed in, not best pleased, wrapped in a tatty woollen dressing gown. She crossed her stick-thin arms that matched her stick-thin body, the product of choosing cigarettes over healthy meals way too often.

‘You’d better have a bloody good reason for disturbing my beauty sleep.’

Tilly said nothing in return. What could she possibly say? She wasn’t exactly sure what had just happened herself. However, needing to make some kind of response, she opted for the non-speakery of a vague shoulder shrug.

Her mother marched over to the cause of a chilly draught. ‘What’s this window doing open? You’re letting out all the heat.’ She closed the window and turned to face her daughter. ‘Well? Cat got your tongue?’

Again, she shrugged. Again, no words were uttered. Instead, she winced at the stupidity of the cat/tongue phrase. They didn’t even own a cat. And even if they’d been blessed with a feline, what would it want with Tilly’s tongue?

‘Get back to bed, you,’ the parent snarled, making her way back across the room. ‘School in the morning.’ She then killed the light and parted company with the child, slamming the door shut behind her.

Tilly stood in silence, her petite form semi-illuminated by a moon undressed of its recent cloud cover. Her juvenile mind was now crammed with questions. What just happened? How did she get to the beach? Who was Sebastian Quickly? Why did he have such a weird name? How come the pteranodons existed when they should have been extinct? Why were the hands spinning on Sebastian’s pocket watch? How did she get home? Or... had it all been a dream? A really, really vivid dream.

Well?

The child sat herself down on the edge of the bed, deep in thought, staring at nothing in particular. Yes. It must have been a dream. Bizarre events like that didn't happen in the real world. They couldn't. Ah, but if Tilly had been dreaming, how come she'd been on all fours on the carpet and not snuggled up in bed? Hmm, sleepwalking perhaps? Yes. Sleepwalking. Or sleepcrawling. It was the only explanation that rang true. Or... had it actually happened?

Well?

The girl then cast aside such idiotic musings. She was just being silly. There had been no beach, no Sebastian, no winged creatures. The little girl had been fooled, no, no, correction, more than fooled, completely hoodwinked by an over-active imagination.

She bowed her head and blew out a defeated sigh. Oh, it was then when her attention was drawn to her feet.

Her sand-encrusted feet.

Oh. Wow. Cool. As realisation came a'knocking, she offered herself a delighted smile. This was all the proof she required. It hadn't been a dream after all. The events of the last ten minutes or so had been very real indeed. Double wow. Double cool.

One final question then stood up to be counted:

Would she ever cross paths with that mysterious man again?

Somehow, she knew this was not the last she'd seen of Sebastian Quickly.

1976

Flying high above England's gentle rolling fields and dense clusters of emerald woodland, the biplane cut through the air, a four-winged chariot of gleaming red against a backdrop of endless blue. This particular aircraft boasted a passenger's cockpit at the front and an aviator's cockpit situated a short distance behind the wings to facilitate a better view when flying. Maintaining a steady pace, the female pilot laughed. Loudly. Her big eyes shone with unbridled zeal. She adored both the thrill and the freedom of aviation, in the company of clouds and birds and angels, far from terra firma's jostle of crowds.

Wearing a vintage leather aviator hat, thick goggles and a fur-collared leather flight jacket, any chance onlookers would think the pilot's attire (not to mention her quirky mode of transport) looked somewhat dated and out of place, given that this was 1976. Ah, but the girl in question, living her twenty-ninth year of life to the full was not from around these parts, nor was she from this particular decade.

Serendipity Blue was a long, long way from home.

She glanced at the cockpit's control panel, a mechanical array of dials, buttons, switches and... a satnav. Yes. A satnav. Or at least a device that closely resembled one, comprising of a rectangular flat screen displaying an animated chart of the terrain below, plus a helpful "this is you, you are here, this is where you're heading" arrow, showing the way.

Below the device, a pocket watch, yes, you read this sentence correctly, a pocket watch (minus a chain) was wedged inside a circular indentation in the control panel, as if the timepiece was meant to play a vital role in operating the aircraft. To its left, an oval, almost bowl-like cast of metal measuring approximately fifteen centimetres across had been built into the panel, boasting four small holes in a row, each one housing its own dark blue

gemstone, smooth, round, shiny. The exact purpose of the metal object and its resident mineralia was unapparent. But it would be. Later.

There then came a voice from the satnav, female, chirpy, electronic. ‘Serendipity Blue, you have reached your destination.’

The biplane banked to the left and the castle came into view, a stone-built Norman stronghold built during the late eleventh century, its simple design consisting of a square three-storey keep. A narrow tower ran up one corner, inside which a spiral staircase led up to all storeys.

The castle had remained unoccupied for hundreds of years. Despite this, the majority of the keep’s structure continued to stand proud, aside from damage to the battlements area at the top of the castle, more than likely caused by an endless conflict with the elements, rather than the violence of invading armies. Meanwhile, its former surrounding curtain walls and gatehouse, the main line of defence once upon a time, hadn’t been so fortunate, and had long since been reduced to random weathered outcrops of age-old stone and mortar, drowning in a merciless sea of grass and heather; sporadic reminders of its former glory, all reaching skywards, begging to be noticed, yearning to be saved.

Ten metres to the left of the keep stood a spacious caravan, uncoupled from its respective motor vehicle, an ex-military Jeep, accompanied by three small tents, a somewhat rusty saloon car and a black motorcycle, a sure sign that life was nearby. A makeshift washing line ran from the caravan to a neighbouring oak tree, playing host to laundered garments flapping and fluttering in the breeze. At the foot of the keep, next to deep excavation work, Serendipity clocked a small yellow digger, presently dormant and unmanned. At the far end of the site, she spotted people, five in total, engrossed in various forms of activity, digging channels with spades and trowels, searching through fragments of fallen rubble, sifting soil for relics. Mostly men. One woman. All the males were blessed with long hair and flared

jeans, loyal to the trends of the decade without being conscious of following fashion. But not the woman. She wore shorts. Khaki. Matching her hard-wearing (also khaki) top. In fact, she was dressed more for an African safari trek than a humble dig in the heart of the British countryside. These people formed a team of archaeologists. Serendipity knew their shared profession, not from their actions, but because they were the very people she had been seeking out. Well, actually, one person in particular.

Daniel Saunders.

The Daniel Saunders in question, a certain Doctor Daniel Saunders (who preferred his first name not to be chopped up and served as Dan) was a handsome specimen, the rugged outdoors type, hardly the type of man one would guess was an academic. He was almost out of his thirties, close to the big four-zero, but any obvious signs of ageing hadn't yet read the memo. No grey hair, no bald spot, no dreaded onset of wrinkles.

He quit supervising his team and peered up at the sky. The source of the chugga-chugga-chugga that filled his ears was an approaching biplane, bright red... her plane, circling the vicinity for a suitable place to land. Heh, donning an inquisitive smile, he wondered what Serendipity Blue wanted on this particular occasion.

The sole woman of the group looked up from her sifting. Tamara. Just into her twenties. A history student who had practically begged Daniel for an opportunity to work out in the field, to get her hands dirty, to reach out and touch history instead of simply reading about it from afar. Daniel had mislaid her surname. It was actually Benn. Full name, Tamara Benn. But he was rubbish with names and was too polite/embarrassed/apprehensive (delete as appropriate) to request a reminder.

'Somebody you know, Doctor Saunders?' the girl with the mislaid surname asked.

Not once taking his eyes off the descending aircraft, Daniel nodded and remarked, 'She turns up from time to time.'

Tamara frowned an eh, but didn't pursue it. Instead, she returned to her work.

Daniel waltzed over to the adjacent meadow. He watched in silence as the aircraft touched down and taxied a short distance before coming to a halt. Serendipity killed the engine, claimed her pocket watch from the control panel and climbed down from the plane. Off came her goggles, off came her hat, off came her gloves, off came her jacket, all items discarded on the grass. Underneath the leather facade, a beautiful woman emerged, although her checked shirt, cargo pants and hobnail boots sought to challenge her femininity. She plumped up her hair, thick and mousy, cut in a wavy bob, very Roaring Twenties. And then she marched towards the archaeologist and threw open her arms.

'Daniel,' she greeted. 'Long time no see.'

She air-kissed his cheeks, mwah, mwah, they hugged, they patted backs, there was something there, a familiarity, a closeness, a certain chemistry, but they freed each other before any somethings could take hold.

'Serendipity Blue,' he counter-greeted, his smile the picture of elation, his brow wrinkling in question, a contrasting mixture of delight and curiosity in equal measures. 'Amazing how you always turn up the very minute I make an unusual discovery.'

She put a cheeky beam up for sale. 'You know me, I don't hang about.'

It was true. She didn't hang about. Every time Daniel uncovered something bizarre, something not quite right, something seemingly impossible, Serendipity Blue was sure to appear. You could set clocks by her. Which was appropriate, considering the girl was a time traveller.

Of course, it went without saying that Serendipity's anthology of exploits through the years, the decades, the centuries was a closely guarded secret. Very hush-hush. The general public were totally oblivious to people like her – timekeepers – having been drip-fed the lie since the dawn of scientific thinking that time travel was impossible. Being a humble, regular

non-time travelling guy, Daniel felt greatly honoured to be entrusted with such extraordinary and mind-blowing knowledge. Oh, and he kind of liked her. A lot.

‘I take it you can shed some light on what I’ve discovered,’ he surmised.

She nodded. ‘That’s why I’m here.’

Escorting his visitor towards the dig site, Daniel asked, ‘How did you find out?’

‘I read about it. In your book.’

He lobbed across a curious glance. ‘The book I’m yet to write?’

‘That’s the one.’

Daniel smiled, warming to the idea of one day putting words to paper. ‘Is it a good read?’

There then came a swift follow-up question: ‘Is it successful?’

She dealt a mock scowl. ‘You know I can’t tell you that.’

‘Fair enough. But there is one more question I’d like to ask.’

She dealt a second mock scowl.

In response, he raised theatrical surrendering arms. ‘Totally unrelated, I promise.’

Her mock scowl was replaced by faux suspicion. ‘Riiiiiiight. Go ahead.’

He stopped in his tracks, ushering her to do the same. ‘Be honest. Do we have a future together?’

‘Ah.’ She playfully rolled her eyes. A coy smile also demanded an audience. ‘That question. Again.’

‘Yes or no?’

Serendipity felt flattered. But no. She needed to be strong, to be firm, to take back control.

‘Daniel, I’m married. You know that.’ And she continued the journey.

Cantering after the girl, Daniel replied, ‘Yes. In 1922. This is 1976. Hubby is probably dead and buried by now.’

The wife of the probably dead and buried husband tossed over a smirk. ‘Your wooing techniques could do with emergency improvement.’

‘You can’t blame me for trying. You’re a beautiful woman.’

‘Yes. In 1922,’ she mimicked. ‘This is 1976. I’m probably dead and buried by now.’

Daniel volleyed back a grin, knowing he was beaten, taking it all in good humour.

They reached the dig. The student, Tamara, stood up. Serendipity studied the lass. She seemed affable enough. But she could also detect a trace of rivalry in the girl’s body language, as if Tamara had marked her territory and Serendipity was trespassing.

‘Tamara, this is Serendipity Blue,’ Daniel introduced. ‘A good friend of mine.’

The student made a face. ‘Serendipity Blue? Is that seriously a name?’

Ouch. Keep smiling, Serendipity. Don’t gouge her eyes out. ‘I’m living proof that it is.’

‘Are you a fellow archaeologist?’ Tamara asked, a hint of contempt evident in her tone.

‘I’m a lot of things.’ Brief. Succinct. Mysterious. Giving nothing away.

Sensing an impending air of tension between the two women, Daniel steered his guest away from the battleground. ‘How about I show you what I’ve found?’

Daniel ushered Serendipity over to the foot of the keep. Next to the digger and its accompanying parade of spades and pick-axes, huge piles of fresh soil and clay seemingly stood guard before a hole in the wall as tall as Serendipity and about three feet wide, possibly a former door, she surmised. Just inside was an excavated hole in the ground, two metres or so in diameter, exposing a stone staircase leading downwards into the cold darkness of subterranea. Serendipity peered into the mouth of shadows. She could see nothing. In this situation, the naked eye was useless.

Two torches sat minding their own business on a nearby patch of grass. Daniel picked them up, gave them life and handed one to his companion. They then both entered the hole, Daniel first, Serendipity following closely behind.

As they descended the staircase, Serendipity said, 'I don't think your girlfriend likes me.'

It was Daniel's turn to deliver a mock scowl. 'She's not my girlfriend.'

'Oh?' Cheeky smirk time. 'Lost your touch, have we, Doctor Saunders?'

'Very funny. Tamara's one of my students. She's here for the experience.'

'I bet she is.'

Daniel ceased movement and turned around. 'Do I detect a hint of jealousy?'

He waited for Serendipity to reply. Her impassive face gave nothing away.

Eventually, she asked, 'Don't you have something important to show me?'

Daniel smiled, beaten hands down in their game of ~~flirting~~ wits.

The stairs led the pair to a dank and musty corridor, narrow, eerie, uninviting. The walls, the floor, everywhere was stained by remnants of age-old soil. This whole site had clearly been buried and left for dead for who knows how long, only now to be rediscovered by inquisitive members of a fresher generation.

The corridor took them to a naked opening, another doorway, its wooden barrier long since expired. They both shone their torches through the rectangular gap, spreading the gift of light into a room so cold, so squalid, equally as uninviting as the corridor.

'Is this a dungeon?' she asked.

He looked at her and shook his head. 'Contrary to popular belief, early castles didn't come equipped with dungeons. Norman settlers didn't feel the need to imprison enemies. Why bother when it was far easier to kill them on the spot?' He returned his sights to the dank room. 'No, this would have been a basement. A storeroom for supplies.'

Daniel stepped through the doorway. Serendipity followed him inside. Both of them aimed their torches in all directions, garnering a feel for the morbid room.

She said, 'I'm guessing this is where you discovered it.'

He gave a nod. ‘My first thought concerning the find was an act of contemporary vandalism, especially going by the content. But there’s no way anybody could have gained access to this room. It’s been buried for centuries.’

Daniel squatted low before the far wall and shone his torch upon one area of masonry blocks in particular. The torchlight revealed some kind of etched inscription; English words carved into stone, scored deep enough to survive a lengthy passage of time.

Serendipity lowered herself to the man’s level. She too directed her torch and took a peek. With her free hand, she brushed away stubborn crumbs of soil from the inscription to facilitate a clearer view of the text. Her mouth then curled into a victorious smile. ‘Gotcha.’

Daniel peered her way. ‘I take it she’s one of your kind. A timekeeper.’

Serendipity counter-peered his way and nodded. ‘New recruit. Bit of a handful.’ A moment of silent contemplation ensued. Then she added, ‘I hope you realise, you can’t mention anything about this inscription in your book.’

A disappointed sigh escaped through the man’s lips. ‘I was afraid you were going to say that.’ Curiosity then came out to play. ‘This new recruit must be pretty important.’

‘Oh, believe me, she is.’ Serendipity’s eyes returned to the discovery. ‘This is a message from Tilly Tucker. The girl who was supposed to die.’

In case, dear reader, you are wondering, the carved words spelt out in block capitals:
“TILLY TUCKER WOZ ‘ERE. TRAPPED IN 1094. HELP ME!”