

TILLY TUCKER, TIMEKEEPER

by

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Novel. YA time travel fantasy adventure

“The adventure of all of time itself is about to begin.”

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

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

Imagine her name. Tilly Tucker.

And now we begin.

Tilly wore the threads of slumber. Inappropriate attire, peculiar and out of place on this deserted beach. She'd normally wear shorts, a tee-shirt, flip-flops, a thorough basting of sunblock. 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, her face blessed with the kiss of warmth from the afternoon sun, her body slave to an untamed sea breeze intent on ruffling delicate cotton against her petite frame. The beach, the sun, the breeze, 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.

Tilly 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 coastline.

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. 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 Tilly of rare seaside happiness, of ice cream dripping from cornet to hand, of the lobster skin of sunglassesed 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.

Tilly spun around and was met with the affable smile of a man whose charcoal locks danced in the breeze. Oh, so the beach was not so deserted after all. She took note of his peculiar clothes, the type of attire she'd seen in books or movies about the distant past, a tricorne 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? If so, why was he in fancy dress on a beach?

The stranger 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, 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. That would teach him. However, seeking answers and needing them now, she instead decided to ask, 'How did I get here?'

He tossed a shrug. 'You tell me.'

'Okaaaaay.' Another question from Miss Tucker: '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 get away from it all for a while.'

Tilly sighed. So much for answers. 'At least tell me why bedroom disappeared.'

'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.

Help sounded good. Very good. Tilly 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 heavenwards 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, slender beak cutting 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 though he'd witnessed this curious sight a million times before. 'Breathtaking, isn't it?'

To which Tilly replied, 'I've never seen a bird so big before.'

'I think you'll find it's not a bird.'

'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 pteranodon,' the man informed the child. And off her blank stare, he added, 'Oh, sorry. Would you like the answer dumbed down a smidgeon?'

'I don't need anything dumbed down. I know a lot more than you think.'

'Oh? Such as?'

'I've studied prehistoric creatures at school. Guess what? They all became extinct millions of years ago.'

'They certainly did.'

'So how can that pteranodon be here right now?'

'Because this isn't...' Open finger air quotes. '...right now...' 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.'

For Tilly, this conversation had travelled way off-topic. 'You said you can help me.'

'Indeed I can.'

'Then tell me where I am.'

'It would be better to rephrase the request as, "Tell me when I am."'

The statement swept right over Tilly'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.'

An ice-cold wave of concern swept through her tiny body. 'How do you know my name?'

'You told me.'

The Tilly Tucker in question was one hundred per cent 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. '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 found herself fed up with talking to a stranger. Mum would blow a gasket if she got wind of her only daughter talking to a mysterious man in fancy dress. Therefore, it was time to unstranger this person. 'What's your name?'

'Oh, yes, sorry, I haven't fully introduced myself,' he said, the upcoming greeting 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.’

‘Granted, it’s not exactly my true birth identity. 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 broad smile alive with zest. ‘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, spotting 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, this time, Tilly noticed the creature was struggling to gain further height, flapping its wings hard and fast. 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, 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 as it made 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 entire body. This was neither fight nor flight. This was statue territory.

The child couldn't bear it, 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 massive, humungous 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 in his pocket. 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 produced a pocket watch on a chain and held 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. Their prospects weren’t looking too rosy.

‘Concentrate, girl,’ he ordered, ultra-insistent. ‘Picture your bedroom in your head.’

‘How is that supposed to help?’

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

‘Okaaaaaay.’ 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. ‘Yesssss.’

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. 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.

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 failed to realise she still had company until Sebastian spoke.

‘Is this home to you?’ the highwayman asked in whisper-speak, so as not to disturb any family members occupying the flat.

In response, Tilly offered across a definite nod.

Sebastian. Impressed. ‘Well done. You wouldn’t believe some of the places previous fledglings have taken me. You’re clearly a natural.’ The man returned his timepiece to its rightful place, a side pocket of his coat, then stood up from his squat. ‘Don’t 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?’ the frowning little girl whispered back. ‘Where?’

Sebastian grinned. ‘Anywhere and anywhen.’

‘Tilly, what do you think you’re playing at in there?’ Uh-oh, her mother’s voice. Annoyed. Coming from the adjacent bedroom.

‘Ah. My cue to disappear.’ Sebastian opened the window and climbed out onto the ledge. ‘Ciao for now.’

‘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. ‘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? And above all, 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. Yes. It must have been a dream. Bizarre events like that didn't happen in the real world. 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.

Oh, it was then when her attention was drawn to her feet.

Her sand-encrusted feet.

Wow. Cool. It hadn't been a dream after all. The events of the last ten minutes or so had been very real indeed. For reasons the little girl couldn't possibly comprehend, Tilly Tucker had actually visited a prehistoric beach.

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

High above England's gentle rolling fields and dense clusters of emerald woodland, the biplane sliced through the air, chugga-chugga-chugga, a four-winged chariot of gleaming red set against a backdrop of endless blue. The female pilot laughed, her big eyes glimmering with unbridled zeal. She adored both the thrill and 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-eighth 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 are heading" arrow showing the way.

Below the device, a pocket watch, yes, you read this sentence correctly, a pocket watch (minus a chain) sat wedged inside a circular indentation in the control panel, as though the timepiece was meant to play a vital role in operating the aircraft. To its left, an oval, rugby-ball-esque cast of metal, measuring approximately twenty-five centimetres in length, 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 remained unclear. For now.

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 constructed 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 tents, two saloon cars and a black motorcycle, a sure sign that human 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, close to deep excavation work, Serendipity clocked a petite yellow mechanical 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 and 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, 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 hairs, 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 filling 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. Twenty-one years of age. 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 Bean. Full name, Tamara Bean. 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 gave a nod and remarked, 'She turns up from time to time.'

Tamara frowned an eh, but didn't pursue it. Shrugging it off, 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, her hat, her gloves, 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. 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. 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 type of 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 assume you can shed some light on what I’ve discovered.’

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.' Off her second mock scowl, 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. 'Do we have a future together?'

'Ah.' She playfully rolled her eyes. A coy smile also demanded an audience of one. '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 sifting area. 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. A very 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 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. 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 remarked, 'I don't think your girlfriend likes me.'

Cue 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?’

Serendipity’s impassive face gave nothing away. ‘Don’t you have something important to show me?’

Giving in, a smiling Daniel continued the tour. 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. The entire 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.

‘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 made your discovery.’

He offered 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 under tonnes of soil for centuries.’

Daniel squatted low before the far wall and shone his torch upon one family 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.’

‘I take it the author of the message is one of your kind. A Timekeeper.’

Serendipity 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. Even though you did, the first time around.’

A disappointed sigh escaped through the man’s lips. ‘I was afraid you were going to say that.’ And then an afterthought demanded airtime. ‘Hey, I thought you weren’t supposed to change events that have already happened.’

‘Timekeepers have certain discretionary powers when it comes to safeguarding information of a sensitive nature.’

‘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 spelled out in block capitals:
“TILLY TUCKER WOZ ‘ERE. TRAPPED IN 1094. HELP ME!”

TODAY

Imagine a teenager. A not so little girl. Rock-hard on the outside. Fragile on the inside. Fourteen years of age. And this time, six years later, not quite so alone. Well, at least not at this precise moment in time.

Again, imagine her name. Tilly Tucker.

And now we continue.

Tilly wore the threads of education, although it had to be mentioned, the way she portrayed herself as a pupil trashed every school uniform rule in the book. Her necktie dangled limp and askew, the result of a slack knot positioned way too low. The top button of her blouse had waved a final goodbye to its relevant buttonhole, a separation messier than any divorce. And the tail of the blouse hung loose, enjoying its freedom, refusing to be tucked in. Meanwhile, further down, navy blue tights had long since been given their marching orders in favour of the girl's favourite red and white striped variety, and an endlessly repeated request for the pupil to wear sensible black patent shoes was no match for her current personal preference of bright pink trainers.

Her hair was also a visual protest against... well, everything really. The girl wore her lengthy locks in a super-high ponytail at the very top of her head, a thick trunk reaching skywards, held in place by not one but two scrunchies, before fanning out and cascading in all directions, a chaotic follicle waterfall, kicking and screaming severe attitude.

Tilly shifted in her chair in an attempt to prevent the onset of pins and needles in her buttocks. How long had she been forced to sit here? Barely five minutes or so, granted, but it seemed much, much longer. Her buttocks agreed. Wholeheartedly. Therefore, as a way of displaying her escalating intolerance towards a plastic moulded seat clearly designed by a

total idiot with no prior experience of sitting down, she tightly crossed her arms and let out an absolute Krakatoa eruption of a sigh.

The recipient of the absolute Krakatoa eruption of a sigh was the school's head teacher, a certain Miss Bleak, boasting a fitting surname for both the present location (Miss Bleak's office) and her personality. The woman leaned back in her far more comfy leather chair, pressing together the fingertips of both hands and glaring over the top of her (probably school standard-issue) half-moon spectacles.

'Matilda Tucker,' began a stern Miss Bleak, breaking the stifling hush of non-speak.

'It's Tilly actually,' came the schoolgirl's acerbic response.

Miss Bleak ignored the teenager's correction. 'I don't care how much you huff and puff. You are not leaving my office until you explain to me why you chose to attack poor Harry.'

Poor Harry, a fellow pupil, sat to the left of Tilly, his face and upper torso smothered in a lumpy, gooey, drippy yellow liquid. Tilly glanced at Harry. Harry glared at Tilly. Zero words were exchanged, but the detected level of mutual animosity was way off the Richter scale.

Returning her attention to the head teacher, Tilly claimed, 'It wasn't my fault.'

Miss Bleak overly rolled her eyes, blah, blah, blah, she'd heard it all before. 'Funny how you say that about any disruptive act with your name on it. When you set off the fire alarm during the Armistice Day two minutes silence, it wasn't your fault.'

'I was bored of the hush,' said the guilty party.

'When you scribbled "Tilly Tucker woz 'ere" all over Felicity Jackson's art coursework, it wasn't your fault.'

Tilly dealt a cheeky smirk at the head teacher's second example. 'My granddad once told me, when he was a boy, he wrote "Tony Tucker woz 'ere" all over the place. In books. On walls. Everywhere. So I figured I'd keep the family tradition alive.'

‘When you smothered the school cleaner’s mop handle with superglue, it wasn’t your fault.’

‘Oh, get with it, Miss Bleak, it was only a prank.’

‘A prank? She had to go to hospital to have it removed from both hands. Even after all these months, I still can’t convince the poor woman to return to work.’

Tilly huffed, tightening her crossed arms. There was that word again. Poor. Poor Harry. Poor school cleaner. It was as if everybody around her was an innocent victim and Tilly Tucker herself was the sole evil villain. Huh, Miss Bleak didn’t know the half of it, the way they teased the (poor) schoolgirl. It hurt, it really stung inside. Okay, granted, the teasing didn’t happen often. Most of the time, thankfully, her peers forgot about how she’d been practically forced six years ago to attend no fewer than seven sessions with a child psychologist. During the non-teasing periods of term time, life would run smoothly. But every so often, somebody spiteful would bring up the past, and that’s when Tilly found herself lashing out. Often violently. Therefore, in her opinion, it wasn’t her fault. And she felt that Miss Bleak needed to know that.

‘I poured custard over Harry,’ Tilly explained, ‘because he called me a total mental-case.’

‘You are a total mental-case,’ whimpered (poor) Harry, indicating to the thick coat of yellow goo whilst spitting away rogue gloops intent on seeping into his mouth. ‘This just goes to prove it.’

Miss Bleak waved down the boy’s protest. ‘Harry, please. It’s not nice teasing the girl about her former... um...’ She wrestled for the most woke phrase, then decided upon, ‘...psychological issues.’

‘Amen,’ said Tilly, grateful for the defence.

‘And as for you, Miss Tucker, you could have so easily avoided all this trouble by simply asking him to stop.’

Oh. Defence short-lived. ‘I tried. He didn’t listen. So I splurged him.’

This had been Tilly’s revenge served cold. Allow him to continue to tease her, say nothing in return at the time, then wait until they were both in the school canteen... where a humungous pot of gooey cold custard sat available for potential mischief.

‘Right, let’s get this over and done with, shall we?’ said Miss Bleak, longing to end this meeting. ‘I’d like you to apologise.’

Tilly prompt-nudged Harry’s shoulder. ‘Go on, you heard the woman. Say sorry.’

Miss Bleak offered freedom to a long-trailing sigh. ‘I meant you, Miss Tucker.’

‘Me? Why should I apologise? He was the one doing the insulting.’

‘True,’ responded the head teacher. ‘But you retaliated in a most inappropriate manner.’

Tilly thought about it. The adult in authority sitting opposite needed to realise that “most inappropriate” in the eyes of one person could quite easily be seen as “serves you bloody right” to another. However, fuelling further debate on this occasion was futile. The head teacher backing down was an unlikely scenario. Therefore, the only option (and viable means of escape from this office of doom) was to [insert sour grimace here] comply.

‘Fine, Miss Bleak, whatever you say.’ She glanced at Harry and donned an almost but not quite convincing repentant face. ‘I’m... sorry.’

At last, Miss Bleak was finally getting somewhere. ‘Thank you.’

Tilly’s repentance gave way to naked contempt. ‘I’m sorry I only chose to pour a pot of cold custard over your head when I could have so easily splurged you with the entire canteen menu.’ Then, switching her sights to an appalled head teacher, she added, ‘May I now be excused?’

SIX YEARS AGO

The child psychologist's office was cold and stark and frightening. No vibrant paintwork. Instead, boring magnolia ruled this roost. No pictures on the walls. Well, except for a certificate of psychology, framed, a picture of sorts, maybe, maybe not. Oh, and zero photographs of children or a husband. Did she even have children or a husband?

A lonely desk took pride of place in the far corner, littered with umpteen folders of paperwork, but Doctor Penfold (or "Marion" to her "clients") never seemed to perch herself behind it. Instead, the woman chose to sit unshielded by wood, directly in front of the patient, her back rigid and straight, her head slightly tilted to the left, one leg crossed over the other, boasting an expensive notebook and pen in hand, scribbling away, scribble, scribble, scribble, every time eight-year-old Tilly Tucker made a response, scribble, scribble, scribble, any response, scribble, scribble, scribble, even a word-free grunt or a minor shoulder shrug, scribble, scribble, scribble. What was she finding to write about? What did a grunt or a shoulder shrug tell the woman about her young patient?

This was Tilly's seventh session... which seemed like the trillionth. When would these visits to the shrink (she'd overheard people calling Marion that strange S-word behind her back in the waiting room on many an occasion) ever end?

'Tell me, Tilly. Has Sebastian Quickly graced you yet with a return visit?' the psychologist wanted to know.

'You asked me that question last time,' Tilly responded with a sulky bottom lip included into the bargain. 'And the time before that. And the time before that.'

'Well, a week has passed since we last met. I was merely wondering if the man has finally decided to make an appearance.'

Tilly wished he had, if only to prove the non-believing adult wrong, but, ‘No. I haven’t seen him since the day at the beach.’

‘I see.’ Scribble, scribble, scribble. ‘Why is that, do you think?’

The patient, client, however she was currently categorised thought about it. ‘Maybe he’s been busy.’

‘Busy?’ The woman almost smirked, the cow. ‘Doing what? Saving people from pterodactyls?’

Tilly groaned. ‘You always get the species wrong. They weren’t pterodactyls, they were pteranodons.’

Right on cue, Marion took offence at being corrected. And right on cue, the usual (and somewhat unprofessional) retort spewed out of her mouth. ‘Actually, Tilly, I think you’ll find they were all the same species. Namely, figments of your imagination.’

Again, Tilly groaned. How many more times? She was telling the truth, but nobody wanted to take her seriously, not Marion, not her mother (who was no doubt earwiggling on the other side of the door, she always did), and certainly not the teacher (the woman Tilly had confided in about the beach incident) who had then gone on to recommend a full psychological assessment, the traitor. It was most depressing. What would it take to persuade the grown-ups to believe her? A miracle, no doubt.

‘Tilly, do you understand what I mean when I say figments of your imagination?’

‘Of course I do, I’m not thick.’

‘Nobody’s saying you are. By all accounts, you’re an extremely bright child.’

The adult’s voice was calm, almost friendly in a way, although Tilly could see right through the pretence, even at the tender age of eight. So many compliments and big-ups thrown into the mix at exactly the right time, so many occurrences of saying she was on

Tilly's side when, in actual fact, she was secretly wearing the colours of the opposing team, oh, and so much scribbling in that stupid notepad, scribble, scribble, scribble.

'However,' Marion continued, 'there is a big difference between what is real and what is fantasy. You need to learn to distinguish between the two. In reality, people who have gone to bed do not suddenly find themselves on strange beaches. In reality, dinosaurs are extinct and have been for a very, very long time. In reality, pocket watches do not transport people back to their bedrooms. And in reality, Sebastian Quickly does not exist.'

'But my feet,' protested Tilly. 'They were covered in sand.'

Marion rolled her eyes. She performed this exact gesture without fail upon every mention of the "sand proof." One quick scribble later, she said, 'There's a perfectly good explanation for that. Your mother told me about the playground not far from where you live. It has a sandpit. You like playing in it. Sand could have so easily found its way into your socks.'

'So why did it all seem so real?'

'Oh, Tilly.' Her tone had changed again, a softer, caring voice. 'Every now and then, we experience a dream so clear, so vivid, so beautifully played out that we wake up believing the events contained within it actually happened. We've all been there, myself included.'

The eight-year-old couldn't imagine the psychologist enjoying beautifully played out dreams. She seemed too uppity, too stern, too cold to dream about anything pleasant. Dreams about squashed slugs maybe, but not dreams about fluffy kittens or cute puppies, no way.

'But then,' the woman added, 'we soon come to realise, once we've blinked ourselves awake, what we thought was reality was quite simply the nightly theatre of our minds.'

Tilly opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it again. Maybe the adult was right. The woman's playground theory about the sand was certainly a feasible explanation.

Child plays in the sandpit.

Child's socks pick up sand.

Sand sticks to the child's feet.

Child discovers sand on her feet in the middle of the night.

'I suppose sand could have got into my socks,' mumbled the little girl, peering down at her shoes.

The mumble seemed to please Marion. 'There's no suppose about it.' Scribble, scribble, scribble. 'And remember, the sooner you agree with me... that it didn't happen, that it was all a dream... the sooner these sessions can end.'

Tilly looked up and stared into space for the longest of moments. Half of her now believed the woman. The other half remained adamant that those strange events had indeed occurred. However, admitting this fact would spell further sessions with Marion. And did she truly wish to keep revisiting this stark office? No. She didn't.

Therefore, the child decided to say, 'You're right. It didn't happen. It was all a dream.'

Marion beamed brightly. It was the first time Tilly had witnessed the woman throwing her a proper smile. Sarcastic smirks, yes. But never a dazzling all-toother. Until now.

'Good girl.' The lady launched herself onto her feet. 'Consider this session over.'

Smile intact, Marion opened the door to allow the departure of her patient. As predicted by Tilly, her mother stood awkward and guilty in the freshly exposed doorway.

At once, the psychologist's smile was lost. 'Eavesdropping again, are we, Ms Tucker?'

The red-faced mother didn't offer a suitable response. Instead, to speedily change the subject, she asked, 'Does this mean all that loony-bin stuff is done and dusted? Only, it's well humiliating having a mental daughter.'

Marion uttered nothing in return. She was clearly biting her tongue, wanting to say something, yet deciding it was a waste of effort.

This was what Tina Tucker was like. Brash. Uncaring. Self-centred. Small-minded. Etcetera, etcetera, the list of negatives went on and on and on. Weeks ago, when Tina had

been informed of the imminent series of sessions with Doctor Penfold, Tilly wished more than anything that it would be a case of her mother saying, ‘Awww, Tilly, darling, you have psychological issues. But don’t you worry. It’s very common these days. It doesn’t mean you’re a loony-bin. Talk to the nice lady. She can help. Oh, and rest assured, Mummy will be here for you every step of the way.’ Huh, yeah, right. Instead, it had been a sorry case of her mother ranting, ‘Oh, Tilly, must you really turn into a stupid loony-bin? Soooo embarrassing. People are bound to talk. Get your mind back to normal ASAP or I’ll disown you.’

‘Well?’ prompted Tina. ‘Have you fixed the sprog? Or is it an embarrassing case of same time next week?’

Tilly looked to the psychologist. She hoped and prayed that it wouldn’t be the latter, fingers crossed, toes crossed, every follicle of hair on her head crossed.

‘I see no requirement for further appointments,’ Marion announced, her returning smile laced with a generous dash of victory. ‘Something tells me my work here is done.’

TODAY

Fourteen-year-old Tilly Tucker slotted her key into the front door of the third-floor flat and gave it a twist. As the door swung open and the schoolgirl graced the hallway with her presence, she found a giggling Tina Tucker canoodling with a strange semi-balding man cocooned in a hideous multi-coloured jumper. In the brief time it took Tina to feign sweet innocence and say, ‘Oh, Tilly, it’s you. How was school?’ her daughter’s face had flipcharted its way through its entire back catalogue of ill at ease expressions, shock, embarrassment, disgust, revulsion, all the usual suspects, out they spilled, one after the other.

‘Oh, Mum, like, what the actual?’

‘This is my new boyfriend. What do you think of him?’

Stuck fast in the repugnance camp, Tilly pointed an index finger at her own features. ‘See this? It’s my “don’t give a stuff” face.’

It was true. She didn’t give a stuff. In fact, she was sick of meeting the ever-changing next in line for the role of consort to Queen Tina. How did Mum attract them? Mystery overload. Oh, and on the subject of mysteries, where had she dug up Christmas Jumper Man? Even the bottom of the proverbial barrel was too upmarket for this loser. Hmm, perhaps her mother felt sorry for him, like a modern-day Florence Nightingale, but ditching Crimean War casualties in favour of a numpty in a vomit-patterned woollen garment.

Tilly nudged past the “loving couple” and wandered into the lounge. She disposed of her schoolbag on the carpet for any takers to trip over, then claimed the entire sofa, legs up, body outstretched. Tina sailed into the room, the strange man in hot pursuit, as if they were both connected by an invisible length of elastic. A very short invisible length of elastic.

The mother said to her daughter, ‘I wish you’d take more of an interest in my love life.’

Tilly grimaced so hard, her mouth almost collapsed in on itself. ‘Why?’

‘He could be The One. My perfect partner.’ Oh, yes, it looked as though she truly believed this statement. ‘And that would be good news for both of us.’

‘Both of us?’ Was this conversation actually taking place? ‘How?’

‘Well, you could do with a father figure.’

‘Like, seriously? I don’t need another step-dad. I’ve had two already this year.’

Christmas Jumper Man’s face displayed alarm. Then confusion. Then an awkward jumble of the two. ‘What do you mean by that?’

Tilly didn’t offer a reply. She couldn’t be bothered. Besides, wasn’t it obvious?

Boyfriends came, boyfriends went, they sampled the main course, they tasted the dessert, but it was never long before they’d had their fill. Clearly not so obvious to this jumpered drip.

Meanwhile, still seeking enlightenment, the jumpered drip in question gawped at his new girlfriend. ‘What did she mean by that?’

Tina waved a dismissive hand. ‘Ignore my daughter. She’s a teenager. Hormones on fire.’

‘My hormones on fire? What about yours? We’re lucky this tower block hasn’t been reduced to smouldering embers.’

‘All I’m trying to do is find myself a decent bloke.’

The schoolgirl tossed an exaggerated glance at the supposedly decent bloke, then returned her attention to her mother. ‘Must. Try. Harder.’

‘Oh, Tilly, please be nice to Tim.’

‘Tom,’ the jumper wearer uttered.

‘You what?’ the jumper wearer’s other half asked.

‘It’s Tom,’ corrected the man who wasn’t Tim, had never been Tim and didn’t ever wish to be Tim.

‘Tom, Tim, same difference.’

Tom/Tim of “same difference” fame opened his mouth to protest, but –

– ding, dong, the doorbell sounded.

Tina froze. ‘Oh, God, what if it’s another bailiff?’ Biting her nails, she considered the implications. ‘Maybe we should pretend we’re out.’

‘But Mum, it could be important.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like...’ Her brain whirred and clicked. ‘...maybe a long-lost relative has passed away, leaving you a mega-inheritance.’

The torch of optimism brightened Tina’s face. ‘Ooh, let’s hope you’re right.’ Without further ado, she headed out into the hallway.

And then there were two.

#awkward.

Tilly clocked Tom/Tim gawping in her direction. Urgh, discomfited by the unwanted attention, she glared at the guilty party. ‘What do you think you’re staring at?’

Tom/Tim pointed at the girl’s legs. ‘Red and white striped tights.’ He didn’t look too impressed. ‘Something tells me that’s not regulation school uniform.’

Not taking too kindly to the comment, Tilly remarked, ‘What are you wearing, Christmas Jumper Man?’

Tom/Tim seemed suitably ouché by her venomous attack, his bottom lip quivering, scolded child mode. ‘It’s not a Christmas jumper.’

Tilly scoffed. Loudly. ‘Tom, Tim, whoever you are, I suggest you buy yourself a new mirror and take a serious look at yourself.’

Tom/Tim. Doubly ouché.

It was then when Tina returned, looking more than a little anxious. ‘Tilly, it’s for you. Says he’s from the school.’

Uh-oh, the schoolgirl sprang to her feet and stood stock-still. Was her mother about to bag the lowdown on the custard splurge? She certainly hoped not.

The school guy then waltzed into the room. He was an odd-looking man, dressed in a conspicuously vintage three-piece suit and an equally vintage wide-brimmed hat, both matching blue in colour, the costume making him look like a gangster from one of those mega-ancient black and white movies endlessly repeated on obscure satellite TV channels. Age-wise, the man was probably hovering around the fifty mark, but his baby face painted a deceiving portrait of somebody much younger.

Tina scowled at Tilly. 'What have you gone and done this time?'

'Let me assure you, Mrs Tucker,' the man uttered through a prominent smile in a charming, well-spoken voice, politely removing his hat and holding it in both hands, 'your daughter has done nothing wrong.'

'It's Ms Tucker actually,' responded Tina, laying heavy emphasis on her current title. 'I'm divorced.' She held out her left hand, showing off her band of gold. 'See? Kept the ring to prove it.' And then she demanded to know, 'Do you have a name, by any chance? Only, I'm not into the habit of letting all and sundry into this flat.'

Tilly snorted, indicating to the new boyfriend. 'Are you sure about that?'

Tina shot a glare at her daughter. 'Shoosh your noise, you.'

'The name's Ramone,' the newcomer introduced. 'Felix Ramone.' He took note of Christmas Jumper Man hovering awkwardly in the background, the drip wanting to be involved, but visibly uncertain of how to attain the prized status. 'Um, who is this?'

'Latest boyfriend apparently,' sighed Tilly.

'What's it to you?' a somewhat defensive mother asked the visitor. 'And what do you want exactly?'

Felix grimaced, as if a sour taste had invaded his palette. It was crystal clear. The new arrival didn't wish to explain the reason for his visit in the presence of somebody who was not directly involved in a parental fashion. Either that or he shared Tilly's views concerning Christmas Jumper Man's totally pants dress sense.

'Ms Tucker, I'm here about a private family matter.'

'It's all right, mate,' piped up Tom/Tim, eager to enter the discussion, his first official engagement in the Tucker residence. 'I'm going to be her new dad.'

Tilly resulting snort was the best in show. 'I don't think so.'

Her mother growled, 'Tilly.'

And Felix continued to give nothing away.

Tina picked up on Mr Ramone's stubborn silence, then uttered to Tom/Tim, 'Maybe it's best you leave us to it. I'll see you down the pub later, yeah?'

Tom/Tim didn't want to leave. It was written all over his disappointed face. Ah, but alas, he had no choice. Again, he hovered (he was very good at hovering, a feat worthy of a major CV entry), this time awaiting an escort by his girlfriend to the front door. Unfortunately for him, his actions were met by zero reaction from Tina. Tom/Tim then realised that the escort was unlikely to happen, nor a goodbye kiss, nor a goodbye cuddle, nor a goodbye anything.

'I'll see myself out then,' he murmured in defeat.

Tina offered the man a mere fleeting glance, more interested in what Felix had to offer. 'Yeah, catch you later, Tim.'

'It's Tom,' the dejected drip hastened to correct upon shuffling out of the room.

A moment later, the front door could be heard opening and closing. Christmas Jumper Man had left the building. Following the idiot's departure, Tina donned her trademark "needing to know what's going on" face. Tilly had seen this face a million times before. The

visitor was sure to sample the full brunt of the third degree. She certainly hoped he was prepared for it.

‘Well?’ Tina bleated. ‘What do you mean my daughter’s done nothing wrong. She must have done something. Otherwise, why would you be here?’

‘Granted, the education system does consider young Tilly here a problem child.’

‘I knew it,’ Tina interrupted, throwing an accusatory glare at the teenager. ‘You’ve gone and burned down the school, ain’t you?’

‘However...’ counter-interrupted Felix, his voice now a tad more commanding, ‘...the reason for your daughter’s, shall we say, rebellious nature might be down to the sheer frustration of a school unable to understand and nurture her special talents.’

‘Special talents?’ Tina’s perplexed face was almost laughable. ‘She ain’t got no talents. She’s just... her.’

Tilly sighed, deflated. ‘Oh, thanks, Mum. Compliment accepted.’

‘Oh, I can assure you, Ms Tucker,’ said Felix, delivering a fresh smile, ‘your daughter is a very special girl indeed.’

Tina’s brow wrinkled, bemusement overload, seeking clues as to the whereabouts of any special properties associated with her child. When zero results emerged, she said to the man, ‘You never did tell me why you’re here.’

‘It’s quite simple. I’d like to offer your daughter a place on a seven day field trip.’

Tilly liked the sound of that. ‘Does that mean I’ll miss a week of school?’

‘You certainly will.’

Tilly mega-liked the sound of that.

Curious, Tina asked, ‘What kind of field trip are we talking about here?’

‘We have a facility way out in the middle of nowhere. We call it The Shop. A venue where we can turn all her pent-up frustration into positive energy.’

‘Ooh.’ Tina’s face illuminated. ‘Like a boot camp? I’ve seen places like that on the telly. Short, sharp shock.’ She almost laughed. ‘That’ll sort her out good and proper.’

Tilly’s face dropped. She didn’t like the sound of that.

Felix chuckled. ‘No, no, no. Nothing quite so draconian.’

The parent looked way too disappointed for her own good. ‘Shame.’ But then she perked up again. ‘Mind you, I do love the idea of having the whole flat to myself.’

In response, Tilly propped irritable hands upon hips. ‘Do I get a say in all of this?’

‘No,’ snapped her mother, fiercely territorial of her newfound freedom. ‘You’ve brought this on yourself, girl.’ Territorial mode cancelled, eager mode initiated, she turned to face Felix. ‘How do I sign her up?’

‘No need for officialdom, Ms Tucker. All I require is Tilly’s presence at my office tomorrow morning at 9:00AM sharp where I will fill her in on all the required nuts and bolts.’

Tilly’s mother enquired, ‘Will I need to attend?’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

Tina’s sigh of relief could probably be heard as far away as China. ‘Good. I don’t give up my traditional Saturday morning sleep-in for nobody.’

Tilly had been hoping for her own personal version of a Saturday morning sleep-in. Zero chance of that now. Her plans had been scuppered by a strange man in an out of date suit.

It was then when Felix plucked a pocket watch from its resting place, a waistcoat pocket, and eyed the clock face. ‘Goodness me, is that the time? I must be making tracks.’ He returned the timepiece, donned his hat and smiled at Tilly. ‘Would you do me the honour of seeing me to the front door?’

She didn’t want to, but, ‘Suppose so.’

Tilly led the visitor through the hallway and opened the door.

Felix stepped outside amid the grey blandness of the concrete communal access walkway, then spun around to face the schoolgirl. ‘Oh, I almost forgot.’ He handed her a folded handwritten note. ‘That’s the address of my office in town. You can’t miss it. It’s situated slap-bang between Foster & Son Family Butchers and Soled Out Shoes.’ He chuckled to himself. ‘Soled out. I do love a clever play on words.’

Tilly failed to fling across a reciprocal chuckle. She didn’t even manage a smile. Instead, she crossed defiant arms. ‘How do you know I’ll even turn up?’

In a covert, clandestine manner, Felix neared Tilly, his head almost meeting hers. ‘That time on the beach when you were eight years old,’ he uttered softly, so as not to attract eavesdroppers, especially the girl’s mother. ‘It was no dream.’

Tilly’s mouth flopped open. Everybody else had sought to convince her otherwise, hammering it home, it was all a dream, hammer, hammer, hammer, it was all in her head, hammer, hammer, hammer. Even Tilly had resigned herself to fact that the vivid imagination theory was the only feasible explanation to stand by. But look. Here stood a man who stated the total opposite.

Wow. Felix Ramone had suddenly become a whole lot more interesting.

‘Your trip to that beach was very real indeed,’ Felix continued, pleased to have gained Tilly Tucker’s full attention. ‘And tomorrow, I will explain how and why it happened.’

SATURDAY

Oh. My. God. The incident on the prehistoric beach, it had actually happened, and today was the day when Tilly Tucker would discover how and why. Wow and ooer, the prospect of finally hearing the truth felt both exciting and unnerving in equal measures.

Tilly wondered if she should dress formally for the meeting, but soon dismissed the idea. After all, she didn't own a garment even remotely formal. And why would she? She was a teenager. Formality just didn't happen in her circles. Therefore, a pair of ripped, distressed and whatever-elses jeans, her bright pink trainers and a pale yellow tee-shirt sporting the acronym OMG in bold black lettering became today's outfit of choice. The final touch, a cropped denim jacket, and she was out the door.

The girl took the bus into town. Journey's end came ten minutes later. Alighting from the vehicle, she headed for the location of Felix Ramone's office. Once there, she couldn't find herself any more bemused. To her left stood Foster & Son Family Butchers. To her right, Soled Out Shoes. And slap-bang between the two shops stood –

– a car park so cramped and claustrophobic, it was hardly worth the effort.

Eh? Scratching head time. Where was the office? This very spot was where the building was supposed to be situated. Instead, she was met with grey-black tarmac and weather-faded parking bay lines.

'Is this some kind of wind-up?' she murmured to herself.

This girl needed assistance. Badly.

The door to Foster & Son Family Butchers ding-a-linged upon Tilly's entry. An ancient man, all grey hair and wrinkles, and dressed in the traditional uniform of his chosen vocation stood to attention behind the counter.

'Can I help you, young lady?' he asked, trading politeness for potential custom.

‘I’m looking for Felix Ramone.’

‘Felix Ramone,’ the butcher repeated, his face suddenly aglow with nostalgia. ‘Now there’s a blast from the past. My old man, God bless his soul, was always rabbiting on about him when I was a young lad. Nice chap apparently. Always smiling. Very partial to our special family recipe sausages, he was.’

Tilly sighed, only half-listening to the man’s drivel. She wanted answers, not a breakdown of Felix’s eating habits. Plan B, she passed across the handwritten note. ‘I need to find him. His office is supposed to be next door. This is the address I was given.’

The butcher donned a pair of spectacles, formerly dangling free via a cord around his neck, and scanned the piece of paper with squinted eyes. Once read and digested, he offered across a grin. ‘I think you’ve been duped, young lady. This address doesn’t exist.’

If frowns came with sound, Tilly would be making serious noise right now. ‘What are you banging on about?’

‘Sure, there was once an office building next door,’ the man explained. ‘But it was demolished years ago.’

Fuming, Tilly stormed out of the shop. How could Felix Ramone be so heartless? The nasty man in that stupid vintage suit had psyched her up with the golden promise of answers, only then to lead her down a dead-end street named Disenchantment Close.

Then oh, standing before the entrance to the car park, she felt compelled to step forward, as though a strange force was willing her to do so. Ooer, turning around and legging it instead sprang to mind. But no. Whatever the inkling was, she needed to face it.

Decision made, she entered the car park. And then...

1952

... an acute attack of nausea wrenched Tilly's stomach as she discovered, all around her, an office had appeared out of nowhere. Yes. An office. But strangely without a computer, a photocopier, a water cooler or anything else associated with such a workplace. Weird or what?

Without warning, a familiar well-spoken voice jolted the girl free of her questioning thoughts. 'Ah, Miss Tucker. You found me. Well done. You've passed the first test.'

It was Felix Ramone, smiling as usual, seated behind a desk at the far end of the room, minus his trademark headgear which instead hung from a nearby wooden hat stand. Behind him stood a metal filing cabinet and not a lot else. Upon his desk lay a closed foolscap file, various items of stationery and a vintage Bakelite landline telephone.

'Test?' muttered Tilly, balanced somewhere between unsure and insecure.

The seated man eyed his pocket watch. 'And extra bonus points for punctuality.'

'Where am I?' Tilly dared to asked.

Felix put to bed his timepiece. 'Welcome to 1952.'

'1952?'

Felix nodded a definite yes. 'This is my time period.'

'Time period?'

'Are you planning on repeating everything I say throughout this interview?' He indicated to a wooden chair positioned before his desk. 'Or would you care to take a seat?'

Tilly shook her head, uncomfortable with this bizarre situation. 'This is all too... demented.' Defensive mode kicking in, she shuffled backwards and...

SATURDAY

...the office disappeared.

Once again, Tilly found herself alone at the entrance to the car park. Urgh, she felt like throwing up, and almost did, but managed to contain the offending stomach contents with a good hard swallow. Yuck!

The girl glanced to her left. Foster & Son Family Butchers. She glanced to her right. Soled Out Shoes. Okay, so she was back where she'd started. Saturday. Twenty-first century. Phew. The illusion of 1952 (it had to be an illusion, surely) was but the proverbial fading memory.

Tilly abandoned the car park and peered down the road at the nearest bus stop, a distance of about twenty metres. She attempted to journey towards her chosen method of escape, but no, her feet weren't liking it, oh, and her brain had other ideas, banging on about entering the car park and seeking that elusive enlightenment.

Okay, fine, her brain won. Returning to the car park entrance, she went about composing herself. Once ready, she stepped forward and...

1952

...the office suddenly reappeared.

Again, she felt nauseous, but the unpleasantness wasn't quite so harsh this time. More of a niggling gripe in her gut.

'Welcome back,' Felix greeted, still seated behind his desk. 'Please. Do sit down.'

Tilly parked her bum upon the offered chair. 'I don't get it. How can I be in 1952?'

'Asks the girl who once travelled to a prehistoric beach and back again.'

'Okay, fine, I'll rephrase the question. Why am I in 1952?'

'Well, you could hardly visit my office in your time period, could you? The building no longer exists. Therefore, I took the liberty of creating a time aperture to allow you direct access to mine.'

Tilly frowned. 'A time aperture?'

'In other words, a corridor through to another point in time. As you've no doubt gathered, the ways in and out are invisible. Security measure. Oh, and this one's not permanent. Another security measure. It will close when you next return to your own time period.'

'How did you...?' And that's where her question ended.

'How did I create it? With a device called an aperture creator, of course.' The reply was almost spoken as if it was obvious o'clock. He then took note of Tilly rubbing her fragile abdomen. 'That nausea you're feeling, it only happens the first few times.'

'Yeah, I've kind of already been briefed.'

'Ah, yes. By good old Sebastian Quickly.'

Mr Ramone's mention of such a familiar name intrigued Tilly. Oh, and the blatant hint of contempt in the "good old" section of his sentence didn't go unnoticed. 'I'm guessing you know him.'

Behind Felix's smile lay a disagreeable grimace likened to a man who expects to taste sugar but instead swallows salt. 'Let's just say we have... history.'

To Tilly, it was obvious. Felix Ramone and Sebastian Quickly were a far cry from best buddy material. Exactly why was the burning question. She expected him to offload a tad more information relating to the man she'd met all those years ago on that beach. However, Felix failed to divulge any further snippets of gossip.

'Now, where were we?' Felix uttered, shrugging off any signs of ill-feeling towards a certain Mr Quickly. 'Ah, yes, the nausea. It's caused by your inexperienced body adjusting to the sheer physical stress of skipping from one time period to another. You see, in order to meet me here in 1952, you just travelled faster than the speed of light. Backwards.'

Tilly's gut attempted an impromptu triple somersault. 'I swear, if you keep banging on about nausea, I will personally deliver a pavement pizza all over your desk.'

Felix's fresh half-smile told Tilly he understood fully. 'That won't be necessary.' He cleared his throat before continuing. 'Let's get down to business.' The man opened the foolscap file. It contained official-looking typed paperwork. 'I must say, your psychology report from six years ago makes for a very interesting read.'

Tilly's mouth flopped open, catching flies mode. 'My psychology report?'

Felix took no notice of Tilly's astonishment. Instead, he made an exaggerated point of skim-reading the document out loud, running his index finger line by line across the paper. 'Deserted beach, blah, blah, blah, Sebastian Quickly, blah, blah, blah, pteranodon attack, blah, blah, blah, pocket watch, blah, blah, blah, silvery shimmer, flash of light, blah, blah, blah, back in your bedroom, goodbye Sebastian, the end.' He looked up and took note of the girl's disquiet. 'Is anything the matter?'

'How did you get hold of that report? It's supposed to be confidential.'

'I might have accidentally...' Felix offered a somewhat childish grin. '...stolen it.'

‘Stolen it?’

The man waved down her ballooning unease. ‘There’s no need for concern. I’ll return the document a moment after it came into my possession. That way, Doctor Penfold will remain blissfully unaware that it even left her office. In fact, I’ll take it back now.’

He produced his pocket watch. A silvery shimmer, a flash of light and he vanished. Along with the report. Okaaaaaay. So Tilly was now alone. Oh, a few seconds later, another silvery shimmer, another flash of light and Felix reappeared, seated again at his desk, no foolscap file in sight.

‘Mission accomplished.’ His face oozed a generous helping of triumph as he put away the watch. ‘By all accounts, you have quite a story to tell. Are you still trying to convince people that the beach incident actually happened?’

She shook her head, a gloomy no. ‘What’s the point? Nobody believes me.’

‘Good. It’s best the normals hear nothing more about it.’

‘The normals?’

‘Yes. People without your gift.’ And off her puzzled frown, he added, ‘My dear Tilly Tucker, do you not realise? You have been blessed with the ability to travel through time.’ He paused for a moment to allow the statement to sink in. ‘Oh, yes. Your trip to that beach was no one-off fluke. Since then, your special talent has been maturing and developing inside you. Similar to how puberty transforms the body... but with less acne and tantrums.’ His eyes glinted with oodles of enthusiasm. He clearly loved dishing out the preamble, the explanation, the wow factor. ‘Now, with the necessary training, which I will be happy to provide, you will learn exactly how to control and master your ability. Very soon, Tilly Tucker, the entire history of the world will be at your disposal.’

Speechless, Tilly leaned back in her chair. The entire history of the world? Wow. All her life, the girl had known she was special in some shape or form... even though nobody else

seemed to agree. Yet here was living proof that she was not so ordinary, not so dull and certainly not so much of a mental-case after all. Hah, stuff you, haters.

‘Any questions so far?’ Felix asked.

‘Yes. You’re not from the school, are you?’

Hello to a devilish smirk. ‘No. Little white lie. I needed a cover story. The normals are blissfully unaware of our existence. I’d like it to stay that way.’ Goodbye to the devilish smirk, hello to a sober face. ‘I am a member of a secret order of time travellers. We call ourselves Timekeepers. Our purpose is to monitor and police time travel. You see, the majority of people with our ability are honest, decent citizens. However, there are a number of rotten apples in the orchard who seek to manipulate history for their own personal gain. We simply cannot allow that.’ He leaned forward, grave face initiated. ‘Meddling with time is a dangerous game. One false move and the entire universe could implode.’ He then leaned back again, losing his grave face and acquiring a way too chirpy beam. ‘But don’t let that put you off.’

Tilly sat in silence, not knowing what to do, say or think. History being manipulated, the universe imploding, what was she letting herself in for? Then oh, a sudden wave of dizziness hit the girl. Followed by that odd sensation, not quite an ache, not quite a twinge, not quite an itch, not quite a shiver. The room began to swing and sway. She clocked the look of concern on Felix’s face, but failed to comprehend his echoing words. Oh, God, it was happening again. She was about to plunge helplessly through time. Oh, no, her chair toppled over, she fell backwards, there came a silvery shimmer, a blinding flash of light and then...

1771

...Tilly landed rear end first onto dry soil, bare, hard, compacted, ouch, that hurt, some kind of dirt track or bridle road cutting its way through leafy woodland. Then oh, no time to stand up, the deafening clatter of hooves noised up her world. She swivelled on her posterior to face the din. Argh, a horse-drawn carriage thundered towards the seated girl.

‘Whoaaaaaa!’ cried the startled coachman, yanking hard on the reins.

From clatter to clippety-clop, the two horses responded, snorting their discontent, grinding to a somewhat ungainly halt mere centimetres from the bulge-eyed teenager.

‘What do you think you’re doing, sitting in the middle of the road?’ the coachman yelled, his voice gruff and unrefined, glaring down at the girl from the wooden seat situated high up at the front of the carriage. ‘You could have been trampled to death.’

Tilly leapt to her feet and brushed herself down, a human shaking leaf. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whimpered. ‘I...’ In her confused and fretful state, she surveyed the area, nothing but trees to the left, trees to the right, then returned her attention to the driver of the carriage. ‘...don’t know where I am.’

‘You’re in my way, that’s where you are.’

Two heads belonging to the passengers popped out for a curious peek through the glassless windows of the coach doors, one man, one woman, both middle-aged, him with a white periwig, bushy sideburns and a double chin, her with a neck of pearls and a scalp of greying locks, tied up and tightly bunned, providing a perfect setting for the unhindered display of prominent matching pearl earrings. The two of them were clearly members of the well-to-do moneybags brigade.

‘What the devil is going on out there?’ the male passenger demanded to learn, his deep-set blue eyes proving a stark contrast to a pair of rotund cheeks boasting both the shine and blush of red apples. ‘Why have we stopped?’

‘Girl in the road, Mr Pancroft.’ The coachman indicated to Tilly’s distressed jeans. ‘A filthy beggar, I am guessing, judging by her ragged clothes.’

Tilly gasped at the gall of the man. Filthy beggar? Ragged clothes? ‘Oi, you,’ she protested, jabbing an index finger towards the very, very intentional rips in her jeans. ‘This happens to be fashion.’

Pancroft clambered out of the carriage, but kept a cautious distance from the girl. Tilly looked him up and down. She knew it was mean to diss people about their appearance, but come on, the laughable disparity of scrawny legs and an overfed belly gave him the amusing body shape of a frog.

His upmarket attire consisted of a wide-lapelled coat, a satin shirt, knee-length breeches and buckled shoes. Tilly had seen this type of status dress before, worn by male subjects of the priceless oil paintings she’d cast indifferent eyes upon during last month’s yawn-fest school trip to a stately home. She was no history expert, but all assumption roads led to the probability that she’d ended up sometime in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Important question: How was she supposed to get back?

Answer: ???????????

Annoyed and put out, Pancroft looked up at the coachman. ‘What on earth is a beggar doing out here in the woods?’ His attention then switched to the supposed beggar, his weasel eyes squinting at the bold OMG lettering on her tee-shirt. ‘Omg?’ he grunted, not understanding it as an acronym and instead pronouncing it as a word. ‘Is that your name?’

Tilly sneered the mother of all sneers. ‘You seriously need to get with it.’

Pancroft frowned the father of all frowns. 'Get with it? What kind of language is that? Are you one of those ghastly gypsy types?'

'I'm not any type,' came Tilly's retort, bloated with attitude. 'I'm me. One of a kind.'

For the second time, the concerned female passenger turtle-headed out of the window. 'Dear husband, please get back inside this carriage. This is the middle of nowhere.' Mrs Pancroft's apprehensive eyes scanned the surrounding trees, every moving branch, every dubious shadow. 'Danger could be lurking anywhere out here in the forest.'

'No need to worry about me, my dear,' came the stout man's reply, all smug and hoighty-tightly. 'The only lurker I see before me is a mere vagrant. Nothing I cannot handle.'

Tilly. Disagreement overload. 'I'd like to see you try.'

Pancroft glared at Tilly. Tilly counter-glared at Pancroft.

Then oh, three armed men on horseback galloped towards them, a highwayman leading the assault, dressed in the theme of black, a tricorne hat, a dark frilly shirt, high leather boots, a long frock coat and an eye mask concealing his identity. Two unshaven henchmen accompanied their leader, flintlock pistols at the ready, dressed in stained linen clothes, no eye masks, no doubt too stupid to disguise themselves.

'Stand and deliver,' cried the grinning highwayman, wielding a far superior pistol, bigger, better, shinier and evidently more dangerous. 'Your money or your life.'

Pancroft yelped in horror, taking no time in raising both hands. Mrs Pancroft screamed, backing further inside the carriage. The terrified coachman had other ideas. He leapt off the footboard and legged it towards the cover of trees, self-survival his priority, not once sparing a thought for the safety of his passengers. Pancroft gawped in sheer disbelief at the cowardly deserter until he disappeared from view, then returned his bulging eyes to the trio of bandits, knowing full well he was in deep doggy doo-doo.

‘Please do not shoot me,’ he whimpered, almost but not quite at the humiliating stage of wetting himself. ‘I can give you anything. Anything you want.’

The highwayman smirked. ‘That’s the general idea, Pancroft.’

Even though he was tooth-chatteringly afraid, the rich man failed to prevent his uncontrollable self-importance kicking in. ‘Mr Pancroft to you.’

‘Is that right?’ The highwayman dismounted his steed and brandished his weapon like some kind of trophy. ‘This loaded pistol says otherwise.’

Pancroft thought it best not to argue the toss regarding the thief’s logic as both henchmen climbed down from their horses and joined their leader. Three men, three guns, big trouble for the posh couple.

Meanwhile, away from all the action, Tilly stood in wide-eyed silence, frozen on the spot by a marriage of fear and awe. The highwayman, he hadn’t yet looked her way, he hadn’t even noticed her. But... was it Sebastian Quickly? He certainly looked like the guy she’d met on that beach. His clothes, his face (well, what she could see of it), his hair, his voice, all his features, they were exactly how she remembered them. It had to be the same person, surely.

‘Don’t be shy, Mrs Pancroft,’ the highwayman who was probably-maybe Sebastian Quickly called into the carriage. ‘Step outside where I can see you.’

Mrs Pancroft remained a passenger, shrinking into herself, unwilling to play ball. In response, one of the henchmen yanked open the carriage door and grabbed hold of her left arm, removing the woman by force from her sanctuary. Even though the terror of being man-handled overwhelmed the lady, she still sought to use her right hand to lift the hem of her elegant blue gown up and away from the danger of being soiled by the dirt track. In her exclusive circles, keeping up appearances at all times was crucial. Even during an armed robbery.

The shuddering husband and wife were now reunited.

‘Hurry up, people,’ prompted the highwayman, holding open a jute sack in his free hand. ‘Hand over your shinies and sparklies. And make it quick, I’m a busy man, places to go, people to rob, oh, what a hectic life I lead.’

The two victims disposed of their worldly wares. Pearl earrings from her, various coinage from him, the pearl necklace from her, a jewel-encrusted snuff box from him, an assortment of rings from her, and so on, and so on, everything tossed into the sack.

‘You will never get away with this,’ hissed Pancroft, not a fan of losing his belongings to a common thief.

The common thief in question scoffed a whatever. ‘I already have.’

When the tossing of valuables was spent, the highwayman checked his haul. Even though he’d acquired a rich bevy of trinkets, he didn’t look too happy. In fact, he looked positively incensed. Exactly why was more than simply a burning question, it was a white-hot inferno of a mystery.

‘Where are they?’ he snarled at Pancroft.

The posh man dealt a clueless shrug. ‘Where are what?’

‘Dark blue gemstones. Smooth. Round. Shiny.’

I’m sure, dear reader, you are presently consulting with your memory, convinced of a previous mention of dark blue gemstones, smooth, round, shiny. If so, award yourself a house point. You will recall that four gemstones fitting the above description were lodged in an oval metallic object built into the control panel of Serendipity Blue’s biplane. Therefore, fear not, the importance of these stones will become apparent as this novel unfolds.

And now, let us return to the story.

‘I... I have no idea what you are babbling on about,’ came Pancroft’s stammered response.

Irritated, the highwayman flung aside the sack of stolen goodies. He then slid his pistol into its rightful holster and grabbed the stout fellow with both hands by the collar.