

*Tempus Fugit*

# **TEMPUS FUGIT**



by  
**Frank Almond**  
BOSON BOOKS

*Tempus Fugit*

\

---

**TEMPUS FUGIT**

**by**

**Frank Almond**

---

BOSON BOOKS

*Raleigh*



*Tempus Fugit*

Published by **Boson Books**  
3905 Meadow Field Lane  
Raleigh, NC 27606

ISBN 0-917990-50-1

An imprint of **C&M Online Media Inc.**

Copyright 2002 Frank Almond  
All rights reserved

For information contact  
**C&M Online Media Inc.**  
3905 Meadow Field Lane  
Raleigh, NC 27606  
Tel: (919) 233-8164  
e-mail: [boson@cmonline.com](mailto:boson@cmonline.com)  
URL: <http://www.bosonbooks.com>

Cover art by Joel Barr

## Chapter One

It was Emma minus eight hours and counting, the worst Monday morning of my entire life, when my mobile rang. I hoped it would be Emma, my ex-girlfriend, because we'd just ended our two year relationship the night before, and for some reason I thought she might be phoning up to apologise, and then I'd apologise, and then we'd meet up and our life would be back to normal again. I know that all sounds unlikely in this imperfect world, but I am an eternal optimist, although you would never think that if you read this...

"Em?"

"No, it's Julian. Hi, man."

"Who?"

"Me. Julian."

"Sorry. Who is this?"

"Julian. Julian Duckworth."

Pause. I was trying to remember who the hell he was.

"Hello? Steve? Are you still there?"

Suddenly, a large bell started clanging in my head—an alarm bell. Although, come to think of it, it was more like one of those massive bronze things Buddhist monks ram with a swinging tree trunk—that sound like someone's opening the gates of hell. It was my misfortune to spend three years at college with a Julian Duckworth and he was the last person on earth I ever wanted to see again. My life was sad enough, without him adding to it. What the hell was he doing ringing me at six thirty in the morning? What was he doing ringing me at all? I hadn't seen or spoken to the guy for five years.

"Hello, Duck. What is that noise in the background?"

"It's Floyd, man. 'Dark Side of the Moon.'"

"Turn it down a shade."

"Uh. Right. Sorry."

"What do you want? I was just getting ready for work."

I heard Duckworth stifle a little chuckle. "I don't think you'll be going into the office today, mate. Look out the window."

"Look, I'm a bit late, Duck, let's meet for a drink sometime."

"Just look out of the window, Stephen."

Only my mother ever called me Stephen. Duckworth's nerdy voice was insistent and he sounded strangely sure of himself. Self-confidence was not something I associated with the Duckworth of our university days.

Humour him, I thought, and he might go away. I crawled out of my cold Emmaless bed and staggered over to the window, grabbing my pack of cigarettes and lighter on the way. "Okay. What am I looking at?" I yawned.

"The white Cortina," said the nightmarish voice from my past.

Believe me, this guy could be one of the most boring and irritating life forms on the planet. Everybody had made fun of him at college, but I could never bring myself to be quite as nasty to such a soft target as the others, so he had sort of attached himself to me, mistaking my basic humanity for a kindred spirit.

I saw an arm come out of the window and wave.

"Two litre engine, twin, overhead cams," said the Duck, in my ear. "Stereo speak—"

"You woke me at six thirty to show me a car?"

The head of Duckworth himself popped out the window. He was wearing bizarre red plastic spectacles and his long hair hadn't changed a bit—he still looked like

## *Tempus Fugit*

a throwback to the seventies, the Age of the Dinosaurs of Rock. It was as if Punk, the New Romantics, Indie, House, Rave, Acid House, Dance and Hip Hop had never happened. Even at college he had been into ye olde groups, like Deep Purple, Yes and Pink Floyd, when we were all into the latest indie bands and techno stuff.

"Hey, man—you've gotta come for a spin."

"I don't have the time," I said.

"Yeah, you do. Watch this!" squealed the eternally juvenile Duckworth.

The retro car, which might have been cool back in 1972, suddenly raced away and disappeared. No, I don't mean it went down the road and turned the corner or reached a vanishing point, I mean, it simply disappeared right in front of my eyes. Before I could speak, the Pink Floyd music had turned to white noise down my mobile. The white Cortina and Duckworth were vapour.

I threw on some clothes and rushed down the three flights of stairs from my flat, and ran over to the spot where the Duck had been parked.

I was just staring down at the road to see if there were any burn marks—I was thinking the poor guy had spontaneously combusted—when I heard a whoosh behind me and a screech of brakes. I spun round and saw the maniacal face of the Duck grinning at me over the steering wheel.

"Quick! Get in!" he yelled, above the engine he was moronically revving.

"You can drive me to work," I said, throwing my cigarette away.

The Duck nodded madly. I walked round to the passenger side, climbed in next to him and reached for the seatbelt.

"No belts?"

The Duck had a peculiar and annoying way of giggling. He sort of sucked air in through his big nose and made a gurgling noise with it in the back of his throat—a bit like a quack—while beating something with his hand.

"Don't laugh like that," I said, like a father telling off a son. "It makes you sound like a right idiot."

He looked as sorry as a faithful old dog, when he knows he's done wrong.

"You do know it's illegal not to have seatbelts fitted," I said.

The Duck smirked and suppressed another gurgle.

"If you're going to make those ridiculous noises every time I speak to you, Duck, I'm going to get out and take the train."

"No don't! Sorry, Steve."

"All right. What the hell are you wearing anyway?"

"This? Er, just my seventies stuff."

"You look like a refugee from a charity shop."

I wasn't going to mention the apparent disappearance of vehicle and driver a few minutes earlier, because I didn't want to go down that road. Conversations with Duckworth were always pretty odd, and I didn't want this one to get any odder than it already was.

"Did you see it?" he said.

"See what?"

"You know, what I just did..."

"What was that?" I said, looking out the side window.

"This!"

Suddenly, we lurched forward and, let me try to get this clear, we lurched forward and the building I was looking at across the road seemed to dissolve and become a brownish-grey blur. And then all sense of forward motion stopped and we

## *Tempus Fugit*

were just drifting. I looked through the windscreen and saw—I flung out my hands to brace myself against the dashboard.

"What the—?"

Music started playing. I could see Duckworth's multi-ringed fingers tapping the wheel to the beat, out of the corner of my eye. A black and red whirlpool was swirling towards us. We seemed to be disappearing down a giant red plughole.

"What-what's that?" I said.

"It's a midi I downloaded off the net: 'Another Brick in the Wall, Part Three.' Classic Floyd."

"Not the bloody music—that!" I shouted.

"Dunno," he shrugged. "That always comes up."

I looked across at him. My life was in the hands of a lunatic and I was God knows where, doing God knows what.

I saw him look in his rear view mirror. "Hold on," he said.

He did a smart handbrake turn and we were shooting back towards daylight with the murky outlines of my street around us. The music suddenly changed to what sounded like a midi version of "Shine On You Crazy Diamond" by the Duck's favourite band of all time: Pink Floyd.

Duckworth had both hands off the wheel and was playing air guitar.

"I rigged it so this comes on when I hang one eighties!" he shouted, above the noise.

"Would you mind turning it off, you crazy—"

Duckworth turned to me, nodding and grinning from ear to ear. "Yeah—mind blowing—'Shine On You Crazy Diamond!' Sublime Floyd, man. It's about Syd Barrett. He left the band in sixty-eight, but remained their creative inspiration—"

"Turn it off!" I yelled, trying to look for the stereo to do it myself. It was then that I noticed the weird dashboard. "This is not a normal Ford Cortina, is it?" I said.

"This is true, man," smirked the Duck.

"Stop the car."

Duckworth nodded, and calmly performed: mirror-signal-manoeuve, before pulling into what looked like a normal kerbside.

"What happened back there—?" I started to ask.

But Duckworth was staring expectantly in the rear view mirror, with one finger raised, counting under his breath.

"Now," he said.

"What?"

"That's you," he grinned, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder.

I shuffled round in my seat and looked through the rear window. "What are you on a-bout?" My mouth fell open and I lost my ability to speak.

When I found my voice again, I told Duckworth to drive us away. He drove us round the corner—no melting buildings or red whirlpools this time—and then out of the neighbourhood. We stopped beside the town's municipal park. Duckworth offered me a packet of Smoky Bacon crisps. And we both just sat there, munching them for a few moments. Then Duckworth got a flask from a rucksack on the backseat and began pouring me black coffee.

"Worked it out yet?" he said.

"I think so," I said. "I don't know how you did the car bit, but I suppose you've rigged up some sort of liquid crystal display lightshow in these windows—and that must have been Matt or somebody back there—is Emma in on this, too?"

Duckworth giggled. "Who's this Emma bird then?"

## *Tempus Fugit*

I turned and looked into his mad magnified eyes, through the pebble glass in his spectacles. "I really have got to be getting to work," I said.

"I told you: you don't go in today, mate. You get to hang out with me," he said. "You don't have a clue, do you, Steve? It hasn't sunk in yet, has it?"

I forced a smile. "Tell Matt, or whoever that was back there, wearing my—" I was trying to work out how they knew what I would be wearing. Emma could have told them what I usually wore to work on a Monday morning. She had to be in on it. "Where's Em?" I said, looking hopelessly round at the trees and bushes through the park railings, expecting her to leap out and bring the whole stupid episode to an end. I was becoming disorientated, confused, and even a little anxious and...I just wanted to hold Emma.

"Who's Em?" said Duckworth. "Oh—yeah, your bird: Emma."

Suddenly, a midi version of "Hey You" by Pink Floyd started playing, and Duckworth's eyes closed in ecstasy. His head began rocking gently to the music, as he played a set of imaginary drums and cymbals.

"This is insanity," I muttered.

"No, it's Floyd, man," said Duckworth.

I grabbed him by the scruff of his big-collared, paisley print shirt. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"Hey, man! Peace and Love, yeah?"

"Talk to me, Duck," I pleaded. "Or I swear I'll—"

"Time travel!" he blurted, nodding his head frantically and cringing, because he thought I was going to hit him.

I shoved him against his door. "You stupid—you dumb idiot!"

I flung open my door, threw my half-eaten packet of crisps back at him and tried to step out.

"No, Steve! You can't!" he screamed.

The road felt slushy, like swamp or deep snow. I looked down at my foot and saw to my horror that it had sunk into the marshmallow tarmac. My shoe crackled and gave off blue electric wriggles of light. Just at that moment, I felt Duckworth's hands grabbing me, hauling my ass back in.

"Aunt Bloody Nora!" I exclaimed—it's funny the things you say when you're terrified, isn't it?

Aunt Bloody Nora was a phrase I heard one of my grandmothers utter once. I remember practising it in the garden, one sunny afternoon, when I was a toddler.

"Don't ever do that again," I heard a voice saying.

I slumped back in my seat and closed my eyes. Maybe if I concentrated very hard, I thought, I could wake myself up and it would all be a dream.

"That was a close shave," said the Duck. "You nearly corrupted the temporal flux, man. Can't co-exist with the other one in the same real time. Easy mistake to make. Done it myself."

I nodded and smiled. "Of course you have. You're really quite mad, aren't you, Duck?"

He adjusted the red-rimmed spectacles on the bridge of his nose and looked severe. "I've always been mad, I know I have. Ha-ha. I'd better get you out of here. You've got a touch of time fever."

The Duck put the Ford Cortina in first and we shot off into the swirling red mist.

## Chapter Two

I vaguely remember driving up the Thames Valley. There were lots of butterflies that year. We were going on a picnic. Just my mother and me. We parked up and went to sit down by the river, to have our crisps and lemonade, and watch the boats go by.

"Where are all the boats?" I said.

"Bit too early for all that," said a voice.

"Mum?"

"It's Julian. Don't worry, mate. You'll be all right. It's just a bit of time lag."

"Where am I?"

"Runnymede. One of my favourite spots, as it happens."

"What time is it?" I asked, propping myself up on one elbow and gazing around at all the unspoilt countryside and the river flowing gently by.

"Oh, about 1215, I'd say. Give or take a year or two either side."

"Didn't they sign the Magna Carta round here?"

"Yeah. They did it over on that island the last time I was here," said the Duck, matter-of-factly. "Anyway, never mind all that now—eat your crisps, they've got special stuff in, make you feel better—monotonous continuum glutamate or something."

I ate a mouthful of the Smoky Bacon flavour crisps. "I thought for a minute you were my mother," I said.

"Do you mind?" said Duckworth, flicking his hair back off his face and shoving a hank behind each ear.

"It must be the long hair. She used to wear it long like yours and it was ginger, too, like yours, when she didn't dye it."

"Yeah, well," said the Duck. "I'm not. And you call me crazy."

I listened to the clear birdsong and inhaled the sweet air. Even Old Father Thames looked fresher and full of sparkles.

"So, we really did travel through time," I said.

The Duck nodded. "I love it here. I often come down the old temporal vortex to this place. How about a bit of Floyd on in the background?"

"Uh."

Before I could answer, the Duck was up and wading through the tall meadow grass towards what looked like a large handcart. I watched him disappear inside it, although I had no idea how, he just seemed to slip through an invisible tear in the fabric of the day. Suddenly, he emerged and some weird, dreamy psychedelic music started playing.

"Careful With That Axe, Eugene," he grinned, as he sat down cross-legged. "Early Floyd, man. Far out." He began nodding, his mane of straight hair rippling. I think he was head-banging.

I looked anxiously up and down the riverbank, in case someone was coming. "Isn't this a bit risky?" I said.

"Nah! No one ever comes here yet. Got any straights, I'll roll us a joint," sniffed the Duck.

I found my pack of cigarettes and tossed it to him. He started patching together some papers, still grooving to the midi sounds of Floyd, drifting out of the old cart.

"What happened to the Cortina?" I said.

"It's just a three dimensional, holographic skin. A hard matrix shell. It can look like anything you want. I always think the cart skin kinda blends in round here. No one's ever said anything anyway."



## *Tempus Fugit*

We smoked and even I was getting into a long Pink Floyd number called "Echoes," by the middle of the dreamy afternoon. Then we went for a paddle and had a water fight, as you do when you're stoned.

Later we both sat on the bough of a tree, overhanging the river, trailing our feet in the passing water, while we watched the medieval sun going down. It was all very idyllic, but I couldn't stop thinking about Emma. It was strange and heart-rending to think that our love was nearly a thousand years in the future.

"Wait till you see the stars come out, man," said the Duck. "Awesome, no pollution yet, see, so the air's pure for a clear billion miles."

"Sounds like a Floyd lyric," I said.

"Yeah, well, Floyd music's eternal, innit?" he said. "Waters knows the beginning and the end and the end and the beginning."

"I thought that was your department," I said. "So, how the hell did a history graduate like you come to build a time machine?"

"I didn't," said the Duck. "I nicked it."

"You what? You stole a bloody time machine?"

"Yeah."

I saw his teeth glow in the twilight.

"That's not funny," I said. "What the hell were you doing breaking into cars at your age anyway?"

"I wasn't," said the Duck. "I knew it was a time machine. I was just borrowing it."

"You mean there's some poor sod stuck back in our time, wondering how the hell he's ever going to get home?"

"No, they picked him up ages ago—well, ages in the future."

"They?"

The Duck rubbed his downy goatee. "Yeah, uh, apparently there's a Temporal Criminal Pursuit team searching for me, but I've never seen 'em, so..."

"This gets worse." I scratched my head. The time lag or fever, or whatever it was I'd been suffering from, was wearing off and the full realisation of what had happened to me was beginning to dawn.

"Did you drug me?" I said.

"It was for your own good," said the Duck. "I was afraid your first trip would blow your mind, man."

"The Smoky Bacon crisps?"

"Er, yeah."

"We can get back to our own time though?"

"Yeah. No problemo, mate. Usually."

"What does that mean?"

"Don't worry. I'll get us back, though you might lose or gain a few days, or weeks—"

"Weeks? I've got a life back there!"

"Yeah, well, don't worry about that right now. I have got us tickets for the legendary Floyd concert at Knebworth in 1975."

"You shanghaied me to take me to a Pink Floyd concert?"

"I just thought we could take it in on the way."

"On the way where?" I said.

"You're laying too many questions on me, man. Chill. I'll get you home. No one will even know you were gone. Trust me."

## *Tempus Fugit*

Suddenly, I had an idea. "Hey! Could you drop me back at my place twenty-four hours earlier than when we left?"

"Well, uh, probably."

"You may have just saved my life," I said.

"Er?"

"The night before you picked me up, I had a big bust up with my girlfriend. Now, if you drop me back to a time before it happened, I might be able to..."

"Yeah. I get you," said the Duck, thoughtfully.

"What?"

"Well, it doesn't always work out like that. Some things are just meant to be, man."

"You know something about me and Emma, don't you? What is it?"

"Nah. I never even heard of the bird before today. It's just that it's not that easy to change events," said the Duck.

"Come off it—they're always warning us about it in books and films—how one little thing can have massive consequences. The domino effect. Some guy steps on a butterfly in the primeval swamp and we get five Adolf Hitlers and fifteen Mussolinis millions of years later."

"Yeah, but that's just in science fiction stories, man. I've been loads of places, changed loads of stuff, but it hasn't made a scrap of difference to the history books."

"You irresponsible little—. How do you know you haven't wiped out thousands of people by-by throwing your spliff butt on a bale of straw or something? For all I know, you might have caused the Great Fire of London."

"Nah. I studied it all, mate. I masterminded a few events and nothing really happened."

"Masterminded a few events? You sound like the bloody bin Laden of time travel. What do you mean: you masterminded a few events? What events?"

The Duck swallowed hard. I could see he didn't want to get into it. "Nothing. Just field tests. Take it from me, it is not that easy to change history."

"You've had a bloody good try by the sound of it," I said.

"I'm careful. But when I have had the odd accident here and there, it hasn't made much difference."

"The odd accident? You really are unfit to be doing all this. You're the last person I'd choose to play Doctor bloody Who."

"It's not like that. Who's this bin Laden geezer anyway?"

"You don't know, do you?"

"Well. I have heard of him."

"No you haven't. It's all falling into place now. You're not from my time, are you."

The Duck fidgeted on the bough, but made no comment.

"And you haven't aged a day since I last saw you! How old are you?"

"Twenty-um?"

"Twenty. So, that puts you in the second year at our college. You've come forward six years to find me, haven't you? Why?"

"I was going to explain everything when we got to Knebworth," he said. "Honest, mate."

"You wouldn't know honest if it lap-danced on your TV dinner. I'll tell you what's going on: you have got yourself in a big pile of brown sticky stuff and you've got me involved somehow. This is a damage limitation mission, isn't it? What have you done to me?"

## *Tempus Fugit*

The Duck stared off across the darkening Thames. "Don't lay all this on me, man. I can't tell you," he said. "Not yet, anyway."

His words sent a shiver down my spine. I had hoped I'd been barking up the wrong tree. "Just tell me one thing: does it involve Emma?"

He sounded truthful. "No—honest. I swear. It's nothing to do with her. I'd never even heard of her before today. I don't even know what she looks like, mate."

That was something, I thought. "Why can't you tell me now?"

"Well. It might be a bit dangerous—"

"You idiot!" I held onto the bough and bounced it violently up and down with my weight, sending him belly flopping down into the Thames.

I laughed at him splashing around beneath me, his legs and arms kicking and flailing, helplessly gasping and spluttering for air. With the gold and orange light from the sunset catching the splashes and ripples, it looked as though he had fallen into a giant vat of molten copper.

"Steve-can't-can't-uh-swim!!!"

In a momentary lapse of reason, I had forgotten the Duck couldn't swim. I was watching him drown! I dropped off the branch and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

And then, just as I was dragging him towards the bank, we heard the blood-curdling sound of our own names called over a megaphone:

"Julian Gaylord Duckworth, Stephen Gilmour Sloane! Stay right where you are! You are both under arrest!"

We both froze where we were kneeling, in a shallow patch of reeds, and looked at each other.

"Time plods!" mumbled the Duck, through a mouthful of mud and riverweed.

"The Temporal Criminal whatsits?" I whispered.

The Duck nodded.

"Come out and give yourselves up guys," continued the bored sounding cop on the megaphone.

"I thought you said they never bothered you!" I said, giving the Duck a shove. "I've never seen 'em you said!"

"Well, uh, they must have tracked me down. I forgot to leave the Floyd on—"

"Look, this isn't getting us anywhere!" said the echoing voice. It sounded closer. Somewhere above us.

"Will you shut up about Pink bloody Floyd!" I said, from the corner of my mouth.

"You don't understand," said the Duck. "Those midis I play jam the machine's temporal pulse. My midi player acts like a cloaking device. You dig?"

"Now he bloody tells me!" I snapped off two hollow reeds and handed him one. "Here, use this to breathe through and duck under the water. It's our only chance."

We both stuck the reeds in our mouths and submerged, backing out into deeper water on our bellies.

I saw searchlights criss-crossing the surface of the Thames and heard strained voices all around us. Once I even heard boots splashing in the mud and water and trampling down the reeds close by. We must have lain there in the shallows for an hour or more, before the lights and sounds faded and passed. When I thought it was all clear, I nudged the Duck and we both surfaced in a shower of spray and splutters.

I spat my reed out. "You miserable, meddling, dumb-assed, brain-dead, little—!" I cried, and grasped the Duck by the throat, with every intention of throttling him. "You do realise they'll have taken our only means of getting out of here. We're stuck

## *Tempus Fugit*

here—in medieval flaming England! What's the life expectancy round here—twenty bloody nine?"

"Er, forty-one, I think," said the Duck.

I shoved him away from me in disgust. He fell on his backside in the reeds. I clambered up the bank side.

"Wait! Steve!" he called after me.

But I was in no mood to listen to any more of his lies or advice. I was taking charge of my own destiny. First, I was going to check to see if the Time Police had impounded, or whatever they call it, the time machine, and, second, I was going to find the nearest village and eat. Beyond that lay the best part of another eight hundred years between me and my own time. Somehow I had to cling to the faint hope that there was a way back.

## Chapter Three

"Steve! Wait for me!"

I shortened my strides through the dark woodland to let him catch up.

"They took the cart," I said.

"Yeah. I know. What a bummer," he said.

"So what do you suggest we do while we wait for the eight hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta stamps to come out?"

"This is, uh, like a mega-dangerous place to be caught in, man. We have to get out of here," said the Duck, looking nervously around him for any movement in the trees.

"Why? Does Eugene live here with his axe?"

"This is Windsor Great Park, man," he said. "It's the King's Royal Hunting Ground—full of deer and stuff. If they catch us in here, they'll think we're poachers and...uh, I'm not sure what method they used, but the punishment was definitely death. And then they stick your head on a pole."

"Get me out of here."

"Follow me." He grabbed my jacket and tugged me back down the slope, towards the river. "I know a village. There are good people there. If we move quickly, we could be there before it gets light."

I scrambled after him, all thoughts of taking charge of my own destiny flown from my mind. I was placing myself back in the Duck's control.

We reached the level marshland and skirted the wood for nearly two hours. It was such hard going, what with the boggy ground and thickets, we had to stop for a rest.

"We should be safe now," panted the Duck, slumping down on a fallen log. Suddenly, a yard long arrow twanged into the bark a few inches from his hand—and then another.

"Tell me those aren't real!" I gasped.

"Gamekeepers!" cried the Duck, neatly flipping himself backwards off the log. I leapt over it, too, and squatted down with him.

"And we're the game," I said.

There were some unintelligible shouts from the green gloom and then more arrows rained in on us.

"These guys are experts—I don't want one of those things sticking in me in a world without antiseptics and painkillers," I said. "Think of something."

"Leg it!" said the Duck, taking off at great speed in a crouching position, and doing a comical little zigzag.

"I could have thought of that!" I yelled, shooting after him, copying his crouch and zigzagging run.

We ran like hell into a copse of willows and hit the ground on all fours.

"These guys hunt things for a living," I said. "I'd say our chances are slim to anorexic."

"This way!" said the Duck, with admirable decisiveness.

He took off through the thicket like a wild thing and I hared after him. I heard gruff voices shouting behind us and then the sound of arrows rattling through the branches over our heads.

"Couple of feet lower and my ass'll be porcupine!" I yelled.

I caught a glimpse of a burning torch swaying about to our left.

"They're surrounding us!" I cried.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"The river- jump!" gasped the Duck, weaving through the slender willows like a human shuttle.

"You can't swim!" I called, as we shot out of the scrub and reached a grassy knoll, overlooking the Thames.

The Duck didn't hesitate: he just launched himself off the edge of the bank and fell down, down into the dark river, his legs still running in mid-air. I have to admit I looked first, but when two arrows whistled past my head in quick succession, I was soon tombstoning down after him into the swiftly flowing waters.

As I surfaced, I did a three sixty and tried to spot him, but all I saw were torches waving high up on the bank and the silhouettes of at least four bowman. Several arrows gulped into the water around me and I ducked under again, frantically searching around in the inky underwater for poor Duckworth. But there was no sign of him.

I surfaced slowly, swimming for as far downstream under the water as I could hold my breath. When I looked back, I could see that the river had carried me a fair way, and the gamekeepers' torches were just distant twinkles. I called Duckworth's name repeatedly, but heard no cries of help from him. Sadly, I assumed the worst, and settled into a steady breaststroke, but kept gazing around me for any sign of him, as the current carried me along.

As dawn washed across the eastern sky, I finally swam into the shore and hauled my exhausted body up onto the bank. And slept.

Light flickered in my eyes and I felt myself coming back to life, as if I had died in the cold of that river and now the warmth was returning to me. I rolled over and opened my eyes, expecting to see the sun in the blue sky above me—but all I could see were wooden beams and smoke-blackened thatch. I sat bolt upright and animal furs slid off me.

"Hello, mate," said the smiling Duck, offering me a bowl of something steaming. "Here, drink this. Make you feel better."

I took the bowl and shakily drank. It was hot soup. And it tasted absolutely fantastic. "Hmm. That is..."

"Incredible?" said the Duck.

"What is it?"

"Uh, duck soup."

"Ask a stupid question."

"Didn't tell you about the food, did I? It tastes better the farther back you go. Don't know why, it just does."

"How did you—?"

"Survive?" blinked the Duck. "I was lucky. Had some help from some old friends."

He held out his arm and another face loomed into view. A pretty brown-haired girl. The Duck put his arm around her neck and drew her in.

"Meet (he coughed) my wife, Juetta."

I choked on my soup.

"Juetta, this is Stephen. The one I spoke of."

"Steev-ven," smiled Juetta.

I held out my hand and she gave me hers.

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs Duckworth," I said.

Juetta covered her mouth shyly and giggled.

"Yeah. All right, mate." The Duck wiped his wisp of ginger-blond moustache rakishly with his finger and sniffed. "A man has to have a few secrets."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"You weren't joking when you said you'd been coming here for years were you." I smirked. "How many more of these have you got stashed away?"

"Don't ask, mate." He turned to Juetta. "Find Stephen some dry clothes, wife?" he said.

"Yes, husband," said Juetta, with a bow and left the hut immediately.

"You've got her well-trained, mate," I said, and downed the rest of my soup.

"Yeah. Well. It's pre-feminism round here, innit?" said the Duck. He reached inside the leather peasant's jerkin he was wearing and took out my pack of cigarettes. "Managed to dry these out."

I took one and the Duck lit us up with a stick from the open fire.

"Yeah. I haven't been back for a while," said the Duck, stretching out on the straw covered floor and staring up at the rafters as he smoked. "She, uh, was very pleased to see me, if you know what I mean."

"You certainly landed on your feet here," I said. "I thought you were bouncing along the bottom of the Thames. What happened? I lost you in the water."

"I went under. When I bobbed up I saw a branch, as luck would have it—so I grabbed it, and I held on for dear life, mate, I can tell you. Saw you go by, but I had too much Thames in me to shout—besides our friends were right above me somewhere. I could hear 'em shouting and crashing about. So, I sat tight. When they went, I climbed up the bank and started walking down river. I knew I was near Woodside—that's the name of this village—anyway, I got here somehow. Then I got the lads to launch the boats to search for you. We found you about two miles farther down river. Just above the Egham settlement."

"Cheers," I said. "Remind me to buy you a pint when we get back to our own time. How are we getting back to our own time, by the way?"

"One step at a time," said the Duck. "Just be thankful you're still alive."

I nodded. "Yeah, you're right there, mate. For once, you're bloody well right."

Just then, Juetta came back, carrying a bundle of clothes, saw the smoke coming out of the Duck's mouth, screamed, picked up a pitcher of water and threw it in his startled face.

The Duck and I rolled about laughing, watched by the shocked Juetta. She could only shake her head at this bout of ladism and leave us to it.

Later, Duckworth showed me round his Saxon wife's village and introduced me to his in-laws, including his mother-in-law, Swanhilda, a big woman with a big heart, who, the minute she saw me, tried to fix me up with her eldest daughter, Betha. I had a lot of trouble explaining to her that I didn't plan on sticking around. They spoke English, but it was an early, guttural form of our language, and sounded more like German to me.

In the end, her interest in having me as a son-in-law proved a stroke of luck, because it seemed I had a rival for Betha's affections, a surly older guy named Aleman, who had an enormous walrus moustache the size of a milkmaid's yoke, and who, of course, took an instant disliking to me. The guy was so keen to outdo me that he started bragging about all his possessions and parading them about the village. He herded his pigs, then his two cows, hens and even his kitchen utensils past Betha's parents' hut. I told Swanhilda I couldn't compete with that kind of wealth.

The Duck and I were just having a sly laugh about my predicament when old Aleman appeared pulling his huge new handcart. Our mouths fell open like two clams at a bake.

"Is that what I think it is?" I said.

## *Tempus Fugit*

The Duck nodded. I could see his cunning brain shifting into gear, but had no idea how he was going to get the thing back off him.

"Leave this to me," he said, as he slid off the bench we were sitting on, like an alligator entering the bayou.

Immediately he vacated his seat, Betha shuffled in alongside me and began some heavy, one-way flirting. I could feel Aleman's eye boring into me, as I tried to lip-read what the Duck was saying to him. Presently, a broad smile lit up my rival's face and he burst out laughing, nodding vigorously at the same time. What the hell had the Duck said to him, I wondered.

Whatever it was, the Duck looked pretty pleased with himself as he sauntered back across the yard, hands in pockets. He said something in his pidgin Anglo-Saxon to the amorous Betha and she blushed, gave me a playful thump in the arm, and scampered away giggling.

Then he rested his foot up on the bench and gazed around nonchalantly.

"Do I take it we're out of here, mate?" I said.

"No problemo, amigo," said the Duck.

"Good work," I said. "How did you swing it?"

"You're going to wrestle him for the hand of my sister-in-law—he's just squaring it with her family, but it's all settled. There won't be any problems. These people love a good scrap—"

"Whoa! Run that by me one more time," I said.

The Duck looked down at me as if I was stupid. "You fight with Aleman the Smithy, you lose, he gets the girl, we get the cart. What part of easy-peezy didn't you get, man?"

"The bit where I fight the Incredible Hulk over there—why the hell couldn't you fight him?"

"Moi? I'm not in dispute, man. You're the obstacle to his amorous ambitions," said the Duck, picking a piece of straw off the toe of his boot.

"Amorous ambitions? He can have her! I don't even want her!"

"Shh! Keep your voice down."

I lowered my voice, because Betha's family were suddenly all staring across at us from the entrance to their hut, where Aleman was in deep discussion with what looked like her whole clan. "Just tell him it's a straight swap: the girl for the cart," I said.

"No way," said the Duck. "That's not the way they do things round here. There's a girl's honour at stake."

Betha gave me a little wave and licked her lips.

"Well, she doesn't seem that bothered about it," I said.

"What's your problem?" said the Duck. "All you gotta do is step into the circle of combat with the guy and let him throw you around a little. You give him a few slaps to make it look good and then he lands the big one and voila: one cart!"

"Are you sure it's the right cart?" I sighed.

"Positive. I put my hand through the skin matrix and felt the upholstery. As soon as everybody's asleep, we're out of here. Tempus fugit, man."

"All right, I'll do it," I said. "But I'm going down as soon as he lands one on me."

The Duck slapped me on the shoulder. "Normally, I wouldn't condone violence, but in this case, I'd just like to say I think you're doing the right thing," he said. "Try to stay on your feet for a couple of rounds at least. I'm laying a few side bets."



*Tempus Fugit*

"So, he knows I'm going down—that it's all a fix." I said.

"Are you kidding?" said the Duck. "I couldn't tell him that—it would be an insult to his honour if he knew you were going to throw the fight."

"He'll kill me," I said. "I can see it in his eyes. Why the hell couldn't we just steal the damn cart?"

The Duck shook his head. "Do you have a single thread of moral fibre in you? We can't just nick a man's cart."

"Why not? You did!"

"Er, he found it fair and square," said the Duck. He adjusted his specs. "Anyway, I thought you'd rise to the challenge. You wouldn't have been much use at Agincourt, mate."

"You're bloody enjoying this, aren't you?" I said. "You want to see that gorilla beat the hell out of me, don't you? He's a blacksmith—he beats the hell out of things for a living, I'm in advertising—what am I supposed to do—hit him with a cliché?"

The Duck took his foot off the bench and straightened his back. "You're forgetting one thing, Stephen: this is a matter of honour. Don't let the side down, man." He turned and marched back across the yard to join his in-laws.

"Oh shut up," I said, throwing a lump of mud at his back.

The big rumble was scheduled for noon and a large ring was marked out with a rope in the middle of the village for the purpose. I watched the guys marking it out with only mild interest: I had no intention of spending much time inside it, so what difference did it make how big or small it was? Duckworth seemed to think he was Don King and started giving me fight advice. He even tried to massage my back, to loosen my shoulders. I told him he was wasting his time because I had no intention of actually throwing any punches. But that didn't deter him from talking me up, as he put it. Minutes before the fight, he came to the hut where I was changing into the fur leotard I had to wear.

"He may be big, but you're quicker—try to get in under his guard," he said.

"Shut up," I said.

"Try to get him off balance. Pull him forward and then jerk him to the side. He's no ballerina. He should go down."

"Shut up."

"Keep moving around him in a clockwise direction. This guy's a southpaw. That way you keep his good left at arm's length."

"Shut up."

"When he comes out, move towards him and then duck away to his left—then come back a-way over on his right. Dance him round and pick him off with short jabs."

"Shut up."

"Don't go upstairs too soon. It tires the arms. You may have to take a few head shots yourself, but work the body."

"Shut the hell up."

"Okay. You're ready. Go get him, killer."

Two brawny guys with pigtails, my seconds, came to take me to the ring, just in case I had any second thoughts.

When they shoved me through the rowdy mob, I found Aleman the Smithy already waiting for me, casually sitting astride an upturned horse trough, picking his nails and looking bored. But he soon perked up when he spotted me. I thought there might be a bell or something to start the contest. Not a bit of it. As soon as he saw me, my opponent charged across the circle, picked me up and started trying to crush me with his bare hands. And he would have succeeded if my loud piercing screams hadn't

## *Tempus Fugit*

distracted him. I don't think he'd ever heard a human being scream that pitifully before. It confused him. He dropped me and looked puzzled. I rolled over and over like an Italian striker in the penalty box, and tried to reach the rope, so that I could roll under it and scuttle away through the legs of the spectators. But he came after me and before I could crawl through he dragged me back to the middle of the ring by my ankles. I tried the screaming tactic again. If it worked once, I reasoned, why shouldn't it work again? But this time my adversary was wise to me and merely stood me on my feet and began slapping me about the face. The crowd cackled and brayed.

Amid the din, I heard the Duck's voice, pleading with me to work the body. I responded by walking onto one of my opponent's jabs and going down like a sack of proverbial potatoes. The crowd booed. I pretended to stagger to my feet. The crowd cheered. I slumped back down into the dirt again. The crowd booed and heckled.

And then the first fusillade of rotten fruit and vegetables started flying into the ring. I played possum and shielded my eyes. Fortunately for me, a piece of putrid marrow smacked into my tormentor's face and he rushed the rope to beat up the guy who threw it. This was my big chance. Slithering across the muddy ring like a gecko, I managed to reach Aleman the Smithy while he was still busy hitting the marrow-thrower. I scampered through his legs and, turning on my back, landed a punch so below the belt it could only have been seen by worms. The poor guy dropped to his knees like a poleaxed ox, gripping his manhood in both hands and groaning like a walrus with toothache. I wriggled clear and he fell forward, his big moustache ploughing into the mud.

The mob cheered and I ran round the ring on a lap of honour. As I passed the Duck, he called me over. I flopped up to him and leaned on the rope, out of breath from running, not the fight.

"What?"

"You're supposed to lose," said the Duck.

My moment of glory was short-lived. I ran over to my seconds, grabbed the bucket of water and rushed back to my crippled opponent with it. To the guy's astonishment, I threw the water in his face and helped him to his feet.

The crowd started cheering and whistling. My opponent was actually crying as he tried to hit me with great scything punches. I ducked and dived these wild haymakers for a while, waiting for something softer to hang my chin on. And then I saw a short jab coming and flung myself at it. We connected and I saw shooting stars and passed out. The next minute I was being revived with water and cradled in my opponent's arms, surrounded by a cheering crowd. The Duck's face was nearest, grinning proudly down at me. I checked for any loose teeth with my tongue.

"That was great, kid," said the Duck. "We cleaned up." He showed me a rag full of rings, chains and gold coins.

"Am I going to live?" I muttered.

Aleman the Smithy grunted and his huge moustache twitched. Tears filled his eyes.

"The Smithy says you're one tough mother," said the Duck. "And he wants you to be best man at his wedding."

"Tell him I'd be honoured and I hope I haven't ruined his chances of starting a family."

The Duck broke into pidgin Anglo-Saxon. The Smithy laughed and then grimaced.

"If you have," said the Duck, "you'd better hope you're not one of his descendants."

## *Tempus Fugit*

That night, the Duck and I sneaked out of his marital roundhouse, or the little hut on the bog, as I'd been calling it, and went to the Smithy's yard to pick up my prize.

"Ow!" said the Duck in the pitch dark.

"What?" I said.

"Missed the portal. Stubbed my fingers on the side of the cart."

I heard him fumbling about.

"That's funny..." he muttered.

"What's up?"

"Can't find the way in through the matrix."

"Is this a bloody wind up—'cos I'm not in the mood!"

"I'm telling you it's not here!"

"We must have the wrong cart then," I said, peering around in the gloom for another cart.

"No, he said he'd leave it here for us," said the Duck. "It was definitely the right one. I checked it this morning. Here, wait a minute—he must have switched carts!"

"I do not want to hear this," I said.

"Wait here, I'll go and wake him up. It's probably just a misunderstanding," said the Duck. He stumbled off across the yard to the Smithy's Shop. Aleman slept in a room above it.

I climbed up in the cart, lay down and looked up at the incredibly clear Milky Way.

Presently, I noticed a light flicker on in the room over the Smithy's and heard muffled voices. A few minutes later, the Duck returned and leaned against the cart, and began making irritating clicking noises with his tongue. He always did this when he was deep in thought, trying to work out the solution to a problem, I discovered.

"Well?" I said.

"He sold it," said the Duck. "This is a different cart."

I let out an ironic little laugh. "Great. You know if I had to invent the worse case scenario, this would be it: he sold the cart."

"All is not lost," said the Duck.

"Only eternity," I said.

"Aleman told me the name of the guy he sold it to."

"All right, so we just go round to his house and swap it for this one. Right?"

"Not quite."

"How did I know you were going to say that?"

"Stay in there," said the Duck, lifting up the cart handles. "I'll push you for a while and then you can push me."

"So, we're just pushing each other around. Where are we going?"

"Windsor Castle. Aleman sold it to the Royal Household."

"That's all right then," I said. "We'll just go up there and tell the King we want our cart back."

"It may not be that easy," said the Duck, manoeuvring the huge two-wheeled hand cart out of the Smithy's yard and setting off up the hill, with me on board. "The King's in residence and the Smithy said the place is on full alert because they think the French are going to invade."

"And are they? You studied medieval history."

"Er, yeah. 1216. The French Dauphin was in league with the barons. The, uh, castle came under siege."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"I do not want to be a stick puppet."

"Relax, man. We just blag our way in, find the cart and we're out of there."

"You left out the part about them mistaking us for French traitors and sticking our heads on poles," I said.

"Man, you are so full of negative vibes."

"Yes, and I'd like to keep my vibes, thank you. I don't want to see them spilled out all over the floor."

"You don't even have to go in. I'll go in and get the cart. You wait outside," said the Duck.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight," I said. "You're the only thing round here that reminds me of home. And even you only remind me of the bad part."

He toiled up the hill in the direction of Windsor for half the night and then when it got really steep, he stopped and said it was my turn to push. I wanted to get the whole thing over with, so I didn't bother to argue about how he'd done the easy bit and left the hard part for me. The Duck lay on the cart with his hands behind his head.

"So, which king are we talking about?" I said.

"John," replied the Duck, deep in thought, or just catching forty winks.

"Oh, him. The one who betrayed his own brother and drowned the little princes in the tower?"

"That was Richard III," said the Duck. "Although he did usurp the throne while his brother Richard—the Lionheart, that is—was away on the Crusades."

I stopped the cart. "This is madness. If they're expecting the French to attack, this place'll be crawling with archers, like the ones we ran into last night. Remember them? I don't think they were going to ask questions before they killed us, let alone after."

"So what do you suggest we do?"

"I think we should give up and turn back, and get Aleman to go up there. He can tell them he made a mistake and take them this cart instead. Why do we have to stick our necks out?"

"I thought of that."

"What are we doing here then?"

"I put it to Aleman and he said no way."

"He's smarter than you look."

"Look, the castle has a keep—a main tower—surrounded by an outer wall. Inside the wall, there's an open area where they have like a small village and marketplace. We'll just tell the guards we've come to trade. We're not even going into the main castle. Do you really think they'd let us anywhere near the King? There's no risk," said the Duck, trying to put my mind at ease.

"No risk—ah! All right, if we're supposed to be traders, what the hell are we supposed to be selling? Don't you think the guards are going to be a little bit suspicious when they see us pushing an empty cart?" I said.

"I thought of that," said the Duck.

"So, what are we selling—fresh air?"

"No, the cart," smiled the Duck.

Two hours later, we were pushing our cart under the portcullis of the outer gate of Windsor Castle. Amazingly, the guards had let us pass.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"I'm impressed," I said, filling with a great sense of relief. Soon I would be going home, I told myself. I imagined a long, lingering shower with the beautiful Emma, while we told each other what fools we'd been and made up for lost time.

"This is a breeze, man," said the Duck.

"I'm still amazed they swallowed your story," I said.

"I just told them we'd heard they were buying carts and thought we'd sell ours," said the Duck.

It was still early doors and hardly any of the people in the stinking castle encampment were out of their beds, but some enterprising traders already had their stalls set out and were plying their wares.

We wandered around looking at their weird merchandise; there was everything from artichokes to saints' fingers on sale. The Duck chatted away and then exchanged one of his ill-gotten rings—now I knew why he wore so many—for a freshly roasted suckling pig and we sat on our cart and pigged out on it.

I pointed to a row of carts propped against the wall. "There they are. Which one is it?"

The Duck took a quick glance. "None of 'em." He went back to gnawing his greasy hunk of pig.

"How can you tell from here?" I said, looking around for others.

The Duck cleared his mouth. "I asked around." He went back to tearing at his meat.

"I thought hippies were supposed to be vegetarians," I said.

The Duck shook his head as he tore another chunk of steaming pork off the bone with his teeth. "Not me, babe."

I scratched my head. "I don't understand," I said.

"What's to understand?" said the Duck, through a mouthful of pork. "I like meat."

"No, I meant about the cart," I said. "Like, where is it?"

"In there," said the Duck, gesturing towards the Great Round Tower of Windsor Castle, without turning his attention away from his breakfast.

My hands dropped into my lap. Suddenly, I'd lost my appetite. I stared up at the heavily fortified tower and the half a dozen guards warming themselves around a brazier at the gate. "So, King John's sitting in there, in our cart, sucking his thumb?" I said.

The Duck chuckled. "No, it's in one of the ground floor store rooms. They've been using it to take supplies in, they all know there's going to be a siege. We just have to wait till they bring it out to pick up more stuff." The Duck turned and grinned at me. "And then we pounce," he said.

"You're insane," I said. "No, I don't just mean a bit oddball, or amusingly eccentric, no, I mean clinically, certifiably, is-that-straightjacket-too-tight-for-you-sir, insane!"

The Duck was nodding and grinning. "Just leave everything to me," he said.

"Yes, of course," I said. "It all makes sense to me now. I died in my sleep and this is my personal hell. The angels checked my profile, found out what my idea of it was, and sent you."

"Eat up, man," said the Duck. "Tempus fugit."

"Yeah, tempus fugit," I said. I threw the rest of my meat away. "Oh, look, there goes one pig who never thought he'd fly again!"

I jumped off the cart and strode towards the exit gate.

"Where're you going, man?" cried the Duck.

*Tempus Fugit*

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't got there yet."

"Wait! You did!"

I turned and looked back. "I did what?"

"Die, man," he said softly. "Well, as good as. They were going to erase you, that's why I had to come and get you."

I walked back to the cart. "Erase me?"

The Duck was still clearing his mouth. "You know those accidents I was telling you about? Well, you were kind of one of 'em. But, don't get me wrong, man, I'm glad things turned out the way they did."

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"I'm not from 1995. I'm from 1975. Now, do you get it?" said the Duck.

I shook my head slowly. "No. I don't think I do," I said. "I must be dumb, because I don't have a clue what you're going on about. But it's beginning to sound pretty scary."

"Your mother's name was Francesca Elizabeth Sloane. She died in a car crash in Ealing in 1987. God rest her soul. She used to take you for picnics at Runnymede. You never knew your father. You went to live with your grandparents in Bexhill-on-Sea. In 1992 you went up to Oxford to read English. And I decided it would be fun to join you. Naturally, I chose history, because I knew most of it first hand—"

"Wait!" I said. "Rewind that a little."

"Which bit?"

"The bit about never knowing my—oh, my God!" I held onto the cart for support, my legs were buckling under me.

The Duck ruffled my hair and patted my shoulder.

"That's right, man, I'm your father."

## **Chapter Four**

"Damn you, Ford Cortina, damn you to hell!" I said, as I fell to my knees and beat the none too healthy smelling soil of Windsor Castle.

"Well, I think it's pretty neat having a son seven years older than me," grinned the Duck. "Can I borrow the car, dad?"

I jumped up and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. "Listen to me, you horny, ancestor-shagging little hippie! You are going to go up there in that tower and get that cart, then you're going to bring it down here, and you're going to take me home. And then you're going to get out of my life and time forever. Do you understand me?"

The Duck blinked and nodded.

I pulled him down off the cart and slung him towards the Great Round Tower, which was situated on top of a man-made hill, some hundred yards away.

"You're on your own!" I said.

I climbed up in the cart and sat down to watch. I must admit the Duck had bottle. But I wasn't worried about him, because I knew he could sell time-shares to Doctor Who. Imagine my shock then when two burly guards he'd been talking to suddenly grabbed him and dragged him inside the tower.

I gave it ten minutes and then I jumped down, smeared dung over my clothes and face and started pushing the hand cart up there. Don't ask me what I thought I was doing, I don't know what I thought I was doing. But whatever it was, it worked. The guards challenged me and I pretended to be dumb and stupid. They laughed at me and one of them kicked me up the ass, but they shoved me and my cart into the Great Round Tower of Windsor Castle.

Inside, there was a large anteroom. Two guards were sitting at a table, rolling dice and drinking. Several handcarts were leaning against the far wall, which had a door leading off. In addition, to my relief, the Duck was sitting in a corner with his back to the wall. He wasn't even tied up. He looked surprised to see me, but neither of us dared speak. Both guards glanced over at me and one of them gestured towards the other carts and said something I didn't understand, but I guessed he wanted me to park it up and leave. I wheeled it up to the end where the Duck was sitting.

"Which one is it?" I mouthed.

The Duck shook his head slightly.

I squinted at him.

The Duck looked anxiously across at the guards. "Keep them busy while I find it," he mouthed.

I shook my head and propped my cart against the wall. Then I shambled over to the guards and watched them playing, while scratching my armpits and backside, and pretending I had a nervous tic. I was method acting the fool. My aim was to convince them that I was just a dumb idiot they should kick out the door. But they seemed to be amused by my antics. I picked up a piece of candle I saw lying on the table and started to eat it. I'd seen Chaplin do it in an old black and white movie. It worked. The guards laughed.

And then I picked up their dice and tried to eat that. To my horror, both guards drew their huge swords and looked angry. I knew I shouldn't have improvised. I looked to the Duck for help. The Duck had vanished!

Both guards followed my gaze, then leapt to their feet, and rushed over to search among the carts for their prisoner.

## *Tempus Fugit*

I edged around the room to the carts, desperately trying to work out which one the Duck was in. By now both guards had flung open the store room door and were swishing their swords and peering inside. Suddenly I felt a hand grab me and drag me into another dimension.



## Chapter Five

I found myself sitting next to the Duck in the front seat of the Cortina.

"Don't talk to me," I said, "Just take me back to my flat. Right now."

"The Castle's continuously occupied for the next eight hundred years, man," explained the Duck. "Unless you want to end up having tea with the Queen, I have to reverse through time a hundred years and find another location."

"You are talking to me," I said, staring dead ahead.

The Duck did a three-point turn and, looking back over his shoulder, started reversing into the temporal vortex. I assumed he was just pulling out of the tower and going down Windsor Hill. When we braked, the beautiful English landscape suddenly appeared all around us. I saw a stag in the distance running into some trees.

I looked across at the Duck. He seemed sad. He adjusted his glasses and shoved her into first, and we were driving across the meadow. The greenery disappeared and the red swirling wall of the time continuum itself was facing us. A Pink Floyd midi automatically came on, "Welcome to the Machine."

"What period are we in?" I said, just to break the downbeat atmosphere.

The Duck glanced down at the dashboard. "Seventeenth century," he said.

"That's nice," I said. "We're making good time."

"Treason, Civil War, Plague and the Great Fire," said the Duck, without taking his eyes off the vortex.

"Wouldn't have minded meeting Shakespeare," I said.

"Yeah," said the Duck. "He's a diamond geezer."

"You've met him?"

"Yeah. Used to have some groovy times at his garret in Lamb Walk. Died of the dropsy. I was there. Drove up to Stratford soon as I heard he was ill. Left me one of his pens."

"You're making this up," I said.

"It's in the glove compartment somewhere," said the Duck.

I opened the glove compartment and rummaged around. There were all sorts of souvenirs—a brass military button, a large cigar, an arrowhead, a lacy lady's garter, a violin string—it was like a museum of keepsakes. Among them, I found a trimmed quill, smudged with black ink.

"This could be anybody's," I said.

"Want to meet him?" said the Duck.

"Uh?" I was tempted. What a fantastic experience it would be, I was thinking, to see an actual Shakespeare play performed at The Globe, and then meet the playwright himself. "Well."

"Your future's not going anywhere," said the Duck. "It'll still be there when you get back."

"Wouldn't mind meeting the Bard and seeing *Henry the Fourth, Part Two*," I said, against my better judgment.

"What's that—the 1590s?"

"Well, I don't know the exact date the play was performed."

"We'll pop down to his Lamb Walk pad in Bermondsey and ask him," said the Duck. He reached forward and twiddled a few knobs on the dashboard. "Just tuning in the co-ordinates," he said. "I'll park up in the usual place, but we'll have to go forward to our time and then drive down to South London. This is a time machine, not a time and space machine."

## *Tempus Fugit*

I was now determined to meet Shakespeare. It was too big an opportunity to miss. And I was willing to go along with anything the Duck said.

We were soon pulling out of a field and onto a modern road. And then heading back into the City of London.

"So, you're cool with me being your, er, biological father?" said the Duck, as we filtered onto the M4.

"I don't want to talk about that," I said. "Tell me how you found out about time machines" I said, changing the subject.

"Well, I had this theory," said the Duck. "I just thought if Einstein reckoned time travel was theoretically possible, sooner or later it would be invented. I mean, sometime in the distant future. Accept that?"

"Yeah, sounds reasonable," I shrugged.

"And can you believe that past, present and future co-exist?"

"Well, I know they do now," I said.

The Duck nodded. "Right. So, I reasoned, these time travellers from our future, or other planets, must be already coming back to our time—and every other time—on a regular basis. It might account for all these UFOs people keep seeing. Well, I asked myself, why would they be coming back? I decided there could be three reasons: research, interference and pleasure. Then, I reasoned, they would probably come back to witness or study major events in human history. So, if I could determine what a major event was, I had a good place to start looking for them."

"And how did you do that?" I said.

"I got a job at the biggest photographic archive in the land. And, whenever I had any spare time, I'd start looking very closely at faces in the crowds at major historical events. I was looking for the same face twice."

I smiled. "That's very clever. Reminds me of that Woody Allen film, *Zelig*," I said.

"That isn't out in my time yet," said the Duck. "Anyway, it took me six months, but I thought I'd identified twenty-three possibles. One guy turned up seven times, over a sixty-year time period and he hadn't aged. The average number of sightings per face was four point seven. I thought it was far too high to be a co-incidence, so I chose three candidates and researched 'em."

"How?"

"I found people who were still alive who had attended the event, who were in the photograph, and asked them to identify my suspect. None of my three candidates could be identified. One of these guys particularly interested me, because he was turning up at major musical events. For example, he was in Liverpool in 1962, at the Cavern Club, when the Beatles were playing live, and then I found him at the first Isle of Wight free concert in 1969. But I had also found him in an old photograph taken during a wartime concert at the Albert Hall, in 1942. I decided there'd be a good chance he'd be at Pink Floyd's Knebworth Gig in 1975. Everyone, at the time, sensed it was going to be an important one. Floyd had just completed their triumphant *Wish You Were Here* tour, and Knebworth was to be the final gig. They were at their height. My guy just had to be there. All I had to do was identify him."

"And how did you do that—there must have been thousands there?" I said.

"Well, I had to take a gamble. First, I reasoned, he must be coming on his own, because he'd been on his own all the other times. Second, he always managed to get himself near the front. That's why he'd been careless and got himself spotted by someone like me. Third, he'd have his own means of transport. I guessed it would be something that looked contemporary and ordinary. I had no idea what a holographic

skin was at this point. I was just looking for a vehicle that didn't draw too much attention to itself, and had one guy in it. That's pretty unusual at a concert like Knebworth, because most people come with friends, or pick up hitchhikers. But my guy would do neither. So that narrowed the field. And, of course, I knew what he looked like," explained the Duck.

"That's pretty smart," I said. "But you were still lucky he turned up—I mean, it's a bit of a long shot."

"What I haven't told you about are all the other major musical events I'd attended over a twenty month period, starting at the end of 1973, when I attended a Bowie concert, where I'd drawn a blank. It took me nearly two years to track him down," said the Duck.

I felt the first surge of pride, ever, for my father. And to think I'd had him down as one of the most boring people I'd ever met!

The Duck continued. "I knew he'd turn up early, to be sure of getting right down the front, so I waited just inside the main gate, by the track leading to the car park. Now, you've got to remember, hundreds—eventually thousands—of vehicles were turning up that first morning, but as soon as I saw this white Cortina, with one guy sitting behind the wheel, I knew it must be him. I took a short cut through a hedge and ran over to the car park, saw where he parked and walked down past him, as he was getting his stuff out of the boot. It was him all right. Imagine my excitement. As soon as he'd gone down to the concert park, I broke in and, well, I was disappointed at first, because it just looked like a normal Ford Cortina in here. None of this dash was visible. Of course, he had a holographic skin over it—you can get 'em for the interior as well as the exterior. Anyway, I was feeling around under the dashboard and the seats for about an hour, when my hand just disappeared over here in the corner, down by the pedals. I'd only gone and put it through the holographic matrix, hadn't I. This lot just appeared as if by magic. I was so amazed. I just sat looking at it. It was so beautiful and perfect."

"And then you nicked it," I said.

"Well, not right then, it took me a while to work out the controls. I couldn't even start the thing at first. I drove it to my uncle's garage, locked it up and left it there overnight. Then I went back to Knebworth to watch Floyd, Beefheart and Harper were on the line up, too. I didn't want to miss them, did I? Besides, I'd arranged to meet..." The Duck's voice tailed off.

"My mum," I said.

The Duck nodded. "Yeah."

I saw a signpost for Chiswick. We'd be in Southwark in half an hour, if the traffic wasn't too bad.

"Maybe I should see Emma first," I said.

"Er, that may not be a good idea," said the Duck.

"Why not?"

"We're a bit early. I told you getting the exact date was a bit hit and miss."

"What date is it?"

"The, er, twenty-first of June."

"Okay, so I'm a couple of months early—she won't notice the difference."

"We're seven out," said the Duck.

"You said June. We left in August."

"I mean years. It's 1994."

"Seven years out? Do you actually know how to drive this thing?"

"Well, I'm still sort of learning. But I'm getting the hang of it," said the Duck.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"You can't get me back, can you? Not to my own time?" I said, shaking my head in disbelief and despair.

"I think I can get you nearer than this, but it might take some time."

"Wonderful," I said. "I'm a time refugee."

Yet another Pink Floyd midi came on.

"How many of these damn midis have you got?" I said.

"One hundred and forty six," smiled the Duck. "This one's called, 'The Happiest Days of Our Lives.'"

"How appropriate," I said, and sulked all the way to South London.

We turned into Lamb Walk. The Duck flipped a switch and we began drifting down the temporal vortex.

"Here we are," said my cheerful cabbie after a few minutes. "This is 1607. He'll probably be up in his room, banging out another masterpiece."

"What skin are you going to use round here—a plague cart?" I said peering around at the grimy Elizabethan buildings, looming up out of the red mists of time.

"Already activated," said the Duck. "I think a Ford Cortina would look just a little bit out of place in Stuart London, so I always select a pretty neat animated skin."

"Oh, and what's that?"

"You'll see when we get out."

I opened my door and stumbled on the slimy cobbles. Looking round, I saw the Duck holding the reins of a huge dray horse.

"Is that the—?" I said, in astonishment.

"Far out, isn't it?" grinned the Duck. "Whoa, boy. Steady, now. That's it. We'll just pop you in Master Shakespeare's stable and see if the gent's at home."

The heavy horse clopped over the cobbles, dwarfing his handler. I followed a few paces behind. We turned down the first alleyway we came to and came out into a sort of mews or back courtyard, with what looked like three stables, although there were no horses in them. The Duck led our animated time machine into the second of the stalls and closed the door behind him.

"He'll be fine in there for a few hours. Then he'll need some water."

"Water? He's a hologram," I said.

"Even holograms have to drink," said the Duck, brushing past me. "Come on, we'll take the back stairs and avoid Mistress Turpin—she's his landlady, never stops talking, always on about the plagues, Puritans and plots."

We ascended a rickety scaffolding of stairs, like a four-tiered fire escape, until we came to a small wooden balcony, with a view down over the rooftops of other higgledy-piggledy houses, to the Thames.

"This is where he lives," said the Duck.

"What a dump."

"He only rents it. He just uses it for writing and, well, you'll see. He has another place down by The Globe, on the Bankside. A bigger place, but I never go there—it's always heaving with his theatre friends—and they're a right bunch of cutthroats and thieves. Come on, we'll climb in the window. Will won't mind."

The Duck produced a small jemmy from a little tool pouch he seemed to keep inside his jacket, and was about to start forcing the window.

"I see you've come equipped," I said. "Look, I'm not sure about this—breaking into a man's house. Let's just sit out here and wait till he gets back."

The Duck looked at me as if I was mad, but he stopped what he was doing and put his housebreaking tool away.

## *Tempus Fugit*

I offered him a cigarette, he took it and started ripping the paper off to use the tobacco for a joint. I smoked mine leaning against the railing of the little balcony.

"I can't believe Shakespeare lives here," I said. "Are you sure you've got the right Shakespeare? I mean, you haven't brought me to Billy Shakespeare the toilet cleaner's lodgings by mistake?"

The Duck sat himself down with his back against the windowsill to patch some papers together, and squinted up at me.

"Bald headed guy. Wears a golden earring in the left ear. Writes plays," he said.

"Well, it sounds like him," I said. "But I've learnt to take everything you say with a shovelful of salt these past twenty four hours, or however long it's been since you turned up."

"That's a nice way to talk about your father," said the Duck, heating a lump of cannabis resin with his lighter.

"Don't start that. Oh yeah, and what was all that stuff you were coming out with about me being erased?" I said.

"You don't want to know," he said.

I kicked his foot. "I think I have a right to know, don't you?"

"Mind the gear, man!"

"You got me into this mess! I want to know."

The Duck was still holding out. "You're not going to like it," he said, licking his papers.

"Just tell me everything," I said.

The Duck smoothed his straggly little goatee beard. "There's no record of you after August the thirteenth, 2001," he said.

"What do you mean—I died?"

The Duck shook his head. "Worse than that."

"What can be worst than death?" I laughed, nervously.

"Full erasure," said the Duck, with an expression on his face so serious it was scaring the hell out of me. "You can't go back, you can never go back, man. I'm sorry." He placed his spliff between his lips and lit up.

"You're sorry? I'm bloody devastated! What do you mean—I can never go back? Where the hell were you taking me then?"

"I was just trying to buy you some more time. Till I figure out what to do with you."

Suddenly, meeting William Shakespeare slipped into second place on my list of interesting things to do.

I swallowed hard. "What about Emma?" I said.

"You don't want to know," said the Duck, studying the spliff in his hand for imperfections.

"Stop telling me I don't want to know! I want to know! I want to know!"

"Your bird disappears, too," said the Duck.

"And stop calling her my bird! She's a woman—a beautiful, young, gorgeous—God, I miss her. What do you mean she disappears? What happened to her?"

"Nobody knows," said the Duck. "The pigs think you had something to do with it. Some newspapers are saying you may have had an argument, things got out of hand, you did her in, disposed of the body and fled abroad. One paper said you were both abducted by aliens. Either way, the pigs are treating it as possible murder and want to interview you."

"This is worse than I thought. You're right—I don't want to know!"

"Told you you wouldn't want to know."

*Tempus Fugit*

"You must know something—what happened?"

"I don't know."

"They think I murdered Emma?"

He nodded. "Another newspaper said there may have been a little love triangle going on between you, your bird and some guy named Matthew Turner," said the Duck. "Any truth in that?"

"Oh, shut up." I gripped the railing for support. "How can they think I could harm Emma? And as for Emma and Matt—no way. Matt's our friend. I work with him. He'll tell them I could never hurt her."

"He reckons he slept with her behind your back. Sold his story to a Sunday tabloid," smiled the Duck.

"He did what? You're lying! Matt would never—"

The Duck reached inside his jerkin and produced a folded newspaper clipping. He handed it up to me. "It got a little wet, but I kept this."

I opened out the grubby page. Matt's sad face stared out at me. He was holding a photograph of Emma against his heart. The headline read "MY AFFAIR WITH MISSING MODEL". I couldn't bear to read it all, but the subtitles and quotes in the paragraph breaks gave me the gist: "STEVE NEVER KNEW", "OUR NIGHTS OF PASSION", "SHE LOVED ME", "We Made Love While She Talked To Steve On Her Mobile", "She Liked Me To Suck Her Toes", "She Was Having Our Baby"—"Copyright, Matthew Turner, 2001."

"This is a pack of lies," I said.

The Duck reached up and plucked the offensive piece of paper from my hand. "Course it is," he smirked.

"I thought you told me you'd never even heard of Emma," I said.

"Didn't want to hurt your feelings, did I?" said the Duck, putting the clipping carefully back inside his jacket. "Never trust your best friend with your bird."

"You're the one I don't trust," I said. "I have got to go back and clear my name. Find Emma."

"It never happens," said the Duck, taking a long draw on his spliff.

"How do you know—what about alternate futures, free will—parallel universes and that?"

The Duck stood up and offered me his spliff. I declined. "No such thing," he said. "There's just the one universe. We're born in it, we live in it, we die in it, mate. That's it. One past, one present, one future. That's all we get. Well, in your case—no future," he said.

I slumped over the rail.

The Duck patted me on the back. "Never mind, mate, you've still got me."

I pushed him away. "You've done enough damage!"

"You really know how to bring a guy down, man."

"Bring you down? I've a good mind to sling you off this bloody balcony!"

"Temper, temper," said the Duck. "You didn't did you?"

"Didn't what?"

"Top your bird because she was carrying on with this Matthew geezer?"

I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and slung him against the rail, and tried to force him over.

Suddenly, a distinguished, actorly voice boomed out from behind us.

"Unhand the Duck, sirrah!"

## *Tempus Fugit*

We both looked round and saw a bald headed Elizabethan gentleman standing in the open window. He was dressed in black doublet and hose and held a full wine glass in one hand and a clay pipe in the other.

"Is that—?"

"Wills!" grinned the Duck.

Shakespeare looked me up and down. "A lovers' quarrel?"

I unhand the Duck and pushed him away from me.

"Just a misunderstanding," said the Duck.

"Well, you may both come in and partake of me wines, if you've a mind," said Shakespeare. He turned and walked, unsteadily, away from the window.

The Duck and I clambered in over the low sill and practically fell into the room.

The most famous playwright the world has ever known surveyed us from a captain's chair set by a table, so crowded with various bottles of booze, that several of them looked in danger of toppling off at any moment.

"Mind me wines!" he warned.

We straightened up and stood still on the tilting floorboards to get our bearings. I gazed around the room in wonder. One of the walls was shelved and piled up to the ceiling with scrolls. There was another table over by a second window, covered with manuscripts and the paraphernalia of a writer: ink wells, quills, sharpening knife, blotting powder, ruler, magnifying glass, four large reference books, pipe rack—I wanted to go over and grab it all for souvenirs!

"There're goblets on the table, help yourselves, boys," said the Bard. "I'm having one of my happier days."

"May I look on your desk?" I said.

"No. You may not," said Shakespeare.

The Duck poured two glasses of wine and handed me one.

"This is Stephen, he's, er, a friend," said the Duck.

"He's a nosey beggar, isn't he?" said Shakespeare. He looked me up and down. "But of comely aspect."

"I, er, brought you some stuff," said the Duck, producing a lump of something wrapped in silver paper. He offered it to Shakespeare.

"You do it, Duck," he said, wearily.

The Duck got one of the pipes from the rack and started filling it with tobacco. And then he cooked some of the cannabis resin and crumbled it in. He handed it to Shakespeare.

The Bard put his other pipe down and the Duck lit the new one for him with a taper.

"Well, what do you think, Will?" said the Duck.

Shakespeare inhaled deeply, held it in his lungs and expelled the thick aromatic smoke, and nodded. "Good stuff."

"You're giving the Bard marijuana?" I said.

"It helps him write," smiled the Duck.

"No wonder the late plays got a bit weird," I said.

I wanted to ask him a thousand questions about the plays, but all the Bard and the Duck wanted to do was drink wine and smoke pipefuls of marijuana all afternoon. It all got a bit silly. At one stage, they were dancing and singing out on the balcony and the whole structure was swaying and creaking. I thought it was going to come away from the wall and send the important one to a premature death. But it did give me a chance to take a sly peek at what he was working on.

## *Tempus Fugit*

It was hard deciphering the thickly inked scribbles, but it was definitely *Macbeth*! I rifled through the discarded pages and found one that had been screwed up. I flattened it out. It was covered in blots and crossings-out, so I folded it up and slid it in my pocket. What would that be worth, I wondered, at Sotheby's? Not that I would ever dream of parting with it.

Towards the end of the afternoon, we were all sitting outside, drinking and smoking in the sun, and I did get an opportunity to put a few questions to him.

"Where did you go after you left Stratford, Will?" I asked.

"I went to sea, Stephen. Though I confess I only ever saw Holland," he replied. "I lived in Plymouth for a few years and then I came here, to London. My brother, Edmund, and I worked in the leather trade. And then I caught that most contagious of plagues—the acting pox! Acting led to writing, and now I do not walk the boards at all. My leg, you see, Stephen."

"Gout?" I said.

"Syphilis, dear boy."

"I've read your sonnets."

"Have you now? Have some more wine, darling."

The Bard put his arm around me.

"Yes, I—er, thank you—I was wondering who the dark lady might be?"

"Were you now?"

"Yes. Who was she?"

Shakespeare leered at me and touched his nose. "Come, come, dear kitten, you must surely allow the old cat a saucerful of secrets."

I stood up, pretending that I needed to stretch my legs, but actually I just wanted to escape the Bard's clutches.

Later, Shakespeare passed out and I suggested to the Duck that we should be making a move.

"He likes you," said the Duck, lighting up yet another pipeful of marijuana.

"Yeah. I had noticed. A bit too much methinks."

"No. He really does. I was thinking—"

"Don't," I said.

"You could stay here for a bit," said the Duck.

"A bit of what?"

"A bit of culture. I mean, you're into all this literary stuff. What an opportunity—how does personal secretary to William Shakespeare Esquire sound?"

"It's very tempting, but I'm going to have to decline on account I'm not gay," I said.

"I thought you'd be a little more laid back about it, man," said the Duck. "Everybody's a bit gay."

"Speak for yourself—I don't have any gay bits. Not that I'm against gays—I just don't want to be against gays, if you know what I mean. I am totally heterosexual. A one hundred percent red-blooded male. Under no circumstances could I form or take part in any man-to-man relationship of any nature whatsoever."

"So, you'll think about it then?" said the Duck.

"I am going back to my own time and I am going to find out what happened to the woman I love. Notice I said woman. I love women. Always have and always will," I said.

"I thought I'd explained all that, man. You can't go back. You've been erased. There's no future for you. Stay here with Will."

"I don't fancy being chased around the desk, thank you. I'm going back."



*Tempus Fugit*

"You can't."

"What will happen if I do? I mean, what would physically happen to me if I went back to the day you picked me up outside my flat?"

The Duck shrugged. "Well, I've heard there're some pretty weird side effects, but I don't really know."

"Well, there you go—you don't know."

"But what I do know is: you would not be able to exist two days on from when I picked you up. Because I checked. I think you just kinda fade away when you've been erased, like a ghost," said the Duck.

"So, what you're saying is, I've got about twenty-four hours to find out what happened to Emma, clear my name and beat up Matthew Turner?"

The Duck shook his head. "Your erasure had already started before I arrived, man, you'd be like fading away the whole time, getting weaker and weaker, until you become nothing."

"If you dropped me off for a few hours and then picked me up and brought me back in time again, I'd recover—right?"

"I don't know. I've never done it. I tried to save your mother. And that didn't work. Time doesn't make any allowances for change. Like I said, it's really hard to change things."

"You tried to save my mother? How?"

"I tried to warn her. But she wouldn't believe who I was."

"Why not?"

"Because I was in the car when she died, so I couldn't occupy the same space as the real time me. It all got very complicated. I was telling her it was dangerous and the other me was telling her everything was going to be all right."

"They didn't say there was anyone else in the car."

"It was a convertible. I was thrown clear—I wasn't wearing a seatbelt. She went into the wheel."

"And you just crawled away and left her?"

"Amnesia. I was in shock. I don't know. He—I mean, I—wandered off down some streets. The next thing I knew her death was in the papers. She was dead when I left her. I know, because I've been back to that accident a hundred times, trying to figure out a way to stop it happening. I'm still working on it."

"Maybe I could help."

"Maybe," said the Duck. "It's worth a try. But, like you, she wouldn't have a future, so we'd have to bring her back to an earlier time and make sure she could never meet herself."

"I still have to find Emma," I said.

The Duck nodded. "Okay. I'll just write Will a note and we'll saddle the horse."

"Ducky!" cried a voice from below.

We both looked over the rail.

"Oh no," said the Duck. "It's Jemmons."

"Who's Jemmons?" I said.

"Another traveller. Don't say anything. Let's just get out of here as quickly as we can."

A guy dressed in sailor clothes of the period was bounding up the stairs.

"Fancy meeting you here. Is he in?" said the fellow time traveller.

"He's sleeping it off," said the Duck. "We were just leaving. Say goodbye for me."

"Righty-o." He turned to me. "Who's this then?"

*Tempus Fugit*

I followed orders and said nothing.

"Just a mate," said the Duck.

"Cat got his tongue?"

"He's just feeling a bit depressed," explained the Duck.

"Depressed? Depressed? He wants to try spending two years in a Spanish Inquisition dungeon, matey! Then he'd have something to be depressed about all right. Tortured for eight weeks on the trot I was—"

"We have to go, Roger," said the Duck.

"Ever been a prisoner of war in Napoleon's France? I was standing on the scaffold once, looking up at the bloody guillotine. Want to know how I escaped?"

"Why did you escape?" I said.

"No—not why—how? I'm asking you how I escaped."

"Well, if you don't know, how do you expect me to know?" I said.

"No—I know how I escaped—I'm asking you," said Jemmons.

"Well, why are you asking me when you already know?" I said.

Jemmons turned to the Duck. "Is he trying to be funny?"

"Why are you asking him?" I said. "How would he know what I'm trying to be?"

Jemmons squared up to me. "Do you want a fight?"

"No thanks," I said. "I only had one a few hundred years ago."

"Where did you leave your machine, man?" asked the Duck, trying to distract him.

"Down Southwark Dock," said Jemmons, still eyeballing me. "This century's jumping with TCPs. I just came to warn his nibs about a plague that's about to break out round here next week. Thought I could persuade him to take a trip out into the country. Can't have our great man catching the black pox, can we?"

"No," said the Duck. "Er, what was that about TCPs?"

"Yeah. I ran into some up in the 1660s, when I was helping Pepys shift some Darjeeling. And then again when I was watching Charlie boy lose his head—love that bit where he pulls his hair off his neck for the executioner. Cool as you like. Class act that Charles the First."

"Did they see you?"

"You know me, Ducksy—I was well-mingled, but there were more faces than usual about. That's when I knew it was tempus fugit time," said Jemmons. He gave me a glare. "All this TCP activity anything to do with him?"

The Duck smiled. "We have to split, man. Tempus fugit." The Duck set off down the stairs and I followed.

"Yeah, tempus fugit," said Jemmons.

When we reached the stable, I said: "What's his problem?"

"He's a bit of an anorak—thinks he knows everything. Stole his machine down in Plymouth during the Napoleonic War." The Duck found the portal and we climbed inside the horse. "He doesn't like us bringing passengers down the vortex, thinks it causes heat with the Temporal Criminal Pursuit. This time he may be right. I think they're looking for you."

"Because they know I'm not erased?"

"Maybe."

"But why did they want me erased in the first place?"

"I have no idea," said the Duck.

"Yeah. I really believe that."

"I mean it. I don't know why, man. Straight up."

*Tempus Fugit*

"I know when you're lying, Duck—your beak moves. You lied about this machine, too, didn't you?" I said.

"When?" said the Duck, finding first gear.

"When you said you couldn't drive to any date you like. You guys could park these things on a gnat's birthday if you wanted to."

"If I take you back to the thirteenth of August, 2001, your ass'll be toast, man," he said. "I'm not prepared to let you throw your life away—"

"Take me back," I said, grabbing his arm. "Or I'll beat you up."

"This is a real bummer, man—you know I'm a pacifist and you know I have a low tolerance to physical pain, and you know I'm just trying to do the right thing."

"Yeah, well, pacifists with low tolerances to physical pain don't get to call the shots—it's one of the big disadvantages of being a pacifist with a low tolerance to physical pain," I said.

"If I take you back, you have to promise me you won't do anything stupid," said the Duck.

"Like what?"

"Getting out of the car?"

## **Chapter Six**

How can something you have done a thousand times feel so new and peculiar? But when I walked up those three flights of stairs to my flat, that's exactly how it felt.

As I let myself in, I thought I heard a scuffling noise, as though I had surprised someone.

I held my breath and stepped softly into the lounge. A guy with his back to me was sitting on my sofa, smoking a cigar. As soon as he turned, I knew it was Groucho Marx!

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"Well, I might ask you the same thing. In fact, I think I will: what are you doing here?" he said, in that inimitable accent.

"Where did you hire the fancy dress?" I said.

"Have you looked in the mirror lately. On second thoughts, don't look in the mirror lately, you wouldn't recognise yourself," said Groucho. "I hardly recognise you myself and I don't even know you."

"Wait a minute—stop! This isn't happening."

Suddenly, Chico Marx came out of my bathroom. He was accurate in every detail, right up to that funny little hat he used to wear.

"Thisa guy wearsa make-up, boss," he said, fiddling with a compact.

"That belongs to my girlfriend," I said.

"Let me see that, Ravelli. If it's what I think it is, this could be an open and shut case."

Chico handed his brother the compact.

"Just as I thought. This powder's for powdering the inside of a nose."

I snatched it off him. "Give me that and get out!"

Groucho jumped to his feet and did his crazy, crouching walk around the room.

I went into the bathroom and locked the door, and slid my back down it until I was sitting.

My visitors had started knocking on it and humming an old vaudeville tune.

"You can hide but you can't come out, Sloane," said Groucho. "Give him another verse of 'Sweet Adeline' and see how he likes that."

Chico tapped out the tune. "He don't come out, boss. Shall I giva him the second chorus?"

"Of chorus. You can give him his just desserts, too. Or you can give him his marching hors d'oeuvres. In fact, you can give him a new aperitif and let him chew on that!"

The tapping continued.

"You're not funny!" I said. "Go away!"

The tapping died away.

I stood up and, looking round for any fresh signs of Emma, caught myself in the mirror. I was pale, deathly pale. The erasure was kicking in. I opened the door. The Marx Brothers were gone. But I could hear the faint sound of a woman, or a child, weeping.

I walked lightly around the flat, trying to detect where it was coming from. I isolated it to my bedroom.

"Emma!" I said.

## *Tempus Fugit*

I pushed open the door and looked in. A young woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a black Victorian costume, was sitting on my bed, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Miss?" I said.

"Oh, Mr Sloane, thank the Lord you are returned," she said, forcing a smile.

"And you are?"

"My name is Eyre, Miss Jane Eyre," she replied.

"Jane Eyre was a character in a book I read when I was fourteen," I said. "Who put you up to this?"

"Put me up, sir? I do not understand your question, sir. But if my presence offends you, I will leave this moment." She rose and the great yardage of bombazine she was wrapped up in swished towards me.

I blocked her dramatic exit in the doorway.

"Please, I beg of you, let me pass, sir," she said, averting her eyes and holding her hanky to her forehead.

"I don't get it. You're like lucid dreams from my imagination, or memory," I said. "Am I doing this? Or, are they?"

"Will you let me pass, sir?" cried Miss Eyre.

"Yes. Go, Jane. It would never work between us."

She let out a big sob and swept past me.

"That's it—run back to Rochester—see if I care!"

I went over and picked up my mobile phone off the bookshelf, where I had left it a thousand years ago, and rang Emma's mobile number.

"I'm sorry," said a female voice. "But the number you have called is not available. Please try again later. I'm sorry, but the number you have—"

I tried Matthew's work number.

"Matt Turner."

I hadn't made up my mind what to say.

"Hello? You're through to Matt—who is this?"

"Meet me in our usual watering hole in one hour," I said.

"Steve? Where are you?"

"Just be there, Matt." I hung up.

I was determined to ignore any figments of my imagination that showed up, because I thought they might have been deliberately sent to delay me. But it was a bit spooky taking a shower, while Robin Hood was telling me his plan to free Maid Marion from Nottingham Castle, right from under the nose of the Sheriff. Much more worrying was the shock I got when I saw that I could actually see through parts of my arm.

"Pass me that towel, please, Robin?" I said, stepping out of the shower.

The outlaw cleverly flicked the towel off the rail with his bow and tossed it over my head. I dried my hair as I made my way out. Robin followed me.

"What dost think of my plan?" he said.

I turned in the doorway.

"Why don't you find a secret passageway in?" I said. "I think you'll find there's one under the moat."

"Why, that's it!" he cried. "And the gold it's in the—"

I closed the door in his face.

Tommy Cooper showed me a card trick as I got dressed in the bedroom.

"You see—not like that—like that—then like that—and you get that and that..." He started flicking ace after ace onto the bed.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Amazing, Tommy," I smiled, combing my hair. I grabbed my mobile and hurried out.

The Duck was waiting for me in the car. I got in shaking aces out of my sleeves.

"You look terrible, man," he said. "Where to?"

"The Pig and Whistle in Angel Islington—do you know it?"

"I'll find it."

We shot down the road and ran a set of red lights.

"I'd like to get there in one piece," I said.

"You're fading fast, man," said the Duck, accelerating down a back street.

"Don't worry—these babies handle like rally cars. So, what happened up there? You were ages."

"You know that *Sgt Pepper* cover Peter Blake stuck pictures of all The Beatles' favourite celebrities over?"

The Duck nodded. "Great album, man."

"Well. It was a bit like that, only they were coming out of the walls," I said.

"Couldn't have put it better myself, my boy!" said W.C. Fields, from the backseat. "They never did pay me for that appearance."

"Can you see him?" I said.

"Who?"

"W.C. Fields is sitting right behind you."

"There's no one there. I think you're shedding, man," said the Duck.

"Shedding?"

"I have heard it's an early stage of erasure. Your, uh, creative inspiration sheds. Think of your brain as an onion, layer after layer peels off, till you're just left with a—"

"Pickle? I get the picture. Don't tell me any more."

"You'll start losing your ability to think of anything original," added the Duck.

"I'm in advertising," I said. "That won't be a problem."

"I was going to say, that's only the first sign, man," said the Duck. "This guy I met in the nineteenth century told me that in its advanced stages erasure could lead to full scale personality adoption."

"What the hell's that?" I said, not really wanting to go there.

"Uh, it's a kind of physical plagiarism—the subject borrows the persona of a real life, or fictional, character they admire, and unashamedly copies them."

"I'll be turning into the lead singer in a boy band you mean?"

"What's a boy band?" said the Duck.

"You are so lucky," I said.

But the Duck was right, and by the time we reached London, phase two had cut in—I had become a Humphrey Bogart wannabe. It was a peculiar feeling. I knew I was assuming the actor's voice and gestures, but there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

Shielding my eyes against the slanting rain, I left my associate in the car and rushed across the street to The Pig and Whistle.

Matthew Turner was sitting up at the bar, paying for two bottles of lager and flirting with Priscilla the barmaid, who wore her blonde hair in a beehive so tall, even the bees would get vertigo going up there. There were only a handful of regulars in. Just the usual flotsam and jetsam.

I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Steve! Christ—you look terrible. What hap—"

*Tempus Fugit*

"Why don't we just walk over by that window?" I said, pushing him ahead of me and letting him carry my lager.

"They've been trying to reach you all morning. Something about a presentation you were supposed to be doing for—"

We sat down at a table well away from the others.

"Put it on ice," I said, developing a slight Bogartian lisp. "It doesn't amount to a hill of beans."

"No, I don't think it's beans—I think it's for a deodorant or air freshener—"

"I said can it!"

"All right, Steve. Keep your knickers on."

He offered me a cigarette. I took it, broke the filter off and stuck the butt in the corner of my mouth. Matt lit it for me.

"I see you're taking ignoring the Government Health Warning to a new level," he said.

"Speaking of health, how's yours?" I said.

"Mine? I'm fine, mate—it's you I'm worried about. What the hell's the matter with you? I hope it's not contagious. You look like death."

I smiled grimly. "Death can be contagious—it all depends on where you're sitting, Judas."

"What?"

"You thought I wouldn't find out, you thought you could go behind my back and you thought you were home free, but you slipped up."

"Steve? What happened to your voice? You're lisping. Is there something wrong with your lip?"

"Don't get cute—or I might have to give you a slap," I said. "And you wouldn't like that."

He laughed. "Is this a wind up?"

"Nobody puts one over on Stephen Gilmour Sloane," I said. "Why don't you tell me about you and Emma?"

"Me and Emma? What're you on about?"

"We can do this the easy way or we can do it the hard way," I said. "It's just the same to me."

"You think there's something going on between me and Emma?"

"Oh, you're good," I said. "You're very good. But not good enough to fool old Stephen Gilmour Sloane. You gotta wake up pretty early in the morning to put one over on him."

"Steve, you're not well, mate. You're talking about yourself in the third person. I'm phoning Emma," he said, and he took out his mobile and started punching in the numbers.

"That's not a bad idea," I said. "Let's hear what she's got to say about it. Go right ahead."

"Damn. She's not picking up."

"But you already knew that, didn't you? Because that's just the way the two of you planned it," I said.

Priscilla the barmaid came out from behind the bar and started cleaning up a nearby table. Matt looked anxiously across at her.

"Because she never went to work today, did she, Matt?" I continued. "You see, the way I figure it, the two of you had plenty to talk about last night—right after she left me. And I bet you were waiting for her just around the corner. Then you probably asked her if she'd like to go back to your place for a little nightcap. Only she stayed the

*Tempus Fugit*

night. I bet if we went over there right now, she'd still be there, wearing your pyjama top. That the way it played out, Matt?"

"You're sick, Steve. This is paranoia—"

"Is it? Well, let's see how you like this!" I stuck my thumb over the top of my bottle, shook it up and squirted lager in his face. "You dirty-double-crossing-sap!"

"For Christ's sake—Steve!"

"Everything all right over there?" said Priscilla.

"Everything's just dandy," I said. I leaned across the table and looked him straight in the eye. "You went behind my back, Matt. And you stole my girl. I could forgive you for all that. But what I hate is a yellow-bellied liar and dirty snake in the grass!"

"You're off your head!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "I don't have to listen to this!"

"You'll listen to it till I tell you stop listening to it! Sidddown!"

"Take this outside," said the barmaid.

"Stay outta this, sister!" I said.

"No, I will not stay out of it. I want you both to leave—right now!" she said. "Or I'll call the manager."

I stood up. "That won't be necessary, Miss—we were just leaving," I said, and I took a five pound note out of my wallet and dropped it on the table.

Matt straightened his tie and wiped the rest of the beer off his face with his sleeve. I grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the pub.

"Don't push me!" he said, as I gave him one last shove out the door onto the pavement.

"I'll push you around as much as I like, and you'll take it, because you know if you don't I might give you a slap and make you look bad, and you don't want to take that chance," I said.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'm the guy who's pushing you around," I said, giving him two shoves in the shoulder. "See? See? You're not so brave now, are you, sap? Now you haven't got that dame in there to protect you."

"If you push me once more, I'll—"

"You'll what?" I cut in. I gave him a big push.

He grabbed me by my lapels and tried to knee me where I keep my loose change, but I moved my hips out of the way and swung him hard around and up against the wall.

"A lot of saps like you have tried that move," I said, holding him up by the scruff of his neck. "But they were too slow—just like you, sap—ugh!"

Suddenly, he'd brought his knee up into my groin. I let go of his collar and dropped to my knees. Now I knew how Aleman the Smithy felt.

Matt pushed me aside and stormed off up the street, cursing my name. The Duck was soon at my side, helping me to my feet.

"If this is one of your possible futures," said the Duck, "I think I'd better take you back to yesterday."

"Take me to Grantchester Gardens," I said. "And make it snappy."

"That's your bird's place, innit?"

"How come you know so much, Shorty?"

"Er, Channel Four do a documentary about her last hours."

"Get me a copy of that." I climbed in the driver's seat.



## *Tempus Fugit*

The Duck got in the passenger seat. I looked at the complex controls and didn't know what to touch first.

"We'd better swap over," said the Duck.

I pushed the Duck and made him get out, so that I could just slide across. He walked round the car and got in the driver's side.

"You've become very aggressive," said the Duck, as we drove off.

"You gotta beef with that?" I said.

"No, but—"

"Just drive! Unless you want me to give you a slap and make you look bad."

"Why couldn't you have turned into someone nice, like John Lennon or Roger Waters?"

"Come on—quit whining and put your foot on the gas, sap!"

I found the spare key in the usual place—in the Swiss cheese plant down the hall—and let myself into her apartment. The Duck waited in the car.

The place felt empty. I moved through the lounge to the kitchen and touched the electric kettle. It was cold. I checked the bathroom. The soap was dry.

"You haven't been back here," I said, aloud. I slumped down on the edge of the bath. "Something happened to you last night, on your way home. And you never made it back here."

I returned to the lounge and took the most recent photograph of her out of its frame. I wandered over to the window and looked up and down Grantchester Gardens. Everything was as it should be, quiet and still, nothing stirring but a few chestnut leaves in the breeze. I tapped the edge of the photograph on my bottom lip and tried to think about Emma and Matt. If they were having an affair, Matt had done a pretty good job of putting me off the scent. They say the loser's always the last to know, but I couldn't buy Emma and Matt going behind my back and Emma having Matt's baby, no matter what it said in the Duck's stupid Sunday paper.

I caught sight of something moving down in the street, on the edge of my field of vision. It was just some woman in a white coat, walking a dog. I watched her in a bored way. And then she did something slightly strange—at least, I thought it was a little strange at the time—she crossed the road and stooped down to speak to the Duck for a few seconds, through the window. I think he wound it down for her. And then they—the woman and her dog, a King Charles spaniel—walked on.

I went back down to the car.

"Drive me over to Turner's place—it's in Sydney Road."

"Yes, boss," said the Duck.

"What did the old lady want?" I said, as we moved off.

"Uh? Oh, just Neighbourhood Watch. She wanted to know what I was doing there," explained the Duck.

"What did you tell her?" I said.

"I told her I was just waiting for my girlfriend, Emma Gummer," said the Duck.

"That was dumb," I said. "You could wind up as a murder suspect."

"Yeah, I do," nodded the Duck. "There's an identikit of me in that Channel Four documentary I was telling you about. I look quite good. Better than some of the others, anyway."

"Others?"

"The other suspects. People who were seen round here last night and this morning."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"When does this show go out?"

"Not until next spring. March, I think."

"Go pick me up a copy, while I turn over Matt's place," I said. "I might recognise a face."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n," said the Duck, saluting me.

The Vera midi came on.

I felt a numbness in my cheek and flipped the vanity mirror down to take a look. My skin was so faded it was almost transparent.

"I need a scarf or something to cover this up," I said. "I look like Bela Lugosi in *White Zombie*."

"There's one in the boot you can borrow," said the Duck. "Don't hang about in there—we'd better get you back."

"I'll be as long as the job takes," I said.

"I don't know if erasure's reversible," said the Duck. "Some of the skin damage may be permanent."

"Quit yakking," I said. "I got things on my mind."

The scarf the Duck loaned me was one of those long, knitted affairs, but I wrapped it round my neck and face several times, so that little more than my eyes and forehead showed. The last thing I wanted was to attract attention and have to explain why I was turning into an ice sculpture.

I had to break into Turner's flat. I used my shoulder and broke the lock. I never even bothered to ring the bell. Just as well Emma wasn't there, because I made a lot of noise doing it. I was relieved she wasn't there, too, because it could have meant there was some truth in Turner's sordid little newspaper story. But more important to me than that, there was no sign in any of the rooms that she had ever even been up there. No forgotten items of make-up or toiletries in the bathroom or bedroom. No spare clothes in the drawers or wardrobe. And no menthol cigarette butts in the ashtrays. I was about sixty percent convinced Matt was on the level. So why had he sold that kiss and tell story to the gutter press? That would have to keep.

I just about made it back to the car. I don't know how many hours I was into erasure, but I was feeling faint and thin, and it was all I could do to open the passenger door. The Duck had brought the video back from the future, and handed it to me as I collapsed into my seat. I laid back and tapped it with my nearly invisible finger.

"This may just hold the key to this whole mystery," I said, and passed out.

## Chapter Seven

"Where am I?" I said, squinting into the sunlight pouring through an open door. I was lying on a couch, fully clothed, but shoeless and covered in a knitted patchwork blanket. I could just make out a summery garden and green hills beyond. "When am I?" I said.

A Frisbee sailed across the lawn and I heard a girl laugh.

I seemed to be in some kind of hippie farmhouse. Joss sticks were burning and there were dozens of handmade candles everywhere, and all the fabrics and fittings had that Indian look about them. But the architecture was definitely English.

"Welcome, my friend," said a voice.

I turned my gaze deeper into the room and saw a skinny middle-aged guy, with shoulder-length hair and a beard, sprawled in an armchair. There was a half pipe in the corner of his mouth and he was knitting. Oh, and he was wearing Jesus sandals.

"Hi," I said.

"I am known as Tree," he said.

"Steve," I waved. "Can I get a drink of water?"

The hippie rose and I saw that when he unbent himself he could have got into any major league basketball team, on his talent for height alone.

He brought me water in a wooden bowl. I was going to lap it up like a dog for a joke, but resisted the temptation and behaved myself.

"The Duck tells me you have been through much," said Tree.

I checked out my hands, cupped round the bowl. There were no clear spots or signs of fading. My colour was coming back.

"He exaggerates," I said. "Look, I know this is going to sound like a dumb question, but, what year is it?"

"1967," he said, without the slightest hint that he found my question out of the ordinary.

"Is *Sgt Pepper* out yet?" I said.

"Yes. But I prefer the madcap lyricism of Pink Floyd," he said.

"Speaking of which, where's the Duck?"

"In the garden with my daughter."

"How old is she?"

"Seventeen."

"Shouldn't someone be keeping an eye on them?" I said.

Tree smiled. "They are young," he said.

"What're you knitting?"

"A Tibetan prayer bonnet," he replied.

Now, that is what I call a real conversation killer. I looked at my hands again and then out the door.

"I need to speak to the Duck," I said. "Excuse me."

I got up and fell flat on my face. It was as if my legs had turned to India rubber.

Tree picked me up and put me back on the couch.

"Stay there. I will go and get him for you," he said. He went out, stooping low as he passed under the doorframe.

A minute later, the Duck bounced in, holding the hand of a very beautiful and pregnant hippie girl.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Steve," he smiled.

## *Tempus Fugit*

The girl looked at me curiously with her gentle blue eyes, and brushed aside a strand of golden hair that had blown across her face. She looked like an angel thrown out of heaven. I made a point of looking at her bump and then back up at the Duck.

"Er, this is Emily," he said.

"Hello," said Emily.

"Hello, Emily," I said. "Would you mind if I had a word with the Duck alone a minute?"

She nodded, gave the Duck a peck on the cheek and waddled back out into the garden.

"Yours?" I said.

"How do you feel?" said the Duck.

"You really are a menace—no woman in history is safe, is she? You must be the unlikeliest Casanova the world has ever known. I don't think it would be stretching credibility too far to say that you, single-handedly, could be responsible for the entire Anglo-Saxon race. We're all second cousins twice removed, aren't we? From you! And why have you brought me back to 1967? Videos haven't been invented yet! How am I going to watch my tape about Emma?"

"Got one in the car," said the Duck.

"Anyway, as I was saying, haven't you ever heard of birth control? I don't believe you—you've got the most fantastic machine ever invented, and all you can think of doing with it is bonking your way through history! Can't you think of something useful to do—like saving the environment or something?"

"They did that by the fourth millennium, mate," said the Duck. "They've patched the ozone layer, replanted all the rainforests, cleaned up the oceans and genetically replicated all the plants and animals that became extinct. There's a world government. War's over. Everyone's perfectly healthy and poverty's been defeated. All in all, every concern mankind ever had has been sorted, er, except one."

"And what's that?"

The Duck coughed. "Headaches."

"Headaches? But you just told me everyone's going to be perfectly healthy," I said. "Are you telling me they're never going to find a cure for the common headache?"

"No, not that kind of headache. You know—the headache," said the Duck. He mimed someone getting a headache. "Oh, I've got a headache. You know. The headache she gets."

"Who gets?"

"The female, when, you know, they go to bed and the man says, you know, and she says: no, I've got a headache."

"I get you—the big switch off. They still do that, huh? Bless 'em. You know, all that stuff's just another urban myth—women don't say that if you know what you're doing," I said.

"But they do. By the fourth millennium, there's research going on all over the world into it. Trillions of earthdollars pour into it every year. Some of the most eminent scientists in The United Planets of the Solar System are studying the problem," said the Duck.

"They're having a laugh," I said. "All a woman needs is a little romancing. A Chinese takeaway, a good video, a quick grope and then straight down to business."

"You can get five years for those kind of smutty remarks in the fourth millennium," said the Duck.

"Smutty? It's only smutty if you're doing it right, mate!" I said.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Physical sex is frowned upon. Most women go in for artificial insemination by the year 3000."

"You're joking. That's like eating food with the wrappers on."

"All sperm has to be screened. Each stage of the embryo's development is carefully monitored. Only genetically perfect babies are allowed to go the full term."

"And there's no proper sex?"

"Very little. Practically none outside marriage. There are still some women who practise 'the grunt', as they call it, but these women face heavy penalties, if they're caught."

"I bet their diaries are full though. Don't tell me anymore—I'm getting a headache just thinking about it," I said. "You're not from the future, are you? I mean, you don't look genetically perfect to me, but it would explain why you're driving round time's highways and byways, wearing that hippie get-up, looking for a bit of the old free love with anything that moves."

"The future's a bummer," said the Duck. "But—like I told you—I'm from the seventies. It was your generation that couldn't get it up. The lowest sperm count in the history of humankind, man. That's your lot. So, don't lay it on the hippies. We did our bit."

"You did more than your bit, mate."

"I'm essentially a monogamist, man."

"Yeah, a monogamist with a time machine—and the time machine's essential for what you get up to! Speaking of which, where have you hidden it? I want to watch my video."

"You're lying on it, man," said the Duck, and he lifted the Hindu throw and disappeared inside the couch.

We watched the Channel Four documentary about Emma's disappearance through twice. It was fifty minutes long, if you took out the adverts, and was called, *Where is Emma Gummer?* The programme investigated her last known movements, after she left me, and used an actress to play Emma. The reconstructions were spooky stuff to watch, seeing yourself played by an actor, you want to comb his hair and give him a better voice.

Several witnesses, who were in the Dragon Chinese Restaurant, on the evening of Sunday the twelfth of August, when we had our big argument, described fairly accurately what happened, as I recalled it. But one would-be hero said he was all for coming over and sorting me out, because he thought I was upsetting Emma, but his girlfriend stopped him.

"I'd liked to have seen him try," I said.

"He's a fireman and tai chi instructor," said the Duck, who had seen and analysed the documentary many times and made loads of notes on it, as well as drawn up a number of complicated looking flow-charts.

"Fast forward it to the scene where Em goes to book the taxi," I said.

"Where were you exactly when she went over there?" said the Duck, checking his notes.

"I went the other way," I said. "Up the High Street to the bus stop. If only I'd gone with her. Hey! I can go with her. You could take me back—I mean, forward—to that night, and I could follow her."

The Duck sucked in air. "Risky, mate."

"Why?"

## *Tempus Fugit*

"You'd be occupying the same temporal flux—real time—as your other self. We'd have to be absolutely certain there was no possibility of the two of you meeting up."

"What are you saying—you think I'm lying when I say I went straight home?"

The Duck shook his head. "Neither of us can be sure what happened—your erasure had begun, your memory of events could be, er, compromised. It seems odd that you didn't go after her, when she ran off into the night like that, you knew she was upset," said the Duck, trampling all over my feelings.

"Look, I feel bad enough about this already," I said, "without you messing with my head."

"Sorry, Steve," said the Duck. "But I have to look at this logically and try not to let sentiment get in the way."

"And you're enjoying every minute of it, aren't you!" I said.

"Did you, or did you not, have anything to do with the disappearance of Emma Gummer?" said the Duck, pen poised over his notebook.

"Oh, go stick your head down a toilet!"

"Good. You see, I have to test the psychological profile I've drawn up for you against the model. Your response scores a seven on my chart."

"You what? You're not seriously suggesting I could have had anything to do with Emma's disappearance."

"We have to investigate every avenue," said the Duck. "And leave no stone unturned."

"I wish you'd crawl back under yours! Look at this bit, where the swarthy guy comes into the office and orders a cab to take him to the station. He goes outside and then just disappears into the night. None of the drivers remember picking him up. And what's he doing taking a taxi to the station at that time of the night? He'd be lucky to catch a train at eleven in the morning, let alone eleven in the evening. He's very suss. Look closely at that identikit. Remind you of anybody?"

"No. Why—who is he?"

"I don't know—that's why I'm asking you."

"The cab company say she was dropped off at eleven thirty-five at the junction of Grantchester Gardens and Medlar Road," said the Duck.

"Why wasn't she dropped at her door?" I said. "Unless she needed something from the late shop in Medlar Road."

"Good point," said the Duck, making a note of it.

"I don't think she ever got back to her flat," I said. "I got this sense of—of emptiness when I went round there. It just felt like she hadn't been back there for some time. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, well, we have to stick to the facts," said the Duck, adjusting his glasses. "Not your powers of psychic reasoning."

"I want to go back to that night," I said. "I'm willing to risk the temporal whatsit."

"You'd be subjecting yourself to a second dose of erasure sickness," said the Duck. "You're weak. It could be fatal this time."

"I don't care. I've got to know what happened to her. I love her," I said. "I have to know. I have to."

"Don't give in to your emotions, mate."

"That's easy for you to say. I can't bear not knowing!"

"Get a grip!" said the Duck, and slapped my face.

"What the—?" I punched him in the arm. "Don't slap me! You dolly!"

## *Tempus Fugit*

He rubbed his arm and glared at me, his mouth pouting, his beady eyes narrowing to slits, like two hyphens. "That bloody hurt!" he said.

Suddenly, he lashed out at me. He just flew at me, his arms flailing, slapping and punching, scratching and clawing me, like a demented octopus with a grudge.

"I should have disciplined you more!" he screeched. "Spare the rod—spoil the child!"

"Get off!" I cried. "Get off me—you lunatic!"

"How dare you strike your father!" he screamed.

"Get off me! Aagh!" I shrieked.

I was too weak to defend myself. I fumbled for the door catch, but the Duck's onslaught was so ferocious and unexpected, I couldn't get it open. I had him hold by the throat and was trying to keep him at arm's length, but he grabbed my wrist and started biting my hand.

"Spoilt brat! Spoilt brat!" he kept yelling.

"I thought you were a pacifist!" I gasped.

The door of the Cortina flew open and we both tumbled out onto the Kashmiri carpet.

Tree towered over us. "Peace and love," he said.

We both froze and then let each other go.

"We must all reconcile our differences, in the end," said Tree, giving us both a hand up. "For each of us is only one with the universe. An insignificant speck in the eternal flux of reality."

"Yeah, well, he hit me," said the Duck. "I had to work out my aggression."

"Naturally," said Tree.

"I'm phoning Childline," I said.

No matter how much I had imagined it or how many times I watched that video, nothing could have prepared me for the experience of seeing Emma again. The Duck parked way down the High Street and made me walk back up, towards the cab office, so that there would be absolutely no possibility of meeting myself. He seemed to be very worried about that. I waited in a doorway, just across the street from the taxi rank. Of course, I was erasing again, and this time it felt worse, although I wasn't hallucinating, or getting any of the personality disorders I experienced the first time round, I looked as pale as a corpse. Two drunks came by and made fun of me.

"Hey, look at the state of him!" laughed one.

"Hey, you! It's not Halloween, is it?" said his mate.

"Stand back, it's very contagious," I said, just to get rid of them.

They didn't take much convincing and quickly stumbled away.

And then I saw her, crossing the road to book her taxi. I wanted to run to her, to hold her, to feel her warmth and hear her voice again, but the Duck had warned me to keep well away from her. He'd had personal experience of these things, when he tried to save my mother, and knew it was virtually impossible to change events. My mission was to follow her and, finally, discover what really did happen to her.

Suddenly, the swarthy guy appeared from a side street and hurried into the office. I could see them both in there quite clearly through the plate glass window. Emma spoke to the guy operating the radio behind the counter and then sat down on a bench to wait. The swarthy guy acted just the way he did in the television reconstruction: he booked a cab, hung around for a few minutes and then came back outside and looked up and down the High Street. I backed into the shadows of my doorway, so he wouldn't spot me.

## *Tempus Fugit*

A taxi came down from the railway station end of the High Street, where I was probably still waiting for my bus.

Emma came out of the waiting room, said something to the driver and climbed in the back.

The Duck drove past me slowly and indicated that he was going up to turn round.

This brief distraction was enough to make me miss what happened next, but when I looked back across the road, the swarthy guy was getting into the taxi, next to the driver. The taxi driver began to make a three point turn, to go in the wrong direction!

I edged out of my hiding place and looked desperately back up the High Street to see where the Duck was. The white Cortina was coming, but now it was facing the wrong way! Emma's taxi was already passing it on the other side of the road.

The Duck spotted what was happening and swung his car round in a wide arc that brought him up on the kerb right in front of me. I got in. But I was slow, weakened by the erasure I was going through.

"They're going the wrong way. Don't lose them."

We sped after them. I kept my eyes fixed on the distinctive tailgate of the taxi.

"He's taking the swarthy guy to the railway station," said the Duck. "It's a double fare. That's why he kept it quiet. He pocketed the fare."

"I hope you're right," I said. "I don't like the look of this."

We passed an empty bus stop, the one I remembered standing in that night.

"I'm gone," I said.

The Duck slapped my leg. "Nah—don't worry—you're still here, mate."

It suddenly began to rain. I remembered that shower. I had been sitting on a bus less than a mile away, looking at my sad reflection in the window, when the first drops started sliding down.

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed. "This isn't the way to the station—we should have turned left back there! My God—where's he taking her?"

"Don't worry," said the Duck. "I've got them."

"But the swarthy guy definitely said he wanted to go to the station. They must be working together! Pull up closer—I'm going to warn her!"

"You can't," said the Duck.

"We are not going to let this happen!" I cried.

"Relax, man. Nothing's happened yet."

I tried to grab the wheel, but I was too weak and the Duck easily pushed my hand away.

"Please—please get closer," I said.

The Duck ignored me and kept his eyes fixed on the taxi, maintaining his distance.

A great weariness was overcoming me—it felt like the erasure was eating me away.

"Stop them, please—don't let them do anything to her. I'm begging you. Stop them, Duck. Don't let them hurt her..."

My head was swimming, I was seeing the tailgate in triplicate. It was all I could do to turn my head and look at the Duck's profile. My breathing was becoming shallower and shallower. I shook my head and felt the hot tears filling my eyes.

"Father," I said.

The Duck patted me on the knee and the Cortina accelerated. We were drawing closer and closer. I smiled through my tears—I could see her brown hair in



## *Tempus Fugit*

the rear window, through our swishing wipers and the rain. They were turning. I saw Emma's head turn to the side. We were so close now, that I could even see her lean forward and say something to the driver and the swarthy guy look back over his seat at her. We followed them into a side street—and then, suddenly, they accelerated at a tremendous velocity.

"That's a machine!" cried the Duck, frantically reaching for his temporal-overdrive switch.

The whole street lit up with clusters of coloured lights and I glimpsed Emma's face peering back at us through the rear window of what was clearly not a taxi.

And then we were hurtling after them, but the back of the taxi elongated and turned electric blue, until it stretched away to a vanishing point. And then it was gone and we were drifting into the empty red vortex of the time continuum.

The Duck twiddled some controls and shook his head.

"That was a Pursuit vehicle," he said. "Time Police. We can't keep up with that. They're long gone, man. I'd like to get my hands on one of those babies."

I immediately began to feel better, away from the corrosive influence of the erasure. My head was clearing and the heaviness in all my bones was lifting.

"At least she's alive," I said. "Where would they be taking her?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, man," shrugged the Duck, still fiddling with the complex of controls on the dash.

"I'm going to get her back," I said, "even if I have to go to the end of eternity."

"Literally?" blinked the Duck.

## Chapter Eight

"We'll go back and see my mate in Somerset, he might know what to do," said the Duck.

"The old hippie?" I said. "What does he know?"

"His real name's Sydney Mason-Wright. And he's from the future. The far out future, man."

"But he knits," I said.

"Yeah, well, we all have our little vices," said the Duck.

Tree and Emily were hand-dyeing wool in a shed around the side of the house, when we arrived at the top of their lane.

"Duck!" squealed Emily, wrapping her woad blue arms around him.

Tree and I just nodded at each other. I saw the freakishly tall hippie in a new light now, and was more wary of him, not only because of that posh double-barrelled name, but also because he was from the future and must know stuff. And if he had information that could be of use to me in my search for Emma, I was going to suck up to him for all I was worth. We went up to the house and Tree made us all a lovely pot of nettle and honey tea, while the Duck rolled a joint.

"So, you're from the future," I said, casually slipping it into the general conversation. "What year?"

Emily looked quickly to her father and then they both looked at the Duck.

"I had to tell him," said the Duck. "He would have found out anyway."

"I need your help," I said.

And then something extraordinary happened—Tree and his daughter spoke to each other, in their future language. It was hard to make out what they were saying, because it was a strange concoction of several world languages, and they spoke incredibly fast, a bit like a speeded up tape, but I did recognise some English, Spanish and French words and phrases thrown in there.

The Duck didn't have much clue what they were saying either, because he turned to me and said: "They're just talking in their own language."

"I'd worked that out," I said. "But what is it?"

"Um?"

"We were speaking a mixture of Worldese and our mother tongue," said Tree. "In our time we all have to learn Worldese—it is based on your Esperanto—but, of course, no one, not even in our enlightened age, can bear to give up their ancestral language and culture."

"Really?" I said. "Look, I'm sorry if I've caused any trouble, but I need to talk to you about the time police. They've got my girlfriend."

Tree and Emily exchanged looks again, and that scared me. And then they both looked at me with softened eyes, and that scared me even more.

"I see," said Tree.

"It's bad, isn't it?" said the Duck.

All three of us glared at the Duck.

"What I meant was, it's, er, a bit tricky," said the Duck.

"Yes," nodded Emily, joining the Duck's side. "It's a bit tricky."

I looked to Tree, who was easily the brainiest one in the room, I had decided.

"It's very tricky," he nodded.

"So, it's not too bad then," I said.

"No, it's not," said Emily, giving the Duck a nudge.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Uh, no, it's not that bad really, mate. I mean, it could be worse, if they take her to—"

Emily gave him a big nudge.

"What do you really, really think, Tree?" I said.

"It could be worse," he said, his eyes saddening, "but I must admit, I don't know how."

I slumped forward with my head in my hands. "Oh, God—no!" I said. "That's it then. I've lost her."

Emily came and put her arm around me.

Tree stood up. "Let me give this matter some thought," he said.

We all looked up to him. He cut an impressive figure standing there, nearly seven feet tall, with his long beard of biblical proportions, his flowing hair falling over his shoulders, his wise blue eyes gazing fondly down upon us, and all topped off by the a Tibetan prayer hat, which he'd more than likely knitted himself.

"I will walk in the fields awhile, and when I return I will tell you what I think."

I felt a lump in my throat. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you, oh, wise one."

Tree bowed out, twice, once to us and once under the doorframe.

"Oh, wise one?" smirked the Duck, drawing deeply on his spliff. "Bit over the top, innit?"

"If you lost Emily, I suppose you'd find that funny, too," I said, and made a dramatic exit.

My comment was calculated to cause the Duck maximum fall-out with his girlfriend, and, judging by the ear bashing I heard Emily start giving him, as I reached the garden, it had worked.

Tree was leaning against an old oak, deep in thought. I sat on a rustic bench and watched him, hardly daring to make a sound, in case I disturbed him. Half an hour later, he strode off across the meadow towards the hills. I followed him, keeping my distance. He lingered on a small wooden bridge over a stream, and I could almost hear him sighing and see his brow furrowing, as he grappled with the great burden on his mind. Then he was off again, striding purposefully up into the higher pastures. He found a rocky outcrop and squatted down on top of it. I laid down in a grassy hollow and spied on him. The afternoon wore on and the sun slipped low behind the hill, silhouetting the great man against the sky, sitting still as Lord Buddha, doing his deep meditation. I fell asleep. And when I woke up, with dribble in the corner of my mouth, Tree was gone!

I ran back down the hillside to the farmhouse and burst in, breathlessly.

"Is he back?"

Emily was washing her hair in the kitchen sink and the Duck was crashed out in an armchair. There was no sign of Tree.

"Where is he?" I said, shaking the Duck.

"Hey-what?"

"Where's Tree? Where's Tree?"

"Down the pub. Where's the fire, man?"

The Duck rubbed his eyes and licked his lips. He stretched his neck round to see where Emily was. "Any danger of a proper cup of tea, love?" he said.

"Down the pub? Well, what did he say?" I said.

"Hey? What about?"

"We've got camomile," called Emily, wrapping her wet hair in a towel turban. "Or there's fennel."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"I just want a normal cup of tea," said the Duck. "You know, with milk and two bloody sugars."

"What did Tree say about getting Emma back?" I said.

"Er?"

"There's no need to swear," said Emily.

"Bloody, is not swearing!" said the Duck. He tried to answer me. "He said—"

"Yes it is!" said Emily, slamming a teapot lid down on a teapot. "I've studied twenty-first century expletives, and bloody is a swear word."

"Yeah, that's right, I forgot, you're an expert on everything," said the Duck.

"What did you say?" said Emily.

"I said: what would you know? You're not even from this millennium—let alone century!"

Suddenly a teapot lid thumped into the back of the Duck's armchair.

"You can make your own tea for that!" cried Emily.

"What's Tree's plan?" I said.

"Just a minute, mate—don't worry, I will—and I'll bring me own bloody tea bags next time! You can never get a decent cup of tea round here!"

"Well, you know what you can do if you don't like it!" said Emily. She smiled sweetly over at me. "Would you like a cup of camomile tea, Steve?"

"Could I have a glass of parsnip wine?" I said.

"Certainly, Steve," said Emily, getting a glass from the cupboard, with a sweet smile, and then looking daggers at the Duck.

"So, what did Tree come up with?" I said to the Duck.

"He said he couldn't think of anything," replied the Duck, glaring at Emily as she poured my wine.

"He couldn't think of anything?" I said.

"Don't sound so surprised, mate—I think he's got a few marbles missing, the whole family's a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic, if you ask me, don't know why I bother coming back here."

"I hope you're not talking about my father," said Emily, who was just bringing my glass of wine over and was about to hand it to me. I reached out for it.

"I am having a private conversation, if you don't mind," said the Duck.

Emily withdrew her hand and slowly poured the wine over the Duck's head instead, then passed me the empty glass and calmly walked out of the room, slamming the door so hard that the whole house shook.

"I'm sorry I dropped you in it earlier," I said. "It's just that I'm worried sick about Emma. Uh, you're dripping."

"Don't worry about it, mate—that was nothing, you want to see her when she's really mad," said the Duck. "And don't worry about Emma either. The Duck has a plan."

"You have a plan?"

The Duck hauled himself out of his chair and wandered into the kitchen to dry himself off with a tea towel, talking to me the whole time.

"Yeah. It just came to me when I was having a spliff in the bath this afternoon. You see, I got to thinking about that taxi driver—well, actually I was thinking about the machine he was driving, but it's the same thing." He threw down the tea towel and picked up the first cup that came to hand, dumped the slop in the sink, and poured himself a parsnip wine, to the brim. "Wine, mate?"

I held out my glass and he filled it to the top. "Cheers."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Yeah, he must have been working for the company for weeks to set that snatch up. It must all be connected to your erasure. I mean, it's obvious, innit? You had to go. So, Emma had to go."

I nodded. "But why?"

The Duck took a sip of wine. "Emily gave me the idea," he said, his eyes inviting me to work it out for myself. "Come on, mate—hasn't the penny dropped?"

The connection hit me like a ton of Mothercare bricks. "Oh no!"

The Duck nodded and chinked my glass with his cup. "Congratulations, mate—welcome to Club Bambino."

"She's pregnant," I grinned. "Emma's having a baby! I'm going to be a father!"

The Duck's head was rocking with triumph. "Simple when it's all worked out for you, innit?"

"And you're going to be a grandfather!" I said.

The Duck's face dropped. "Leave it out."

"It all makes sense," I said. "That argument we had. She brought up the idea of us selling our flats and buying a place together, and I said something about there being no hurry. And she went a bit quiet. Oh no. I think I said I wanted us to go backpacking together before we settled down. Poor Em. She must have thought I wasn't ready to start a family. That's why she stormed out."

"And are you?" said the Duck.

"I am now. I wonder if she mentioned it to Matt, and he used it in his cheesy newspaper story, only with him as the father!"

"One thing," said the Duck. "This proves it. That baby is not his, because if it were they wouldn't be bothered about it. It's you and any part of you they want wiped."

"Yeah, you might be right. But why though?"

The Duck shrugged and slurped his wine.

"It must be something to do with you," I said, thinking aloud.

The Duck shook his head. He looked nervously across at the door Emily had almost slammed off its hinges, cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "I've got five other kids, with five different women."

"Five? Five women? Emily's number six?"

"Keep your voice down!"

"Hang on—that means my mum was number seven."

"Listen a minute. The point is—the point is: none of my other children have been erased, do you see what I'm saying?"

"I have step brothers and sisters scattered through time? You're unbelievable! I thought you said you were a monogamist!"

"I'm a serial monogamist—I never get it on with two women in the same time zone."

"I don't think they've invented the word yet for what you get up to," I said. "Who knows what damage you've done."

"You're missing the point. I'm telling you all this to prove to you that your erasure can't have anything to do with me," said the Duck.

"I can't get my head round this right now. Just tell me what the plan is."

"That cabbie's the key," said the Duck.

"Go on."

"Uh, that's it, so far."

"I think I'd worked that much out for myself."

*Tempus Fugit*

"No, listen, when we lost 'em, he must have come back and stuck around for at least a week or so, otherwise how could plod have interviewed him? And, another thing, that bit about dropping your bird off at the end of the road instead of taking her to her door—that's got something to do with it."

"What?" I said.

"Cut me a little slack here, man—I haven't worked it all out yet."

"I just don't see that it gets us anywhere. So, the taxi driver worked out his notice to cover his tracks—so what? I don't exist after Tuesday—I can't go and ask him what he's done with Emma. And he'd probably arrest you and we'd lose the machine—so you're not going on your own," I said. "I don't want to do anything to put Emma at risk."

The Duck started rolling another joint.

"Not another one—your brain must be like shaving foam in there," I said.

"It helps me stay in touch with the cosmic, man."

"Yeah, by smoke signals—you're like a human chimney. What if we found out where this taxi driver was living before the thirteenth? We might find something that could tell us where they've taken her," I said.

"Nah, they're professionals, they'd never leave anything lying around. Now, if we could get inside that machine..." said the Duck, sealing his joint with one long lick.

"You just want to nick it," I said.

"I want to find your bird as much as you do, mate—she's carrying a relative of mine, in case you'd forgotten."

"Her name is Emma," I said. "Well, I think it's worth a try. We check out the guy's address and if we don't turn up anything we go for the machine."

The Duck's face disappeared behind a huge cloud of smoke. "Now we're cooking," he said.

I poured my parsnip wine away and replaced it with tap water.

"Maybe the reason he didn't go into Grantchester Gardens was because he'd already dropped Emma and the swarthy guy off somewhere else," I said, "and didn't bother because he didn't know which number she lived at anyway. He just drove there and took another call, to make it look as if he'd dropped her off, to make everything seem kosher."

"What-ifs and maybes, man," said the Duck, taking another deep draw on his spliff.

"You are more or less stoned all the time, aren't you?" I said.

"Not all the time. Haven't been stoned in the fifteenth century yet," smirked the Duck.

At that moment, the back door swung open and Tree fell in, blinding drunk.

The Duck and I rushed over to pick him up, and help him over to his armchair.

"Look at the state of him," laughed the Duck. He patted him on the head. "You'll be all right, mate."

"How much has he had?" I said. "Look, he's turning blue."

"Nah, that's from the woad," said the Duck. "That's where he gets the blue dye for his wools. He grows woad plants. Everything has to be organic with old Tree."

"Ma-ma, some—ma-ma," mumbled Tree.

"What's he saying?" I said.

"Dunno. Foreign, innit?" said the Duck, lying back in his chair to re-light his joint.

"Tree?" I said. "Speak English—we can't understand you."

"You won't get any sense out of him now," said the Duck. "He's off the planet."

## *Tempus Fugit*

Tree suddenly sat bolt upright and pointed directly at me, with a terrified look in his eyes.

"The Castle!" he gasped. And went out like a light.

"Tree?" I shook him, but I couldn't bring him round. I turned to the Duck. "What's the Castle?"

"Dunno," shrugged the Duck. "Well, I've heard of it, but I dunno what it is."

"You're a big help. Where's Emily, maybe I can get some sense out of her," I said.

"In her boudoir," sniggered the Duck.

I shot off upstairs to find her.

"Emily? Emily?" I called, when I reached the landing.

"Steve? I'm in here. Come in."

I followed the voice to a room at the end of the hall, and found her lying on her bed, reading a Jane Austen paperback.

"Ah, *Pride and Prejudice*, one of my favourites," I said.

"I've read it four times," smiled Emily. "I love all the characters, especially Darcy. And, of course, Jane's such a witty person. We always go for long walks."

"You've met her?"

"Lots of times, when I was younger," said Emily, "but father and I haven't been back to see her in years."

"It's your father I've come to see you about—"

"—Is he all right? Has something happened to him?" she cried.

"No. He's fine. He's asleep, but he mentioned a place called the castle. Does that mean anything to you?"

The book slipped from her hand. She slid her legs off the bed and sat up. She was looking through the window, out into the darkness, when she spoke. "The Castle is a prison. They sent my father there once. He told me about it. It is a very painful memory for him." She turned and gazed at me, her eyes filling with tears. "They locked him up in that place for seven years, Steve. My mother died of grief, waiting for him."

"I'm sorry." I sat down on the edge of the bed next to her, and put my arm around her. "What happened?" I said

"It was because of me," she sniffed.

"You? I don't believe that. You mustn't blame yourself," I said.

"But it's true. I—I was a natural birth," she said, as though she had just admitted to being an axe-murderess.

"Yeah?" I said.

"That's it. You don't understand, Steve. In my time natural birth is forbidden."

"Oh, right. Yeah—the Duck said something—I see," I said. "And he got seven years for—"

"—Having real sex with my mother," she nodded. "You don't know how lucky you are to live in an age when love is still something beautiful, physical and free. When two human beings can explore every erogenous zone of each other's bodies and give full expression to their most erotic sexual fantasies."

"And you've, uh, expressed yours fully with the Duck?" I said.

She nodded. "Many times. The Duck is a magnificent lover. He is a sexual colossus among men, a liberator of the libido, an angel of erotica, god of the orgasm—"

"—Yeah, all right. I hope you haven't told him any of this," I said.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Why not? Is it not healthy to express our innermost thoughts and feelings to the one we love?" said Emily.

"Sure," I said. "But just hold a little back in reserve. Tell me about the Castle—where is it exactly?"

"No one knows. Its location is a closely guarded secret. Some people say it is in the frozen north, because there is always snow there, but my father says it is in the south, and not even in our time—I mean, 3000, that is when we left and travelled back to your time," she said.

"What does he mean—not in your time?"

"He believes it is somewhere far back in time—even beyond your time," she said.

"The Ice Age," I said.

"I do not know. Perhaps. Europe was frozen far to the south at that time," said Emily.

"What's the use of guessing?" I sighed. "It could be anywhere, in the far future even—a new Ice Age."

"You will have to speak to my father—he is sure it is in our past. He has never really talked to me about it, though sometimes I wish he would. It is good to take these things off your breast, as they say."

"Chest," I said.

"I mean chest. There is something I've wanted to tell you, Steve, ever since I first met you. I'd like to take it off my chest now. Promise you will not deny me," she said, like a character from the book she was reading.

I took my arm away from her shoulder. "Look, maybe you shouldn't say anymore, Emily. I think I know what you're going to say anyway," I said.

"You do?" She bit her bottom lip.

"I've been picking up a few signals," I said, looking down at my curling toes.

"And you don't mind?"

I turned and looked into her big innocent, beautiful blue eyes. "Emily, I'm flattered, but I don't think the Duck would be too happy about it."

"But I've talked it over with him and he has agreed," she laughed, throwing her arms around my neck and shaking her head. "I wouldn't do it without asking him if he minded. He was a little uncertain at first, but I wore him down, and now he wants me to."

"But you're preg—"

"—I want to name my baby Steve. I just love the name. I loved it the moment I heard the Duck say it, when he first brought you here. It's a beautiful name. You don't mind, do you, Steve? Please say you don't mind?"

"I, uh, don't mind," I smiled.

She kissed me full on the lips and tried to hug me to her breast, but the bump got in our way.

"Oh, very cosy," said a familiar voice.

We let go of each other and looked to the door, where the voice was coming from, and saw the Duck standing there, wine glass in one hand and a huge spliff in the other.

"This," I said, "is not what you think."

"Why, what do I think it is?" said the Duck, cavalierly rocking his head, and looking down his nose at me.

"What it isn't?" I said.



*Tempus Fugit*

"I see. Would you mind leaving us please, Emily?" said the Duck. "I've got a few choice words to say to Stephen."

"We weren't doing anything," said Emily, demurely.

The Duck closed his eyes. "If you would just leave us, my dear—I'm sure Stephen and I can sort this out, man-to-man."

"You'd better go, Emily," I said, thinking of her condition.

She held my hand and looked into my eyes. "The Duck can be very jealous," she whispered. "I'll stay if you want me to."

"No, it's all right, you go," I said, patting her hand.

She rose and walked out with her nose in the air.

"Thank you, Emily," said the Duck, gallantly standing aside to let her pass. He closed the door behind her and stared me levelly in the face for a few moments, with a lopsided smile on his mouth. "Now," he said, "just what do you think you were doing on that bed with my fiancée?"

"Now just hang on a minute!" I said. "If you think—"

The Duck burst out laughing, by sucking air in through his nose in that irritating way I described. "You should have seen your face, mate!" he quacked. "It was bloody priceless!"

"Oh, for—grow up, you obnoxious little—"

He mimicked himself: "Would you mind leaving us please, Emily! I'd rather you didn't entertain Mr Sloane in your boudoir, my dear!"

And he quacked and snorted even more, until he spilled his drink and fell on the bed, bicycling his legs in the air and trying to smoke his joint at the same time.

I fell back on the pillow and put my hands behind my head, stared up at the ceiling and tried to ignore him.

"You shouldn't frighten Emily like that, I said, during a lull in his laughter, "not in her condition,"

The Duck crawled up next to me and laid his head down on the other pillow.

"They bloody love it, mate," he wheezed. "The big scene—the jealous lover—all that stuff! What they hate is indifference. You've gotta lay it on thick, mate—the thicker the better."

"Thick being the operative word in your case. How many lovers do you think Emily's had?" I said.

"I was her first," said the Duck. "Why?"

"If only you knew how relieved I am to hear you say that," I smiled.

"Why—what's she been saying?"

"Nothing. It just explains a lot," I said. "Now, shut up and listen to me for a minute, I've had an idea. What if they've taken Emma to the Castle? How would we go about getting her out?"

"We couldn't," said the Duck.

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know where it is," said the Duck. "Nobody does."

"What about Jemmons? Do you think he'd know?"

"Nah! He's all mouth and bell-bottoms. Anyway, it's like a mythical place to travellers. I don't think it even exists," said the Duck.

"Emily told me her father spent seven years there," I said.

"He thinks he did—Tree's a bit fond of the old high narrative," said the Duck. "Our best bet is to go after that machine—I mean, taxi driver."

"Let's go tonight then," I said. "I want to get this over with."

## *Tempus Fugit*

Suddenly, there was a commotion downstairs. The Duck and I looked at each other and both pulled puzzled faces. We heard Tree's voice raised. And then Emily's shouting something in Worldese from the top of the stairs.

"Plod!" cried the Duck, springing off the bed and rushing out the door.

I leapt up and was about to follow him, but I heard the tramp of many feet coming up the stairs and Emily screaming. And then the Duck shouting:

"Let her go! Let her go, you bastards! It's me you want!"

I was at the door listening. Then everything went quiet. I hit the light switch.

"Julian Gaylord Duckworth," said a calm, official voice, "I am arresting you for the theft, illegal use and possession of a time vehicle. You do not have to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down and may be given in evidence to the Council of Justice, and they've got such a backlog of cases, they'll probably rubber-stamp your conviction. Cuff him."

"Leg it, Steve!" cried the Duck, in one last, heroic act of defiance.

## **Chapter Nine**

I closed the door gently and crept over to look out the window. Three men and two women, wearing black uniforms with white Puritan collars and baseball caps were standing around in the yard below, shining flashlights about. And then two officers brought Tree out, with his hands handcuffed behind his back. I could hear more of them on the landing, opening doors and shouting to me to come out. I looked around for somewhere to hide. There was nowhere to hide and nowhere to run. I was trapped! In a moment of desperation, I flung open the window and climbed out.

"There he is!" someone shouted, from below.

Dazzling beams of light instantly fixed on me.

I shielded my eyes.

"Up there—on the ledge!"

I heard them burst through the door.

"Don't move!" ordered a gruff voice from inside the room.

I reached up to the guttering and pulled myself up. Hands were snatching at my ankles, but I kicked out and broke free. With a strength I never knew I had, I hauled myself up and scrambled onto the slated roof.

"Give it up, Sloane!" called a sarcastic voice, "you're not going anywhere, lad."

I scuttled up the slates on my toes and fingers, and escaped the beams of light for a few seconds, but then they were spotting me again, casting my crab-like shadow up the roof. I panicked and threw myself the last few feet, and then I was over the top and lying on my belly, facing down the other side, but in darkness again. I had no plan, just some vague notion of climbing down and running away across country. I was going to slide down headfirst, swing off the eaves and take my chances, until I remembered where Tree and Emily had been dyeing wool. It was in a lean-to at the end of the farmhouse. I traversed the tiles and blindly rolled off the gable, crashing through the shed roof.

I landed in a hopper full of woad plants, which looked like cabbages and smelt twice as bad, but they broke my fall so effectively that I only sustained a few cuts and bruises to my hands and legs, from the roof. I was soon out of the bin and at the door, listening. I could hear them calling and see their light-beams flitting about, so I pushed open the door, took off one of my shoes and threw it across the yard, and then climbed back inside the hopper and burrowed down under the squeaky plants.

I heard loud shouts and the pounding of boots outside. A torchlight shone into the shed. I held my breath. Someone came in and stepped lightly around, their boots creaking on the floorboards. The darkness above me, through the leaves, suddenly turned bright. I thought I was done for.

"I've found his shoe!" cried a female voice.

There was a shuffle, a stamp of feet and I was plunged into darkness again. After more calls and running noises, it all died away.

I didn't waste any time, I was out of there and running around to the back door to get to that couch!

Amazingly, it was still there—the Duck obviously hadn't told them where it was—now all I had to do was find the portal in the matrix and get inside, something I had never done before. Finding your way into a machine, through a skin is not easy, you just have to feel about until your hand slides into a kind of soft, mushy gap, a bit like very wet, runny mud, and then you have to fumble about for the door handle. But when you open that portal you just kind of get sucked in, and then there you are,

## *Tempus Fugit*

sitting in the front passenger seat of a Ford Cortina, with the whole room clearly visible, all around you. It's really, really weird.

Of course, I had no idea how to drive a time machine, let alone start one up, but I knew I was just going to have to learn fast to stand any chance of saving anyone. My plan was to reverse through time and warn everyone about the Temporal Criminal Pursuit squad that was about to drop in on us. I slid over into the driver's seat and stared down at the bewildering array of lights, dials and graphics, pulsing and humming up at me from the console. I felt about on the steering column for the ignition.

"Where's the bloody ignition?" I said.

I shut my eyes and tried to remember what the Duck did when he started the thing up. He definitely reached down and did something with his right hand. But what? There was nothing to turn on or press. And then I felt something round. I looked down—there was nothing there—it was an invisible ignition knob! I pulled it and the machine's powerful hydrogen gas-fuelled motor throbbed awake.

I nodded and scratched my head. Now all I had to do was work out how to set the time controls for two hours, I thought that would give me enough time to warn everyone about the raid. I turned my attention back to the console and looked for anything that resembled a clock or timer. One of the screens looked like a two-dimensional map, another like a speedometer, a couple of others like fuel gauges or some sort of frequency monitors—I didn't have a clue. One was just a green raster, with a few dashes of gold light pulsing across it. There were loads of others, but this one reminded me of the timer on a video recorder, so I twiddled the knob under it. A Pink Floyd midi started playing.

"Interstellar Overdrive?" I muttered.

I shook my head and decided to just drive the thing and see what happened. My feet readily found the familiar accelerator, brake and clutch pedals, and away we went! I was out across the yard and hammering down the track, waiting for the vortex to appear, but nothing happened, and I had to slow down, or run the risk of going up the side of a hedge in the bendy lane.

"How the hell do you make the thing time travel?" I cried, beating the steering wheel with my fist.

And then I had a mental image of the Duck reaching forward somewhere on the left to turn a dial. I saw one in the rough area where his hand would have touched and gave it a quick turn. Suddenly the machine lurched forward and the red vortex appeared.

"Yes!" I exclaimed, punching the air.

I held her steady and the vehicle settled into the usual drifting motion, as we motored down the time continuum.

"Piece of cake," I said, more than pleased with my work.

I thought two hours wouldn't take that long to do, so I gave it a couple of minutes and then reached forward and turned the knob back to where it was—nothing happened! I turned it back farther. The machine swayed a bit, but continued to drift forward. I turned the dial again. We rocked quite dramatically, but soon settled back on beam and held the line down the vortex.

"Do not do this to me," I said.

I tried twiddling the other dials close to it. One of the screens lit up and some bizarre graphics began jumping about. I tried another knob and the whole vehicle rolled sideways and did a one eighty degree turn. I flicked a couple of switches and the engine revved and whined. A few red warning lights came on. I tried to switch some

lights off, but more came on instead. I gave the console a bash and another monitor lit up, with funny writing all over it, and a flashing red light. I had the idea of putting all the switches in the down position and all the knobs in a completely anticlockwise position, to see if that would stop the bloody thing, but it just made it speed up and shudder. Several more warning lights started blinking. I was getting pretty mad now, so I began kicking the console and broke one of the screens. A siren came on and the whole interior of the car was bathed in a pulsing red light. I felt like I was in a womb. Then something flashing and whining shot out of the boot and vanished up the vortex.

"Shut up, shut up!" I cried. I covered my ears. And then I tried opening the door and getting out, even though I was in the vortex. Blue electric squiggles of light crackled and flared all around the door, so I quickly closed it again. Now I was scared.

"Let me out of here!" I yelled. "Help!"

On and on we sailed, down and down the red swirling tunnel of time, shuddering and stalling, coughing and spluttering. I had no idea whether I was going backwards, forwards or bloody sideways.

There was only one thing for it, I decided, so I climbed over my seat and hid in the back.

How serious is this? I asked myself. I'm in a time machine, I've broken it and it's jammed on drive. I wondered what would become of me. If I was going backwards, I'd probably end up getting blown to atoms in the Big Bang, and if I was going forwards, the damn thing might keep on going forever.

"No it won't!" I exclaimed. "Because I'm going to turn the bloody thing off!"

My brainwave was to switch off the ignition.

I scrambled back over the seat and found the invisible knob.

"Here goes!"

With an almighty crunching of gears, whining of motors and flashing of lights, we came to an abrupt stop. And my nose bumped up against the windscreen. When I opened my eyes, the vortex had vanished, and I saw that I was in a swamp, surrounded by strange looking trees, with giant dripping fronds. A huge dragonfly the size of a small glider flew up and crashed into the passenger side window, spewing its mucky brains out over the glass.

And then the heat hit me. I broke out in a sweat and could hardly breathe, so I made the big mistake of winding down my window. I could have cut the stinking heat with a knife and sold the slabs off as dehydrated cesspits, for people who were too lazy to dig their own. I quickly wound it back up.

I was just wondering what was worse: being trapped forever in the vortex or stuck in a festering bog, when the car started sinking.

Now I really did have to do something, although I'd already done so much damage, it might have been better do nothing. I was just weighing up the possible consequences of doing nothing, when an enormous Tyrannosaurus Rex loomed up in the rear view mirror. It was probably about a hundred feet away, but, believe me, it looked a lot closer.

I fumbled frantically for the ignition, with my eyes locked on the monster in the mirror, which was definitely getting bigger. I let the clutch up and slammed my foot down on the accelerator. The Cortina surged forwards. I never thought I'd be glad to see that red vortex again, but I was!

It was becoming obvious to me that I had travelled back in time more than two hours—I estimated that I had overshot my target date by about two hundred million years.

## *Tempus Fugit*

It was time for a cool head. If the Duck could fathom out how to drive a time machine, I was sure I could work it out. I ferreted around in the glove compartment, looking for a manual, though I wasn't surprised to find there was no such thing. But I did think there might at least be some way of accessing a computer readme file, or something, on one of the monitors. I knew I had all the time in the world, so I settled down to work my way through the console controls, from top left to bottom right.

My admiration for the Duck grew as I attempted to make sense of control after control, and failed miserably. I wondered how long it had taken him to work it all out, because I didn't think I'd be able to in a millennium of Sundays. So, I gave up and I went back to the one thing I could do—I switched on the midi player. Imagine my amazement when I heard a voice I knew—no, not the Duck's—it sounded like Roger Jemmons!

"Ahoy, Duck! Ahoy, Duck! Come in, Duck. Roger," he was calling.

"Uh, hello, Roger. This is the Duck's mate, Steve. Roger, er, Roger," I replied.

"Ahoy, Duck! Ahoy, Duck! I picked up your mayday buoy. Do you require assistance? Roger."

"Yes, I need assistance!" I shouted. "Help! S.O.S! S.O.S.!"

"Ahoy, Duck! This is Roger Jemmons. Do you read me? Roger."

"Yes, I read you! Help! Help! Roger, Roger!" I yelled.

I suddenly thought I should be pressing or switching on something before I spoke. I felt all around the midi player, like a blind man, and found a switch. I clicked it. The Pink Floyd midi, "Echoes," started playing.

"Can you hear me? Is there anybody out there?" I cried. I clicked the switch off.

"Who's that?" said Jemmons.

I repeated my switch trick. "Just listen to me," I said. "I'm the guy you met in London, round at Shakespeare's. The Duck has been captured by the time police. I escaped in his machine, but I don't know how to set the timer thing. Please can you tell me what to do, Roger? Roger."

"Stone the crows! They nabbed the Duck?" cried Jemmons. "What happened?"

I flicked the switch. "No time to explain, just give me a basic, very basic, lesson on how you steer this bloody thing—I've got dinosaurs chasing my ass here!"

"Jumpin' jellyfish! What're you doin' all the way back there?" exclaimed Jemmons.

"I am panicking, Roger," I said calmly. "What the hell do you think I'm doing?"

"Yeah, all right—no need to shout, matey," said Jemmons. "Switch your midi player to clock."

"How do I do that?"

"Calibrate both dials—just twiddle 'em together till you get a different screen."

"What? What a stupid place to put the bloody clock!" I said.

"Got the clock?"

"Yes."

"Righty-o. What date is it reading?"

"Um, it's just two rows of noughts," I said, giving it a sharp rap with my knuckle, to see if it was just playing up.

"Blimey! You must be off the meter! Set her to the date you want—top row for the month, day and year; bottom four zeros for the time—and she'll bring you home," said Jemmons.

"How?"

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Depress the left dial and bring up the number you want with the right one."

It was as easy as setting a digital watch!

"Done that?" said Jemmons.

"Yeah!" I cried, pleased with myself. "She's turning round!"

"That's because you were going the wrong way. Right. Now, make sure she doesn't veer off course, and she'll not let you down," said Jemmons.

"I can't thank you enough, mate!" I said. "Thanks, Roger. I bloody owe you one!"

"Keep your midi on—the vortex is crawling with TCPs again. Tell me where you're headed and I'll meet you," he said.

"No," I said. "I'm not going to involve you any more—I've got to do this myself. I'll get the Duck to contact you as soon as everything's sorted. Over and out." And I left the switch in the off position.

It took a good hour to get back from wherever I'd been, but when I finally did pull out of the vortex and enter real time, it was already sunset.

I parked the Cortina in the yard and rushed in the back door, breathlessly.

"We've got to get out of here!" I cried. "The Time Cops are on their way!"

Emily was just about to wash her hair in the sink. The Duck was sitting sideways in his armchair, with his legs hanging over one arm, rolling a joint.

"Where are they?" cried the Duck, leaping out of his chair, and rushing over to look out the back window.

"They're not here yet," I said. "They'll be here in about half an hour."

The Duck looked at me strangely. And then the Duck and Emily looked at each other and shook their heads. The Duck stared back at me.

"How do you know that?" he said slowly.

"I was here," I said. "Come on, we've got to get Tree—he's probably on his way back from the pub by now. We're wasting time."

The Duck came over to me, touched my arm, and then inspected his fingers.

I could see Emily, out of the corner of my eye, backing away from me.

"Where have you been, Steve?" said the Duck. His eyes widened. "Oh, no—"

"I escaped. I got to the machine and then it all went wrong, but Jemmons helped me. Listen, Duck, I am not joking—they're on their way here right now! Why won't you believe me?"

"Oh, I believe you all right, mate," said the Duck, looking nervously over my shoulder. He began to back away from me. "Stay right where you are, mate. Don't move a bloody muscle."

"What's the matter with you? Why are you both looking at me like that?" I said. I went to take a step towards the Duck.

"Stay there!" cried the Duck. He kept his eyes fixed on me, but pointed at Emily as he spoke. "Get in the machine, love," he said.

"But, Duck, we can't—" Emily started to say.

"Just do as I say!" ordered the Duck. "I'll sort this lot out."

Emily circled round the back of the Duck to the couch and disappeared under the throw.

"That's it, stay where you are, Steve," smiled the Duck. "And whatever you do—don't look round—no!"

"Why not—?" I had instinctively turned my head and looked back over my shoulder.

Suddenly, the whole room seemed to expand all around me and I saw every corner all at once—and myself multiplied dozens and dozens of times. I thought my

*Tempus Fugit*

head was going to explode. I could hear multiple screams echoing around the room and then everything went black.



## Chapter Ten

You know when you catch yourself looking at yourself in a mirror and you smile, and the image in the mirror doesn't? And when you run out the door screaming and bump into yourself coming in, and get chased around the room by yourself, the dimensions of which are expanding exponentially, because you are multiplying, so your planes of vision and temporal presences are increasing exponentially, too, and you don't know who you are anymore? Well, it was a bit like that.

It was Emma minus eight and counting, the worst Monday morning of my entire life, when my mobile rang. I hoped it would be Emma, my ex-girlfriend, because we'd just ended our two year relationship the night before, and for some reason I thought she might be phoning up to apologise, and then I'd apologise, and then we'd meet up and our life would be back to normal again. I know that all sounds unlikely in this imperfect world, but I am an eternal optimist, although you'd never think so to read this...

"Em?"

"No, it's The Duck. Listen carefully."

"Who?"

"Me. Julian Duckworth—The Duck."

"Sorry. Who is this?"

"It's the bloody Duck—now, just shut up and listen."

I was just trying to remember who the hell he was, when my bedroom door swung open, and then my mouth fell open.

"Hello? Steve? Are you still there, mate?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm there and I'm here."

"Now, listen to me very carefully, mate—don't be frightened, do not panic, I know things must seem a bit strange up there, but it was the only way. Now, do exactly as I say and everything'll be cool. Dig? Hello? Steve? Are you still listening?"

"I'm listening," I said. "You know there's a—"

"What's the other one doing?" said the Duck.

"He's just standing there staring at me. Is it some kind of dummy? It looks alive," I said, without taking my eyes off the exact replica of me that was watching me from the doorway of my bedroom. "What is it?"

"I don't know," said the Duck. "But I don't think it's dangerous. Just ignore it and get dressed and then come down here. I'll, er, be waiting for you in the car."

I eased myself out of bed and edged over to the window. The thing in the doorway followed me every inch of the way with its eyes. I looked down into the street. Julian Duckworth's head was poking out of the window of a white Ford Cortina, looking up at me. He waved. I waved back.

"Take your time, mate. And, er, just ignore it," he said, down the phone.

I nodded. I placed my phone down on a bookshelf and climbed over my bed to get to my wardrobe, rather than go near the creature in the doorway.

"I'm just going to put some clothes on, clean my teeth and pop out for a while—you stay here and make yourself at home."

I turned round—it was gone!

I hopped over to the door, still trying to pull my trousers up, and looked into the lounge to see where it went.

"Where the hell's he gone?" I said.

I went back and got some socks and shoes on and returned to the lounge, tucking my shirt in.

*Tempus Fugit*

"Where the hell is he?" I muttered, as I opened the bathroom door.

"Oh—Christ!" I exclaimed, and jumped back.

The thing was in the bathroom brushing its teeth, and as I'd opened the door it had turned and showed me all the toothpaste in its mouth. I slammed the door and ran out into the hall, grabbed my coat off the hook and got out of there.

As I reached the street, I saw the Duck pulling away in his Ford Cortina.

"Hey! Where're you going?" I shouted, as he whizzed past me.

Then the strangest thing happened—the Duck's car simply vanished, right before my very eyes. I stepped out into the middle of the road and stared at the place where it had disappeared, scratching my head. How the hell did he do that? I was wondering, when I heard the roar of an engine behind me. I turned just in time to see the Cortina hurtling towards me. I was rooted to the spot. In that split second, I thought: he's going to stop. But he didn't.

I screamed and slammed over the bonnet with a massive jolt.

And then I felt hands grabbing me from both sides.

"Aaaagh!" I screamed.

"There, there, shh, you're going to be fine, Steve," said Emily.

I looked up at her and screamed again.

"Relax, mate," laughed the Duck, patting my shoulder. "You'll be all right."

I looked at him and screamed again. I was shaking like a leaf.

"He's terrified, Duck," said Emily, her voice full of concern. "What on earth did you do to him?"

"Believe me, you do not want to know, love," said the Duck. "But it had to be done. I had three of 'em wandering about at one stage."

I looked at Emily and screamed again. She hugged me to her breast and patted the back of my head.

"There, there. It's okay, it's okay," she said soothingly.

"I-I had a dream—it was—" I stammered.

"Try not to think about it," said Emily, kissing my head, and rocking me gently in her arms. I suppose it was her maternal instinct coming out.

I shivered.

"That was the worst dream I've ever had," I said.

"That was no bloody dream, mate," said the Duck. "You wouldn't believe the problems I've had sorting out all the trouble you caused. I've been up and down the vortex like a new bride's nightie half the night. We've had multiples, plod in and out and you nearly wrote me machine off."

"All that really happened?" I said.

"You don't know the half of it—"

"Don't confuse him, Duck," said Emily. "Help me to put him in the car."

The Duck helped Emily to pull me to my feet. I looked around at the darkening landscape, and then down at the grassy hollow I had been lying in.

"Where am I?" I said.

"Where you should have stayed," said the Duck. "Mind you, I'm glad you didn't. Come on, we've got to be off—plod'll be back soon—they've already busted us three times this evening."

They took me to the Cortina, which was parked a few yards away, on the hillside, the one I'd followed Tree up, only now he was slumped on the backseat, wrapped in a blanket, fast asleep. They bundled me in next to him. Then Emily and the Duck got in the front and we drove off, into the swirling red void.

"Where are we going?" I croaked.

*Tempus Fugit*

"We are going for a little holiday, mate," said the Duck. "To recharge the old batteries."

"Must find Emma," I said.

"All in good time, all in good time," said the Duck.

## Chapter Eleven

I woke up in a sunlit bedroom. The fixtures and furnishings looked Georgian to me, not that I know much about antiques, only I suspected they were not antique, but contemporary. What did it matter? The main thing was I was feeling a lot better. I pushed off the bed sheets and discovered that someone had put me into an ankle-length nightdress, probably also of the late eighteenth century period.

I drank a mouthful of water from the cut-glass beaker sitting on my bedside cabinet and wandered over to the window.

"Emma would love this," I said.

I was looking out over an immaculately kept formal English garden, with a swathe of open meadow beyond, bordered on either side by a mature avenue of trees.

Suddenly, the door flew open and in strode the Duck, briskly followed by a uniformed butler, carrying a silver tray, set out with a full English breakfast. I laughed. The Duck was wearing riding boots and breeches, a matching white waistcoat, and one of those little tailed tunic coats, in blue, trimmed with yellow lapels and cuffs.

"Good morning, Mr Sloane!" he bowed. "I trust you slept soundly, sir. What're you laughing at?"

"You—in that get-up," I said. "You look like something out of a bloody Barbara Cartland novel."

The Duck dismissed the butler and tugged his frock coat around him to show off his slim figure. "What do you mean? I'll have you know this is the latest fashion, mate."

I walked over and picked up a rasher of crispy bacon off the tray and took a bite. "What and where is this place? I think I've worked out the when."

"This," said the Duck, raising his arms, "is the Duck's little hideaway—Duckworth Hall, in the County of Gloucestershire. What do you think?"

"You own this?"

The Duck flopped down on the bed and bounced up and down. "Call it an investment," he sighed.

"But—how can you afford a place like this?" I said, staggered.

The Duck quacked with laughter, in that infuriating way he has. "Use your imagination, mate. I own a bleeding time machine! I buy and sell antiques, of course!"

"And gambling?" I said.

"Well, you can't call it gambling when you know the result," he said, "but I, er, have been known to dabble in the old stocks and shares, the very old stocks and shares."

"And then nip into the next century and sell 'em at a big fat profit," I said.

"Just one of the perks of having your own time machine," smiled the Duck.

"No wonder you can afford to live like the lord of the manor," I said, pouring myself a cup of tea with a brand new Wedgwood tea set.

"Er, that's a very high quality tea, I had it specially imported from Boston, it was going cheap, I bought a job lot of it," said the Duck.

"A materialistic hippie," I said, "that's a new one."

The Duck lounged on the bed and helped himself to a slice of toast. "I could set you up, after all you are my, uh, son. Find you a nice little period of time—this one's very pleasant—unless there's another one you'd prefer—how much money would you like, Steve—one million, ten?"

"I don't want your money," I said. "I just want to get Emma back."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Yeah, we will—well, we'll try—I meant after that. As I keep telling you, Steve, you can't go back to your own time, you know that," said the Duck.

"This is all an illusion," I said. "Enjoy it while you can, because sooner or later the law is going to catch up with you, Mr Duckworth."

"Er, it's Sir Julian Duckworth back here, Steve," he smirked. "I've been knighted, for services to my country. I foiled a French invasion."

"You'll get life when they finally convict you—you won't be so damn smug then," I said.

The Duck sprang off the bed and strutted around the room. "What is your problem, Stephen? What have I ever done but try to help you? What you don't seem to grasp is—I saved your bloody life! They were going to erase you, and, at great personal risk, I might add, I came forward to that miserable little twenty-first century, which has to be the worst bloody century in the whole of eternity, and rescued you! And this is the thanks I get! You sound like you want the bastards to catch me and bang me up! You ungrateful little shit!"

I thought he was going to attack me again. "Calm down," I said. "I'm just very concerned about Emma."

"It's Emma I'm thinking about!" the Duck exclaimed, waving his arms about. "I'm thinking about where you're both going to live when we get this bloody mess sorted out. What about the 1920s? That would give you eighty years. There's jazz, the Charleston—it's a great age to be young in. I could set you and Emma up anywhere you like, give you a nice healthy bank balance—and I'll even throw in a set of reference books from 1999, containing all the winners of every major sporting event, everywhere in the world, for the entire twentieth century. I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

I sat down on the edge of the bed and nodded. "It's a very generous offer," I said, "but we've got to find her yet."

The Duck sat down next to me and put his arm around me. "I know that, and I know you miss her, mate. I understand, I really do."

"Fivefold," I smiled, referring to his partners. "I know I must seem ungrateful to you, Duck, but I just don't understand why this has happened to me—the erasure, Emma's kidnap—and I suppose you're the only reason I can see, you're what connects it all. I just can't help blaming you."

"Yeah, well, don't, because it's nothing to do with me," said the Duck. "I thought I'd explained all that."

"Yes, you did, and it's beginning to sink in," I said. "You are right, I've got to start looking at this in a totally different way, if I'm ever going to make any sense out of it. I've got to leave you out of the equation."

"That's more like it," said the Duck, patting me on the shoulder.

I looked around the elegantly decorated and furnished room, with its gold and blue painted ceiling and wall mouldings, and its shiny new furniture, fresh out of the carpenter's shop.

"Emma would love all this," I said.

The Duck nodded. "Beautiful, innit?" He turned to me, and the faint look of sadness that crossed his face betrayed his true feelings. "It's all yours," he said. "A present from me to you and Emma, and the little one."

"I wouldn't dream of accepting it," I said. "But I appreciate the offer, and I think it's really nice that you included Emma and..." I couldn't say it.

"I'll get you one just like it," grinned the Duck.

## *Tempus Fugit*

Naturally, the Duck planned to install a woman in his dream house, he introduced me to her at lunch. Her name was Henrietta, she was nineteen and the daughter of a Viscount. And the Duck had actually agreed to marry her! She was very beautiful, of course, a porcelain-skinned brunette, who could have stepped right out of the pages of a Jane Austen novel. I felt a shade envious, to tell the truth, but only because I was missing Emma.

I also discovered that the Mason-Wrights were soon to be the Duck's neighbours, so I imagined his relationship with Emily was going to become pretty strained, to say the least. I felt really sorry for her. I even felt sorry for him. But I had enough problems of my own to worry about the Duck's love life. I just wanted to get back to 2001 and find that taxi driver! And I knew it was going to be difficult to drag the Duck away from his magnificent estate, even though it was less than idyllic, what with the two women in his life, both vying for his attention, and a baby on the way.

After dinner, the Duck and I strolled in his twenty-five acre garden, sharing a spliff, and I took the chance to work on him, while he was in a mellow mood.

"Now that I know how to drive the machine," I said, handing him back the huge joint he'd rolled for us, "I could go back to the future on my own and check out that driver. You've got enough on your plate here."

"You must be joking," said the Duck.

"No, I'm serious," I said. "I want to borrow the car, dad."

The Duck laughed through a cloud of thick grey smoke.

"Why not?" I said.

"Because I'm not letting that machine out of my sight," he said. "That's why."

"You don't trust me?" I said.

"In a word—no."

"Look, I'm only interested in finding Emma. You know that," I said.

"Yeah, that's what Little Jack Horner said when they gave him the Golden Goose and said, here, look after that a minute, mate. The next thing they knew it was Easter in Toyland," said the Duck.

"I think you're getting your fairy stories mixed up," I said.

"That's what I mean—they're all fairy stories," said the Duck. "Once you get behind the wheel of a time machine, the roads are paved with good intentions—where they've been thrown out the window of opportunity!"

"Is this English you're speaking or some language you've made up?" I said.

"Make no mistake," said the Duck. "A machine is a very sexy animal."

"I think what you're trying to say is that I'll be seduced by the idea of time travel and nick your machine," I said.

"Got it in one," said the Duck. "Look, as soon as I've laid out a few carpets of good will round here, and friendlied up the natives, we'll split."

I was getting nowhere. I decided to try a different tack.

"Wouldn't be a problem if we had two machines," I said.

The Duck took a big inhale and held his breath.

"Don't Bogart that joint," I said. "Gimme."

He let it out. "You mean that Pursuit," he gasped.

"That's exactly what I mean," I said, taking the joint off his hands. "With two of us on the job, we could bring her home, and keep both. I'm sure you could handle the Pursuit, and I could drive the Cortina back."

I raised the spliff to my mouth, but he took it from me before I got a chance to enjoy.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Temptation is the patron saint of theft, and the handmaiden's name shall be opportunity, man," he said.

"That's so true," I said, even though I didn't have a clue what he was on about.

"I could really dig this gig, man, but I'm bummed out about the situation here, as it really is. I'm picking up so many bad vibes," he said.

"That's understandable," I said, not quite understanding what we meant. "What you need is a break, Duck. A break from this whole lousy scene."

"This is a break," he said.

"Yeah, but you need a break from the break, man," I said.

"I've only been back twenty-four hours," said the Duck.

"Yeah, but tempus fugit, man," I said, "tempus fugit."

He looked around him at the splendour of the house with its brightly lit stones and the beauty of the garden in the softly gathering dusk.

"Yeah, I want that Pursuit," he nodded. "The hunger never dies."

"It's what makes living worthwhile," I said, relieving him of the spliff.

"That's it, man, that's what life is—wanting," he said. "We live to want."

"So true," I said. "And we want to live."

"Yeah," nodded the Duck. "Look, man, I'm gonna crash out for a while. We'll leave first thing."

"Yeah, man, as soon as," I said.

"Right on, man," said the Duck, taking the spliff away from me. "Hey, this is good stuff," he said, inhaling deeply. "Wish I could remember where I scored it, man."

"It's all in the mind," I said. "Somewhere."

## Chapter Twelve

I smelt the unmistakable perfume of cannabis, and opened my eyes. I'd been having a nightmare about a dinosaur, but now that I was awake, and realised where I was, I felt really scared, and wanted to get back into my nice, warm, cosy nightmare, and continue being chased by my prehistoric monster.

The Duck was sitting on my bed, smoking a clay pipe, and contemplating something. It was still dark outside.

"What time is it?" I said.

"Time to split," said the Duck. "Come on, get your clothes on. Oh, and, by the way, man, you snore like a pig."

"I do not!"

I got dressed and the Duck led me down the magnificent marble staircase. The rest of the household was still asleep. He showed me a grandfather clock standing in the elegant, black and white tiled hall.

"What do you think?" he said.

I nodded. "Neat skin," I said. I opened the door and tried to step in, and bumped my knee on the pendulum.

"Are you crazy—what the hell are you doing?" cried the Duck, pulling me away from it. "That's a Harrison!"

"Sorry. I thought it was the machine," I said.

"Just say if this is too early for you, man," said the Duck, gently closing the door of the priceless long case clock. "This way."

I followed him down a corridor. He stopped at a door, took out some keys, unlocked it, and we went in.

"What a fantastic library," I said, looking round at the thousands of books, neatly stacked on shelf after shelf, all around the room, except where there was a reading desk in a bay window. "Have you actually read any of these?" I said, pulling out a morocco-bound volume of Chapman's *Homer*, and flicking through the pages.

"Hey! Put that back! They're too valuable to read, mate," said the Duck. "They're all first editions. Worth a bleeding fortune, this lot. I don't want to get any finger marks on 'em, it reduces the value."

"Philistine," I said, replacing the book.

"No, I haven't got that one—what year did it come out?" said the Duck.

He was half way up a sliding ladder, feeling for something in the shelf. I'm sure it wasn't a book. Suddenly, that whole section of the bookcase, ladder and all, with the Duck still on it, became a giant turnstile that swung out from the wall, to reveal a secret room, with electric lighting.

"And this is my little workshop," said the Duck, with a flourish of his hand.

"Oh, very sly," I said, sauntering in. "Where do you get your power supply for all these tools?"

The walls were hung with every electrical power tool imaginable. There was a lathe and a sturdy looking workbench. The white Ford Cortina was up on a ramp, over an inspection pit.

"They run off the car battery," said the Duck. "As does the lighting."

"How on earth did you build all this on your own?" I said.

"Had it prefabricated and brought it all back in pieces," said the Duck.

"You've thought of everything," I said.

"It pays to stay one jump ahead," said the Duck, pressing the button on a hydraulic line, dangling from the ceiling, to bring the ramp down to ground level. "I



couldn't sleep after you reminded me about that Pursuit machine, so I came down here and gave the Cortina a complete overhaul and service," he said. "Oh, and I repaired the dash after your little accident."

"So, we're ready to go?" I said, keen to get started on my quest to find Emma.

"Not quite," said the Duck. He produced a small metal capsule, about size of a lighter, from inside his jacket, and handed it to me. "I want you to swallow this," he said.

I gave it straight back to him. "No thanks. So, are we all ready then?"

"No, you swallow it," said the Duck.

"No, you swallow it," I said.

"Look it's just a little device I designed, based on that mayday buoy you ejected from the boot when you were kicking the hell out of my dashboard," said the Duck.

"You call that little?" I said.

"It's as small as I could get it," said the Duck. "I've given it a smooth lozenge casing, so it'll slip down the throat easily."

"You swallow it then," I said, folding my arms.

"It's a temporal tracking device. If plod kidnap you, it'll tell me where you are," explained the Duck.

"I don't care if it's a Normandy truffle—I am not swallowing that!"

"You'll have to stick it somewhere else they won't think of looking then," said the Duck.

"That's funny, because I was just going to tell you to do the same thing," I said.

"Steve," said the Duck, patiently. "This may be our last chance of finding Emma, if it all goes pear-shaped, I need to know where you are. Now, if it were my girlfriend, I'd be prepared to do anything to get her back. What you've got to ask yourself is: how much do I really love Emma?"

"Oh, gimme the bloody thing!" I said, snatching it out of his hand.

"Which end are you—?"

"Turn around!" I said.

"Oh, right, that end," smirked the Duck, turning his back and looking away.

I made a lot of fuss about undoing my trousers, but I couldn't bear the thought of inserting anything up there, so I cheated and stuffed it down the side of my shoe.

"Okay," I said.

The Duck turned round, sniggering all over his face. He patted me on the shoulder. "Now, if anything goes wrong, don't panic, remember—"

"Yeah, I know. I'm sitting on plan B."

We journeyed forward to the twelfth of August, 2001, and the Duck dropped me off in the High Street. It felt strange to be back, poignant, knowing that somewhere in the city Emma was going about her everyday life, oblivious of the impending danger. Come to that—so was I! If only I could have warned us, but my experience with the phenomenon of multiples, which I still didn't understand, had taught me one thing: never ever meet yourself.

Although the taxi driver who kidnapped her didn't appear in the Channel Four documentary, he was named, so the Duck and I conceived a plan to get his address. I was to pose as a would-be cab driver, and then during my interview, the Duck was going create a diversion, and give me a chance to look through the drivers' files.

"So, Mr Sloane, why do you want to be a mini-cab driver?" asked the unshaven guy in the Metallica T-shirt and jeans, who was interviewing me.

"I thought it would be a good career move," I said.

*Tempus Fugit*

My interviewer nodded wisely. "And what made you choose AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA Cabs?" he said.

I looked over my shoulder, to see if there was any sign of the Duck.

"Uh, I liked the name," I said.

"And you like driving for hours on end, in a car that smells of sweat and b.o. twenty four-seven, and cleaning vomit off the back seat?"

"Not particularly," I shrugged.

"Well, you seem to be just the sort of driver we're looking for. Got a licence?"

I felt around in my pockets. "Must have left it at home," I said.

"Never mind—we can have a look at that some other time. Can you start this morning, only I've got a call to take a geezer to Croydon? Know where that is?"

"No idea," I said, wondering what the hell was keeping the Duck.

"Well, just ask the client," said my new employer, reaching behind him to take a set of keys off a hook. "Here, take the maroon Nissan Bluebird, you'll find it parked round the corner in Canal Street. There's a full tank, if some little scrot hasn't siphoned it off."

"Don't you want me to fill something in?" I said.

"You can fill my brother-in-law in if you like—he's a pain in the neck," he laughed.

"You mean you don't keep records of your drivers' details, addresses?"

"We find it's best not to get too close to our drivers—they're not usually with us long," he said.

"What sort of taxi service is—?" I started to say.

Suddenly the Duck rushed in, brandishing a small machine gun. He rattled off a burst of warning shots into the ceiling. Paint flakes and plaster rained down on us.

"Down on the floor!" he yelled.

We hit the floor. The Duck peered over the counter.

"Not you, mate," he said.

I got up, brushing the dust off my clothes.

"You call this a diversion?" I said.

"I thought it had style," smirked the Duck. "Get the bleeding files then."

I shook my head and looked down at my employer, who was lying on the floor, grinning up at the Duck.

"Where are the files?" I said.

"No, you want the money, mate," he said. "It's in the safe. We're only carrying the float though, rest went in the night-safe early this morning."

"I don't want the money, I want the drivers' files," I said, patiently.

"What do you want them for? Here, you're not the VAT man, are you?"

"No, we're gangsters," said the Duck.

"Thank God for that." The guy looked genuinely relieved.

"Give us the bloody files, or you're dog meat!" screamed the Duck, waving his little machine gun around.

The taxi office manager scratched his ear. "I think the boss keeps a ledger somewhere in his desk out the back, might be something in there," he said.

I darted over to the door and went through to the backroom.

"Is that a Mac-10?" I heard our hostage ask, as I rummaged through the desk drawers.

"Yeah. AKA the raincoat," said the Duck. "It'll pop off thirty caps a second, if you just tickle her trigger."

"That is so cool," I heard the idiot on the floor say.

## *Tempus Fugit*

But the idiot was right—there were no files, or driver details, that I could see anywhere, and I had been through just about every grubby book and folder in the desk. They were mostly full of accounts figures, unpaid invoices and letters of complaint, from what I could make out. I gave the desk a boot for being so unco-operative and returned to the front office.

"Nothing," I said.

"Told you," said our hostage.

"Shut up!" said the Duck and I.

"Don't you keep any bloody records whatsoever?" I said, incredulously.

"Whatsoever?" said the guy.

"He means—any bump on the drivers," said the Duck.

"Oh, right. Like photocopies of licences, you mean?"

"Which you keep where?" I said.

"Out the back in the cardboard box," he said.

I went into the back office again, found the box, searched through the piles of Xeroxes, found what we were looking for, wrote the address down and came back out.

"Got it," I said.

The Duck slipped the little twelve-inch long machine gun back inside his jacket, and gestured to the manager to get up on his feet.

"Say nothing," the Duck warned him. "Or I'll be back with my little friend."

The guy grinned and nodded.

We were on our way out into the street.

"Do you still want the job then?" he called.

The mini-cab driver's name was Ricky Anderson and he rented the top flat in one of those nondescript houses you find in bedsitter-land, with four storeys, a railing and a basement. It backed onto the canal, just a stone's throw away from his temporary place of work.

The Duck and I sat outside in the car for a few minutes, deciding what to do. I had already been up the front steps and checked the names listed against the buzzers.

"There's an intercom," I said. "But, according to the list of tenants, flat 9's got a Mr L. Sam living in it, not R. Anderson."

"Might be his partner," said the Duck. "The swarthy guy. I say we go up."

"What if he worked last night—and he's still in the sack?" I said.

The Duck's bottom lip stuck out. He was thinking.

"We'll go round the back and break in," he said. "If he's up there, I'll create a diversion."

"Not like the last one I hope," I said.

"Getting cold feet?" said the Duck.

"This all comes second nature to you, doesn't it?" I said. "Guns, break-ins, stealing cars, smoking dope—you've got a criminal mind. I hope it's not genetic."

"I love the smell of risk," said the Duck. "Routine, nine-till-five jobs, playing safe—that's strictly for losers. People respect you if you've got a touch of class and the balls to go with it, mate."

"I think I heard a guy say that in a TV documentary once," I said. "He was serving life in Parkhurst Maximum Security Prison."

"They'll never take me alive," said the Duck. "Come on, let's go pay Mr Anderson a visit."

He jumped out of the car and swaggered down a side alley. And, like an idiot, I followed him. I felt like the good kid, who is led astray by the local bad boy. Only this

bad boy was my father and he was six years younger than me. Time plays some cruel tricks.

There was a canal, a toll path and then the high back wall of the terrace of houses. I made a stirrup with my hands and gave the Duck a leg up. He disappeared over the wall and opened the back door and we were in. We were in a narrow yard with some dilapidated looking garden furniture, a rusting barbecue on wheels, a strip of grass, a concrete path and some steps, leading up to a door.

We jogged up to the door, which was locked fast, of course, so the Duck went to work with his jemmy. I looked around anxiously, since we were now higher than the back wall, I could see across the canal to the far bank, where there was another path and what looked like the rear of a factory. An old man, with a small dog on a lead, was standing there watching us.

"We've been made," I said.

"Made what?" said the Duck, without looking up from the wood he was splintering. "Knights of the bleeding realm?"

"Made—spotted," I said, nervously. "Guy with a Jack Russell—other side of the canal. I bet he's one of those sad old busy-bodies, who can't wait to run round to his friendly neighbourhood cop shop and dob us in."

"Give him a wave," said the Duck.

"I'm not waving to him!"

The Duck turned round and waved his jemmy at the guy. "Forgot our keys, mate!"

The old man nodded, waved back and walked on.

"We're in," said the Duck, slipping the jemmy back inside his jacket.

He darted inside. I followed quickly, but then turned back and tried to close the door, but it wouldn't stay shut, the slightest puff of wind blew it open. I left it and chased after the Duck, and ran into him.

"Damn! Another door," said the Duck, reaching for his jemmy.

I pulled him away, turned the doorknob and it opened.

"Not every door deserves the Duckworth treatment," I said.

We were in the ground floor hall. The Duck made straight for a pile of letters on a table just inside the front door.

"Don't go through their mail," I said, "let's just get this over with."

"Sometimes people post things to themselves, when they want to lose something for a few days," he explained, leafing through the bundle of letters.

"Like what?" I said. "Our guys are from the Fourth Millennium, I hardly think their post would have arrived here yet."

The Duck held up a manila envelope and gave it a shake. "Like keys," he said, ripping it open. "This is addressed to Mr L. Sam."

"Keys?" I said, impressed with the Duck's powers of deduction and thoroughness.

"Car keys," grinned the Duck. "I bet I've only gone and laid me hands on the keys to his bloody machine!"

"Let's check his room first," I said, "before we get too carried away."

"I know. You check his room and I'll see if I can fit these to a car. It must be parked out there somewhere. I wonder what skin he's using," said the Duck, heading for the front door.

I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back. "No you don't! Your true colours are coming out now, aren't they? I want to find Emma as much as you do, you said—all you're interested in is that Pursuit."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"It doesn't take two of us to search a bloody bedsit," said the Duck.

"Those might be the keys to the bloody bedsit," I said.

"These are car keys. I know what a car key looks like," said the Duck, waving them in front of my face.

My stomach churned over. I snatched the keys from his hand. "Let me see those!"

"Oi! What is it, Steve?"

"These are the keys to Emma's car," I said.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I recognise this bit of red plastic around the top of the key. And this smaller one's for the petrol cap—I've pumped enough petrol into the thing, I should recognise it," I said.

The Duck was disappointed. "What would they want with her car? These can't be hers. I'll just check," he said.

"They're Emma's I'm telling you!" I said. I was stunned. I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes.

The Duck sighed, patted me on the shoulder and bounded up the stairs. "Come on, mate. Let's take a look at this flat!"

"Wait-wait," I said.

The Duck waited for me on the first landing.

"What are they doing with Emma's car keys? It's too early. This is Sunday, so these have been lying here since yesterday—if these were posted on Friday, at the earliest, that was the tenth. They've had her keys since August the tenth, at least." I said, at a loss to make any sense of it all.

"When was the last time you saw her car?" said the Duck.

"Wednesday or Thursday, she didn't use it much—it was Thursday, Thursday morning, she drove us out to Welwyn Garden City to see one of her old school friends the night before," I said. "And then she dropped me off at work the next morning."

"That's on the way to Knebworth," said the Duck.

"And the connection being?" I said.

"No connection, just saying—Knebworth, that's where Floyd performed the last gig of their *Wish You Were Here* tour. I was—"

"I do not want to hear about Pink bloody Floyd," I said.

"Do you remember anything out of the ordinary happening that evening?" asked the Duck.

"Out of the ordinary? No."

"Did you sleep there?"

"Yes. How did you—? We'd had a little too much to drink, so we stayed over and drove back the next morning. The traffic was diabolical," I said.

"It always is on the A1. I remember in '75, it took me eight hours to drive back to the concert. I missed the Beefheart and Roy Harper sets. Just got back in time to see the two spitfires fly over—"

"Can we get back to the present? Why did you ask if we'd slept there?"

"Look, let's talk about this later, man," said the Duck. "We'd better see this flat first." He turned and continued up the stairs.

I didn't like the Duck's new tone. His voice was usually mocking or enthusiastic, but now it sounded resigned, even defeated.

"What is it?" I said. "What's the matter?"

"I don't like the sound of this," he said. "I'm getting bad vibes, man."

I reached up and pulled him round by the sleeve. "Tell me!" I said.

## *Tempus Fugit*

The Duck looked down at my hand gripping his arm and then at me and blinked. I let go.

"I think they knew we were coming," he sighed, "but we won't know till we look inside that flat—which may be a trap, or may not—I don't know—let's just go up there and find out."

He was terrifying me. I barged past him and ran on ahead, all the way up to the top floor.

"Steve! Wait, Steve!" I heard him calling.

I got to the door of flat 9 and tried the door handle. To my surprise, it opened. The Duck was close on my heels.

"Emma? Emma?" I called, running through the rooms.

I know it sounds absurd, because she hadn't even been abducted at that time, even so, I half expected to find her tied up and gagged. But it was completely empty—no furniture, no curtains, no floor coverings, no rubbish left by previous occupants—just bare floorboards, bare walls and a window with a view over the canal.

"Mr Nobody was here," said the Duck, running his finger along the mantelpiece and inspecting the dust. "For quite some time, I'd say."

"You know something!" I said. Out of frustration, I grabbed the Duck by the scruff of the neck. "Tell me what all this is about—"

The Duck pulled my hands away and shoved me off. "I'm as much in the bloody dark as you are!" he said, and retreated to the window. "You say you stayed overnight with this old school friend of Emma's, in Welwyn Garden City—did you sleep with Emma?"

"I don't see what my sex life has got to do with anything," I said.

"Were you with Emma the whole time?" said the Duck.

"Yes. We slept in the same bed, in the spare room. It was a good evening. Nothing out of the ordinary happened," I said, racking my brains to think of something.

"Do you know this friend of Emma's well?"

"Never met her before that evening. Emma hadn't seen her since they were at school together. She contacted Emma on the Internet. Their school has a website, where ex-pupils can post messages to each other. Caroline posted one for Emma. It went on from there," I said.

"Was anybody else staying in the house?"

"No. Look, why are you asking all these questions about Emma's friend? Just tell me what you're getting at."

"I don't believe in co-incidences," said the Duck.

"What do you mean?"

"Long lost friend turns up after all these years, gets you to stay overnight—four days later, your bird's abducted," said the Duck. "Sounds fishy to me."

"You think Caroline Legg had something to do with this? No. She couldn't have. They're old friends. You could see. They've known each other since they were kids," I said.

"If that was the same Caroline Legg Emma knew," said the Duck.

"That's crazy. They were talking about school. Laughing—"

"It could have been one of them, wearing a holographic skin. They could have found the real Caroline and mind-scanned her. Then they can make a memory chip and install it in their brains. They can impersonate anyone they like—even you. Even me," said the Duck.

*Tempus Fugit*

"Oh, you are really spooking me now," I said. "Tell me you just made all that up."

"Well, I made the bit about the mind-scan up, but they have got holographic skins—just like the ones I use for the machine," said the Duck.

"Okay. Assuming any part of what you just said is true—why would they go to all that trouble to get me and Emma out to Welwyn Garden City?" I said.

"What does this Caroline do for a living?"

"She's an aroma therapist. A good one, too. She gave me and Emma a massage—"

"I thought you said nothing out of the ordinary happened? You call having a massage with two chicks nothing out of the ordinary?" cried the Duck. "That wasn't Caroline Legg! I bet if you contacted the real one she wouldn't know her chakras from her Chaka Khans!"

"So what was it all about?" I asked, hardly able to believe what I was hearing, though the Duck seemed convinced he was right.

"They were checking to see if she was really pregnant—you can do that by massage—if you know what you're, er, feeling for," said the Duck.

"Seems a roundabout way of going about it," I said.

"They had to know—you didn't even know!" said the Duck. "They were probably recording everything and using it to build up a clearer picture of her, to help them decide what they're going to do with her."

"Do with her? What do you mean?" I said, alarmed.

"They might be thinking of taking her back with them," said the Duck. "They made copies of her car keys. They were getting ready to snatch her."

"To take her to the future?"

The Duck pursed his lips.

"Well, come on, answer me, you seem to know so much—you spring all these things on me!" I said.

"Who knows?" said the Duck. "Jemmons told me a mate of his got nabbed and taken back to the future, but you don't want to believe everything Jemmons says."

"Yeah and what if Jemmons is right, and what if Tree's telling the truth and there really is a place called the Castle, and Emma's been taken there? Have you been to Tree's time?"

"No."

"Never?"

"It's too risky," said the Duck.

"Never been curious?"

"They've got powerful sensors after about three thousand A.D., it would be like flying low over enemy lines," said the Duck.

"You've been there," I said.

"No I haven't."

"Yes you bloody have. And you're going to take me there," I said.

What the Duck did next truly shocked me—he pulled out his midget machine gun and pointed it at me.

"If you kill me I'll never speak to you again," I said.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

"Get out of the bloody way, Steve!" cried the Duck.

I moved aside and glanced back over my shoulder, following the Duck's eye beams. A tall, unshaven guy was standing, frozen, in the doorway, staring wide-eyed at the gun.

"Mr Sam, I presume," said the Duck. "Put your hands behind your head and get down on your knees! Do it!"

But instead of doing as the Duck said, the guy rushed him, I stuck out my foot and he pitched forward. The Duck got off two bursts of bullets in those split seconds. I saw the flashes hit the guy as he was falling—his clothing ripped, as though invisible claws were tearing at him, and then I saw a second grouping explode down his back. I covered my ears and turned towards the wall. I don't know where the Duck put the last three bursts. But when the noise stopped, my ears were ringing and the room was stinking with a smell like fireworks, and filled with thick grey smoke.

"Did you have to kill him?" I yelled, as I spun round.

The Duck was waving the smoke out of his face and just about to stoop down and turn the body over, when there was a loud crackling noise, followed by dancing coloured lights, which whizzed round and round the room. The Duck and I threw ourselves flat on the floor. I watched them, spellbound, as they orbited faster and faster, and slowly clustered into a single red ball of pulsing light.

"What is it?" I shouted.

"Keep your head down!" cried the Duck.

Suddenly, the ball passed through the window with a noise that sounded like gloop, as though it had been dropped into water, and vanished, leaving a perfectly round hole. We waited a few seconds and gradually got to our feet.

"Has it gone?" I said.

The Duck waddled on his haunches to the window, with his little machine gun at the ready, and peered out over the sill.

"I think so," he said.

As the smoke was sucked out of the hole in the window, it revealed a scorch mark on the floor, in the shape of a man.

"What was that?" I said.

"That was Hologram Sam," said the Duck.

"It wasn't real?"

"Holographic matrix, concealing an intertemporal camera," said the Duck. "A camera sent back through time to observe the past. In effect, that was a small, unmanned time machine."

"And you knew that before you introduced it to your little friend?" I said.

"Come on," said the Duck, whipping his baby machine gun away. "If they didn't know we were onto them before, they do now. We've got to get out of here!"

And the Duck was out of there and flying down the stairs, with me hot on his tail.

As we hurtled round the third floor landing, holding the banister to stop ourselves from skidding into the wall, a young woman opened her door, in her dressing gown and slippers.

"Hey, what's all the noise?" she complained. "Some of us are trying to sleep!"

"Sorry!" I cried. "We're time criminals, fleeing justice!"

"And I'm Wonder Woman!" she called down the stairs after us.



## *Tempus Fugit*

But we were already wheeling round the second landing and in sight of the first. And then we were tumbling down the last flight of stairs and in sight of the front door. But it opened before we reached the bottom. The Duck braked hard and I crashed into his back, sending him sprawling down the last few steps, and flat on his face. And out cold, I think.

The guy who had just come in the door and I stared at each other for a split second, and then we both looked down at the Duck, and then back up at each other.

"He tripped," I said.

He reached inside his jacket. "Do not move—" he said.

I jumped down to the Duck and wrenched the machine gun out from under him and stuck it up at the man I was convinced was another hologram.

"Don't move a muscle you mothe—" I started to say.

But the guy had already pulled out a mobile phone and, looking terrified, he slowly completed his sentence, "him. Let me call an ambulance."

"Close the door and get down there!" I said, nodding towards the passageway, leading to the back door.

He pushed the door to with his heel, without taking his eyes off me. "Okay," he said, putting his hands up, and stepping over the Duck, "but be careful with that gun."

"I'm not really a dangerous person," I said, beginning to feel ashamed of myself.

"You could have fooled me," he said.

"My girlfriend's been abducted by people from the future and they keep sending holographic assassins to try and capture me. They've already tried to erase me once, that's when they turn you into a kind of ghost and you just fade away and cease to exist. You see lots of people from your past and imagination when that happens, but none of them are real," I explained. I knelt down and tried to revive the Duck by giving his head several pats with my hand.

"Yes, right," said the guy, who looked like he wished he hadn't come in the door at that particular moment in time.

"He's been trying to help me," I said, "but I pushed him down the stairs. It was an accident. You do believe me, don't you?"

"Yes. Yes I do," he said.

"No you don't," I said.

"No, I do—every word. I can help you, I—"

"Shut up!" I said.

"Yes."

"You think I'm off my head, don't you? Mad, insane."

He shook his head. "No-I-I can help you, I have done some first aid."

"Oh, really?" I smiled. "I didn't know you could take first aid classes in psychiatry! What're you going to do—bandage up my brain and put my mind in the recovery position?"

"Your friend needs help," the guy said. "Let me help him."

"Just tell me one thing first," I said. "Are you a hologram with a camera inside your head?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, I am not."

"Let me see your eyes," I said, taking a step towards him.

He took a step towards me.

"That's close enough!" I shouted. I was only a body length away from him. I stared so hard into his eyes, that I thought I would go cross-eyed if I looked any harder.

"They look pretty normal," I said.

He smiled. "They are."

## *Tempus Fugit*

Just then, I caught a movement in his left eye, fainter than a blink, but it was there. A shivering sensation crawled up my spine and made my hair bristle.

"Aunt Bloody Nora!" I breathed. "You are one of—"

He lunged at me and grabbed the barrel of the Duck's gun, forcing it upwards with tremendous strength. My finger jerked on the trigger, there was a series of flashes and bangs, and shards of ceiling plaster fell on us. He pushed me onto my heels and I stumbled backwards over the Duck. He held onto the gun and twisted it around to make me let go.

Suddenly, our attention was distracted by a scream from the top of the stairs. We both turned and looked up at the girl in the dressing gown, who was just standing there screaming at us, but my reactions were quicker—maybe because I knew who she was and the thing, whatever it was, was slower, because it was electronic, or whatever—anyway, he, or it, looked at her longer than me, and I was able to jerk the gun from his grip.

I threw myself backwards against the door and let him have it. Only when I tugged the trigger, nothing happened. The bloody thing was out of ammo!

My attacker looked just as surprised as I was that nothing was happening, but as soon as he realised I couldn't shoot him, he came at me again. And this time he made straight for my throat. I remember thinking, the last sound I am going to hear in my short, miserable life is a girl screaming her head off. I tried to fight him off, but my hands weren't making any impression on his vice-like stranglehold.

"Why? Why?" I tried to say, but it must have come out as, "Muhy? Muhy?"

I stared into his impassive eyes. Close-up, I could now see the dim flickers of camera lights deep inside the retinas. I felt myself blacking out as the blood cut off from my brain. I was just about to give up the ghost, when I felt his hands tremble slightly and I thought I saw his eyes blink. I was fighting to stay conscious. And then his whole body shuddered several times and his pupils turned to the side repeatedly. I thought I could hear screams, but they were too far off. I was falling down and down, into a deep pool. I held on, with hope in my heart, knowing that we never truly walk alone. I had been a life-long Liverpool fan, so you will forgive me what I thought were my last few sentimental remembrances.

Suddenly, I was released—free and gasping for air and the screams were so loud they scared me. I slumped back against the door, smoothing my swollen, throbbing throat.

"Ice, ice," I croaked, staggering forward.

I bumped into the hologram, or whatever the bloody thing was, it had its back to me and there was a dirty great iron bar sticking out of the shoulder. I realised it was the Duck's jemmy. And then I saw the thing had someone else hold and was trying to strangle that person, too. So, I pulled the jemmy out of its back and started beating it over the head as hard as I could.

"Have some of that—and that—and that—and that—you bastard!" I gasped.

Its skin seemed to short-circuit and go up in smoke, like thin tissue paper, and then it exploded in a shower of lights, exactly like the last one. I hit the deck and found myself face to face with the girl in the dressing gown.

"Thanks," I rasped.

She stared at me wildly and then looked up at the revolving lights and then back at me, a look of sheer horror in her eyes.

"Don't worry," I whispered, "it'll go away now."

The little lights formed themselves into a single ball of whirring red light, which did its usual whirling trick and shot up the stairs. I patted her shoulder.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"What did I tell you," I smiled.

And then it shot back down again, making us duck, as it cornered low over our heads, and zoomed out through both back doors.

I raised my eyes and found the girl had flung her arms around my neck. Our lips were about three inches apart. I could smell her toothpaste. I thought she was going to kiss me, like they do in the movies when the good guy saves the girl's life, but she just looked shocked, or embarrassed, and removed them instantly.

Now I could see the Duck over her right shoulder. He was still lying down, but was resting up on one elbow, looking at us, with a sick grin on his stupid face.

"Can't turn me back for five minutes before I find you groping some bird," he said. "You want to watch him, love—he's a right little raver when it comes to the ladies."

"Oh, shut up—I just saved her life—she was terrified," I said.

My leading lady gave me a shove. "I saved your life, you mean—and I was not terrified!"

"You sounded terrified to me, darling—it was your screaming that woke me up," said the Duck.

She looked at me. "Tell him if he doesn't stop calling me darling and bird, I'm going to shove that crowbar down his stupid throat."

"Don't let me stop you," I said.

"Come on, mate—it's time to split," said the Duck, using the wall to lever himself up. "It's getting chilly round here, man."

"You're not going anywhere, sunshine," said the girl, "until you tell me what that was all about. And who's going to clean up all this mess and pay for all the damage?"

"Do you have any ice?" I said. "My throat's on fire."

"You'd better come upstairs," she said. "Both of you."

We got to our feet and I picked a piece of plaster out of her hair.

She flinched.

"Just a piece of plaster," I smiled.

"We don't have time for all this," said the Duck, rubbing a bump the size of a duck egg on his forehead.

"I have a few questions, too," I said. "Maybe she—I'm sorry, I don't know your name," I said.

"Ibiza," she said.

"Ibiza—Ibiza?" I said.

"That's a place, innit?" said the Duck.

"It's my name, lemon head—got a problem with that?"

"I'm sorry, Ibiza, we're a little confused. I'm Steve and he's, er, Julian. If we could just get that ice," I said.

She looked at us, each in turn, as if memorising our faces for an identity parade. "All right," she said, and turned to go up the stairs.

"Duck, I think Ibiza might be able to help us," I said, as we filed after her.

"How?" said the Duck.

"Yeah, how?" said Ibiza. "I don't know anything about men who explode and turn into lava lamps."

"Knowing isn't always understanding," I said.

Ibiza turned and looked down at me. "Are you suggesting that I'm thick or something?"

## *Tempus Fugit*

"No, of course not! I was just saying—what I was trying to say was you might know something that might be relevant to what we want to know, without knowing that it's relevant. Do you see?"

She looked past me to the Duck, who was last in line, going up the stairs. "Could you translate that for me, please?" she said.

"Seen any dodgy characters coming and going?" he said.

"You mean apart from you two?" she said, and carried on up the stairs.

The Duck and I looked at each other.

"Feisty is good," I said. "This girl is really sharp. She'll make a good witness. We could learn a lot from her," I said.

"I'll do the talking," said the Duck.

"I think I can handle her," I said. "We're on the same wavelength."

"You're not even on the same planet as that chick," said the Duck. "Leave this one to me, mate."

It was a little humbling, not to mention irritating, when Ibiza threw me a packet of frozen peas, while she lavished all her attention on the Duck, as soon as we got inside her flat. She held an ice cube on his forehead with her hand, and when it melted, she held another one on it, until that melted, too. They were even giggling. It was as though I wasn't even in the room. I could hear the Duck asking her things and she was answering him, but they kept their voices down so low and intimate, I couldn't make out what they were saying. Do you suppose it's true that certain males give off an invisible aura, which women can detect and find themselves uncontrollably attracted to? It certainly seemed that way with the Duck sometimes. Either that, or he'd slipped her a love pill.

"I am in the room, you guys," I said, with the bag of peas stuffed round my throat like a plastic cravat.

"Steve," said the Duck, "Ibiza says the guy who attacked you was Anderson, so that's one mystery solved."

"Yes, but does it get us anywhere?" I said.

"Thanks a lot," said Ibiza.

"No, I didn't mean it wasn't useful, Ibiza," I said. "I just meant I can't work it all out yet."

"Well, it's obvious," said the Duck. "Anderson and Sam were holograms of the real Anderson and Sam, left here to make everything look kosher."

I noticed Ibiza now had her other arm resting around the Duck's neck as she gently applied the latest ice cube.

"I wonder what Sam's job was," I said.

"Probably just playing a minor role, watching Anderson's back," said the Duck. "A bit like you watch mine—when you're not bumping into it and nearly breaking me neck!"

Ibiza and the Duck laughed at his joke. I could have strangled him. I took my photograph of Emma out and looked at it, tracing her lips and hair with my finger, I was really missing her and wondered if I'd ever really see her again.

I heard Ibiza offer to make the Duck a cup of tea, and as she passed me, by way of an afterthought, she asked if I would like one.

"Milk two sugars, please," I said.

She looked down over my shoulder at the picture of Emma.

"That's Lucien Sam's girlfriend," she said.

"What?" I exclaimed. "No. This is Emma, my fiancée!"

## *Tempus Fugit*

"You want to keep an eye on that one then," said Ibiza, and went through to her kitchenette to put the kettle on. I jumped out of my chair and raced after her.

"Take another look," I said. "You're mistaken."

Ibiza glanced at the photograph, as she filled the kettle. "Yeah, that's her. I caught them at it on the stair, when I came in late one night. Dirty pair!"

"But this is Emma!" I said. "She's having my baby."

"Sure it's yours?" smirked Ibiza.

"Duck!" I shouted. "Emma was here. They must have been holding her against her will."

"She looked willing enough to me," said Ibiza.

"Duck?"

There had been no answer to my calls, so I went back through to the lounge, expecting to find that he'd fallen asleep, but he wasn't there. I turned back to tell Ibiza.

"The Duck's not—"

"The ice cubes contained a sedative," said Ibiza, pointing a strange-looking handgun directly at my heart. "I simply dribbled some of it into the idiot's mouth. Do not worry, he will not be harmed. But I'm afraid he is facing a rather long prison sentence, so I doubt that you will ever see your friend again. However, it is you that we really wanted, Mr Sloane."

"Me? But I don't understand. You saved my life," I said.

"I was afraid the drone would kill you, otherwise I would not have intervened," she said. "Drones can be a little heavy-handed. Mr Anderson's drone overstepped his authority." She felt her neck. "So, I deactivated him."

"What you said about Emma—it was all lies?"

"A mere diversion—I needed to distract your attention, while the Temporal Police removed Duckworth."

"You're not Police, are you?" I said.

"You're very perceptive, Mr Sloane, though I imagine most of it is mere guesswork, but, yes, you are correct, I am not with the Temporal Criminal Police," she said.

"Then who the hell are you working for?" I asked. "And why have you destroyed my life?"

"In answer to your first question, I am an agent of the Council of Corrective Measures. And, in answer to your second question, you would not even understand if I explained it to you," she said, with a coldness in her voice which suggested she held me in abject contempt.

"And Emma—is her life worthless, too?" I said.

"I do not feel any sympathy for you, Mr Sloane," she said. "If you knew the truth about yourself, you would understand—that is why it made me so angry when you said: knowing isn't always understanding. Isn't it ironic that you will never know and never understand? You will simply cease to be."

I turned my back on her.

"Where are you going?" she snapped.

"Nowhere, it seems." I slumped down on the arm of a chair. "Well, go on then, get it over with, vaporise me, or whatever you're going to do."

"It's not as simple as that, Sloane."

"Well, I'm making it simple, because I've had enough. I'm not doing another damn thing. It's all pointless anyway, so I'm just going to sit here and sulk."

"Get up!"

"No."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"I can make you," she said.

I looked her up and down. "I doubt it, honey," I sneered.

"Don't you want to see your precious Emma one last time?" she said. "I can take you to her."

"Now, that's very tricky," I said. "Because, you know, that I can't be sure that you're lying, so I just might go along with you."

"You'll just have to trust me," she said.

"And I don't," I sighed. "So this is stalemate."

"Don't you want to see my endgame?" she said.

I let out a little ironic laugh. "Emma and I are doomed, I think it's better that we don't see each other again. It would be too painful, but I don't expect you to understand that."

"That's a pity," she said, "because she wants to see you. She told me. I told her I'd see what I could do, as a favour."

I laughed at my tormentor. "You are such a bitch!"

She laughed with me. "You know you're going to come with me, so we might as well leave right now. *Tempus fugit*, Sloane, time flies, and I'm afraid you don't have many more air miles left."

"All right," I said, "I'll go with you, even though you know I know I shouldn't trust you, and you probably have no intention of letting me see Emma again. But I'm going to go with you anyway, because I love Emma. And if it is all an evil, nasty, inhuman, perverted, sick trick you're playing, well, at least I can say the last thing I ever did, I did because I truly wanted to do it. But first, I need to go to the loo."

"It's through there," she said, indicating the hall.

I got up and walked out. She followed me.

"I hope you're not planning on coming in with me," I said. "I need to do number twos."

She shoved me towards the door. I could tell I was getting to her.

As soon as I was inside the toilet, I took the Duck's tracking device out of my shoe and put it in my mouth. It almost choked me. There was no sink, and I wasn't prepared to drink water from the pan to wash it down, so I climbed up on the seat, lifted the lid off the cistern and scooped water up into my mouth with my hand. But I couldn't get it right down. It was stuck somewhere in my chest, between my gullet and the entrance to my stomach. Maybe gravity would help it to go down when I walked, I thought. I put the lid back into position, got down and pulled the flush.

She was right outside the door, waiting for me. The apartment door was wide open.

"Out there. Up the stairs. Walk slowly. I'll be right behind you," she said, waving her gun at me.

"Well, if you're the future, I'm so glad my little contribution's going to be erased. I wouldn't want to be blamed for the likes of you," I said.

"Don't talk, just walk," she said, prodding me in the back with the barrel.

I belched and clutched my chest. The trapped wind was excruciating, but I had managed to get the device down to my stomach. I could feel it lying there, like a lead weight. It matched my heart. I was just praying I would be allowed to see Emma again, but I didn't want to give the sadistic Ibiza the satisfaction of knowing that. What I wanted to do was rile her so much, that she let me see Emma out of pure spite! I know, not much of a plan, but I was in not much of a position.

"Is free speech banned, too, in your time?" I said. "What a wretched, petty little world it must be—you must feel right at home there."

## *Tempus Fugit*

That got me another jab in the back. "Shut up, Sloane—you don't know what you're talking about."

"That's right," I said, "you have me at a disadvantage—you've seen my world, but I'll never see yours, so I can't really make a comparison, I was just going by you and your sicko mind."

"Don't be too sure you won't see it," she said.

"So you are taking me back to the future with you?" I said. "Thanks for telling me, I'm sure you weren't supposed to."

We had reached the fourth floor. The door of the flat Anderson and Sam had apparently shared was still open, just the way the Duck and I had left it half an hour earlier, in a hurry.

"So where did you hide the machine? The Duck and I already searched in here," I said.

"Through there," said Ibiza, pushing me towards the bathroom.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and looked around the shabby room. "It could do with a makeover, but this could be quite a pleasant little wallow, if you don't suffer from claustrophobia," I said.

"Get over there."

I backed up against the basin.

"Tell me if you're going to swing any cats, I'll have to duck," I said.

She crouched down, keeping the gun aimed up at me, and pulled the plastic fascia off the bath, by squeezing her hand through the gap between the carpet and the bottom, and tugging.

"Crawl under," she ordered.

"Under there? A cockroach couldn't get under there," I said. "But, hey, maybe you could fit under there."

She rushed me and stuck the gun in my stomach and her hand around my throat.

"I'm getting tired of you running off at the mouth. Maybe I should shut it," she said.

"Would you be able to keep a civil tongue, if you knew you were going to die? I'm just—" I started to say, worrying she might actually pull the trigger.

"Shut up," she said, and stuck her mouth over mine.

She frenched me long and hard, and then pulled away with a dirty, stupid grin on her face.

"keeping up my morale," I finished saying. "I thought physical contact between the sexes was dirty in your time, won't they dock your salary or something for that?"

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I just wanted to see what it felt like," she said.

"And how did it feel?"

"Not bad," she said. "Not bad at all."

"There's plenty more where that came from," I said, thinking to myself: what the hell, I could try a new approach with her. Wasn't there some theory about hostages getting close to their captors? Now I knew why—it's hard to shoot somebody you want to have sex with! You don't need a doctorate in psychiatry to work that one out, but when you're being paid three hundred pounds an hour for your time, I suppose you have to make it sound much more complicated than that.

"Don't flatter yourself, Sloane—just climb down there and find that portal, it's through the bath," she said.

## *Tempus Fugit*

I got down on my hands and knees and felt around for the gap in the matrix. When I found it, I made the mistake of stretching forward too far and put all my weight on my leading hand—and tumbled head first into the machine. But my landing was cushioned by the soft furnishings of the seats. Although I wasn't hurt, I was jammed between the seats for a while, before I could push myself clear.

Ibiza was in on top of me, before I could even sit up, planting another kiss, full on my lips, but I could still feel the gun, it was sticking in my ribs this time. She had her eyes closed, I think she was getting a buzz out of it. I kept my eyes open and looked around. The first thing I noticed was that the time machine was round, giving three hundred and sixty degree visibility, but it was much more compact than I had expected. I don't know why I expected it to be bigger, I suppose I thought—more advanced means bigger and better, but then that didn't apply to Japanese technology in the late twentieth century, did it? You can see how confused I was getting, what with all the worry about whether or not I'd ever see Emma again and having Ibiza coming on to me, I was thinking about engineering. I pushed her off me.

"Just hold off a second," I said. "I want to know where this relationship is going—I mean, are you going to turn me in or are you going to fly me to some place nobody will ever think of looking for us, and help me to forget Emma, and how I ratted on her? Come on, Ibiza, I have a right to know—do I have a future with you or not?"

"I would like to commit full sexual intercourse with you before I turn you in," she said.

"And what do I get out of it?" I said. "Besides, I don't think I'd be capable of, uh, full arousal with that gun stuck in my mind."

"Are you impotent?"

"Not the last time I looked—but that's not the point, I'm just not sure we should be—"

"Then get it up, baby—as they say in the swinging London of your time," she said.

"Wrong decade. You want the Duck. Listen, Ibiza—I mean, look at you, you're all full on and I'm—I'm at a big disadvantage here. I mean, I'm the type of guy who likes to take the lead in these things—I'm, uh, a very dominant lover, Ibiza, and I'm being forced to have sex under some pretty submissive circumstances here. I'm not used to this."

"You want to go on top?"

"No, that's not what I mean. Is everybody this sex-starved in the Fourth Millennium? Jesus, the shrinks must be cleaning up."

"You don't want to sock it to me?" she said.

"Sock it? No, look, it's not that I don't find you attractive—I mean in a physical way, because I do—it's just that you're not my type."

"Type? Of course you need to know my blood group and genetic profile—wait I have them on disc, we can do a match—do you have your details?"

"My genetic details? I don't even know my national insurance number," I said.

"It doesn't matter—I can take a swab and the computer will analyse your DNA and Y chromosome," she said.

"You can do that?"

"Of course. It will only take a few seconds for the computer to process the data—and then we can boogie on down!"

"Boogie? You're still in the wrong decade, baby, but you're getting warmer," I said.



## *Tempus Fugit*

I was intrigued at the idea of having my DNA analysed, and she hadn't mentioned terminating me for at least three minutes, so I went along with her. She took the swab from the inside of my cheek and dropped it into a plastic chute, attached to the dashboard.

"Will this tell me if I'm going to get any life-threatening diseases?" I said. "Maybe it's not a good idea to know—but what the hell, I only have a few hours left, so unless I contract something in the next hour, I'm not bothered."

"Don't worry, such things have all been eradicated, at least on your father's side—his genes should be powerful enough to counteract anything on your mother's side," she explained.

"It's funny to think of the Duck's genes being so powerful. This is a complete surprise to me, I thought I'd lost my capacity to be surprised after the last few days. You know, he never told me he was really from the future. He made up some crazy story about being from the early seventies and stealing a time machine. Do you know, I don't think he's genetically capable of telling the truth?"

"He is," said Ibiza.

I shook my head. "No. Really. That guy is such a liar. I almost feel ashamed to be his son," I said.

"You're not," said Ibiza.

"I'm not what?"

"Is that what he told you—that he was your father?"

"Yes. That's what he told me," I said, getting more and more confused by the second.

"Then he is a liar," she said. "You really didn't know, did you?"

"It seems I don't know anything," I said. "Not even, it appears, who my father is."

"Well, I can soon tell you that," said Ibiza. "Although, of course, I already know, or I would not be here."

"Who is my father?"

"Wait, I will show you."

I didn't even know if she still had the gun on me, didn't care—nothing would have dragged my eyes away from that computer monitor, as we waited for the results of my DNA screen to come up. I have to say though, it was a bit of an anticlimax when it suddenly started filling with meaningless, at least to me, figures and script.

"What does it all mean?" I said.

"It suggests that we would be a perfect match, our hormonal imbalances compliment each other and your blood sugars are fine," said Ibiza. "Hmm, what a huge sperm count! Oh my God, it is enormous. I've never seen figures this high before!"

"Never mind all that—but you might just run me off a few dozen copies—what does it say about my father?"

"Father's name Zebulon Zirconion, born Jupiter City, April eighth, 2983," said Ibiza. "There's a lot of information about his DNA, but not much else."

"Is there a photograph?"

"Yes. But it is very old. Taken when he was a temporal design undergraduate at BlairTech. I'll just download it."

"Excuse me. Did you say BlairTech?"

"That's right. It is on Mars. Named after some ancient politician—from your time, I believe."

"Yes. He's still around," I said.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Here it comes."

I watched the screen, transfixed, as the image of my father loaded, in all his pixelated glory.

"He looks a bit like you," said Ibiza.

"And all this has been about him?" I said.

Ibiza nodded. "Oh yes, he was once considered one of the most brilliant and respected scientists in the whole of The UPSS, The United Planets of the Solar System. And now he is the most hated," she said.

"Why, what did he do?" I asked, unable to tear my eyes away from the boyish face of the crew-cutted space engineer, looking benignly back at me from the screen. "He looks harmless enough."

"I should not really tell you," she said. "But I can tell you that he has caused serious anomalies to the time continuum. These problems do not affect your time, but they will certainly change our future."

"And I'm a part of these problems?" I said.

"We're not sure what your part is, but we cannot afford to take any chances," she said. "All trace of Zirconion and his offspring must be eradicated—obliterated from the space-time continuum."

"A guy sows a few wild oats through time and it all gets zapped? The Duck's fathered at least half a dozen children that I know of, does this mean you're going to annihilate all those, too?"

"No. They will not affect the vortex. They will simply live and die."

"Well, that's all I was planning on doing," I said. "Why can't I live and die like the Duck's kids?"

She turned and looked into my eyes. "I've said too much," she said.

"No, you haven't said enough," I said. "Why do I have to die? Why does Emma have to die, just because she's carrying my kid? What's wrong with me—you said I was a perfect partner for you, you said I had a sperm count the size of a small galaxy. Why must I be the last of the Zirconions?"

"Because you may be too perfect for your own good, and, more importantly, for the good of humanity," she said.

"But what does that mean? Tell me in words I can understand? Don't I have a right to know why humanity wants to erase me from its Christmas card list?" I pleaded.

"You may be immortal," she said.

"Immortal? You mean I'm going to live forever?" I said.

"Not if we can help it," said Ibiza, and shot me.

## Chapter Fourteen

"Ahoy there!"

I opened my eyes. I was lying on an examination couch, in a bare white room, with Roger Jemmons grinning down at me.

"Am I alive?" I said.

"No, you're dead—I'm a blooming gravedigger—now get off that bed! We've got about ten seconds to get out of here," said Jemmons.

You know when you go to the dentist and he injects that painkiller stuff into your gum and you can't feel a thing, well, that's how I felt—only all over my body. I felt comfortably numb.

"I can't move," I said, smiling complacently about it.

"I'll have to carry you then." He picked me up and threw me over his shoulder like a carpet. "Where's the Duck?" he said.

"I don't know. I don't even know where I am."

"You're in London Green Cross, matey—and believe me, you don't want to be here," said Jemmons, opening the door and peeking outside.

"I expect you've been in places ten times worse than this," I said.

"No I haven't. This is the worse place on Earth. Make no mistake about that, matey."

"Why, where am I—in a privatised torture chamber?" I said. I imagined some guy getting paid three hundred grand a year to run it—plus share options and bonuses for all the confessions his staff extract. I wondered what he got when he retired—a golden thumbscrew? I giggled to myself.

"What are you on? It's worse than that. It's a hospital," said Jemmons.

He ventured out into a long white corridor, and laid me on a trolley thing that floated on air, and bounced up and down when he put me on it, like the sea.

"Lucky they left you unattended," he said, pulling me down the corridor. "How long have you been waiting in there like that to be seen?"

"It seemed like hours," I said.

"I only picked up the Duck's distress signal a few hours ago. It took me a while to work out where it was coming from. I never thought it would lead me here, to this Godforsaken hole. What does Corrective Measures want with a sprat like you anyway?"

"They think I'm immortal."

"I might just put that to the test when I get you out of here. I knew you were trouble the minute I clapped eyes on you," said Jemmons, looking left and right at every door, as he towed me along.

We swerved round a corner, and then swiftly reversed and swerved round the opposite corner.

"Forget where you left your machine?" I said.

"All these damn corridors look the same."

"I think this might be a clinic for people who suffer from paying excessive attention to detail," I said. "They put them in a corridor and say, go on, smarty pants, count all the corners and tell us how many there are—"

"Will you pipe down, I'm trying to think!" said Jemmons, throwing open a few doors.

"Where did you leave it?" I said.

"In a broom cupboard."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"I know—we'll tell a nurse we spilt something and ask where we can find a mop to clean it up, and then—"

"What the hell did they give you?"

"I think Agent Ibiza shot me with a tranquillizer gun. I feel very tranquil. It's quite pleasant really. I don't mind if it's permanent. I haven't felt this tranquil since I went on holiday to Benidorm with the lads when I was nineteen, and the Duck put something in my tequila—"

"Will you put a sock in it—or I'll tranquillize you—permanently!" He opened a door. "Ah, this is the one—it's not here—some bastard's taken her!"

"I know—we could just stay in here. It's cosy. We could sneak out at night and steal food and drink from the vending machines and—"

"I'll swing for you, if you don't pipe down! Let me think."

"What did it look like, Roger?" I said.

"I used a trolley skin, like the one you're lying on."

"Maybe this is the one," I said serenely.

"Don't be so bloody stupid—" He looked under my bed and felt around. "Octopuses' armpits! It is the one—she's here!" he cried.

He lifted me off the trolley and took me below. I found myself on the deck of a small sailing sloop. A midi hornpipe was playing in the background.

"It's a boat," I said.

"Welcome aboard La Belle," he said proudly.

"Is this the one you half-inched in Plymouth?" I said.

"Who told you that?"

He carried me down into the cabin. "I've had her out of the vortex and given her a complete overhaul, I'll have you know, she was a wreck when I got her—she was practically salvage," said Jemmons, laying me down on a bunk, in a large, comfortable cabin.

"You've done a good job," I said, noticing the lovingly varnished wood everywhere and shiny brass screws and hinges. "Bit of a dab hand at time machine engineering and design are you, Roger?"

"I know enough. Now that's enough nattering. I better get her underway, before their sensors pick us up," he said.

"The Duck's scared to come here," I said, "he says they'd detect you as soon as you enter the Fourth Millennium."

"Aye, well, you've got to keep your wits about you and know what you're doing," said Jemmons, fiddling with a set of gauges and pulling a few brass levers.

"And you do?" I said. "You seem to know more than they do."

"You ask a lot of questions, boy. We're not out of here yet—not by a long chalk," he said. "Right, now I've got to go topside and take the helm. Will you be all right down here?"

"Aye, aye, cap'n," I said.

He clattered up the stairs and I heard a bell, and we began to move forward. I could see the red mist swirling around us through a porthole. Could Roger Jemmons really be Zebulon Zirconion? I mused. I remembered the rude oaf I had met at Shakespeare's garret and how he had been coming to warn the Bard about a plague, and how he had helped me when I got lost in time—and now he had come to my rescue again, risking life and limb for me. It all added up. The only thing that jarred was the instant disliking he had taken to me when we first met. Could he be my father? I decided to ask him outright, after all what did I have to lose? I was obviously important to him.

"Hey, Jemmons!" I hollered up.

"What?"

"Are you really some bloke named Zebulon Zirconion, who just happens to be my father?"

"No!"

"Okay. It's just that I wouldn't mind if you were, in fact, I'd be—"

"Well I'm not! So, put a cork in it!" shouted Jemmons. "You're doing my head in!"

There was a loud clunk. It seemed to come from the hull on the starboard side. And then another and another. And then two more clunks on our port side.

"What's happening, Roger?" I cried, trying to slide off the bunk, but only succeeding in rolling onto the floor.

"We're being boarded—that's what's happening!" exclaimed Jemmons.

I heard a scuffle on our decks, right over my head. I was terrified because I couldn't move and felt totally defenceless.

"Out here—in the vortex?" I cried. "But how?"

I could make out what sounded like Jemmons struggling and there were two or three garbled shouts, and then a clear authoritative voice cut through the pandemonium:

"Take him away!"

I heard Jemmons shout something that sounded obscene or threatening, but I couldn't make out what it was, and then several sets of footsteps rattling down the wooden stairs.

Two black uniformed time police, like the ones I'd seen at Tree's farm clattered into the cabin and dragged me to my feet. They held me up straight by my arms and faced me towards the foot of the stairs, as if standing me to attention to face someone important. Two more had positioned themselves either side of the staircase, guarding it. More footsteps creaked down, but these were sedate and deliberate. Then my blood ran cold—I heard the Duck's simpering voice!

"...the device is in his stomach, Over-Controller. The same trick could be used to trap other time thieves. I might even patent it—the Duckworth Thief-Taker—"

"Don't be absurd, Duckworth! You copied the design from our technology!" said the voice of authority.

"Sorry, Over-Controller—of course, you're quite right, what was I thinking of," said the Duck.

A pair of black boots and black trousered legs stepped carefully down the last few rungs of the stairs, and a distinguished-looking, grey-haired officer appeared, followed closely by the Duck.

"Ah, and here is the elusive, Mr Sloane at last," said the Over-Controller, looking me up and down. "I was on my way to meet you, Mr Sloane, when they told me you had escaped. I was most put out. But, now, thanks to Duckworth, here, here you are again, safely back in my custody."

I looked around him at the Duck, who was sort of hanging back a bit, as though hiding behind the Over-Controller.

"You slimy, lily-livered, spineless piece of crud!" I yelled.

"I had no choice, mate—they were going to put me away for life," said the Duck.

"Traitor!" I cried, hardly able to believe what the Duck had done. "You even gave them Jemmons—you really are the lowest of the bloody low!"

"You mustn't blame young Duckworth, Mr Sloane. Faced with a simple choice, he chose his liberty. Most of us would have done exactly the same, under similar circumstances," said the Over-Controller. "And I should not waste your time worrying about Prisoner Jemmons. I should worry about yourself, and that young woman you got with child, like a filthy animal of the field!"

"What about him then?" I said. "He's fathered at least six that I know of!"

The Over-Controller swallowed, as if clearing an unpleasant taste from his mouth. "Yes, well, we won't go into all that—Mr Duckworth has bought himself immunity by offering to assist us in our thief-catching. We are going to make miniature versions of his temporal tracking device and he is going to plant them on all the fugitives from justice he meets. Aren't you, Duckworth?"

"Er, yes, Over-Controller."

"You rat turd!"

"Now, now, Mr Sloane. You may be relieved to know that the Council of Corrective Measures have decided to keep you alive, though in a high security facility."

"What about Emma Gummer, my fiancée?" I said. "I'm not going anywhere without her."

"Ms Gummer will be detained in a Women's prison," said the Over-Controller. "A matter neither you nor I will have any say in, Mr Sloane."

"I'll go on hunger strike!" I said. "Unless they put us together, in the same cell."

"What a vile idea!" he cried, looking aghast. "You will be nourished intravenously. Oh, did I not mention, Mr Sloane? You will be kept alive for medical research purposes only. I imagine some of the experiments they may wish to conduct on you will be quite painful."

"See what you've done, Duckworth!" I yelled. "I'll get you for this!"

The Duck stepped out from behind the Over-Controller to address me face to face. There was a sneering tone in his voice.

"Oh, grow up, Stephen—it's the way of the world. You didn't really think I was going to sacrifice my life to save yours, did you? You're not even my proper son."

"Mr Duckworth!" snapped the Over-Controller, clearly offended. "That's enough of that foul language!"

"I'm sorry, Over-Controller," said the Duck, "but this prisoner just makes me feel sick to the pit of my stomach."

"There we are in accord," said the Over-Controller, giving me a distasteful look. "Take him to the holding cell."

The two guards, who were holding me up, lifted me off my feet and marched me out. I tried to kick Duckworth as they carried me past him, but he dodged behind the Over-Controller, and I kicked him by accident.

"Pay him back tenfold!" shrieked the Over-Controller, rubbing his shin.

The guards began kicking me in turn, as they dragged me up the stairs, until they had counted out ten kicks.

Once on the deck of the time ship, they blindfolded and manhandled me into some kind of vehicle. After a brief journey, I was roughly pushed and pulled out, and frogmarched on a level floor. The feeling had started returning to my limbs, so I was able to stagger and stumble along to wherever they were taking me mostly under my own steam. Finally, I heard a pneumatic hiss, like a door opening, and I was uncuffed and thrown into an open space. There was another hiss behind me. I immediately tore off the blindfold.

"I'd given you up, matey," said a friendly voice.

## *Tempus Fugit*

Roger Jemmons was sitting on a bunk, hunched up, with his back against the wall, splicing a short piece of rope. His face showed signs of a beating.

"Duckworth sold us out," I blurted. "That cheap little creep turned us in to save his own miserable neck!"

Jemmons looked shocked. "The Duck betrayed us—how do you know?"

"I've just been speaking to him and his new chum—the Over-Controller of the bloody TCP," I said, flinging myself down on the only other bunk in the bare white, windowless cell. I looked around; there wasn't even a ventilation grille. "This is just a holding cell—I'm being sent to some prison where they do experiments on humans—these people are like bloody Nazis!"

"I can't believe the Duck's a turncoat," said Jemmons, shaking his head and staring down at the concrete floor, in disbelief.

"Yeah, well, they let you find me, because the Duck told them some poor sucker would detect his stupid distress signal—which I conveniently swallowed," I said. "He's going to help them catch the rest of you, too."

Jemmons leapt off his bed and thumped the nearest wall. "I'll strangle him with my bare hands—the yellow-bellied dog!"

"Yeah, get in the queue, mate," I said.

Suddenly there was a hiss and Agent Ibiza was standing in the threshold of the door, flanked by two armed guards—these guys looked like a cross between Waffen SS and Pilgrim Fathers, with their black uniforms, floppy white, big-collared shirts and jackboots. Or, worse, a female singer with her two muscular male backing vocalists, about to burst into some sort of sado-rock song.

"Give us a song, Swastika Sadistika," I said, having a private joke.

"Time to say goodbye, Sloane," said Ibiza.

"No, not that one," I said, having another little private joke. "You're not fit to lick Sarah Brightman's boots."

I thought about licking Sarah Brightman's boots myself for a moment, and felt strangely comforted.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Male humour was so pathetic," sighed Ibiza. "Women were forced to endure it for millions of years, but now, thankfully, it has been eradicated."

"Sounds painful," I said. "Looks like you did a pretty good job on those two though."

"You will find there is no fun where you're going, Mr Sloane," she said. "The time for joking is long over. And we have had the last laugh."

"Well, I hope you weren't joking when you said I could see Emma," I said.

"That was a little white lie," smiled Ibiza.

"No it wasn't—it was a big black ugly one!"

I rushed at her. But her burly guards simply stepped between us and intercepted me. Jemmons ran to my assistance, but was cracked in the chest with a stun gun, which sent him hurtling back across the cell and crashing into the far wall.

"Cuff him," said Ibiza.

The guards spun me round and forced my face against the wall, while they fitted me with a pair of electronic manacles. Ibiza came to whisper in my ear, while they held me there for her.

"Your precious little whore has already been taken to a place and time you will never ever find, even if you searched for all eternity."

"I'll find her," I smiled. "I've got all the time in the world—I'm immortal—remember?"

"Take him away!" she screeched.

The guards wrenched me off the wall, bundled me out of the cell and quick-marched me down yet another long white corridor.

"Boy, this place could do with a makeover," I said. "Have you ever thought of pink? Well, you could have it any colour you like, but why all this white? Who's your decorator—Armitage Shanks?"

I felt Ibiza's boot up my backside. "Shut up!" she snapped.

"When they get me to the Death Camp, I'm going to tell them how you came on to me," I chatted. "Oh, yes, I'm going to sing like a canary, honey. They'll probably come back and work a few corrective measures on you, by the time I've finished singing our little love song."

That brought another kick from Ms Ibiza's boot.

We came to a T-junction and swung right. Suddenly, I heard a phut, followed by a thud. My guards and I spun round. Ibiza was spread-eagled on the floor, unconscious. The Duck was leaning against the opposite corner, wearing the ridiculous black uniform of a Temporal Criminal Pursuit officer, and holding an enormous double-barrelled tranquillizer gun.

"Duckworth?" I cried.

"Let him go," said the Duck, casually.

The guards looked at each other and went for their side arms. In the blink of an eye, the Duck blasted them both, and they brought me sprawling down with them as they fell. The Duck quickly found the key to my cuffs and knelt down to release me.

"Where's Roger?" he said, as he worked.

"Back there—I'll take you," I said. I gripped his arm as he went to straighten up. "If this is another one of your tricks, Roger and I are going to take in turns killing you," I said.

The Duck adjusted his glasses. "I bet my name's mud, innit?" he grinned.

"Too right," I said. "Your ears must have been burning."



*Tempus Fugit*

He helped me to my feet. "You should have a little more faith in your mates," he said. "Come on—we're wasting time."

"Jemmons believed you were a traitor, too," I said, as we ran back down the corridor to the cell.

"I expect it of him," panted the Duck, "but I do not expect it of you."

"Sorry," I said. "But you were a little too bloody convincing for my liking."

"Just another one of many talents—where's this cell?"

"Right here," I said, pulling him up at the door. "It's locked."

"Well, of course it's bloody locked," said the Duck, he showed me a swipe card, "that's why I brought my Get Out of Jail Free card!"

The door hissed open and Jemmons promptly knocked the Duck out cold with one punch, and started pulling me down the corridor.

"No-no!" I cried. "That was the Duck—he's all right now. He just freed me!"

We both tracked back to help our stunned liberator up onto his feet.

"Sorry, Duck," said Jemmons, "he told me you were a filthy turncoat."

"I said my name would be muck round here," said the Duck, making a big deal about articulating his jaw back into place. "This is the thanks I get for masterminding your escape."

"What about Emma!" I cried, suddenly reminded.

"She's not here, mate," said the Duck, "they've already moved her."

"Where?"

"There's no time now—I'll tell you when we're out of here," said the Duck.

"I'm not leaving without her!" I cried.

"You haven't got any bleeding choice!" yelled the Duck, in my face. "I told you—she's not here! Now, come on!"

They both grabbed an arm each and made me run with them. We ran and we ran, around and around that rat's maze of a place, but the Duck seemed to know exactly where he was going.

"Are we lost?" I gasped, after we had turned the umpteenth identical corner.

"The Duck is never lost," wheezed the Duck. "It's just a bit farther."

Suddenly, there was a hiss as a door slid across, blocking our path.

"Quick!" cried the Duck. "The other way!"

We skidded to a stop and wheeled round as one. But another door hissed across, sealing us in.

A cold authoritative voice reverberated from the walls:

"Stay right where you are! Resistance is futile!"

The Duck grabbed Jemmons and me by the scruffs of our neck.

"The prisoners were escaping, Over-Controller, but I caught them for you!" he said, feebly.

"Be quiet, Duckworth," said the Over-Controller, "you are in this up to your neck."

I shrugged the Duck aside. "Get off."

Jemmons pushed the Duck out of his way and walked towards the wall.

"What's he think he's doing?" whispered the Duck.

Jemmons laid his hands on the wall and felt all around it.

"You won't open that, mate," said the Duck.

"Shh!" I said, nudging him with my elbow and pointing to the ceiling, where I had spotted an air vent.

Jemmons, meanwhile, had taken a short run up and tried to barge his way through the door, but only succeeded in hurting his shoulder.

"Rog!" I called.

He saw me pointing up at the vent and hurried back to us. I climbed up on his shoulders and then the Duck climbed up on mine, and began loosening the flimsy grille. He soon had it open and hauled himself up into the ceiling cavity. And then he reached down and pulled me up, then we both tried to stretch our arms down to Jemmons, but despite all his leaping salmon imitations, we couldn't reach him. After five or six attempts, he dropped his arms, rubbed his shoulder and said:

"Leave me, lads."

"All right—we'll be back," said the Duck crawling away on his hands and knees.

I grabbed him by the seat of his pants and hauled him back.

"We are not leaving without Roger," I said.

"Are you dumb, stupid and crazy?" hissed the Duck, his eyes swimming about behind his thick lenses, like two stir-crazy goldfish in twin goldfish bowls. "There's no time!"

I looked down at Jemmons. "I swear I'll come back for you," I said.

"Forget it," said Jemmons, hands in pockets, "I wouldn't have left without La Belle anyway."

The Duck slid the vent cover back over, and it felt to me as though we were scurrying away like a couple of rats, leaving a sinking ship.

By the time we got to the next air supply grille, we could hear the tramp of boots in the corridor below. We spied through the slats and watched as dozens of guards passed underneath. When the last one was gone, the Duck turned to me and said:

"This is where we get off, mate."

We lifted the cover and dropped down.

"Through here, mate," he said, opening a door with his swipe card and pulling me into a side room.

"Where is it?" I said, looking round at piles of boxes, all marked: GREEN X HOSP.

"It's not in here," he said, "we've got to lie low for a while. We'll hide behind this lot." He reached around inside his jacket and took out a coil of what looked like electrical cable, with a pair of scissor handles attached to one end.

"What's that?" I asked.

The Duck looked at me and blinked. "There's no easy way of doing this, mate," he said.

"Doing what?" I said.

"It's gotta come out—or we'll have the lot of 'em in here in next to no time," he said.

I looked dumb and then it suddenly twigged what he meant. "Oh, no—no way—you are not putting that thing down my throat!"

"Keep your bleeding voice down!" he said, uncoiling his evil-looking gadget. "This is a proper internal inspection scope. It's got a camera and a pair of pinchers on the end."

"I don't care if it's got a bloody seagull and an amusement arcade on the end—you are not putting that thing inside me—you're not even trained!"

"I know what I'm doing," said the Duck. "Here you are—swallow that."

He offered me one end of the cable and pointed to his own mouth, to indicate what he wanted me to do with it.

"Get off!" I said.

*Tempus Fugit*

"All right. Just tilt your head back and I'll shove it down then," he said.

"Get knotted," I cried, pushing it away, as he came at me with it.

"That bloody signal device has gotta come out—we can use it as a diversion—it's our only chance, you selfish little git!"

"I'm not doing it!"

He tried to force it in my mouth. We struggled among the boxes.

"You are having this down there!"

"Get off me!"

"Hold still, you little—"

I bit his hand.

"Aaagh! You little swine! That bloody hurt!"

He jumped on me and got me in a headlock, while I held his other hand with both mine, to stop him from inserting the thing in my mouth.

Finally, he let go and pushed me away in disgust. I pushed him back.

"They'll track the signal you're giving 'em and be here inside five minutes," he said.

"You shouldn't have made me swallow the damn thing then, should you!" I said.

"Listen," he said, in a reasonable voice, "if you won't do it for me, do it for Emma."

"Oh, that's right—bring her into it—trying to make me feel guilty," I said.

"If we don't get out of here, we'll never find her—you'll be lying on your back in some research lab, having worse than this done to you, and I'll, well, they'll throw away the bleeding key when they get their hands on me this time. I could end up doing life and all because I tried to help you and Rog to escape. This is all the bleeding thanks I get."

I tilted my head back.

The Duck threaded the cable down my gullet and peered around.

"There the little blighter is!" he exclaimed.

I felt a few painful tugs inside my gut.

"Got it!"

And then he was pulling something up and I couldn't breathe.

It popped out with a long slimy slurp. I belched.

The Duck wiped the device off on my shirt, while I was still coughing and choking.

"Look at that," he said, "it was corroding—that's your bleeding stomach acids."

"Pardon me for having a digestive system," I said.

The Duck took out a screwdriver-type instrument, with coloured lights in the handle and fiddled with the tracking device.

"Just deactivating it," he said.

"Shouldn't we be making a move?" I said. "Where's the machine?"

"Ah. There's one slight problem there," said the Duck. "They've impounded it. But don't worry, I've got a plan to—"

"Are you telling me we are hiding in a store cupboard, in the middle of a maze, surrounded by the Pilgrim Fatherlanders and we have no means of escape? This was your masterplan?"

"Relax, man. Look, let me roll us a spliff and we'll—"

"A spliff? Are you insane? In case you hadn't noticed, this mausoleum smells like a giant bloody mothball. The smell alone'll bring the patter of ruddy great jackboots in here!" I cried. "Where is the machine?"

## *Tempus Fugit*

"They scrapped it—but we are going to nick another one. I've had my eye on it, ever since I got here."

I put my head in my hands. "Just tell me the plan," I said.

"It's the latest design," said the Duck, "a Mark IV, Transtemporal Research Bus, with full cloaking and time-space capability. They use them for transporting archaeologists and that back on digs, and stuff like that. You can live in 'em."

"Not if you're already dead," I said.

"I'm having one," said the Duck. "Man, you should see the inside of one of those TRB's—they've got fully-equipped labs, a kitchen, sleeping quarters, shower and toilet—they've even got bleeding greenhouses!"

"Where is this bus?" I said, suddenly seeing myself taking a shower and then relaxing in a garden with a cup of tea.

"Well, it's in another building—but it's not far from here, and I know how to get there," he said.

"Oh, then let us go for it," I said, sarcastically.

"Yeah, we will," said the Duck, "but first we've got to throw 'em off the scent."

"And how do you propose to do that?" I said.

"Right. I am going to escort you down to the main lobby, as if I've caught you and I'm taking you in, and then I'm going to say I have orders to take you to the TSB—"

"What—to withdraw some money?"

"Not that TSB—the Temporal Shuttle Bay, where they keep all the machines. I'll say you have to be put on the next shuttle out, to wherever—that Corrective Measures place they were going to send you. They'll have already received the orders anyway. And then I am going to reactivate this tracking device and send it back through time, so that they think you've escaped. Meanwhile, we will be across town, nicking my bus. Get it?"

"Just one thing," I said. "Why don't we actually board the machine and really escape?"

"Because then I wouldn't be able to get me hands on the bus, would I?" said the Duck.

"Oh, silly me. I forgot—we're running for our lives from a bunch of puritanical Nazis and all you can think about is getting your hands on a bloody camper van! Do you really think I'm going to find a machine, put that thing in it, instead of me, and calmly wave it goodbye?"

"That bus is our only chance of getting out of here," said the Duck.

"And how do you work that out?"

"Because it's got a cloaking device—they won't even know where we are—they'll never catch us," said the Duck.

"All right," I sighed, too weary to argue, "but if this goes wrong, I am going to ram that thing down your throat and let them chase you around, while I get the hell out of here!"

I prodded him.

"What did you do that for?" he said.

"Just checking you really are here. You see, I keep hoping you're just a nightmare," I said.

"Ah-ah, very funny. You forget, I'm in this, too. I could be back at Duckworth Hall, with me feet up, or listening to Floyd at Knebworth," said the Duck. "This is your bloody nightmare we're in, not mine, mate!"

I had to admit he had a point, but I didn't.

## *Tempus Fugit*

We laid low for a few hours in the cupboard and then the Duck led me out and marched me down the corridor to the lifts that would take us down to the main lobby.

We must have travelled down dozens of floors, yet no one got in. We hit the bottom floor and the doors opened. I gasped. The main lobby was awesome, the place must have been the size of a football stadium, all steel and glass, and crawling with police and civilians. It was like Heathrow on Christmas Eve. Two guards approached and challenged us as soon as we stepped out. They addressed the Duck in Wordese.

"Don't talk to me in that gibberish," he said, pointing to the officer insignia on his epaulets. "I'm old school. You speak to me in English."

"Sorry, sir. Who is this, sir?" one of them said.

"This is Prisoner Sloane—we caught the bastard trying to hide in a toilet—I'm taking him to the shuttle for immediate transportation," said the Duck.

"We'll escort you over there, sir," said the guard.

The Duck laughed. "I think I can handle this idiot on my own," he said. "You stay here—there's another one still on the loose—now he is a slippery customer—you want to watch out for him. He'll run rings round you lot, if you're not ultra-vigilant." He saluted. "Peace and Purity."

The guards clicked their heels. "Peace and Purity," they chorused.

The Duck marched me away across the busy concourse.

"Did you have to find me in a toilet? Couldn't you have found me in a control room or something, doing a bit of sabotage? I noticed you gave yourself some great soundbites," I said, as soon as we were out of earshot.

"I know what makes these people tick," said the Duck.

"I thought you said the future was a great place, and the only problem they had was suppressed sex—it's a bloody puritanical police state!" I said.

"What's wrong with that?" said the Duck. "Bit of law and order and cleanliness never did anyone any harm."

"You are joking! These people are Nazis!"

"But you can get great sex here," said the Duck. "The repressive, ultra-right wing regime seems to unleash a woman's deepest cravings."

"You are really sick, you know that?"

"Don't knock it till you've tried it, mate."

"I've got to get Emma out of here," I said.

"I told you—she's already out of here. Don't worry about her, she's been sent to a convent," said the Duck.

"A convent?" I exclaimed. "So you do know where she is!"

"I know where she is, but I don't know where it is," corrected the Duck. "Now, shut up, you're supposed to be me prisoner, not a bleeding spokesman for Amnesty International."

"You always seem to know more than you let on," I said. "And then you spring these things on me—I think you like keeping me in the dark—well, I'm not taking another step until you tell me where Emma is!"

"I told you—I don't know." The Duck lowered his voice. "Now, will you move, everybody's looking."

"I don't care who's looking—I want the truth!"

The Duck shoved me. "Move!"

I shoved him back. The crowds milling around us, going about their business, parted, trying to give us a wide birth, and like most people everywhere, tried to avoid trouble.

## *Tempus Fugit*

The Duck pounced on me and got me in a headlock. I bit his hand and he let go. Then I kicked him and he tried to kid me that he could do karate and attempted a high kick to my throat. I pushed him off balance and kicked his supporting leg away, and he went down in a heap. I leapt on him and we wrestled on the floor. We bit and punched and twisted anything we could see or grab of each other, neither of us gaining the upper hand, but both of us were out to inflict as much damage as possible. Finally, I managed to get the Duck in a headlock I had seen the guys do on a WWF show. It was then that we both noticed we were surrounded by black trouser legs and ruddy great jackboots.

We looked up to find dozens of cops staring down at us with bemused looks on their faces.

"Let me go, you pillock," said the Duck, out of the corner of his mouth. "Unless you want that lot to pile in."

I loosened my grip and the Duck swept round and jumped me from behind. Our spectators cheered. I let the Duck thump me and twist my arm up around my back. His colleagues egged him on. He thumped me in the arm a few times, trying to give me a dead arm.

"Don't overdo it," I warned him.

"Gotta make it look good!" said the Duck, giving me a kick in the leg as I allowed him to hoist me to my feet.

The crowd started clapping. The Duck bowed and raised his fist in the air, while still twisting my arm up my back.

"Peace and Purity, brothers!" he cried.

"Peace and Purity!" they cried, as one.

The Duck racked my arm up an extra twist. "You try anything like that again, boy, you'll get it back tenfold!" he said.

One or two of the nearest policemen patted him on the back, and then others thrust themselves forward to do the same, offering words of encouragement and advice. One even gave me a sly kick. I tried to kick him back, but the Duck restrained me.

"No you don't, sunshine," he said. He turned to the coward who had kicked me. "This one's still got a bit of fight left in him, brother, but they'll soon knock that out of him where he's going."

He pushed me through the baying mob of black-clad cops.

"He's on the next shuttle out of here," said the Duck.

"Move aside there—prisoner coming through."

An earnest young time cop stepped in front of me and stopped us in our tracks by placing his hand flat on my chest.

"Wait a minute," he said, scrutinising my face. "This is Sloane!"

A buzz went through the crowd, and my name was passed along: "It's Sloane." "He's got Sloane!" "It's him—Sloane!" "Sloane?" "He's the one! It's Sloane!" "It's Sloane, brothers!" "He's caught Sloane!"

"Yeah, all right," said the Duck. "There's no need to broadcast it! This is my collar."

A great hubbub went up in the gigantic hall. The crowd pressed in on us, eager to have a butchers at me. We could see some people running away, but more and more black uniformed officers were converging on us—there must have been hundreds of them.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Now look what you've done!" shouted the Duck, in my ear. And even though he was shouting there was no danger of anyone but me hearing him, there was such a tumult around us.

The guys closest to us were being pushed from the back that much they were practically cheek by jowl with us. An officer found his face shoved up so close to mine that we could have been kebabed.

"Are you really immortal then?" he said, before he was barged past me and replaced by another, facing the other way.

This one said, "You're scum, you are!" And he tried to spit at me, but he was nudged and missed me.

A tannoy boomed out an announcement:

"The prisoner, Stephen Gilmour Sloane, believed to be the son of Zebulon Zirconion, has been apprehended in The Lobby of Everlasting Chastity. All TCP personnel to the Shuttle Bay immediately."

I craned my neck around to tell the Duck to do something, but he was gone!

"Duck!" I screamed.

Swarms of police were arriving from all directions for as far as the eye could see. I was being crushed from every angle. It felt like my chest was going to cave in.

## Chapter Sixteen

The throng parted like a sector cut through a circle. I dropped to my knees, gasping for air and clutching my sore ribs. The huge crowd fell silent and still. I raised my eyes and saw the Over-Controller walking towards me down the split, followed by three or four henchmen. The main crowd fell in behind them, like spectators following a group of Open golfers up to the last green.

"Well, well, Mr Sloane, here you are again," said the Over-Controller, halting a few feet away from me.

"Get back—get back!" ordered his henchmen. The crowd receded a few yards, opening up the inner space around us.

"Who captured this man?" said the Over-Controller.

"I did, sir," said some cop near the front.

I looked over at him. "No he didn't," I said. "It was—"

"Come here!" the Over-Controller ordered the man.

The police officer that claimed to have caught me came forward.

The Over-Controller looked down at me. "Is this the officer who arrested you, Sloane?" he asked.

"Yes, that's him. Give him a medal," I said.

"Well done, officer," said the Over-Controller. He swivelled round to his adjutant, or whatever the guy was—he had a gold braid lanyard like the Over-Controller's. "Write this man up a citation. And award him seventy credits and an Over-Controller's merit."

The adjutant clicked his heels and saluted, and drew the man who didn't catch me aside to take down his particulars. I had no hard feelings against the guy, if he wanted to say he captured me, that was fine by me, at least it gave the Duck, wherever he was, a chance to get away.

"Now, Mr Sloane," said the Over-Controller. "On your feet. And this time I will escort you to the prison colony shuttle myself."

I tried to stand up but had to go down on one knee again, like a boxer unable to recover from a series of body blows.

"Help him up!" barked the Over-Controller.

Firm hands fastened onto my arms and lifted me up. I staggered about, but they held me up straight, to face their all-powerful Over-Controller.

"But first you will be good enough to tell me where I may find your accomplice," he said. "We know Duckworth must have removed your tracking device and I hardly think you could have got this far on your own, Mr Sloane."

"What do I get out of it if I tell you?" I said.

"You are in no position to make bargains, Mr Sloane," replied the pompous ass, who reminded me of my old physics teacher, which I now realised was one of the reasons why I had taken such a disliking to him, apart from all the other stuff about him, such as his determination to send me away to a Death Camp, his abduction of my fiancée and the way tiny bubbles of foam gathered in the corners of his mouth.

"And you're in no fit state to teach physics," I said, sticking my hands in my pockets and feeling something lozenge-shaped—the tracker!

"I beg your pardon?"

"You foam," I said. "It's very distracting. It gives me earache."

"What? How did you get down here?" he said.

"I just sort of wondered down here, you know." As I rambled, I was fiddling with the tracker device the Duck had obviously slipped into my pocket. "You see, I lost



## *Tempus Fugit*

my true love. The second thing I know I'm in a car chase. I wake up in a river. Then I'm in a ring. Then this big Saxon lady wants me to marry her daughter, but that upset the apple cart, so they sent me to the tower. But that burned down. I wind up in London. I get a job as a secretary to a bard, but I quit before I'm hired. I go home but there's nobody home, including me, so I lock myself in the bathroom. Then I go out to lunch and get thin. It was just a waste of time. Then I lost my girlfriend again. Then I was on my way to a Pink Floyd concert and I fell asleep on a hill. Then you turned up. Or was that me. Well, I played at being Santa Claus for a while, but I fell through the roof. And then I got really careless and lost myself. So I drove in a swamp. And then I ran out of time. Well, there were lots of me by now, so I decided to find out where I really was, and who. And I was here and there and everywhere. Well, I suppose you know the rest. Is that all?" I said.

"Handcuff him," said the Over-Controller. "And gag him."

"Wait!" I cried. "I have a last request."

The Over-Controller raised a hand. The guys who were about to gag me paused.

"Can anyone tell me if England won the World Cup at any time during the last millennium?" I said.

"No, but they were in three finals and lost on penalties each time," said a young cop.

"Well, you can't practise penalties," I said. "That is so unlucky. Who did we lose to?"

"Australia, Germany and Scotland."

"You are kid—"

The Over-Controller clicked his fingers. And they gagged me.

I was taken to the Temporal Shuttle Bay along a human corridor, made up of gawping cops, and escorted onto a shuttle, which looked a bit like a London Tube carriage, only cleaner, by the Over-Controller himself. He manacled me personally to my seat, before he disembarked and waved me goodbye. I think there were thousands of ill wishers on the platform, waving me good-riddance. And then I was alone in the time shuttle, on my way to the prison colony, just me, and my fourteen glum-faced guards. I wondered where the Duck had got to, I wondered where my prison was, ahead in time or back in time, or if my prison was near Emma's prison. You wonder a lot of things when you're sitting in a time shuttle on your way to God knows where, with fourteen guys who look like they're going to work on a Monday morning, to a job they hate. I wished I was going to work on a Monday morning, to a job I hate.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

When we came out of the vortex we were in another shuttle bay, but this one had a quaint sign up on the wall, which read: Cairngorms School of Corrective Studies.

Two men in white coats were waiting eagerly for me on the platform.

"Welcome to The School of Corrective Studies, Mr Sloane," said the shorter one of the two, who seemed genuinely pleased to meet me. The other guy, who was much taller and thinner, and wore glasses, just looked me up and down as if I was a piece of meat hanging up in an abattoir.

"And you're welcome to it, too," I said.

One of the two guards who got off the shuttle with me punched me in the kidneys.

"No—please—no violence!" cried the little guy.

I was just warming to him, when he added:

"You must not damage the specimen!"

"Can I get a shower, something to eat and a little nap before you start my pre-mortem?" I said.

The shrunken faced guy with gold spectacles answered that one:

"You will be hosed down and given an anaesthetic before we conduct our preliminary examination."

"Thank you," I said. "And is there a games' room?"

"No, Mr Sloane," said the little one. "Our patients do not require such facilities."

"They are strictly for research only," said the tall one, and his lips peeled off his teeth, like a horse's, in what passed for a smile.

"Could you tell me your names?" I said.

"Our names?" said the little one. "What for?"

"For the Crimes Against Humanity Trial," I said.

"We are simply obeying orders, Mr Sloane," he said.

"Where have I heard that before? So, what is it you are going to be doing to me?"

The tall one licked his teeth and answered:

"We will be attempting to identify those parts of your anatomy that make you immortal—and then removing them."

"And if I'm not immortal?" I said.

"We won't know that until we remove the parts," he replied.

"But you can put them back in and sew me back up again?" I said.

"The usual practice is to throw them into the incinerator, Mr Sloane," he said.

"That's called an atrocity, I think you'll find," I said.

"No, Mr Sloane, it is just basic cleanliness," he said.

"You must come now, we are wasting time."

The guards reminded me that it wasn't a request and prodded me towards the exit. I found myself on a glass-covered bridge, spanning a chasm, connecting the shuttle bay to a monorail terminus. The single, raised rail disappeared through an entrance in the rock. They directed me towards the carriage. It was smaller than a cable car gondola. I took a last look up at what I imagined would be my last sight of the sky and climbed aboard. And then the doors slid across and sealed us in, and we were away, speeding under the mountain. I do not mind saying I was scared.

To hell with this, I thought, I'm not going to just sit here and let these monsters experiment on me. I'm going to put up a fight. What have I got to lose? I might as well

## *Tempus Fugit*

rush to the door and throw myself out. Even though we must have been hammering along at about sixty miles an hour, I was prepared to take my chances.

"I'm not going to let you do this!" I yelled, jumping to my feet.

Both guards drew their guns and shot me.

When I came round, I was in a white hospital gown and strapped to an operating table, staring up at blinding lights. Two men, one short, one tall, dressed in white gowns, hats and masks entered and stood looking down at me, like malevolent angels. One of them was wearing a pair of red-rimmed spectacles, like the Duck's. They started to undo my restraints.

"Is the operation over?" I said.

"Pipe down," said the taller of the two.

"Jemmons?" I said.

"You are a pain in the bleeding proverbial," said the short one.

"Duck?" I cried. "How did you—?"

Jemmons clamped his hand over my mouth and pulled his mask down.

"Mam my mab moo mee moo," I said.

"Quiet," said Jemmons, putting his finger to his lips.

The Duck left us to unfasten the rest of my straps and dashed across to the door to have a listen.

"Thank God for that!" I squeaked. "It's still there."

"What?" said Jemmons, helping me off the table.

"Don't ask," I said. "But I will be fathering more children."

We tiptoed over to join the Duck.

"There's someone coming," he said. "Get back on the table!"

"No way!" I said.

Jemmons seized me by my gown strings and slung me across the room. I slid into the operating table and climbed aboard, just as the double doors swung open and two fully robed doctors walked in.

"We will start with the reproductive organs," one of them said.

"Why not the brain?" said the other one.

I sat up. "Why don't you two make up your minds?" I said.

They stopped dead. Jemmons came up behind them and banged their heads together. There was a noise like someone cracking open coconuts, and they both sank to the floor.

"Tie 'em up," said the Duck.

The Duck kept watch. Jemmons and I lifted them up onto the operating table, and then I gagged them with bandages, while he strapped them together.

"Hurry up!" called the Duck, going out the door.

I switched off the overhead light and covered my would-be dissectors with a sheet. Jemmons waited for me at the door, and then we left together. The Duck was already up the far end of the roughly hewn passageway, peering round the corner. We ran after him, as he turned it. But as we reached the corner, the Duck was rushing back.

"Guards!" he cried.

All three of us started running back the way we had just come. A siren sounded and red lights, fixed to the ceiling, began flashing.

"What the hell did you do?" I shouted, to the Duck.

"It's your fault!" he said.

"How do you work that out?"

We ran past the operating theatre.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"If you hadn't blown it at Green Cross, we wouldn't be in this mess!" he replied.  
"Pipe down—the both of you!" said Jemmons. "Let's just get the hell out of here!"

We swung left round the next corner, ran up another passage, and swung right.

"Does anyone know where we're going?" I asked.

"Just keep running!" panted the Duck. "Look for a way up to the next level."

"Stairs!" yelled Jemmons, pointing ahead of us, to a spiral staircase.

It looked like a fire escape, or emergency stairs, spiralling up through a round hole cut through the solid rock. We clattered up them in single file, with Jemmons leading, me in the middle, and the Duck bringing up the rear. At the end of my fresher's year at university, I took a summer job, working on a new hospital building site. One lunchtime, this other idiot and I climbed up the steel ladder inside the incinerator tower. By the time we reached the top, my arms were dropping off, well, this time it was my legs that were dropping off, which will give you some idea how many levels we had run up. I just had to stop and rest. The Duck ran past me.

"Rest is for wimps!" he puffed.

"Got to," I gasped. I tried to continue, but had to stop again, after only a few rungs. I could hear and see the Duck and Jemmons high above, still pounding their way up. I was obviously not cut out for serious physical exertion. "Wait!" I cried.

And then I heard shots being fired, but I couldn't tell whether they were coming from above or below.

"What's happening?" I called.

I didn't know whether to keep going up or go back down.

"Duck! Roger!" I called.

I could hear them calling back to me, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I decided to carry on climbing, but at my own slow pace.

More shots rang out. I could hear things hitting the steel structure of the staircase—probably darts from tranquillizer guns. To my knowledge, they did not use bullets.

"Come on! Come on!" I heard the Duck shouting, through the shooting and resounding pings and clangs.

I tried to hurry and look up at the same time. And then I saw what was happening above me. Jemmons was fighting with a guard and the Duck was hanging over the side of the stair rail, trying to see me. Our eyes met.

"Will you get a move on!" he yelled.

"Coming as fast as I can," I said.

I attempted to pick up my feet, but my legs felt like lead, it was all I could do to put one foot down on the next step and then raise the other one and lift it past it, to the rung above that.

I rested on my knees. I heard metallic thuds above me, and then the Duck was grabbing me and hauling me back up on my feet.

"Just a bit farther," he said.

"Don't know what's wrong with me," I said.

"It must be the pre-med drug they gave you," said the Duck.

We staggered together up a few more twists of the spiral and onto the platform that connected it to the level. A red light above the door said, LEVEL SEVEN. By now, Jemmons had overpowered the guard and was using his gun to keep the others pinned down.

"Can't hold these beggars off much longer!" said Jemmons. "This thing's getting low on juice."

## *Tempus Fugit*

"Buy us another thirty seconds, Rog, while I get him in the bus," said the Duck, barging the swing door open.

"You got your bus then," I said.

We were in a huge book depository, what looked like millions of books arranged on shelf after shelf. But I couldn't see any sign of a bus.

"Where is it?" I croaked, my eyes flickering. My legs had all but given out, and the Duck had to support all my weight.

"It's right in front of you, mate," said the Duck. "It's invisible. Pretty neat, eh?"

"I don't know," I said. "I can't see it."

The Duck felt for a door and directed me to a step, which, of course, I couldn't see, and then I was falling forward onto a hard floor, which seemed to be suspended in mid air, but could not be seen.

"This is so weird," I said, lying down. "What are all these books?"

"They've all been banned," said the Duck. "Don't worry about that now—just crawl a bit farther in, I'm going back for Roger."

I clawed at the invisible floor of the bus and then everything went as black as a censor's pen.

I woke up in what appeared to be a good hotel room. It had that well worn, yet, comfortable and tidy look to it, where the fixtures and furnishings—which had a sand and earth colour scheme—seemed to match, and be functional, rather than homely or luxurious. I noticed, for instance, that my duvet cover had a fossil motif and there were some pictures on the wall of ferns and a wholly mammoth. But the odd thing was, there was no window.

So, I got out of bed and crossed the room to open the door, passing a shower and toilet along the way. I found myself in a carpeted hall, with a door at either end. I chose the left hand one. On the other side, the Duck and Roger Jemmons were seated at a dining table, eating a meal. Beyond, I could see through to a large lounge area.

"Steve!" cried the Duck. "Come and sit down—have something to eat."

"Where are we?" I said, joining them at the table.

There was cold meat, cheese and a selection of salads.

"You are aboard the Duck's new machine," he said. "Isn't it fabulous? It's got everything! All the vegetables you see are from the greenhouse. The rest is synthetic, but it tastes great—try some of the ham—"

"Are we still in the vortex?" I said.

"No, we're parked up at the moment, but I've turned the invisible skin on, so no one can see us," said the Duck.

Jemmons began spooning a selection from the plates and bowls onto a plate for me.

"So, you rescued Roger?" I said.

"That was easy," said the Duck, lounging back in his chair and tasting his wine. "Once you distracted everybody for me, I sneaked off to help myself to this beauty. Then I went after Rog. I pretty much knew where they were holding him. I picked up your signal, but then it went dead. They must have found it and turned it off, but we got there in the end, mate—thanks to my new bus, which can do space as well as time travel—"

"Well, if it's so wonderful, why didn't you go and rescue Emma?" I said.

Jemmons and the Duck exchanged glances. I could sense the news was bad.

"I was leaving that part out," said the Duck.

Jemmons passed me a plateful of food. I pushed it aside.

"Why?" I said, folding my arms.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"We went to the convent, didn't we, Roger?" the Duck said.

"That we did," said Jemmons.

"And?" I said.

"She wasn't there," said the Duck, placing his wine glass down on the table and folding his arms. "She'd only gone and escaped, hadn't she!"

"Emma's escaped?" I gasped. "But why didn't you just go back to the day she escaped and stop her?"

"Because she never arrived, mate—we went back and checked," said the Duck.

"I don't understand—how could she just disappear—she has to be somewhere!"

"Roger and I have been discussing that, and the only explanation we can come up with is: she must have escaped in the, er, vortex," replied the Duck.

"In the vortex? But she can't. She'd die!" I exclaimed.

"Not necessarily," said the Duck.

"You're telling me she's dead!"

"Calm down. She's not dead. Probably."

"How can she live in the vortex—it isn't anywhere? There's nothing there but red squiggles and electric shocks!" I cried. "If she jumped out of a time machine into that, it would be like committing suicide."

"We don't know that," said Jemmons.

"Theoretically," said the Duck, "she could be in a sort of stasis, a limbo land, between time and space—"

"Don't give me that mumbo-jumbo! Why did you tell me she had escaped—when you knew all the time she'd jumped out of a machine? You're just clutching at straws. Emma's dead. She's dead!" I said, my eyes filling with tears.

Jemmons laid a consoling hand on my shoulder. "We'll find her, matey. If she's out there, the Duck'll find her."

"Him? He's useless!" I said, bitterly. "He's the one who started all this! If it hadn't been for him, I bet none of this would have happened. He meddles with things—things he doesn't understand. How many more lives has he ruined? Ten? Twenty? Thousands?"

"Now, that's not fair, he—" Jemmons started to say.

But the Duck held up his hand. "No, let him get it off his breast, Roger," he said.

"He's a liar," I said. "Everything he says is a lie and everything he does is for himself. And he doesn't care who gets hurt, just as long as he gets what he wants!" I raved on. "Look at him, sitting there—all he's interested in is this stupid bloody bus!"

Jemmons shook his head.

"Have you finished, Stephen?" asked the Duck, without a trace of hostility in his voice.

"Is this real Cheddar or that synthetic stuff?" I said.

They both smiled and answered me together: "Synthetic!"

"It's nice," I said.

"How would you like a conducted tour of our new machine?" said the Duck.

"Yeah, all right," I said, "but tell me something first—and I want the absolute truth this time—how can Emma be alive and what can we do to find her?"

The Duck explained to me, with some input here and there from Jemmons, how there was a better than seventy percent chance that Emma was alive and may have been spun out of the vortex—rather like debris is flung out of a twister—in which case, she could be anywhere along the timeline. Locating her would be a big problem, but it was not as impossible as it sounded, because they had already narrowed the

event—Emma's leap from the machine that was taking her to the convent—down to a few years. It would simply be a case of visiting samples of these years and looking for clues about her. They made it all sound perfectly plausible, and the thought that she was more than likely still alive, obviously, cheered me up.

"How many years are we talking about exactly?" I asked.

"Fifty-seven," said Jemmons.

"The convent they use is in Hertfordshire, circa 1940. The war years," added the Duck. "They always transport prisoners to places out of their own time—a bit like the way we used to send convicts to Australia."

I nodded. "Right. Okay. Fine," I said. Then I shook my head. "No, it is not fine. How the hell are we going to find her in all those years? It's impossible."

"It's not impossible," said the Duck. "But it is a challenge."

"We found you," said Jemmons. "Though we did have the distress signal helping us for a while. You were in an old armaments depot in the Cairngorms, around 2578 A.D."

"One idea we had was that she might try to go to her parents' house. How old was she?" said the Duck.

"Twenty-three," I said, suddenly having a vision of the adult Emma meeting herself as a child in some sunny suburban garden. "What if she did—could that be dangerous?" I said, recalling my own horrific experience of meeting myself.

Jemmons scratched his head and looked to the Duck.

"It could be," said the Duck. "But I think it's unlikely that she will meet herself."

"Why?"

"Because I think she would have been too confused to jump out of that machine at the start of the journey. It wouldn't take more than a few minutes to zip back sixty years. I believe she realised she was in trouble, waited for it to slow down, and then jumped," he explained. "Which would put her somewhere in the forties, which is a bad thing."

"Why?" I said again.

"There was a war on. If you go back there asking questions, Dad's Army'll more than likely shoot first and ask questions after," said the Duck.

"So what can we do?"

"We're going to go back to Duckworth Hall for some r and r, think about the problem, do as much research as we can, and then go and bring her home," he said.

I reached a hand across the table and patted the Duck's arm. "Thanks, mate—that's just what I needed to hear."

"Start her up, Roger," smiled the Duck.

Jemmons drained his wine glass, wiped his mouth with the napkin and made his way forward.

"So," I said. "You're not my father."

"Er, no," said the Duck.

"Well, I must admit, it did make me feel a bit awkward, I mean, what with you being—anyway, I suppose it does prove once and for all that all this has nothing to do with you," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I suppose it does."

"Mum must have been two-timing you," I said. "I mean, it's the only explanation. The old Duckworth magic must have been so not working—"

"Yes, well, no point in going into all that now," said the Duck.

"I suppose she must have met someone at that Floyd concert—maybe while you were off nicking time machines," I said.

*Tempus Fugit*

"Yes, maybe," said the Duck.

"Wouldn't it be funny if she got off with the very guy whose machine you were—" I stopped. "That's it!" I cried. "That's what happened! The guy at the Floyd concert was Zebulon Zirconion! My real father! Don't you see?"

"I had already worked that out," said the Duck, folding his arms.

At this moment, Jemmons came rushing through a door leading forward from the lounge.

"You'd better come and take a look!" he said.

"What's up?" said the Duck, rising from the table.

"She won't start," said Jemmons. "And there's worse."

"What?" I cried, tired of disasters happening to me all the time.

"She's sending out some sort of distress signal—she must have been alarmed—you'd better do something, Duck. They'll be on us in no time!" said Jemmons.



## Chapter Eighteen

We all rushed forward to the control room, which resembled the cockpit of a passenger jet, and looked about as complicated to me. It was bathed in a red pulsating light. The Duck immediately took the captain's chair and Jemmons sat in the co-pilot's.

"Where are we?" I said, looking over their shoulders through the windshield, at the rolling countryside.

"The County of Hertfordshire," said Jemmons.

The Duck was too busy fiddling with all kinds of controls to answer me.

"What year?"

"The Year of Our Lord, 1975," said Jemmons.

"The Year of our lords, Pink Floyd, you mean," I said. "He's only brought us to the *Wish You Were Here* concert."

"The skin's not functioning," said the Duck. "Nip outside and see what we look like, Steve."

I looked round for the door and saw one just to my left. I opened it and climbed down a short ladder. I could already see that the skin was something shiny, but when I dropped down onto the field we were parked in and took several paces back, I could see clearly what we looked like to any passing motorist on the nearby motorway. I hurried back inside.

"We look like one of those ruddy great American campers—only much bigger, I'd say about fifty meters long—all silver chrome, with a few observation portholes. We stick out like a sore thumb," I reported.

"Crikey!" said the Duck. "That's her real form. The locals'll be on their phones, reporting a UFO."

"We can be seen from the M1, too," I said. "Why don't you drive us down to the bottom of the field, at least we won't be seen from the road down there."

"Good thinking," said the Duck. "Uno problemo though—she won't start."

"Well stick her in neutral and me and Rog'll give her a push," I said.

"You'll never shift this lot," said the Duck.

"It's worth a try," said Jemmons.

"Go on then," said the Duck.

Roger and I got out and hurried round to the rear of the bus. Although it must have weighed at least twenty tons, it was lying across a fairly steep slope, so if the Duck took the handbrake off and turned the wheel a little, the vehicle's own weight and gravity would just need a little help. That was the theory anyway.

We put our backs into it and pushed. We pushed and we really pushed. The thing didn't even budge an inch. You know when you push something really heavy and it sometimes rolls forward ever so slightly and then rolls back? Well, this mother didn't even do that. Even Jemmons, who looked quite muscular and strong slumped down on the grass, rubbing his back after a minute or so. I leant against the back of it and shook my head.

"Bad idea. This isn't going to work," I said.

Suddenly, I was flat on my backside and the whole bus was moving away, slowly at first, but then it picked up speed as it turned and was fully facing down the hillside. Roger and I ran after it, but by the time it was halfway down we could hear the engine starting up and it accelerated so rapidly that we had no chance of catching it.

Jemmons pulled me to a halt. "He's jump started her," he said. "Wait."

## *Tempus Fugit*

We sat down on the grass and watched as the bus careered down the field like an enormous silver cigar tube on wheels.

"If he's not careful, he'll go straight into that hedge," I said.

And then the bus vanished.

"Don't worry," said Jemmons, "he's switched her over to time travel mode, he's likely recharging her battery."

An hour later, I was bored just lying on the hillside, sucking a blade of grass and watching the clouds go by.

"He should have been back by now," I said. "I mean, even if he drove round for hours, he could have returned here a few seconds after he left." I paused to give Jemmons a chance to say something, but he didn't make a comment. "What if he couldn't turn that alarm off and they caught him?" Another pause. "I think they've got him. Rog?"

I looked round to where he should have been, sitting on the grass, just behind me—Jemmons was nowhere to be seen!

"Where the hell—?"

I sprang to my feet and, not seeing him anywhere in sight, thought he might have hopped over the hedge. I ran back up the field and scrambled up, expecting to find him scouting around in the next field, but there was no sign of him.

"Roger! Roger!" I called. I made my way round the other three hedgerows, climbed over and shouted his name again and again. I couldn't believe it, I had lost both of them.

Yes, I waited. I thought it was wise to stay put, but when it began to cloud over and then drizzle, I just had to do something. And then I had a good idea—I would go to the Pink Floyd concert, which was happening at Knebworth House, nearby, and see if I could find the Duck there. Of course, this wouldn't be the Duck who knew me, it would be the pre-time travel Duck, but I was rather looking forward to meeting him and telling him exactly what he was up to and what was going to happen to him. For once, I smiled to myself, I would have the upper hand, I'd be the one with all the answers. I couldn't wait to see his face when I interrupted him breaking into that Ford Cortina, assuming I could find the bloody thing. I set off towards the motorway at once.

The tailback on the M1 for the Pop Festival was staggering, mile after mile of cars jammed together for as far as the eye could see. Like many hippie types walking along the hard shoulder and the verges, I decided it would be quicker to walk than try to hitch a lift. I fell in with a group of Scandinavian fans, two guys and a girl, who generously gave me coffee and soup they heated up on a primus. It took us about an hour and half to cover the last lap of the journey to the Knebworth concert ground, but, as I said, we did stop for refreshments, and a joint, along the way.

It was only when we got there that I realised two things, one, I didn't have a ticket, nor the money to buy one, and, two, I was way too late to catch the Duck stealing the time machine. I remember him telling me that he took the car home and then it took him nearly eight hours to get back to the concert, and he'd finally arrived back just in time to see the two spitfires roaring over. Many people at the time did not realise it, but the band, as a curtain raiser to their show, had laid on those spits. Well, after I'd said goodbye to my Scandinavian friends at the main entrance, making up some cock and bull story about having to meet a mate, I heard the World War Two fighter planes go over. I knew then that the Duck must be somewhere in the concert area—with my teenaged mother!

## *Tempus Fugit*

It all felt really odd but I didn't have time to think about the incredible weirdness of it all too much, because I was too busy trying to figure out how I was going to get in without paying. I didn't know how well the site was marshalled, but if it was anything like the two Glastonburys I'd been to in the nineties, it was not going to be easy gate crashing the place. And I couldn't afford to get myself caught, or, even worse, arrested, so I decided to stowaway on a large vehicle and ride in. I was even prepared to cling onto the underside of a camper van or converted bus like a human fly, I'd seen enough of them on the motorway that afternoon, and they weren't all in the ground, even by the time Floyd came on.

When I found a suitable vehicle, however—a converted coach, painted lemon yellow—I chickened out. No way was I going to crawl under the thing and hold on. Hold on to what? I did have a quick look under it, as it stood there rattling and humming in the queue, but I clearly hadn't thought it through—I opted for a direct assault instead. There was a ladder round the back, so I just climbed up that and threw myself flat on the roof, which had a rack, covered with an awning. The guys in the van behind it must have seen me go up there, but I suppose they just thought, what the hell, the poor guy's just trying to get in to see his idols! Anyway, they kept quiet and in I rode, on that roof. I was amazed none of the people at the ticket office we had to stop at thought of checking the roof. Maybe they thought, what the hell, Floyd are on, half the festival's over, we want to get to see some, just push these last few stragglers through. I noticed, too, that some vehicles were actually leaving the place! What was all that about?

Well, my coach ride was brief, for we parked up easily and my unwitting chauffeurs piled out and hurried off to the festival ground. I scampered down and followed them, across the car park field and through an avenue of old trees. I could see Knebworth on my left, over a track and I was in the actual concert arena, if you could call it that. Even though the noise I could hear was Pink Floyd, always fastidious about the live sound they produced, I have to admit the sound and general organisation of these pop festivals has come a long way over the past quarter of a century. The organ didn't sound right at all, it sounded out of tune, and the stage was just a box, with green tarpaulins draped over it. True, there was some sort of light show and back projection going on—I recognised the tune as "Shine On You Crazy Diamond"—but it wasn't anything like the modern ones. The seventy thousand strong crowd seemed to be enjoying it though. And that was my big problem: how the hell was I going to find that short-ass, the Duck, in all this multitude? And then I remembered the photograph I'd often been shown of mum and her boyfriend, who I now knew to be the Duck, at this very pop festival. It had been taken somewhere near the front, but I had always been struck by the tree in the background. I could see that very tree from where I was standing, at the rear and to the right of the crowd. All I had to do was work my way down to the other side of the tree and I should find them.

I started pushing and nudging and excusing my way forward. Sure I took a lot of stick—these old guys were not all peace and love, you know—some of those old hippies got pretty irritated, even aggressive, when I tried to barge my way in front of them. I tried to win their sympathy by claiming that I had to get back to my chick, who was pregnant, but even that didn't cut any ice with some of them, some of them I had to skirt right around, because they actually threatened to punch my lights out.

"Hey, peace and love, man," I called to one, as he shoved me back.

"——— you, man!" came the reply.

"Motherlover!" I shouted, lamely.

## *Tempus Fugit*

It took me over half an hour to wriggle and wheedle myself forward. I was really close to Floyd now and the sound they were making was extraordinary—I began to see what the Duck meant about them. The air was reverberating with the noise of clocks, suddenly they were abruptly stopped by an alarm and then the bass guitar broke into "Time," from *The Dark Side of the Moon* album. And then I saw them—the Duck and my mother!

I was about four or five people away before I spotted them. I just stood there, getting jostled in the crowd, as Floyd played "Time," staring at my mother, my eyes welling up with tears. I slid between the two guys to my left to move in closer, but suddenly I felt a firm tug on my jacket.

"No, Stephen," said a voice, directly behind me.

I squirmed round.

"Tree?" I gasped. "Is it you?"

"Come with me," he said.

"I'm lost," I said. "My mother—I must speak to the Duck."

"She's not your mother, yet," he said, putting his lips to my ear, to tell me. "They won't understand. Leave them, Stephen, let them be, or you may never be."

"No, you don't understand," I said, "the Duck's not my father. That was all a mistake. You see, my old man was from the future, his name is Zebulon Zirconion, and he made me immortal—"

"Come with me now, I will explain everything," said Tree, pulling me away.

"But, I was going to warn the Duck about—" I was going to explain about the bus and Jemmons.

"He knows," said Tree. "Quickly, we must leave here now."

"He knows? How can he know? Hey, wait—"

We didn't have as much trouble going backwards as I had going forwards through the audience, and within a few minutes, the Tree had led me right over by the avenue of trees, where I came in, and where the music was not loud enough to prevent him from talking to me in his normal voice.

"I must talk to you," he said. I could see he hardly knew where to begin, he was just staring at me and shaking his head.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "Where's Emily?"

"She's not here," he said. "Just listen carefully to what I have to tell you. It may be hard for you to understand, or accept, but you must accept it, because there is no alternative, and nothing you can do."

"You are scaring the hell out of me," I said.

"The Duck's real name is Zebulon Zirconian, and he did not steal a time machine, I did. I stole his machine."

"What? I don't understand. He said—no, they told me he wasn't my father. Ibiza—she works for Corrective Measures—told me my DNA matched this Zebulon Zirconian character's—and he doesn't look anything like the Duck—"

"You must forget what you think you know. What I am telling you is the truth: Julian Gaylord Duckworth, alias, well, he has a thousand aliases, but he really is Zebulon Zirconian, and he really is your father," said Tree.

"I don't believe you," I said. "The Duck can't be my father, he has lots of kids, Corrective Measures didn't come after them—how come they tried to erase me and not the others?"

"Because they are mortal and you are not," said Tree. "Zebulon introduced an anti-ageing gene into your DNA string—you will never age after you have reached adulthood like other men, you'll remain just as you are now, as long as you are not

killed, you should live forever. Doctor Zirconian, to give him his title, developed the immortality gene in the year 3007. Realising how potentially dangerous it could be, he used himself as a guinea pig. Unfortunately, his newfound immortality registered on the time continuum and came to the attention of Corrective Measures. They have been hunting him down ever since. Hence, all the subterfuge, disguises and lies. He could never let you know the truth, and yet he was not prepared to let them erase you."

"What about Emma?" I said.

"She is safe now," he said.

"Emma's safe? Where is she?"

"She's with Emily, at Duckworth Hall."

"You mean—she's free?"

"Your father secured her release, and your freedom and that of Roger Jemmons, but there was a price," said Tree, his eyes filling, I could see, with a deeply felt sadness.

"Price? What could they possibly want, apart from—"

"He gave them the only thing he had to bargain with—himself," said Tree.

"But why give them anything—the Duck was born to run!" I cried.

"I think he knew it was the only way to spare his children," said Tree.

"But it's in our blood—I'd rather have the Duck back and run all my life than—what will they do to him?"

"He will be sent to the Castle for the rest of his life, if he's lucky, if he's not, he will be sentenced to death," he said.

"He's going in my place—we can't let him do this, Tree!"

"Emma is waiting for you," Tree said. "We must leave now, agents from Corrective Measures and the TCP are watching us, even as we speak."

"Why are they here if they have the Duck?" I said, looking round, a hippie in a sheepskin body warmer, purple flares and a paisley bandana tied round his shoulder length hair, looked away from my gaze. "I didn't know they were into Floyd. Is the Duck still here?"

"You saw him with your mother," said Tree.

"Not that Duck—I mean the one I know," I said.

Tree hesitated. "The Duck you saw with your mother is the one you know—he wanted to spend one last evening with her."

"Where's the old one?"

"It was my job to get him out of the way for a few hours—he's helping the roadies backstage, he doesn't suspect a thing," said Tree. "And now we must be going."

"We're taking my father with us."

"Are you mad?"

"Yeah, I'm insane. Where's the machine?" I said.

"They have agreed to let us keep the old Ford Cortina. It's just over there." He pointed through the gap in the trees to the car park.

"Good. Now, lend me that Tibetan prayer hat you're wearing," I said.

"My hat?"

I took it off his head and put it on mine. "Yeah. This thing's giving me good karma, man—I can feel those Shangri La vibes feeding right through."

"What are you going to do?"

"I've got a plan, Tree. A little trick in the tail."

Yeah, I had a plan, though it wasn't completely formed in my head, it was more like an idea, okay, so it wasn't a fully developed one, it was more like a rough outline, taking shape, although I couldn't see the whole picture, I had an impression of

it in my mind's eye. And it was a good one. That is, I think it was going to be a good one, when I thought of it.

"The Duck made me promise him that I wouldn't let you risk your life," said Tree, looking around nervously.

"Don't worry, I have no intention of risking my life, I was thinking of risking his," I said. "Do you think you could go back into that crowd and ask the Duck to meet me over there?" I pointed to the avenue of trees.

"Out of the question!" he exclaimed. "He has given his word to the Council of Corrective Measures."

"I believe you—you really did work in a photographic archive. Listen, tell him I just want to say goodbye to my old man. Surely, that's not such big favour to ask."

"I strongly urge you to reconsider," he said.

"You strongly urge me? Did you think I could just walk away from this—let another man bargain his life for mine?" I said. "Just go and tell the Duck what I said and then get in the car and wait."

I gave him a little shove. He shook his head but headed off into the crowd. The sound of a giant cash register started ringing in the air—Floyd were breaking into "Money." I ran into the avenue and jogged down the track, to see if I could get around to the backstage area. I was stopped before I even got to the end of the avenue, by two marshals.

"This is off limits," said one of them, as he came towards me like a rugby player.

"I know, I know," I said, "but my mate's in the crew, his name's Julian Duckworth. I have to speak to him urgently. It's really urgent."

"No can do," said the marshal, daring me to try and fly past him on the blind side, or try to duck inside, where his mate was waiting to tackle me.

"His partner—I mean, his chick is having a baby, man—she's actually giving birth up there right in front of Pink Floyd! You've gotta get him for her—he's screaming for him, man."

The two marshals hesitated—they must have heard every line in the book—and shot each other a glance.

"If she miscarries because he wasn't holding her hand—she is going to sue everybody to hell—she's like that," I said.

The nearest one jabbed a finger in my face. "This better not be a—wind up!"

"I swear it's the truth," I nodded. I was lying like a true Zirconian.

The other marshal hurried off down the track and disappeared round to the left, into the backstage area.

"Tell him it's Zebulon!" I shouted.

I sat down on the ground and pretended to do some Buddhist meditation stuff.

"Ommmm!"

"What the hell's that?" laughed the marshal.

"It's a prayer for the unborn child—we're Buddhists," I said. "That's why he has to be there."

"I see. He could call the nipper Pink or Floyd."

"No, it has to be Annakarrapastanakka, that's a Tibetan name," I explained, and continued my prayer. "Ommm! Annakarrapastanakka. Ommmm!"

The guy retreated down the track, in case what I had was contagious, which was exactly what I wanted him to do and think. I kept up my Tibetan charade for another ten minutes, and then the other marshal returned, but without the Duck.

## *Tempus Fugit*

"He's on his way!" he called. "They've had a fire in the bales they stacked round the generator."

I nodded and continued to pray. The lane was growing darker by the minute, as dusk fell. I looked back up the shadowy avenue, over my shoulder. There was still no sign of Zebulon Zirconian. The marshals were standing about six or seven yards away from me, in a huddle, probably talking about me, and my weird behaviour. If my half-formed plan worked, they hadn't seen anything yet!

"Are you sure he got the message?" I called to them.

"Yeah, yeah," said the one who delivered it.

"Just say your prayers!" said the other one, which I believe may have been a crude attempt at some primitive form of humour, although it was a strain of comedy so faint and feeble, it hardly touched my consciousness. I was really getting into my mumbojumbo and starting to believe I was a Buddhist. It must have been the hat!

"Ommmm! Nikkaknakkarakka! Ommmm!"

Suddenly, the Duck emerged from the backstage area, via an entrance hidden from my view, so his appearance really did take me by surprise. But not half as much as the sight of me took him by surprise. I heard him say something to the marshals and then they pointed at me, sitting cross-legged in the darkening lane, making funny noises. He walked towards me, straining his eyes to see who I was.

I looked nervously over my shoulder and saw the silhouette of a figure step out into the middle of the lane. I stood up.

"What do you want?" said the Duck, looking me up and down.

"Are you the owner of a white Ford Cortina?" I said.

"Why?" asked the Duck, looking over my shoulder.

"Someone's going to nick it," I said.

"How do you know? Who are you?"

"Everything all right, mate?" called the pushy backstage security guy.

"Yeah, everything's cool," said the Duck, stepping to the side of me and staring up the lane at the approaching figure.

"That's the guy who's going to steal your car," I said. "He knows it's a time machine!"

The Duck shot me a strange look. I could see he had no idea who I was.

"If you like seventies rock so much, you can stay here!" I said, and started running up the lane.

I heard the Duck coming after me and the two marshals shouting something. I didn't dare look back. The figure up the lane halted.

"Zebulon!" I shouted. "Stay there!"

The figure looked round. Three more figures broke cover out of the trees at the top of the lane and began moving towards us. I was only twenty yards away from Zebulon by now and the Duck was hot on my tail. I glanced back to see just how close he was and saw he was only ten yards away, and the marshals were only another five or six behind him. Only Zebulon was rooted to the spot. And I reached him first, breathless and unable to speak, I just threw my arms around his neck.

"Stephen—what have you done?" he cried. "It's my—"

"The old you," I gasped. I whipped the Tibetan hat off and pulled it over his head, and was determined to hang onto the strings, come hell or high water.

Suddenly, Zebulon and the Duck multiplied in a long line of electric blue mirror images, shooting up and down the lane, like a human rainbow. And a great wind blew in both directions at once, emanating from a point somewhere between Zebulon and his other self, the Duck. Everyone hit the ground, except me and the

## *Tempus Fugit*

hundreds of Ducks and Zebulons. I tried to drag the one I had hold of out of the wind tunnel of what I assumed was the time-space continuum, but he wouldn't budge and his face was turning green and red and then yellow and purple, and bizarre sounds were echoing through the air, crackles and distorted voices, wind chimes and a rain noise.

"Zebulon!" I cried, at the top of my voice.

"One of these days," he said in a slow bass voice.

I heard a gurgling laughter, resounding everywhere, and looked back, to see hundreds of shimmering blue and green images of the Duck, stretching away into infinity, all laughing, and all becoming clearer and more animated by the second.

The two marshals were cowering on the ground.

"Don't worry!" I yelled to them. "It's just part of Floyd's light show!"

I pulled the hat tight over Zebulon's ears. "You're Zebulon!" I shouted in his face.

He turned his head to look at me, in slow motion. "I can see everything," he said. "Everywhere, all at once."

"Yeah, I've been there, done that, bought the T-shirt," I said. "Can you step out of this crazy chorus line? Step with me, Zebulon. Come on! Close your eyes and step out of this!"

"No," he said. "Can't move."

"We can make it," I said. "You got me out of one of these things—remember? How did you do it?"

"Which one am I?" he said, his voice reverberating everywhere.

"You are this one—the one I'm holding," I said.

"You're holding us all," he said. "We're everywhereeeee!"

"How did you do it?" I yelled. "Tell me how you did it—how do I get you out of this?"

"Too late," he said. "Don't touch me—mustn't touch—"

I looked down at my hands, holding onto the earflaps of the Tibetan hat. They were glowing blood red and virtually see-through! I panicked and let go, and was thrown through the air onto the grass verge, as though I had received an almighty electric shock.

From my new viewpoint, I could see the full extent of what I'd done—there were literally hundreds of Ducks and Zebulons, streaming away from the meeting point, just like the cab I had seen disappearing into the vortex that night we followed Emma. But what really caught my eye was the light and twinkling particles that seemed to be connecting the Duck and Zebulon, which I had not noticed when I was up close. It was as if they were exchanging something, intermingling with themselves. The terrible thought struck me that if I didn't do something quickly, they would both explode, or implode or disintegrate, or do something harmful to each other. But I couldn't think of one sensible thing to do. I mean, what do you do when you see something supernatural happening? How can you possibly know what to do? Suddenly, I remembered how the Duck had driven his car over me. Was that the answer? Did I have to kill one to save the other? And if so, what was that thing in my flat, that clone? What was that doing there? How did it fit in?

I looked about me on the grass and saw a piece of branch. My plan was simple—I was going to hit the Duck over the head with it. It was the most scientific thing I could think of doing. I picked it up and rushed back into the stream of light.

"Sorry, mate!" I cried and clobbered the Duck over the head, fairly hard, well, really hard, actually—too hard, probably. He went down like one of those soviet



statues after the velvet revolution, after glasnost and perestroika and Gorbie and Uncle Boris Yeltsin, all rolled into one, when they toppled all the monuments to Lenin and cuddly old Joe Stalin, with his bushy moustache. He went over like that, and took all his multiple images with him. Even Zebulon's endless tailback of himself flickered and shuddered. I grabbed Zebulon and dragged him out of the line. His multiples tried to swerve around with him—the light bending—but some of them shot straight past us and vanished down the lane, and then others rebounded off the tree trunks in the avenue, and shot off into the night.

"Bring him!" said Zebulon, staggering around, rubbing his head, and pointing down at the Duck.

"Did that hurt you, too?" I said. I looked down. There were three or possibly four, real looking Ducks lying on the ground, and hundreds of jelly baby-like ones, made of various shades of blue, green, yellow and red light. "Which one?" I asked, throwing my hands up in the air in despair.

Zebulon looked at them for a moment. "Not the one who's bleeding—better bring the next two," he said.

"Two? I can't carry two!"

"They're light," Zebulon said. "Like foam. Go on pick them up."

I stepped over the one I'd hit and grabbed the next one, who had managed to crawl up onto his hands and knees. He was so light, that I could carry him under my arm like a roll of wallpaper. The third one in line looked in better shape and was swaying around on his feet, rubbing his head. I snatched him up and turned to Zebulon.

"Come on—Tree's waiting in the machine—let's get out of here!"

I ran off through the gap in the trees and across the grassy bank to the car park. Zebulon trailed after me, still trying to shake off the blow to the Duck's head, which he had obviously felt, too.

"Are you okay?" I shouted back.

"Don't wait for me—keep going!" he said.

To my surprise, Tree was waiting just beyond the row of parked vehicles, revving the engine of the Ford Cortina. He must have seen the fireworks and driven down. I swivelled round, with my two Ducks still under my arms, to tell Zebulon the good news, and saw him wrestling with two hippies—only they weren't Floyd fans—they were TCP in plainclothes!

I kept running and threw the two groggy Ducks I was carrying on the backseat.

"Watch them—won 'em at the fair—I'm going back for Zebulon!" I shouted to Tree.

"Hurry!" cried Tree.

I dashed back across the verge and leapt on the back of the first hippie cop I came to. This made him release Zebulon, but then he had the great idea of charging backwards into the nearest tree trunk, to break my back. After the first crushing blow, I let go and he turned on me with a snarl. The next thing I knew he was putting the boot into me—and, boy, did he know where to put it!

Suddenly, his grunts and the sickening stabs of pain in my backside, back and ribs stopped. I had curled myself up as tight as an ammonite during the attack, but now I opened my eyes and dared to look around me. Tree was bashing my attacker's head against the bonnet of a VW camper, which had the words PEACE AND LOVE painted all over it in psychedelic swirls and flowers. I scampered to my feet and began kicking him anywhere I could see to put the boot in. Tree grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and slung me away.

## *Tempus Fugit*

Then the Tree continued to beat him up alone.

I went to help Zebulon but he was already getting the better of his assailant, too, and had him by the arm, swinging him round and round. I tried to kick him as he went by, but it was like trying to kick someone on a Noah's Ark, and I kept missing. Then Zebulon let him go and he flew right past me and into a tree trunk, and we could both tell he was never going to get up and walk again, this side of Christmas. Nevertheless, I ran over and put the boot in twice, before Zebulon pushed me off him, and then proceeded to put the boot in himself. I dragged Zebulon off, so that I could take over.

"Will you get in the car?" I said.

Zebulon staggered off towards Tree, who was still banging his opponent's head against the bonnet of the love wagon. I gave the unconscious guy lying under the tree a last kick up the backside and ran off.

Zebulon was trying to pull Tree off his victim, and I helped—together we managed to prise Tree away and fling him on the backseat with the Duck—the Duck?

"Where's the other one?" I yelled.

Zebulon spotted him wandering between the parked cars, about thirty yards away, and pointed. I ran him down, spun him round, and started kneeing him in the goolies and punching him. But then I heard Zebulon crying out and realised that whatever I did to the clone Duck was being felt by Zebulon, so I slung him over my shoulder like a fire-fighter and carried him back to the car.

"Sorry about that," I said, "he wouldn't come quietly."

"Bullshit," said Zebulon, slumping in behind the wheel. "You enjoyed that—you little sado-fascist!"

I laughed coyly and climbed into the passenger seat.

Tree patted me on the shoulder. "Don't be ashamed of the beast within you," he said.

"You can really get a taste for all this violence," I said. "Now I know why football hooligans don't bother to go to matches anymore."

"Goran Taroc, the great twenty-seventh century psychiatrist said: most people would enjoy violence, if they only tried it," said Tree.

"A psychiatrist advocating violence? That's a new one. So what's war—therapy for the masses?"

"Don't laugh. Tarockian theory became the foundation of Fourth Millennium society," said Zebulon. "He also said: sex is just a substitute for violence."

"That explains a lot. But I was just getting that cop back—he really laid into me," I said. "I'm not usually a violent person. I have an honours degree in English Literature—I happen to think the pen is mightier than the sword and all violence is pointless."

"Bollocks!" said Zebulon, slamming the Cortina into first and shooting away, down the aisles of parked vehicles.

"Yes, well, that's an interesting point," I said.

"Would you care to expand on it sometime? I mean, I thought we were supposed to be the good guys round here."

"They're all puritanical Nazis, remember?" smiled Zebulon, as we went into temporal overdrive.

"But we could have tried to reason with them," I said, feeling a bit ashamed of the excessive violence I had used. I licked my lips and tasted blood. "Maybe explained our point of view a little more."

"I think we did that all right, mate," said Zebulon.

## *Tempus Fugit*

I caught sight of Tree in the rear view mirror, sitting on the backseat between the two grinning Ducks.

"What are we going to do with them?" I said, as we drifted into the vortex.

"They're multiples," said Zebulon. "They've absorbed some of my atoms and enough DNA to replicate me—if you hadn't stopped the multiple replication, there would have been thousands of these things running around. They'll have to be destroyed."

"It seems a shame," I said.

"And they have to be destroyed quickly—the more they develop the harder it will be for me when they're culled," said Zebulon.

"Couldn't we just drop them off somewhere in time?" I said.

"No way," said Zebulon. "Replicates aren't like my other temporal selves—whatever happens to those two I would feel too, physically."

"I see, so that's why you had to kill mine off," I said.

"Well, I had to kill the real you off and one of the replicates, because you were too damaged—you're actually one of the replicates, mate," explained Zebulon.

"You did what?" I cried. "You destroyed the real me? I'm a replicate? Is that what you're telling me?"

I don't know why, but my hand instinctively went to my genitals.

"I had no choice, man."

I looked round at Tree, in horror. "Did you know about this?"

"He's pulling your leg," said Tree.

I looked across at Zebulon—the bloody Duck was back to his old self—he was smirking all over his stupid face!

"You sick—!"

"Your face, mate!" laughed the Duck. "You should have seen your bleeding face."

The two other Ducks on the backseat started laughing, too. We destroyed them humanely by lethal injection as soon as we got back to the Duck's secret garage, behind the library at Duckworth Hall.

And then I was escorted by Sir Julian Duckworth himself up the elegant stairs to the very room I had stayed in on my first visit.

"She's waiting for you, mate." The Duck bowed and winked, turned on his heels and went.

I turned the doorknob and opened the door.

**END**