

WORDS WORTH

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READING

A quarterly fiction
magazine:
short stories, serials,
novellas, novels



DIANE WORDSWORTH

MARDI GRAS

a toni & bart time-travel novella

Words Worth Reading
Issue 0 | October 2023

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Diane Wordsworth



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welcome

A warm welcome to *Words Worth Reading*.

This is a revised and rebranded re-issue of the magazine, which was originally published in October 2021 as Issue 1. Here you will find fiction long and short, all written by Diane Wordsworth.

In this issue you'll find three short stories, and a novella, complete and in its entirety, all of which were brand-new when *Words Worth Reading* first appeared. You'll also find a short story from the archives as well as the first part of the novel serialisation for *Night Crawler*. Part 2 next time.

One of the short stories, *The Ace of Wands*, is the first instalment of a series of Tarot-related tales that stand up on their own. These are the backstories for my series of loosely Tarot-related mystery novellas set in the fictitious Yorkshire Riding of Horvale and starring Stevie Ash.

Have fun reading the stories. I hope you enjoy them.



**Wordsworth
Shorts**

- Diane Wordsworth -

the girl on the bench

the girl on the bench

The artwork for this short story appeared on the cover of the original version of the magazine. I was looking for something autumnal and fell in love with the picture, and then, of course, I had to write a story around it. I started with the young girl and built my character around her.

At about the same time that I was writing this story there was a sad tale in the news about school bullies. So I decided to incorporate that theme into my short story.

*

A male blackbird foraged for the last of the berries on the hawthorn while his mate tugged fat, juicy worms out of the ground. A squirrel scampered about, searching for acorns. His cheeks were already stuffed. If he could fit just one more in, then he'd go and bury his stash.

Golden leaves crunched underfoot, made yet more crunchy by a thin layer of morning frost still lingering from the previous night. Tamsin Price dragged her school bag along the floor before she sat down heavily on a bench beneath one of the trees. There was a nip in the air making her breath steam every time she opened her mouth. Making sure that her school coat was well beneath her bottom on the cold and icy bench, she pulled her collar up around her ears and watched the wildlife for a few minutes, smiling at their antics. They were very tame and not at all frightened of her.

She dug into her bag and arranged some of her belongings on the bench beside her. Mobile phone. Ear buds. Asthma inhaler. Mr Turford.

Teddy Turford was her oldest and her favourite teddy bear. She was a bit old for teddy bears, but this one went everywhere with her. She'd had him for ever, and he was small enough to fit into her school bag without anyone spotting him. She'd skived off school today, so it wasn't an issue, but Tamsin would die of embarrassment if the other kids found out about Mr Turford.

She breathed in the smell of wood smoke. There was a bonfire somewhere. She hoped whoever it was had checked that there were no hedgehogs asleep under the pile before setting light to it.

After scrolling through her phone for a bit, she went to the story she'd bookmarked the day before that had popped up on Facebook. Not that she was old enough to have a Facebook account, but that was soon remedied simply by falsifying her birth date. Every year she moved her birth year back a year and by her next birthday, it would read the right date at last.

It was the headline that caught her eye:

BOY'S ATTEMPTED SUICIDE BLAMED ON SCHOOL BULLIES

Tamsin always found it a bit spooky that Facebook seemed to know *everything* about you. Apart from her real birth date, of course. But generally, if she Googled anything or if she followed a link to somewhere, within seconds Facebook would target her with adverts and stories based on what she'd just been looking at.

Tamsin shuddered. According to her dad it was Big Brother watching everything that everyone did. She had no idea who Big Brother was, but he seemed Very Important, and almost all-seeing. She hoped he couldn't really see everything.

She'd read the story a few times the day before and now she read it out loud to Mr Turford. The words had hit a nerve. The story said the boy had been wagging school. Just like Tamsin was right now. The name-calling had really got to him, and when things started to get physical, he started to skive off school. Unable to face going back to school, he'd tried to cut his wrists. But he hadn't cut deep enough and now he'd have scars on the insides of his arms for the rest of his life. The story didn't mention the boy by name, but it did say that he was at a school in Birmingham. Tamsin's school was in Doncaster, so there was no chance that she might know him.

Tamsin sighed and picked at a scab on her knee. It wasn't quite ready yet and she winced at the sharp pain. She wiped away a small drop of blood with a tissue. "How painful would it be to slice at my own arm with Dad's Stanley blade?" she asked her teddy, tucking the soiled tissue back into her coat pocket. She didn't really want to think about it. "There must have been a lot of blood."

She shuddered again. There were too many similarities between the story on Facebook and the real story in her own life. She frowned as she tried to remember when the bullying at her school had first started.

"Probably the first week of the new school year," she said. Though try as she might, she couldn't pinpoint what it had been over. Was it the hockey boots? She furrowed her brow as she tried to remember. Yes, it was something about hockey boots.

Carey Parkes had told JoJo Skinner that JoJo could have Carey's old hockey boots. Everyone knew it was because JoJo was one of the best hockey players in their year but without a proper pair of boots, she wouldn't be allowed to play in the inter-school tournament. The rumour was that JoJo's parents couldn't afford to buy her a pair of her own. Even if the other girls didn't like

her very much, they still wanted JoJo in the team because, more than anything, they wanted to win the trophy.

And then, for some reason, JoJo had helped herself to the boots from Carey's locker, which wasn't even locked, and when they saw her in them in the playground, Carey and all of her friends had laid into JoJo. It had started with just calling her names. But before long they were poking fun at her family's lack of money, following her home, spitting at her, pulling her hair, accusing her parents of being junkies. It had gone on for weeks, but not once did JoJo report Carey and her friends to the teachers.

And then yesterday, JoJo didn't turn up for school and Tamsin had seen the story on Facebook.

Why had JoJo helped herself to the boots? Why didn't she wait for Carey to just give them to her? More importantly, why had Tamsin jumped on the bandwagon and joined in? It was none of her business.

Tamsin shook her head. She wasn't a bully. "I'm not a bully!" she told Mr Turford. But she'd given in to the peer pressure at school and she'd sided with the bullies instead of sticking up for JoJo. She'd joined the others when they ganged up on her. Tamsin was very much a bully.

What if JoJo tried to kill herself? What if she tried to cut her own wrists? Apart from not wanting that on her conscience, Tamsin didn't think it was worth it, especially over a pair of hockey boots.

Tamsin stuffed all of her belongings back into her bag and tucked Mr Turford in too, then she swung the bag over her shoulder and made her way back down the hill towards school.

But she didn't turn in to the school entrance. Instead, she carried on walking until she reached JoJo's house. She knew which one it was because she'd followed her all the way there with the others.

Tamsin hesitated at the gate. She looked at the clean and tidy frontage. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the gate open and marched right up to the front door, rapping on the shiny red woodwork until her knuckles hurt.

A lady answered, who Tamsin assumed was JoJo's mother.

"Is JoJo there?" said the girl.

"She's not very well at the moment," said the woman. "She's in bed with the flu. Can I give her a message?"

"Yes, please tell her that Tamsin dropped by, and... and..."

"And?" said the pretty woman.

Tamsin pulled the bear out of her bag and held it out to JoJo's mum. "Tell her that she can borrow Mr Turford until she's better... and that I'm sorry."

*



Mardi Gras

a Toni & Bart time-travel tale
Diane Wordsworth

mardi gras

Mardi Gras is a very special story for me. After a long hiatus (more than ten years) and several failed attempts at NaNoWriMo, I finally buckled down and finished something I'd started. It was also the very first story I wrote by the seat of my pants.

Sister and brother time travellers Toni and Bart became my latest series characters and I followed this novella with a short story in 2022 set against the Phoenix Lights.

Hopefully the duo will have yet more adventures in the future.

*

Chapter 1

The eddy picked up speed as it sucked them both down and into its depths. Down, down, down, until they couldn't breathe properly, until they thought they'd never breathe again. At that precise moment there was a bump, restarting the supply of oxygen, and Bart stopped clawing at his throat. He knew it would be all right, but it still threw him into a panic.

He felt Toni's hand reach out for his. His sister knew, she always knew how it got him, and while she couldn't speak, while they couldn't yet communicate, and while they couldn't properly see each other, this was always how she gave him courage. Just by reaching out a hand and touching his.

He felt another bump as the colours changed from white silver to white gold, to yellow, to orange. The specks of dust would turn into little stars next, then big stars, then the planets, as they reached their programmed destination. Only the specks didn't turn into little stars this time. This time there was an extra bump – that wasn't supposed to be there, he thought – then a bit of a rumble. And the orange light changed to red and then deep vermilion.

As it span faster and faster, he realised there was something wrong. No, no, no, no, no. This wasn't supposed to happen. This never happened. It was going too fast.

He reached out his other hand to find Toni's. Her fingers were cold. She wasn't expecting this either and her fingers squeezed his more tightly than ever.

This wasn't her reassuring grip. This was a "what's happening?" grip. And until they actually stopped, if they ever stopped, they wouldn't be able to

speak. But at least he could see her eyes come into focus, staring out through the opening in her helmet.

Well, if it was going to go wrong, at least they were together. They always had that to booster their confidence, like a little joke about a circumstance that would never, ever happen. It was never supposed to happen.

Bart squeezed Toni's hands and pulled her a little closer to him as the darkness closed in around them.

His nostrils twitched as the vortex bumped and skittered again. Burning. Something was burning. He looked around him wildly, and he saw Toni do the same.

The dark redness was turning smoky. Something was on fire. The machine was on fire. And it was slowing down. It was coming in to land – crash-land more like.

Bart was finally able to pull Toni into a hug, and they clung on to each other. He pulled his legs up so he was in a foetal position, and she mimicked him. He remembered someone telling them once to keep their arms and legs in. "Curl up, don't put your hands out. You'll hurt yourself if you put your hands out."

As the machine finally came to land, the g-force propelling it and them forward, they clung together and rolled with it.

Bart felt the first bounce, then the second, and then three more before they finally crashed against something that sent shockwaves through his entire body. Toni yelped out an involuntary scream, which meant their time had come, they'd arrived at their destination, or at least a destination of sorts.

And then all went quiet and still and black.

*

As the machine crashed against a moss-covered boulder, sparks shot everywhere and two people fell out of an opening that wasn't even there before. Originally entwined, they came apart, tumbled along the ground, and landed in an eventual heap, both knocked out by the fall.

The smell of blood oozing from their fresh wounds and into the dirt alerted a local resident snake. Initially alarmed and then curious, it started to slither towards them.

Chapter 2

The helmet had fallen off her head before she landed and rolled a few feet away. Toni's head hurt and every bone in her body felt as though she'd been trampled by a herd of elephants.

She heard a groan, thought it was Bart, and realised it was her. She mentally checked herself over, making sure there were no broken bones, and she

opened her eyes to the weak sunlight, her vision blurred but already was starting to clear.

Toni carefully pulled herself up into a slightly sitting, slightly lying position and moved her head slowly to see where they were. It looked like the Everglades, which meant they weren't too far off the mark. She rubbed a sore part of her elbow and cast around to see if she could see Bart.

She found him only a few feet away, he too in the process of checking his injuries. He sat up slowly and removed his helmet.

Her head itched. She lifted her hand to scratch it but instead felt a warm wetness. Pulling her hand away she saw it covered with blood. And then the sore part on her head suddenly kicked in. Ouch, it stung! There was blood running down Bart's face too.

"Are you all right?" she asked, getting onto her hands and knees.

"I think so," he replied. "You don't look so great."

"Gee, thanks," she laughed.

Well, she still had her sense of humour. She wasn't dead yet.

Bart got up a bit more quickly than she did and she saw the dizziness embrace him.

"You have blood on your face," she said, gradually climbing to a standing position herself.

"You have blood all over your head," he said, coming towards her. He stooped to pick up her helmet. "What have I told you about fastening your chinstrap properly?" he said, waving the helmet at her. She was about to retort with a smart reply when he stumbled over a root and collapsed to the floor again. And then he froze.

"What's wrong? Did you hurt something else?" she asked.

"Ssh!" She started to move towards him. "Stay there," he hissed.

Toni froze too. In slow motion Bart reached out for a heavy branch, discarded it as it was still joined to a tree root, and scabbled as quietly as he could for a rock instead. Then he hurled the rock at Toni, frightening her half to death.

Impulsively, she ducked away from the flying missile, but it totally missed her and landed in a squelch behind her. She turned to look and saw a snake with its head stoved-in by the stone.

"I thought you were throwing that at me!" she shouted, relief making her bad-tempered.

He shrugged as if to say, well, you can see that I didn't. And he climbed to his feet once again, this time more slowly.

"I wonder where we are," he said, glancing around at their surroundings. He handed Toni her helmet. "That wound looks like it needs a stitch."

She took the helmet sheepishly, dug into the pocket of her skirt to find an old dried-up tissue and pressed that in a wad against her head. "This will have to do until we find some help." And she held it there knowing her arm would start to ache soon.

"Where are we?" Bart wondered again, looking about them again. "It *looks* like the Everglades. So at least we're in the right country... unless they have Everglade-type environments all over the place."

"If it *is* the Everglades, there will be more to worry about than that," she replied, nodding towards the dead snake.

"Something went wrong," he said.

"I thought so too."

"And did you smell that fire towards the end?" She nodded. "I reckon something burnt out."

"It smelt like hydraulic fluid to me," she said, wrinkling her nose at the thought. "I remember the clutch went once on my dad's car. The hydraulic fluid got too hot and the slave cylinder caught fire. All the hydraulics went and I could smell that smell on everything for days afterwards. It really sticks in your nose."

They looked sadly towards the machine. "It'll need repairing," said Bart. "But first, we need to get you to a doctor."

"Oh, I'm all right—"

"You're not. That tissue's soaked right through. What are you going to use next?"

They took their helmets back to the machine and stowed them in the side-car. Toni picked up her classy top hat and gave it a dust. But she was too sore to place it on top of her curly head.

"Come on then, let's start walking," she said.

*

Fortunately it wasn't raining, but the atmosphere was quite humid. Toni could feel her curls frizzing. Bart's hair was curly too, but he kept it too short for it to be a problem.

"This won't be good for the machine," mused Bart. "If there's a break in any of the circuits, or even in any of the wiring, this damp will cause it to misfire."

"I don't think crash-landing in the Everglades will do it a world of good either," replied Toni.

"If that's where we are..."

"Wherever we are, it still won't have been any good."

The marshy, root-ridden ground was tough to negotiate in her low-heeled ankle boots, but she managed. It didn't take them long to reach the road, even if it was just a dirt-packed shrub-lined track.

"Which way do you think we should go?" asked Bart, looking left. "I can't see anything for miles this way."

Toni looked to the right. She thought it was more built-up in the distance. But there didn't seem to be a lot of life and there were certainly no road vehicles. "That way looks like something," she said. "It doesn't look far."

As they drew nearer to the small town, they saw a road sign:

WELCOME TO NEW ORLEANS

"Well, that's handy," grinned Bart.

"It's where we were headed," agreed Toni.

"It doesn't look very... " he cast around for the right words "... modern."

"We *were* going back in time," said Toni. "And we were supposed to land quite close to where we would probably find the artefact we've been sent for."

"Hmm, yes," agreed Bart. "So either we landed in the wrong place..."

"Or we landed in the right place, wrong time?"

"Exactly."

"If we're in New Orleans, then this isn't the Everglades," said Toni.

"It must be the Mississippi Delta," replied her brother.

"Mm. The ocean won't be far away." She sniffed, but she couldn't smell any sea air.

"And nor will the city," said Bart. "Come on, this isn't getting you to a doctor."

"Won't we have to pay?"

"We have money, remember."

"Yes, but if we've gone too far, it might not have been printed yet..."

So many things were whirling around inside Toni's head. Perhaps it was the bump. Perhaps she was concussed.

"It's because we've landed in the wrong place," she tried to reassure herself.

"What?" said Bart.

"Sorry. Talking to myself."

"Hmm. Come on. Doctor."

They followed the packed dirt track until the town in the distance turned into a small city closer up, and soon they were wandering the back streets looking for a doctor. Their clothes and probably their hairstyles attracted a few curious looks, but that could also be the blood. A cheerful lady wearing a red dress and a matching head scarf and carrying a heavy basket of brightly coloured fruit on her head stopped to ask if they were all right.

"My sister needs a doctor," said Bart.

"What happened to you?" asked the lady. The beads around her neck and dangling from her ears rattled as she spoke.

"We were in an accident," said Toni.

"It looks like it," said the lady. "Down the next road on the right, third door along, someone there will help."

"How much will that cost?" asked Toni.

The lady looked them up and down and reached up inside her basket. "Give him these mangoes, tell him Veronique sent you. He won't charge you then."

"Oh, but we want to pay—"

"He'll be offended if you offer. He'll appreciate the fruit."

"Who should we ask for?" asked Bart, taking the mangoes from her.

The lady chuckled, a deep-throated chortle. "There's only he there, child. But his name's Desmond."

"Thank you very much. You're very helpful."

"It's Mardi Gras week," replied Veronique. "Peaceful happy time to all." And off she waddled, basket of fruit perched securely on her head.

Chapter 3

They found the doorway easily enough. It was the one painted in several different bright colours.

"Now if she'd told us that," laughed Bart.

There was no knocker, just a giant handle. He knocked on the door... and a witch-doctor opened it. Toni sprang backwards with surprise. The bones on the man's head rattled as he looked from one to the other.

"Ha ha ha," he boomed, making the orange, red and yellow feathers around his head shake and tremble. Removing the headdress, he said, "It's Mardi Gras. I was just trying it on for size."

"We're, er, looking for Desmond," said Bart, cautiously.

"And you have found he," said the witch-doctor.

Bart told him their names. "Veronique asked us to give you these." He held out the fruit, which Desmond took with a big smile, filled with sparkling white as well as missing teeth.

"Come in, come in. I can see why Veronique sent you." He opened the door wide with one hand and gestured towards the blood on their clothes with the other. "We'll make you some coffee, fix your wounds, and find you something to wear while we wash those." He hesitated as he saw what they were wearing. Then he nodded his approval. "I like. Very much."

The house, or shop, or whatever it was, was like a cave filled with all sorts of interesting and colourful things hanging from the ceilings and piled on every

surface. Some were quite ordinary knick-knacks, others were voodoo-related or religious.

Toni and Bart dipped so that their heads didn't bump into feathers, shrunken heads, bone necklaces, various talismans on various lengths of leather thong, crystals, amulets, things made from glass, rag dolls, wax effigies and candles. And they emerged into a lounge area furnished with stuffed chairs and over-sized floor cushions, beads and tassels hanging everywhere, but shiny surfaces reflecting light in various jewel colours. It certainly wasn't dark and dowdy. It was actually quite a fun, cheerful place.

"You're very kind," said Toni, sinking with relief into one of the over-stuffed chairs.

In an adjoining room a child, aged about twelve or thirteen, busied herself boiling water and grinding coffee. Desmond shouted something to her in a patois, and she stopped what she was doing and started to tear strips of material instead.

"My daughter," explained Desmond, proudly. "My wife," he added, pointing to the window, where they could see another lady pegging out washing. "Our son is out running errands. We're getting ready for Mardi Gras."

Picking up on the conversation, Desmond's wife came in from the back yard to help their daughter. "This is Odette," said Desmond. "My daughter is Esme. Our son is Gideon."

"It's nice to meet you all," said Toni. "You're being very kind."

"It's Mardi Gras," smiled Odette from the kitchen, as though that explained it and perhaps they wouldn't be so affable at any other time of the year. Her hair was braided and secured in a bun on the side of her head, probably ready for her own Mardi Gras headwear. As she moved around the kitchen she kept touching a feather boa with affection, which hung over a cupboard door handle.

Esme and Odette helped Desmond treat their wounds, bandaging what they thought needed bandaging and securing the bandages with some kind of tucked-in loop. Then Esme disappeared inside the house somewhere, and came back with shirts for both of them, trousers for Bart and a skirt for Toni.

"We'll wash your clothes for you," explained Odette, over coffee.

"You must let us pay—" started Bart, but Toni interrupted him, remembering Veronique the fruit lady's warning about them being offended.

"You're all very kind. We'd like to come back later and collect our things, if that's all right? You're all very busy and we need to... erm... find out a few things."

"What would you like to learn?" asked Odette.

"Well," said Toni, casting around for something that wouldn't freak them out.

"We need to get some provisions, and some souvenirs," said Bart, quickly. "It's not every day we turn up in New Orleans in Mardi Gras week. There must be lots for two strangers to town to see and do."

"Yes," agreed Toni. "And we need to get something for the Mardi Gras too. Would you recommend we start anywhere in particular?"

Odette and Desmond exchanged looks. "They've already decorated the streets. That's always nice to see," said Odette. "There are lots of food stalls, you can get something to drink too. And souvenirs are available in all the shops and on stalls."

"Please, go and have a look at our beautiful city," agreed Desmond. "Meet our beautiful people. Tell them Desmond sent you."

"And Odette," added Odette.

Toni and Bart washed themselves in a bowl of warm water. Odette took Toni's silky blue shirt and black waistcoat with care, and pushed everything over her arm with the taffeta skirt on top. Bart's outfit was so much more practical than hers – brown trousers, striped waistcoat, white shirt – it didn't need as much care. They changed into the clothes they'd been given, then they left the witch-doctor and his family to their preparations.

"What lovely people," said Toni, feeling much better just for being out of her bloodied clothes.

"I've always wanted to come to New Orleans," agreed Bart.

"I wonder what time we're in," mused Toni. "Everything looks very basic."

"But they have electricity, so it's not that long ago."

"There must be a newspaper we can check, or a sign advertising the Mardi Gras."

"I think that depends on when it is," said Bart.

They wandered the streets, necks stiff at all the leaning backwards to look at decorations hanging from upstairs windows, wrought-iron balconies, lamp posts and flag poles. Water hydrants, garbage bins, benches. Everything looked lovely and colourful. And everywhere they went, brown faces grinned at them, some shouted out greetings in one language or another.

"It's a good job I still have my schoolgirl French," mused Toni.

The money they had was US dollars, and it seemed good enough for what they wanted, the only attention being if they used a slightly higher denomination note.

They gazed up at the Spanish architecture and noted the Haitian and the Creole influences everywhere. The camellia was in bloom and even the

streetcars were decorated for the upcoming festival. One stall had free gumbo on offer.

"We have to try this," said Toni, but Bart's hands already held a bowlful of the steaming hot seafood soup. And in the distance they heard the horn of a steamboat. "That must be on the Mississippi."

At one stall selling ribbons, Toni bought a couple – one for Odette and one for Esme. Simple but pretty. And she didn't know how else to thank them for their kindness without offending them. At another stall Bart bought them some more fruit. Desmond had seemed so happy with the mangoes, he assumed that was a good bet.

At the end of one street Toni caught sight of a fountain. She loved fountains. Everywhere they went, she always tossed a coin in the fountain and made a wish – more coins if the fountain claimed to raise funds for charity. She'd been doing that ever since the Trevi Fountain in Rome and it gave her a kind of link between each of the strange places.

"Come on, Bart," she called. "There's a fountain."

"We're not actually supposed to be enjoying ourselves, you know," he scolded. "We need to find out where in time we are, get the machine fixed, and get out of here."

"I know. But we also know that New Orleans was our destination. Perhaps the artefact has been here longer than we thought. And while we are here we may as well enjoy it. Soak up the atmosphere."

"Okay," he laughed, following her, but bumped into her when she stopped suddenly. "Whassup?"

She pointed towards the fountain. "Isn't that...?"

Chapter 4

Conrad was so busy negotiating with a chap with masses of beads around his neck he clearly didn't see either Toni or Bart approaching him. He was dressed pretty much the same as Bart had been, but his waistcoat was leather, a red neckerchief hid the collar of his white shirt, and his trousers were black. Bart didn't wear a hat, but Conrad's was a black John Bull top hat with goggles strapped above the rim. Conrad also sported a pointy beard and a droopy moustache, but Bart was clean-shaven.

When they appeared at Conrad's side he almost jumped out of his leather waistcoat, dropping several strings of beads he was examining.

"Hey, Conrad," said Bart, pleased to see a familiar face.

"Oh. Bart, Toni," replied Conrad, nodding to them both in turn.

"What are you doing here?" asked Toni.

"I, er, came to find you two."

"Did we fall off the radar, then?" asked Bart.

"You've been gone for days."

"Days?" asked Toni. "We've only been here since this morning."

Conrad shook his head. "We lost contact with you about... four days ago. When you didn't report in the boss told me to come and find you. I didn't know where to start."

"You managed it, though," said Toni.

Ignoring her tone, Conrad looked them up and down, sending the bead-seller on his way and tucking his leather pouch into a pocket. "What happened to you two?" he asked. "Why the bandages? Is that a disguise?"

"No," said Bart. "We crash-landed." He explained how the machine had malfunctioned and how the fruit-seller and the witch-doctor had helped them so far.

"So you've already interacted with the locals?" asked Conrad.

"Well, yes," said Bart. "Why not?"

"You know we're not supposed to mingle, in case we change history."

"What were you doing with that bead-seller, then?" asked Toni.

"Er, buying beads?"

"Well, we were getting medical treatment."

"But your clothes?"

"They very kindly offered to clean them for us," she said. "We're to go back for them later."

"Anyway," asked Bart. "How did you know how to find us if you lost contact with us? We're not even where we're supposed to be."

"I was able to programme into your navigation system. We could see where we lost you and I took it from there. We knew where you weren't, at least."

"Lucky," said Toni.

"Where are you parked, anyway?" asked Conrad, glancing behind them as if expecting to see their machine there.

"It's out on the delta somewhere," said Bart. "We think it's where it was supposed to be, just a few years before where it was supposed to be was built."

Conrad made an attempt to follow that, but seemed to give up. "Can you take me there? More heads might help."

"Sure."

The three of them headed out of the town, towards where they thought the crash-landing site was. But they didn't have to look too hard. Toni had dripped blood on the dirt-packed track and the spots were easy to follow.

"Where's your machine?" Bart asked Conrad.

"I'm in a cemetery. I think it's the old cemetery. I was able to hide it quite well among the tombs."

The walk to the crash site only took them about twenty minutes. It took them a little longer to find the exact spot over the rougher ground. The poor thing looked very sad and dejected on its side.

Bart's time machine was a motorbike and side-car combination, usually garbed up to look like an old Triumph. They rarely went back before the old bike was originally built, so it suited their purposes quite well. Much of Bart and Toni's work was wartime work. This was actually the first time they'd ventured out of Europe, in fact, so the Triumph usually fit in quite well. As they were coming to America, they'd garbed it up as an old Harley.

While the boys took great pleasure umming and ahhing over the engine and other technological bits, Toni went into the side-car part of the machine to retrieve their stash of gold coins. They had a certain amount of currency with them that would have been in circulation in the 1940s, and so far they'd got away with using the coins. But the notes, with pictures of presidents on, might be more difficult. There would be a bank somewhere in the town where they could swap one of the gold coins for some local currency. Luckily, with the machine being in an unpopulated part of the country, no one had tried to mug it. And everything was still in its place, apart from the bits that had fallen off in the crash.

Conrad and Bart flicked some switches and checked the dials and Conrad asked Bart to repeat what had happened during the malfunction.

"I don't know what it can be," he said at last. "Perhaps the boss will know. We'll need to make contact with him, if we can find a communication portal. Or perhaps we can use my machine to contact him."

They agreed that might be the best bet, but with night falling they should find some accommodation first.

"Everywhere's probably fully booked, with it being festival week," said Toni.

"I bet Desmond would find us somewhere," said Bart. "He seemed like a nice bloke. Or your bead-seller?" he said to Conrad. But Conrad didn't reply.

"It looks like a mechanical failure," he said, instead. "We'll need to rebuild the steam pump first, I think. But we'll have to improvise. They won't have what we have in this era."

"Do you know what year it is?" asked Bart.

"It's 1926. You overshot by twenty-two years."

"Crikey," said Bart.

"Perhaps there's a library or a drugstore where we can get a newspaper," said Toni.

"And maybe a motel where we can stay," agreed Bart.

"You'd better get everything you need and then we'll head back," said Conrad.

Bart and Toni rummaged through the side-car and top box to get what they needed and Toni stuffed it all into a carpet bag. Bart threw a satchel over his shoulder and the three of them shifted the contraption to a more suitable place, covering it with scrub.

"It should be all right here," said Conrad. And the three of them headed back to town.

On their way past the end of the road, they made a quick detour to Desmond's brightly coloured door and knocked. Esme answered and, seeing who it was, called out to her father.

Desmond told her to invite them in, and Odette told them to sit down and have something to eat with them. It would have been rude to say no, so the three of them joined the family, now including Gideon. And they ate and drank and chatted about the upcoming fiesta.

"We could do with somewhere to stay," said Toni. "Can you recommend anywhere?"

"You will find plenty of hotels downtown," said Desmond. "They're likely to have room as there are so many of them there."

"But in case they're all full," said Odette, "Veronique, the lady who sent you to us, she has rooms. She doesn't usually let them out to strangers, but she's my sister and I'm sure she'll let you stay there for a day or so."

They thanked the family for their hospitality, took directions, and headed off downtown to find a hotel. Desmond had been right. There were quite a few and some still had vacancies.

"Will they accept our gold?" asked Toni.

"I have the right denomination notes," said Conrad. "But you might have to come in with me," he sneered, leering at her.

"Forget it," said Toni. "Either you two can bunk up or I'm in with my brother. There's no way I'm sharing a room with you."

"Suit yourself," said Conrad, resigned but accustomed to her rebuffs.

The hotel they chose had a lovely little courtyard behind it, but the fascia was on the street front. The French quarter was very pretty, clearly the oldest part of the town even if the town hadn't expanded across all of the Delta yet. They were able to get just the one room, but with two beds: a double and a queen. Conrad and Bart were to share the double. Toni bagsied the queen.

It was strange to be in a hotel with no television. There was an ancient contraption Bart assumed was a telephone, which was how they were to order room service. Conrad eyed the thing with interest anyway.

"We might be able to get hold of the boss with that," he mused.

Toni preferred to leave the technological side of things to the boys, and didn't care how unfeminist it was. Technology didn't interest her in the least, and quite often she thought she was actually better off not knowing how everything worked.

"We'll try your machine first, though," said Bart. "Wiring up that old phone might take up more time than we have. We usually only get 72 hours in any one place and we've already been here for a day. We don't know if we can complete our mission in this era, or if it will alter history. And we don't know yet how long it's going to take to get us away from here."

"I suggest we all get some sleep," said Toni, making herself comfortable in her borrowed clothes on the roomy bed. "We can have an early start in the morning while we try to figure everything out." And anyway, her head hurt and she needed to rest.

"I'm not turning in yet," complained Conrad. "I want to go and explore the bars. You coming with me, Bart?"

Bart shook his head. "Nah. I'm a bit shaken after the crash. I wish we had some paracetamol, but maybe we can send for some warm milk instead."

Conrad snorted. "Warm milk? You'd do better to sample the bourbon. That'd knock you out."

"Yeah, and give me a headache in the morning too. No, you go. I'm turning-in too."

As Conrad let himself out of the door, Bart called after him: "And don't wake me up when you come back."

Conrad closed the door softly behind himself, and headed on down the stairs.

Chapter 5

"I don't trust Conrad," said Toni as soon as the door closed behind him.

"You just don't like him," replied Bart, eyeing the telephone on the bedside table.

"No, I don't. He's creepy and slimy and he gives me goose-pimples. But I don't trust him either."

"Why don't you trust him?"

"If he was truly looking for us, why wasn't he actually *looking* for us?"

"What do you mean?" Bart stopped staring at the phone and looked at her instead, puzzled.

"He was negotiating something with that bead-seller. He even had a handful of beads. And he looked as though he'd been here for at least a day, but he said he'd only just found us."

"He also said that we've been off the radar for several days, yet to us we've only been here one day. Time has already been warped a little. Perhaps it seems like just a day to him too."

"Why do you keep looking at that telephone?"

Bart picked the instrument up and examined all of its parts. "Conrad said we might be able to contact the boss. We'd need to adapt it a little, with whatever we can find. But he might have a point."

"I don't think there's anything you can do with it tonight," said Toni. "Get some rest and we'll see what we can do tomorrow."

*

Downstairs in the bar, Conrad was drinking bourbon and thinking. Something had gone wrong and he needed to fix it. He'd have to help Bart and Toni fix their time machine, but the artefact they had come for he needed to find first too. He'd figured he needed to get here before they did – about twenty-two years before, when the artefact was hidden in the first place. The wires must have got crossed somehow, and that's how they ended up here early too. Now it was a race to see who would find it first.

*

The following morning Bart was woken by the sound of Conrad's snoring. He hadn't heard him come back, yet his snoring woke him up now. He looked across at his sister's bed and she was snoring softly too. An ornate clock on the fancy mantelpiece told him it was 8am. He was hungry and he needed breakfast. He tiptoed into the adjoining bathroom to get ready, and when he came out he softly shook Toni awake, a finger to his lips warning her not to wake Conrad.

Good as gold, Toni silently got herself ready and they crept out of the room and downstairs to where they found tables laden with fresh fruit for breakfast. They ate their fill, and took some for later too, then off they went on their quest.

"Where should we start?" asked Toni.

"How about we find the old cemetery where Conrad claims he left his machine?"

"What do you think he has it garbed as?"

"Probably a period motorcar if I know him," said Bart.

They purchased a primitive street map from one of the street vendors, got their bearings, and went in search of the old cemetery.

It was so easy to navigate the city as the roads were all in the classic American grid, meaning even if they did take a wrong turn, they could easily correct when they reached the other end as all streets linked to each other. With the mighty Mississippi behind them, they passed through two parks

before reaching the walled cemetery. They shinned up the wall to get in as the wrought-iron gates were locked.

When they landed on the other side of the wall they stopped in awe of the maze of tombs, gravestones and mausoleums. It was like a little town in its own right, with paths criss-crossing all over the place, disappearing up dead-end alleys. Some of the tombs were new and well maintained, shining white marble in the February sunshine. Others had been allowed to fall into disrepair and the red bricks they were made from emerged from the stucco and paint.

The whole outside wall of the cemetery was lined with memorial stones and plaques. But the actual cemetery itself consisted of what looked like different-sized houses, some surrounded by polished and painted wrought-iron fences, others the fences had been allowed to rust and weather, but more were free-standing.

"Where on earth do we start?" said Bart, running a hand through his hair.

"We'll cover more space if we split up," suggested Toni.

"But it could be anywhere. The place is a rabbit warren."

"Start at the gate. You go left, I'll go right, and we'll just keep going until one of us finds something. How long can it take?"

Bart surveyed the cemetery before them. "It's huge."

"Then we'd best make a start," said Toni, logical and practical as ever.

So the two of them split up and went off in opposite directions, up and down the grid-work of paths, occasionally seeing each other at the other side as they turned and went down the next path.

Toni's side didn't reveal anything, but she did marvel at all the different architecture, the different standard of tomb or mausoleum or sarcophagus, depending on how wealthy or not the deceased or their family was. She was saddened by some of the dilapidated ruins, but any descendants had probably died out long before so there was no one to maintain them. Most, though, were in good order, painted in bright colours. Some had brickwork exposed behind plaques or stones that had come away – or been pulled away. But most were perfect examples.

Just as Toni was about to give up, she heard Bart shouting her name and she ran to the end of her path and waited for him to emerge.

"I found it," he panted, gesturing for her to follow him. He was about two-thirds of the way along his section, a well-kept well-maintained. She ran towards him and followed him back down his path.

There, in one of the older mausoleums, the double-width doorway stone was clearly already loose and pushed to one side. Inside the darkness there was no grave or sarcophagus, but there was a 1926 Model T Ford.

"See," said Toni after Bart told her what it was. "I told you he seemed to know exactly where he was, or he would have made it a later model."

"Hmm," agreed Bart. "I think you may be right."

"Sticks out like a sore thumb here, though," she mused.

"Perhaps he crash-landed too. But one thing's for certain, whatever he is here for, you can pretty much bank on it not being far from here."

The two of them examined Conrad's machine, but there was nothing left in it not secured down. The car radio was in place, which would be how he communicated with the boss. But there wasn't really anything they could nick or salvage to do something with the phone with.

"And we won't be able to contact the boss without Conrad's key," said Toni, gloomily.

"Oh, I don't know," mused Bart. "I might be able to hack into it. We have our own key..."

"Let's see what he comes up with by himself, give him the benefit of the doubt."

Bart was surprised. "That's very generous of you. More generous than usual."

"I'd rather give him a chance and be wrong than lay into him and be wrong."

They pushed the stone across the double-doorway again and made sure it didn't look disturbed, and then headed back to the main road.

They didn't get much chance to do anything else because there was a procession heading right towards them.

"It's not Mardi Gras already, is it?" asked Toni.

"No, we're definitely early for that."

"There's a brass band coming towards us."

"That'll be a funeral. We'd best move out of the way in case they're coming in here."

And, sure enough, the small band of about eight musicians danced their way slowly towards them, but they continued on past, followed by a huge procession, everyone also step-touching, step-touching in time to the bluesy mournful tune.

"Ah," said Toni, quietly, ensuring she still showed her respect. "The gate's locked on this one. There must be another one further up."

They fell in behind the crowd, step-touching in time with everyone else, and followed them a few blocks to another, larger, newer cemetery. This one had more space between the mausoleums and was better maintained too.

"See, now," said Bart. "Conrad knew exactly which cemetery to land in too. Yup, he's definitely up to something."

"We need to sort out a communication portal and get in touch with home," reminded Toni.

They started to head back towards their hotel, but noticed Conrad and the bead-seller coming towards them and, for some reason, Toni felt the need to hide.

"Come on, let's mingle with this funeral for a while," she said. "They might not see us."

"I wonder what they're plotting?" said Bart, shuffling along in time to the music, trying to get the step-touch at the right moment. Toni was much better than him.

"We'll find out soon enough."

Once they were sure Conrad and the bead-seller had rounded the corner, they set off again. This time, as they re-joined the main drag, they heard a telephone ringing in one of the buildings, but they ignored it. Until someone came running out and after them shouting.

"Hallooo! Hello! Antonia? Bar-tolamew?"

They turned to see a man running towards them waving his arms.

"How does he know our names?" whispered Bart.

"Telephone-ee!" the man cried "Telephone-ee."

"For us?" asked Toni.

"*Oui, oui.* Come now."

And so they went back with the stranger, who held out the old contraption for them, a candlestick-type version that you needed two hands to hold and use.

"Hello?" said Bart into the mouthpiece.

No answer.

"Hello!"

Static.

"HELLO!"

"Bart? Where the hell are you?"

"Is that you, boss?"

"Yes! Where are you?"

"We're in New Orleans."

The shop-owner watched on anxiously and Toni smiled at him, hoping to put him at his ease. He was trying to eavesdrop on the conversation, and they couldn't risk anyone knowing why or how they were there. She looked at the trinkets he had for sale, so that he was torn between selling her something and listening in on the phone call.

"Do you know the year?" asked the boss.

Bart waited until the shop-owner was engrossed with Toni before answering.

"Yes, it's 1926."

A pause. "Then you over-shot."

"How did you know how to find us?"

"I used your last-known co-ordinates and compared them to Conrad's. He's gone missing too—"

"He's here—"

"What?"

"He's here. With us."

"Now?"

"No, we left him in the hotel room but he's wandering around town now with one of the locals."

"Well, listen Bart, I won't have long,"

Already the static was kicking in.

Chapter 6

"I just tried to get you on Conrad's communication portal," the boss said. "I'd tried yours for days but was getting nothing, not even static. But I received information that you were close."

Bart said, "We'd just found where he'd hidden it but he has his keys and things with him, so we couldn't activate his radio."

More static.

"Sorry, boss? This is a terrible line!"

"Something's gone missing from (crackle, crackle) here. Something that could change the course of history if we don't get it back."

"What is it?" asked Bart.

"It's another amulet," said the boss.

"We haven't got it."

"I think whoever has it deliberately tampered (crackle, crackle) with your machine. The artefact you're looking for was placed in its hiding place at about the time that you're there now. If it isn't hidden, like it's supposed to be (crackle, crackle), if it's used, then... the course of history could change. That and the one that's (crackle, crackle) could prove fatal if they're ever reunited. If Conrad's there, he's the only (crackle, crackle) who could have taken it."

"Where was it hidden? The building we were supposed to land in hasn't even been built yet."

"It's (crackle, crackle...) shop (crackle, crackle...) crystal (crackle, crackle... crackle, crackle...)"

"Boss? Boss!"

Toni and the shop owner stopped looking at his wares to see what Bart was shouting at.

"BOSS?!"

"Has he gone?" asked Toni.

"I think so," said Bart, pushing up and down on the lever trying to get a response. But there was just static, and the person who owned the telephone thought he was going to break it.

He gave up and handed it back to the man, who looked expectantly at Toni, waiting for her to pay for the pendant she was holding.

She handed over some pennies, thanked him for the use of his phone, and they left the building. Bart filled Toni in.

"Looks like your suspicions were spot on," he said at last, when he'd finished.

"So someone, probably Conrad, stole this other artefact from our vaults?"

Bart nodded as they walked.

"Then he tampered with our machine to stop us landing in 1948, but the thing misfired and overshot us anyway by twenty-two years..."

"To when the artefacts were separated," continued Bart, "and one hidden now, here in New Orleans, and the other taken somewhere else."

"Then Conrad fixed his own machine to come back to now and reunite the two artefacts together?"

"He must have been furious when we showed up," said Bart.

"And perhaps that bead-seller knows where the other amulet is. The one Conrad's come for, the one we were supposed to rescue in 1948."

"He might have it already..."

"I don't think so. If he had both halves, then he'd either be doing what he wants to do with them or he'll be taking it back to the future—"

The two of them looked back towards where they saw Conrad and the bead-seller.

"That might be why he's making his way back to his machine," said Bart.

"Come on," said Toni, setting off at a trot.

Bart started to jog after her, but they pulled up again when they saw Conrad, alone, coming back towards them. And this time he saw them.

"Act as though we don't know," hissed Toni.

"Conrad!" said Bart, slowing right down to a standstill.

"What have you two been up to?" asked Conrad. There was no sign of the bead-seller.

"We've been looking for some kind of communication portal to get in touch with the boss."

"Any luck?"

"Nah. There's nothing here – just your machine. We could go there?"

Conrad shook his head. "I've just been trying to get in touch with him myself, but I can't get through."

"Really?" asked Bart, all innocence.

"Too much static. We can try again later if you like?"

"That'd be cool," said Bart. "Where are you off to now?"

"Just sightseeing. You?"

"Er, same."

"Enjoy," said Conrad, sauntering off.

And so they parted and went in different directions.

"He can't have found it yet," said Toni.

"Which means we still need to," said Bart.

"What did the boss say? Did he tell you where you might find it?"

"He said 'crackle, crackle, crackle' a lot."

"And?"

"That's it. Something about a shop. And a crystal."

"Our keys are crystals—"

"Maybe that's it," said Bart. "Maybe we can fashion a crystal to use Conrad's communication portal?"

"We could do with finding the one that Conrad brought with him, the one he stole," said Bart.

"Do you think he has it on him?"

"He might have given it to that bead-seller."

"Or it might be in the Model T."

Gosh, there were so many possibilities, and so little time in which to explore them all.

"And a shop that sells crystals," said Toni. "There are so many shops and stalls that sell fancy goods like that."

"We need to sit down, take stock, explore all the avenues," said Bart, the analytical side of him taking over. "Otherwise we could be running around in circles getting nowhere."

"There's a café over there," said Toni. "Let's get some coffee, stop, pause, think."

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Toni said, "Let's put what we have in some sort of order."

Conrad had an amulet, Artefact A. It's the other half to the one they were looking for, Artefact B. If the two amulets were somehow put together, something terrible would happen that would change the course of history. In February 1926, the amulets were separated and at least one was left somewhere in New Orleans, but probably moved to a new location that hadn't

been built yet but that would be there in 1948 – close to where they were supposed to land. There was a chance of the amulets coming together in or after 1948, which was why Bart and Toni had been sent to fetch Artefact B. They already had Artefact A in the vaults, unbeknown to Toni and Bart, but Conrad had stolen it and brought it back to 1926.

Conrad tampered with the controls on the Harley so that they didn't land in 1948, or even in New Orleans. But it had gone wrong. It still landed in New Orleans, but it overshot by twenty-two years. Meanwhile, Conrad had set his own Model T to go back to New Orleans in February 1926, and it had landed close to where Artefact B was in 1926.

That gave them both of the old cemeteries, the French quarter, and this part of the Mississippi...

"The Mississippi," said Bart, a light going on behind his eyes. "It's not in a building, it's on a boat. A steamboat."

"And the boat hasn't come in yet," said Toni.

"Or he'd already have it," said Bart.

"That's why he's hanging around."

"Perhaps it's late."

"I wish we had Google so we could look up the boats," said Toni. "Or at least a library."

"But there must be some sort of office where they keep information like that," said Bart. "The steamboats must run to a timetable."

"I bet they're all due in for Mardi Gras anyway," said Toni.

"Which we're only going to catch briefly before it's time for us to go," said Bart.

"The boats will all be here in time for the fiesta," said Toni. "There's no point them coming otherwise."

"There must be an administration office or something for the boats," said Bart.

"Let's go to the river, have a look there."

They finished their coffee, left some coins on the table, and headed off towards the mighty Mississippi.

As they reached the vast expanse of dirty, muddy, brown water, they breathed in the soily, earthy smell. It smelt like the first rain on parched earth, mixed in with brine. Toni took a deep breath and filled her lungs. It was almost like being at the seaside, yet this was a river. There were a few big boats moored up at various points, but there was still plenty of room for more.

Various wooden shacks lined the winding bank, general traders, coffee houses, already decorated for the approaching fiesta. The two of them wandered along, wondering which of the wooden shacks might house a

harbour master. Instead, they found two old men playing jack-stones in the dirt.

"Good morning," said Toni in French.

The men replied in Spanish. So Bart took over.

"Is there a boat late in?"

They exchanged some language that Toni didn't really understand until Bart thanked them and gave them each a coin for their help, a gesture that caused them both to grin, exposing cracked and missing teeth.

"What did they say?" asked Toni as they walked away.

"It's the showboat," said Bart. "She should have docked yesterday."

Chapter 7

The showboat was due in yesterday, but it had been delayed, that much they could pretty much glean from everyone. It had been upriver, performing at the various ports along the way. Whoever or whatever was on board could have joined the boat anywhere.

"What if it's someone fetching the amulet here?" said Toni to Bart.

"Yes, that could work," agreed her brother.

"We should concentrate on fixing the Harley," suggested Toni.

"The bike hadn't even been built yet," mused Bart. "It's a 1929 model. They might not have the part we need."

"Then, as usual, we'll have to improvise."

Bart thought deeply as they roamed the banks of the Mississippi. Toni chatted to the locals, asking each of them when they expected the showboat and who was on it. As it turned out, anyone could be on it, as anyone could hitch a ride back down the river if they wanted to, and if they paid for their ticket.

"I wish we had time to go up the river on a paddle steamer," said Toni, wistfully.

"If we find everything we need to and still have time, then we will," smiled her brother.

Some of the locals were French creole, some were Spanish, some were white, some were black. Most of them spoke English, and those who didn't, they could usually get by with Toni's schoolgirl French or Bart's university Spanish – he often said that Spanish was one of the easiest languages to learn.

Everyone was very friendly, very trusting, and very generous – with their time, their information, and anything they had that might be of use to someone.

A lot of the performers on the showboat would have family in New Orleans, and most would want to be back for Mardi Gras. Some would even be

performing for the event or taking part in the procession. The riverside was going to be just as busy as anywhere else in the town.

Both cemeteries were fairly close to the river, so even if the amulet wasn't on board the boat, if it had something to do with someone on the boat, it could be hidden somewhere near to the river too.

But if there was a funeral, equally, the artefact could be hidden in one of the coffins. So another item on their list was to find out how many funerals had taken place recently and how many were due over the next few days. Probably none were booked in over the fiesta time.

As they made their way back up the bank towards the French quarter, they saw Conrad's bead-seller. He was selling beads but still moving at a pace.

"Shall we follow him?" dared Toni.

"You bet," said Bart.

They left the river behind them and followed at a good distance behind Conrad's friend.

He looked either mixed race or suntanned white, late twenties, with sore-looking eyes. A hint of a moustache touched his upper lip, but the rest of him was clean-shaven and short-haired. The beads he was selling were wrapped around his neck, hundreds of them in different shapes, sizes and colours, and different lengths too. Most were made of coral or pearl or other shiny stones. Some were all one colour, others had mixed beads on them.

The money he got for his wares he stashed in a leather money belt around his waist. He had a bit of a nervous tic that caused his head to flick back and his eyes to blink at intervals. But he was nifty on his feet. He wore baggy blue trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, but more than that they couldn't really see.

When the crowds thinned out it became harder to follow him without being seen.

"Do you want to carry on without me?" asked Toni. "We might be less obvious that way."

"Sure, but what will you do?"

"I'll nip back to see Desmond and Odette, see if our clothes are ready. These are great, but it'd be nice to have a change, and I think my own outfit might be more suitable to a Mardi Gras anyway – it's a bit more... colourful."

"Okay. I'll see you back at the hotel at, say, three o'clock?"

They both checked their watches were reading the same time. Then Toni watched as Bart followed the bead-seller down another side street.

She navigated her way back to the witch-doctor's, and the family were very pleased to see her.

"Come in, come in," said Esme, taking her by the hand and leading her through into the magical grotto.

"I bought you this," said Toni, handing her the ribbons. And the child's little face lit up, the whites of her eyes and the white of her teeth almost luminous.

"It matches my dress," she said, scampering off to fetch her parents.

Desmond and Odette both came to see her, then Esme reappeared with a neatly folded pile of clothes.

"Thank you so much for doing this," said Toni.

"What have you been up to?" asked Desmond. And Toni filled them in on everything so far.

"Do you know when the showboat is due in?" she asked.

"It's late," said Desmond.

"It's usually here on a Tuesday," said Odette. That made today Wednesday.

"But it didn't turn up," continued her husband.

"There's a rumour someone was arrested in," said Odette.

"What for?" asked Toni, surprised.

"We won't know until it gets here," said Desmond. "But a lot of folk are annoyed."

"They're waiting for their relatives, or for things they've ordered from the other towns, or just to book a show," said Odette. "Are you wanting to see a show?"

"Er, yes. I think we do."

"Well, it might be here later today."

"What have you done with your brother?" asked Desmond.

"We bumped into some friends," said Toni. "He's off with one of them."

"That's nice," said Odette.

"Where are you staying?" asked Desmond. Toni told them.

"It's nice there, but expensive," said Odette. "You should think about speaking to my sister, Veronique."

"That's fine. We shouldn't be here that long. It's okay for a few days."

Esme came out of the kitchen carrying a tray with cups of coffee on and sweets on a plate. She'd already tied her new ribbon around one of her braids.

Toni stayed with them for an hour, chatting, learning about the showboat and the people who travelled on it. Then she had to be off to meet Bart and find out what he'd learnt, if anything.

Chapter 8

Bart followed the bead-seller right out of the French quarter and into the larger city. He stopped to sell strings of beads to anyone who wanted them. Gradually, the stash of beads around his neck grew smaller and smaller and the leather pouch that dangled by his hip hung lower and lower with the weight of all the cash.

Bart kept at a decent distance, looking into the first shop or house window he passed if the bead-seller stopped and turned. He ended up buying bread and fruit from a couple of street-sellers and some feathers for Mardi Gras, and tucked them in the satchel he wore across his body. The food might come in useful, he thought. Toni might like the feathers to wear on Mardi Gras as they were royal blue, black and white and would look quite jaunty tucked into the rim of her top hat.

Gradually, the streets became less populated, the buildings less cramped together, until they opened up into a wider road with larger houses behind high walls on each side. Bart had to drop back further as his presence might be noticed.

The bead-seller continued on, but seemed to stop selling his wares the further he got from the tightly packed streets of the French quarter. Then, as he reached the gateway to a particularly grand-looking residence, he disappeared up an alleyway between this house and the terraced houses next door.

Bart lurked at the end for a short while, then he ducked down the alley in pursuit of the other man. It was much cooler down the alley and it smelled damp, a bit like how the river smelled but more subtle. Along the walls on either side at regular intervals was the occasional door or gate. Some were solid, substantial, sturdy. Others were just a bit of wood propped against the opening.

The bead-seller, about a hundred yards ahead, stopped at one of the doorways, looked both ways quickly, then disappeared through the doorway. Bart slunk in one of the less-secure openings until he was sure the other man was gone. Then he trotted after him, tried the big iron ring carefully, and swung the door inwards.

The door opened onto a lush, green courtyard that had potted plants around the outside and a giant pool in the middle. When the bead-seller emerged again from the building on the far side of the courtyard, Bart ducked behind a potted palm. The hawker had lost the strings of beads and instead was carrying a plate with what looked like meat on it. Then he took it to the edge of the pool and chucked it in in chunks.

For a moment, nothing happened. The bead-seller watched from a safe distance until the water started to bubble. Then three or four alligators suddenly appeared and started to thrash about amongst themselves, fighting over the meat. Satisfied, the bead-seller backed off a bit, then turned and went back inside the house, wiping his hands on his trousers and swinging the now-empty platter.

"Oh great," said Bart to himself. "Pet crocodiles. I don't think we need to upset him."

He waited for a while, not knowing whether to follow the man into the house. But as he hadn't really thought up any cover story, it was probably better for him to go away and come back again with Toni, if need be. She was so much better at coming up with viable cover stories on the spot.

But Bart couldn't just walk away without taking a closer look at the alligator pit. He'd never seen one before.

He kept one eye on the back of the house, that fortunately didn't have any windows in it other than the door, and one eye on the rippling water. He got as close to the edge as he dare.

The water was very clear and he could easily see that several tunnels led into the pool from elsewhere.

Bart looked up at the complex of housing that the tunnels went under. They could lead anywhere. The building was huge.

He heard shouting from within and made a quick getaway, but as he emerged into the alley behind the houses, he collided with another man who swore at him in Spanish.

"Sorry, sorry," Bart replied, also in Spanish. "Wrong address." He could feel the man's black eyes boring into his back before he turned at the end of the alley.

Chapter 9

Toni paced up and down outside the hotel waiting for Bart to show up. She was starting to worry.

On her way back to the hotel she'd popped into a few shops asking about a crystal amulet. She knew what it was supposed to look like as it was part of their brief – to make sure they didn't take the wrong thing and so possibly change the course of history. She assumed that its pair was a mirror image of it, so that the two would lock together.

Nobody could help her, although one person did say that someone else had also been looking for the same thing.

"Was it you?" she asked Bart, when they were finally reunited and they'd exchanged tales.

"There's only one person who could be asking the same questions as us," said Bart, shaking his head.

"Or two, actually, if you include his little bead-seller too," said Toni.

"Hmm, that's a point."

"We need to get to it before he does, and we need to get his away from him."

They went into their hotel so they could wash and change for dinner. Now they had their own clothes back they would feel so much more comfortable. But perhaps the borrowed clothes were better for exploring, and, of course, they'd stick out less obviously in the borrowed clothes. Bart might fit in quite naturally, but her frilly shirt and taffeta skirt were much more noticeable than the plain, nondescript, almost-rags-in-comparison clothes Odette had loaned to her.

Toni placed the pile of laundered clothes on one of the beds, her top hat pressed flat on the top.

"Is your torch working?" she asked. "So's mine," she added when he nodded his head. "We should get something to eat, then maybe we can go out exploring later?"

"Back to the bead-seller's place maybe?"

"Why not? That might be where the amulet is hidden."

"Or it might be where Conrad has stashed its counterpart," said Bart.

"I'm not sure I fancy those alligators, though," said Toni, wrinkling her nose.

"We won't be going diving," said Bart.

"Come on, then. Let's get ready and go and eat. I'm starving."

That reminded Bart about the bread and fruit he'd bought, but she wanted something a bit more substantial. So they got changed, went downstairs to eat, came back and got unchanged again, and then headed off to the bead-seller's pad.

*

In the dark the housing complex didn't look quite so fresh and inviting. It wasn't very well lit, and now the sunshine had gone the greenery looked less green, more mud-coloured. The alley was more sinister. The doorway was harder to find.

But, they finally made their way there, tripping only a few times on the uneven ground. And they quietly let themselves into the courtyard behind the bead-seller's house.

"Is he in?" hissed Toni.

"I know as much as you do," whispered Bart.

"Does he live alone?" hissed Toni.

"I don't know."

"Has he gone out?" hissed Toni, but this time she was silenced by just a frosty look from her brother.

"Shall we go and have a closer look?" he suggested.

She nodded and then trotted behind him as he quietly negotiated the pool in the middle of the courtyard. She hoped the reptiles weren't hungry and was glad her wounds had stopped bleeding.

They reached the back door, but it didn't have a window in it after all. What used to be a window had been barred over and boarded up from the inside. And, as Bart had noticed earlier, there were no windows on this side of the house and there was no way around to the other side from here. The only way was to go through the house or walk all the way around. But they had no idea how far round they'd have to go and even if they'd know it from the other side.

"We'll just have to go through," said Bart.

"Is it open?" asked Toni.

He lifted the latch as quietly as he could. "Yup," he replied. He nudged the door inwards until he could see through the gap.

"It's a stairwell," he said.

They both pushed through to see several doorways leading off this inner courtyard and a stone staircase rising to more doorways off a landing.

"They look like flats," said Toni.

"Any one of them could be his," said Bart.

They had six to choose from – three on each floor.

As it happened, the downstairs rooms were actually storage facilities, one of which was very cold and had slabs of stone with various foodstuffs on them.

"This must be where he got the meat from," said Bart, nodding towards an empty bucket made of wood.

"This must be where they keep most of their food," agreed Toni, noticing the salt pigs and various other preservation methods and receptacles lying around.

They closed the door softly and tried the next one. This one contained beads, loose beads, strung beads, barrels and boxes of brightly coloured beads. The room was dominated by an over-sized table that probably served as his work area.

The third room contained sacking, barrels, pieces of wood, empty pots, and a few cast-iron implements that looked like weapons of torture.

"Perhaps this is what the usual everyday crocodile farmer uses to keep his pets trained," mused Bart.

"We must remember not to call them crocodiles," reminded Toni.

A door opened from above, and they heard the rattle of the door catch as it was pulled to behind whoever had come out.

Toni and Bart exchanged an alarmed look, then their eyes wildly scanned the tiny space for the best hiding place.

Bart nodded at some crates in a corner. They dived behind them as they heard the footfall on the tread of the stairs. There was no conversation, there were no cheery goodbyes. Whoever it was was on his own.

They'd forgotten to close the door properly behind them, so were able to spy on the stairwell and the doorway leading out to the courtyard. First they saw feet on the stairs, then the bead-seller emerged and noticed that the door was open. He stepped over, checked inside the room, and pulled the door to behind him.

Toni and Bart held their breath as they listened to him leave the lobby. When they thought he'd had time to cross the courtyard too, the crept out from their hiding places, Bart opened the door gently. No sign.

He checked the other two doors. Still closed. He glanced up the stairwell. No sign of anyone. He beckoned to Toni that all was quiet and then loped across to the courtyard door, opening that a crack too to peer out into the night.

He just caught the outer door closing behind the bead-seller, and in the quiet of the night could distinguish footsteps going up the alley.

"He's gone," whispered Bart.

"What now?" she asked, creeping out of her hiding place.

Bart looked up the stairwell again. "He's gone out," he said.

"He may not live alone," she replied.

"He didn't shout goodbye to anyone."

"They might not do that here."

"We won't know unless we investigate."

Toni sighed. "Okay."

They tiptoed up the stairs, aware that there were three more doors off the landing that could lead anywhere or to anyone. The doors were numbered one to three, and each had a panel in the wall to the side with a doorbell and a name printed on a piece of card.

Mr and Mrs Franklin lived at number one. Hondo Pitts lived at number two. And Iniko and Jimiyu Lujan lived at number three.

"Crikey," said Bart.

"Did you think it would have his occupation printed on the card too?" asked Toni.

"No, but it would have been useful," he agreed.

"What do we do now?" asked Toni.

"Improvise," said Bart, knocking on the door of number one.

"You can't do that!" said Toni, as the door creaked open and a tiny, wizened face peered out.

"Hi there," said her brother, giving them the full benefit of his hundred-watt smile.

The face said nothing.

"We were told we could get some beads from here, for the fiesta?" he said, hopefully.

The face grew a bony, wrinkled hand and finger pointed at the door next door.

"Is that Hondo Pitts?" asked Bart.

The face nodded, the hand was withdrawn and the door was closed.

"Thank you!" shouted Bart at the closed door. Then he grinned at Toni.

"I thought you said you couldn't improvise," his sister grinned back.

"You're an inspiration to me," he replied.

They made their way to the scuffed red painted door that had a number two screwed onto it, and he knocked this one.

No answer.

He knocked again.

Still no answer.

"He went out," said a voice from behind them. It was the wizened face back at the open doorway. Then it closed again.

"Now what?" said Toni.

Bart tried the handle, and the door opened.

"You can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Because that little old lady... man... has seen us. They might call the police."

"This is New Orleans," said Bart. "It's 1926. They probably didn't do that here then."

"But we can't just go in. What if he comes back?"

Bart thought for a moment. "That's a good point. Perhaps you could go and keep watch?"

"Downstairs?"

"In the alley. Soon as you think he's coming back, let me know and we'll hide again."

"Okay, but I don't like it," Toni sulked.

But she made her way back down the stairs anyway.

Chapter 10

Bart let himself into the apartment, but there was no lighting. He could smell the remains of some incense that had been burning, or an aromatic oil. Or perhaps even a candle that had been extinguished. Whatever it was, it smelt like a Catholic church on benediction day, not at all offensive but disturbing all the same.

He found a switch on the wall and flicked it on and off. Nothing. He had to rely on his torch to look around and it was already quite dark outside. It wasn't very clear, but he got the impression Hondo Pitts lived very sparsely. He didn't have much furniture, or not as much as the witch-doctor and his family.

Using his torch, Bart looked around the apartment as best as he could. There was some wooden furniture, a table, two chairs, a cupboard. Nowhere looked as though it would make a good hiding place, but all he needed was a box the size of a jewellery box.

A central ceiling light was covered with loose material that had a fringe on, but there was no lightbulb in the holder. Two windows looked out onto the front of the building. There were drapes up, pulled tight.

A single door led to what was probably the bathroom, but otherwise the room was divided into sections with curtains and voile panels.

Bart pushed through some drapes that hung from the ceiling, separating the living area from the sleeping area. The bed was unmade but it looked comfortable enough.

On a windowsill overlooking the front of the building was an ivory box. He opened it to find a few jewels in there – a bit of gold, some precious stones made into a necklace, and a cheap pendant on a leather thong.

He wondered if that was it. The pendant didn't look like anything special. It looked cheap but decorative. Bart grabbed it anyway and stowed it in a pocket for it was the only thing that even resembled an amulet in the box.

The window over the bed was a bit grubby and another drape hung there, but it wasn't drawn and he could see out into the street. There were a few people milling about, but one person coming towards the building looked familiar. In fact, Bart would recognise that John Bull top hat anywhere.

Conrad.

And he was heading his way. He might even be coming to see Mister Pitts.

Bart had to get out of there.

He ran to the door, careful to leave everything looking as he'd found it. He didn't think there was another entrance into the complex – or if there was it wasn't clear from the doors he'd seen so far. But if Conrad saw Toni lurking in the alley, he'd probably know why they were there.

In two strides he was out of the stairwell and into the courtyard. In the dusk light he found his way around the alligator pit and was at the outer doorway, making Toni jump.

"Conrad's coming," he hissed.

Toni looked up the alley towards where they'd come in, then she glanced in the other direction.

"I can't see him," she said.

"He was at the front of the building."

He guided her in the other direction along the alley, neither of them knowing where it went.

"What if he comes in this way?" asked Toni.

"There are plenty of doorways to duck into."

They hurried along the alley, but it didn't lead anywhere. There were plenty of doors and gates leading off, but the alley itself was a dead-end.

Turning around they went back the way they came, but as they reached the end of the alley, they could see Conrad and Hondo, and they were both coming towards them.

"Quick," hissed Bart, "in here."

He pulled her through one of doorways into another courtyard, this one less well-kept.

They closed the gate and leant their backs against it, panting for breath as quietly as they could. They could hear Conrad and Hondo talking as they passed outside, but then they heard another noise, a growl.

In the darkness, they heard a chain rattle and they saw a dog emerge from the shadows.

"Shit," said Bart. "I hate dogs."

"It's on a chain," Toni pointed out.

"It seems a very long chain," said Bart.

The Rottweiler barred its teeth.

As quick as they could they were out of that gate again and were relieved to see that there was no sign of Conrad and Hondo Pitts. They must have been safely back inside the bead-seller's house.

They ran to the end of the alley and continued running along the streets until they found themselves back on familiar territory. When they paused to catch their breaths, Bart told Toni what he'd found.

"I don't know if it's significant, but it might be what we're looking for."

"It might not even be anything," agreed Toni. But she also agreed that it was better for him to take it than to leave it. "So long as he doesn't notice."

Chapter 11

As they arrived back at their hotel, Toni and Bart were called to the reception desk.

"We have a telegram for you," said the concierge.

Toni and Bart looked at each other in surprise, and then at the concierge.

"For us?" said Toni.

The concierge handed them the yellow slip of paper.

TARGET NOT IN SHOP STOP NOT FOR SALE STOP MIGHT BE BACK IN ROOM STOP

"What's he on about?" asked Toni.

"He could mean anything," said Bart. "Conrad's key. The artefact Conrad stole. The amulet we came for. The temporary key for our machine."

"But we already have at least one of those, probably," said Bart, holding out the amulet he'd found in the bead-seller's apartment.

"And that wasn't in a back room," said Toni, examining the trinket. She fingered the purple and white glass beads that had been set into the pendant and pulled a face. "No crystals here."

"But if we know what this is, it'll narrow down what the boss means."

"Okay," said Toni. "So we need to try out your amulet with the Harley first, then maybe with the Model T."

"Yes, come on then," said Bart, and they headed off out to the Delta first.

The weather was cool but dry and the walking kept them warm, and when they got to the crash site, Toni left Bart to fiddle with the mechanics of the time mechanism. That was his area of expertise. She just hung around, picking up debris, tidying up, looking out for passers-by.

Bart got the portable tool kit out of the locked top box and fiddled with the mechanics in the faring on the dashboard.

"This amulet doesn't fit anything here," he called to Toni over his shoulder. "But I think I've found where the lines were crossed or cut. I think I've fixed that now. Our own key might fit now."

"That's good," said Toni.

Bart fiddled some more, lifted the bike off its stand and rested it on the side-car wheels, and jumped on board. He jumped up and launched himself at the kick-start.

Nothing.

He tried again.

Still nothing.

He put the bike on its stand and had another fiddle, this time with the engine.

He kick-started it again, and this time it coughed a little.

"Might be a flat battery," he said. "If I can get it going it might be worth driving it round a little."

He tried again. This time it burst into life and he let it tick over as he revved with the throttle.

"Oh, well done," said Toni. "Do we go for a ride now?"

"We need to, but not too far as we need to conserve fuel until we can find where to get more from."

Toni climbed up behind Bart on the pillion. She didn't like riding in the side-car and only did that when they were travelling through time. She was much happier on pillion, and it was great to be able to ride without a helmet on. She loved to feel the wind in her hair. Their lids were in the side-car, and were more than just helmets. They had to wear those when they were travelling

through time as well. They chose to wear their bike jackets, though. They were both starting to feel the cold a little. The leather flying jackets were comfortable.

"We can ride into town," suggested Bart.

"That'd be great," agreed Toni. "It'll certainly beat walking everywhere."

"Where should we park it?"

"The logical place would be one of the cemeteries, like Conrad has. We know he's already close to where we need to be."

"Okay." And within minutes they were back in town and driving around the city streets, drawing admiring and curious looks from the locals.

"Anyone'd think they'd not seen a motor vehicle before," shouted Toni.

"They have trucks," said Bart. "They must have motorbikes too."

"Yes, but this one hasn't even been built yet."

"They don't need to know that," said Bart.

When they stopped at a junction, some of the locals came for a closer look and smiled at Bart to show their approval.

"See," he said, as they pulled away again.

They paused outside the old cemetery. Bart left the engine running and went to inspect the lock on the gates.

"Conrad probably has a key for here," he said. "If he knew he was coming to this place, he'd already have everything he needed."

"Then the key to the gate will be on him."

"There definitely wasn't a key to fit this lock at Hondo's house."

"If Hondo has it, he might keep it on him too," said Toni.

"Perhaps they have a key each. Perhaps Hondo is also caretaker or something at the old graveyard."

Toni thought for a moment as Bart climbed back onto the motorbike. "Hmm, that would work," she said.

Bart opened the throttle and they drove around to the other cemetery. There were no funerals today.

"We need to find a suitable place to keep it," he said.

"I expect it would be fine at the hotel..." said Toni.

"They don't really have anywhere secure," said Bart. "I'd prefer to keep it hidden away, where prying eyes can't see it."

"There might be somewhere more suitable at the other one," said Toni. "But we need to go when the gate is open."

"Or get the key."

"Or get the key," she agreed.

"Let's check here first," said Bart. "They're still building these ones. There might be a mausoleum that's not properly sealed."

Once again they wandered up and down the new cemetery until they found one of the little buildings with the stone pushed to one side. There was no one inside, and it didn't look like they were expecting anyone any time soon. So that's where they hid the bike, pushing the stone across the opening and leaning it against the little building.

Back at the old cemetery they climbed the gates and headed towards where the Model T was hidden. Toni stood watch while Bart went in to investigate.

The Model T Ford had floorboards. One looked a bit uneven in this brighter light of day. Bart lifted it carefully and was delighted to have found Conrad's true stash – a medium-sized strongbox... that also needed a key to unlock it.

"Dammit," he said.

"What?" called Toni.

"Nothing is ever easy, is it?"

"What's happened?" she said, coming closer.

"I've found his safe," said Bart, holding the strongbox aloft.

"That's great," said Toni.

"It's locked."

"Oh, that's easy," she said. "If we take it with us I can pick that lock back at the hotel."

"But I need you to pick it here. We can't take it away. They'll know we've been snooping," said Bart.

"I don't really have any equipment here," she replied.

"Can't you improvise?"

"I'll try, but you'll need to keep watch."

"Let me try the pendant in his time travel mechanism first," said Bart. "Then we'll swap."

Bart had a bit more of a tinker with the mechanism in the dashboard, but shook his head.

"Nope."

"Then it must be one of the artefacts," said Toni.

"Either it needs taking back and putting somewhere safe," said Bart, "or it will be part of the repair for the Harley."

"At least we're narrowing it down," said Toni.

"Wouldn't it be nice, though, if everything slotted into place neatly," said Bart.

"Let me take over," said Toni. "I'll have a go at that box and you can keep watch."

They swapped places, but Bart soon got bored standing guard and instead went on another wander around the graveyard. Some of it was walled, some of the walls were incomplete. They were still building parts of the cemetery.

Toni tinkered with the lock on the strongbox. She would have preferred to have her lock-picks with her, one of her favourite tools that was always handy. But that was back at the hotel, stashed away in the hotel room safe. All she had with her was a hat pin and a brooch pin. She'd just have to manipulate both of those.

After about ten minutes she heard the lock click.

"Yes!" she said with relief, and she punched the air in celebration. "God, I'm good," she said out loud for good measure.

The lid of the box sprung open and inside was Conrad's supply of gold coins, some paper money (very large denominations), some gemstones, and several cog wheels of different thicknesses and sizes.

"Curious," she breathed.

Hearing a footfall outside on the pathway, she backed out of the Model T Ford with the box in her hands and a smile on her face.

She scrambled to her feet and made her way to the door, saying, "You can thank me later but this looks very interesting," and she almost banged into a smiling Conrad, Hondo Pitts lurking behind him.

It took her a split second to glance behind them in search of Bart and then gather her faculties. "I'll thank you now, if that's okay," said Conrad.

Chapter 12

Bart slowly made his way back to Toni and the Ford.

He started to whistle a tune, *When the Saints go Marching in*, but when he rounded the corner and saw Hondo Pitts standing outside the Model T Ford's mausoleum, his feet crunched to a standstill on the path and he ducked behind the nearest gravestone. He needed to think quickly.

"Hey!" he called out to Hondo Pitts.

The bead-seller looked up to see Bart coming towards him, and frowned.

"Is that Bart?" he heard Toni say from inside the tomb. And she emerged with Conrad in tow, but she was still holding the box.

"I told Conrad you'd gone looking for him," she said quickly. "But I managed to open it anyway." She turned to Conrad who was looking very puzzled. "I didn't think he'd find you in time and I wanted to get the key back to our machine before dark."

Picking up on her thread, Bart improvised too. "So you just broke into his box?" he said, shocked. To Conrad, "Sorry mate. I told her to wait, but you know what she's like."

Conrad looked from Bart to Toni to Hondo to Bart again and his frown matched the bead-seller's.

Toni flashed him one of her best hundred-kilowatt smiles, and presented him with his box, which he snatched from her hands, quickly checked the contents, and slammed the lid back down.

He stayed silent as he placed the box back in its hiding place, ignoring Bart's questions.

"Did you get in touch with the boss? Any idea on how we can get our machine going again? Do you know how close we are to finding our amulet we were supposed to get?" And so on and so on, but Conrad didn't answer.

He was clearly cross with them, but if he was allegedly on their side, he couldn't admit that they'd annoyed him or were doing something wrong. Not until he'd found what he'd come for himself first.

Bart grabbed Toni's hand and pulled her away.

"Did you get it?" he asked hopefully as they backed away. Toni nodded.

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"What do you want to do about them, boss?" asked Hondo Pitts, looking after them and lighting a cigarette.

"I don't know yet," replied Conrad.

He wondered why they were mooching around, what Toni was doing breaking into first his car and then his strongbox.

Of course, it was quite natural for them, he supposed, to think he wouldn't mind them mooching through his stuff to see if he had anything they could use to fix their own machine.

"They could have asked," he muttered.

"She did say he'd gone to find you," replied Hondo.

Conrad grunted.

"And they don't know yet of your plan to leave them here—"

"Don't even say that out loud," he growled. "Knowing that pair they might be lurking around the next tomb, listening in."

"Sorry, boss," said Hondo.

"And don't call me boss," said Conrad. "Not while they might hear you."

"Sorry boss."

"So long as you still have my amulet safe," said Conrad. "We just need to wait for the match to come in with the boat – or the person on the boat – and then we can dispose of those two. We still need them for now, though."

He turned back to his Model T Ford and checked it was secure. He pushed the floorboards back over the strongbox, now locked, pulled the stone back over the opening, and turned in the direction Toni and Bart had headed in.

"If we fall out with them over this they'll get suspicious. Just carry on as if nothing has happened. We need to see if that damn boat has come in yet."

And off they went towards the port.

"That was close," said Bart, rushing towards the main town centre again.

"Where were you?" Toni demanded.

"I got bored. There was no one coming and nothing going on in that graveyard. It was only a little wander. They must have literally followed me around the corner."

"It could have got messy, Bart," said Toni.

"I know and I'm sorry but there's no need to go on about it. You talked your way out of it easily enough." Toni nodded her head. "What did you say to him?"

"Just that we were waiting for him but didn't want to lose the light so you went looking for him, but in the meantime I thought I'd have a fiddle and it popped open, just like that."

"And he believed you?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. But he could hardly show his hand, could he?"

"That must have killed him, keeping his mouth shut."

"He went red, though. I thought he might pop," laughed Toni, her bad mood forgotten.

"Still," she said, "I could have been in trouble."

Bart was about to tell her to give it a rest when a deep-throated steam whistle sounded behind them. They turned towards the river.

The whistle sounded again.

"The showboat!" they both said at the same time. They turned on their heels and dashed towards the Mississippi, as excited as two small kids seeing their first paddle steamer.

"Well, it is our first paddle steamer," said Toni, reading her brother's thoughts.

They couldn't get there quick enough.

When they arrived at the river front there was a lot of activity as one of the biggest boats they'd ever seen on an inland waterway nudged towards its dock.

"Wow," said Bart.

"It's beautiful," said Toni.

And they both joined the melee at the dockside. It was like a mini Mardi Gras just welcoming the boat back to port, with flags and whistles and cheers and music.

"They do love their music," said Toni, delighted.

A crowd of children dashed to the gangplank, hoping to see or touch one of their idols. The smart ladies and gentlemen of the company gathered on deck

until they were ready to disembark, waving at the people who had come to see them. But they weren't on a usual tour. They weren't performing to a bunch of strangers. These passengers were coming home. They were coming to help their friends and family celebrate the most important day of the year for the community.

"I see Conrad and is oppo are already here," said Bart, almost as an aside.

The pair were lingering by some crates and barrels, smoking woodbines.

"I wonder if Hondo knows he's from the future," mused Toni. "I wonder if Conrad brings him Benson & Hedges."

"I think that would comprise 'altering history'," said Bart, "And anyway, you're assuming they already know each other. They might have only just met on this particular trip."

"True," agreed Toni. "Worth a thought, though."

"He could fetch modern cigarettes as a bribe, though," said Bart. And he turned his attention back to the boat's arrival.

The paddle steamer had docked now and the passengers were getting off at one end while porters removed luggage at the other and friendships were rekindled while others greeted family members.

"It must have been a very grand life," said Toni.

"It still is, for these. This is now, remember. We're not in the future anymore. This is the past."

They watched the arrivals for a little while longer, watched the business of bringing a boat home to dock.

"Did you get anything out of Conrad's strongbox?" asked Bart.

"A couple of cogs, funnily enough."

"Cogs?"

"Yes. I'd just spotted them when Conrad walked in on me. I turned around to show you, but it was him. I didn't realise."

"They sound perfect," said Bart.

"That's what I hoped," said Toni.

"Should we take them back to the hotel or back to the hotel, do you think?"

"I don't think we should leave anything at the hotel, and I don't think Conrad realises yet that we've brought the Harley back. It might be best if we stash them in our own security chamber. He doesn't know the bike is here yet, so unless he goes out into the delta looking for it, everything might be safer with that."

"We just need to make sure he doesn't follow us to our own hiding place," agreed Bart.

"It probably wouldn't take him long to work it out."

"Hopefully we'll be gone by then."

"Let's go back to the Harley then, and make sure he's not following us," said Toni.

"Or Hondo," said Bart.

"Or Hondo," agreed Toni.

Chapter 13

Conrad was looking for someone in particular and he kept his eyes peeled on the boat. He scanned all of the faces, but didn't see the one he needed. So he asked one of the porters.

"Boy!" he called out. The baggage handler stopped in his tracks and turned to see Conrad.

"Yes, boss?"

"Halima Dominique? Is she on board?"

"Yes, boss. Miss Halima, she on the boat."

"Thank you," he said, pressing a coin into the boy's hand.

He turned to Hondo Pitts. "You follow those two," he said, nodding towards Toni and Bart's retreating backs. He'd spotted them almost instantly, but pretended not to. "I'll wait for Miss Dominique."

"Okay boss," said the bead-seller. Fortunately, he'd discarded his mound of beads for now so wasn't as noticeable, and probably more nimble on his feet. Conrad watched him go after the other two. Then he leaned against a bale of something or other and lit another Woodbine. The things got on his wick. They were bitter all right, but apart from that, the filter-less tips meant he kept getting tobacco on his tongue. He missed his Marlborough Lights, but he'd never get away with smoking those in public.

Above, there was a crack of thunder and a flash of light and the river started to whip up a bit. There was a storm coming. Conrad pulled up his collar, pushed down his sleeves, and thrust his hands into his pockets, the Woodbine stuck to his bottom lip. His hat would give him some protection from the rain and hopefully he'd finish the cigarette before it got too soggy. He pressed himself against the bale and waited.

Halima Dominique was the original owner of the two matching amulets. But they'd retrieved one of them – his one – many years after from a museum before the museum got pulled down. The other one, the one the terrible twosome were after was still part of her personal collection at this point. But it was at the 1926 Mardi Gras that she was to be robbed and the other amulet taken from her and eventually placed where Toni and Bart were supposed to find it twenty-odd years later. In 1926, though, the amulet was apparently buried with the rest of the stash somewhere in town before being moved out to the cellar of a house that hadn't even been built yet, which would be

roughly where the Harley Davidson had come in to land. At the moment, it was still the Mississippi Delta. But New Orleans was a town that was to spread out further leaving, eventually, just a pocket of the original landscape in what would be a nature reserve by the twenty-first century.

Conrad had done all of this research back home. So he knew he could intercept the amulet now, before it was buried. Or even after it was buried but before it was moved out to the new town.

The Woodbine he was smoking was almost finished, so he lit another with the dying ember of the first and waited some more. Fat spots of rain started to fall onto the dry earth and another crack of thunder ripped the sky apart with a flash of lightning. The mixed smells of wet rain on dry grass and packed dirt drifted up and he breathed it in with the Woodbine smoke, just as he was racked with a fit of coughing that made his eyes water and he had to spit out the cigarette.

Then, after all the fuss had died down, she was there, slowly emerging from her cabin. Such a shy little thing for such a famous personality. Or maybe she wasn't so famous in those days... these days, as she would become in the future.

He finished his fag and stubbed it out with his boot, pulled his John Bull down over his eyes and put his hands back into his pockets.

Miss Dominique looked up at the sky and went back into her cabin, returning with a big black umbrella. It was old and worn with one of the arms broken and it probably doubled as a walking stick, but it did the job and covered her head enough for Conrad to follow her at a safe distance and not be seen. Unfortunately, that was also how she would be robbed – because she couldn't see her assailant coming.

For a moment Conrad wondered about doing the assailant's job for him. It would be so easy for him to simply relieve her of the trinket and she'd never be able to identify him. But that would probably change the course of history and despite everything, Conrad never, ever did that. As a rule.

And so he waited. And watched.

Halima Dominique wore a coat over her dress, but it gaped to reveal the black satin flapper drop-waisted dress she wore. She was fair for a creole, which had probably helped her become a showgirl, and she was pretty too. Her hair had been permed straight and she wore it curled and to the side of her face, with a flower tucked in at the top. She was wearing stockings that were getting splashed by the rain bouncing off the dirt, and the high-heeled shoes weren't really very practical for this kind of terrain. But he supposed she had an image to maintain.

He followed her at a very safe distance into a less savoury part of town and it was while she passed a saloon bar that he noticed who he thought might be her attacker. And he reminded himself again that he wasn't allowed to interfere. She had to have this mugging, she had to be robbed, and she had to end up in a hospital. But she recovered, and that was the main thing.

What he wasn't expecting, however, was the blow to the back of his own head. And he landed with a thud on the wet ground.

Chapter 14

Back in the French quarter, Toni and Bart were semi-aware of Hondo following them.

"I bet they did see us," said Toni, looking behind them.

"We don't have much time," said Bart, looking up at the darkening sky. "We're about to have a cracker of a thunderstorm too."

"We'd probably do better if we split up again," said Toni. "And then if Conrad and Hondo are following us, they'll have to split up."

Lightning cut across the sky and was accompanied almost immediately by an almighty clap of thunder. Toni scurried into a doorway and Bart followed her.

"We don't even know where to start," he complained.

"The boss said a back room, so we need a building. A house or a shop."

"But where do we start?" asked Bart, throwing his hands in the air and ruffling his own hair again.

"We'll just have to watch and wait and see," said Toni. "But we can't go back to the Harley yet. Not if someone's following us. We don't want them to know we've already retrieved the bike."

"Give me the cogs, then," he said. "I can carry them in my satchel, and they're less likely to think I have them if they caught you red-handed."

The rain started to fall and a chill fell on them too as they both wrapped their flying jackets closer to them, grateful that they had them now at least.

"We'll just have to wander around, look at things, see what looks likely," said Toni.

"But it might not even be this part of town."

"Then one of us will have to go back to the boat and see if anyone suspicious seems to be getting off."

"They'll all be off already by now, I imagine, Tone."

"We have to start somewhere."

"Okay, you go back to the boat and I'll make my way back to the hotel. There might be another telegram waiting for us—"

"I doubt it, Bart. He's not used the same method of contacting us twice yet. I think his next message might be in a different form."

"But what?"

They both thought for a moment. He'd used the telephone. He'd sent a telegram. There was only one thing left that had been invented by 1926. Well, two things, actually.

"A newspaper," said Toni.

"A radio," said Bart, at the exact same time.

"A radio!" agreed Toni. "And the parts might also come in handy."

"The parts might be exactly what we need," agreed Bart.

"Okay," said Toni, "I'll go back to the boat and see if I can find a newspaper on the way. You work your way back to the hotel, in case he does send a telegram, but see if you can find a radio. Even if you need to nick it."

"They might notice, Tone," said Bart.

"Not if they're already busy with Mardi Gras preparations," said Toni, "Or the boat coming in."

Toni headed back the way she came – and almost collided with Hondo Pitts.

"Well, hello," said Toni to the bead-seller. "I almost didn't see you there without your beads."

Hondo grunted something back and pretended to be going somewhere else.

Toni backed away and waved cheerily at him. "See you later," she said.

Hondo grunted.

*

Damn! She'd seen him. AND they'd split up. How was he going to follow them now?

He called a young black boy over and gave him a dime. "Follow that lady, will you?" The boy nodded. "Come back and tell me where she goes, and there's another dime for you."

"Yes 'm," said the boy, running off at a trot after Toni.

"Don't let her see you!" Hondo shouted after him, and the boy waved over his head and slowed down. Then he set off after Bart.

Hondo Pitts was annoyed. It was raining and all he was wearing was a short-sleeved shirt and a thin pair of trousers. There was no wide-rimmed hat for him to keep off the rain. No collar to pull up around his ears. No warm coat to huddle inside. He glanced up at the sky and cursed silently. But he kept at a safe distance behind Bart.

He turned to check on the boy and saw him disappearing around a corner after Toni. Then as he turned into the street Bart had just gone into, he saw the back-end of him disappearing into a store.

*

Toni was sure that she'd lost the bead-seller but, even so, she took a very roundabout way of getting back to the port, keeping an eye out to see if

anyone was following her. She was certain that they weren't, so off she headed.

When she got to the boat it was completely dead. Everyone who was getting off had got off and even the crew were taking a rest before getting the vessel water-worthy again. There was not a soul.

She was able to creep up the gangplank without anyone stopping her, and she felt the ground become unsteady beneath her as she did so. The rain wasn't helping. The water was getting quite choppy. And the boat was starting to dip slightly from side to side. She worked her way around the deck, trying doors that were locked, peering through windows that had blinds up at them or it was too dark inside to see anything. She identified an engine room, a laundry room, the captain's quarters, a bar with a stage at one end, a restaurant, and various other closets, broom cupboards and washrooms.

On the next deck down were the more residential cabins and lounges. The lounge doors were open, but all the others were locked. Not like the rest of New Orleans in this era, it seemed. But perhaps they had more experience of crime when they travelled so far though the whole country. It didn't do anything to help Toni, though.

She wondered about visiting the rest of the boat but decided it was a waste of time. So she made her way back to the riverside again, where it was raining heavier than ever and the only person she could see was a small boy sheltering under a shelter thing...

She smiled at him but he looked the other way, at what she had no idea. She started to approach him, but he took fright and scarpered into the advancing night. Then it occurred to her that the bead-seller might have set him on to following her.

"Interesting," she muttered out loud.

At a loss for what to do next, she went back to the hotel. Bart would be there presently. She may as well already be ready.

But when she got back to their room, someone had already been there.

Chapter 15

Toni looked around the room, cautious that someone might still be there. The beds had both been overturned, the mattresses pulled to the floor, slashes everywhere pouring out stuffing. The drawers had been upended and strewn across the room, the contents spilled on the floor. A mirror had been broken. She crept to the en-suite bathroom where the sight was much the same, but with toiletries squeezed out of tubes and soap trampled into the floor.

They'd been right not to leave anything of value here, even the gold coins they'd kept on their persons.

As Toni walked around the room her feet crunched on broken glass and she was grateful for her boots.

She checked that nothing of even any low value had been taken, then she lifted the telephone.

"(CRACKLE, crackle, crackle...) hello?" shouted a voice from the other end. It sounded as though he was calling from a long, long way away.

"Boss? Is that you?"

"(Crackle, crackle...) Toni...?"

"Yes, it's me!"

"Are you all right... (crackle, crackle, crackle)?"

"Yes! But how did you know?"

"I called and someone answered, then (crackle, crackle) heard a kerfuffle... (crackle, crackle, crackle...) slammed the phone down."

"We weren't here."

"Someone was... (crackle...) a scream... (crackle)."

He started to fade.

"Boss? BOSS!" But she lost him.

She pressed the receiver in a few times until someone answered again.

"Boss?"

"Switchboard, can I help you?" said the accented voice.

"Oh, er, someone's been in our room. I need to report it."

"I'll send someone up," said the voice.

"Thank you—" said Toni, but there was just a click and a dead tone again from the other end.

She looked around at the carnage, hoping they didn't think that she'd done it. She started to tidy up, automatically. But then she realised they needed to see this. So instead she perched on the edge of one of the beds and waited.

*

Bart was looking for a radio. He knew they'd have them, the museums were full of 1920s radios. But would they have them in 1920s New Orleans? And where did he go if he wanted to buy one? There must be shops and stores here that sold those kinds of things. He found plenty of food shops and lots selling crystals and amulets and voodoo dolls and all sorts of mumbo jumbo like that. But he couldn't find a Currys or a PC World or anything close.

"Guess I'll just have to pinch one," he murmured to no one in particular.

He'd seen Hondo Pitts ages ago. Blinking idiot should stick to selling beads. He was a rubbish tracker. Bart did wonder where Conrad had gone, though, and hoped he wasn't after Toni. She was cute, though. She'd notice if she was being followed, especially if it was by someone she knew.

Bart carried on going from store to store, and every store he went into, he also checked for a back room. Most were just single room properties, though – or only the one room was visible. But as the shopping area made way to residential, he did find himself sneaking a look into front windows too.

Nothing. He couldn't see a single radio. Plenty of the houses had back rooms... Hmm, now there was a thought. What if whatever the boss wanted them to find wasn't in a shop or store at all? What if it was in someone's home? Or even a run-down empty property? God, that opened up almost the whole of the city! They needed more information. They couldn't keep going on supposition and second-guessing.

They needed a proper strategy:

1. Find the crystal or the amulet or the whatever to fix the time machine on the bike.
2. Get the bike fixed and ready to go.
3. Find the amulet they'd been sent for? If it was already here.
4. Confirm the one they had was Conrad's.

Hmm, perhaps the one they had was the one they were supposed to find? Perhaps Conrad's was the one that they needed to find?

No, that didn't work. The boss definitely said that Conrad had already taken the one from the archives to match up with the one they were supposed to find. That meant he already had it with him when he came to New Orleans. But he might have given it to the bead-seller for safekeeping.

He went back in his mind and scrubbed out no 4:

~~4. Confirm the one they had was Conrad's.~~

He needed a proper piece of paper for this...

Huh, then he realised that maybe the amulet he'd stolen from Hondo's apartment wasn't the one Conrad had at all, but maybe another one?

4. Find out which amulet the one they already had was.
There, that was better.
5. If they find two amulets, see if they match together.

6. Take the booty, grab the bike, and get the hell out of New Orleans.

Oh, he wished he had a piece of paper.

As he looked around he realised he didn't recognise where he was at all. The whole area looked unfamiliar. That's what daydreaming and not paying proper attention did.

He stopped and turned a full circle and scratched his head. His thick brown hair was damp and itchy. He started to retrace his steps, sniggering as he passed Hondo lurking under a nearby tree.

Bart was lost. He needed to get back to the hotel. His stride got longer but he was aware of the bead-seller almost running to keep up.

*

What just happened? wondered Hondo Pitts. He'd watched... Bart, was his name? He'd watched Bart have a whole internal argument all by himself, and then he'd spun on the spot and headed back in the direction they'd just came. He seemed to have some wind beneath him too as Hondo had to hop a bit to keep up. And still manage not to be seen.

He'd followed him in and out of shops. He'd watched him looking in folks' windows. What was he looking for?

The rain got heavier, and Hondo Pitts never liked to be out in the rain for very long. It made him shrink. He wasn't a fan of thunder and lightning either and here he had it all. Not a great day for the great Hondo Pitts.

He loped after Bart, trying to dodge raindrops and being seen. Mister Conrad would owe him for this, but it beat selling beads to people who didn't want them.

Chapter 16

Conrad lay face down in the rain, mud seeping into his clothes and a lump growing on the back of his head. As he came to, he wondered briefly what had happened, but then he remembered as he pulled himself up.

He was following Miss Dominique – in the rain, clearly – and then the lights had gone out.

As he climbed to his feet, one hand instinctively went up to the back of his head, and he looked around in alarm.

But there was no one there, and even Miss Dominique had disappeared.

Well, that was shit, wasn't it?

And he too was lost somewhere in New Orleans.

And he was cold.

He made some attempt at brushing himself down, took one more look around him at the run-down area, then turned to head back to the hotel. All he could do was retrace his steps and hope he'd get there in the end.

At least the rain was starting to stop now, although he was soaked through to the skin and very cold. And stiff. This wasn't good. This wasn't very good at all. Everything was going wrong.

*

The hotel manager came to see Toni, along with a couple of heavies she didn't know. They had a look around, but didn't ask her any questions. Instead, the manager picked up the phone and spoke in French to whoever answered.

He's told them to fetch the police, thought Toni. Perhaps waiting like a good little girl wasn't the best idea she'd had. She should have cleared out while she had the chance.

What worried her more, though, was the two heavies. Especially when they stood in front of where she sat, took on an intimidating stance, and effectively blocked any hope of escape she might have.

She was here for the duration.

At least for now.

*

As Bart walked along the corridor to their room he became aware of a bit of kerfuffle.

"What's happening?" he asked a maid who was making up the beds in a different room.

"The young miss n mister had their room burgled," she replied, not pausing in her task.

He thanked her and continued along quietly, creeping to the open doorway and peering in. Through the open door he could see Toni sitting on the edge of one of the beds. She was watching two big burly guard-types when she caught his eye.

Bart pressed a finger to his lips, "Shush."

Toni nodded almost imperceptibly, and her eyes slid back to the guard directly in front of her.

Bart kept as close to the door frame as he could without revealing his presence, wondering what had happened and how he could get Toni out of there.

On the wall behind him was an old-fashioned fire alarm... well, it may have been state of the art in present day New Orleans. But it was one of those round red things with a handle that turned around the outside.

He turned back to the open doorway and waited to catch his sister's eye again. When she did glance at him, he wiggled his eyebrows in an attempt to convey to her that he had a plan and she was to get ready to move.

To give Toni her due, although she clearly didn't know what he was doing, she managed to keep her face and her expression completely blank. Her eyes slid back to her captor. She didn't blink an eyelid.

Bart had to trust that she'd understand what was happening. In two strides he was at the fire alarm. He cranked it twice so that the bell sounded, then he ducked into the other open room where the maid was still cleaning and tidying.

Her face looked startled and she paused mid-pillowcase, giving him a quizzical stare.

"Fire?" said Bart, and comically shrugged his shoulders. He took the pillowcase from her and guided her out, and once she started to drift along the corridor with other confused-looking residents and staff, he ducked back into the room and hid behind the door jamb.

From here, if he peeped around the doorway, he could see the activity in his own hotel room.

First to emerge was one of the guards he'd seen watching Toni. He was followed by a management-looking chap – well, he was wearing a suit, so Bart made the assumption – and a hesitant Toni. The other guard-type person followed in the rear.

The four of them started to head towards the main entrance when Toni said: "Oh, I just need to get my handbag," and she slipped past the second guard and back into the room.

The guard didn't know what to do, so Bart showed himself and engaged him in conversation, leading him along the corridor with the others. As they reached the stairwell, he said: "I'd best go back, make sure she gets out safely. You go on with the others."

The guard paused, looked puzzled, and looked back up the corridor before looking back at Bart, who nodded and winked. Then he followed his colleagues back down the stairs.

Bart made sure they'd all gone before dashing back to their room, almost bumping into his sister who was already on her way down.

He stopped her in her tracks, spun her round on the spot, and walked her back the way she'd come.

"Ah, so the fire alarm was you?" she said.

"Of course," he shrugged.

"We've been mugged," she said.

"So I gather," he replied.

Chapter 17

Hondo Pitts arrived at the hotel just as everyone else was leaving and didn't understand what had happened or why everyone was hanging around outside in the pouring rain. He lurked for a bit. But there was no sign of Bart. Or his sister.

He looked around for the boy he'd set on after Toni and saw him sheltering beneath a nearby tree. Hondo went over to him and the boy told him what he'd seen the woman do but that she'd seen him so he ran off. He'd stayed close, though, and she'd come into the hotel ages ago. The fire alarm had gone off not five minutes ago. No, he didn't know the man Hondo asked about.

Hondo gave the boy another dime and off the lad tripped.

He waited around for as long as he decently could, but when the residents were advised that they could go back in, he realised that staying here was futile. The fire alarm had quite clearly been a false-alarm and he didn't need any prizes for guessing who might have set that off. They'd be miles away by now if they'd left from a different exit.

He watched as the residents all piled back into the hotel, then he circled the block to see if there were any rear entrances or windows they could have sneaked out of. There was a trade entrance that probably led to the kitchens, and a whole bank of windows, most of which were closed. And those that were open weren't really big enough for anyone to squeeze out of, other than perhaps a child.

If they came out this way, it would be the trade entrance.

He started to make his way inside, but was shooed away by a member of staff. If he wanted to search the hotel, he had to go in through the front entrance.

He completed his circuit of the block and followed the other residents into the hotel. Then he realised he neither knew which room they'd be in nor what name they were booked in under. He knew that Mister Conrad had booked the room too, but he didn't know his surname either.

Pitts took one last look at the reception area, then left the building. He'd have to go in search of Mister Conrad and tell him what had happened. He wasn't happy at having to go back out in the rain again.

Conrad kept on losing his bearings and was having dizzy spells and blurred vision. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other and hoped he was going in the right direction.

The rain got heavier, which added to his misery. But at least the thunder and lightning had stopped. It was chilly, though. He could have done with a nice

flying jacket, like the one Toni wore, rather than the flimsy thing he usually wore. It was better than nothing, he supposed.

The run-down area he'd followed Miss Dominique to gradually changed back to the slightly nicer part of town, and he started to recognise various landmarks he must have passed earlier. It was dark, but he didn't think he'd been out for longer than a few minutes. The stiffness was easing as he walked, and still he concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Ideally he could do with getting some digs closer to the river. That way he'd have more chance of seeing Miss Dominique when she returned. Meanwhile, he might have to just keep coming back to this part of town, so he tried to commit the directions to memory.

By instinct, he made his way back to the hotel he shared with Bart and Toni. Who knew, everyone might be back there by now and they could all get cosy and friendly again – and he could get a bath while his wet clothes dried. And then he could get something nice and hot to eat. His mouth started to water at the thought of food. He hadn't realised how hungry he was and once he did, that contributed to the dizziness.

Everything looked quite normal back at the hotel, so he collected his key and made his way up.

He was surprised to be greeted by two burly guards and the hotel manager, and the guards were both pointing guns at him.

*

Hondo Pitts couldn't find Mister Conrad. So he too made his way home and let himself into his apartment.

Within minutes of letting himself into the courtyard, he went into the meat locker to get food for the alligators. He chose several large chunks of meat that had been dropped off by the butcher and tipped the bucket into the courtyard pool. He didn't spend time these days watching the alligators come to eat. That particular novelty had worn off long since.

He made his way up the stairs and let himself into his room. He was supposed to be going out, but he couldn't be bothered. He had plenty in to throw together a meal of sorts, and he just stripped off his wet things and threw himself onto the cushion-strewn sofa, pulling one of the blankets around himself for extra warmth.

As the day's stress leached out of his aching body he started to nod off.

But in his semi-awake state he realised that he wasn't alone. There was someone in the back room of his apartment...

*

It wasn't Bart or Toni. They'd made a run for it, grabbing anything of worth from the room as they went by. Then they'd found the back stairs and made

their way out of the back door of the hotel. As most of the staff were out front, responding to the phoney fire alarm, there was no one to stop or question them.

"What do we do now?" asked Toni. "We can't go back. Someone knows we're here and they don't like it."

"Who were those goons?" asked Bart, completely ignoring her original question.

"I don't know. I thought they were security and the hotel manager."

"But they had guns?" Toni nodded. "Nah. They didn't look like anyone from the hotel to me."

"Then who could they be?"

"No idea. But you're right. We can't go back there."

The rain at least had stopped now, but they could still hear the rumble of thunder in the background and there was a chill in the air.

"Did you grab everything?" asked Bart. He knew he had.

"Yes," said Toni, holding up the bulging carpet bag.

"Perhaps we could go back to the witch-doctor's?" he suggested. "Odette said her sister might put us up. What was her name?"

"The fruit lady? That's Veronique. And yes, she did say she normally doesn't but might do as it's us."

They wrapped themselves up against the weather and headed off into the night, off to Desmond and Odette's.

*

The cell was dirty, dark and cold. Conrad perched on the edge of the rock-hard camp bed with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. There was a tiny little window up in the air where he couldn't see out. But there was no glass in the window, just bars, and the wind howled through. A stub of a candle sat on the floor, a bucket in the corner.

This wasn't supposed to happen. This wasn't in the plan. And at this time of night there was no chance of Hondo Pitts coming to get him. If they were in the twenty-first century he'd be able to call him, but they weren't.

He resigned himself to a night locked away from everything and everyone. He'd assumed the three men were hoods or gangsters. But they'd brought him to the police station, so either they were in cahoots with the cops or they were actual real life police. Conrad didn't even know they had them in New Orleans in 1926, unless it was some kind of sheriff's department.

Anyway, the police station was a lot more desirable than a hood's den might have been, so he made the bed as comfortable as he could, wrapped the flimsy blanket around himself, and lay down to sleep.

There were noises elsewhere in the police station that would have normally given Conrad the creeps – scratching, whimpering – but he knew it was likely just other prisoners in the jail.

Outside he heard the rain start again over the noise of the wind, fat, heavy raindrops competing with the howling gale. The thunder and lightning had stopped, but there was still an electrical storm happening not far away. He could hear it bubbling and spitting in the distance.

Another prisoner started to snore and a guard jangled some keys. But whether it was the knock on his head or a busy day, Conrad was very tired and didn't have any trouble going to sleep.

Which was why he was annoyed to be woken only a few short hours later by someone unlocking the gate to his cell very loudly.

He squinted into the bright light and shot upright.

"Come on. Let's get you out of here."

Chapter 18

As usual, Toni and Bart received a very warm welcome at Desmond and Odette's. The children were pleased to see them as well, and once again they had fresh coffee made for them as they sat on the sumptuous, plump cushions.

Such lovely, unassuming people who welcomed the brother and sister into their home.

Toni asked how their preparations were going for Mardi Gras. "And did you finish your outfit?" she asked Desmond.

His face split into a beaming, white smile and he wiggled a finger, saying, "Yes I did but you can't see it yet."

"Aww, you're such a spoilsport," teased Toni.

"Will you still be here for Mardi Gras?" asked Odette.

"It's starting to look like a possibility," agreed Bart.

"Then we will have to sort out some clothes for you to wear."

"How exciting," said Toni.

When they were finished, Odette told them how to find her sister Veronique's house.

"She'll be surprised to see you at this time of night," she said.

"I can go with them," said Gideon.

"Me too," said Esme."

Their parents exchanged glances, but agreed that the children could accompany them.

"It's not far," said Odette.

"Come straight back," said Desmond. "I'll keep watch for you, so get back before it gets really late."

Bart looked at the sky. It already looked really late to him.

"We'll be all right," said Toni.

"No," said Odette. "The children want to go and my sister will be happy to see them."

She went to the kitchen and got a package and gave it to Esme. "Give that to your aunt for me," she said.

Bart felt awkward. He didn't know what to say to a couple of children, and strangers at that really. So he just kept awkwardly quiet instead.

Toni was different. She always knew what to ask, and the three of them chattered away, about what their favourite lessons were in school, what their favourite games were, who their friends were, what they were doing for Mardi Gras.

Within a very short time they stopped and Esme pointed at another brightly painted front door.

"This is my aunt's house," she said.

Gideon went on ahead, pushed the door open and shouted a greeting to Veronique the fruit lady, who was surprised to see them but delighted that the children were there.

"Come in, come in," she said to them. "Who are your friends?"

"Don't you recognise them?" giggled the girl.

Veronique squinted at them both in the dim light, and they politely smiled back at her.

"Perhaps you'd recognise us better if we were covered in blood," said Toni at last.

There was another split second and the big fruit lady burst into a big deep-throated chortle.

"You look much better now," she said at last. "And your clothes are...are..."

"They belong to your sister," said Toni, holding up the bundle in her hand. "These are ours. Odette laundered them for us. We just prefer to explore the town in the ones she loaned to us."

"Well, they suit you both very well. Come on in and tell me what I can do for you."

She led them through a home that would, in later decades, be described as bohemian, but most of the houses and apartments here seemed to look like that.

"We need a room for the night," said Bart. "Odette said you used to let rooms out but didn't anymore, but you might let us stay."

"We can't stay," said Gideon, reminding his sister that they were supposed to go straight back."

"But Mama asked me to give you this," said Esme, holding out the package.

"Off you go, then, said Veronique to the children, seeing them safely out and along the road again for as long as she could, knowing full well that her brother-in-law would be watching for them as soon as they rounded the end of the street.

Once the door was closed again behind them, Veronique waddled back to the sitting room and addressed her guests.

"I don't let out rooms anymore," she agreed, "but if my sister sent you, you're very welcome."

"We can pay—" said Bart, realising as soon as he said it that he may be insulting the woman.

"I don't want your money," said Veronique. "But you're very welcome," she repeated. "Come on, I have a room ready, it just might need airing. When you've settled in you can tell me what's been happening to the two of you over the past few days."

*

The room was small and dark but adequate, with two beds pushed apart and separated with a wooden chest. There was a tallboy for their clothes and a single chair, also wooden. All the wood was painted in different primary colours – the chest yellow, the tallboy red, the bedsteads blue. The floor was boards left rough, the walls were rough plaster, painted white. There were colourful curtains at the window, which Veronique had opened for them to let in some air. It was chilly and damp, though, with the storm outside, so they didn't think the window would be open for long but pulled back the covers on the beds to air them a little anyway.

When they'd hung their clothes in the closet and stashed their things, they returned to their hostess who had made fresh coffee for them all.

Toni thought that with all of this coffee they'd struggle to sleep, but it tasted rich and warm and comforting anyway. She wished they'd come to Veronique first and she briefly wondered where Conrad would be tonight if their room was still a mess.

Veronique inspected Toni's head wound and applied fresh dressings for her while they chatted. She asked if they would still be here for Mardi Gras.

"It's looking very likely," said Bart, for the second time that evening.

"I expect my sister has offered you an outfit each, then?"

They obviously knew each other very well.

She gave them some supper and they finally turned-in just as the storm outside was quieting down too. They both slept incredibly well and incredibly safely.

*

The next morning they enjoyed a breakfast of fruit and bread with milk. Veronique had work to do and so did they. But she said they were welcome to use the house while she was gone.

Toni and Bart did the only thing they thought they could do, under the circumstances. They made their way back to the cemetery so that they could have another go at the Harley and stow their belongings in the side-car.

"Did you see Veronique's radio?" asked Bart.

"No I didn't," replied Toni. "But you can't steal that. Or cannibalise it."

"Why not?"

"We can't steal from someone who's shown us such hospitality!"

"No, of course not. But we might be able to *borrow* it..."

"And what if it does the trick? Or if we need to break it to pieces before it can work? Will we be just *borrowing* it then?"

"Well, no. But at least we'd know if it worked or not."

"Hmm." Toni didn't like the idea but maybe he had a point.

"I don't mind so long as you put it back exactly as you found it."

When they retrieved the bike, they doubled back to help themselves to Veronique's radio. It was quite portable, but as they'd motorcycled back to her house they didn't have to carry the radio very far anyway. And they were able to park in her back yard and work there where no one could see them, and still have the warmth and shelter of the house if they needed it.

Toni watched as Bart fetched the radio and dismantled it on the kitchen table. He very carefully placed each of the components in a safe and logical place, so he could put it all together again quickly if necessary.

Before long all of the radio innards were spread across the table-top and Bart was scratching his head.

"Okay, Einstein," said his sister. "What now?"

"Now I have to go and dismantle the time-travel mechanism on the bike, see what works best. Do we still have those cogs you pinched from Conrad?"

She nodded and went to the side-car to get them from the bundle of their belongings grabbed from the hotel.

Toni added the cogs to the collection on the table, but put them a little to the side to differentiate them from the other gubbings.

Bart scratched his head again and then launched himself at the motorbike, lifting the seat and disappearing beneath the fairing. He was happy enough,

tinkering away. But he needed to get the time machine fixed if they were to get home.

Toni watched him scurry backwards and forwards between the motorbike and the kitchen table, taking things, putting them back, sometimes adding to them. Then he suddenly started to put the radio back together and tidy away after himself.

"Have you done it?" asked Toni.

"I think so," he replied.

"That's good. How can we test it?"

"We'll have to test it when we're ready to go. I think we'll only get one pop at it."

"And what about the artefacts? Do we still need to find those?"

"I think so. We may never be able to return to this exact time, so we need to reap what we can and then get out of here."

"And Conrad?"

"What about Conrad?"

"Whatever he's done, we can't leave him here."

"He found his own way here. I'm sure he can find his own way back again."

Bart returned the radio to the shelf where he'd found it and they were just leaving when the radio burst into life.

"Did you switch it on?" asked Toni.

"Nope."

"Then it must be the boss."

The two of them went and sat in front of the radio.

"(Crackle, crackle,)" it said, so Bart thumped it on the side. "Ouch!"

"Sorry!"

"Now listen very... (crackle, crackle,)" said the radio.

Chapter 19

"How did you know where to find me?" Conrad had asked when Hondo turned up to rescue him the night before.

The bead-seller indicated a small boy lurking in the shadows.

"I had him follow the girl but when she spotted him he ran off. He came back later and reported to me that he'd found you lying face down in the mud not far from Miss Dominique's neighbourhood. By the time we got there to help you, you were already on your way back to the hotel. I had some business to attend to so the boy followed you to the hotel and kept watch. By the time I got there, you'd been arrested and he didn't know what to do. So he waited for me to turn up and when I did we both headed to the jail.

"It took some persuading, and some cash – you might want to pay me back some of that – but eventually they let us see you. And you know the rest."

"He's a good boy," said Conrad, nodding in the boy's direction.

"You might want to give him a little something too."

Conrad nodded.

He'd spent the night on Hondo Pitts' couch, considerably more comfortable than he'd thought his night was going to be. And warmer. And there was hot coffee too. And hygienic sanitary conditions.

"Do you know where Toni and Bart went?"

"No," said Hondo. "When I got there earlier, the place was empty. A mess, but empty. There had just been a fire alarm, a false alarm. I think they may have sneaked out the back way."

Conrad pointed to the boy. "He doesn't know where they are either?"

"Can speak for m'self," said the boy.

"Course you can," agreed Conrad.

"Ask me, then."

Conrad shrugged, and said: "Do you know where they are?"

The boy shook his head and Conrad sighed.

"But I can find out," said the boy, and Conrad brightened.

"You do that," he said.

*

The radio message was their best yet, but it was still very crackly. Bart and Toni hoped that every message from now on would be that good, but if they were honest, they realised that the boss was starting to run out of channels. He'd used almost every available one now and they weren't sure if he could use them again. They'd got gradually better. All they needed now was a newspaper telling them exactly what they had to find, where to find it and what to do with it. But, of course, life wasn't that simple.

"So we have to find our own amulet," said Bart.

"Check," said Toni.

"And we have to get Conrad's amulet."

"Check."

"We have to keep them both apart and take them back to the future and put them in safe-keeping."

"Check."

"Then we have to find a single crystal and two cogs, and we have to connect them with three valves from a radio."

"Check."

"Which means we have to cannibalise a radio..."

"That's right."

As the only working radio they'd found so far belonged to Veronique, neither of them felt very happy about that particular part.

"And once the connection is made, we'll be on our way back."

"Check."

"But we already have one amulet," said Bart.

"We do," agreed Toni.

"Do you think it matter's which one is which?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, do you think it matters if we already have Conrad's or if we already have our own?"

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure it's Conrad's that we have. I'm sure he would have given it to the bead-seller for safe-keeping once he got here."

"But what if there are three amulets?" mused Bart. "We can't take the wrong one in case it interferes with history."

"Well, the boss said that one of the amulets is in a back room, didn't he?" Bart nodded. "And we found Hondo Pitts' amulet in a back room."

"So that means it's one of the right ones?"

"Perhaps."

"He said the other amulet was somewhere else, that it had only just arrived in the city," said Bart.

"So that must have been on the boat," agreed Toni. "It's the only thing that's also just arrived in the city."

"What did he say about it already being here?" asked Bart.

"He said it was hidden where we were supposed to find it in 1942 much later than now but that this might be a good time to get it before then anyway."

Well, it made sense to Toni, despite a puzzled look from Bart.

"If we can't find it," he said, at last, "then we'll just have to go back without it and come back again to the right date."

"That could be expensive, though. If we can find it now, before it gets hidden in its first hiding place, then we could save time and money."

Bart rubbed his chin while he thought of a solution.

"I bet it just gets shoved in a cupboard and then gets moved when the owner moves to a new part of town," he said. "The new part of town that hasn't been built yet."

"But why would anyone want to move to a different part of town?" asked Toni.

Bart shrugged his shoulders. "Anything. Work. Betterment. Marriage. Perhaps it's an old people's home or some other kind of sanatorium."

"In the 1940s?" asked Toni. "I'd bet it's a loony bin."

"God, I wish we had Google," said Bart.

"I bet Conrad checked Google before he came too," said Toni.

"So he'd know where to find this extra amulet, not knowing we already have the other one?"

Brother and sister looked at each other and exchanged a knowing glance. They both knew what the other was thinking. But it was Toni who voiced it.

"Then we need to find out where Conrad got to and follow him."

"Or insist on tagging along with him wherever he goes. He won't know we already have the other amulet."

"Okay," said Toni, counting things off on her hands. "We have one amulet. We're going to follow Conrad to find the other amulet – unless we run out of time. We know where there are some radio valves if we can't find another radio. We have the cogs. What we don't have is the crystal."

Silence.

"Hmm," said Bart at last. "Pity the boss didn't tell us where to find that before he got cut off."

"Or what it looks like," agreed Toni.

"It could be anywhere," mused Bart.

"And it could be anything," said Toni.

It was time for dinner as Bart's belly was rumbling and he hated to be hungry.

"Do you think Veronique will be back by noon?" he asked his sister.

"I don't know, but I think if she does and we're still here, we might be overstaying our welcome a bit. We can stay here for at least another night, but then we need to be going home."

"Yes," said Bart. "We have just under twenty-four hours to find this crystal, another radio if we can, and get the time machine working."

"And, of course," said Toni, "It's Mardi Gras tomorrow. The town is going to be busy."

"Mega-busy," agreed her brother.

And off they went in search of first food and then Conrad.

Chapter 20

On the other side of town, Conrad and Hondo were having a similar conversation – just apart from the bit about time travel and messages from the future.

"Does she show any sign of being a bit nuts?" asked Conrad.

"Who? Miss Halima? Not that I know of. But there is a rumour that she likes her opium and her booze—"

"Booze? Where does she get that from?" Conrad knew alcohol was prohibited in the United States during the 1920s.

"Black market I guess," shrugged Pitts.

"And does she have a temper when she's, er, drunk or stoned?"

"Oh yeah. She's known for it."

Ah, thought Conrad. That would be it. In their ignorance, the powers that be would probably put her away in the loony bin when really, if it was the twenty-first century, they'd put her in rehab. In these olden days, being black wouldn't help her either.

"Have there been any complaints so far?" he asked.

"Not that I've noticed," replied Pitts.

He needed to get to her now, before they put her away, and retrieve the other amulet from her. He couldn't buy it or anything as that might change the course of history. But he wished he could warn her what would happen if she didn't give up her vices.

*

Halima Dominique was brought up in the slums of old New Orleans when she was spotted by a talent scout from the showboat. All she'd been doing was playing in the yard with her old golly, singing to it, when a total stranger overheard her. Of course, she didn't have such a glamorous name in those days. The name Halima Dominique was given to her to make her seem more exotic so that people would pay more money to see her.

Fame didn't suit her very well, though, and it was her manager who got her onto the dope in the first place, and then into the whiskey. It helped her to sleep, or it helped her have the courage to perform, or it kept her awake. Whatever she needed, opium and whiskey did the trick. But Halima Dominique wanted to be normal, get married, have children, and she never knew whether the men who showed an interest in her did so for her or because of who she was. And, eventually, by 1926, she was totally dependent on the drugs and the booze.

It was during Mardi Gras of 1926 that Halima was kidnapped. But she was able to hide her most treasured possessions in a secret compartment hidden under the house.

Several years later, when she was allowed home again, she retrieved her goods and took them to a totally new part of town. But she was still a very sick and lonely woman, hooked now on quaaludes and other drugs of the day, and she was to be locked up again in a new mental institution in a new part of town, and this time she was given electric shock treatment.

She'd been allowed to take her personal belongings with her this time and while she never really opened the old jewellery box and examined its contents,

she still kept it close to her, hidden beneath the floorboards in her hospital room until the day she died.

Toni and Bart were supposed to go back to the mental hospital in 1948. But to beat them to it, Conrad had instead travelled back to 1926 and hoped to find the treasure stash before the house became inhabited again by a new family. What he hadn't reckoned on was Toni and Bart landing there too. He just wanted to delay their arrival at the hospital to give him chance to stop the amulet being moved there anyway. But he'd obviously fixed their time machine good and proper.

The amulets were from the old voodoo and each apparently had a curse on them that could only be broken if they were kept separated. But legend had it that once the amulets were reunited, the owner would be miraculously showered with wealth so vast he'd never have to work again.

Conrad longed for the day that he didn't have to work again, but until then, or if it wasn't possible, he just wanted the company. The company that should have by right gone to him but had instead skipped him and gone to his younger brother due to a fall-out with their father who no longer trusted his first-born.

But if he could get hold of both of those amulets together, then he wouldn't have to worry about the company ever again. Or his stupid little brother.

"Boss?" said Hondo Pitts, drawing him from his reverie. "You were miles away there, boss."

Chapter 21

Last minute preparations were underway. Flags and banners were added to lamps and balconies not yet decorated, or those that had lost their decorations in the storm of the previous day. What little litter there was was swept away and extra bins – decorated of course – were put outside shops and bars. Stallholders set up their stalls, doing any last-minute carpentry or making any repairs following the storm. A bonfire on a bit of spare ground received its finishing touches, but other bits were added as people passed. People cleaned their windows at the front of houses and shops, or they polished their steps to within an inch of their shine, or they washed down any paintwork or removed any loose flakes. Some were even painting or repairing the brickwork or the stucco.

Men, women and children scurried from door to door, their piles of purchases getting taller. Roads, footpaths and gutters were swept, broken glass was replaced. It was a bustle of activity.

"It'll be worse tomorrow," said Bart.

"But tomorrow there will be bright outfits, shiny brass bands, beautiful dancers. No one will worry how their house looks tomorrow."

They passed a furniture shop that had radios for sale, but they were too expensive or too big or too old-fashioned to be of any use to them. And so they pressed on regardless towards the cemetery where Conrad had left the car, hoping it would still be there. The car was as good a place as anywhere they might find Conrad.

But there was no sign of him or the bead-seller or of the boy Toni had seen the other day.

"Shall we try the port?" asked Bart.

"May as well," shrugged Toni.

The port was as busy as the town with the same kind of activity going on. Two men were arranging folding chairs in rows facing the showboat.

"Looks like they might be having an open-air performance," commented Toni.

The ensemble could be seen boarding the boat and making their way to their various cabins to make final preparations for tomorrow's show. Children got in the way playing marbles and jack-stones on the floor, but every time someone kicked them or complained, they just laughed, made a rude gesture with their hands, and moved on. One small group of children, all girls, hung around the end of the gangplank, hoping to catch the eye of their favourite dancer, singer or actor. Most of the performers humoured them.

A white man wandered around with a large camera on a tripod across his shoulder and a large flash gun in his hand. They watched him set up in a corner, sheltered from the weather by two walls of the port buildings. He started to offer his service for a small fee. He kept a small notebook and pencil to jot down their names and addresses, and he had a suitcase with props of feather boas and various hats.

Corn dog and hamburger sellers began to arrive, securing the best spot for selling their wares.

Bart at first eyed up the photographer's flash gun, no doubt wondering if the element inside might be of any use, but he was distracted by the smell of cooking burgers and Toni could swear she heard his mouth water.

Of Conrad and the bead-seller there was still no sign, but Toni did catch sight of someone that she did recognise, loitering around the ladies and gentlemen of the showboat.

She tugged at Bart's sleeve.

"There's that boy I saw following me," she said.

Bart looked to where she was pointing.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He was wearing the same clothes."

They hid behind the corn dog seller while they watched the boy watching the folk arriving on and leaving the boat. He didn't seem to be interested in anything else happening on the riverbank, just who was coming and going on the boat. And he wasn't particularly watching the men either.

"He's only looking at the women," whispered Toni.

"Wait, he's seen something," said Bart, catching hold of her arm.

The boy ducked behind some barrels and his eyes watched someone leaving the boat, a woman, a pretty little thing dressed like a flapper beneath a long fur coat. Under her arm she carried a parcel wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. Her own eyes darted around the port, looking for someone, not seeing them, and she decided to walk into the town.

The boy followed at a safe distance.

So Toni and Bart followed him too, also at a safe distance.

They walked through the busy town to a much poorer section, where the houses grew more shabby and more dilapidated. There were not as many street decorations here, but there were not as many people either and the boy – and Toni and Bart – had to drop back further to avoid being seen.

The woman disappeared inside a small house on the edge of the town, and the boy hung around at the end of the street wondering whether or not to stay. Toni and Bart decided to stay for now, at least until either the boy or the woman made another move.

It was the boy who went first.

"What do we do now?" hissed Bart.

"You follow the boy, I'll watch the house."

Toni positioned herself against another house, in the lee of the overhanging roof, with her back to the wall.

"Okay," said Bart, heading off after the boy.

Toni stayed in her relatively sheltered position but she did feel a chill. She pulled her leather jacket around her more tightly, zipped it up to the top, held onto her thumbs – where she'd been told once there was a pulse that would keep her warmer – and thrust her hands into the fleece-lined pockets. She pushed her chin inside her jacket so that her hot breath warmed her through too.

When there was no sign of life from the house the woman had gone into, Toni crept closer and did a full circuit of the building. Through a back window she could see the woman moving around.

The woman unwrapped the brown paper parcel. Inside was a bejewelled hip-flask. The woman unscrewed the cap and took a deep drink, the sour liquid making her grimace but then clearly hitting the spot. Toni looked at her watch. It wasn't even noon yet.

The first thing to occur to Toni was that she was a lush. The second thing to occur was that this was 1926. Prohibition was in place. Not only was this woman drinking liquor at an unusually early hour, but she was also breaking the law.

As the woman moved around the house, from room to room, Toni carefully followed on the outside. And through the other window at the back she was startled to see a hookah pipe smoking and bubbling away.

The woman was a junkie! Or someone in the house was.

Not wanting to be seen by anyone, Toni moved away from the house and sat on a small wall beneath a tree, from where she could watch the woman's front door quite safely from a distance and not be seen quite so easily.

As she sat and mulled, something else occurred to Toni while she waited. In fact, it struck her so suddenly and so strongly she could almost see the light bulb above her head flash on brightly.

Without her big fur coat, Toni could see the woman's dress. And around her neck, on a leather thong, was an amulet. The double of the one they already had.

Toni could hardly wait to tell Bart.

Bart kept good pace with the boy as they retraced their steps through the town. He'd stayed a fair distance behind and every time the boy stopped, Bart walked in a different direction, averting his face.

Very soon he started to recognise his surroundings and he didn't need to follow the lad up the alley between the houses. The boy was going to the bead-seller's house. So Bart was able to hang around in the square rather than follow the boy and draw unnecessary attention to himself. There was plenty to look at in the square as it too prepared for the fiesta of the following day. And it was so busy it was easy to mingle and not be noticed.

Before long the boy re-emerged from the alley, but this time he had Conrad and the bead-seller, Hondo Pitts, in tow. The two men must have been taken by surprise as they were both still doing up their coats. And Conrad tugged down his hat. The group quickly made their way back through the town, the boy running ahead, the adults trying to keep up with him without drawing too much attention to themselves. And several feet behind them trailed Bart, also trying not to draw attention to himself.

The group in front drew attention to themselves in another way, however, by shoving and pushing people out of the way. If anyone got in front of them, either by accident or a hawker wanting to sell them something, they just ignored them. If anyone stumbled or just plain got in the way, they forced their way through. At one point they even knocked a woman's wares all across the road and didn't even bat an eyelid, let alone say sorry or offer to help.

By the time they reached the woman's house in the shabby part of town, Bart started to worry about whether or not they'd see Toni. He needn't have worried, though. When he got there himself, there was no sign of her.

Chapter 22

Bart didn't know whether to panic and show himself, or hang back and keep quiet.

Conrad and Hondo Pitts followed the boy right up to the front door of the house. Conrad knocked on the door. When there was no answer he knocked again, this time much louder. There was still no answer and he started to circle the house and peer in at the windows. As far as Bart could see, the curtains or blinds were all drawn. But still Conrad cupped his hand to block out the light as he tried to see through.

Bart watched as Hondo Pitts and the boy did the exact same thing, following and copying Conrad like sheep.

But no. There was no sign of life from the house.

He kept his distance and watched as Conrad tried the door handle. The handle gave and the and the boy were able to simply walk in.

Bart lingered around outside and waited for them to complete their inspection. When they came out, they huddled together to obviously discuss whatever situation they thought was going down. Then they made their way back to the town, resigned to their journey being a waste of time.

He waited until they were well and truly out of sight before he too ventured into the house. He wanted to see if there were signs of a struggle or, worse, any blood.

The house, and indeed the whole of this neighbourhood, seemed to be a bit of a throwback to grander times that had been allowed to grow shabby and unmaintained over the years. As if the money that was one here had moved on elsewhere in the city. The houses were quite elaborate but small affairs, perhaps struggling for the grandeur of bigger mansions that the rich had lived in.

The street consisted of small wooden houses that were either built as single dwellings or two dwellings stuck together, like a semi. This house, a pair, used to be painted white, but a lot of the paint had peeled. Both houses were long and narrow, each with an individual flight of five stone steps leading up to a private front door, one at either edge of the house. Next to the door was a floor-to-ceiling ten-paned sash.

The house next door had painted wooden louvred shutters over its front door and front window, both closed. But the house he was looking at was just the bare door and window.

Five wooden pillars held the porch roof up across the whole front of the property, and a little wooden frieze ran around the top. There were curtains up at the window and a blind up at the door. Gold plated numbers above the door in the pane of glass had peeled away too, but these houses were definitely up in the 2,000s.

A wrought-iron fence flanked the steps and ran along the front of the terrace, separating it from the street to give it some privacy. Two in-built troughs overflowed with dead greenery, parched to death in the summer but starting to come back after the recent storms.

The next-door neighbour had a nice potted palm outside the front of their house, but this one had a broken pot on its side, the contents long spilled out.

He knew the door was open as he'd just watched Conrad let himself in, so Bart pushed the door handle and did the same.

The house was long and thin, with one room leading into another and then that one leading into another. He could see right through to the back door, and he wondered if this was what they called shotgun houses in New Orleans. If it was, he could see why someone would be able to shoot from one end of the house to another without hindrance.

This first room was the living room, from what he could gather. But, like the other homes he'd seen in the town, it was, again, very bohemian in its style with drapes and curtains and wall hangings all over the place, some separating the rooms where a door would normally be. There was a divan-style settee built-in to the recess next to the kitchenette, and a small, scrubbed dining table with two chairs tucked under was pushed up against the kitchen counter. There were floorboards covered with rugs in this room, but in the kitchen area was a tile-effect vinyl-type floor covering.

A hubble-bubble pipe sat on a side table, still smoking from whatever was in it. Next to it was a bejewelled hip-flask now empty but smelling strongly of absinthe. Bart pocketed the hip-flask. It fitted quite snugly against his hip. Then he placed it back on the side table where it belonged. Next to the pipe was a table-top radio, and he resisted an urge to pick that up too.

There hadn't been a struggle here, but it did look a bit abandoned. The rugs were thread-bare, the floorboards and the lino in the kitchen badly scuffed.

Bart walked slowly past the kitchen, where pots and pans and cups and plates were piled in and around a small sink area. The next room was a sitting room. Aside from a fireplace with a rocking chair in front of it there was also an upright piano in this room. That was interesting, but then he supposed that a musical town like New Orleans would have lots of musical instruments tucked away.

Again, the floor here was boards, but a larger, newer rug sat on the floor.

The walls were wood panelling with a large but dirty mirror over the empty fireplace and other small works of art in various spaces.

The next room was kitted out as a bedroom with just a camp-style bed pushed beneath the single window, a small wooden tallboy, and a single chair. The last room was a bigger bedroom that had a double bed with a wrought-iron bedstead and a patchwork quilt across it. The bed hadn't been made and there were clothes strewn about the room. But here there was also a large chest of drawers, a small writing desk, a bedside table, two wooden chairs – one another rocker – and lino again on the floor with a brightly coloured rug over the top.

The door here led out to a back yard with a very small entry that took him back to the street. He looked up and down at the nicely kept but old and shabby homes, all of them semis with a single tiny window in the roof space. He assumed this was attic space and maybe the house on the left had the back of the attic and the house on the right had the front attic. Some had wooden stairs with banisters leading up to the front doors, others were, like this one, stone.

Bart went back inside the house. He was sorely tempted to start taking the radio to bits, but he resisted, sat on the rocker in the middle sitting room and waited.

*

Conrad, Hondo and the boy made their way back to Hondo's place.

"I've been meaning to ask," said Conrad, as they passed the alligator pit at the front of the complex, "why the, er, pets?"

Hondo Pitts went into the downstairs storeroom and got the creatures some meat. The three of them watched as four alligators came to feast on the offering.

"That's my main business," said Hondo. Shoes, boots and ladies' pocketbooks. They also make belts, watch bands and wallets."

"They don't seem to have a lot of room," said Conrad.

Hondo laughed.

"Come on, I'll show you," he said. He led them out of the yard, down the alley, around the buildings and into what looked like a smallholding, perhaps an acre or so, with nothing but delta on the other side of a fence. He hadn't realised these houses were on the edge of town.

The small area was landscaped like a water park, but basking alligators could be seen on some of the little islands within the man-made ponds.

"The ponds in the yard are connected to the delta underground. They can get into the rivers from here, and they hunt and swim and wander. But if they know they're being fed, they keep coming back. And when they're close

enough, we can shoot them. We sell the meat too. And the teeth for jewellery. I've even made some necklaces out of them myself. Do you want one?"

Conrad shuddered at the thought, but didn't like to appear rude or ungrateful, so he changed the subject.

"And you make money from that?"

"Enough. It was the tooth necklaces that got me into the beads. You can only sell so many alligator-tooth necklaces or bracelets, but you can sell lots of glass beads to lots of people. Between the two businesses, I live well enough."

They went back to Hondo's apartment and he told the boy to scoot.

"See if you can find out anything about Miss Dominique and come back to let us know, okay?"

The boy nodded and ran off.

Conrad and Hondo made their way upstairs again where Pitts rustled up something for them to eat and a drink of coffee. And he told Conrad more about the alligator business and how it was seasonal.

They got back onto the subject of Halima Dominique and Toni and Bart again, wondering what had happened to them all over the past day or so as they'd lost contact since the hotel room was raided.

"Do you still have the amulet?" asked Conrad.

"Of course I do," said Hondo, going into his back room and coming back with his little treasure pot.

But when he opened it and looked in, his face dropped.

"It's gone," he said.

Chapter 23

Bart listened to the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. It was very relaxing, hypnotising almost. And it was while he was daydreaming that another thought occurred to him.

A clock.

They already had the cogs from Conrad's stash in the car and he knew they could do with some valves from a radio. But a clockwork mechanism? That could only be useful too. His hands itched as he resisted helping himself, and he let the ticking of the clock lull him into a doze.

The clock struck one o'clock and Bart awoke with a start. But it wasn't just the chime that had woken him. There was someone in the house.

He stood up and crept to the curtain that separated the middle room from the front room, and heaved an audible sigh of relief.

"Toni!" he said. "Where have you been?"

"I was following our little lush from here."

"Did she go out?"

"No. Two men came and got her. She was scared stiff when she saw them, but she went without a fight."

"What did they look like?"

"They were both big, white, youngish. They wore heavy coats and large hats that shaded their faces. But I heard some of what they had to say."

"Was it interesting?"

"Well, not to me. But I don't think she'll be coming back here."

"Ever?" Toni shook her head. "Why not?"

"I think she was a runaway slave—"

"Slave? But slavery was abolished... over a hundred years ago..."

"Actually, it was only sixty years ago here – we're in 1926, remember. And I think the deep south held onto their servants a while longer anyway. In fact, I'm sure there are some here that still do."

"What made you think she was a runaway?"

"Just that they shouted at her that she'd led them a merry dance and how changing her name hadn't helped. That she shouldn't have joined the showboat if she hadn't wanted to be found. They'd been watching her for a few days, even stopped someone else stalking her only a day or so ago, while they checked who she was and where she came from. Then they frog-marched her out of the house without letting her collect any of her things."

"Why do you think she won't be back?"

"Because they took her to a big house on the outskirts of town and locked her in the basement, told her she'd have to stay there until she realised what was good for her. And then, if the boss'm allowed it, she'd be let back into the kitchen to resume her duties."

"Poor cow," said Bart.

"Poor junkie too," said Toni. "The way she was puffing on that pipe thing and swigging from that hip flask, she's going to go into cold turkey before the end of tomorrow."

"Well, that might not do her very much harm, if she is an addict."

"Yes, but it might also kill her. Or, if she gets nasty, she might kill someone."

"Sounds like she'll have to escape first."

Bart was very happy to see his sister safe and well, but he was also keen to know what she thought about the woman's things.

"If she isn't coming back, she might not need her stuff."

"What stuff were you thinking of?"

"There's a clock in the middle room," he indicated over his shoulder with his thumb. "Then there's this here radio," he pointed at the side table. "And that hip flask might come in handy too."

"What could you want with a hip flask?"

"It's encrusted with gems. Ideally we could do with a crystal, but one of those gemstones might be good enough – if they're real. Or even if they're not. One of them just might be the right size, shape and consistency."

"Hmm," said Toni, "I see your reasoning."

He waited a moment to see if he would get his sister's blessing, but she was deliberately not going to give it.

"Tone."

"What?" she smirked, knowing full well what he wanted.

"If she's not coming back..."

"Yes...?"

"Couldn't we... borrow her radio?"

"And her clock? And her hip flask?"

"Well, yes, now you come to mention them."

"But we're not going to lug them across town, are we?"

"No," replied Bart. "In fact, if she's not coming back, I don't see why we can't stay here tonight. There's food and coffee and a kind of squash drink in the pantry in the kitchen."

"No fridge?"

"No fridge."

"Okay, I'll go for a wander while you spread out on that kitchen table."

"Actually," said Bart, "it might be worth going to get the bike too."

"Is it not best hidden?"

"There's a yard out back and I need the time machine anyway, so I can work on it."

"Come on, then, let's go and get the bike."

"Actually..." said Bart.

"What...?"

"You may as well stay here, make sure no one comes back."

"We're already taking a punt on her living here on her own," said Toni.

"Only one person lives here," said Bart. "I've seen the rest of the house."

"And if she was an escaped servant, it might be that she was squatting anyway."

"Or it belongs to her family."

They had no way of knowing. But Toni agreed to stay behind and keep watch while he went for the bike.

"But while you're gone," she added, "get us some bread and fruit and cream and stuff."

*

Conrad was furious. The boy ran off while Hondo Pitts stood there, the open box in his hand.

"Why don't you people lock your doors?" blustered Conrad, starting to turn purple.

"There's not usually any need," replied Hondo. "Until you lot arrived."

"When was the last time you checked it?" asked Conrad.

"The day you gave it to me."

"But that was three days ago."

"And?"

"Well, anyone could have been in here since then."

"Like who?"

"Like bloody Miss Twinkle-toes and Mister Butter-wouldn't-melt."

Hondo Pitts had no idea what he was talking about.

"Never mind," said Conrad. "So much for them bloody crocodiles too."

"Alligators," said Hondo, helpfully.

"What?"

"We have alligators."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Okay, boss."

"Has that box been anywhere else?" asked Conrad.

Keeping his lips firmly sealed and blowing his cheeks out, Hondo shook his head.

"Then they must have been here. And I bet they took something from the car."

Hondo Pitts watched as the truth of that last throwaway statement hit home.

"I bet she did," repeated Conrad, jumping up and grabbing his hat and jacket.

Hondo Pitts followed him out of the apartment, along the alley and out into the town again, half running to keep up with the other man's long gait – and aggressive speed. As he ran, he did up his jacket and pulled his hat down tighter on his head.

When they got to the cemetery, there was another funeral in progress, so they had to slow down, partly to show respect, but also because they couldn't get through. Conrad grew more and more frustrated until he was able to reach his precious motor car. He even forgot to check that no one was paying too much attention as he rolled the stone out of the way.

Hondo waited outside the tomb. It was tight enough in there with a motor car parked up without him jostling for room with Conrad too. He could hear the banging and clattering coming from inside as Conrad opened the car, lifted the loose floorboard, and retrieved his stash box.

There was silence, a few expletives, and Hondo Pitts guessed that something had indeed disappeared from the boss's precious chest.

As he emerged from the mausoleum, Conrad cursed some more.

"What did she take, boss?" asked Hondo, bravely.

Conrad shook his head and stormed out of the cemetery. All Pitts could do was keep up.

As they passed the other cemetery, Conrad saw something else to make his blood boil and Hondo Pitts heard an almighty roar.

Bart was wearing his goggles so Hondo wasn't sure it was him. Conrad recognised him straight away, though. Or he recognised the motorbike and side-car he was driving. Hondo thought it was quite a nice, tidy piece of kit, but he felt a cuff around the earhole as his boss reminded him he wasn't here to admire the opposition's transport.

"But boss, it's a new motorbike. I've not seen one of those before."

"And you might not see one again if you don't keep up."

There was no way they would catch Bart on foot, and they didn't have time to go back and get the car. They had no choice but to let him go. At least they knew now that he was still alive, still in town, and probably so was his sister.

*

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the quarter hour. Bart had been gone for well over an hour, almost two hours. Toni was starting to worry.

And she was hungry.

She needn't have worried as she heard the roar of the motorbike coming towards her. She hoped he had some food.

Her brother bounced into the house, a paper bag filled with groceries under one arm and a newspaper under the other.

He placed the bag down on the kitchen counter and opened the newspaper on the kitchen table.

"Looks like the boss has been in contact with us again," he said, pointing to the leader article on page three.

Chapter 24

The article took up about a quarter of a page of the broadsheet newspaper. There was a big, smiling picture of the boss, sitting sideways on a bench with one of his leather-booted legs bent up onto the bench. He was wearing suede trousers and a tweed jacket, and looked as though he were posing for a men's lifestyle magazine photo-shoot.

"Heck, It's good to see him," said Bart.

"What does he say?" asked Toni, trying to read over her brother's shoulder.

Bart started to read the story aloud to her. "It's in code," he said.

"That's okay," replied his sister taking out a notepad and pen. She knew the cipher.

In order to fix the time machine, they needed a clock mechanism, a crystal, two radio valves, a radio antenna, the filament from inside a Tungsten light-bulb, some calcium carbonate, magnesium wire, a firing pin and enough electricity to cause the light-bulb to flash.

Everything they needed could be found in their current surroundings.

However, in order to fix the time momentum thing they went back for, they had to be present at the Mardi Gras when an actress called Halima Dominique would be arrested and locked up so that her house remained intact until her release twenty-two years later. The risk was that someone would either help her escape or get her killed, and that would ruin everything and cause the company to start to fade.

There followed a detailed description of Miss Halima Dominique, who was apparently addicted to alcohol and to drugs.

"That sounds like our landlady," said Bart.

"I didn't realise she was an actress," said Toni. "I can't see her hogging the limelight at all."

"But I bet she came in on the showboat," said Bart.

"And that's what Conrad was waiting for," agreed Toni.

"No wonder he was furious when the boat was late."

Once Miss Dominique had been taken into custody it would be safe for them to fire up the machine and come home.

But they'd only get one shot at cranking the time machine fully. So they had to make sure they had all of the components, or similar, before even attempting to reboot.

They didn't need to worry about the amulet at this stage, unless they stumbled upon it anyway. They were to concentrate on foiling this particular time sabotage and get back home. They could always go again to get the artefact.

According to the weather forecast, which was immediately below the article, there was to be another thunderstorm tomorrow afternoon.

Toni looked at Bart, a question on her face.

"What?"

"She's already been locked up."

"Then we need to help her escape."

"But she seems like such a sweet, gentle thing."

"We can't meddle," he reminded her.

"No," she sighed. "But where will we find all of that stuff?"

Bart glanced down the list again.

"We already have a clock mechanism and a radio," he said. "Looks like those cogs are useless."

"Unless he took them out of our time machine and they need to go back."

"Mm," said Bart. "That could work."

"What about the rest of it?"

"There was a photographer down by the riverside," he said. "He might have the calcium carbonate and the magnesium wire—"

"But what is that even?"

"Some photographers used it before the flashbulb was invented. Apparently, quite a few died."

"Can we get a Tungsten light-bulb from him too?"

"I doubt it, but I think I know where we might find one. You gave me the clue."

"What did I say?"

"You mentioned how our landlady might like the limelight..."

"And?"

"Where do you think that expression came from? It's what the footlights were made of." She still wasn't convinced. "The showboat? They'll have a stage. I bet they have footlights and spotlights too."

"Oh yeah," said Toni, feeling a little dim. She looked at the list over her brother's shoulder again. "We don't have a crystal or a firing pin, though. Or a radio antenna."

"The antenna will be easy. All we need is a piece of rod. But our landlady's hip flask is studded with gems. If we can't find a crystal in any of these heeby-jeeby voodoo shops, we might be able to use one of those stones. A firing pin we still have to find."

"But what about the electricity?"

"I think that's what the radio antenna is for." Toni's face may as well have turned into a giant question-mark when she looked at her brother again. "To conduct electricity. From the storm." Nope, still nothing. "Lightning. Lightning conductor. Electricity generation."

"Oh, that's clever," she said.

"Not really," he admitted. "It was in a computer game I played once, one of the first that came out." He cast about in his memory for the title. "I can't remember what it was called but they had a kite and they needed to generate electricity to power a Hoover, so they flew the kite in an electrical storm and conducted the power from a flash of lightning."

"Sounds like fun," said Toni. "I feel deprived now."

"Anyway," continued Bart. "We need to help our lady escape so that she can be at the Mardi Gras tomorrow. Do you remember where they took her?"

"Yes, but it's a long walk."

He jangled his bike keys in front of her face. "We have the Harley here now," he said.

They retrieved their goggles from the side-car, hopped on and off they went, to the big house on the outskirts of town where the two men had taken the woman whose house they'd borrowed. The bike was a bit too noisy to sneak up on anyone, though. So they had to park it in a tree-lined avenue and walk the rest of the way.

The house loomed up on them as they rounded a bend. It was set back from the main road but there was no wall around it, just shrubs and trees. There were lots of windows, so the chances of them being seen were quite high.

"Perhaps we need to come back in the dark," said Bart.

"I agree," said Toni.

They headed back to the bike and back to Miss Dominique's house.

*

Conrad was hopping mad. His amulet had been stolen. His cogs had been stolen. What did they even need those for? He didn't understand why they'd take them when he needed them for his own time machine. He'd taken them out for security reasons, rather like an immobiliser on a car. If they weren't in place then no one could accidentally start the time machine. But without them, neither could he.

Without the amulet there was no reason to try and steal the other one. And even if they had the one, there was nothing to guarantee they had the other one too. Why would they? They didn't even know where to find it in this time zone. Their amulet was hidden away in a lunatic asylum that hadn't even been built yet, so it hadn't been moved there yet either.

He had no idea where Toni and Bart were or where they were staying. All he did know was that they hadn't been back to their hotel room and they'd cleared it out before leaving.

"Did they take anything else?" asked Hondo Pitts.

"I still have my coins, if that's what you mean," replied Conrad. "Don't worry, you'll get your wages."

"Do you want me to send the boy off after them, see if he can find them?" asked Pitts.

"May as well," said Conrad, losing his fire now.

"We can split up and look," suggested Pitts.

They still had a whole afternoon of daylight, so grudgingly, Conrad agreed.

"We'll meet up back at yours at six o'clock?" he suggested, all the wind knocked out of him but he had to go through the motions anyway. Hondo Pitts nodded and they split up.

All Conrad could do was stroll through the town asking people as they went if they'd seen a man and a woman who matched his description. But not many remembered a couple, although some remembered the man on his own.

Perhaps they'd split up too.

A stray dog wandered into his line of vision and he realised he hadn't really seen many animals, apart from those horses people were still using. The dog sat down in front of him and looked at him in an expectant manner, head cocked to one side, tongue lolling out making him look like he was laughing.

"What do you want?" grunted Conrad, and the dog cocked his head some more and wagged his tail.

He wasn't wearing a collar, but Conrad wasn't even sure they used collars on dogs in New Orleans in 1926.

"I don't have anything to eat," he said. "And I don't have anywhere to live."

The dog stood up, as though he understood, and disappeared up a side street.

Conrad walked a block, but when he turned he saw the dog following him, with a stick in his mouth.

"What?" said Conrad, laughing at the animal.

The dog trotted up to Conrad, dropped the stick at his feet, and then started to run off in expectation.

Conrad kicked the stick into the gutter and carried on walking.

The dog bounced back after it, jumped on the stick, picked it up and followed Conrad some more.

When he stopped again, the dog dropped the stick at his feet again. Conrad stopped down, picked it up, and tossed it a few feet before them.

The dog bounded after it and brought it back, and Conrad couldn't help but smile.

"Come on then, if you want company," he said, and continued on his way, asking his questions as he went, tossing the stick for the dog to fetch at regular intervals.

The dog followed him for about a mile and then, as if a silent whistle had called him, he collected his stick, woofed out of the side of his mouth, and loped off.

Conrad felt almost bereft when the dog had gone, but at least he'd helped to pass the time.

Chapter 25

It was dark by the time Toni and Bart got back to the big house. A soft drizzle soaked into the dirt and hydrated all of the lush greenery some more. An owl

screached in the distance, mid-hunt. Bats swooped just above their heads. A chorus of toads croaked. And crickets chirruped.

Lights burned behind blinds and curtains at windows. Some flickered behind closed shutters. It was a quiet neighbourhood with little street-life.

The Harley would have alerted everyone within a so-many-yard radius, so they left it between a couple of dumpsters behind one of the commercial buildings, covered with some sacking they found lying around.

They whispered quietly between themselves not wishing to draw attention while local residents minded their own business and got on with their lives in the privacy of their own homes.

"Which house was it again," asked Bart.

"It's the biggest one in the street, at the end of the road," replied Toni. "You can't miss it."

Sure enough, the mansion that looked like it might once have belonged to a governor loomed out of the mizzle, smudged lights behind windows making it glow like a Thomas Kinkade painting. There was no wall around the perimeter, there were no dogs guarding the house, all seemed quiet.

They circled the house until they reached the double gates leading down to the cellar at the back. A wooden bar had been fastened across it, but there were no bolts, no locks, no keys. Just the wooden bar.

"Do you think one of us needs to keep watch?" asked Toni.

"We're not going to be here that long," replied Bart. "We should be able to shift this bar, make sure the doors are free and then get out of here."

All the same, Toni was nervous, so he agreed that she should stay in the yard and keep an eye out for anyone wandering around.

Bart positioned himself and tugged at the bar. It refused to give at first, so he gave it another pull and ended up rolling onto his back with the inertia. But at least he'd removed it.

"Shall we make sure she's still in there?" asked Toni. "It'll be a waste of time if she isn't even here."

"She will have heard me pull the bar out," said Bart. "If she's in there, she'll be on her way out soon enough."

"Okay. But do you want to make sure that the doors will open? We can run away if we hear her."

Bart carefully approached the cellar door again, but he needn't have worried. Before he got there the doors gave once, bounced closed, and were pushed open again. He scurried backwards, on his bum, and hid behind a nearby shrub. The rain seeped through the back of his trousers and the bottom of his shirt, where it hung out below his jacket.

Toni stayed where she was, hidden in the shade of a tree. Bart made sure she was out of sight, then they both watched the cellar doors.

A dishevelled-looking Halima Dominique emerged from the bowels of the house, glancing around as she climbed out of the cellar, either for her captors or for her liberators. Seeing neither, she closed the cellar doors behind her and made her way across the garden.

Toni joined Bart in his hiding place.

"Do you think she'll head for her house?" she whispered.

"Only one way to find out," he replied, starting to follow her.

"But you're wet," hissed Toni. "And dirty. And you've grazed yourself. You're bleeding."

Bart shrugged and carried on after Halima. "That doesn't matter. I can get cleaned up once we get back to the house."

"I suppose if she does go there we could always tell her it was us who let her out," said Toni.

"We might also end up having to tell her a lot more, if that's the case," warned Bart over his shoulder. "But come on," he called. "We'll lose her otherwise."

As they followed her again, it soon became apparent that she wasn't going home at all.

"I think she's heading towards the boat," said Toni.

"I do too," he agreed.

"Perhaps she doesn't feel safe at home."

"Or the boat's neutral territory," suggested Bart.

"Or maybe there's something there that she wants," said Toni suddenly.

The pair kept their usual safe distance behind, with one watching the front and the other watching their rear. They were getting more cautious the longer they stayed in this city.

Bart splashed in a puddle and added a sodden shoe and sock to his ever-increasing list of woes, and Toni tripped over a cobble and almost landed in another puddle, but Bart thrust an arm out to save her.

At the riverside, Halima stopped running. But instead of going towards the boat, looking resplendent with all of its lights on, she turned and went instead to one of the shacks, knocking frantically on the locked door, which in itself was unusual in this usually open town.

A man opened the door, saw Halima, and pulled her inside, closing the door tight behind them.

Bart and Toni followed as far as the door, then pressed themselves against the wooden wall, trying to see in and listen at the window, which was also locked tight against the night.

The voices inside were muffled but they got the gist of the conversation.

Halima told him all about her ordeal and screamed at him asking why he hadn't come to rescue her. He replied that he didn't even know she'd been kidnapped but had wondered where she'd got to. Then, when he asked her how she had got out and she told them someone had unbarred the gates to the cellar, he launched himself at his own door again and stuck his head out, looking to see if she'd been followed. Fortunately, Bart had pre-empted this just in time, grabbed his sister, and pulled her into the shadows at the side of the shack.

Satisfied that there was no one there, the man once again retreated inside and locked the door again behind them.

From the rest of the conversation, which was growing less heated, they learned that Halima would be staying there for tonight at least. It was safe for them to go back to the house and carry on working.

They went back to the big house, collected the motorbike, and drove to Halima Dominique's smaller, friendlier home on the other side of town, and let themselves in.

The components of the time machine sat on the kitchen table hidden beneath a tablecloth they'd found in one of the cupboards. It kept the dust off as well as hiding the equipment from any passing prying eyes.

Bart had his toolkit out and tinkered for a while before admitting that, without the rest of the parts, there was nothing more he could do. He was tinkering for tinkering sake.

Toni took the small bed in the back bedroom while Bart made do with the banquette in the front room. And there they passed a relatively peaceful, undisturbed night.

*

Hondo Pitts sat at his work desk in one of the downstairs rooms threading different coloured glass beads onto a length of catgut. In the background a radio quietly broadcast a musical show.

Upstairs a frustrated Conrad paced up and down, from room to room. He could just make out the radio too, but he wasn't listening. Inside his head he plotted against the brother and sister who were helping his own brother hold onto the company that should rightfully be his. He'd worked out the perfect plan, had gone back in time to change the time continuum thingy, but his brother had caught on, or been warned, or just plain noticed that something wasn't quite right. And so he had sent the gruesome twosome back in time to fix it. Conrad had thought they'd be elsewhere by now and unable to do anything to help. So when they'd turned up in his shadow, they'd taken him totally by surprise and he'd had to act on the hop.

Now everything was going wrong. His own time machine wouldn't work without those cogs. The amulet he'd come back for in the first place and given to Hondo Pitts for safekeeping had been stolen. The woman who had the other amulet had disappeared off the face of the earth. And someone had knocked him out when he'd followed the actress home. He wondered who that could be as it clearly hadn't been Bart. Or Pitts. Either someone else wanted the actress for something, or they were protecting her.

Tomorrow was the day that he needed to stop her getting arrested at the mardi gras. But he didn't know where she was. If he didn't do it this time, though, he supposed he could always come back... supposing, of course, that he could get back to the future to come back from.

It was all very complicated and difficult when it should have been so easy, so quick, so simple. His brother was far too clever for his own good. But at least he had the element of surprise over his colleagues. They'd had no idea where they were, when it was or why they were here. They wouldn't have had chance to do any research before getting here, so all he had to bank on now was their ignorance.

Hopefully, they had no idea what had happened or what they needed to do to fix it. Hopefully, he had the advantage. Hopefully all would work out in the end. Hopefully everything would fall in to place tomorrow.

Chapter 26

Bart packed everything he needed into his satchel. The weather didn't look very thundery, but even if it did, they were still short a few essential items. So, while it was still dark, he took his satchel, his motorbike and a small pocket torch to where the boat was docked on the river. Toni stayed at the house, partly to hold the fort but also to see if Halima Dominique returned. And anyway, she wanted a lie-in before the day's adventures – it was going to be a long day as it was and she'd need all of her energy.

She lay on the bed in the back of the house and listened in the darkness to the motorbike as her brother drove off into the night. Actually, it was morning, but it was still very dark and it was still very early. He'd taken the chiming clock to pieces so she only had her watch to rely on. He'd put the bits he needed in with his other guff and left the rest of the clock spread out on the kitchen table.

Toni tossed and turned for a while and probably even dozed, but she couldn't really settle. So she got up to make a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast. She made herself some black coffee too. She preferred tea but couldn't stand it without milk, whereas she didn't mind coffee without milk. The milk they'd bought yesterday smelt a bit ripe and she didn't want to risk it.

With nothing to do and a cannibalised radio she couldn't listen to, Toni went back to the bed, pulled a notebook and pencil from one of her pockets, and started to write a journal.

*

The streets were fairly empty at this time of the morning. The occasional worker was up, sweeping the streets, emptying the bins, extinguishing the streetlights. Some were making their way to their place of work. Most were still indoors, curtains, blinds and shutters closed against the dark and the apparently incoming storm. Soon everybody would be up to make final preparations for the Mardi Gras. Until then, he had the place to himself. The first parades would begin mid-morning to early-afternoon.

The streets were pretty much ready, aside from a few repairs following the recent storms. And the dockside was all of a bustle, compared to the rest of the city he'd passed through. Shutters on houses and all exterior paintwork was looking its best. Flowers still in bloom decorated the railings, balconies, pillars, walls and windows. Windows not covered with shutters glistened. Washing lines had been brought in. Everywhere looked spic and span.

Bart parked the bike behind some crates and covered it with a large piece of sacking. He'd already immobilised it. He hitched the satchel strap onto his shoulder and wandered as though aimlessly. He didn't want to make a beeline for the boat in case he was spotted. Instead he moseyed around, looking interested in the various shops, stores and businesses that weren't open yet.

The gangplank was in place and there didn't seem to be anyone guarding it, so he nonchalantly made his way up it, along a white-painted outer deck, down some steps, and along a few corridors until he found the concert room – or whatever they called it on a boat. Show lounge? Theatre? The safety curtain was down but he could still get to the footlights. He disconnected one and took it behind the privacy of the safety curtain, where he thought he'd be alone.

Two men were painting scenery and a third was repairing the banister on a wooden staircase. He had a pot of paint at his feet. They nodded good morning to him and got on with their work. Perhaps they thought he was the electrician. He dismantled the footlight, took out the bulb, the mirror, and a few other connections, then he put it all back together as best as he could. He nodded farewell to the other workers, slipped in front of the safety curtain again, replaced the light, and tripped out of the concert room again.

With hardly anybody about he was able to explore the rest of the boat at his leisure, finding his way down the stairs to another deck. This must have been where the players lived when they were on the road – or on the river. Some of

the doors had numbers. Some of them rather helpfully had names on them. Sadly, he couldn't find a name for Miss Halima Dominique.

He found an office in which was a huge ledger sat in an unlocked cupboard. This had lists of names, lots of other details, and in the final column a monetary figure. He wasn't sure if this was a record of the performers, the crew, the passengers, or just a bought or sold ledger. So he adjusted an oil lamp on the desk, settled down and started to read.

The fancy scrawl was difficult to read in the dim light, especially when the ink started to run out of the pen they were using. But he persevered and worked out that there were different sections of the ledger for different activities. And there she was:

Dominique, Halima – vaudeville – singer – 39

Did that mean her cabin was number 39? There was only one way to find out.

He went back to the residential part of the boat and found a cabin with the number 39 on. The door was unlocked, and inside were three cabin beds, all set at different angles. Three women shared this cabin, one of them may have been Halima Dominique. He went back to the office to see what else he could find, but all he came up with were some flyers for the following few days' programmes.

The vaudeville section was due at four o'clock for the matinee performance, and nine o'clock for the evening performance. There didn't seem to be any other performances scheduled, but the programme was the same for the whole of Mardi Gras. That meant that Halima had to be back at work in the afternoon. She would probably be back here by four o'clock at the latest, if they didn't have any rehearsals.

He left the boat and walked up and down her side on the dock, surprised to see another much smaller boat almost nudging up against it. A young lad was swilling the deck of the smaller boat and saw Bart watching. He called out a greeting and Bart replied.

"What boat is this?" he asked.

"This is the boat that pushes the showboat along the river," said the lad.

"Oh?" said Bart, surprised. "I thought it was a paddle steamer."

"No, boss. The theatre takes up too much room where the engine would normally go. So these showboats need another boat to move them around."

"Does anyone live on this boat?"

"Only the crew."

"No passengers?"

The lad shook his head. "Jus' crew, boss."

Bart thanked him and tossed a dime at him, which the lad expertly caught.

"Thank 'um boss," he said, with a smile, pocketing the coin and getting back to his early morning chores.

Bart strolled along the shacks and shanties that lined the dockside, giving the one Halima had gone into the night before a wide berth.

Aside from the chemicals, he had everything he needed other than the radio antenna. The chemicals he could get from the photographer's flash gun. He cast his eyes around the dock to see if there was a likely place to find a rod. His lightning conductor.

He could only think of an engine room, and the showboat didn't have one of those, apparently. He looked up at the funnels that weren't actually connected to anything. A flag hung at full mast with another one further down the pole.... and then the light-bulb went on over his head again.

The flagpole.

He clambered aboard the boat again and climbed up onto the top of the bridge where he could just about reach the rope that the two flags flew from. Using this, he pulled himself up and towards the flagpole base, which was secured with four nuts. They were very tight. Too tight for him to undo without taking a long time about it and drawing attention to himself.

He dropped back onto the bridge, falling against the railing that ran around the edge of the bridge roof. And he felt it move behind him.

He turned his attention from the flagpole to the railings behind him, which were very badly maintained and at least needed a fresh coat of paint. The railing along the top was crooked. He pushed it, and it moved again. It wasn't fastened.

The length of pole was only about five feet long, but that was probably all he needed. And it unscrewed very easily if he pushed the uprights slightly apart.

The railing gave with a clatter and he caught it before it fell overboard and into the murky depths of the Mississippi.

Armed with his latest pickings, he turned to jump back down the ladder.

However, there was a man waiting on the deck below with a gun in his hand pointing directly at Bart.

Chapter 27

Toni checked her watch. It would soon be time for her to go and meet her brother at Veronique's house. They hadn't told her they wouldn't be back the previous night and Toni was feeling guilty. Besides, they still had a key. Not

that they needed it. Just like almost everyone else in the town, Veronique didn't bother locking her door.

"If anyone wants anything, they'll get in anyway," she'd said. "There's no reason for them to destroy everything in the way in the meantime."

Toni skipped along, carrying her belongings in the carpet bag. She'd helped herself to anything that looked useful. But everything else was hers or Bart's – or Conrad's, she remembered guiltily, thinking of the cogs that were apparently of no use whatsoever to her or Bart.

When she reached Veronique's brightly coloured door, she was greeted by the cheerful face of the fruit-seller. Toni had made her a little corn dolly-type trinket out of some of the things she'd found in Halima's house and she hoped that Veronique would appreciate the little thank you gift. She'd made a similar one for Odette too, and a smaller one for Esme. Gideon and Desmond were harder to gauge, but she hoped she might find something for them at the Mardi Gras itself. "Come in, come in!" said Veronique, opening the door and gesturing for Toni to follow her into the house. "You found somewhere to stay last night?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm sorry we didn't let you know—"

"Hush, chile, it's fine."

Toni gave her the key, and thanked her. When Toni held out the corn dolly, the older woman seemed delighted and promised to treasure it forever.

"You and your brother, you're leaving today, yes?" she asked.

"Hopefully, if all goes well, yes."

"You have repaired your vehicle?" Toni nodded. "That is good. You will stay for some of the fiesta, though?"

"Oh yes," said Toni. "We don't want to miss that."

"Good, because I know that my sister and her family would like to say goodbye to you too."

"And we want to say goodbye and thank you to them too."

Veronique led Toni to the back of the house. Her back room was like her best parlour. And she sat Toni down while she went to make coffee.

"Where is your brother?" asked Veronique from the kitchen.

"I thought he might be here," replied Toni. "He's supposed to be meeting me here. I take it he hasn't been yet?" she asked.

"No, I have not seen him. What time did he say he'd be here?"

Toni looked at the clock on the wall. "He was supposed to be here ten minutes ago. I'm already late."

"I expect he will be here very soon," said Veronique, placing the coffee in front of Toni along with a plate of small tidbits.

Toni hoped so, but a shiver ran down her spine all the same.

Conrad hustled Hondo Pitts out of the apartment and into the town. The boy was waiting for them in the alley way, and together the three of them made their way into town, Pitts breaking off briefly to feed the alligators.

Once the beasts were fed, Hondo went and gathered three rolls of beads. One roll, the biggest, he placed around his own neck. The smallest of the piles he gave to the boy. The medium-sized roll he gave to Conrad, who looked at it as though it was something he'd walked in on the street.

"What do you want me to do with that?" he asked, incredulous.

"Do you want to fit in or do you want to stand out?"

Conrad tutted and sighed but took the beads anyway and hung them around his neck. He could feel the weight of them all and was surprised. They were a lot heavier than they looked when there were so many of them together.

They did keep getting stopped on the way as people bought beads from them. Some tried to haggle, but Pitts was having none of that. Even the boy sold some, but Conrad's seemed to be for restocking for when the other two needed more.

"It's the best day for these," said Hondo Pitts. "Well, today onwards. Sometimes at the end of Mardi Gras they think they can buy them cheap. But I just put them into the storeroom until next time. It's not as if they'll go off, is it?"

They slowly made their way to the dock.

There the showboat sat on the water, looking just as resplendent as the rest of the town with all of her finery. Crew and company were milling around, doing their bit, smiles and cheerful faces painted on, literally. The smell of greasepaint and perfume and talc mingled with the usual smells of the murky river.

And there she was, Miss Halima Dominique, firmly on the arm of the master of ceremonies, who was also wearing his performing best. Miss Dominique looked beautiful in a scarlet, drop-waisted satin dress and a long-line fur coat draped over her shoulders to keep her warm. A hair band around her head held a feather in place and around her neck hung the amulet.

Conrad's mouth almost watered at the sight – not of the beautiful woman, but of the striking pendant against her breast.

He grabbed hold of Hondo Pitts, who was just in the middle of another sale and didn't take too kindly to being either manhandled or interrupted. But he relaxed when he saw what the other man was staring at.

"Calm down, boss," he hissed, nodding towards the sheriff's men who were on the prowl.

Conrad tried to contain his excitement, but everything else had so far gone so wrong, he really needed this to go right today.

He had to stop her getting arrested.

And then he had to get that amulet from around her neck.

Of Toni and Bart, there was no sign.

*

Bart was on the floor of the shack Miss Dominique had taken refuge in the night before. His hands and feet were tied with rope, and he'd been searched, but he'd not been hurt – or not beyond his pride. The man with the gun was the man who had opened the door to her. He spoke with a rough, French accent.

"What you want with Miss Halima?" asked the man.

"I wanted the flagpole," said Bart, "but I had to make do with the handrail from around the roof."

"I watch you," said the man. "You went to Miss Halima's room and searched her things. What you want with Miss Halima?"

"I wondered if she had a necklace. We have the pair and my sister saw her with it and we wondered if she'd left it in her cabin," Bart half-lied, thinking on his feet – or, rather, on his backside. "But we think she may be in trouble."

"You no her slave master?"

"No. I'm not her slave master."

"Miss Halima, she need help," said the man.

"She does?" asked Bart, wriggling into a more comfortable seated position.

"She has the problem with the..." he cast around for the right word but decided on sign language instead, mimicking drinking with his hand.

"Booze?" suggested Bart.

"Yes, the booze as you say. And the smoke?" Again, he did sign language for smoking a pipe – a big pipe.

"Yes, smoking," agreed Bart.

"She need help. Or she kill herself. And she need help or her slave master take her back."

"I thought slavery was abolished sixty years ago," said Bart.

"Not here in Louisiana," said the man. "The ol' families. They still keep their slaves, but they call them servants. They mek them buy the'selves out, but most can't afford it. Miss Halima, she bin gone a year and a day. They shunt a took her back, but they did. She need help," he said again.

"We can help her..." ventured Bart.

"How you do that?"

"We can get her taken away and put in a safe place."

"Will that mek Miss Halima well again?"

Bart nodded. "And it will keep her safe from her slave master. And you might still be able to visit her."

"I no care about that, so long as she well and safe. How you do this?"

"Do the booze or drugs make her violent?"

The man thought for a moment. "Yes'm. Sometimes."

"Well, if we can upset her so that she attacks someone, while the sheriff's men are here, they might arrest her."

The man stepped back. "I no want her arrested!"

"No, it will be temporary. But they will put her in a hospital, where they can care for her, get her off the booze and laudanum, keep her safe from the slave boss too."

Bart felt sorry for the poor man. He seemed torn. Keep her free and she'd never be free – of either the substances or her old master. Lock her up and she'd be free from those, but not free herself. He was between a rock and a hard place.

"We could give her the gun," he suggested. "If she wave the gun they may take her too."

"But she may also hurt someone—"

The man's face broke into a gap-toothed grin. "She no hurt anyone. It no real." To prove it, he picked the gun up from the table and showed it to Bart. It was a replica.

"The name's Bart, by the way."

"Bart? That is strange name."

"It's short for Bartholomew."

The man tried to say it but gave up. "I call you Bart," he laughed. "Koofrey Carbonneau," said the man. "But you can call me Koof," he added as Bart tried to roll the name around his mouth and failed.

He untied Bart's hands and feet.

Chapter 28

Conrad, Hondo Pitts and the boy roamed around the dockside keeping a very firm eye on Miss Halima Dominique and her escort. But they weren't the only ones watching her.

The two men who had taken her to the big house had noticed that she was missing, and they thought they knew exactly where to find her. They'd searched and searched from very early this morning, but she wasn't on the boat and she wasn't with the rest of the ensemble. Then, all of a sudden, when there were too many eyes around, she'd appeared, in all of her finery. But not from the boat. She'd come from a different part of the town, a different part of

the dock, and they'd not seen from where, which would have been useful if she disappeared again. When they caught her this time, it had to be for good.

They watched her and the MC from the show as they paraded around, chatted to folk. And every so often they saw her sneak a drink from a small bottle she carried in her equally small bag. Trying not to look too conspicuous themselves, they clearly failed when Halima Dominique spotted them and whispered something into her companion's ear, who also looked towards them. Because she was too busy watching them, she didn't see the other group of people who were clearly interested in her. But the two men watching her had seen them.

The bead-sellers and the boy stayed as close to her as they possibly could. Watching, following, whispering. Then they noticed someone else was watching her. Well, one of them was watching her, the other one was staring right at them.

This wasn't going to end good.

The two men decided to slope off, but Koofrey Carbonneau wasn't about to let them do that. He touched Bart on the shoulder, who turned to see where he was pointing. And then they started to follow the two strangers. Who decided to hedge their bets and stand their ground after all.

"You leave Miss Halima alone," said Koof.

"She's our property," said the bigger of the two men.

"She was away a year and a day. She no longer anyone's property."

"And anyway," said Bart. "Slavery's illegal now and has been for years."

"She's not a slave. She's our servant."

"So you pay her a wage and she's free to go as and when she likes?" asked Bart.

"That's not how it works here. She's our property."

"And how it works here is if she manages to stay away for a year and a day, then she's free."

The two men looked at each other, then the big one continued.

"It hasn't been a year."

"Was a year and a day the day the boat was due in," said Koof. "But the boat was a day late. It's been gone all that time and Miss Halima was on it when it left."

The bigger of the two looked puzzled, but the other one wasn't having any of it.

"She's ours and she's coming with us," he said, rushing towards Halima and the MC.

The MC placed a protective arm around Miss Halima's shoulders, but Miss Halima looked over to the sheriff's men and called out to them.

Within moments there was a scuffle going on with Miss Halima being pulled from the MC to Koof to a deputy to one or the other of the two men.

Bart didn't know if this was how he was supposed to let Halima be arrested. But he doubted it meant her being taken back to the big house again. He also doubted it meant being carted off to the local jail, but so far she wasn't causing a scene, or not enough to be arrested, and especially when she was the victim.

But the sheriff's men were white and the big men were white and Halima and the MC and Koof were all black. Bart remembered hearing many cases of racism between the police and the black community and even the Ku Klux Klan. So he doubted that Miss Halima would be treated very fairly. But he'd promised Koof he'd help her.

By now Conrad and the bead-seller had joined them, with Conrad trying to placate everyone. He and Bart acknowledged each other, but they were both plainly interested in the same thing. Conrad did seem to be pouring oil on, though. Perhaps he and Toni had read him wrong after all.

Bart could see that Miss Halima was getting agitated, so he pulled her free and as he did so retrieved the fake gun from his pocket and gave it to her.

The alcohol she'd consumed so far today already made her very unstable. As soon as she noticed she had a gun, she started to wave it at everyone while screaming like a banshee for them all to leave her alone. Not just those around her hit the deck. Everyone within the vicinity did, and like a wave of water it spread around the dockside.

"Leave me alone!" she yelled. "I shoot!"

When Conrad noticed that Bart and his mate hadn't dropped to the ground, he started to stand up too.

"Come on now, miss," he said. "You don't want to hurt anyone."

"They want to put me in prison again!" she cried. "I no theirs. I free. I on showboat for a year and a day. I free!"

"I'm sure they'll understand that, miss, if you tell them calmly and quietly. You don't need the gun."

He continued to walk towards her and eventually those watching lifted their heads from the floor too, and slowly stood up again.

Halima stopped waving the gun around and pointed it at Conrad instead.

"Go away! I shoot!" she said.

But he paid no attention.

As she tried to pull the trigger, and failed, realisation swamped over her and she started to scream and wail again.

"Shush, shush, miss," urged Conrad.

She started to cry and she threw the gun at Conrad. Then she started to pull and rip at her beautifully coiffured hair.

Her MC tried to calm her down. The two men who had come to steal her tried to calm her down. The police tried to calm her down. Even Hondo Pitts the bead-seller tried to calm her down. They all failed miserably and had to watch out for sharp fingernails scratching, teeth biting, and small fists thumping.

Bart and Koof just watched. Koof wanted to go to her but he stayed at Bart's side.

The sheriff's men approached with caution. Between them and Bart they were able to catch her and hold her still until she calmed down. When she'd stopped keening, they escorted her away, asking the MC to accompany them.

"But I have a show to put on," complained the MC.

"I go," said Koof.

The deputies looked at Halima and she nodded, resigned. They let go of one of her arms so she could hold her hand out to her friend.

Bart stooped in the dirt and picked up the fake gun, causing the crowd to jump again, until they remembered that it was a fake.

"Here," he said to Koof.

"You have it, my friend," said Koof. He trailed sadly after the little huddle heading to the nearest jail.

"Surely you don't need to arrest her?" said Conrad, but they ignored him. "Wait!" he cried, and they turned. "She has my property. She stole it." They all looked at him, puzzled. "The charm around her neck. It's mine."

Halima let go of Koof's hand and pressed it to the amulet, shaking her head. But one of the deputies ripped it from around her neck and threw it into the dirt.

As Conrad stooped to pick it up, Bart was sure he had a smirk on his face. But he was quick to wipe it off when he presented himself to the crowd again. "Such a shame," he muttered. He turned to Bart and pointed at him. "And you have something of mine too."

One of the deputies paused and turned to see what Conrad was on about this time. But his colleague called him and they finally disappeared into the town.

Bart sighed. "I don't have anything of yours," he said.

*

Toni and Veronique made the decision to go on to the street festival anyway. On the way they collected Desmond and Odette and the children. Odette and Esme were very happy with their corn dollies, and Toni promised Desmond and Gideon that they would get something too.

Desmond looked absolutely wonderful in his witch-doctor outfit, with coloured feathers floating in the breeze and red and black face paint rendering

him almost impossible to recognise. Odette had her hair braided and she wore a pert little hat and a bright purple feather boa over her gold sparkly outfit. Esme and Gideon were dressed in bright colours with what looked like dyed handkerchiefs pulled back over their heads that they could turn into masks when the parade started. Veronique was a vision in scarlet with a turban on her head and a double string of fat beads around her neck.

"I feel quite under-dressed," complained Toni, laughing.

"In that outfit?" squealed Desmond.

She was wearing her black taffeta skirt and her royal blue satin shirt, her black corset-like bodice over the top of her outfit, pinching her in at the waist, and her very fine top hat. And her long hair curled down to her waist.

"I think you look splendid!" said Odette. "Perfect."

The streets were starting to fill up as everyone made their way to the parade.

"I don't want to go without Bart," she said, looking one way then the other for her brother.

"Then you won't have to," beamed Veronique. He was coming towards them, looking slightly the worse for wear in his work clothes and with his satchel over his shoulder.

Chapter 29

"Right then!" shouted the MC, clapping his gloved hands together. "Let's get this show on the road. Roll up, roll up. Free shows on the showboat today after the main parade. Get your tickets early. Or there won't be room."

He wandered off, completely ignoring Bart, Conrad, Hondo and the others who had joined them all. A small cluster of people followed him, hoping to get some good tickets for the unusually free show later this afternoon.

Bart had already started to leave, but Conrad didn't want to lose him again. He was pleased to see that he was heading towards Toni.

"Ah, Antoinette," he murmured.

"Boss?" said Hondo Pitts.

"Don't call me that," hissed Conrad. "I've told you before."

"Sorry, boss."

"Do you know who that dog belongs to?" he asked, spotting the white dog. Hondo shook his head, so Conrad shrugged his shoulders and ignored the creature.

As he approached Bart and Toni and, obviously, their friends, the brother and sister greeted each other as though they hadn't seen each other for years.

"Do you know who those people are?" he asked Hondo Pitts.

"The lady in red is Missus Veronique. She's a fruit-seller. The woman in the feather boa is her sister Odette, which means the man in the bright feathers is probably Odette's husband, Desmond the witch-doctor. The children are theirs. I don't know their names."

"Do they all live together?"

"I don't think so, boss."

Conrad approached the crowd and opened his arms in recognition and welcome. "Antoinette! Bartholomew! Here we all are."

Toni glanced over at him and burst out laughing.

"Nice necklace, Conrad."

Damn! He'd forgotten the beads. He took what was left of Hondo's wares from around his neck and gave them to the boy. He saw Toni give the boy a double take. Hmm, she knew him too. He turned to Hondo Pitts to give him a quizzical look.

"She must have seen him following her," said Pitts, holding his hands out in surrender. "No harm done."

"I think you have something of mine," he said to Toni. She looked at the necklace in his hand.

"What do you mean?" asked Bart.

"Your little sister stole something of mine from the Model T Ford." He turned back to Toni. "Didn't you, sweet pea?"

Toni had a rummage in her bag and came up with the cogs. "I thought they might help us fix the time machine on the Harley," she said, holding them out to him. "But we didn't need them in the end."

"Oh?" said Conrad, taking them from her. "Have you repaired it, then?"

"Not yet," said Bart. "But we have almost everything that we need." He started to look around the crowd to see if he recognised someone. Conrad didn't know who he was looking for.

Conrad raised an eyebrow. "Interesting." His eyes alighted on the rod Bart held in his free hand. "You have scaffolding?" he said.

Bart looked down and agreed that yes, it would make a very good scaffolding pole. To his sister he said, "Have you seen the photographer, Toni? Don't forget you wanted him to take a picture of us all."

"Oh yes," said Toni. "I'd forgotten, but no I haven't seen him." She turned to their friends. "We'd love to have our picture taken with you all," she said.

"Then our picture can be our thank you gift to you, Desmond, for all of your help." She indicated the scratch on her forehead that no longer needed a dressing. "That ointment of yours works like magic," she said. Then, to Conrad, "Do you have everything you want now?"

"Apart from you, sweet pea," he said, lasciviously.

"Ugh," she shuddered, and went after her brother, their friends towing along and giving Conrad a polite nod but a wide berth.

*

"When we have our picture taken," she said, chattering, to the others, we'll have to give him your details and then we can tell you where to leave our copy so we can pick it up later." She was referring, of course, to some kind of time capsule that she and Bart could find when they returned to their own time. Or, they could always come back for it.

The group was quite excited and had no trouble leaving Conrad and his friends behind.

"One moment, miss," said a voice.

Toni turned to see Hondo Pitts coming towards her.

"Would you like some beads? For the Mardi Gras?"

Toni looked around and saw lots of people were wearing single strings of beads, sometimes double like Veronique, but most were like the ones Hondo Pitts was selling.

"Yes please," she said. She bought a string of beads for her and a string of beads for Gideon, who proudly hung them around his neck and beamed a dazzlingly white smile at her.

*

They all trailed after Bart, who was loping along at quite the gait. He kept on looking at the sky. It would have been good if the boss had given them a time to aim at because, at the moment, there didn't seem to be any sign of a storm.

He'd spotted the photographer, who had set up a mini photo-booth-type area in a corner of the dock. His camera was directed towards the river where the huge showboat was in the background. There was a queue of people waiting to use his services. Bart hoped that the man would be happy to do business.

"He's over here," he called behind him to Toni and the others, who weren't keeping up particularly well. When he reached the queue, he took his place and waited for them to join him.

Once Toni and the others were able to hold their place in the queue for him, he peeled off and chatted to the photographer as he worked, asking pertinent questions, complimenting him on his chosen backdrop and so on. Then, when it was their turn, he paid for the group shot and asked for three copies to be sent to Desmond's address.

The seven of them clustered in a group with the mighty showboat behind them and they all fixed beaming smiles on their faces while they waited for the flashgun to go off. Then Bart chatted some more with the photographer, paid

him extra, and came away with small amounts of the chemicals he needed. The photographer didn't even ask him what he wanted it for.

"I think that's us done here," Bart said to Toni, after thanking the photographer. He turned to their friends. "The photographer will bring all three copies to Desmond's house," said Bart, "and then you can let Veronique have her copy."

"What should we do with your copy?" asked Odette. "Take it to the post office? Do you have an address we can use?"

Bart scratched his head and looked at his sister. They hadn't thought this through properly yet, had they?

Toni had one of her light-bulb moments. "Do you have a monument in any of the cemeteries?"

"No," said Odette.

"But we do have a plaque on the wall in the old cemetery," said her sister.

"Great," said Bart. "Does it have a chamber behind it?"

"I think so," said Veronique.

"Could you leave it there for us?" asked Toni. "We don't know when we might be back but in case we don't have chance to drop in to see you all..."

"Yes, yes," said Odette. "We can do that."

"But of course, you must still try to come and visit us when you do come back," said Veronique.

"Cool," said Bart.

*

Conrad and Hondo Pitts left the party, with the boy and the dog trailing behind. They made their way through the packed streets, which were getting fuller now, to the old cemetery where Conrad was keeping his machine parked. On the way, Hondo and the boy made many more sales of beads, and Hondo even let the boy keep some of his money.

Conrad clasped the amulet tightly. Hand and charm were both in the pocket of his coat.

When they got to the cemetery, Hondo and the boy stayed outside and continued to sell beads to the passers-by, leaving Conrad to do what he had to do.

He moved the stone aside and inched into the space between the car and the wall of the tomb. He didn't have a lot of room and hardly any light. But he knew his machine very well and was able to work.

He stripped off his coat, removed his hat, rolled up his sleeves and set to work lifting the floorboards on the passenger side of the car.

There, in the box, he stowed the amulet, clicking it into a special place designed to engage it securely during time travel. He packed the box away

again, making sure the floorboards were securely fixed down. It wouldn't be long before he was heading home now, and the immobiliser was still in place until then anyway.

He opened the glove compartment to reveal the mechanism for the time machine. He fixed the two cogs in place, set everything into motion, then closed and locked the glove compartment.

With everything primed, all he had to do was insert his ignition key, press the starter motor and push down the clutch pedal with his foot. Then the vortex would start and he'd be on his way.

He stepped out of the vehicle into the tight space again, and this time locked the door securely, making sure the other door and the boot were also locked. Then he stepped outside of the tomb, rolled the stone over, and returned to Hondo Pitts.

They all went back to Hondo's place to replenish his bead supply, get something to eat, feed the alligators, and conclude their business. Conrad was to pay him in several gold coins for his services, and he promised to look him up next time he was in the area.

As Conrad made his way through the streets, the first big spots of rain slowly began to fall. He looked up at the darkening sky and sniffed at the air. There was another humdinger on the way, but this time he'd be long gone before it arrived.

Chapter 30

Bart was up to his elbows under the seat of the Harley, which flicked up into a right angle and revealed the time machine mechanism beneath it. It was dark inside the tomb, so Toni dug into her bag for her mini torch.

The rod was propped up against the wall. The bits out of the clock and the radio were laid out on a cloth on a shelf inside the tomb. The chemical powders were being kept dry in two little pouches that the photographer had let them have.

Bart saved the chemicals for when the machine was definitely working, but he was using his toolkit to add each of the parts to the main mechanism.

"It needs a spark for the powders, he said.

"Like a lighter or a match?" asked Toni.

"No, like a flint or something. But we don't have a flint."

"A stone age flint or a flint from a lighter?"

"Yes, anything like that. But not a flame. It needs to be a spark.

He got all of the bits connected and tested it. He closed the seat, climbed onto the bike and jumped onto the kick-start. The engine turned over and fired up, but that was all. He shook his head, switching the engine off again.

They wheeled the motorbike out into the open where they could take advantage of the remaining light and even the rain didn't stop them doing what they needed to do.

Bart had another go at making sure all the components were in the right place. But still it wasn't doing what he wanted it to.

He fastened the lightning rod to the electrics, pulled the mechanism to pieces one more time, and carefully and methodically put all the components back in, cleaning the connections, making sure there were no breaks in the wires, testing that everything worked before he added it.

He tried to fire it up again, but failed.

"We need a flint," he said to Toni.

Toni tried to think where she'd seen a lighter – or where indeed she'd seen any matches.

Bart rummaged in his coat pocket and pulled out the replica gun, holding it in the air in triumph. "This has a firing pin," he announced. He dismantled the gun, pulled out the firing pin, then wondered where he was supposed to put it. He fitted the firing pin in a few places before deciding where it was supposed to go. Then he nodded, stroked his chin, and said, "We'll get one pop at this now. If it doesn't work, we're stuck."

The spots of rain grew heavier and the sky clouded over. There was a very quiet rumble of thunder in the distance. Downtown they could hear the party getting into full swing. They would put up awnings if the rain grew too heavy. Birds stopped singing, however, and the sky turned a cloudy purple.

"We don't have long," said Toni. "We have to get out to the delta yet."

Bart climbed onto the motorbike, gave it a kick, and the engine burst into life again. He checked some dials, climbed off the bike again, lifted the seat, checked a few things and looked at his sister with a frown.

"That's it," he said. "We've done it." He waited a beat for Toni to realise what he was saying, and as the smile crept across her face he said it again. "We did it!"

"Great!" said Toni. "Can we go now?"

"Yup," said Bart. He closed the seat, adjusted something on his dashboard, and placed the rod inside the side-car. "I'll connect that when we get out to the delta," he said.

Toni settled into the side-car, fixed her seatbelt and put on her helmet and goggles. Her brother glared at her until she had also fastened the strap beneath her chin tightly. Nodding, he climbed aboard again, put his own helmet on, and did up his jacket.

He changed gear, opened the throttle, and sped off towards the delta.

The streets on this side of town were almost empty. Everyone was at the fiesta, apart from the odd stray dog taking advantage of unattended rubbish bins with food in.

As they left the town and drove out onto the dirt track, the heavens opened. They only had a few minutes to get to the delta and the rain made visibility difficult. They had to slow down when they reached the crash site, but once they were sure, they came to a standstill.

Bart fixed the lightning rod while Toni lifted the floorboards in the side-car and opened the stash box. She removed all of the trinkets and odds and sods that she kept in there to reveal at the very bottom the engaging mechanism. She took the amulet, Conrad's amulet, and fastened it into place, twisting it until it engaged and the light came on. When she was happy the artefact was secure and registered, she piled everything back into place on top of it, refixed the floorboards, and settled back into her seat.

Ready to go, they assumed their positions and waited for the storm to arrive.

Chapter 31

Back in town, in the oldest cemetery in New Orleans, Conrad fired up his machine, braced himself, and was off.

The eddy picked up speed as it sucked the vehicle down and into its depths. Down, down, down, until Conrad couldn't breathe properly. Suddenly there was a bump, restarting the supply of oxygen, and Conrad relaxed.

He felt another bump as the colours changed from white silver to white gold, to yellow, to orange. The specks of dust turned into little stars, then big stars, then planets. As the vortex continued to swirl, Conrad became aware of a high-pitched whining noise he'd never heard before. He went into a mild panic thinking that something must have gone wrong – those pesky interfering interlopers must have sabotaged his time machine in revenge.

But the whining stopped for a moment and changed to a whimpering, and Conrad felt hot breath on the back of his neck.

He turned in his seat slowly not knowing what to expect, and almost jumped out of his skin to see a pair of eyes peering frantically into his.

Then he laughed as he realised it was a dog – the stray dog that had been following him, the same dog he'd thrown a stick for only the day before. His laughter of relief changed to disbelief and then slight outrage before he was horrified.

He'd never had a pet before, didn't even like dogs that much. What was he supposed to do with this one?

Conrad didn't have much time to decide what to do. He knew he could keep it or he could go back another day and take it back. Or he could just kick it out when he got home and let it fend for itself.

Whichever, he didn't have time to do anything now. He couldn't abort the journey. He'd make his decision in a day or so... after he'd lived with it for a while.

Conrad smiled at the dog and stroked its head.

"Don't worry, little tramp," he said. "It'll all be over in a moment."

He turned to concentrate on the matter in hand again.

As the lights started to disappear, Conrad felt the first bounce, then the second, and then one more before finally landing back at home base. All went quiet and still and black. They'd arrived at their destination. Conrad was home.

*

Bart and Toni watched as the swirling storm approached. Across the delta they could see a funnel that had picked up all sorts of debris. Trees and houses were swirling around before disappearing into the centre of the maelstrom. The funnel was going in a different direction to where they were, but they were still able to watch it as it crossed the open land, whipping up water and more rubbish as it went.

The electric storm followed it. Again, they watched the lightning fork between murky sky and dusty land, and they heard the thunder rumble a few seconds later. As the thunder followed the lightning ever closer, Bart counted the seconds. He checked the dial on his motorbike dashboard. It was just after four o'clock.

He monitored the storm, to make sure it was coming towards them, and he calculated its speed and actual direction.

He turned to his sister and shouted to her. "Are you ready?"

She held onto the sides of the side-car with her fingers until her knuckles turned white with the effort. She nodded and held her breath.

Bart pulled his goggles down one last time, revved the engine a few times, checked over his shoulder to ensure the funnel was behind him, then he opened the throttle and sped into the oncoming electric storm.

The milometer crept up – thirty miles an hour, forty miles an hour, sixty miles an hour, seventy-five – then one almighty flash of lightning struck their lightning rod and, after a bit of a trip and a rumble, all of the lights started to flash.

The eddy picked up speed as it sucked them both down and into its depths. Down, down, down, until they couldn't breathe properly, until they thought they'd never breathe again.

He felt another bump as the colours changed from white silver to white gold, to yellow, to orange. The specks of dust turned into little stars, then big stars, then planets, as they reached their programmed destination.

Bart squeezed Toni's hand as the darkness closed in around them. He felt the first bounce, then the second, and then one more before they finally landed. And then all went quiet and still and black.

They'd arrived.

*

Back home in his normal garden at the back of his normal house in his normal neighbourhood and in his normal time zone, Conrad picked up a stick that lay on the ground at the foot of a tree. He looked at it, taking in all of its texture and feeling.

Then he pulled his arm back and threw the stick as far as he could. Away it flew, along the length of his low-maintenance but long patch of land, sailing through the air against a winter blue sky. As it bumped and bounced before coming in to land, the dog went flying after it as fast as he could, tongue hanging out in pure pleasure, panting his head off, as if laughing out loud.

When he fetched the stick back and dropped it at Conrad's feet, jumping backwards and forwards, waiting for Conrad to pick it up and throw it again, Conrad felt a stupidly mad rush of happiness and pride.

He picked up the stick again and sent it off into its orbit again, closely followed by the speeding dog.

Chapter 32

They were sat around the boss's comfortable living room. Three mismatched over-stuffed settees were placed in a group. Between them sat a massive wooden chest that served as a coffee table as well as storage. A fire roared in the grate.

Along one wall ran a series of period wall units made of oak panelling, but the wall units slid apart to reveal a state-of-the-art communications system. For now, the wall units remained tightly closed.

On the rug at Conrad's feet lay the latest member of the team – the stray dog who had travelled all the way from New Orleans to a small village in England and across time too.

"Did you bring the amulets with you?" asked the boss.

Toni immediately placed her artefact on the coffee table before them, then sat back in the soft cushions sipping her hot chocolate.

Conrad didn't move. He just stared into the fire.

"Conrad?" prompted the boss.

Conrad's attention snapped back as though he'd been daydreaming and was somewhere else, very far away. "What?" he said.

The boss moved his eyebrows and indicated the coffee table with his head. Conrad's eyes flicked from the boss to the table to Toni's amulet to Bart, who mimicked what the boss had done with his head. Reluctantly, Conrad reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of fabric and slowly unwrapped his prize. He glanced down at the pendant in his hand, then slowly put it on the table in front of them.

"Why did you try to match the two amulets?" asked the boss.

Conrad shrugged his shoulders. He'd had a few days to come up with his story but didn't want it to sound too rehearsed. "I thought we needed the money."

"How would merging the two amulets bring us more money?"

"Placing them together and engaging them brings great wealth to the person doing it."

"And you had no intention of gaining that great wealth for yourself?"

"Of course not, little brother. What do you take me for?"

"I take you for someone who's been jealous of me inheriting the company and who has been trying to undermine me ever since."

"Come now, that's not very fair. You were complaining only the other week that you weren't sure we could afford to keep going for much longer."

Toni and Bart exchanged an uncomfortable look. This news was news to them.

The boss flicked a glance in their direction, but returned his attention to his brother.

"That was just me voicing a concern," he said. "I didn't expect you to go off into history to resolve it, putting Toni and Bart's lives at risk while you were at it."

"Their lives were never at risk," scoffed Conrad. "I was there waiting for them."

Without any proof, the boss couldn't really argue with his brother on that one. So he changed the subject. "What's this you've fetched home with you?" he said, indicating the dog.

"This is Sabot," said Conrad. The dog lifted his head at the sound of his name and Conrad gave him a scratch.

"Sabot?" said Bart.

"It means tramp in French," said Conrad. "He was a stray in New Orleans and he stowed away in the Model T Ford."

"I think he's lovely," said Toni, making kissing noises at the dog, who thumped his tail then lay back down again on the rug.

"He's my new partner," grinned Conrad. "He'll keep me company on future missions, give me someone to talk to."

The boss seemed to accept that and turned his attention to the two amulets. "We can't merge them," he reminded them all.

"Why not?" asked Conrad.

"Because they're not ours to merge. They're ours to keep safe and out of the wrong hands."

"But we don't have any money."

"We have plenty of money."

"Where did we get it from?" asked Conrad.

"From a Miss Halima Dominique."

Silence crashed into the room like a deafening noise, and the three explorers looked at each other very puzzled.

"Miss Dominique?" asked Bart, perplexed.

"Yes. It's a long story."

"What happened?"

"In 1926, she was arrested at the Mardi Gras for using violent and threatening behaviour. But when they got her into custody, a friend who had accompanied her—"

"Koofrey Carbonneau?" interrupted Bart, sitting forward onto the edge of his seat.

"Yes," said the boss. "Or Koof as he preferred to be known. He convinced the sheriff's deputies to have a psychiatric evaluation done, which was unusual in those days. But it seems that Bart here convinced him to give it a try."

Bart had the good grace to blush.

"They decided that she was schizophrenic, when in fact she was just an alcoholic and a drug addict. But she was locked up in a sanatorium in the town for many, many years. Away from the temptation of absinthe and laudanum, she was soon in a lower security hospital that hadn't been built yet in 1926."

"But it had been built by 1948?" asked Toni. "The date we were supposed to go back to?"

"That's it. She became a volunteer nurse in the hospital first, then they gave her a job. And all the time her friend Koof was there by her side, keeping her on the straight and narrow, reminding her of the advice the English stranger had given him back in 1926."

"But the amulets?" said Conrad.

"She'd already joined them. She earned good money on the showboat and put it into a bank account in New Orleans that Koof opened for her, where it stayed until her eventual release from hospital."

"So are they useless now?" asked Toni.

"No. Because their power has already been used to bring great wealth to the person who merges them, to merge them again will undo all of that. There might be a financial crash or someone hacks into their account or for some reason their revenue is simply drained."

"What does it have to do with us?" asked Bart.

"When Koof searched you, Bart, you had a business card on you..." Bart thought for a moment, and then he remembered. "Koof and Miss Dominique were so happy with how her life turned out in the end, compared to how it could have done, that they sought us out."

"When did she die?" asked Toni.

"In the 1970s. She was very old."

"But you and Conrad were still boys."

"I know. But our father had already founded the organisation. Miss Dominique hired a private detective and, after a few long months, he came up with our father's company. And when she died, she left the surplus – after giving much to her own family – to the company. And, when Koof died too, not long after her in fact, he did the same. But the money didn't register until the moment in time that you helped her to get arrested, Bart."

"I don't understand," said Conrad.

"What don't you understand?"

"Why only a week or so ago the company was struggling and now, because of Bart, it isn't."

"Well, the money was there, but it started to disappear. I thought it was being syphoned off by a hacker or a fraudster. But when I looked into it, it's because someone went back to 1926 and started to meddle with history. Gradually, the money started to fade and our credit score was going through the floor.

"Nobody wanted to do new business with us, no one wanted to hire us to go back in time to maintain the balance. We were losing credibility, losing work and losing future revenue.

"It took me a while to work it out, but I knew that if someone had gone back to 1926 to collect the other amulet, all they had to do was find the one that would come to us anyway, put them together and undo the good that Miss Dominique had already done. I also picked up a vibe that they were going to try and stop her getting arrested and so stop the process that way."

"But I didn't go back until you said you were in trouble," said Conrad. This really was making his head hurt.

"I know," said the boss. "I think there may be someone else out there wanting to sabotage us. I thought it might be you at first, Conrad—"

"Me?!" Conrad was affronted.

"I know, and I'm sorry. But there must be someone else. And we need to find out who it is before they catch on and try to ruin us again."

"It's a bit scary really," said Bart. "That someone can do that and potentially change everything that we stand for."

"We obviously have some homework to do," agreed Toni. "How can we help?"

"Well," said the boss, stroking his chin. "First of all we need to get those two amulets placed into safekeeping as far enough apart as we can. We'll take the rest from there, but you might be off on another mission before too long."

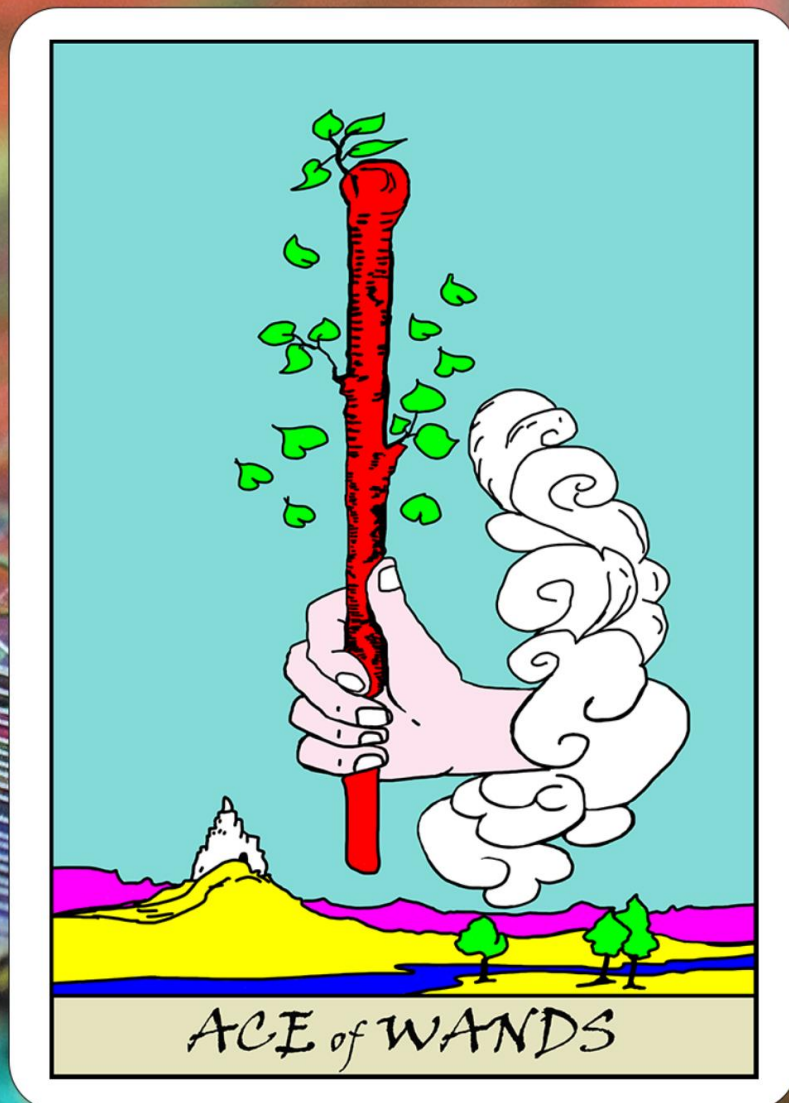
"Great," said Conrad, ruffling his dog around the neck. "Me and Sabot here can get to know each other even better."

"Right then," said the boss, leaning forward. "Here are your next missions."

*

a short Tarot tale

THE ACE OF WANDS



Diane Wordsworth

the ace of wands

The Ace of Wands *is the first in a series of loosely Tarot-connected short stories.*

Each story is the backstory for one of the characters that features in the novellas of the same series. But I won't tell you which character other than that the aces represent each of the four main players.

The others could be about anyone.

*

As with all aces in the Tarot, the Ace of Wands is all about initiating a new venture or the excitement of starting something fresh. But the suit of wands signifies energy and action, it signifies doing. Therefore, the Ace of Wands isn't just about dreaming, it's about doing too. It's about doing something about it.

Rebecca Stevens was certain there was some junk inside this old shed that was worth selling. Naturally, she'd seen it when they first moved in, surprised it hadn't been cleared out properly. But then the previous resident, sadly deceased, had apparently been quite an elderly lady. Perhaps she'd simply not had the time or the energy to clear out the shed before it became too much for her.

Then again, Rebecca hadn't felt so inclined either and she'd been there long enough now herself. It made Rebecca wonder about the loft too, another space they'd not really explored. Heck, they still had packing boxes lying around unopened and some that were regularly dipped into but still left half-unpacked. They simply hadn't had the time to investigate all of the dark and dusty tucked-away corners. There could be treasures all over the old house, treasures she could quietly sell, behind her abusive partner Martin's back, and add to her slowly increasing escape fund.

Mind you, her life couldn't be *that* bad she reasoned, having been reminded of that often enough by her neighbour Cathy, who she had very quickly made friends with. Like her, Cathy was tied to the house, though not because she too had a husband who didn't like her to go anywhere, but because she was a young mother of three children all under the age of four. The kids were far too young for Cathy to make new friends at the school gate, but she *had* been very

happy when Rebecca moved in next door, and even happier when she realised Rebecca didn't have a job to go to either.

So the two unlikely women had formed an equally unlikely friendship, each providing a lifeline to the other for completely different reasons.

"If it's really that bad," Cathy had argued once again, "how come you haven't left him so far?"

"Because I can't afford it," Rebecca had replied.

"Then it isn't that bad, yet."

And perhaps Cathy was right. But it really wasn't that easy when you honestly had no place to go and not even a bank account of your own. Martin had very quickly taken advantage of Rebecca's previous debt status, first encouraging her to add her name to his existing account and then to close her own once she'd cleared her debts. She did still have one bank account left, though. A basic account the NatWest had given her when she hit rock-bottom that she'd never used in the end and totally slipped her mind until they'd started packing. It didn't have anything in it, though.

Martin *had* supported her while she did clear the debt, but he made sure she never forgot. And when she lost her job at the steelworks, he got used to having her at home doing all the cooking and cleaning, where he could keep an eye on her. And he got steadily worse, steadily more controlling.

On another occasion, Cathy had said, "In our mums' days, you'd go to a hostel and have done with it."

"Or they just tolerated it and suffered in silence," agreed Rebecca.

"But they don't seem to have hostels any more, or not for single childless women."

"No, Cathy, they don't. Single mothers get given houses these days, and they have hostels and refuges for battered wives." But Rebecca wasn't a battered wife. In the first place, she wasn't a wife, and in the second, Martin was much too sly and clever and calculating to do anything so physically obvious. He preferred to inflict mental torture, a secret oppression, one that was difficult to prove.

"They call it domestic mental abuse you know, Rebecca. There is a legal term for it now."

But Cathy was right. Maybe it wasn't bad enough yet for her to leave, regardless of the money situation. And yes, many other women did have it worse than her. Far worse.

However, Rebecca wanted to make sure that when it *did* get bad enough, and she was sure that it would, that she wouldn't have to worry about money or the lack of it. The escape fund was building up ever so slowly and was automatically paid into the previously forgotten bank account.

Now Rebecca was tackling the shed at the bottom of the garden to see if there was anything she could salvage or do up and sell on eBay. Cathy let her use next door's broadband on an old laptop she didn't use any more, and she'd bought her a cheap mobile phone that she topped up for her too. Everything was done via email so Rebecca didn't need to worry about letters coming to the house and giving her away if Martin saw them first.

The shed was so old that the door was already almost off its hinges, taking Rebecca by surprise and grazing her shoulder when it fell onto her. It was light enough for her to prop out of the way against the fence. Then she had to negotiate several heavy-duty cardboard boxes filled with empty flowerpots and trays, laced with cobwebs and coated with dust. The flowerpots could go into the plastics recycling bin, she thought.

There were stacks of boxes, all coated in a thick layer of dust, so she methodically started to rummage through them each in turn.

The first 'treasure' she stumbled upon in a sealed cardboard box were some old sepia photographs in plain and ornate plastic frames, just like the ones her own great-grandma used to have. She watched enough daytime television to know that if the frames were Bakelite, they might be worth a few bob. Then she found an old telephone made from the same material, but black, still with the original twisted cord attached. If that could be adapted to fit a modern BT outlet, *and* if it still worked, *that* might be worth a few quid too. *Every little helps!* sang the supermarket jingle inside her head. There was also what her great-grandma would have called a wireless, with a knob missing and no plug on the end of the frayed cable. And right at the bottom of the box she found an old biscuit tin with some bangles and buttons in and an old toffee tin with some dice and some tiddly winks. And there was the missing knob from the radio. All Bakelite. *Someone* had known to keep all of these gems together. Even the tins were probably worth something.

Under an old bench was *another* box, but this one was purpose-made to hold seven-inch singles, with a little carry-handle on the lid. The catch was rusty, but Rebecca could tell by the weight that there were records inside. She'd fetch some WD40 next time. The record box was on top of another larger cardboard box, and this one contained seventy-eights, of all things. Wow! Would she find an ancient gramophone in here too? Or a television? She doubted it, the shed wasn't *that* big. But it was fun fantasising anyway.

When she placed this last box to one side and stood up stretching, she noticed an old briefcase on the bench beneath a broken window. There was no glass in the pane and no shards to be seen. And this briefcase was relatively clean. There was no dust, there were no cobwebs, but it was rain-splattered. It was also quite modern, with combination locks.

"That's interesting," she muttered. "You can't have been here for very long."

She sat back on an old galvanised bucket, hoping it wouldn't give beneath her weight, and placed the briefcase on her knee.

"What if it's drugs?" she wondered out loud, trying the catches.

Hmm, it was locked. But Rebecca knew that if she pressed the outside of the combination lock in, she could change the code. The locks snapped open and she lifted the lid, revealing bundles of scruffy twenty-pound notes.

"Wow!" she said for the second time, this time out loud, feeling the weight of one of the bundles in her hand.

She flicked through the notes with the tips of her fingers, as if assuring herself it was all money and not paper in between.

Checking several bundles, she was shocked to see it was indeed all money. She sat staring at the cash for several minutes when the church clock interrupted her.

It was five o'clock. Martin would be home in half-an-hour and he'd expect his dinner on the table. Rebecca glanced down at herself. She was filthy dirty and her hands and fingers were smudged and grubby. She didn't have long to clean herself up, so she quickly arranged the shed back to how she hoped she'd found it, propped the door back against the door frame, and dashed inside.

Someone had been in that shed more recently than she'd originally thought and she didn't want to arouse any unnecessary suspicion.

*

The next morning, as soon as Martin left for work, Rebecca was back in the shed counting money. The notes had paper bands around them in one-thousand-pound bundles. Every five bundles had another paper wrapper around them but in a different colour.

There was no writing on the bands, just a different colour for each of the two sums – red for one thousand pounds, and white for five thousand-pound bundles. There were four five thousand-pound bundles and three loose one thousand-pound bundles, plus a few loose notes left over.

"Twenty-three thousand pounds!" exclaimed Rebecca. "Thank you, Cosmos!" That would do the escape fund a world of good and was the answer to one of her prayers at least.

Where did the money come from? Who did it belong to? It couldn't be Martin's. He wouldn't have let her scrimp and scrape to clear her debts if he had thousands of pounds lying around, wouldn't have been able to resist having something else over her. Perhaps it was from a bank robbery, and they'd left it here and planned to claim it at a later date.

Or maybe it belonged to the little old lady's estate and no one knew it was there. Whichever, it was Rebecca's money now, and she had every intention of using it.

Next to a pot-bellied stove she found an old-fashioned footstool with a lift-up lid and a single pull-out drawer. The upholstered top had cigarette burns in it and a few of the buttons were missing.

Rebecca emptied out the cash and stuffed it into the top of the footstool, placing the briefcase back in its original place beneath the broken window.

The pull-out drawer in the footstool had just a key hole in it and no key. But it wasn't locked. She found the key inside alongside some scraps of cloth, a couple of thimbles – cheap metal ones – and some cotton-reels with rusty sewing needles stuck into the thread. One of the scraps of cloth was actually a deep red velvet and, on closer inspection, turned out to be a small bag with a drawstring at the top. It felt as though there was another bundle of cash inside, and Rebecca pulled out another little bundle wrapped in deep red silk. But it wasn't money, it was a pack of cards—a deck of large, old-fashioned playing cards. However, when Rebecca turned the pack over they weren't playing cards at all, and a shiver went down her spine.

"Tarot cards," she whispered. In her imagination, the Tarot cards whispered back at her, causing pin-pricks of sweat to tingle on her arms and in the small of her back.

The facing card depicted a disembodied hand sticking out of a cloud holding on to a wooden stick with leaves growing out of the top. Along the bottom it said: 'ACE of WANDS'.

Rebecca quickly wrapped the cards up in their red silk, pushed them back into the velvet bag and pulled the drawstring tightly. Then she shoved the bundle back into the drawer and slammed it shut. Piling boxes of flowerpots in front of the dralon footstool, she told herself to forget about the cards.

As she made her way back to the house, Cathy's words once again rang in her head: "It isn't that bad, yet." Cathy was right, and it certainly wasn't bad at all now that she had the money. She'd register with a letting agency, look for a job, and hopefully have a bolt-hole to escape to already in place when the time finally did come, all ready and with furniture in place. Then the next time he had a go at her she'd just leave, straight into her readymade new home. Where he'd never find her.

And so went the best laid plans of mice and men... and Rebecca...

*

The eBay work went considerably better than Rebecca even hoped it would. When she did the weekly shop – on Martin's debit card while he waited in the car (shopping being "women's work") – she asked for cashback on any offers

she'd received. It wasn't much, but every little helped and she called it her own payback for being such a savvy shopper. Even the escape fund in her secret bank account was starting to swell. But she hadn't had any chance at all to do anything about her personal situation.

"Never mind," she reminded herself one night when Martin quietly picked her up on a pile of washing-up still in the kitchen sink when he got home from work. "It isn't that bad, yet."

On mischief night, Rebecca went out to the shed and disturbed some kids who were loitering in the back alley where some people parked their cars. As she went back into the house, she told her husband about them.

"I hope they haven't been up to anything," he said on his way out to investigate. "I'll soon sort them out if they have."

Martin was gone for what seemed like an age. Rebecca watched the remaining episode of her favourite soap opera and then went looking for him in the break.

She found him in a heap on the floor, blood pouring from what looked like a broken nose. But what shook her the most was the state of the shed. Someone had broken in to the shed...

"Oh no!" she cried, dashing to the end of the back garden.

"It's okay," mumbled Martin, getting to his feet. "I'm not dead."

Remembering her priorities, she went back to him and fussed about his poor face.

"What happened?"

"That was no kids acting up for mischief night," he said, carefully mopping at his nose with his pocket handkerchief and wincing from the pain. "There were three men here, going on about something that belonged to them. Next thing I know is I'm seeing stars and then you come running out."

Rebecca strained to see the damage over Martin's shoulder.

"Don't worry about that now," he said, leading her indoors and flicking the outside light off. "There's nothing worth stealing in there anyway. We should call the police."

"They won't come out tonight," she said, trying not to show her agitation too much. "They'll be too busy with the kids who *are* making mischief."

"I pay my taxes and I've been assaulted. By grown men! Not by children. They blummin' well will come out!"

And come out they did. But it was very, very late and they'd obviously had a very, very busy evening.

The two officers who came were also very, very tired and they didn't really want to come out to a broken nose and a burgled shed that didn't contain anything of any value in the first place. They were eager to leave Rebecca

patching up her partner – he'd made her wait until they'd been in case they wanted to take pictures, but, of course, they hadn't. Then she packed him off to bed with a packet of frozen peas wrapped in a clean tea towel and some painkillers.

"It's your fault I have these two black eyes and a broken nose," complained Martin the following morning as he got ready for work.

"How is it my fault?" asked Rebecca, not really surprised but wondering what his reasoning could possibly be this time.

"If you hadn't of gone out to that blinkin' shed in the first place. And even then told me about them kids. I would have stayed safely indoors. And now I have to go to work looking like this!" He waved a hand in front of his messed-up face.

"You could always call in sick. We can take you to the hospital." Behind her back Rebecca crossed her fingers that he'd feel too compelled to play the martyr in front of his colleagues. She let out a soft sigh of relief as he remained true to form.

"I can't do that, they need me. I'll just have to tell them I fell or something."

"Or you could just tell them the truth. They might send you to Occupational Health anyway."

Secretly, of course, Rebecca could hardly wait for him to take himself off so she could go and examine the shed, see if her stash of money was still there.

She knew that she should act as normally as she always did, hopefully making all the right noises in all the right places. But this time, for some reason, she snapped when he had just one more go at her.

"Look, I've already told you once. It's *your* fault. I'm not going to admit to something that's your fault and tell everyone –"

"It's *my* fault, is it? How? I didn't *make* you go out there. I tried to convince you it was probably just kids being mischievous. But no, you had to play the big man, the big I-am, the hero who just *had* to go out there and interfere.

"Just like it wasn't my fault you spilled hot tea down you because the mug handle was wet and slippery, even though I wasn't even in the room.

"Just like when you cut your hand on the broken glass in the washing-up bowl because you couldn't wait for me to wash the crocks. I wasn't even in the *house* that time, let alone in the *kitchen* –"

CRACK!

When the punch came it startled her first, before the pain kicked in.

"*That's* for being stupid!" he said, hitting her again, this time in the stomach. "And *that's* for answering me back!" And he left her there, stunned and crying, as he stormed off up the path to work.

He'd never, ever hit her before. Not once. But now he'd crossed the line. It was definitely bad enough now. Rebecca didn't care that she hadn't organised anything yet. She was off.

When she eventually managed to examine the shed she wasn't surprised to see that the briefcase had gone. She *was* surprised to see that her hiding place had been ransacked and the money gone. The velvet bag containing the Tarot cards lay trampled on the floor. On impulse, Rebecca picked it up and pushed it into her pocket.

She packed her bags and later that day walked into a women's refuge. It was strictly for battered wives, but today at least she had some new bruises forming. She used a false name and they didn't ask too many questions. Cathy, next door, would have to wait. But Rebecca had no doubt that she'd understand.

*

The following day Martin Wood walked into the local police station.

"I'd like to report a crime," he said to the desk sergeant, who looked up and seemed shocked to see this battered face before him.

"Go on, sir," he said.

"My common-law wife had me beaten up, stole my life savings, emptied our joint bank accounts and has disappeared."

"I see," said the desk sergeant. "And how much are we talking about?"

"There was about five thousand pounds in the current account – I can let you have the exact figure – about ten thousand pounds in the savings account..." he paused.

"Sir?"

"And just over twenty-three thousand pounds in cash..."

*

Wordsworth Shorts



- Diane Wordsworth -

**the most scariest night
of the year**

the most scariest night of the year

As this was an autumn issue of the magazine, I wanted an autumn story. And you can't get more autumn than Halloween. I don't write horror stories very often, but I enjoyed the challenge of this mildly scary tale.

*

Georgia Lennard didn't have time to collect another fare. She had to get back to school to collect the kids. It was apparently the most scariest night of the year and she was taking them out. She flicked on the off-duty sign in her taxi and hightailed it in the general direction of the school.

The back streets were relatively empty at this time of day, being more likely to come alive with the less than salubrious night-life this quarter was famously known for. It wasn't a district you came to of an evening unless you were a gentleman or lady of the night. It wasn't really a district you'd choose to come to during the day either, to be frank. Georgia hated having to come here for customers, but it was a short-cut to everywhere else and if it saved time, then it saved money for Georgia.

She drummed her fingers on her steering wheel in time to the music on the car radio as the streetlights started to come on, and she thought ahead to the evening's shenanigans. It was Halloween. The kids loved Halloween. Once they'd had their tea, they were going out trick-or-treating. Georgia hoped that the weather would hold for them.

As she rounded a corner between a couple of industrial units that towered over the streets, Georgia slammed her foot on the brake. What was that in the middle of the road? She let the engine tick over as she wondered first if it was a pile of clothes and then if it was a sack of discarded kittens. It was the thought of kittens that made her choose to go and investigate further.

Georgia opened the door just as a fine drizzle started to fall. Pulling up the collar on her jacket, she carefully picked her way across the slippery cobbles. A shiver ran down her spine. She glanced around. *Creepy*, she thought.

Looking down at the pile of clothes she shivered again. It wasn't moving, so that meant it wasn't a sack of kittens... unless they'd all already died. She thought about examining the pile but shuddered at the thought. Did she really want to see a load of dead kittens? No, she didn't. But she squatted down anyway and used one of her long fingernails to move the material to one side.

A clown's face suddenly grinned at her, causing her to topple backwards with surprise and land on the wet ground. She was quick to get back up again and she stared at the face, feeling the backside of her jeans at the same time. When

she saw that it was only a mask, she felt silly and looked around to see if anyone had seen her. There was no one there. Just Georgia, her taxi and the clown. What a strange thing to leave lying around.

She crept up to the pile of fabric once more and shone the torch on her mobile phone at it. Then she laughed. An embarrassed laugh.

"It's a puppet!" she said out loud. "A clown puppet." She looked at her surroundings again, to make sure that there really wasn't anyone else there, then she bent over and carefully picked the puppet up.

It was about the size of a child and it had strings attached to its head, hands and feet. She held onto the wooden slats and wiggled them around a bit, but she couldn't get the puppet to move for her. Running her fingers over it she realised it was all in one piece. *If the kids can work out how to use it, what a great thing for them to take out with them this evening,* thought Georgia.

She gave it a shake, lifting it completely clear of the ground, made sure there was nothing underneath it, and she stowed it on the back seat of her taxi. Then she climbed back into the front of the cab, hit the accelerator, and sped off towards the school. By now it was quite dark and her headlights sliced through the rain.

At a set of traffic lights, Georgia peered over her shoulder and jumped again. The clown was grinning right at her in the rear-view mirror. She shook herself. *Stop being daft!*

And then she felt one of her tyres blow out as the taxi skidded into the kerb.

"Dammit," she muttered, getting back out of the taxi. She didn't have time to wait for the AA. It would be quicker for her to change the wheel herself. It did make her even later, though. And the rain soaked right through her denim jacket.

*

When they all eventually piled into the house, Connor and Abbie dashed upstairs to change out of their school uniforms. Georgia left her denim jacket hanging on the balustrade and rubbed at her hair and face with a towel. Then she put their tea on (fish fingers, beans and chips) and arranged the puppet on the worktop where the kids would see it when they came back down to eat. She had a menacing feeling that she was being watched, but every time she turned around, only the puppet was there.

There was a death-curdling howl. Georgia looked down to see their black cat, Domino, arching its back and yowling at the puppet. Her yellow eyes were wide, her ears were flat and her tail had bushed up to more than twice its size.

"What's the matter, Dom?" said Georgia. "Don't you like it?"

She scooped the cat up into her arms, but Domino had her claws into her so fast that Georgia dropped her again. The cat scooted out of the kitchen, hissing and spitting and slipping all over the place on the floor tiles.

How odd, mused Georgia.

"What's wrong with Domino?" asked Connor, as usual the first one to report in for tea. He was still watching after her over his shoulder.

"She didn't like our new friend," said Georgia, waiting for Connor to see the puppet.

Connor's head turned to his mother, and then his eye caught the brightly coloured creature on the worktop. "Wow! What's that?" he said, dashing up to have a closer look.

"It's a puppet," said Georgia.

"It's ace," said Connor. "Can I have a go?" Without waiting for the go ahead, he picked the puppet up by the wooden things at the top of the strings. Within seconds he had the clown walking across the kitchen floor.

"Mum, the cat's just thrown up on the landing carpet!" called Abbie down the stairs.

"Clean it up, then!" her mother called back.

"Urgh!" said Abbie's voice.

But within a few moments Georgia could hear something rubbing on the carpet, and she smiled to herself. Her daughter was a good girl who'd do something if it needed doing rather than wait for someone else to do it.

Georgia was watching Connor making the puppet dance. She heard the upstairs toilet flush and then a tap running in the bathroom sink. Then her daughter's feet came thumping back down the stairs.

"Don't forget to let your sister have a go," said Georgia, turning to serve up their tea.

Connor wasn't listening. He was miles away, a massive smile on his face.

Abbie had Domino in her arms when she came into the kitchen, but the cat yowled again, jumped down, and scampered back up the stairs. "What's wrong with her?" asked Abbie. "Is there a full moon... Wow, what's that?" she said before anyone answered, running to her brother's side. Connor was demonstrating his new-found skills and he made the puppet wave at his sister. Abbie was delighted, and she clapped her hands. "Oh, can I have a go?"

Connor was reluctant at first, but he conceded and handed the mechanism to Abbie. Like her mother, though, she couldn't make head nor tail of it and she handed it back to her brother.

"Where did you learn to do that?" she said, taking her place at the table.

"Dunno," shrugged her brother. "Never tried it before."

"I'm sure you'll get the hang of it, Abbie," said Georgia, putting their plates on the table.

Connor carefully sat the puppet back down on the worktop, washed his hands, and sat opposite her. He picked up a squeeze bottle of tomato ketchup and smothered his baked beans.

Georgia turned up her nose. She'd never understood how anyone could put ketchup on beans when they were already covered in it.

She took her place at the table with the kids, pinching a chip off Abbie's plate.

"Hey!" said Abbie, but she didn't mind really.

"I thought you might want to take him out trick-or-treating," said Georgia, pointing the half-eaten chip at the puppet.

Connor's blue eyes grew wider. "Can we?" he said.

"That's a cool idea," said Abbie.

The house phone rang and all three of them exchanged surprised looks. No one ever called the house phone. It was there purely for the internet. And Great Aunt Mabel, of course, who refused to call any of them on their mobile phones. "Too expensive!" she always complained.

Georgia hoped that Great Aunt Mabel was all right. But when she picked up the receiver, there was no one there.

"Perhaps it's Dad struggling to get a signal," suggested Abbie.

That was possible. If ever their father did have trouble calling any of their mobiles, he did in fact call the land line, just in case.

She dialled 1-4-7-1, but the electronic voice at the other end told her that the last call was three weeks ago last Wednesday... And it was, indeed, Great Aunt Mabel.

"Hmm," she said, replacing the receiver on the wall-mounted cradle. As she started to clear up the kids' dinner plates, the phone rang again. This time there was just a hollow cackle before static took over again. She hung up, dialled 1-4-7-1 again, but got the same message as before. She stood there thoughtfully for a moment before seeing the clown's face looking right at her, making her jump. But when she checked again, his painted eyes were simply staring, unseeing.

Another shiver ran down Georgia's spine. She needed to pull herself together. This Halloween lark was getting to her.

*

The kids went to get changed into their Halloween fancy dress outfits. Connor was a vampire, Abbie was a witch. Georgia had bought a black harness and lead for the cat, so that the witch's familiar could accompany them. However, of Domino there was no sign.

Georgia didn't bother dressing up, although she did change into some warm clothes. She was only there to supervise in any case. She wished that Terry wasn't working away that night. He always dressed up in a skeleton costume when he accompanied the kids. She hoped that the puppet would make up for him not being with them this year.

As it happened, the kids didn't seem to notice. Abbie carried the bucket for people to fill with sweets and chocolate and Connor walked the clown along, making him wave at passers-by as they passed by. Most of the neighbours seemed to like the puppet. It did make some of the older residents jump with fright, however. And even old Mr Jones at number forty-two who usually told them to clear off dropped some fifty-pee pieces into the bucket, eyeing the clown cautiously before slamming the door in their faces.

"Charming!" said Georgia.

"He always does that," said Abbie.

"Dad says he's a right old misery guts," said Connor.

*

The kids were more than satisfied with their evening's haul as they shared everything out equally between themselves. They were only allowed to eat one chocolate bar each. Everything else went into goody tins on the kitchen counter. That was one of the things that Georgia liked about Halloween. She didn't have to buy any sweets for the next month.

As the kids made themselves comfortable in front of the telly, Georgia made her own dinner. She always ate her meals later than they did, because usually she ate with their dad. When he wasn't there, she stuck to it so that she didn't get too hungry the next time he was there.

She eyed the puppet, which Connor had sat back on the worktop, but this time it was sitting next to the goody tins. Georgia got up to fasten the lid back onto Abbie's goody tin, but when she sat down again at the table, it was unfastened again. "Hmm," she murmured, not taking her eyes off either the puppet or the tin.

The house phone rang again, but once again there was no one there, and once again 1-4-7-1 told her there hadn't been any callers for three weeks. When it rang again, she ignored it. But when the ringing stopped, she could hear Terry's voice.

I've had an accident, said the voice. Help me! Help!

She jumped up to pick up the phone, but all she could hear was that cackle again. She called her husband back, on his mobile, but it went to voice mail.

And when she slammed the house phone back into its holder, she caught the puppet looking at her again, this time with an even bigger smile on its face.

Georgia shuddered. "You're creepy," she said, and the clown's head slowly started to move...

She grabbed at the puppet, dashed outside, and stuffed it into a wheelie bin, almost tripping over the cat.

"Oh, Domino!" she exclaimed. "You could have broken my neck!"

The cat hissed and spat at the wheelie bin and ran inside the open door into the house.

Georgia looked at the wheelie bin, then she wheeled it up the drive and left it at the side of the road. It was bin day the next day in any case and it would save her a job in the morning.

When she went back into the house, she saw Domino in her basket quite contentedly licking her paw. The cat paused for a moment to regard her human before carrying on.

*

A few hours later, after everyone had gone to bed, a car crawled along the road in the rain that had grown heavier throughout the evening.

Terry Lennard had decided to come home tonight rather than tomorrow morning. He hadn't told his wife because he wanted it to be a surprise.

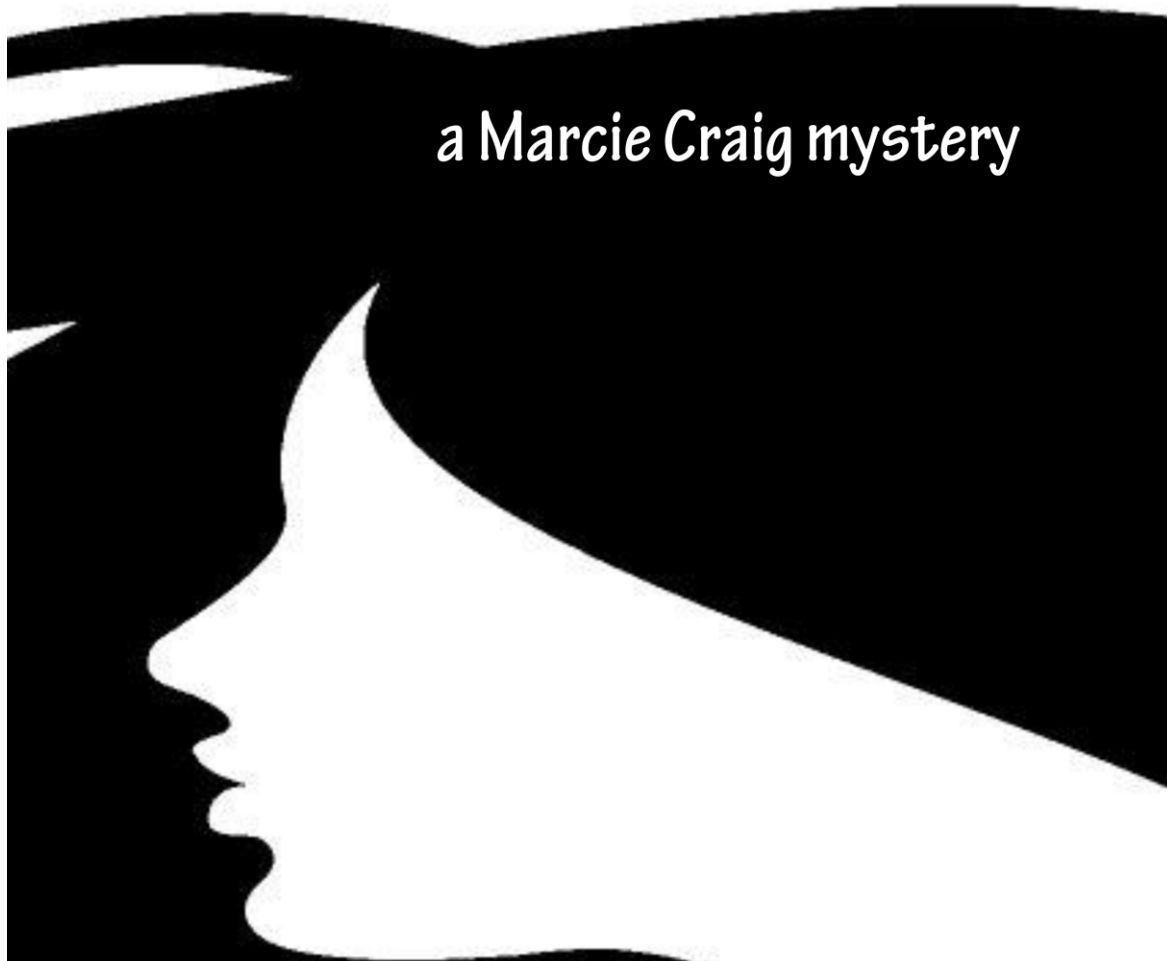
Domino was sitting on the windowsill looking out into the dark when she started to growl. She twitched her head and opened her eyes wide as she watched the lid of a wheelie bin slowly lift up.

The clown clambered out and calmly went to stand in the middle of the road before melting into a pile of rags.

In his headlights, as he was turning into his driveway, Terry saw a pile of clothes lying in the road. Knowing how Georgia felt about people who abandoned kittens in sacks, he left his engine ticking over and went to investigate.

When he saw it was a puppet he decided to take it into the house. Georgia and the kids would be delighted when they saw what he had brought home when they got up in the morning.

*



a Marcie Craig mystery

Night Crawler

Diane Wordsworth



night crawler: part 1 of 4

Night Crawler was the first novel I completed. It introduced Marcie Craig, the sassy Harley Davidson-riding Jeep-driving rock DJ.

I wrote it in 1996, self-published it in 2010, and sold the large print rights to Ulverscroft. It was rebranded and republished in 2015 when I married and changed my name.

*

**** warning: strong and explicit language ****

Chapter 1

Easter 1996

My name's Marcie Craig. I'm thirty-two years old and the only female rock DJ in Birmingham. I've been on the rock circuit for around thirteen years. I can be hired for a hundred quid a night, or one-fifty if I use my own gear. I prefer to use house equipment if I can, because I ride a Harley Davidson. Not easy with amps and CD players and things. The CDs are mine, I leave them on site and pray the place doesn't get done over. I do get the Jeep out every now and then, when I need to. Generally when I do a private gig.

The Cellar is my regular pitch. It's a poky, sleazy pub at the bottom of a double flight of stone steps. Overhead is one of the biggest small markets in central Birmingham. There's a poorly lit underground car park at the back of the pub – the ideal place to commit a murder... Up until then, Easter had been approaching in the same old boring way with not a lot going on. Then came Good Friday and, to borrow a phrase from a great man and massage it slightly, everything went fucking crazy...

I always start my show bang on half seven. The punters get a bit panicky if they think you're not turning out. It doesn't matter that you might be ill or on holiday or anything. If I'm not there at half-past seven they start to leave. I like to use the same spiel and play a familiar track, just so they know it's me. Mac, who does Mondays and Thursdays, always starts off with *The Muppets*. Dave, who's here Tuesdays and Sundays, likes *Green Onions*. Me, I prefer a bit of an anthem, some good old-fashioned rock and roll.

"Hi there. This is Marcie Craig welcoming you to The Cellar – the hottest little rock spot in Brum. Here's Diamond Head with *Am I Evil?*"

It does get a little loud down here. Scratch that. It gets *very* loud down here, but that's the way they like it. It's also very dark, and they like that too. You walk down the stairs into this disgusting black hole and, if you breathe in too deeply, you get high on the alcohol and drugs fumes. Pendle, the gaffer, doesn't really like drugs on his premises, but he's so pissed half the time he doesn't even notice.

Before the place was all done out recently, you would stick to the carpet. It was so full up with beer and ash, dirt and phlegm. There were other things too, but I'd prefer not to mention them. It was filthy. Now you just stick to the dirty tiles instead: heaven. In those days the 'wallpaper' consisted of bill posters advertising forthcoming bands. One of Pendle's many protégés had painted a huge mural on the ceiling. Feng Shui she'd called it. Looked like a tart giving a dragon a blowjob to me, but I could have just been looking at it from the wrong angle. Now the walls are painted orange (over anaglypta), and the ceiling is painted matt black. There's the occasional framed disc, or here and there a star photo, placed between the fruit machines.

There's only one room down here. In one of Pendle's more lucid moments he christened it the lounge. It's long and thin with a bar running almost the whole length of the back wall. They (the brewery) have stuck us poor DJs in a tiny cage at one end of the counter. It sounds claustrophobic I know, but the bars give it a sort of airy feel. It keeps the pissheads from falling all over us and damaging the gear, so it isn't so bad. When there's a punch up, or any other sign of trouble, I just duck out the way behind the counter. In the old days we used to end up in the thick of things.

Opposite me, next to the main entrance, there's a step up to this quaint mezzanine with another step down again to the toilets leading off. It's a good job the gallery has those steps, though, as the blokes' loos are always flooding. And it isn't nice. The kitchen is on my left and the fire escape to my right, leading to that delightful little car park I mentioned earlier. That's where I park my bike.

Good Friday had been just like any other Friday, with the usual crowd turning out. I played some Terrorvision, a bit of Motörhead, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Manic Street Preachers, and so on. Woodstock, one of the regulars and a very good mate of mine, had this new friend with him. Woody's gay, something else the gaffer hates. But no one tells him Woodstock's gay – else he wouldn't still be allowed in – and, again, I doubt he's even noticed.

Woody's a great character. He spends half the time hanging around the ladies' loos (the inside) having a good old gossip with the women. He's broken

a few hearts too, I can tell you. Everybody likes him, even the Hell's Angels – but I don't think he's broken any of *their* hearts... yet.

He's twenty-eight with beautiful smooth olive-coloured skin. Long shiny black hair – in good condition. A hint of a moustache, and big, sad brown eyes. *Sigh*. Such a waste. He always wears an old army combat jacket that hangs from his slim frame, with faded baggy jeans, an old concert tee shirt, and well-worn Doc Martens. I suppose he's about my height, five feet seven inches.

Woodstock was clearly smitten with this new boyfriend of his, and who could blame him? The guy was a good four inches taller, with spiky bleached blond hair and a gold stud in his nose. He was wiry, like Woodstock, but he didn't carry it so well. His clothes were a bit tatty, but that doesn't mean much around here. Most of the people who come in here seem to dress down. He was wearing a black vest that showed off his bulging biceps, and thread-bare jeans. He didn't look very old, but those muscles looked slightly out of proportion to the rest of his body.

I expected Woody to come over for a chat and, obviously busy as he was, he didn't let me down.

"Hi there Woody. How's things?"

"Oh, you know," he replied. I didn't, but never mind. "Will you play a record for Gavin?"

"Is that your new friend?" I tossed my head in the direction he'd just come from.

"Yeah," he said, turning around and grinning across the room. Gavin flashed a startling smile back.

"Phwoar. He's gorgeous, Woody."

"Yeah, I know." He turned back to face me. "He likes Thin Lizzy."

I thought that can't be bad – particularly as I like them too. "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

"Cheers," he said, giving me a double thumbs-up and a grin. "See ya."

"Sure," I said as he swaggered off. Does anyone remember the Hoffmeister bear? That's another thing about these people. They strut along, swinging from side to side, just like the bear, or maybe Del Boy out of *Only Fools and Horses*. The women do it too. I've even caught myself doing it once or twice too. It's very sad.

I looked across at Woody and Gavin in the corner chatting. What a pair of crackers. Nobody would guess from looking at them what they were. Again I found myself thinking what a waste, though obviously they wouldn't agree with me.

I played *The Legend of the Black Rose* by Thin Lizzy for Gavin, it being an old favourite of mine, and followed it with *Emerald*, to which the aforementioned

Gavin duly freaked out – a proper little head banger. I do like to make people happy.

After that I don't seem to recall seeing Woody or Gavin for a while, but then the place gets so packed that it's easy enough to lose someone. Many a time I've been asked if I'd seen so-and-so, only to be asked the same question by the person they were looking for about five minutes later.

Eventually the punters get really pissed off at having to wait more than twenty minutes before getting served. It doesn't surprise me when half of them disappear at around half-past nine. Some go to pubs where they know they'll get served, while most go on to Barneys.

Barnaby III used to be a trendy discotheque, when discos were all the rage that is. Then the Picariello brothers bought the place, Tony and Nico. They discovered that while all the trendies were prepared to queue outside for ages before getting in, they didn't actually spend much money once inside. Now rockers, on the other hand, will pay to get in *and* spend a fortune drinking the place dry once they are in. A much more lucrative situation.

So, the Picariellos kicked all the trendies out and opened up three floors of rock music: heavy metal, traditional rock 'n' roll and grunge (or whatever the latest fashion is). If they weren't loaded before, they must be now, but these days they own half the night clubs in the Midlands anyway.

If the punters get to Barneys before ten o'clock, they can get in for half the normal price. Hence the mass exodus from The Cellar at nine-thirtyish. Thank God there are still some people who'd far rather go home at eleven o'clock than head bang until dawn. Otherwise The Cellar would be dead come ten o'clock, and I'd be an hour short on my wages. I do two nights at Barneys myself, Thursdays and Sundays, so maybe I shouldn't really complain. At around twenty-to-eleven I caught sight of Woody and attracted his attention.

"Where's Gavin?" I asked, when he came over.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Dunno."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I went to the bar and got us a drink, but by the time they served me, he'd gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah. Looks like he's fed up of me already."

I tried to think what I'd say if this were a boy-girl thing. "Have you checked the loos?"

"Yeah. Both lots."

Oh dear, I thought. You see a lot of this sort of thing in my job. I would have carried on with the conversation once I'd changed the record, but just then the place was invaded with Hell's Angels... and they weren't ours...

Chapter 2

I shouldn't really call them 'Hell's Angels' because they're not strictly part of *that* particular gang. The bikers we have are more like 'outlaws'.

We have three motorcycle clubs here: The Satan Beasts (ours); The Cycle Witches (anybody's); and The Death Riders (no one's).

The Beasts are really cool. They wander about the place looking dead thuggish while at the same time raising loads of money for kiddies' charities. The president, Roach, is my hero and my oldest and best mate. He's a pussycat and I fancy him like mad. If he wasn't such a big kid himself playing big boys' games on motorbikes and in gangs, then we might just, you know...

Well anyway. The Cycle Witches are the women's chapter, and they really are anybody's – and don't care who knows it. A bunch of old, well-used bikes riding around on, er, a bunch of old, well-used bikes. 'Stone Age' Sal is their president, and we hate each other's guts. She has these mean-looking metal teeth and hair like the two cavemen in the Wacky Races – you know, the ones that keep beating each other up with the clubs.

The Death Riders are a violent lot led by Angus, a hot-tempered red-head. They only ever show up to cause trouble and prove how intimidating they can be, usually flying their colours (beautifully embroidered denim jackets with the sleeves cut off, worn over their leathers or tee shirts), and tonight was no exception.

About eleven or twelve of them stormed in, forced their way to the bar, and stood like a wall with their backs, and colours, facing everybody.

Roach (my hero) was drinking quietly in a corner, with no colours and no henchmen. The Riders took over. Time, I thought, to duck behind my nice, safe counter, coward that I am. Now, where was that obscure CD I couldn't find?

One young guy must have been prospecting for The Riders as he seemed intent on causing the most trouble. He stormed down the bar and helped himself to someone else's fags. Then he was nicking someone else's matches. From my relatively guarded spot I was able to peer through the bars. The kid looked about seventeen, only just old enough to phutt around on a tiny 125cc, let alone some of the beasts these people usually ride about on.

He was another red-head (it must be some sort of prerequisite to get into The Riders). But his hair was still the bright orange of adolescence, frizzy and sticking out all over the place. He had tons of massive freckles all over his face, hands and arms. I can't vouch for the rest of him, thankfully. And his cheeks were bright red, as though he'd been running and was out of puff. He was only about five feet four, and no arse to fill his jeans. A beautifully drawn Black

Widow Spider crawled up his upper arm. The tattoo still looked fresh and must have cost him a fortune, the size of it. It was probably still very painful too.

The next thing the prospect did was 'accidentally' spill one person's beer. Oops. Then he was off swigging ale out of other people's glasses. He did all this while Angus and his chums stood back and watched on with interest.

A 'prospect' is someone who dearly wants to belong to a Hell's Angel type of chapter. Before he is initiated, however, or whatever it is they do to each other, he (or she) has to prove to the others what a complete bastard he can be, and demonstrate how tough he is.

Until this point it appeared that Roach hadn't seen The Riders, as he had his back to the rest of us. Someone must have pointed them out to him, or said something to him, though, as he twisted in his seat. He looked across his shoulder at the alien bikers, but shrugged and turned away again. Did I say he was my hero? Scratch that. He obviously thought they were causing no harm and were better left to it. Besides, he was outnumbered.

Little Mister Prospect continued with his rampage and, on the whole, was left to get on with it. Then he caught sight of me lurking behind my cage.

"And what have we got here then?" he said. "Not scared of old Ginger are you, girlie?"

Ginger? Now there's an original name. "No I'm not scared," I protested, pulling myself up to my superior height. "I was getting a CD."

Now, don't get me wrong. I wasn't in the least bit frightened of this little shit. After all, I have my nice strong *reinforced* cage to protect me. But I didn't really want to look him in the eye in case he thought I was staring at him. Trying not to make eye contact, I looked down at the CD in my hand instead, not really seeing who it was by.

"Do you want me to play you a record or something?" I asked, glancing down at him quickly, then at the clock, and then back at the CD again. "Only we're almost out of time."

His sharp green eyes also settled on the CD and the mocking, arrogant expression on his face changed to something much blacker.

"You cheeky little bitch..."

I checked the name of the band and nearly died. Oh dear, it was The Bangles. Not exactly your everyday rock thug's favourite group. For some reason my heart stopped a beat.

Laughing nervously, I tossed the CD over my shoulder. "Er... I didn't mean *this* one... you look more like a Therapy? fan, or Sepultura. Name one and it's yours –"

He leaned back and eyed me up and down. "You'll do."

What? In his dreams. "Ha, ha. Good one. Pity this chick's not available." I put on a Black Sabbath single instead. "Now, what is it you want?"

"I said you," he hissed through clenched teeth. "You deaf or summat?" Ginger wasn't laughing.

I took in the beady eyes, the crazy hair, the massive gaps between chipped and crooked teeth – they looked drug damaged if ever I'd seen it before. He had a body odour problem too. He was only a kid though. I could handle him.

Giving him what I hoped was one of my sexiest smiles, I leaned against the bars of my cage – seductively, of course – and indicated with an index finger that he come closer. He started to dribble and leant his face on his side of the cage, a stupid, inane grin spreading across it. (His face, not the cage.) I missed my vocation. I should have been a lap dancer.

"Listen honey," I whispered hoarsely, loud enough to be heard over the sound system. He was almost panting. "Why don't you run along home, like a good little boy, and wash that silly tattoo off your arm before Mommy sees it?"

As soon as he realised what I was saying, his face changed again. "Fucking bitch!" he bellowed. He shoved a freckled fist around the side of the cage and made a grab for my hair, roaring like an animal. He'd make a good Rider. I was too quick for him though and soon bounced out of his reach.

"Come back when you're big enough," I snarled at him. This time he leaped up across the counter, his short fat legs stretched out behind him. He reached over and managed to snatch a handful of my hair.

"Ow," I cried as blood rushed through my veins. He was really hurting me.

"I'll smash your fuckin' head in," he said, in his best growl.

Where were all of my superheroes now? With adrenaline pumping I had to think fast, especially as the record was ending. I remembered the tattoo and pinched the soft, pink flesh around the drawing between my fingernails, and twisted sharply. As he squealed with the pain, I was able to move away from him again. If the cavalry didn't arrive now, I was in deep shit.

Help did arrive just then, but to my surprise it wasn't Roach.

"Are you all right?" asked Angus.

"Yeah, no thanks to you." I rubbed my head where Ginger had pulled my hair. "Just get this monkey of yours out of my sight."

"He ain't one of mine. He just blew it." Angus turned to Ginger. "Get outta here, asshole." I'd go as far as saying he might have snarled at the boy.

"But Angus...?" whined Ginger.

"You made a mistake picking on the lady. Now get out of this place before you feel the toe of my boot up your arse."

Wow. 'Lady' eh? Maybe the thug has a soul after all. All the same, he brought his mob in to cause trouble, and that's exactly what they did. Just as the Sabbath record finally finished, Roach put in an appearance.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Nothing, now. No thanks to you." I put another record on quick. "Angus and his cronies were just leaving." I glared at the president of the opposition.

Angus glowered back at me for a second. But he gathered Ginger up by the scruff of his neck, who was still simpering nearby, and stalked off. The rest of his gang followed them out, just as the gaffer came in, with one of the doormen in tow.

Pendle looked notedly at his watch and then nodded at me, before moving behind the bar and helping himself to a large Jack Daniels.

"It's last orders at the bar, folks," I announced at the end of the record. Then I played the last two songs for the night: AC/DC's *Back in Black* followed by *Can't Smile Without You* by Barry Manilow. I like to finish on a high note, and if they go out singing then I know the punters have had a good time. Hopefully they'll notice this too and come back for more another night.

*

On a good night it generally takes the guys about an hour to clear up, pack away and have a quick drink – Coke for me of course, as I'm on the bike. I suppose it was getting well on for midnight by the time I left. Like I mentioned, the Harley was in the car park at the back.

For some reason the fire door wouldn't budge. I knew it wasn't locked as Pendle had already had the Fire Service crawling all over him with the pub being underground. There are plenty of this type in Birmingham, something the Irish terrorists found particularly useful during the 1970s. But a locked fire exit contravenes safety regulations and Pendle wouldn't risk his licence – not for something like that anyway.

Vernon, the doorman who'd not long come in with Pendle, gave me a hand.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I don't know. But I can't seem to get this door open."

"Here, let me have a go."

It still took the two of us to get the thing free. We pushed and shoved until the door gave. As it opened outwards something fell to the floor. We looked down to see someone lying in a crumpled heap in the dim light.

"Probably stoned," grumbled Vernon. He crouched down and rolled whoever it was over to reveal a bloody mess for a face.

I clamped a hand across my mouth.

"What is it?" asked Vernon. "Do you know him or something?"

"Oh my God... Yes. I think so. His name's Gavin."

Chapter 3

I looked down at the slumped figure of Gavin on the floor.

There was blood everywhere. On his face. On the walls. All over Vernon's hands and frilly-fronted white shirt. Now my eyes were becoming accustomed to the poor light, it was getting clear what had gone on out here. In truth, the amount of blood would normally make identification more difficult, but I was pretty certain it was Gavin, despite having only seen him for the first time that evening. I recognised the spiky, bleached blond hair and the black vest.

There was a nasty hole in the side of his head. I shuddered and the adrenaline started soaring. I could feel my nose turning up at the ghastly sight, and felt what could only be bile rising up in my throat. Vernon was busy feeling around for a pulse. Then he gave up, placing his ear to the boy's heart instead.

"Is he all right?" I asked, rather stupidly. Anyone could see he wasn't 'all right' at all. At first I'd been rooted to the spot with shock, but now I didn't know what to do for the best – stay and help, or go and call for an ambulance. Instead, I found myself shuffling around in silly little circles, flexing and unflexing my fingers and shaking my wrists out. Once I realised what I was doing, I tried standing still again.

"He probably is stoned," said Vernon, still feeling for a heartbeat. "There's a needle over there." From his viewpoint, hovering over Gavin's chest, he'd seen the needle where it would otherwise have remained hidden. I followed his glance and reached out to pick the hypodermic up.

"Leave it!" he bellowed. I snatched my hand back again. "You don't know what you might catch from one of those things."

I caught a fleeting image of Gavin and Woodstock shooting up together, but shook it away again. It didn't bear thinking about. Not Woodstock.

"I'll go and call an ambulance then, shall I?" I said finally, wondering why I hadn't done that in the first place.

Vernon gave up listening for a heartbeat and started massaging Gavin's heart instead. As he did so, he looked up at me still standing there. "Well go on then."

"Is he all right?" I repeated. Clearly I was useless in an emergency.

"I don't know, Marcie," he replied, labouring under the exertion of pounding Gavin's chest. "I don't think so. It looks as though he's still bleeding, which I think must be good. But I'm not sure. You really ought to go and call for that ambulance."

What on earth was the matter with me? I heard what he was saying, but couldn't seem to move. You always think you can deal with an emergency, but I'm ashamed to say I must have seemed quite childish.

"You'd better call the police too," he added.

"Why? Do you think someone tried to kill him?"

"I don't think he gave himself that knock on the head. But if you don't fetch that fucking ambulance soon, there will be no 'tried' about it."

"Yeah... right." That did it. This time I did move.

I ran back inside the pub to the phone just inside the kitchen. As I dialled nine, nine, nine I could see into the bar and noticed there were still a few 'guests', and they were still drinking.

When the emergency operator finally put me through to the ambulance service, I gave them the barest of details, but agreed with the lady at the other end that there might be suspicious circumstances. She told me the ambulance, and the police, would be there in a few minutes. After I'd finished, the gaffer stumbled past me as he went, once more, behind the bar.

"Whassup Marce?" he slurred. No wonder he was so pissed, he would have been at the hard stuff all night, wherever he'd been tonight that is, before coming back.

"There's been an accident."

"Oh. Right." He knocked back what looked like a quadruple Jack Daniels, and poured himself another from the optics. Why he just didn't pour himself a pint I will never know. It was nice to see him so concerned at any rate.

"The police are on their way," I nudged.

"So what?"

"It's after hours."

"S'all right. These are my friends." He flung his arms in a circle, and flung half of his drink all over the place too. No problem, he just helped himself to some more. I almost got the bottle down from the optic for him, to save him time, but I didn't know how to do it. What was that I suggested earlier? Pendle wouldn't risk his licence? Silly me.

The gnawing, sickly feeling in my gut wouldn't go away, but out of courtesy, and because I could see that Pendle obviously wasn't going to warn them, I did mention to his 'friends' that the police were coming. Those who cared drank up and left; those who didn't simply smiled and said 'thanks'.

I made my way back to the car park and Vernon, who had now been joined by the other doorman, Tommy, and one of the bar staff. I dreaded what I might find. Tommy was using a clean bar towel to mop up some of the blood from Gavin's face, while Peter, the barman, was pressing another against the hole in the boy's temple in an attempt to stop some of the bleeding. I noticed that none of the other women had come out to watch.

Close up, and in his unconscious state, Gavin looked to be only about fifteen – a baby. Again, I found myself thinking of Woodstock. I wondered if he knew

how old Gavin was. Indeed, I wondered if he needed to know. I had no idea how far their relationship had progressed, but I could see that Gavin was well under the age of consent.

Then I remembered that Woody had lost Gavin earlier. Had they had a row? I shuddered at the thought. He hadn't mentioned a row. Even if they had argued, Woody couldn't have done something like this... could he? Someone had though. But who? Why?

Vernon stopped the heart massage and looked worn out. He had placed his own jacket over Gavin to keep him warm, and was once more feeling with his fingers for that pulse.

"Yes," he announced finally, with relief. "I've found it."

We all relaxed. "So he's still alive?" I asked, somewhat unnecessarily.

"Only just. His pulse is very weak. If that ambulance doesn't get here soon..." He left the sentence unfinished and sat back on his heels. The hard, concrete floor must have been killing his knees. Vernon was a stocky bloke, but the drama had taken its toll and he was looking tired and gaunt.

I've always been a bit scared of death. Well, not *death* exactly, but dead people themselves. I'm one of those poor, sad souls who can have nightmares after watching the slightest horror movie, even the comedies and cartoons. I hate graveyards, even in daylight, and I dread walking into any zombies that might be wandering around. At night I make sure my neck is well covered with the quilt so any vampires flying about won't get tempted to take a bite – even in the middle of summer. I never read any horror books if I can help it and I live in fear of some mad axe man coming to kill me. Anything with a face on in my bedroom? Forget it. Okay, okay, I'm afraid of the dark too. But we can't all be perfect.

Now I was glad that I hadn't seen my first ever dead person. Under the circumstances, I think I coped quite well. Then something horrible dawned on me. What if the nutter, whoever had done this terrible thing to Gavin, was still out there? Was he lurking in the shadows in the car park? Lying in wait for his next victim? My bike was out there. How was I going to get home?

"Is that the ambulance?" asked Vernon, still kneeling beside Gavin.

I could hear an engine in the background too. I stepped out into the car park, picking my way around Gavin and the pool of blood that had formed, but hanging onto Tommy's shoulder for safety, to see better. "No. It looks like a police car."

Sure enough the Zulu drove into view, blue light flashing but no siren. Two uniformed police officers stepped out, one male and one female. The bloke seemed to lurk in the darkness, making a show of 'examining the scene'.

"It's okay," I said to the policewoman. "We don't need you anymore. He's alive."

She stifled a snigger, but said, "It doesn't quite work like that, love."

"Where's the bloody ambulance?" asked Vernon.

"Don't worry, sir," she said. "It's on its way. We'll take over here now."

Vernon stood up and allowed the officer to examine Gavin and his immediate surroundings. Shortly another engine sounded in the blackness and another blue light sliced through the dark. It was the ambulance. At last. Two paramedics in green boiler suits climbed down. Everyone moved out of the way to let them pass.

No sooner had one of them started treating Gavin than he looked up and said in a grave tone, "I'm sorry. He can't come with us."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Why not? He's not well."

He gathered together his stuff and made to leave. "He's not alive, duck. We're not supposed to carry bodies. He's the coroner's property now –"

I clutched the ambulance man by his sleeve. He wasn't going anywhere. I had a queasy feeling I might be needing him. That nice, secure sensation that had accompanied the fact that Gavin was still alive came tumbling down around me.

"He can't be dead. Vernon's been looking after him. There was a pulse. He's bleeding. He can't be dead."

"I'm really sorry, duck. Your friend obviously did his best. But I'm afraid you were a little too late. He's been dead for quite a while. Any pulse would have been wishful thinking."

"But the blood...?"

"Common with an injury such as this." He peered down at me. All I could see was a faceless silhouette in the dark car park. Vernon had been keeping a dead person warm. "Do you want some fresher air, duck?"

Did I need air? I'd stopped myself from being sick loads of times before. But there's a difference between feeling sick because you've had far too much to drink, and feeling sick at seeing your first ever corpse.

"What about Gavin?"

He looked down at the body. "You've done all you can here. The police will look after him now. Come on."

As realisation dawned, all of my good intentions not to throw up went down the gutter, along with half the contents of my stomach. Already the police were on the radio for assistance, and I heard someone complain about contaminated evidence. Was that all Gavin was to them now? Evidence?

The ambulance man dragged me through the pub and up into the clean night air. I suppose there must have been some outside air in that

underground car park, but it didn't smell very sweet. I did manage not to puke again, and for that I was grateful. I hate throwing up at the best of times, let alone in public – and this wasn't the first time.

It appeared that the police were now dealing with a murder case. They needed everyone who was still at the pub to go with them to the station. I didn't mind that so much. Steelhouse Lane nick was only around the corner, and I'd be able to come back and collect my bike.

The paramedic, satisfied I wasn't going to be ill any more, and that I didn't need treating for shock, went back down the steps with me and re-joined his colleague, who was waiting patiently behind the driver's wheel of the ambulance. Already a bus load of coppers seemed to be at the scene and us 'witnesses' were told that our transport would soon be here.

"Why do we all have to go?" I asked a familiar looking constable as the ambulance pulled away. I think he'd been one of the first to arrive in the Zulu.

"Routine. It looks like we've got a murderer to find. You'll be asked some questions and, hopefully, allowed to go."

"Hopefully?"

"Like I said. Routine."

He was wearing a copper's helmet (excuse the expression), but I could see that the dark hair beneath it was quite long for a policeman. He was clean-shaven though, and about ten feet tall... well, maybe about six and a half. He had quick, darting brown eyes that looked anywhere but at me. He's embarrassed, I thought.

"Don't I know you?" I asked eventually.

"You should do Marcie. I've been a regular in this pub for about five years."

"But you're a copper."

"I know," he grinned sheepishly, finally looking me in the eye. "But don't tell anyone, will you?"

While we waited for our transport (which turned out to be two top of the range police wagons), the police started taking names and addresses from those present. There were the two barmaids, Rachel and Norma, Peter the head barman (Basil, the other barman, must have already gone off home), Tommy and Vernon the doormen, and me and Pendle.

They kept on asking if we could remember who had been in that night. In a city centre pub like this one that would normally be quite a difficult question. But rock music has a faithful following so, between the seven of us, we probably covered most of the regulars.

Pendle's guests, or what remained of them, were also questioned. But they can't have been that much help. They didn't know anybody, apart from the gaffer, and didn't arrive until well after eleven o'clock. I doubt that any of us

could have remembered any strangers who might have shown up, apart from Gavin of course. Oh, and the Death Riders.

Several people, men and women, in white boiler suits and with plastic bags, brushes and cameras, arrived at the scene. They traipsed around a bit, in their little white booties, trying to preserve things and take samples, until the two vans arrived. Then us civilians were ushered inside the vehicles and were ferried to the police station.

The seats were hard and the journey much longer than I expected, and very bumpy. By the morning I'd be saddle-sore. I found myself sitting next to the policeman I had recognised, and I racked my brains trying to remember his name.

"It's Reefer, isn't it?"

"Don't crack on you know me," he hissed.

I gave him an indignant 'sor-ree'.

The rest of the trip passed in relative silence with none of us quite knowing how we'd come to be there. It seemed ages before we arrived.

Chapter 4

"This isn't Steelhouse Lane Police Station," I exclaimed as we all finally piled out the back of the wagon. We might have been in the rear yard behind a cop shop, but I still didn't recognise the surrounding scenery. Shit. Where the hell were we?

"Ten out of ten for observation," said Reefer drily.

"So where are we?" We had been off-loaded in the car park, but now we were being led around the front. Well that was something. At least we weren't being man-handled through the back door. It was dark and dank. Inadequate streetlights made some inroads against the night sky, but even they were switching off, one by one. I caught a whiff of old potato skins and noticed we were passing the bins – overdue for a collection by the look (and smell) of them. I stuck close to Reefer.

"Welcome to Acocks Green," he said at last.

I looked around. He wasn't lying. I could just about make out the Great Western Pub on the corner, silent and dark at this time of night. There were no cars or buses along the usually busy road. Just us fugitives.

"How come?" I asked, trying to take my mind off the horror of everything else so far this evening. When in doubt, make inane conversation.

"Steelhouse Lane's full."

"So what about Digbeth?" We traipsed along the path in front of the building.

"All of the city stations are full."

"Full of what?" We climbed up the stone steps and packed into the tiny reception, which smelled of floor polish... and something else...

"Blacks."

"What, like black *people*?"

"Yup." Reefer nodded.

"That's a bit racist isn't it?" What *was* that smell? I felt my nostrils twitch and tried to look around the room without appearing completely disinterested in what he was saying.

"No." He had a quick word with the desk sergeant, who apparently was expecting us.

"So why are all the city nicks filled with blacks?"

He returned his full attention to me, which felt somewhat comforting. "You've heard of all this drug warfare between the blacks, haven't you?"

"No." It meant nothing to me.

"God, Marcie. What planet have you been living on? Don't you read the papers?"

"No."

"Watch the local news?" he ventured.

"Uh-uh."

"You *do* live in Birmingham, don't you?"

"Yes. Well no. Oh sort of," I replied. "I live on the outskirts." Actually, I live in the next county, but that's beside the point.

He took a deep breath, ran a hand through his hair, and then put both hands in his pockets. "There have been these gangs, right?" I nodded. "Well, they've been shooting each other in this big drugs war that's been going on."

"What? With guns?"

Reefer coughed a little laugh of disbelief. How to prove what a bimbo you are in one easy lesson. I felt my cheeks flush, but he smiled kindly. "Actually, with pea shooters," he grinned. Then he added, "Yes. With guns."

Wow! In Birmingham too. I could hardly believe it. I always thought I lived in a nice, pleasant, friendly part of the world – or on the outskirts at least. But in one evening, and one dead body – probably murdered – later, my naïve dreams were shattered. I wanted to go home and, with frustration, I felt my bottom lip start to tremble. I just *couldn't* start blarneying now.

"Hey," said Reefer, his face full of concern. He gave me a quick all-lads-together type of hug, and I felt better. I wanted him to hug me some more, it made me feel safe. But at least I was in control again now.

"Look," he said finally, seeing I'd pulled myself together. "I'm going to go and file my report. If you take a seat, someone will be out to have a chat with you shortly."

He disappeared through a door at the back of the room, leaving me feeling quite lonely, and I looked around for a seat. I was a bit stiff after that bumpy ride in the van, and suddenly quite tired. A nice sit down would do me good.

About fifteen of us, it seemed, had been squeezed into this tiny space. I hardly recognised half of them. Who were all of these people? Was one of them really a killer? What was I doing with them in this smelly police station? Aside from a leaflet shelf, which took up much of the limited wall area and literally dripped literature, there were four metal chairs, all welded to each other and sunk into the concrete floor – as if anyone would want to nick them. They were all taken by a single drunk, who hadn't been one of ours, but who was snoring loudly.

Urine. That's what I could smell. This chap, whoever he was, had pissed himself and just been left there to dry. Maybe I didn't need that seat after all.

A secondary-glazed window had been propped open to let in the cold night air. I leaned against the rack of leaflets, helping myself to one that was about to float down onto the pisshead. I turned my collar up against the draught, and read all about how to set up my very own neighbourhood watch scheme.

*

"Miss Craig," called a male, Scottish baritone over the din.

"That's me," I cried back. Over the sea of bodies, I could just about see the chap beckoning me from an open door on the other side of the room next to the desk. I forced my way through the throng and found myself in an even tinier room.

"Sit down, please." He indicated one of two plastic grey chairs on one side of a battered, wooden table, and sat down in another on the other side. The quicker I got this over and done with, the quicker I could go home. I tried to tell myself to behave and just answer the policeman's questions. Easier said than done.

"I'm Detective Sergeant MacGregor," he said gently. "I understand it was you who discovered the body?" He flashed his ID at me, although there really was no need. Who else would know their way around this police station and have a key to this door?

"Along with Vernon, the bouncer. Yes." I flashed a smile at him.

He avoided my eyes and made a note in his little black book. With his head down I noticed the creeping bald spot he was trying to hide beneath wispy, blond hair.

"Tell me, Miss Craig. Did you see the deceased at all in the pub this evening... before he died?"

"Yes. I played a record for him."

"Ah, so you knew him then?"

"No. I've never seen him before tonight."

"Yet you played a record for him?"

"I'm a DJ. I play records for people."

"Why? Did he ask you to?"

"No. His friend asked me to."

"So, you know the friend then?"

"Yes. He's a regular."

"What's his name?"

"Woodstock... er... Mark. Mark Palmer."

"But you didn't know the deceased?"

"No. It was Gavin's first visit to the pub."

"Gavin?"

"Yes. The... er... deceased."

"Ah." He made some more notes, then his hazel eyes observed me for a good few minutes. I could hear his brain creaking from the effort. I shuffled nervously in my seat. "Hmm."

"Can I go?" I asked, finally.

"No. I'm afraid not."

"Why? Am I under arrest? Aren't you supposed to read me my rights or something?"

"Have you ever been under arrest, Miss Craig?"

"No."

"So why should you be under arrest now?"

"I... er... I don't know." What the hell was he playing at? If he was trying to intimidate me he was doing a bloody good job.

"Do you have something to hide, Miss Craig?"

"No."

He watched me again. "Hmm."

I'd had enough. "Look, if you have finished with me, I really do need to go home now. My poor animals will think that I've deserted them. That is, unless I am going to be arrested. I'd really appreciate it if you could hurry up and make up your mind. Then I'd like to call my mom, so I can get her to pop over. I trust I am allowed to make one phone call?"

"No Miss Craig. You are not under arrest yet."

"Yet? Does that mean that I might be? Am I a suspect? Should I be asking to call a solicitor instead of my mom?"

"Only if you think you need one. Everyone in that room is a suspect, Miss Craig. Anyone who may have used the car park. The fact of the matter is, Miss Craig, that you were the first person to see him dead. You may have also been the last person to see him alive."

"But he was still alive when we found him," I'd forgotten what the ambulance man had said about him being dead for a while. "And Vernon was with me. I couldn't even open the door because Gavin was leaning against the other side."

"Yes, I'm sure that what you say is quite possible. But look at it from our point of view. The whole sequence of events could easily have been contrived, conveniently arranged to shift all blame."

"I didn't move from my spot all night."

"Not even to visit the ladies?"

"No way! Have you seen the loos in that place? Ask any of the others. They'll all tell you what I'm saying is true. The furthest I went was to the kitchen to make a cup of tea – and that's on the other side of the bar to the car park."

"And if they do confirm your story, then you may go. But until then –"

"Do you really think that I did it?" How could he?

He looked at me again before answering. "No, Miss Craig, I don't. But it isn't up to me. If you bear with me for a minute, I'll just go and have a wee word with the boss."

Phew. That was a relief.

There was a second door in this room. I presumed it led through to the offices. MacGregor stood up and left through this door, leaving me alone for a very long minute. I felt like I was there for hours, but according to my watch, it was only a few minutes.

I gazed about the spartan room to see if I was being observed by a TV camera or something. I wasn't. This had to be the least decorated room on the planet. Plain glossed walls and a plain vinyl floor. There wasn't even a curtain or a blind up at the window; just opaque glass and more secondary glazing. If I'd had a pen on me I would have probably doodled on the table. 'MacGregor is a dick head', or something to that effect. It was probably just as well that I didn't, I suppose, as I would be in trouble then. If this was the visitors' room, I wondered what the cells must be like.

MacGregor returned and smiled warmly at me. What a transformation. So he was human after all. I was glad I didn't have that pen... He didn't sit down.

"Well, Miss Craig. You're in luck. Some of the others have backed up your story." Oh good. "And the boss has agreed that once you've given us your witness statement, you may go." Gee thanks. "We may want to speak with you again though."

"Sure. Thanks. Whatever."

He summoned another officer and they both sat down while I went over everything again and the second officer made notes. What a job. I wondered if they ever got writer's cramp. I told them about the whole evening, from the

seven-thirty start, right through to calling for the police. Once the statement was completed, they let me go.

"How am I supposed to get home?" I asked.

"Don't you have any transport?" asked MacGregor.

"No... yes. Your officers gave me a lift, remember? My bike is in a police restriction zone." The Scot raised an eyebrow. "It's in the car park at the back of the pub."

"Oh. Right. Whereabouts do you live?"

"Out in the sticks. Near Meriden."

"No buses?"

I looked at my watch. "No buses."

"Right. I'll get one of our officers to run you home."

"Thanks." He made to leave the room. "What about my bike?"

"We can't run that home for you too," he joked. Then he coughed, remembering his fellow officer. "Um, as soon as the restriction is lifted, you can collect it."

"And when will that be?"

"As soon as possible. I'm sorry, but I can't be more specific at this stage." He changed his mind about leaving me to find my own way and escorted me back into the now virtually empty waiting room. "If you take a seat, someone will come for you."

"Thanks." I sat.

"Goodnight Miss Craig."

"Yeah. 'Night."

Well, he didn't seem so bad after all. Quite a nice chap really. When Reefer showed up to take me home, my spirits lifted further. A familiar, friendly face makes all the difference.

"Come on then, Marcie. Let's get you home."

We retraced our steps out through the front door and walked around the outside to the back. Obviously no back doors at Acocks Green nick after all. He let me in one of those police cars with an orange spot on the roof and three big, black numbers. It smelled new too, though I didn't notice the registration. I gave him my address and he pulled away. Over the constant rattle of the radio, we managed some snippets of conversation.

"So," I continued. "Don't they like you to socialise with us folk from the gutter?" I started to fiddle with the sun visor and look around at all the gadgety things.

"Not really. They think a dive like The Cellar is no place for a copper. They reckon that so many shady deals go on that we'd clearly be involved. A bent

cop is a bad cop, and there's no room on the force for either." He thought for a second, then added, "Allegedly."

"I didn't see you in tonight."

"No. I'm on duty." He glanced down at his uniform and I immediately felt a bit silly.

"Of course." I adjusted the seat lever so I was in a more upright position. That's what comes of riding a bike, I suppose. I can't understand why people travelling in cars need to lie down. I've even seen some bikers doing it too, though, so maybe it's me.

"Anyway," he was saying. "One of you lot would have positively identified me if I had been there on this particular night. Then I'd have been well in the shit first thing Monday morning."

"What's the matter with them? Aren't you supposed to have any life outside the force?"

"It's not that. They prefer us to mix with our fellow officers." He pulled a face at the windscreen, and checked the mirrors. He was a good driver. "It's the drugs and violence that *always* go with places like that." His sarcastic tone was not wasted on me. "It's my duty as a police officer to grass on my mates. But I like my job and I like my mates. Best not to tell them about each other, eh?" He glanced across the car and winked at me. Phwoar!

"Don't worry," I said, pulling myself together. "Your secret's safe with me." And I winked back.

"Thanks." He glanced around outside the car. "Now, where is it you live?"

I too peered out into the dark to see where we were. "We're almost there now. It's the next turning." If any of the neighbours caught me being dropped off in a police car, there'd be all sorts of gossip by midday. "Will my bike be okay?"

"It'll have a police escort until they've finished," he said – sincerely, of course.

"What are they looking for?"

"Clues. Samples. A weapon."

"Will they let me know when I can collect it?"

"Yes. But let them know if you're going anywhere. They might release it sooner than you think. They don't like to hold things longer than they have to. That's because they are responsible for it, you see, and they don't like that either."

"I hope they do finish with it soon." I was missing old Harley already.

Reefer dropped me off outside the park and I resisted a sudden urge to kiss him goodnight. I wanted him to give me another cuddle. It would have been

the most natural thing in the world, had it been a habit. I must have been really tired.

He watched me walk safely up the drive. Once at my front door, I waved him off and he drove away into the night.

I did a quick take around the neighbourhood, but all was quiet. Even the curtains at Ivy's caravan were still. Ivy Dennis was the site's champion curtain twitcher, but at four o'clock in the morning, as a quick glance at my watch indicated, even Ivy was in bed. If the rest of the neighbours had any sense, they'd already, or still, be in bed too.

That was where I should be...

Chapter 5

It's at quiet times like these that I really appreciate where I live – I just don't get to see this hour of the morning very often. I paused before letting myself in to take it all in.

I live on a caravan site, not actually *in* Meriden, but not far away. It's about fifteen miles out of Birmingham city centre, almost in Coventry. The park used to be a gypsy camp, but is now one of the nicer sites around here. My own caravan – or "mobile home" as Mother insists on calling it – is a single unit with two double bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen-come-dining room and a roomy lounge. It's not that big overall, but it suits me. Most of the other homes are double units and very luxurious. But they have mainly families in them. Too big for me. I couldn't afford one when I moved in anyway.

Having escaped what would have been an early marriage at the age of eighteen, I now live alone. The wedding was more for our respective parents' sakes than our own.

Pulling out of the wedding was one of the most selfish things I've ever done. But I don't regret it. We probably would have ended up hating each other's guts and it would have all finished with a divorce. I've never met anyone I'd care to share my life with since.

I have a marine aquarium with seahorses, shrimps and anemones and things, two white mice called Thomas and Jeremy, and a big fat white cat called Sylvester. They're happy and so am I. I like it this way.

Something else I adore, aside from my bike, is my caravan, which is cosy and homely. It's also very tidy, courtesy of my mother. If it was up to me I'd probably live in a tip.

Mom arranged for a woman to come in and 'do' for me. It's a pity she didn't arrange to pay her too for me, but I suppose you can't have everything. Jackie lives on the same site and 'does' for me three times a week. Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

There's a small lock-up that goes with the van, which the manager calls and charges as a garage. Blooming cheek. I keep the bike in there. My Jeep stays on a tarmac pad outside my van – partly because it doesn't fit in the 'garage' very well (I wouldn't be able to get out of it for a start, unless I use the boot, which is really useful), but mainly because I value the Harley more.

Gypsies Gate (where I live) consists of a massive green circled by an asphalt track, and surrounded by the mobile homes. The drive runs right the way round, and back out again through the way in. There are about forty units in all (I live in number 12), and each unit has its own bit of garden. Visitors park on the way in, or on the way out, depending on which way they're going at the time. The car park lies in the shadow of an old Dutch barn. I don't think the farmland has been used as such for years, but there are people who don't live at the site who store their touring caravans and boats in the barn when they're not using them.

There are probably about half a dozen of these caravan sites in the area, though mostly they're very crowded and solely for the retired. The owners pack as many caravans in as they can with no room for games or activities. I own my own van outright, though it's possible to rent them.

I choose to pay the higher ground rent at Gypsies Gate, if only to enjoy the spaciousness of the park. I'm not claustrophobic, but I guess I'd come close to it at the other sites.

We're not allowed to keep dogs in case the residents exercise them on the green. I like dogs and wouldn't mind following mine around with a shovel and a plastic bag. I suppose, though, that there is always the danger of those who go out to work all day leaving the poor animals to run loose around the park, so maybe the rule has its good side. I make do, instead, with the cat, the mice and the fish.

I breathed in the clean, fresh air and opened the door. One of the mice was using the wheel when I let myself in. If I hadn't have been so tired, the noise would have irritated me. As I moved about the place on autopilot, I pulled off my boots and shrugged out of my leather. I'm not a tidy person by nature and my clothes tend to stay where they fall until I need them again, or when someone comes to call. The doorbell will ring and I'll be dashing around shoving junk into cupboards before I let them in. Then I can never find anything when I need it. These are the times that I'm grateful to Jackie, as she puts everything back in the right place on the days that she's here.

By the time I fell into bed, the weak spring sun was already showing signs of rising. As soon as my head touched the pillow I was gone. However, no sooner had I surrendered to complete oblivion than the alarm clock started to screech. I didn't even remember setting the damned thing. The clock is a

rather naff motorbike that someone gave me for my birthday once. The alarm is set for about half past eight in the morning, which means I'd had about four hours kip. It didn't even seem like five minutes.

I flicked the alarm off, rolled over, and went back to sleep...

But the bells kept on ringing in my ears and I couldn't get them to stop.

I hurled the clock across the room and the batteries fell out. Still the ringing didn't shut up. In the end I had to wake up properly, and I discovered that the ringing wasn't the alarm clock after all. I had been certain I hadn't set it. It was the phone.

I padded into the kitchen to pick the phone up.

"Yeah?" At least, that's what I think I grunted into the mouthpiece.

"Marcella?" asked a clipped female voice. I don't really like being called 'Marcella'. It's not very heavy, is it?

"Yeah."

"This is your mother calling."

Shit. I knew I recognised the voice. I told myself to wake up. "Yeah."

"Marcella. Did you forget your sister's wedding, or did you just decide not to turn up?"

"Shit." I'd forgotten.

"I beg your pardon, madam," continued Mom. "You're not too big to have your mouth washed out with soap you know, my lady."

I didn't realise I'd said it out aloud. "Yes. Sorry. No. I was just on my way." I checked the kitchen clock. Twenty-five to eleven. Double shit. I should have set the alarm clock after all. Penny, my kid sister, was getting married at eleven o'clock.

"You've got ten minutes to get here or the car goes without you." *Click!*

She hung up on me. There was no way I'd get to the house in ten minutes. I'd have to make my way straight to the church, which was much nearer. Sod the bloody car.

Mom had been planning this wedding for ages – since she'd started mine, actually, and that was fourteen years ago.

I'd always been a bit of a let-down to both of my parents – Dad wanted me to go to university – and jilting everybody at the altar on my wedding day didn't help matters. I think my dad was secretly relieved, though – no one is good enough for his little girl – but I don't think Mom's ever forgiven me for that one, nor forgotten. It probably took her ages to be able to face the neighbours again. Thank God for my little sister, that's all I can say – and thank God she didn't insist on me being her bridesmaid.

"I don't think they do bridesmaid dresses in black," she'd said, calmly and truthfully.

"Well I ain't wearing one of them frilly, flowery things," I'd argued.
"It's not frilly *or* flowery."
"So what is it then?"
"It's lemon satin."
"Yuk."
"Marcie!"
"I don't mind purple... or mauve even... but lemon?"
"Lilac?"
"No."
"Well I'm not having a purple bridesmaid."
I tried to reason with her. "Look, you don't really want me to be your bridesmaid, do you?"
"I've only got one sister, Marce."
"Yeah, but what about your friends?"
"What about them? Which ones?"
"Sarah and Kate." These were Penny's ancient friends from the beginning of time. I don't know any of my mates from school – apart from Roach – but my sister still knows millions. "Didn't you all promise each other when you were kids that you'd all be each other's bridesmaids?"
"Yes, but –"
"And wouldn't they both look lovely in lemon satin?"
"Well, yes. But –"
"Well then."
Penny mulled it over, but I noticed that some other bright idea had just occurred to her.
"Go on," I prompted.
"Okay." She took a deep breath and I wondered what was coming. "So you really, really don't want to be my bridesmaid?"
"Not really, no."
"I'll let you off then."
"Get on with it."
"All right then. You can do the disco instead."
Was that all? "Yes," I said, without any hesitation.
"You've got plenty of time to tell Ken Pendle that you can't do The Cellar."
She hadn't seemed to notice yet that I'd agreed with her.
"Or I could swap with someone."
"But there'll be none of that heavy metal rubbish."
I was mortally offended. I don't play that much heavy metal, and the rest is nothing like rubbish.

"I do have a shit box too, you know." This was the term I used to affectionately refer to my 'weddings and other stuff' material. It contains the real shit too, though. Pinky and Perky, Middle of the Road, Matchbox. You know what I mean. Actually, these are some of my favourite records, but don't tell anyone. My street cred will go way down.

"So you'll do it?" The penny (excuse the pun) had dropped.

"Sure. I just said so, didn't I?"

"And you'll not charge?"

"Course not. You're my sister aren't you?"

"Thanks, Marce."

She gave me one of those sloppy, sisterly hugs and had skipped off to tell Sarah and Kate the good news. Lemon satin it was. Sooner than me.

In the event, it looked as though I would have been out of a job for the night anyway, with the murder. Although, I had managed to swap with one of the others, so my wages weren't affected. The pub would be staying closed as long as the car park was.

I had a quick shower and towel dried my hair. I always did prefer the wet look, and both me and Penny have naturally curly dark brown hair. It would be dry by the time we got on to the photographs bit, so that should appease Mother. Of course, I didn't have anything suitable to wear, so we had to go out one of the days and buy me something special – a nice velvet mini dress so I didn't object. I needed a decent going out outfit anyway. Oh yes, *and* it was purple.

Five second makeup is one of my fine arts. A bit of lipply and some mascara. So I was ready in no time. I caught sight of myself in the full-length mirror in the hall. Not bad, even though I do say so myself. I couldn't have done any better if I'd tried.

Remembering Reefer's advice of the previous evening, I wasted further valuable minutes calling the police station to let them know where I was off to. The wedding was going to take out the whole of the rest of the day, and I really needed them to tell me when I could collect my bike. I locked up, fired up the Jeep and arrived at the church just behind the bride's car.

"You look lovely," I said to Penny as we both climbed out of our cars. And she did too.

"You look all right yourself," she grinned through her veil. "You going to escort me down the aisle after all?"

"Er... I'll go on in, shall I? Mom'll be convinced I'm not coming. Good luck, anyway." I gave both Penny and my dad a quick peck on the cheek and left them to re-arrange themselves for the pictures. Penny's two friends waited

patiently at the main door, looking resplendent in lemon satin in the morning sunshine. It was good of the sun to pop out.

As I waltzed into the church the whole congregation turned, a look of expectation on each of their faces. As they saw me, however, their expressions dropped in disappointment, and most of them turned to face the front once more. I tottered down the aisle on my high heels, waving and grinning at those guests I recognised. Mom, however, gave me a frosty greeting.

"Oh. So you made it then?"

"Looks like it." I squeezed past her into the front pew. She wasn't moving for any man. The rest of our extended family sat in the pews behind, though I have to confess, I didn't recognise half of them.

"How gracious," she hissed.

"Penny's outside now with Dad," I said. I leant forward and waved across at Richard, who looked as nervous as every groom should. He managed a strained grin back.

"She looks beautiful," I whispered to Mom, who promptly burst into tears, and the Wedding March began.

*

The wedding went as weddings do, totally boringly. Everyone remembered their lines and no one fainted. As usual, the photographer went on for ages. Rain threatened, but the sun persisted – at least until we were well-covered. By about a quarter to one we were ready to move on to the reception.

The church is in a park called Elmdon, and the do afterwards was at a hotel nearby. Mom and Dad had certainly organised a good show. But, like I say, they'd been practising for years.

At the hotel there were more photographs, but eventually the meal got underway and the speeches got out of the way. At five o'clock, staff at the hotel started moving furniture, which cued me, along with a load of others who didn't live very far away, to take a well-earned break.

Gypsies Gate is virtually just around the corner – well, okay then, it's a bit along the road too – so I nipped home to get changed, feed the animals and collect my gear.

The purple dress was all very nice, and contrasted well with the bridesmaids, surprisingly. But come this evening I needed to look like a DJ and not the bride's big sister.

Tom and Jerry both performed well for their tea. Not a trick I've taught them, by the way, but something they always do. They often go for a good old joint spin in their little wheel. I assume they're expressing their undying gratitude. Before feeding Sly I changed my clothes. He's a lovely cat, but he's got this annoying habit of circling your ankles when you're trying to serve up

his food (haven't they all?). I didn't want him snagging my tights or leaving long white hairs all over me.

There was even time for me to grab a quick cup of tea. After the mammoth five-course meal we'd had that afternoon, I was otherwise stuffed. But I do like a nice cup of tea.

My DJ gear is stored in the lockup down by the visitors' car park, so I drove down there to collect it. Most of my rock collection stays at The Cellar, but I leave the weddings and other stuff back at home. When I do Barneys I use their music. With the bike out of the way it was easy to get to my kit. The deck, amps, speakers and leads fit in a storage area behind the back seats in the Jeep, while the CD boxes, which are a lot smaller than the albums and singles boxes of the old days, balance anywhere I can fit them.

As I locked the back door of the Jeep I felt a heavy hand placed on my shoulder and I jumped out of my skin, dropping the keys onto the floor. I turned around to see DS MacGregor and someone else I didn't know.

"Hello Miss Craig," said the Scot.

"All right." I bent down to retrieve my keys. "My bike ready then?"

He avoided the question. "This is Detective Constable Anderson." He indicated the younger man who was with him, who flicked open his ID while I unfolded myself again.

"Oh yeah?"

"We wondered if you'd mind accompanying us to the station?"

Chapter 6

Shit. I was really going to be in for it now from Mother.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"It's about the incident at The Cellar last night," said Anderson. He was quite a few years younger than MacGregor, without the paunch hanging over his trousers, and with a somewhat thicker thatch of hair – jet black. He was just as tall, and just as mean-looking, with big bushy eyebrows that met in the middle.

"But I gave you my statement last night," I reminded them.

"Yes, we do know that," continued Anderson. "We just need some more information from you. That's all."

I checked my watch. It was a quarter past six. The evening do wasn't kicking off until half past seven, but I like a good hour to set up. This wasn't looking good.

"You don't understand," I argued. "It's my sister's wedding today and I'm supposed to be doing the disco. Besides, if I don't get there soon..." I thought of my mom and left the sentence unfinished.

"It shouldn't take long," said Anderson.

"But I'm still not a suspect though?"

"No."

"And I'm not under arrest, or anything?"

"No."

"So can't it wait?"

The two men sighed and exchanged looks. MacGregor was the first to speak.
"Where is this reception?"

"The Royal Oak Hotel. It's just down the road."

Anderson checked his watch. "What time do you need to be there?"

"Half past six. Please, please let me go. I'll come along afterwards."

MacGregor raised a sandy eyebrow and exchanged another look with his subordinate. "This is highly irregular," he said, but thought to himself for a minute or two anyway.

I wished he'd hurry up, but tried the emotional blackmail trick. "Wouldn't you prefer it if *your* daughter's wedding went ahead as scheduled, without any last-minute problems?" And anyway, I'd hate to be in his shoes if Mom ever found out.

"Hmm."

"At least when you arrest people at the church you let them get married first." Ha! I'd seen all the films.

"It isn't usual," said MacGregor finally. He mused again, but then came to a decision. "Okay. But DC Anderson will have to go with you –"

"Sarge!" whined Anderson.

MacGregor patted him on the back. "You'll enjoy yourself – just keep off the pop."

"Do I have to?"

"No. But it will be taken into account for any future career moves. And besides, I'm telling you to."

"Sir," agreed a resigned Anderson. He passed the car keys to MacGregor, who winked at me, then drove himself back to wherever it was he'd come from – or wherever it was he was going to. He'd taken a shine to me and that was going to be very useful.

Me and Anderson made friends, I think. I was only grateful he was a detective and in plain clothes, which suited a wedding a bit more than a policeman's uniform. Imagine my mother if I walked in with a copper? Actually, she'd probably be quite proud for a change. Anderson made a good roadie at any rate, and the party kicked off as planned.

Unfortunately Mother couldn't let anything drop, and she just had to have a go at me about being late to the church before – about fourteen years too late – and turning up at the Royal Oak looking like a tramp.

"I couldn't help it, Mom. I was helping the police until the early hours."

"I don't know how you could do it to me, to your sister, to your father." She waved her frilly hanky up and down. "And to think we bought you that lovely dress."

Lovely dress? She'd hated it when we bought it. Said it looked too tarty – especially for a wedding. I sighed.

"Mom, I wore the dress all day. I'm working now. Okay?"

She wasn't really listening to me but was more concerned with playing the emotional mother bit. I left her to her ramblings but caught my dad's eye and he came over.

My dad's all right really, and being the eldest, I suppose I'm his favourite. When I was supposed to be getting married, he just went along with things. Although he lost quite a bit of money when it was all cancelled, I really do think that he was relieved, after the initial shock wore off. He'd been a great ally ever since. I needed him right now and he came to the rescue.

"You all right, Marcie love?"

Then Mother interrupted with one of her usual retorts. "I don't know why I bothered to give either of my daughters pretty names. What's wrong with Marcella? And Penelope? If I wanted them called something short, I would have called them Jane and Ann."

Dad and me exchanged tired smiles. "Yeah, Dad, thanks," I said, in answer to his original question. "It's going okay isn't it?" He nodded his agreement as he rubbed his hands together and beamed around the room. His hazel eyes settled briefly on DC Anderson, flickered disinterestedly, and met mine again. Great. He was letting me know he didn't approve of this one either. "Can you get Mom a stiff drink or something?" I whispered. "She's starting to depress everyone."

He nodded. "I think she's had enough already though," he admitted quietly. "Come on Doreen, love." Mom wailed softly, for a change, but allowed herself to be led away to the bar. A double gin should just about do the trick.

Apart from assuming that Anderson must be my latest flame, and approving of the well-dressed young man ("Not like your usual friends, is he?"), she left me alone after that... thank God.

*

Back at Acocks Green nick, much later that evening, I was once more seated in that marvellous room of the previous night. They hadn't decorated it since then, nor made it more homely with a nice plant or picture. It was still stark.

"Am I going to be arrested?" I asked finally, after Anderson presented me with a tin of pop from a machine somewhere upstairs. MacGregor sat quietly in the corner.

"Hardly," replied Anderson. "We would have dragged you in earlier if that was the case."

"And I'm definitely not a suspect?"

"Is there any reason why you should be?"

"No."

"Well then. Stop worrying." He took a swig from his own drink – piping hot coffee – and I tried to get excited about my freezing cold Coke. This room was bloody freezing at this time of night. Steam drifted upwards from MacGregor's cup too, and from all of our breath. I must have still looked worried – it was probably the temperature (or lack of it) – because Anderson continued in a kinder tone.

"Look, this is a murder enquiry. We want you to give us some more information. That's all."

"Like what?"

"Like, who else was there?"

"But I told you all that already last night," I directed at MacGregor. Talk about belt and braces.

He was right though. All they did want was some more info. He kept asking me, over and over again, to put names to as many people as possible. The other witnesses, who had also been questioned the night before, would also be asked to be more specific if they could. Then the police would contact everyone named so far, and start the whole rigmarole all over again with them, hoping for a snowball type of effect. Well, that's the impression they gave me anyway.

In the end I had an idea. "When will the pub be back open for business?" I asked.

"We're not sure yet," replied Anderson. "Why?"

"Most of the regulars come in on the same night, or nights, of the week. Apart from a few stalwarts who come in every night, and every lunchtime they can, as far as I can tell.

"We get the same crowd every Friday. Then we get another on Saturdays, and yet another on Wednesdays. Those are the three nights I do," I explained, and waited for him to speak. He didn't, so I carried on. "Obviously, if I recognise someone on Wednesday, I'll make a note. But it's impossible to know everyone's names."

"So what do you suggest?" asked MacGregor, finally.

"If you're no further forward by Friday, come along to The Cellar and I'll point everyone out to you."

Anderson and MacGregor looked at each other. They were getting pretty good at that little charade. Then Anderson replied, all business-like again. "In our experience it's unlikely the murderer will return to the scene of the crime."

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's the best I can do. It looked like an accident to me, though. The murderer may not even know he's dead."

I looked from DC Anderson to DS MacGregor, who both looked at each other, *again*. Then MacGregor nodded. "Okay. It might be worth a go."

Great. I assumed that meant I could leave. Nobody told me I could, but nobody stopped me either. On my way out I checked the clock. Just gone half past twelve. After a spot of mental arithmetic, I reasoned I could still get back into town in time for a couple of hours at Barneys. A bit of a bus man's holiday for me, but I wasn't ready for home yet.

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As I was already in the Birmingham suburb of Acocks Green, it didn't take me long to get into town, even in the Jeep. Barneys was humming. Deep Purple's *Speed King* was grooving over the PA system. I satisfied myself with a half pint of cider, sweet and on draught, downed in one, before switching to lemon and lime. It's a real pain not living on a direct bus route.

I don't know why, but I was really surprised to see Woodstock mooching about the place. Then I realised that he probably hadn't heard about Gavin yet. He couldn't have popped into The Cellar at lunchtime, or this evening, because it would have still been closed. I decided to go and have a chat with him anyway. The toilet was calling to me but I told myself it could wait.

"Hi Woody. How you doing?"

"Oh, you know." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Not used to seeing you out on a Saturday." He wasn't one of the Saturday crowd – well, not in The Cellar in any case.

"Nah." Talkative, wasn't he?

"Have you been to The Cellar?" I asked, finally, between sips of pop.

"Place was shut, wasn't it?"

"Was it?" Was this a good time to feign ignorance?

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Dunno."

So, he didn't know then. Should I tell him or not? I supposed if it were the other way around, I'd like it if he told me something like that. We were old friends, after all. I took a deep breath while he took a swig of his beer.

"You haven't heard the news then?" I asked, tentatively.

"What news?" He wiped a frothy moustache from his own hint of one with the sleeve of his jacket, and turned those big brown eyes to mine.

"It's Gavin," I said.

Suddenly he was interested. "What? He came back?" He looked wildly around the dark club as if Gavin were about to spring from the shadows. "Where is he?"

I felt very sad. He was breaking my heart. I held onto his hand and rubbed the soft skin with my thumb. "Oh Woody, I'm really sorry." How the hell was I supposed to break it to him? I moved my arm around his back and placed it gently on his shoulder. "Gavin never left The Cellar last night."

"Well where was he then? Where did he go?"

"I found him in the car park. Me and Vernon did."

"Found him? In the car park? But that's where I left him."

At that particular moment in time I didn't realise the full implication of his words. Idiot. I could have warned him.

"He's gone, Woody." Have you ever felt like a shit? "Gavin's dead, Woody."

He looked at me for a second or two before shrugging out of my embrace. He coughed a sort of laugh. Then he was laughing properly in complete disbelief. "That is a sick joke, Marcie."

I let my arm fall back down to my side. "I'm not joking, Woody. I wish I was."

He stopped laughing just as Ian Gillan started (over the speakers, of course). My bladder was bursting now. Deep Purple turned into UFO and, as I'm not a great fan of theirs, I decided that this was as good a time as any to nip to the loo. If nothing else, it might give Woody time to pull himself together.

"I'm just off for a squirt, Woody. Wait for me."

He didn't answer. But by the time I came back, he was gone.

Chapter 7

I don't know why Woodstock disappeared, or where he went. I guessed my bombshell must have been quite a shock for him. He probably went off somewhere to let it all sink in. I was really sorry for him and felt awful for being the one to tell him. Because I was driving I couldn't even get pissed, which is just as well. I was depressed enough and the alcohol would have simply brought on floods of tears. Silly cow. Then I *would* have looked daft.

Nothing much else happened that night immediately after Woody left. Nothing of great consequence anyway. I just mooched around, touring the three floors and chatting to anyone I recognised – as well as a few I didn't. Being a DJ I do know quite a few people, but can't always put a name to many of them. They all think I should remember them, so I pretend that I do. I'm pretty good at putting partners to faces though – then they go and change them so I don't get too cocky.

Barneys isn't a place I generally socialise in. I work here two nights a week and, personally, I prefer The Cellar, even though I do three nights there. There isn't so much of an atmosphere in the club as there is in the pub. The beer isn't so nice either. Some dare to say that the Picariellos water it down, but I don't think I'd make such a suggestion. The brothers are notorious gangsters, even in this day and age, and I value my life too much.

Most of the people who come here are generally stoned – or they come to get stoned. I'm not into drugs myself – honest. Maybe that's why I don't feel at home here.

Also, many of the punters aren't even regulars. They tend to travel in to Birmingham from places like Nottingham, Coventry and Walsall, and probably visit clubs in other surrounding areas too. About four times a year our crowd hire a coach and return the visit. Rock City is always a favourite. There are the regulars who come here at half past nine of course, from The Cellar and other pubs in the city, and those are the ones I get to know.

After I'd been there for about an hour, one such old friend of mine dropped by.

"Hi Daisy," I said. "How's tricks?"

She threw back her bleached head (hmm, blonde this evening then) and laughed like a drain. "Oh you are funny, Marcie."

Daisy is about forty-four – no one is sure precisely how old she is – and she's been on the game for as long as I've known her, which feels like forever. The thing is, she loves it, or that's the impression she gives, and everyone loves her. The Tart with a Heart is what people call her. Not very original, but perfectly apt. She truly does have a heart of gold.

I don't think I've ever heard a wrong word said about her – or by her. She'd give you the coat off her own back if she thought you needed it more than she did, even if you didn't have quite the same penchant for fake leopard skin that she did – or tiger, or snake (yeurgh!). I couldn't tell you the real colour of her hair. She must change it as often as she does her knickers.

Her orange painted talons matched her orange painted lips, which in turn matched her orange painted face (I have no idea how I notice such things). Daisy really does look good for her age, I found myself thinking, whatever it may be. She likes to keep herself trim by working out at the city gym – and all of that sex, no doubt.

I like Daisy. She's a nice lady, despite her trade. There's no malice about her and she'll always listen to a good sob story – or even a bad one. David Coverdale was wailing something by Whitesnake over the speakers while I had a chat with her.

"Have you heard the news?" I asked.

"What's that?" She took a swig from her lager.

"Woodstock's latest boyfriend was found dead in The Cellar last night."

Daisy still managed to light a cigarette, despite my revelation. "In the lounge?"

"No. Out back, actually, in the car park."

"What did he die of? An overdose?"

I was taken aback. "Was he a junkie then?"

"You sound surprised." She exhaled a cloud of smoke.

I remembered the hypodermic needle Vernon had warned me not to touch.

"I didn't know him that well. Did you?"

Daisy shrugged. "I'd only met him a couple of times. I don't think Woody's been going out with him that long."

"Anyway," I continued, "Pendle doesn't like them in the place, junkies that is. Nor gays. He won't let them in usually."

"He can't ban someone just because he *suspects* they're a junkie," said Daisy. "He has to be certain... doesn't he?" I nodded in agreement, taking a drink from my lemon and lime, and Daisy carried on. "He probably didn't even notice Gavin anyway, the state he was in."

"Who?"

"Pendle."

"Why?"

"Well, he was pissed again, wasn't he?"

I frowned and searched my memory. "I don't remember seeing you."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Where?"

"In The Cellar."

"I wasn't in The Cellar."

"But you saw him, though?"

"Who?"

"Pendle. Last night?"

Daisy dragged heavily on her fag, and took another swig. "Er... He was pissed though, wasn't he?" She knocked back the rest of her lager and waved at one of the girls behind the bar for another. The girl checked the wall clock but poured her one anyway. The bar at Barneys shuts at two o'clock.

"When is Pendle not pissed?" I said finally, once Daisy was settled again.

"Exactly," she replied, quickly. Too quickly. "That's what I meant. It's the state he's in most of the time. So how did he die then?" she changed tack.

"It looked like someone bashed his brains in to me."

The fag dropped from Daisy's sticky mouth. "You mean someone *did* it to him?"

I nodded and finished off my glass of pop. She gazed in the general direction of The Cellar.

"Out there? In the car park?"

"Yep."

"Ugh! It gives you the creeps, doesn't it?"

"Tell me about it," I pulled a face.

"And you *saw* him?" she asked in disbelief.

"It was me who found him... with Vernon." I filled her in on the details, adding a bit of flourish here and there to give it more drama. "And I have to go and collect my bike from there once they lift the police restriction. I'll be parking it upstairs outside the door from now on, like everyone else does."

"I don't blame you. I don't think I'll be taking any more of my clients out there for a bit either –"

"Daisy! That's a dreadful thing to say."

"What?"

"You don't... you know... in the car park... do you?"

"Why not? Everyone else does."

"Like who?"

"Anyone who gets the urge. You wanna go out there half an hour before last orders. There are loads of 'em at it. They shag, smoke dope, shoot up, pee –"

"Ugh!"

"Oh don't be such a prude, Marcie Craig. It doesn't suit you." She took another drink from her new lager and I remembered, again, the vision of that hypodermic needle. Was that what Gavin went out there for? "How's Woody taken it anyway?" she asked.

"Hard to tell." I shrugged my shoulders and wished I still had a drink. I told her about our earlier conversation. "He thought he'd been stood up when Gavin disappeared... and all the while he was lying out there in a pool of blood.

"He was still alive, you know, when we found him." I didn't care what the ambulance man had said. "If we'd only got to him sooner we might have been able to save him. He might still be alive."

"It's best not to think about it," said Daisy, patting my arm. "There's nothing you can do now. The poor sod. And poor Woodstock."

"Yeah. Poor Woody."

"I'll see if I can track him down. See if I can comfort him."

"Daisy," I looked at my watch. "It's almost half past two."

"So?"

"You'll never find him."

"Don't you worry about that. You're not the only one who knows where he lives at any one time," she winked and I raised an eyebrow. "A shoulder to cry on, that's all," she said. "You never know. It might make him feel better."

"I doubt that, Daisy," I said, just as she was getting ready to leave. Then, from out of nowhere something occurred to me. "Daisy?"

"Hmm?"

"Were you out there last night? In the car park?" She looked at me quizzically. "With a punter?"

Her expression changed quickly. "Sorry, Marcie. I've gotta go. See you around." She took one last swig from her glass before dashing off.

"Yeah. Bye then." I watched her disappear into the dark, my unanswered question left hanging in mid-air, and I looked longingly at the remains of her drink. Lucky for me I don't really like lager, otherwise I might have finished it off for her. I think lager tastes like sick, without the lumps, and I'd had enough of that the night before. Anyway, the glass had sticky orange marks on it where her mouth had been. That was enough for me to remember I was driving.

Oh well, my last drinking partner was gone for the night, and so was my drink, I could hear my bed calling to me and, looking around, felt relieved that I didn't have to stay and clean up this place. It had been a long day, and Woodstock was the only person I'd seen on that Saturday night who had also been at The Cellar the night before.

"On your way now," said one of the barmaids, as she collected the glasses. She was either new or just didn't do the same nights here I did. "Haven't you lot got beds to go to?"

"Yeah," I smiled. "G'night."

I found my Jeep, where I'd parked it, and crawled on home to bed.

*

The following Friday The Cellar was back open for business. The police had done everything they needed to and, as far as I could gather, hadn't found the murder weapon. DS MacGregor and DC Anderson showed up as promised. I prayed that PC Reefer might have the good fortune to stay away this evening. When he did turn up, however, luckily for him he was on duty.

As far as I knew, everyone who had been fingered, and the other staff too, were prepared to help the police with their enquiries.

And, so I believe, most were prepared to donate a handful of their hair as a non-intimate sample too, as a process of elimination. The police tell me a single hair can tell them a hell of a lot.

I'd had a spot of good news too myself. Tonight I'd be allowed to collect my bike. It was Reefer, in uniform, who came to give me the go ahead, just before closing time. Apparently I could have collected it on Sunday, only no one

remembered to tell me. They clearly had far more important things on their minds.

There was no way on earth that I was going to go into that car park on my own, so Reefer came with me. I unlocked the heavy chain I keep on my bike, which is sheathed in black rubber tubing, to disguise it against prying police eyes when I wear it across my body.

"You do realise that's an offensive weapon, don't you?" said Reefer.

"It's the only insurance I have against thieves."

He raised an eyebrow and then frowned. "I hope not."

"Well, all right then, yes the bike is insured. But that won't stop anyone nicking it, will it?"

"All the same..."

I grinned up at him as I locked the chain around me. "Are you talking to me now with your policeman's hat on or what?"

He had the decency to blush, straighten his helmet, and grin back. "Yeah, I suppose I am. Still, at least I've advised you now."

I climbed onto my bike and revved up. Amazing. A week in the cold, damp car park and it still fired up first time. What a beauty. Shit, that felt good.

"I'll bear it in mind," I said finally, squeezing my head into the crash helmet – black, full-faced with my name in gold letters across the front so people know who they're talking to. After a week strapped to my bike in the same car park, the helmet hadn't fared so well. It was damp inside. I'd probably catch a cold now.

"You take care, Marcie," said Reefer, touchingly.

"Yeah. You too. And thanks for the escort. Will I be seeing you around?"

"Sure."

I burned off out of the car park and thoroughly enjoyed my ride home. There was still a nip in the air, but there's nothing quite like speeding along the road with a powerful piece of machinery between your legs. Okay, so I wasn't actually speeding. But it was at about this moment that I remembered my Jeep. Shit. It was still in town.

Well, I couldn't leave it there. After six o'clock in the evening all the parking meters in town are free. First thing in the morning, though, my Jeep would be illegally parked. There was nothing else for it. I had to go home, lock up the bike, and get a taxi back into Birmingham. So much for crashing into bed.

By the time I got back home after that little lot it was well after four. I crept into bed and as soon as my head touched down on the pillow, I was gone, blissfully unaware that the police had found their prime suspect.

On Saturday morning I was awakened by yet another early morning phone call. What had I forgotten now? This really was becoming quite an irritating little habit.

"Marcie? Is that you?"

"Nmph," I grunted into the receiver.

"It's me, Woodstock."

I checked the clock. "Woody, it's five o'clock in the morning."

"I know. Sorry. I'm at the police station."

"Yeah?" So what?

"I'm really sorry, Marcie, but I didn't have anyone else to call.

"Marcie, they're charging me with Gavin's murder."

Chapter 8

I got to the police station as soon as I could. But they wouldn't let me anywhere near Woodstock.

DC Anderson said: "I'm afraid he won't be allowed any visitors until he's appeared before the Magistrates." He had taken me into my usual room.

"And when's that likely to be?" I asked.

"Monday morning." He said that as though I should know.

"In town?"

"In town."

"And will I be able to see him then?" I asked, mentally re-scheduling my entire day. It wasn't difficult. I generally stay in bed until noon on a Monday – usually alone.

"Only if they grant him bail."

"And is that likely to happen?"

Anderson pulled a face. "Probably not."

"Why not? He's never been in trouble before."

"It's a very serious offence." He had the patience of a saint, bothering to explain routine procedure to anyone who cared to ask... well, me in any case. "We will strongly recommend that he be kept on remand until the court case."

"So when will that be?"

"Who knows?" he shrugged. "It could take months."

My heart dropped. "And where will he go until then?"

"He'll stay in our cells tonight and tomorrow, but he'll probably go to The Green until the trial."

I shuddered and started to feel sick – you know that sense of dread that you get? Winson Green isn't one of the nicer places in Birmingham, particularly as it's a prison. I hated the thought of Woodstock alone in that place... only he wouldn't be on his own, would he? And that's what really worried me.

I swallowed, and said: "He didn't do it, you know."
"Yeah. They all say that."
"He *didn't*," I insisted.
Anderson paused.
"You sound pretty certain."
"I'd like to know on what grounds you're keeping him here."
"And are you his solicitor now then, or what?"
"He doesn't want a solicitor." He'd told me that much on the phone.
"He needs one."
"But surely that just supports the fact that he didn't do it?"
"Most of them try that one. But even the innocent should get legal representation."
"But Woodstock *is* innocent," I argued.
"You know who killed Gavin?" Anderson was talking about him as if they'd known each other.
"No."
"Well, we have someone who *knows* it was your friend –"
"Who?" I interrupted. "It's a lie. Woody didn't do it. How do they *know* it was him?"
"Because they saw him, Miss Craig."
"Oh, for God's sake, call me Marcie. You are *so* patronising when you say that." When I saw a flush start to appear above his collar, I apologised to take the edge out of my voice. He was starting to tire of my endless questions, I could tell. "Who saw him?" I said quickly. "Who saw him do it?" I knew it was a lie.
"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. Confidentiality –"
"Bollocks."
"I'll pretend I didn't hear that." He resumed his aloof manner and clammed up. Damn. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing more I can tell you at this stage."
"But –"
"No, Miss Craig –" I shot him a look. "*Marcie*," he corrected. No. He definitely wasn't comfortable with it. "I've already told you more than I should. If you want to see your friend, I suggest you go along to court first thing Monday morning."
He went to the door and held it open for me. As I walked through I realised that maybe I shouldn't have swore at him.
"Look. I'm sorry –"
"Good morning, Miss Craig." He closed the door behind me.
Bastard.

Give him his due, everything DC Anderson had told me turned out to be spot on. I went along to the Law Courts and waited a couple of hours while several obviously guilty defendants were given bail by some miserable old bat on the bench. One or two others who were clearly innocent – or at least not as bad as the others – were kept in custody.

Okay, they probably got a few of them right, but I didn't believe for one minute that every decision she made, even following consultation with her two stooges, was the right one. How could she justify fining someone for their fourth offence of drunk driving while banned when another bloke with too many points on his suspended licence was sent down for taking his sick and elderly father to hospital? It just didn't seem right and just to me at all.

These people certainly took their time and all. There were three of them up on that bench, lording it over the rest of us. The foul-tempered-looking, dried up old trout – who was probably only about fifty-five and possibly quite sweet... in another life, and two remarkably grey men. All wore suits and the three of them nodded their heads together as if in a deep discussion, when they couldn't possibly have managed more than a few words to each other.

Every half hour or so, or when a case conveniently ended, the magistrates took a ten-minute break. All of us lot in the public gallery at the back had to keep standing up and sitting back down again. This 'audience' changed every time a defendant disappeared back down the steps. These frequent breaks gave me the opportunity to study the room if nothing else. I'd never been in court before and was quite staggered by such opulence and grandeur.

Dark timber panelling lined the walls from floor to ceiling – a very high ceiling, which was ornately carved from a sand-coloured stone. Six lots of six lights illuminated the otherwise dreary interior. We had hard wooden benches to sit on while everyone on the other side of the barrier had nice comfy upholstery. It was quite draughty too – particularly as the door kept on opening and closing. A huge coat of arms looked down on proceedings and a steady flow of defendants.

Woodstock was the last one I bothered hanging around for.

He was accompanied by two uniformed officers as he came up the steps. I didn't know either of them. They went to sit on a bench in front of him and kept pulling faces at him to behave himself. Poor Woody. He *was* behaving himself. He appealed to me with those big, sad eyes, but there was nothing I could do for him. At least he didn't look gaunt and unwashed. They must have looked after him at Acocks Green Station. He'd already been advised to keep facing front by one of the monkeys sent in to guard him. I didn't want to get him into any more trouble, so I concentrated my own gaze on a massive wart on the end of the old bat's nose. Or was it a bogey?

As Anderson had predicted, Woodstock was remanded in custody. He had to appear every four weeks before the trial came up. Every four weeks? How long was this trial going to be coming for?

Before they took him back down the steps, I was at the rail.

"Marcie," he said, smiling weakly. "Thanks for coming."

"Send me a visiting order," was all I could manage before the two escorting police officers pulled him roughly away.

There was nothing more I could do until the visiting order came.

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By the end of that week it had arrived.

On Friday morning I was finally allowed to see Woodstock.

"They're treating you all right?" I asked, trying not to pay too much attention to my surroundings. It was cold and sparse, and they'd sat us at a little table.

"Oh yeah," he grinned. "They've given me a phone card and everything."

"Really?" Honestly, sometimes, little things.

"Really. The prisoners hate us lot who're on remand. We get far more privileges than they do, you see."

"But doesn't that make them aggressive?"

"They can't touch us. We're quite safe." Pity I wasn't as convinced as he was.

"So how are you anyway?" I asked.

"I'm fine, actually." And actually, he looked fine too. "Three square meals a day. Laundry done for me. And we get recreation time as well."

"Great," I said. Palatial, I thought. "So what have they got on you?" I had to get to the point at some stage, otherwise it would be time for me to leave and I would have got nothing from him.

He shuffled, uncomfortable. "Someone claims they saw me."

"But they're lying. They must have something else to go on?"

He fidgeted nervously now on the hard backed chair. "Well, actually they have."

"What?"

"Forensic evidence."

"Oh yeah?" I didn't believe him... them.

"Yeah."

"What kind of forensic?"

"I'd rather not say." He fidgeted again. He obviously wasn't going to be very forthcoming, so I tried a different tack.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"I didn't kill Gavin."

He didn't need to look me right in the eyes when he said that. I knew he couldn't have killed Gavin.

"I'm not saying you did."

"So will you help me?"

"What do you want me to do?"

Poor Woodstock. Maybe he didn't look so fine after all on closer inspection, now he'd dropped his guard. His hair had lost its sheen, his eyes were hollow, the colour flat, and his lovely olive complexion looked pale and washed out, as though he hadn't seen any sun for a while. He probably wasn't sleeping properly and Gavin's death must have been an awful shock to him. He would still be grieving – given half the chance.

"You have to find Gavin's killer," he said.

"Why?"

"Because it wasn't me."

"I'm not a detective."

"No. But those who are aren't interested."

"That's not fair. They've worked hard on this case." I thought of all the lenience they'd shown me, but then I hadn't been banged up.

"Gavin was gay. He was also a junkie and a tramp. No fixed abode, you know? He doesn't have any family mourning him. They don't have the time or the resources to spend on this case. They need a result and I'm it."

"That's a strong accusation, Woody. Besides, with no family to pressurise them, they don't have to wind it up so fast. Even if they did, why you?"

"Because they've got someone who said I did it."

"Surely it's just their word against yours?"

"They can place me at the scene too."

"How?"

Woodstock looked away. "We'd had sex –"

"In the car park?" He avoided looking at me. "You and Gavin?" My God. They were all at it. Then something dawned on me. "Woody, how old was Gavin?"

Woodstock glanced at me, coughed, and looked away again. "He was fifteen," he muttered quickly.

"I think you'd better tell me all about it, don't you?" I sat back and listened.

Chapter 9

'Woodstock' – in his own words

I only ever pretended to be gay, you know, Marce. It was something I started when I was younger, because I'd noticed that girls – attractive girls – always wanted to be The One to change me. It was great. Any young lad's dream. Women threw themselves at me because, quite clearly, I hadn't found the Right Woman. Someone who would convince me that I was straight and that she was my soul mate.

It just kind of stuck. I had my pick of women and not a single one would breathe a word that she'd slept with me. After all, it was a lot to admit that you'd probably given a bloke the time of his life, fulfilled his greatest fantasies, yet still he preferred men.

I've turned down my fair share too. Stone Age Sal for a start. She is one ugly fucker, and those crazy metal teeth do nothing to help matters. Imagine getting a blow-job off that? Quite frankly, I'd sooner have a wank.

Getting into the ladies' toilets has always been one of my better ideas. It was always a good crack. Have you *seen* what some women get up to in the loos once they've had a few? And I mean *outside* the toilet cubicles. It's like having my very own private peep show and it doesn't cost me a penny. I could be standing there, or leaning against a radiator, with this huge, great hard-on and no one would be any the wiser. Talk about Paradise. And if anyone new ever came in who didn't already know me, one of the other girls would always introduce me:

"Oh, this is Woody. Don't mind him. He's gay."

And the whole cycle would start again with this new bird trying to convince me that she was The One.

It was one of these birds, Julie, who introduced me to Gavin. She knew him through a friend of a friend, and thought he would be my perfect mate. I didn't realise this at the time. Somehow she had decided that it was her mission in life to fix me up with someone – anyone.

As I didn't, or couldn't, fancy her, and as she had failed to convince me I was straight, then the least she could do was find me another, ideal partner.

Honestly, some people are just so full of themselves.

I didn't know she was hoping to set me up with Gavin until it actually happened. I think she must have mentioned his name in passing: Oh-I-know-someone-else-who's-gay. But she dragged me along to the Pink Flamingo – that's a gay club at the back of Hurst Street. It's been there for years. I'd been to the Flamingo before. Sometimes I'll go along for a quiet drink, if I feel the need to reinforce my cover. Sometimes I'll go if I'm having trouble shaking off a particularly clingy bird. But this was the first time I'd ever been with someone else.

It turned out that this Julie one's a closet lesbian after all, just waiting for Mister Perfect Bloke to come along and prove that he's The One and that she's straight. She'd been denying her true sexuality all along.

Julie introduced me to Gavin and then left us to it. I was a bit embarrassed at first. She had made it so obvious that she was matchmaking. And, of course, I wasn't really interested. In fact, if he'd made a pass at me that night I

probably would've punched his lights out. But he turned out to be quite interesting and we arranged to meet up again, just for a drink.

This was only about a month or six weeks ago. But I found out more about Gavin in those few short weeks than I've ever learned about anyone else in my whole life.

He was only fifteen, going on forty-five. He'd had a terrible life. He was physically abused by his dad and then sexually abused by his alcoholic mom after his dad ran off with a friend of Gavin's sister. His mom made him have sex with his sister too. I didn't know them but I found myself getting fucking mad at these two cunts for what they'd done to their kids, and to Gavin in particular.

His sister's in a mental hospital now. Gavin was put into care when his mom died of liver cirrhosis. He was even abused at the care home too, though.

Gavin was too fucking good looking for his own good and had the body of a twenty-year-old man. No wonder they couldn't keep their filthy hands off him.

He got away from the care home in the end and was living in a bedsit in Moseley – not far from my current place in Kings Heath as it happened – making his way as a rent boy and by collecting glasses and emptying ashtrays at the Pink Flamingo.

We were getting on really great and I was horrified to find that I was actually becoming attracted to him. I became angry with all of the people who had spoiled him, damaged him. I was jealous of other guys, old boyfriends, clients of his. And I started to act jealous too.

He'd already sussed me out as far as the gay cover story went. They say that homosexuals can generally tell who's straight and who isn't. But he also suspected that I was developing some sort of crush on him, and that I was fighting my own feelings. He was really quite... sweet about it all, very understanding. As though he'd seen it happen before.

And that huge, great stonker I was getting with the birds in the ladies' loos, I was now getting with Gavin. He was beautiful. He was exciting. He was sexy. And he was young. It was all quite... scary.

In the end I admitted it, told him how I was feeling, about the confusion, how scared I was. And it turned out he fancied me too. He had this fantasy about being The One, about convincing me I wasn't straight. It was like payback time, I suppose.

Then, on that night we came into The Cellar – as 'partners' for the first time – he said that if I truly cared for him then it was time to choose. Decision time. Was I gay? Straight? Or was I bi? And to prove it, to prove that he was The One, I had to go with him to the car park.

I was so nervous. Excited too. And the whole situation got me going again. I was really turned on by it all. I needed a few drinks, though – a bit of courage. But the time had come for me to come clean. I'd been ranting on that I was gay for half my life. It was easy to slip into character. Gavin convinced me to at least give it a go.

So, after we pretty much made sure that everyone knew we were an item, and once I'd downed a few pints, we went outside – well, underground – to the car park. That's where I usually ended up with most of the women, which is why Ken Pendle never barred me from his pub for being gay. He'd always known it was a lie.

Me and Gavin, we had a bit of a snog – something I'd already tried with him once or twice – and then he started to arrange himself across the bonnet of someone's car, on his back. The way a bird would. That was the shocker. I didn't know you could do it that way... well, not with a bloke at any rate. He'd already kicked off his jeans.

That put me off a bit. For as long as I thought we would do it doggie-style I could have got away with it. I could have at least imagined he was a bird if I didn't like it. But this way? This way I had to look at his face and know it was him, know it was a bloke.

I couldn't back out, though. I've called one or two women a few choice names for changing their minds at the last minute. I know how frustrating and painful that can be. I had to see it through. I started to fumble in my pocket for a three-pack, but Gavin stopped me.

He said: "If you use one of them it'll be just like doing it with a punter." He always used protection with his clients and was adamant about using his own needles too. "With you it should be different."

I wanted to get it all over and done with so I didn't argue. I knew he would be clean. And I was still so turned on. It was distasteful but erotic. It wasn't right, for me, but it was dangerous. What if someone saw us? That just made it all the more exciting. And I did find him incredibly attractive – *and* I'd had a good few to drink. So I just got it out of the way.

He didn't look particularly interested anyway and I squeezed my eyes shut to avoid seeing his face, closed my ears to his foul-mouthed chatter. After him insisting it should be different with me, I still felt just like a client. I hated it.

By the time it was over I already knew that I never, ever wanted to do anything like that again. It was time to stop telling lies. It had sobered me up and I needed another drink. I said I'd get us a pint each and meet him by the bar. He wanted to sort himself out and shoot himself up I think.

When he didn't show up I felt relieved at first, but then I felt cheated and used. I'd just had unprotected sex with a male prostitute and a minor at that, and all of the implications that went with it soon dawned on me.

After The Cellar I moved on to Barneys and got slaughtered. I didn't go home all night. I was disgusted with myself. I started drinking again as soon as the pubs opened, but by the time I saw you at Barneys the next night I'd drunk myself sober once more.

I never did see Gavin again. Yes, I thought he'd made fun of me. Thought he'd used me or taught me a lesson or something. But I still fancied him. That's the part that sticks in my throat. I loathe myself but I was still attracted to him.

It suited me that he was dead. I wouldn't have had to face up to any of this then. But I never did hurt him.

It's because I denied ever being there with him in the first place that I'm in this mess now. Because someone did see us there. And the police found the evidence that I'd shagged him, so I couldn't deny that anymore. I'll have to have the test I suppose, but I know he was clean.

I only ever pretended to be gay, you know.

to be continued...



Wordsworth Shorts

- Diane Wordsworth -

the spirit of the wind
a Major's Marsh short story

the spirit of the wind

In 1987, the south-east of England saw it's worst storms in living memory. Sevenoaks in Kent lost six of its famous trees and a further nine were blown down elsewhere.

A few years later I was working in the payroll department at the National Grid and one of my colleagues suggested I write a story based around those storms.

This is the first of the stories set in the fictitious village of Major's Marsh.

*

Father O'Rourke was a chirpy fellow. He was well-fed, well-rounded and well into his sixties. He was also a popular character in this tiny hamlet in Kent, and the villagers were always calling on him to perform one service or another.

Tonight it was the turn of the McMahons, newcomers to the village but also the new landlord and his wife at the local pub.

The old priest sprinkled holy water at various intervals around the public bar in the Queen's Arms. Taking care not to splash any on the antique rosewood furniture, he muttered constantly to himself.

"I don't know," he chuntered. "Never had any complaints before..." a splash at the door, "... Old Ned's a friendly ghost... first time in thirty years I've ever been asked to exorcise him..."

"What was that?" interrupted Bernadette McMahon, a pretty young thing only recently married. "What did you say, Father?"

"Oh nothing, nothing," he replied. "Just a little prayer," then under his breath: "I pray Ned doesn't turn up tonight."

Bernadette and Patrick McMahon hadn't been in Major's Marsh long. Newly wed and newly qualified, they'd been sent to the sleepy hamlet on trial to run the Queen's Arms, an old coaching house owned by the brewery.

Patrick was great fun. He got on well with the locals and everyone liked him. Everyone liked his young wife too, she was just a little 'odd' at times.

Still, they both did a good job, it was nice to have a young couple around the place and she kept herself to herself – until Pat let slip the story of Old Ned that is.

"And he managed the pub for forty-five years..." he told her one evening. "He was so happy here during his life that when he died he chose to stick around..."

"Oh don't be daft," interrupted his wife. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

"But he's here –"

"How do you know? Has anyone ever seen him?"

"No but –"

"Has anyone ever heard him?"

"No but –"

"Well then. I rest my case."

"But they know he's here. He loves the place so much he keeps an eye on it, looks after it – and the people who live and work here.

"One year they discovered a fire had started in the kitchen," he continued. "It had been doused with water while everyone was asleep. Another time a burglar was shut in the cellar until morning even though no-one had locked the door.

"I tell you he's here."

"Well," she said finally when she could get a word in. "If you believe it so much we'll get the local priest in to remove him."

"You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a friendly ghost."

"Rubbish," she retorted. "No such thing as a friendly ghost."

"You just said there was no such thing as ghosts," but she didn't hear him as she was already half-way up the stairs to bed.

Bernadette made the necessary arrangements the very next day and the Queen's Arms was granted a bar extension one night in October so the exorcism could take place.

Father O'Rourke didn't really want the job, but Mrs McMahon had her mind made up and would have gone outside the village if he'd refused. He thought that Ned would understand if it was someone he knew and stay away. So the old priest did his duty and turned up with all his bits and bobs.

They waited for three hours. Pat got fed up and went to bed but couldn't sleep. Ned didn't turn up much to Father O'Rourke's relief and Bernadette's satisfaction.

"See," she cried. "I told him there were no such things as ghosts."

Father O'Rourke collected together his things. "I'm sorry you've had a wasted journey, Father. Would you like a cup of coffee – or something stronger perhaps?"

"No thank you, Mrs McMahon," he replied glancing at the Grandfather clock. "Three o'clock is well past my bedtime. I'll see you on Sunday though?"

"Oh yes, I'll be there," she walked with him to the door. "I'm sorry Pat won't be there too."

"That's all right," he said patting her hand. "Your husband has the faith, that's good enough for me."

"Goodnight Father, and thanks."

"Goodnight my child. God bless."

Bernadette closed the old, heavy door behind the old heavy man and slid the bolt home.

The noise echoed around the empty room as the fire collapsed for the night. She unplugged the fruit machines and Wurlitzer juke box, switched off the few lights that were still on and made her way to bed.

*

The following evening a new fire danced brightly in the hearth. the wall lights were on low and the Grandfather clock ticked steadily. Ale flowed freely and everyone talked about everything except the failed exorcism of the early hours. The locals were quite fond of Old Ned and didn't really want to think about what might have been.

"It's blowin' up for a bit of a storm out there," said Tom the grocer as he burst through the door. "I'll have my usual please, Pat," and he warmed his backside on the open fire.

"I'm sure it'll blow over," said Jack. He ran the Post Office. "They haven't forecast anything."

"That's just it," laughed Tom. "They don't know what to forecast so they don't bother."

"All the same, it's getting very dark out there."

"Well," said Pat. "It does get late early these days you know. Get some beer down you an' ye'll be fine." He chuckled softly at his own awful joke serving the drinks quite cheerfully. It had gone cold out – always good for business. Most people would far rather sit by a real fire supping real ale than stay at home running up their own electric bills.

By nine-thirty the bar had filled up nicely. Bernadette joined her husband pulling pints.

Soon the cosy front room at the Queen's Arms was heaving with bodies, all catching up on the news and gossip, which was much the same as on previous evenings, oblivious to the storm that was starting to rage outside.

Suddenly, the lights went out, the juke box – quiet though it was – wound down to a halt and the pumps failed.

"Who switched off the fruit machine?" someone wailed.

"S'all right," said Pat. "Stay where you are. I'll fetch some candles."

"But what're we going to drink?" asked someone else.

"We've plenty of canned and bottled stuff," assured Bernadette, amused by some people's sense of priority. "There might even be a keg or two in the basement." She soon got the drinks going again.

The pale firelight flickered, reflecting in thirty-or-so faces while Pat placed the candles strategically around the room. It looked so warm and friendly that

Bernadette considered doing it more often. It didn't take long to entertain the villagers. Jack's wife, Beattie, sat herself down at the old upright and tinkled away at the worn piano keys until strains of 'Side by Side' and 'The Birdie Song' drifted out and along the lane above the sound of the wind.

Bernadette thought she could hear someone slowly clapping outside, but when she went to see, there was no-one there and the noise stopped. She served a few more drinks but when Pat heard it too she decided to investigate. "Probably the TV aerial or washing line flapping in the wind," she said as she walked around the bar counter.

"Here, I'll come with you," said Pat wiping his hands.

"You stay here and look after the customers. I shan't be long."

She left the joviality behind and peered around the front door into the darkness. Two huge oaks flanked the house. The wind had stripped bare any solitary leaves intent on surviving the autumn.

The trees swayed precariously, their uppermost branches brushing the slates on the coaching house roof. They leaned dangerously into the building.

Shadows danced around the bottom of the trees until her eyes got used to the dark. Then she stepped out into the storm to see what, if anything, had worked itself loose. But she found nothing. A rather windswept and slightly wet Bernadette checked her watch and went back in to call time just as the power came back on.

"She timed that right, Pat," said Tom. "Goodnight to you both."

"Night, Tom."

"Don't forget that fruit machine owes me money. Goodnight."

"See you tomorrow," said Jack finishing his pint and collecting his wife from the piano stool.

"Yeah, g'night," said Bernadette locking up behind them all. "We'll have taken a penny or two tonight," she said to her husband.

"Yes, and the electric bill won't be too high either."

They pulled the plugs, washed the glasses, turned off the lights and extinguished the candles. Both too tired to clear up completely after the previous night's escapade, they made their way to bed. In fact, they were both so tired they slept through the rest of the storm.

*

Bernadette and Patrick awoke the following morning to the sound of excited chatter outside and the huge brass knocker against the heavy front door.

"What is it?" called Bernadette jumping out of bed and throwing on her dressing gown. Pat did the same and together they stumbled down the stairs. On opening the front door they were greeted by half the village.

"What's up?" asked Pat squinting in the winter morning sunshine. The wind had dropped now.

"You're lucky to be alive," said Tom stepping down off the doorstep.

"Surprised it didn't wake you earlier," said Jack.

"Are you all right?" asked Beattie.

"Why?" asked Pat. "What's happened?"

"The two oaks," said Tom pointing. "They should have fallen onto the inn."

"But they went two completely different directions," continued Jack.

"They fell against the incline."

"It's a miracle," said Beattie. "They should have fallen onto the inn."

Pat and Bernadette stepped out into the sharp October air, pulling their dressing gowns around them. Indeed the two trees had fallen away from the house. Bernadette remembered watching them leaning over the house the previous evening. It was true, they should have fallen onto the inn.

"Jesus, Mary an' Joseph," exclaimed Bernadette crossing herself. "It really is a miracle."

"Actually," said Father O'Rourke pushing his way through from the back of the crowd. "Much as I'd like to believe it, I don't think it was a miracle."

"What makes you say that?" asked Pat.

"The trees were both chopped."

"You mean someone tried to kill us?"

"On the contrary. It probably saved your lives."

"But who would do such a thing?"

Everyone exchanged looks but no-one replied.

"I thought I heard a strange noise last night," said Bernadette.

"Yes, but there was no-one there," answered her husband.

"Then it must have been Old Ned," said Father O'Rourke. "Planted those trees himself. Must have broken his heart to do that, but at least the inn was saved." He was in a world of his own. "And to think I tried to exorcise him," he finished sadly, shaking his head.

At first this statement was met with stunned silence. But then, as if it were the most natural explanation in the world, the villagers bade the McMahons good morning and went about their business discussing something about Sevenoaks in Kent being flattened during the night.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," said Bernadette as she stomped back into the house.

Patrick exchanged a wink with the old man, followed his wife and closed the door.

*

coming next time

two brand-new short stories
from the archives: *New Year's Revolution*
a complete novella
series part 2: *The Ace of Cups*
part 2: *Night Crawler*

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Diane Wordsworth was born and bred in Solihull in the West Midlands when it was still Warwickshire. She started to write for magazines in 1985 and became a full-time freelance photojournalist in 1996. In 1998 she became sub-editor for several education trade magazines and started to edit classroom resources, textbooks and non-fiction books.

She has taught creative writing to adults for several adult education departments and was a tutor for the *Writers' News* Home Study Division (now *Writing Magazine* Writing Courses) for many years.

In 2004 Diane moved from the Midlands to South Yorkshire where she edited an in-house magazine for an international steel company for six years. She still edits and writes on a freelance basis.

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