

**TILLY TUCKER: TIMEKEEPER**

by

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Novel. Time travel fantasy

“An adventure of all of time itself.”

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

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

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

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

But not today.

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

This child had two questions on her mind:

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

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

These very facts prompted two additional questions:

3. What happened to her bedroom?

4. What happened to the flat?

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

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

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

Ooer, this mysterious beach had appeared out of nowhere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He tossed a shrug. 'You tell me.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Breathtaking, isn’t it?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Oh? Such as?’

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

‘They certainly did.’

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

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

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

‘Indeed I can.’

‘Then tell me where I am.’

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

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

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

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

‘You told me.’

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

‘When you were older.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘How?’

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

‘What? Why?’

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

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

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

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

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

‘Can you picture it?’ he asked.

She sighed. Irritably. ‘Yessssss.’

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

## SIX YEARS AGO

...a dizzy, disorientated Tilly stumbled and fell, landing on all fours, both palms flat upon the carpet. Oh. The carpet. Her bedroom carpet.

Trying her hardest to ignore her stomach tying itself in knots, she took in the familiarity of her surroundings, the bed, the wardrobe, the awful childish wallpaper. She was home. Not a pteranodon in sight. She was safe. Relief overload.

Tilly failed to realise that she still had company until Sebastian spoke.

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

In response, Tilly offered across a definite nod.

Sebastian. Impressed. ‘Well done. You wouldn’t believe some of the places previous fledglings have taken me. You’re clearly a natural.’ The man returned his timepiece to its rightful place, a side pocket of his coat, then stood up from his squat. ‘Don’t freak out about the dizziness and the nausea. It always happens to newbies. Once your body grows accustomed to travelling, you’ll be fine.’

‘Travelling?’ the frowning little girl whispered back. ‘Where?’

Sebastian grinned. ‘Anywhere and anywhen.’

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

A follow-up grin from Sebastian. ‘Ah. My cue to disappear.’ He opened the window and climbed out onto the ledge. ‘Ciao for now.’

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

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

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

The bedroom door then burst open, the light came on and her mother stormed in, not best pleased, wrapped in a tatty woollen dressing gown. She crossed her stick-thin arms that matched her stick-thin body, the product of choosing cigarettes over healthy meals way too often. ‘You’d better have a bloody good reason for disturbing my beauty sleep.’

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

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

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

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

Tilly stood in silence, her petite form semi-illuminated by a moon undressed of its recent cloud cover. Her juvenile mind was now crammed with questions. What just happened? How did she get to the beach? Who was Sebastian Quickly? Why did he have such a weird name?

How come the pteranodons existed when they should have been extinct? Why were the hands spinning on Sebastian's pocket watch? How did she get home?

Or... had it all been a dream? A really, really vivid dream.

Well?

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

Or... had it actually happened?

Well?

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

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

Her sand-encrusted feet.

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

One final question then stood up to be counted:

Would she ever cross paths with that mysterious man again?

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

1976

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

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

Serendipity Blue was a long, long way from home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Daniel Saunders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She nodded. ‘That’s why I’m here.’

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

‘I read about it. In your book.’

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

‘That’s the one.’

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

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

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

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

She dealt a second mock scowl.

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

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

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

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

‘Yes or no?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘I bet she is.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Is this a dungeon?’ she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daniel peered her way. 'I take it the author of the message is one of your kind. A timekeeper.'

Serendipity counter-peered his way and nodded. 'New recruit. Bit of a handful.' A moment of silent contemplation ensued. Then she added, 'I hope you realise, you can't mention anything about this inscription in your book. Even though you did, the first time around.'

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

'Timekeepers have certain discretionary powers when it comes to information of a sensitive nature.'

Okay, fine, Daniel surrendered all proverbial arms. He then remarked, 'This new recruit must be pretty important.'

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

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

## TODAY

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

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

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

The schoolgirl shifted in her chair in an attempt to prevent the onset of pins and needles in her buttocks. How long had she been forced to sit here? Only five minutes or so, granted, but it seemed much, much longer. Her buttocks agreed. Wholeheartedly. Therefore, as a way of displaying her escalating intolerance towards a plastic moulded seat that had clearly been designed by a brain-dead dwerk with no prior experience of sitting down, she tightly crossed her arms and let out an absolute Krakatoa eruption of a sigh.

The recipient of the aforementioned absolute Krakatoa eruption of a sigh was the school's head teacher, a certain Miss Bleak, boasting a fitting surname for both the present location –

Miss Bleak's office – and her personality. The woman leaned back in her far more comfy leather chair, pressing together the fingertips of both hands and glaring over the top of her (probably school standard-issue) half-moon spectacles.

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

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

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

Poor Harry (a fellow pupil and fully paid-up member of the clinically obese club) sat on a purposely stronger chair to the left of Tilly, his hair, face and upper torso smothered in a lumpy, gooey, drippy yellow liquid. Tilly glanced at Harry. Harry glared at Tilly. Zero words were exchanged, but the detected level of mutual animosity was way off the Richter scale.

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

Miss Bleak overly rolled her eyes, blah, blah, blah, she'd heard it all before. ‘Funny how you say that about any disruptive act with your name on it. When you set off the fire alarm during the Armistice Day two minutes silence, it wasn't your fault. When you scribbled “Tilly Tucker woz ‘ere” all over Felicity Jackson's art coursework, it wasn't your fault. When you threatened to burn the school caretaker alive in his car, it wasn't your fault.’

‘Oh, get with it, Miss Bleak, it was only a prank,’ came Tilly's somewhat flimsy defence regarding the head teacher's latter example. ‘That petrol can was filled with water.’

‘Yes, but how was he supposed to know that? Even after all these months, I still can't convince the poor chap to return to work.’

Tilly huffed, tightening her crossed arms. There was that word again. Poor. Poor Harry. Poor school caretaker. It was as if everybody around her was an innocent victim and Tilly Tucker herself was the sole evil villain. Huh, Miss Bleak didn't know the half of it, the way



they teased the (poor) schoolgirl. It hurt, it really stung inside. Mind you, the teasing didn't happen often. Most of the time, thankfully, her peers forgot about how she'd been practically forced six years ago to attend no fewer than seven sessions with a child psychologist. During these non-teasing periods of term time, life would run smoothly. But every so often, somebody spiteful would bring up the past, and that's when Tilly found herself lashing out. Often violently. Therefore, in her opinion, it wasn't her fault. And she felt that Miss Bleak needed to know that.

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

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

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

'Amen,' said Tilly, grateful for the defence.

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

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

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

Miss Bleak groaned. Loudly. She was getting nowhere fast, Tilly Tucker knew that Miss Bleak was getting nowhere fast, and Miss Bleak knew that Tilly Tucker knew that Miss Bleak was getting nowhere fast.

\*One or more re-reads of the previous sentence may be required, though not essential.\*

Therefore, it was time for Miss Bleak to seal the deal, so to speak. The end of the school day was fast approaching, and even starchy, half-moon bespectacled head teachers had lives outside of the education system. That half-finished scarf at home was hardly likely to come to life and knit itself.

‘Right, let’s get this over and done with, shall we? I’d like you to apologise.’

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

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

‘Me?’ The schoolgirl didn’t look at all happy about it. ‘Why should I apologise? He was the one doing the insulting.’

‘True,’ responded Miss Bleak, ‘but you retaliated in a most inappropriate manner.’

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

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

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

Tilly’s repentance then gave way to naked contempt. ‘I’m sorry I chose cold custard when I should have poured boiling hot water over your fat head.’ Then, switching her sights to an appalled head teacher, she added, ‘May I be excused now, Miss Bleak?’

As you can imagine, Tilly was not granted the luxury of freedom. Instead, Miss Bleak condemned the disobedient pupil to after-school detention, sitting her down in the designated classroom and ordering her to write one hundred lines: “I must not call Harry fat.”

Apparently, making fun of Harry's weight was a far more serious crime than splurging the kid with custard or casting the threat of dousing him in boiling hot water. However, as Miss Bleak refused to hang around to supervise the teenager's progress (scarf/knitting on her mind), Tilly wandered off two minutes after the head had departed to make use of the nearest available school computer to copy and paste, copy and paste, copy and paste until the requested centenary had been reached. Sure, Miss Bleak had told her to "write" one hundred lines. But technically, she hadn't made it clear how the written words should be created. So there! And once printed out, she placed the offending sheets of paper on Miss Bleak's desk.

'Job done,' she muttered to herself upon her swift departure from the head's office.

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Tilly caught the bus home. The vehicle slowed to a halt beside one of many bus shelters on this particular route. A clutter of aged folk abandoned the shelter in favour of a ride home. Annoyingly, each member of elderly persuasion took an ice age to board the bus, more interested in telling the driver all about his/her aches, pains and worldly woes than beeping the bus pass and choosing a seat at an acceptable pace. During the painfully slow vocal broadcast of said aches, pains and worldly woes, Tilly couldn't help but notice a somewhat odd-looking man seated at the bus shelter, seemingly in a world of his own, dressed in a conspicuously vintage three-piece suit and an equally vintage wide-brimmed hat, both matching blue in colour, a costume that made him look like a gangster from one of those mega-ancient black and white movies endlessly repeated on obscure satellite TV channels. Age-wise, the man was probably hovering around the fifty mark, but his baby face painted a deceiving portrait of somebody much younger.

1950s Man (which was what Tilly had decided to name him) boarded the vehicle and paid his dues before cheerily (yes, cheerily) walking with a noticeable bounce in his step along the centre aisle, seeking a vacant seat. Uh oh, so as not to allow the weirdo to sit next to her, Tilly slid her bum away from the window seat and across to the aisle seat. These were her seats, all two of them, and she was in no way prepared to give them up without a fight.

1950s Man offered Tilly what appeared to be a subtle yet knowing smile before parking his posterior on a spare seat on the opposite side of the aisle. Once settled, he produced a pocket watch connected to a chain which in turn was fixed to his waistcoat. Oh. Look. A pocket watch. Just like the timepiece belonging to Sebastian Quickly six years previously.

While the man took note of the time with avid interest, all Tilly could do was stare, wondering if the hands of the pocket watch would start spinning. She was practically willing them to rotate. Oh, that's when he caught her eye. Oops, Tilly tore away her vision and instead pretended to gaze out of the window. When it was safe, when 1950s Man was no longer looking in her direction, she returned her sights to her newfound subject of great interest and watched him lose the watch to its waistcoat pocket home.

Question: Could he use that watch to travel to a certain pteranodon-infested beach?

Hold on a minute. What was she thinking? It was a normal everyday pocket watch, belonging to a normal everyday (if somewhat eccentric) passenger. It held no magical properties. In fact, in reality, it was nothing like Sebastian Quickly's pocket watch. Why? Simple. Because it had never existed. Likewise, there had been no Sebastian, nor a beach, and there certainly hadn't been a flock – was that the right word? – of hungry pteranodons.

It had all been a dream. A totally realistic yet mischievous trick of the mind. Tilly knew this because the child psychologist had told her so. Therefore, she had to be right and Tilly had to be wrong. To believe otherwise would make her crazy. Wouldn't it?