

The Greatest Race in the universe

a time travel adventure begins



DAILY FLORENCE

The Greatest Race in the Universe

by **DAILY FLORENCE**

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Chapter 1

BETSY'S FABULOUS ARRIVAL

3 DAYS TO GO

1928, Walter's Garage, 3:15pm

Walter scurried to pull an old sheet over a metal contraption on the floor. Without so much as turning around, he listened to the voice of an American man who had entered the garage.

'I think you need some help building a machine.'

'I can fix these motorbikes myself, thank you,' Walter said, squeezing a wrench tightly in his right hand.

'I'm talking about the time machine.'

3 DAYS TO GO

1928, Walter's Garage, 3pm

Betsy Grace Doolish was the master of entrances. 'It's all in the ankle,' she'd quip to any fool she considered less graceful than herself.

Of course, it wasn't really in the ankle at all. "Ankle" was the trendy new word for walk and Betsy would take great pleasure in measuring people by their attention to her ankles after indulging them with her generous wisp of enlightenment.

That said, when faced with the door to her estranged Father's garage, especially after having received no smiling faces at the door, her entrance, she had concluded, was of the utmost importance.

She turned the handle and swung the door inward, all ready for her fabulous arrival. Except, before she even had time to get a single

ankle in the door, it smashed into something on the opposite side and slammed back shut in her face.

Betsy recoiled in horror: that was her trademark move and this was utterly dreadful.

On taking a deep breath in, she gave the unfortunate incident a further fifteen more seconds, just long enough to deflect any wild connections between her own entrance and that of the idiot before her, and tried again.

'It's not that I expected you to meet me at the boat or anything,' she declared. 'But a welcome at the very least would have been nice.'

Her Father, Walter Doolish, who was crouched over some tools on the garage floor, froze to the spot.

In total, it had been fourteen years since Betsy's Mother, Irene, had slammed the porch door on Walter's face one summers afternoon in 1918. Taking with her an eleven-year-old Betsy and sauntering off to the South of France for a warmer, richer, more sophisticated life.

Irene the green, as she was so fondly nicknamed by all on the Isle, was never a stayer. Even at school, she ploughed through more boyfriends than coursework. Ever the optimist, ever the dreamer, her life's motto could be comprised of one single sentence: the grass - or so it seemed - was always, always greener on the other side. As a young woman she had managed, quite successfully, to coincide as every gossips dream and every young woman's nightmare. Should an option more rosy than her current exist then no amount of emotional carnage would ever stand in her way.

Eventually the limitations of a small Island would finally halt her quest and - much to the relief of young women Island wide - she would eventually settle for the best that the Isle of Man had to offer: Walter Doolish.

However, despite Irene's ruthless and rather immoral disposition, as the delicate stained glass windows of the porch door rattled behind her that summers afternoon in 1918, Irene dragged a tearful Betsy into the waiting car knowing that she had made the gravest of mistakes in Walter Doolish.

As her car ambled down the road that day, that would be the last time Irene the green ever set eyes on, spoke to, or even so much as mentioned her perfect husband, Walter Doolish.

Back in the garage, the world stood still whilst both father and daughter stared at one another.

Of course, Betsy had intended to behave in a much more reserved manner. She'd waltz in, dazzle him with her film star looks, reel off her death-defying tales of how she rose to fame as the world's first female motorcycle racing champion, bowl him over with her incredible tales of foreign adventures, mystify him with her impressive, eloquent grasp of the French language. They'd fall around laughing, he'd be terribly impressed, hanging off her every word, with his chin resting on the palm of his hand as he looked up at her, wondering why on earth he never moved mountains or fought like a superhero to see his little girl any sooner.

That never happened.

'Father, I've missed you,' she said as she ran over and flung her arms around him.

Walter never moved an inch, and Betsy was left hugging Walter at an awkward sideways angle, her arms crossing his chest and back and her head resting on the back of his left shoulder.

Walter lifted one arm up and gently tapped her arm in a slow "there, there" manner.

Betsy increased the hugging pressure. 'Oh, I've had the most terrible time getting here. That boat, no seats, they lost my bags and I've had to walk the whole way back. In these shoes too. Can you believe it?'

Walter said nothing.

Betsy loosened her death-grip as her head, in the most disjointed of angles, lead her body away backwards as she looked Walter straight in the eye.

'Yes, yes, that's terrible,' Walter mumbled as he looked back to the floor.

'Anyway. You know it's a lovely day for a walk and all that, so not so bad.'

Something caught her attention around the cluttered workshop. There was bike tyres, bike parts, bits and bobs, wall to wall but something very special was completely missing.

'My bike, Father, my bike. Please tell me it's arrived.'

'Yes, don't worry it's here, it's out for a test drive at the moment and one of the lads will be bringing it back later. Look, why don't you rest up and all that. We'll have supper later.'

Back in the house, Betsy dragged her feet up the wooden staircase as she made her way to her old bedroom.

Walter remained in the darkened hallway below. 'I must make a phone call and then I have more work to do. Your room is made up. Tea will be at 7. I will find your luggage,' Walter shouted, as he watched Betsy disappear at the top of the stairs.

On hearing Betsy's bedroom door slam to a close, Walter lifted the telephone receiver.

'It's me... I'm phoning because. Well, tell me, has everything gone okay?...'

As Walter listened to the person on the other end of the phone his eyes darted back up the stairs.

He lowered his voice and moved his mouth closer to the telephone. 'The problem is Betsy is here... I don't know how... No, she has no idea... Listen to me, nothing, she knows nothing... We can work that out later. Just come back. I can't do this. I've told her that we're going to have a meal together. She hugged me... Walter's face turned to a scowl as he gripped the receiver even tighter. 'Don't make me angry. Come back. Do you hear me? I can't do this.'

Upstairs Betsy squeezed the cold brass door handle to her old bedroom and gave the door an emotionally deflated shove, leaving it to creak open. Inside her once vibrant-chaos of a bedroom was now an empty, lonely space. One mahogany double bed, one mahogany dressing table, and one mahogany wardrobe.

Betsy slumped to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, staring out onto the sunny back garden. *What a terrible day it had been*, she thought to herself as she spotted two unfamiliar men in the garden making their way into the outhouse.

Thinking nothing of it, as the outhouse was where her father's staff lived, she simply shut the bright sun out, lay down on the bed, and was fast asleep in around two seconds flat.

Chapter 2

THE AWKWARD MEAL

Some while later the sound of Betsy's Father's voice faded into earshot. 'Betsy, I have some clothes for you.'

Betsy rose to a sitting position in bed, her hair sticking to her bottom lip as she rubbed her eyes. Walter was standing in the doorway with a huge welcoming smile. 'Sorry Father, I don't know what's wrong with me, I'm so tired.'

'That's fine. Now I wasn't able to find your luggage but I have some clothes for you and there's a hot bath ready. Come downstairs though straight after. Supper is ready.'

'Thank you.' Betsy rubbed her eyes and looked her father up and down. He didn't move an inch. 'Father, is everything okay?'

'Oh yes, oh yes. I'm just so happy to have you here.'

'Um... well, I'm glad that you're happy to see me.'

Walter placed her clothes on the dressing table and hurried out the door.

Well, that couldn't have been weirder, Betsy thought to herself as she got out of bed, *but at least he's happy to see me.* Betsy made her way over to the door however mid-stride she let out a squeal and froze to the spot, her hands cupping her face. Of all of the terrible things that could happen, Betsy had only gone and caught sight of herself in the dresser mirror and it was horrific. Her silky golden locks were full of static, causing hundreds of tiny hairs to stand on end, all raising themselves toward the ceiling.

Normally Betsy was so well turned out that it was damn near impossible to detect if she had just recently risen or been awake all day. She was famous for it. Even after a sweaty, gruelling motorbike race across foreign lands with greasy bikers in tow, Betsy would end her race by taking off her helmet to reveal her winning smile and a

shiny head of perfectly neat wavy hair. Even make-up seemed to cling to her face like a magical fairy had painted it on.

'A bath, I need a bath,' she whispered to her outrageous reflection.

Betsy entered the kitchen at a furious pace, her hair, although much sleeker, was still damp, and the borrowed dress she wore terribly ill-fitting.

'Oh, Father I have the most terrible...'

Betsy froze. Amongst the white, rustic kitchen with its low beams and far too many saucepans, the long kitchen table was laid out: no tablecloth, a huge pot with what seemed to be stew in, plates, glasses, and a bottle of red.

Walter dropped the dish he was cleaning and ran over to Betsy, his hands dripping onto the wooden floor. 'What could be wrong, Betsy?

Betsy looked at the table and then at Walter's hands. 'Are... are we having supper in here or something?'

'Absolutely. I've cooked a lovely rabbit stew and there's the most delicious berry pie for dessert. Freshly picked from the fields yesterday. You're going to just love it.'

'Father you've never washed a dish in your life let alone cook anything. Where's the staff? Did they do this?'

'No.'

'We're eating in here though. We have never eaten in here.'

'I've changed though Betsy, I told you that. Things will be different this time. Better. I'm going to be here the whole time. With you.'

'Sorry, I... I... I found the most terrible scars on me, Father. Like tiny feather pattern of red scars down my arm.' Betsy lifted her arm to reveal a red feather-like pattern that ran from the armpit down the

inside of her arm. 'It's all over my stomach and back. What is it? Do you think it will go? It looks terrible.'

Walter studied the marks. 'You know,' he said. 'You've been stung. That's all. There have been lots of these cases, some form of foreign bee has come over and this has been happening all over the place.'

'A bee. I don't remember being stung.'

'Well now, you wouldn't would you, most likely happened when you were asleep. Don't worry, I will get some cold cream for that in the morning and it will soon clear up. Now then why don't you pour us both a glass?'

On pouring the wine, Betsy took a seat and swirled her rabbit stew around her plate, staring at the pattern it made and occasionally taking a small mouthful.

At the same time, Walter looked on, desperately searching for the first words to break the ice.

As it turned out, that day, Betsy wasn't the only one with grand ideas on how their first meeting would go. Exactly six months prior, one Tuesday afternoon, Walter had been excited to receive his daily copy of the Douglas Metropolitan. A local woman named Edith Pratt, part of the Peel Pratt's clan, had secured a daily cooking column in the paper, much to the delight of Walter. As a staunch Manx home cook (not one of those fancy trained chefs), not only did she offer up delicious Manx recipes, such as her signature spuds and herring, she also offered up ground-breaking tips on how to organise the kitchen, reduce waste and save time -the likes of which had never been offered before. This woman, as far as Walter was concerned, was a domestic God and a perfect icebreaker.

'Do you remember the Pratts from Peel?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' said Walter. 'Edith Pratt has only been sharing her cooking tips via that poor excuse for a newspaper, the Douglas Metropolitan. Here, look at this.' Walter jumped up and grabbed a scrapbook from the side. Ushering Betsy to look inside at his paper cuttings.

'You're. You're really into cooking?'

'Are you kidding. It's practically my favourite thing to do. I've gotten really good at it.'

Betsy held the book up and stared back at Walter's face.

'And you wouldn't believe the things she knows, stuff I'd never think of. Ways to store things, making gravy from meat juices. She's just incredible. We should absolutely do some cooking together while you're here.' With wide eyes, Walter looked back at Betsy.

'I. Well. Cooking. You know, Father, I've never cooked.'

'Never. That can't be true. You're a woman.'

Betsy dropped her fork.

'Betsy, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like...'

'Father I have been riding motorcycles, remember. Doing what you taught me to. No one ever taught me how to cook and there's always someone around to cook it. Why should I? Woman or not. It's not like you ever taught me. It was you who wanted me to ride bikes. All those speeches from you on how I should be when I grow up. What's wrong with you?'

'I didn't mean it like that. Sorry, Betsy, I just put my foot in it that's all.'

With one throwaway comment, Walter was back to square one and he knew it. The kitchen went silent once again as they continued to eat their supper.

But more about that six months ago when Walter was flicking through the Douglas Metropolitan so he could catch up on Edith's cooking tips...

As if from nowhere, Walter let out a shout. 'Lo and behold,' he cried. It was Betsy, a huge picture of her sitting on a motorcycle after winning a race in France, her golden locks flowing and not a hair out of place. The headline read:

"WORLD'S FIRST FEMALE MOTORCYCLE CHAMPION HAS MANX CONNECTIONS."

'Manx connections. Bloody Manx connections,' Walter mumbled to himself as he read the article. That particular turn of phrase really riled Walter due to the local rags taking great pleasure in writing it

when someone even slightly famous had a loose connection to the Isle of Man. This, and for this reason alone, meant Walter was not very fond of journalists, often likening them to hawks with typewriters, sitting in their journalist offices, relaying gossip to one another on an Island-wide scale.

But on that very day he was reading the newspaper which contained Betsy and his favourite recipes, the phone in the hall began to ring at an ear piercing holler, causing him to scrunch the newspaper as the sound passed through him.

He gave it a few more rings but could take no more. So, with a huff and a puff, Walter bounded into the hallway and grabbed the receiver.

'Yes... Betsy, is that really you? I don't believe it...I would love to see you...Of course. To race...No, not now. I have nothing to do with that race. I've not been near it since you left...How about you just visit and we can spend time together...Yes, yes I have seen you in all the other races. I'm very impressed but Betsy...But why this race...But you're a woman. They'll never allow it. You know what they're like round here...You've already made history. Betsy, I don't want to make promises I can't keep. I just don't know if I can get you in...'

And with that, that very day that Walter picked up the phone, that would mark the very beginning of a chain of events that would reach the very end of the universe and beyond.

Walter would go on to spend six months planning the arrival of his estranged daughter: every move, every thought, every moment planned. He'd dazzle her with his newfound cookery skills, they'd picnic on the top of Snaefell Mountain, pointing out the seven kingdoms before exploring the rest of the Island by the electric trams. And the stars, oh the stars. He'd take her to Niarbyl where they'd spend hours plotting stars and discovering planets. They'd fall around laughing, she'd be terribly impressed, hanging off his every word, with her chin resting on the palm of her hand as she looked up at him, wondering why on earth she'd never moved mountains or fought like a superhero to see her Father any sooner.

That never happened.

Back in the kitchen, the silence was only making the silence worse.

'I'm sorry, I'm just so sorry for everything', Walter blurted out.

Betsy looked up. 'No, no. It's me who should be sorry.'

'You sorry. That's nonsense Betsy, I have been the most terrible person. What do you have to be sorry about? I'm the father, I should have been there.'

'But I get it. After what happened, how could you have been? And Mother she took me away. It's just that I was so mad...'

'And every right you have to be mad too. I should have called, should have done something.' Walter lowered his head. 'I didn't do anything. I just let you go. I thought that was for the best.'

'No Father you don't understand. You don't understand how mad I was at you, at everyone. Oh, what have I been thinking? It's just that I got off the boat and everything felt different. You know, I walked home and really had time to think things over. It's just when you never met me at the boat, not even at the front door...'

'And what a fool I am. My memory, Betsy, well, it is not what it once was. I'm so sorry, I ...'

'Well, I tried to be fine about it. But then I saw you in the garage and I didn't think you cared I was here. But you know, for the first time I wasn't mad anymore, just, it just really hurt.'

Betsy, in her ill-fitting dress, bad hair and sparse make-up began to fight back tears as she shoved a piece of rabbit in her mouth.

Walter leapt to his feet and gave Betsy a hug, leaving her sobbing even more where she sat.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' Walter wailed.

'But you don't know how mad I was though,' said Betsy as she gripped onto Walter.

As Walter and Betsy were hugging, something out of the corner of Walter's eye caught his attention.

Out of a darkened window, that Betsy had her back to, Walter laid eyes on a shadowy figure of a person peering back in.

'I know,' Walter said. 'Let's go on a trip together, just you and me. I have bought that delightful little cottage down at Niarbyl that you will love. Right underneath the stars. You can still see the Milky Way from there, you know. It never went anywhere.'

Betsy wiped her eyes with a napkin and gave a little chuckle. 'Really, it didn't disappear?'

'It is still the most amazing place, you know.'

'But what about the race? I should be practising right now. The practice race is the day after tomorrow and then, oh, oh my gosh, the main race is literally the day after that.'

'There's plenty of time. Besides, you know these roads like the back of your hands.'

Betsy sank back in her chair. 'I suppose I could spare *some* time. As long as I can get a couple of laps in on the new bike, at the very least, then maybe Niarbyl would be nice. That boat has really taken it out of me.'

'Now then, let's eat that berry pie. I think I've had enough rabbit.'

With his back to Betsy, Walter walked over to the oven and lifted out the pie. A dark look fell over his face as he took another glance out the window: the shadowy figure was gone, as far as he could tell at least.

'How's that pie looking?' said Betsy, wiping away the last of her tears.

Walter picked the pie up from the sideboard, being careful to pull his cuff over a small red feather-like pattern on his wrist, and turned back around to face Betsy, his face beaming with delight. 'Wonderful,' he said, holding out the berry pie. 'I think this is the best one yet.'

Chapter 3

THE JAZZ DOME

2 DAYS TO GO

The suspension on Walter's 1920s shiny black, open-top motor was no match for the long winding path down to the house. Walter gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands, his body lurching forward at the high steering wheel, while both he and Betsy bounced around at an uncomfortable rate.

'Ahh, home at last', Betsy shouted over the inconvenient sound of creaking metal and unhealthy suspension. 'Niarbyl was as it always was, Father, but I am glad to be returning home. I have plans tonight.'

From his hunched over position, Walter took a sideways glance at Betsy. She was about as tactful as a brick. He put his foot down for the last one hundred yards, pulling the car up at the front door with an almighty screech and causing a huge dust cloud to swallow the car.

'Look, Betsy, you can't keep putting this off, the practice race is tomorrow. We really must discuss a plan of action. Unless we address the issues you may not be able to....'

'Father, honestly, I trust that you can make arrangements. Now, I must make a phone call, I will be out tonight', she announced as she slammed the car door shut and bounded into the house.

Walter got out of the car and leant on the bonnet, looking back out onto the beautiful luscious green fields that surrounded him. On wiping the perspiration from his brow, he buried his head in his hands. It had been a long time since he and Betsy had seen each other but already she was turning out to be a handful. Exactly how much more of her could he take?

That afternoon, Betsy was thoroughly delighted to discover that her luggage, in all of its excess, had found its way to her bedroom.

So that evening, in her gold sequin dress and reddest of lipsticks, she trotted out of the front door to the sound of a tooting horn and some incredibly high pitched giggles.

Before closing the porch door though, she took a moment to glance back through the darkened hallway at her father's garage on the back lawn. The light was on and the house completely still; meaning Walter, despite his earlier decelerations on being a changed man, had returned to his ways faster than Betsy could slam the door.

Dusk was upon Douglas as the open top motor and its over-excitable habitants hurtled down the main road and into the city, heading at great speed toward the shimmering lights of Douglas Promenade.

The Prom, as some would like to call, was a mile long stretch of curved shoreline that sat at the bottom of the tiny city built on a steep hill. In daylight, the city left little to the imagination. It's bleak brick houses, stacked high, spilled over one another, while on the grey stone streets it's tamed and indifferent occupants aimlessly wandered, but when the skies were dark, the city lit, as if an enormous electric charge had jolted it into action, sweeping its inhabitants and firing up the lights.

Along the Prom, hundreds of guest houses lined the front, packed to the rafters with jovial guests and unlicensed bars. With every step taken, there was circuses, shows, music and singing.

Near the water's edge, sunken gardens lined the waterfront and beautiful fountains burst through the air. Above everyone's heads lay thousands of fiery fairy lights, all intertwined like webbing, and across the bay, Manannan's Cloak, a thick blanket of dark mist, crept in each night to welcome the late-night revellers.

The defining feature was a double set of steel tracks that ferried overcrowded horse trams full of intoxicated revellers from one end to

the other, each gripping on for dear life as horses with herculean strength trotted the passengers back and forth.

Betsy's car left the main road and hit the Promenade, whereby a snail-paced battle between cars, motorbikes, horse trams and drunk people began.

In the back of the car, the ladies had embraced their role as merry passengers with ear-shattering ease, ensuring that nothing would break their ecstatic chatter and overinflated mood.

Betsy, however, was not paying any attention the ladies that surrounded her, rather she was fast becoming impressed with their pint-sized driver and his ballsy driving skills.

Initially, she had doubted his pleasant smile and bright eyes, but as their car merged to the Promenade that night, it was clear that this assuming little fellow was a seasoned pro. He took up his position at the helm like a duck to water, waving his arms, overreacting, hurling abuse at other drivers (even though it wasn't their fault), calling everyone an idiot (even though they had done nothing wrong), and speeding up when drunk people passed within range.

Now, this IS a night out, Betsy thought to herself as the carnage unfolded.

'Ladies', bellowed a young man. 'There's plenty of room.'

Besides the ladies was a slow moving horse tram, perfectly matching their snail's pace. And amongst that horse tram, a small group of twenty-something men all eagerly beckoning the women to jump from their comfy open-top motor and onto their laps.

The ladies raised their giggle volume up a notch, all except Betsy. 'No, no there absolutely is not', she loudly announced to the eager bunch. The tram was full. People hanging off the side, sitting on each other's laps.

Betsy however was on a night out with a bunch of career girls, each, therefore, possessing their own varying level of desperation and selective hearing. Gizelle Hogg, Betsy's long-time childhood friend, leapt to her feet, spurred on by loud female gasps and hollering lads. She balanced on top of the car door as the remaining passengers,

who by now had caught onto their dangerous manoeuvre, turned their attention and fell silent.

'Oh, for goodness sake', Betsy mumbled to herself as the horse tram lurched to one side and a sea of arms caught one flying Gizelle Hogg from the back of the open top motor.

An intoxicated cheer went up.

Having successfully landed one flying lady, the whole horse tram now erupted with each passenger absolutely positive that they too could successfully land the rest of the women.

While the rest of the ladies leapt for their lives, Betsy sat, arms crossed in the back of the comfy ride, staring at her heroic driver with a look of begrudging disappointment.

'Come on, oh come on jump Betsy', screamed the girls who were now nestled amongst wandering arms.

The pint-sized driver looked in his rear view mirror, lifted his hat up and nodded to Betsy. It was no good, she was going to have to jump, but rather than take a nervous, indecisive jump, aiming for any hand that was reaching out for her. Betsy, in her ridiculously high heels, lifted her dress, stuck one foot on the back seat, the next on the top of the car door, and propelled herself toward the overcrowded tram with a stunt like ease, landing one foot on the edge of the tram and jabbing her arm in amongst the bodies to secure her hand to a wooden seat.

To say that the lads regretted their decision to let Betsy into their personal space was an understatement. She stared each wandering hand out with a sharp, death-like stare, causing each and every chancer to quickly conclude that if they valued their manhood then they would need to spend the remainder of the ride giving Betsy as much space as possible.

Much to everyone's relief, the horse tram eventually pulled up at the far end of the prom and the passengers poured out onto the street, swiftly replaced by another set of overzealous drunkards.

'I know,' said Gizelle as she skipped along the sidewalk. 'Let's start at the Promenade Bar'.

'No,' Betsy gasped, arms spread out wide. 'Let's not. Let's start at the Jazz Dome.'

'The Jazz Dome, oh Betsy we could get in trouble for that.'

The Jazz Dome was an old converted theatre in the backstreet that lay parallel with the Promenade. The Promenade Shadow, or The Shadow as it was known, was a mile-long cobbled, dark haunt, where Manannan's Cloak drifted in and settled down for the night. It was packed with small casinos, dancing bars and shady guest houses; a perfect hang out for career girls looking to let their hair down.

Betsy led the way, sauntering down the Promenade Shadow as if she'd borrowed her gait from a movie star.

Men lowered their hats as she passed, women whispered, bodies clawed over one another, hanging from windows, all eager and desperate to catch a glimpse of the world's first female motorcycle racer.

Outside the Jazz Dome, Betsy steam-rolled passed the enormous queue, heading straight for two burly doormen, who spotted her arrival. For a moment, they simply looked at one another, before weirdly synchronizing as if they had already undertaken emergency training for this type of situation. In unison, they began hurling unimportant people aside and falling over one another as they fought to open the double doors.

It was incredible, Betsy hadn't broken her stride once. She burst through the front doors and flowed into the great dome, closely followed by her gawping friends who were shuffling in like cattle behind her.



Betsy reached the top of the red-carpeted stairs, placed one hand on her hip and the other out limply in front of her, looking down past her nose at the crowds.

Incredibly, each and every spotlight noted her arrival and sought out her gold sequin dress with laser-like precision, alerting every man, woman and ship in the vicinity that she had arrived.

And then began a sequence of events more notably witnessed in nature documentaries, a meerkat-like Manager sprang up from amidst the crowds, leading Betsy and her limp hand toward a VIP area next to the bar, cordoned off by red rope.

The Manager, a look of pure gritty determination shooting from his eyes, clicked his fingers in the air as he sliced through the crowds like a well-oiled shark.

Across the way, Bastian the barman was serving cocktails. His head twitched to attention as his unnaturally razor-sharp ears detected the sound of clicking fingers through the dense, gathering patrons. Bastian dropped the drinks he was about to serve some other customers, brazenly shook some seats containing some of Ramsey's finest, and whipped out a bottle of bubbly and five glasses, all in the shake of a Manx cat's tail.

Betsy and the Manager were seconds away from the table and closing in at speed, a disaster in the making. Bastian however got a second wind, simultaneously pouring the bubbly and lighting the candle at exactly the same time.

He lifted the oversized glass to his Manager's nose height with not so much as a second to spare. Just when everyone was finishing up their sighs, a panicked look washed over his face, his knees weakened and a bead of sweat dripped down his forehead. The glass shook in front of his Manager's face.

In the last split second before total disaster, the manager, in one fell swoop, swiped the champagne while doing an ever-so-graceful, swan-like 360 swivel on the balls of his feet. He held the drink out to Betsy, whilst simultaneously shielding a pasty looking Bastian from view.

'And may I say what a pleasure it is to have you with us tonight,' the manager said, in the most casual of tones.

Betsy sighed, snatched the drink and turned her back on the manager. 'Well,' she said, scanning the overpopulated room. 'I most certainly hope so'.

Betsy scoured the crowds of polished suits and flowing dresses that beat to the sound of trumpets. Overhead, the oversized vintage chandeliers joined in the dance, watching from the rafters as the toe-tapping flapper band sent the whole room into an interconnecting mass jazz-funk.

This joint really was on the up and everyone from the surrounding villages knew it. People travelled from far and wide to grace its doors, all eager and keen to hang out in the hottest place in town.

And as for the TT riders, well there was certainly no better place to be than the Jazz Dome during TT week. You see throughout the remaining year, if they were still alive, the riders would hang up their leathers and retreat back to their cumbersome lives where their mere existence would turn into all but a fleeting memory.

At home, their faces were left to blur amongst the rest and their names left to endure similar rings to that of their neighbours. It was a well-known fact that should one racer not actually turn up to race the following year then all memory of him would be assigned to oblivion.

But in actual TT week, these guys were major celebrities who lavished every minute of their short-lived social status. Along the streets they were set upon by adoring locals dressed in supportive leather, the Hawks circled them at any given opportunity and women flocked. The Dome, in particular, meant they could collectively parade their celebrity and draw in the crowds like no other. This, and this reason alone, made The Dome a perfect hunting ground for Betsy and her one track mind.

Gizelle spotted Betsy staring into the crowds. 'Looking for someone?'

Betsy smiled. 'Found him.'

'Betsy you don't mean.'

'I do'.

Without so much as pausing for thought, Gizelle launched into her 'this is a bad idea' and 'he is such a loser you should stay away from him' rant. Betsy, however, stared straight ahead, beginning a solid, clearly pre-practised set of peacock-like poses that were capable of attracting any man within a five-mile radius in.

And the focus of her attention?

Across the dance floor, stood on the outer corner of a group of moderately acceptable looking men, was Finlo Gilroy.

At one time he and Betsy had been great friends, having been thrown together due to both their fathers being good pals, but Betsy had been eleven years old the last time she set eyes on him and since then he had certainly grown some. Although blossomed wasn't exactly the right turn of phrase. Now standing at six foot, his rugged and unshaven appearance was an unusual choice for Betsy's attention.

Nevertheless, she casually flicked her hair while paying absolutely no attention to Gizelle and her wearisome words. But unlike all other men in the room, Finlo Gilroy kept his back to Betsy, almost -quite unbelievably- as if he were trying his best not to catch her gaze.

Now it would be fair to say that any such interruption to Gizelle's rant at that point would have been a welcome one. But the distinctive male voice, a resting two octaves too high to be comfortable, was absolutely not.

'Women racing bikes, whatever will we have next,' said the distinctive male voice.

It was Cane Lugh, Douglas' poster boy on male chauvinism and Betsy's biggest rival in the upcoming race, who had leant in to share his thoughts on Betsy's participation. 'Men giving birth'.

Cane chuckled loudly while Betsy turned to face 'the biggest prat on two wheels' (as she would like to call him) with her best, deadpan 'you're not bothering me really you idiot' face.

Gizelle, with her underdeveloped concentration, caught sight of a drink on yonder table and floated away, leaving Betsy and Cane to stare one another out.

Growing up, Cane Lugh had held the position as one of Betsy's top twenty mortal enemies, a position he cemented aged seven when he sold the class pet, a frightfully annoying little hamster, for a shilling. Of course he didn't do it for the shilling, as one might presume, and neither did he need the shilling, he simply did it because he was forced to look after the hamster for a week and that, as far as Cane and his hideous Father was concerned, was something called 'work', and something that he required payment for.

Cane Lugh looked as though someone helped him to get dressed every morning, his suits steamed within an inch of their short-expensive lives, his face ridiculously symmetrical and his family's fortune grand.

'Mmm... Men giving birth, mother nature, total extinction. I wonder. Could that be why she never left that up to the boys?'

Betsy slapped Cane on the back, causing his expensive bubbly to swill dangerously in his glass. 'Now then, I rather think men curled up and crying like a baby when they lose to a woman a much more likely scenario. And Cane, I expect nothing less from you too when I win.'

Cane brushed Betsy's man-slap off his shoulder with an indignant huff and a puff. 'Oh, Betsy, what nonsense. Let me guess, your Father told you and you have taken no such notice. You being a tough woman and all that'.

'Oh, I heard him, and you're right, I did take no such notice. Not because I'm a woman and all that but because I'm by far the better racer than any man here. We will see at the meeting tomorrow. The amount of men who have tried to stop me before. Now that is laughable.'

'Well my father has already said no.' Cane, his bum cheeks doing much more moving than they should, walked away. 'You do realize he is now chairman of the TT races, don't you?'

Betsy raised her glass high and smiled. 'Of course,' she said.

Betsy turned her soured face toward Finlo who still wasn't moving. 'That's it,' she mumbled as she stomped in Finlo's direction.

'A little taller I see.' Betsy, her face now the epitome of calm and collected, tapped Finlo on the back.

Finlo's friends quietened as Finlo, with his sturdy jawline and dark, scraggly hair, turned to face her, puffing on a cigarette and looking down at the floor. 'H... hi.'

'I rather expected to see you sooner'.

'Been, you know, been busy I'm afraid'.

'Sorry, it's loud, what did you say?'

Finlo raised his voice. 'Busy, I said I've been busy, I'm afraid.'

'Really, so busy that you couldn't call an old friend who was back in town?'

Puffing his cigarette faster Finlo stepped back from Betsy with a pained look on his face. 'You know I just can't do this'.

'Do what?'

Finlo took two more steps back. 'This, this. I just can't do it'.

Betsy lowered her head to one side, deepened her voice and pointed to the floor in front of her. 'Finlo, I think you should come back, right now.'

Betsy looked around from the tops of her eyes, people were beginning to look in their direction and he wasn't walking back.

'Now listen to me, you were a kid, I was a kid, it was all a tragic accident. I really think we need to bury this though, forget it. Be friends again.' Betsy held out her hand to him, stepped forward with her "butter wouldn't melt" eyes and did her "only as a last resort upside down mouth".

Finlo shuffled his feet for a few moments and stared back at Betsy's big blue eyes. 'Sorry, I don't mean to be like this with you. It's just that I don't think I've ever...'

'Now that's enough of that. More importantly, I need someone to tell me the who's who of this TT race thingy and you're the man to do it. Looks like I'm in for a real cahoot tomorrow'.

Finlo dropped his shoulders. 'Yes, I'd say you've ruffled some feathers'.

Betsy took Finlo by the hand and they found a seat by the bar.

Finlo, who was born in the parish of Onchan, just like Betsy, had always been an affable chap, his soft and quiet nature in stark contrast to Betsy. He listened intently to Betsy's wild stories and conquests without so much as a single attempt to get a word in edgeways. She had always been such dominant character, and maybe that was the draw, for Finlo at least. Soon enough though the conversation turned to the race.

'Last. Well now, it's the taking part that's what I say,' Finlo said, emphasising the "taking part" point with a good old-fashioned uppercut air punch.

Betsy's deadpan face returned. 'Finlo, no. It absolutely is not about the taking part. It's about winning. Goodness me, you're not planning on being last in this race are you?'

'Well it's not like I plan to be last, I just...'

'Ah, now then, over there. I'm sure I have seen that face before. Are they racers?' Betsy pointed over to a small group of lads, each had wafer-thin, wispy ginger hair with ginger curly moustaches and an unkempt farmer-like appearance.

'Yes, they're the Foxdale boys. The one in the middle is Magnus Matthias, you will have heard of him. He's been coming second for the last few races, catching up with Cane he is.'

'Brothers?'

'No, no. Just friends, you know, local lads getting together to make a team.'

'Really?'

Finlo continued. 'Ahh, over there too.' Finlo pointed to a short, serious looking fellow in the middle of a group of lads. All were paying no attention to the ladies that surrounded them. Instead, they were huddled together, deep in the throes of conversation.'

'Ahh, they're the Ramsey boys. Wilmot Turner, great guy. An absolute professional too. Won't catch them drinking like the rest. Probably working out their game plan as we speak. Not like them boys over there'. Finlo pointed over to another group of lads across the way. Each had at least three ladies hanging off them and were playing drinking games amongst each other. 'Peel boys'.

'Think even I could have guessed that'.

'Juan Sampson, he's the racer. Never won anything mind but in Peel they're treated like royalty. Don't think the Peel villagers can believe anyone's even managed to get a team together let alone actually take part in the race. Great for a night out they are. And then there's the Castletown guys.' Finlo pointed over to the dance floor, where a small troop of men danced in unison with slender women, with a semi-professional edge, the men flung the women over their backs to the music with incredible ease.

'Gosh, they can dance. What are they, professional dancers?'

'No, no. It's just there's so out of the way that they've been finding ways to keep themselves occupied. Everyone in Castletown dances. Orry, the big guy who looks like a sumo wrestler in the middle, he's the racer. He's actually getting pretty good. Only 'cause they have nothing to do mind.'

Finlo's face suddenly darkened though as he moved his attention toward another group of lads. 'Not like that Jurby lot who are so far out they practically don't exist and can't get off their backsides for love nor money.' Finlo pointed over to a group of lads who were practically asleep on the table, despite the manic party that surrounded them. 'There, him in the middle. Gorrry Cowan.' Amongst the slumbering bunch was a blond-haired chap with his face flat on the table, surrounded by countless empty drinks glasses.

'Don't tell me you lost to him'.

Finlo's unkept eyebrows crushed together as he turned to look at Betsy face on. 'Well, only because I stopped to help him. Blithering idiot. I thought he'd crashed, you know, lying dead on the mountain. Turned out he hadn't bothered fuelling up so when he ran out of fuel he pulled over and fell asleep at the side of the road. When I woke the snake up he only went an inched my bike, leaving me to walk home.'

Betsy roared with laughter. 'That, that's like the funniest thing I've heard in ages...'

Finlo's unkept eyebrows remained firmly unimpressed.

'So, what're my chances then? At getting in this year's TT race.' Betsy ran her finger around the glass of her drink and looked into Finlo's eyes.

'Not great, really. Cane's Father, well, he's one of the chairmen in the motorcycle club now. He hates women racing so he will be doing his absolute darnedest to stop you at tomorrow's meeting.'

'But he's not the only one that decides, is he?'

'No. It's up to that grumpy old Angus Kelly and his sidekick Cutpert. They're also chairmen but, unfortunately, that Angus Kelly is still a piece of work and Cutpert is still his sidekick jellyfish. Like I said, not great really.'

'Mmm... My Father did mention something about that pair. I probably should have paid more attention to my Father but it's a bit late now. No matter, I'm sure my Father has everything under control. '

'If only your Father and you know, my Father, well if they were still chairmen, this would...'

'Well, they're not. Let's just forget about that,' Betsy said.

Chapter 4

The 1928 Practice Race

1 DAY TO GO

Walter Doolish built his grand brick house right smack-bang in the middle of a two-mile stretch between Onchan and Douglas. Surrounded by sweeping grass and lavender, the house sat exactly two hundred foot from the main road and lined perfectly up with the apple of Walter's eye: the TT Grandstand.

Built in 1908, at the same time as Walter's house, the Grandstand was an ambitious wooden structure crafted with the blood, sweat and tears of local artisans. Which was not, as one might presume, necessarily a good thing.

The first section of the enormous wooden structure could be found to the right of the starting line. The leader board towered above head, jam-packed with as much up to date as possible information. Each racer would be given a number prior to the race and a set of corresponding clocks would display whether or not a racer has passed a variety of checkpoints: 'O', 'G', 'R', 'B'.

'O' meant the racer had passed the Grandstand, 'G' meant the racer had passed Glen Helen, 'R' meant the racer had reached Ramsey and 'B' meant the racer had passed the Bungalow on the bottom of the Snaefell Mountain.

Further to this, the board showed non-starters, lap numbers, retirements, race position and a light that would signal a racer being two minutes away from their arrival at the grandstand. Information was fed to the scoreboard via landline phones, sparsely scattered around the thirty-seven-mile course.

Operating the scoreboard was the job of five steely, intelligent looking, short men wearing white coats and stopwatches. A job that no person in their right mind would want to take up. Glasses were mandatory, screaming was expected, precision was everything and

perfection was just the beginning. So bad had it got that by 1920 the Island had run out of intelligent looking short men. Toppling off, crying, punching and being a so much as a second off would result in instant dismissal and public humiliation.

One year, all five of the scoreboard team were had been wiped out in one fell swoop. Failure to agree on a half-second count had resulted in one of the most dreadful of brawls ever seen at five foot high. This, considering the comical height of the men, was an unfortunate headache for the Island, especially considering the Hawks had managed to photograph the whole of their dramatic decent into the dirt road below. Had the government not paid the Hawks to keep the whole thing quiet that year then these dreadful photographs could have floated further afield, the locals shuddered at the thought of it. Thankfully though, the whole incident was hushed and their dewy-eyed replacements were shipped in from far afield, each stepping off the boat to expect the usual hum-drum of professional scoreboarding.

But this was no normal race, this was the most difficult and dangerous motorcycle race in the world: across towns, villages, open roads, twisting turns, hills and a mountain.

To the right of the scoreboard stood two hundred wooden seats, each row sitting virtually top of each other, for optimal viewing, and a twin set on the opposite side of the road, and widely was it known, alcohol consumption was mandatory. Force one gales, singing and uneven seat distribution was enough to send each construction into a giant creaking sway, the likes of which could only be corrected by the linking of arms and nerves of steel. One man too many and it's been said that the desperate screams of the seated could be picked up in Onchan Village.

Needless to say, the beer was free-flowing.

On the left of the road, just past the mirror set of seats, were the pit stops, a long set of numbered wooden stops, where each of the racing support team, or persons, would wait in anticipation. Due to the long wait and the free-flowing beer, professionalism amongst the

pit stop support teams was often viewed as a lottery, especially where Peel and Jurby were concerned.

The final wooden construction of the grandstand, and quite possibly the most important, was the shed. The shed was an inadequately sized meeting point for the racers and their teams to meet before the big race.

Outside the crowds were beginning to gather, but inside the rickety old place, the 1928 practice race pre-meeting was just getting underway.

Cane Lugh had positioned himself at the front where he was in the throes of bitter words with Angus. It was clear that Angus was in no mood for messing, he gripped his aching, arched, back and locked horns with Cane underneath a torrent of heated whispers. While Cutpurt, on the other hand, was reduced to a stuttering piece of upright jelly.

Together the crowd leant forward at a ten-degree angle, ears perked and doing their absolute utmost to catch what they were arguing about, but just when it seemed that Angus might blow the whole roof off the whole treacherous wooden structure, which was entirely possible, the door to the shed burst open, causing the two arguing men to stop in their tracks and hurl their attention toward the door.

The crowd sprang back into a vertical position and watched as Betsy trotted down the centre of the room and squeezed into an empty seat, but this time it wasn't Betsy that the room was stopping to see: it was Walter. He stroked his long curly moustache as he strode down the centre of the room with more swagger than Eminem in a kids poetry competition.

Orry from Castletown leant into Finlo and whispered. 'I don't believe it. He's back.'

'Me too,' said Finlo. 'Betsy said nothing yesterday about him actually racing.'

Magnus Matthias from Foxdale leant toward Finlo. 'Hey boy, am I right in thinking it was Walter who started the TT races or is that just a Manx rumour.'

'No, you're right, yessir,' said Finlo. 'Walter set the races up and was the number one racer but, you know, after what happened, he's not set foot in here since Betsy left.'

A smile swept Orry's face as he interrupted Finlo a shove to his arm. 'Best day ever. Check out Angus' face. I've never seen him so mad.'

On spotting Walter, Angus straightened his arched over back and coughed loudly, drawing everyone's attention right back to him. 'Moghrey mie everyone and welcome. The morning is upon us and it seems that Cane's father, Hugo Lugh, has been held up. I am sure he will be along soon but we must get underway.'

Cane stood behind Angus and Cutpurt and stared at the door. 'We should wait. Just a little longer,' he said.

A pained voice rose up from the sweaty, sardine-like crowd. 'No man, we've got forty-five minutes now, everyone's gathering.'

'That's enough. We must go ahead,' said Angus. 'Now then, now then, a very warm welcome everyone to the first official practice race to kick off the 1928 TT races.' The room cheered. 'Last year we saw a top speed from Cane of sixty-two miles per hour. And this year I am absolutely sure we can beat that target...'

Cane took a small break from his worried state, letting out a wry smile to all that would entertain.

Angus rattled on about the roads, rule changes and bike specifications, sending any enthusiasm in the room for the race straight down the pan. Just near the end of his speech though, just when everyone thought they might pass out from heat stroke or boredom, the door at the back of the shed burst open.

Cane lifted his head in anticipation but instead Gorrry Cowan from Jurby, a cigarette hanging from his mouth and his flyaway blonde curly hair on the rampage, burst through the door. 'Sorry I'm late, boys,' he shouted at the top of his voice. 'The trouble I've had getting a drink around here.'

'Ya never have,' said Magnus Matthias, looking confused.

Finlo snarled at the sight of Gorrry. 'Surprised you woke up on time,' Finlo said. The crowd laughed.

'Never mind. Never mind all that.' Walter leapt to his feet, waving some papers in the air. 'I suppose you have all heard. It's been said to me that my daughter is not allowed to race. Are these rumours true?'

Angus stared at Walter with a face of steel. 'That's true. We decided, we all decided, that racing is not the sort of thing a woman should be doing.'

'How dare you? How absolutely dare you?'

Cuthbert sank back while Angus crossed his arms.

Waving the paper once more, Walter continued. 'Don't you all think I don't know these rules? Don't you all think I might have checked? It was me who wrote the rules. And nowhere did I say women cannot race.'

'That may well be,' said Angus. 'But the motorcycle club is a just that, a club. And Betsy is not a part of this club.'

'Really? Have you checked the members recently? Because I distinctly remember adding her to the members' list when she was eight. Here.' Walter shoved the paper he was holding into Angus's hands.

'That's enough.' Cane stepped forward, his voice doing that two resting octaves too high to be comfortable thing again. 'My Father isn't here. You can't go changing things or making decisions without him. We have to wait.'

'No Cane, we don't. If a meeting is held and one of the chairmen are missing then the meeting goes ahead and they can overrule the missing chairman.' Walter tilted his head to one side and stared Cane straight in the eye. 'Do you want a copy of the rules?'

Cane's eyes widened as his nostrils flared at Walter's outrageous attitude.

'Then we go to a vote between the chairmen,' said Walter.

Cane's wry smile came back as he focused in on Angus.

'And I vote no to Betsy racing,' said Angus.

Cuthbert stared at the floor. 'I... I.... I.'

Angus leant in. 'You need to say no,' he said to Cutpurt in a slow tone.

Cuthbert looked up at Betsy who, by a stroke of luck, was wearing her "butter wouldn't melt" eyes at full pelt.

'I. It's just that I,' Cuthbert continued.

Angus stepped closer. 'What the hell are you doing? Say no.' Angus shouted his final word so loud that Cuthbert jumped where he stood. 'Now,' he bellowed.

Cuthbert gripped his chest. 'Y... yes. I say yes, she races,' he said before raising his voice to a shout. 'And stop, stop telling me what to do.'

Angus staggered back, a look of pure disbelief radiating throughout his face.

'No, no this is not happening.' Cane began rummaging around in a bag in the corner of the room while Gorry shouted from the back. 'Why Cane, afraid you will be beaten by a girl?' The rest of the crowd chuckled away while Cane flung a set of papers in the air. 'Here, this is it. My Father has written a new set of rules. One that doesn't include a woman racing. All they need is to be agreed in by the majority of chairmen. He was going to do it this morning.'

'Fine,' said Angus as he turned back to Cuthbert. 'I say yes, now I hope you have gathered your senses. All you have to do is say yes.'

Cuthbert, his eyes burning in Angus's direction, delivered his final words. 'I. Said. No.'

'Then to a member vote, it is.' Walter bellowed to the crowd. 'Now lads, I'm sure you have no problems with a bit of competition. Who votes Betsy in?'

A small shower of hands flew from the crowd and into the air.

'Ah ha,' wailed Cane. 'Outvoted. There's twenty racing and only nine votes.'

Walter stared at Orry from Castletown. 'Come on,' he said. 'It was me who taught you to ride, remember.'

'Oh, what the hell?' Orry raised his hand high in the air.

'Still not enough' said Cane.

Walter placed his hands on his hips and breathed out. 'Hands up who's racing this year.' A sea of hands raised. '16, 17, 18, 19. Nineteen, there's only nineteen riding this year. Who's missing?'

Everyone looked around, scratching their heads. 'Um... erm... well now.'

'That lad do you think from. Oh you know I'm not sure,' said Angus. 'Anyone know?'

Cane stamped his foot loudly on the wooden floor. 'Oh come on. Who is it? We must know.'

For several minutes humming and haring from baffled faces rumbled around the tiny shack, until finally....

'Then that's it,' said Walter. 'Betsy Grace Doolish. You are racing.' The room exploded with a cheer.

Cane shouted over the top of everyone. 'No, I said no. We have to wait for my Father. How dare you all?'

Gorry raised his voice from the back of the room. 'Must say, this is the best entertainment I've had in ages.'

While the other racers were congratulating Betsy, Cane watched on with nostrils flaring.

Once again, the door to the tiny shed burst open but this time it was the local bobby stood in the doorway. 'Cane, Cane Lugh,' the Policeman said as he studied the cramped bunch.

'What is it?' Cane piped up from the front.

'Cane you need to come with me.' The policeman made a beeline for Cane down the middle of the room.

'No. Tell me, tell me now.'

The Policeman said nothing, he began trying to guide Cane toward the door. Cane resisted, yanking his arm back as hard as he could. 'Tell me, now.'

'No lad, just come outside.'

A small struggle ensued until finally, the Policeman leaned into Cane. 'Cane he's dead. I'm sorry lad, I really am. Please come with me.'

'Dead. No, he was fine. I saw him last night.'

The Policeman dragged Cane down the middle isle while Cane thrashed his arms and shout once more. 'How? Tell me how, right now.'

'I can't. We can't be sure.'

'Tell me.'

'Oh, lad this isn't the place.'

'Tell me now.'

'He's been murdered. We think he's been murdered.'

The crowd gasped. Unable to draw another sentence from his mouth, the policeman took the opportunity to yank Cane from the room.

Angus was the first to speak. At first, he simply let out a few hums, as if he was about to address the horrible things that they'd all just heard, but instead he said, in a low and glum tone. 'Make your way to the start lads. The practice race will start in ten minutes.'

Angus stomped down the centre of the room toward the door, his heavy footsteps whipping up a frenzy of dust particles that hung densely in the air. On flinging the door open, he stepped outside to the wail of a hundred or so cheering fans who had gathered to escort the racers to the start line. Angus's voice strained over their excitement. 'And may I officially announce the start of the Tourist Trophy races 1928.'

An almost deafening roar pierced each and every wall of the dilapidated shed, shaking the very core of everyone in it. Walter scanned the room of blank faces, there seemed more trepidation at the screaming crowd than there was at the actual race.

Like robotic-wide-eyed-lambs-to-the-slaughter, one by one, the racers, followed by their support teams, stepped out and into the

light where they were swiftly swallowed by a legion of overly eager spectators.

Finlo shot to a standing position. 'Right then,' he said. 'We've got a race to win, let's get going.'

Outside Walter battled to keep up with Besty as the crowds swept her and Walter toward the start line. 'See you at the finish.' Walter shouted to Betsy as she straddled her bike.

Betsy placed her helmet on and began revving her engine. Facing forward she paid no attention to Walter.

Walter watched the back of her head as he took his position. He'd been here so many times before, his ears rumbling with the sound of roaring bikes and joyous spectators, the smell of motor oil and his nose thick with dust. Oh, how he loved the races. But something wasn't sitting right. Before Walter could contemplate his uneasy feeling anymore though, the starting beeps fired and Walter and the rest of the races burst from the start line.

The race went well and Walter drove over the finish line in an air of relief, but as Walter removed his helmet he picked up a strange feeling that was sweeping the stadium. All eyes were on the men with white coats as they updated the leaderboard, all the while whispering voices were rumbling through the seats.

Betsy's bike was number 4 and Finlo's number 8, both of which had passed the letter 'R', meaning they had passed Ramsey, but not the checkpoint at the bottom of the mountain.

Walter watched as Angus took a call on the leaderboard and the men in white coats hovered like flies around him.

Then Angus did something that Walter didn't want to see, he hung up the phone, whispered to one of the men in white coats and began scanning the start line. Almost immediately, Angus caught the gaze of Walter.

Angus didn't need to say anything, the dulled expression as he locked eyes with Walter said everything.

There was something horribly wrong, and Betsy was almost certainly involved.

Chapter 5

The Mission Begins

3008, New York, United States

Felix Dibble was lapping up the attention, despite doing his absolute utmost to pretend he hadn't noticed. Strolling down the chaos that was West 33rd Street, Felix's vintage leather jacket was turning heads like no other. 'What a guy,' twenty-something women gasped as Felix and his middle-aged spread rolled by.

It was the year 3008, where forty- five was the new twenty- five, where hairy arms, tattoos, dirty moustaches and beer bellies were all but extinct, where those pesky all-American dreams had spread like a disease, obliterating difference and rendering people of earth bland, and most importantly where Mr Felix Anthony Dibble was tearing up West 33rd Street on his way to Penn Station.

A group of wafer-thin tourists in matching beige skin suits stopped Felix in his tracks. 'Can we have a picture? Please. Please. Please,' they said.

Felix looked down. 'Why yes, you certainly can.'

On straightening his 1970s oversized gold-wire shades, Felix positioned himself smack-bang in the middle of the group, towering above them like a giant ogre amongst beige tinted fairies. More people gathered to watch admire his unusual look.

'Are you a rider?' someone shouted.

'Did someone say something?' said Felix in a deep voice as he peered out from the top of his sunglasses with overly concerned eyebrows. Overhead, looming shadows from the hanging shuttle cars were flickering wildly as they whirled back and forth, blocking his vision.

'Are you a rider?'

'Certainly am,' he said. 'This is my first year.'

The crowd clapped and a young boy rushed forward. 'Have you picked a name yet?'

'Why, what do you think I should be called?'

'Erm... erm... Maddog.'

Felix laughed. 'Sounds good. I'll think about it.'

Felix continued on his way to Penn Station, watching from behind his shades at a constant flow of delighted faces that passed him by. Why didn't I dress like this before?, he mused to himself. I've never felt freer. But the truth was, Felix's look was not a simple case of throwing on some biker gear, he'd been preparing extensively over the last year in order to reach his current state.

In a world where 'healthy choices' had taken over to the extreme, people quite simply didn't get fat. Instead they wore scantily clad skin suits that clung to every pore. These slim suits regulated temperature, had built in computers, advised you on calorie intake, aided youthfulness, eased pain, healed skin and monitored health. Everyone owned one and everyone who wore one enjoyed supermodel-esk type figures coupled with a life expectancy of at least one hundred and fifty.

Felix, on the other hand, had tossed his aside last year, favouring fat laden pizzas from underground restaurants, procrastination and fry-ups. Whilst not technically obese, he had piled on a few stone and gained an impressive middle age spread that was jutting proudly out from underneath his black grunge t-shirt. Most surprising though, as Felix realized that day, letting himself go wasn't exactly the "end of the world" state that everybody had been duped into thinking. In fact, he'd had a great time getting in that state and today, of all days, this new look of his was really paying off.

Inside Penn Station, Felix strolled through the hustle and bustle of bodies, taking the lift to the underground station and taking a seat on platform fifty. Trains were long but gone, instead replaced by bullets, metal carriages that reached great speeds.

Scouring the platform, it was brutally obvious who was heading to Outlaw Island. The minimal, sleek fashion of the year 3,008 was a thing of the past for the passengers of Felix's bullet, replaced by wild-hair, biker's leathers and painful looking piercings. Felix rested back on the bench and began inconspicuously weighing up effort that the rest of his fellow travellers had put in compared to him.

A female voice snapped Felix from his cloud of smugness. 'I love you so much,' the voice said. Wafting his long greasy hair from his face, Felix shifted his body around so that he could get a better look at the grey haired lady in a skin suit who was sat on the bench behind him.

'Mom,' he whimpered from underneath his breath. 'What the hell are you doing? You'll get us in trouble.'

Felix and his mom turned their backs on one another, just enough so that they could talk but not be seen talking.

'I love you so much.' his mom said, her eyes filling with tears.

'Are you crying. Oh Mom, please. You know I can't. Why are you doing this now?'

Across the way, Felix spotted one of the armed guards staring coldly in his direction. He leant back slightly, hanging his arm over the back of the bench and covering his mouth.

'Then take this.' Felix's mom said as she passed him a small package through the bench which he placed in his pocket.

'All aboard Outlaw Island,' the train guard shouted. Once more the guard looked over, squinting his eyes even further.

'I have to go,' Felix said, lifting his backpack and walking toward the train, but by now the Guard had him in his sights, hardly had he put a single foot on the train when Felix felt the cold metal of a gun press onto his chest. 'Identification and tickets,' the guard said.

The guard studied the papers until he spotted Felix looking back to empty space. 'Problem?' he said.

'No, no. Absolutely not. Just thought I'd left something, that's all.'

The guard removed his gun from Felix's chest and slammed his papers there in return.

'Very kind,' said Felix as he hopped onto the bullet.

On taking a window seat, Felix noticed a commotion was taking place between the Guard and a couple of passengers on the platform.

'Do you know who I am,' a sprightly man dressed in a skin suit said.

'I don't care who you are,' said the guard. 'No one gets on looking like you,'

'I think I can wear what I want considering the price I paid for these tickets. I want to speak to the manager now.'

The sprightly man had no chance, a long, high pitched beep echoed around the station and the electric doors slammed shut, causing the bullet to blast from the platform and plunge into darkness.

A few moments later the flickering orange synthetic lights fired up as the carriage rattled like a rocket launcher through the underground tunnels.

Felix's eyes wandered around at the passengers, eventually resting on huge guy who was sat directly in front of him. He wore a denim jacket which had tons of colourful badges and an embroidered back which read: "WILD BEAST BIKERS". His hair was long and looked as if it hadn't been washed in a long time. This guy was giving Felix a real run for his money.

The man turned around and Felix could see the his worn face was as fierce as his jacket. 'That you're mom, was it,' he snarled.

A voice to Felix's left caused the biker to turn back around. 'Hi, you're Felix, aren't you?' In front of him stood a slim young man of no more than twenty or so. He wore tight leather trousers with a black printed vest and a black bandanna.

'That's ma name.'

'Don't mind if I sit do you,' he said, hurling himself into the seat next to Felix and squashing all of his belongings onto his lap. 'Names Axel,' he said, puffing out his chest and holding out his hand.

'Pleasure,' said Felix, staring at his open hand.

'Yes, well, real name's Sebastian but figured it's not much cop for a rider's name and all that, better change it. Now, I heard you hit a top speed of 400mph in the Hollywood Hills race, that's why you're in. Is that true?' Axel gazed into Felix's eyes in anticipation.

'Yeah, that's right. Caught the attention of DIG Space Treaty Corporation.'

'I'm a racer too. I hit 350 in Alabama last month, sponsored by Hot XT now.'

'Hot XT, never heard of them.'

'Well, they basically make the components for space shuttles. Nothing too exciting, not like D.I.G. Anyway, they're sponsoring me.'

Felix gave Axel a look up and down, letting out a small shrug and turned to look out the window which, unfortunately for Felix, was pitch black. The only thing he could now see was the reflection of a disappointed looking Axel. Felix let out a sigh and turned back around. 'This your first race?'

Axel sat up straight. 'Yeah, at the TT races, it is. Can't believe I got in. Did you know it's the most dangerous race in the world?'

'Sure, I heard that.'

'And the oldest. Like a thousand years old.'

Felix nodded.

'Have you, like, even raced on the roads before?'

'Nope, I'm going in cold.'

'Yeah, me too.' Axel rested his shoulders down. 'There's no way I could afford to go there. It's super expensive. Wouldn't earn enough in my lifetime. I like fix slicers in my normal job but there's no way I could afford it.'

'Mmm... that's true.'

'Hey, see who's over there.' Axel pointed toward a woman in tight black leathers sat at the front of the train. 'That's Hornet. She's sponsored by Space Flight Global.'

'She's pretty good, right?'

'Right.' Axel began pointing toward the big guy in front of them and mouthed the rest of his sentence. 'And he's Crusher. Sponsored by Wild Beasts Space Flights,' he said with eyebrows raised. 'He's really good.'

A high-pitched screech began ringing in everyone's ears, sparks flew outside of the window and the cart shuddered with extreme force, causing everyone to grip the seat in front of them. They were arriving in Douglas Central.

On the platform, the holidaymakers were separated from the riders by some leather-clad armed guards. Altogether there were about fifteen racers, including Axel and Felix, who were then led through the morning hustle and bustle. Felix couldn't see a single person dressed in a skin suit on the platform, everyone wore either leather or jeans and sported grunge t-shirts and tattoos. Even the guards resembled tough looking bikers from some sort of vintage biker gang.

One-by-one, Felix and his fellow riders lined up in front of a security gate of clear gel-like film, still separate from the holidaymakers.

The first man to step through, a middle-aged biker wearing a black and white bandanna, jumped as a loud siren sounded and red lights flashed from above. The guards were swift, surrounding him in seconds with guns pointed straight at his head. He froze to the spot, sweat dripping down his face.

'What do you have?' shouted a guard.

'Nothing, nothing, you have it wrong, nothing,' the quivering man screeched back.

'I'm giving you till the count of five. One, two, three, four-'

'In my pocket. It's in my left pocket. Don't shoot.'

'Take it out slowly. One wrong move and I shoot.'

With shaking hands, the man reached into his pocket and lifted out a black sliver of metal. 'Here, it's my phone. I forgot. I forgot I had it.'

The guards snatched the phone and handcuffed the man, dragging him away at speed.

Axel was up next but as he passed Felix, and ensuring the guards couldn't see, he used his fingers to mimic the action of a gun going off at his temples.

Felix rolled his eyes at Axel's terribly timed humour, of all the funny jokes someone could come up with that was not in the slightest bit funny.

Then something terrible slammed into Felix's mind, that package his mom had just given him was in his pocket, and knowing his mom there was something very likely up with it.

Felix stepped closer to the scanner, but just as he managed to get one foot through, a siren rang through the station, causing him to pull his leg back. Everyone looked to their left. One of the general visitors in the gates further down was surrounded, his face drained of all colour and head surrounded by guns.

'Step through,' said one of the guards to Felix, breaking his attention. Gripping his fists, Felix stepped through to the sound of a ping and a green light.

'That was fun,' said Axel on the other side.

'You are joking, right?'

'Hotel Twisties. Now I know I've arrived,' said Axel, looking up at a crumbling building with a half-lit neon sign hanging precariously from it.

'You know I heard this place was authentic but I'm not sure I really took that in. Literally, this place hasn't changed in a thousand years.'

Felix and Axel both took a moment to inspect the Promenade Shadow with its crumbling stone-brick houses and cobbled streets. 'At least we're dressed for the occasion,' said Axel.

'Don't worry,' said Hornet as she made her way up the grimy steps of the hotel. 'I heard the insides like a palace.'

'Really, oh phew,' said Axel, following her up. 'I like a nice comfy bed.'

Axel however quickly found out the inside was worse than the outside. Painted black, the walls were plastered with random, tatty posters advertising local bands, the place stunk of smoke and there were drunk bikers strewn all over the foyer. Reception, as it turned out, was a hole in the wall where a muscular biker with narrow eyes stared back at them.

'Hello,' said Axel in a merry tone, doing his absolute darnedest not give away so much as a single hint of impending doom that was slowly devouring him. 'We're here to check in.'

The biker-slash-receptionist slammed a key down in front of Felix and Axel.

'Erm... do you want our names?'

'Nope,' said the receptionist, crossing his arms and flexing his muscles.

Axel picked up the key. 'I, well, you know. Thank you and all that. I am very grateful.'

'I'll take one of them', said Felix.

'Nope,' said the receptionist.

'Erm... you know, I need a room.'

The receptionist pointed straight at Axel, who held the key up and smiled at Felix.

'Wait, no, I can't share a room with him. I need my space.'

The receptionist leant onto the desk in front of him, causing his muscles to bulge even further and his eyes to squint dangerously in Felix's direction.

'Totally fine, let's do that.'

Upstairs Felix eyed some punch holes in the corridor wall whilst Axel held the key to his face. 'A key. An actual brass key. I don't think I've ever used one of these,' he said as he rattled the key into the door.

It took a minute but the door sprung open.

Stepping in first, Axel swiped his hands in the air. 'This is an illusion, isn't it? They've got a virtual world going on in here and they've set it to this?'

The windows in the room were as thin as paper, there were two rusty metal beds shoved in the corner and the walls were covered with faded and peeling wallpaper. On opening the bathroom door, Axel let out a squeal. Inside there was a tin bath, a grimy toilet and an unstable-looking ceramic sink.

Felix popped his head around the door. 'At least they have bleach,' he said, pointing to a bottle located behind the toilet.

'But it's full,' Axel gasped. 'This is the worst place ever. Why? Why would anyone want to holiday like this?'

Felix threw himself onto one of the beds which made a metal crunching noise as he sank into it. 'Money,' he said, rubbing his back. 'You know, the filthy rich, bored crapless with their over-privileged lives, wanting the sort of messed up holiday that makes them get home and actually appreciate their shitty little lives.'

'Suppose. For real though, what if we win. Would we be like one of them? Desperate to come here just to escape our own crappy privileged lives.'

'No come-over has ever won on their first year let alone even made it as a runner-up. If we live through it then we might make history on our second.'

'Can you believe what the prize is this year though? We could come runner up. I think that's totally possible.' said Axel.

'No one has ever done it on their first year though.'

'But you're like one of the fastest races out there. You might. I can't believe that you've not been here before. At the speed you go too..'

Felix rested his hands on the front of his chest. 'Would be pretty cool racing slicers in space.'

'Cool, are you kidding me? It would be the best thing ever. Intergalactic space racing. What a prize. We'd be the first humans to ever to race in space. We'd be making history. Oh I hope we come runner up at the very least.' Axel sat down on the edge of his bed. 'Hey do you know what planet it would be on? I say Mars..'

'No idea. Not thought that much ahead...'

A loud knock on the door interrupted the men. 'Initiation in five. Meet in the foyer.'

'Do you know what they do at the initiation? ' said Axel.

'I heard you gotta drink piss.'

Axel's face dropped. 'Not even for a one way ticket to Mars. No way.'

Chapter 6

The Initiation

The new racers sat in silence on their journey to their initiation, the trepidation silently chewing through their internal organs as they bounced around on the back of an old pick up truck.

'By gum, I think this might just be an original,' Axel said, slapping the side of the pickup truck. 'What's the chances of that,' he continued with wide eyes.

The rest of the riders said nothing, deep down they knew exactly what a vintage truck meant whilst Axel, on the other hand, clearly didn't have a clue.

That evening they were heading to Onchan Stadium, a drag racing battleground with them as the star-studded attraction. Dusk was beginning to settle in as their vehicle pulled up at the back of the stadium, when Axel suddenly gripped his chest, his eyes darting back and forth.

"Zombies. We're all going to die. There's zombies everywhere," Axel wailed.

The rest of the riders gasped in terror as they quickly scanned the misty, black and beaten remnants of an old play park that surrounded the stadium. Dotted around the place were drunk wandering bikers everywhere, randomly staggering in the dark as they held their hands out to try to steady themselves.

'Bikers. You mean drunk bikers?' said Felix, whilst glaring in Axel's direction.

Axel took another look around and sank back. 'Oh. Oh yeah, right. Bikers. I knew that.'

Life, it seemed, had been confined to the stadium itself, bright floodlights shot up into the dark sky and the thundering cheers of

spectators and motor engines flowed from the grounds. A large steel gate opened and they drove in.

'I don't see any bikes for us,' said Axel.

Inside the stadium, there was an air of crazed excitement sweeping the riotous crowd. Death-defying stunts on bikes were taking place on the grass centre of the stadium, causing the crowds to foam at the mouth at near fatal falls to the ground.

The pickup ground to a halt whilst a wrinkled, bald biker watched with sinister eyes as the racers disembarked. The biker stopped chewing her toothpick and threw it to the ground.

'Now then ladies,' she said, raising her voice above the carnage. 'Tonight is your initiation. Pass this test and you'll be automatically granted your patch and welcomed by default into the Outlaw Island Bikers. Die and you won't. Any questions?'

The riders looked around at one another.

'Then your cars await,' she said, gesturing to a starting line full of badly damaged, vintage motorcars.

One of the racers suddenly piped up. 'I... I've never driven a car.'

'Me too,' another woman said with hands spread out wide.

Axel leant forward. 'It's fine, you know gears, right. Just get in and get used to the pedals, fast. Break by using the left and middle pedal, right.'

'No helping other riders.' Crusher's face filled with rage at Axel's over-helpful outburst.

The riders climbed into their seats via the windows and began revving their engines to warm the tyres. The cars were ancient, reinforced rust buckets, the likes of which they had never seen in their lifetimes.

Plooms of black smoke rose from the start line and the sound of sickening cheers filled the riders' ears. A red light flashed in front of them, then a countdown clock timed their start. Three, two, one. The cars erupted with smoke as they burst from the start line.

Everyone had made a clear start, all except the man who had never driven a car before. He fired up the engine again, moving only slightly forward before it stalled for the second time. He tried again before a look of panic swept across his face.

The race track wasn't big. This wasn't a huge stadium. The other racers would be coming back around from their first lap in a matter of moments.

He looked out of the window at the bald biker, shooting a look of sheer desperation in her direction, but rather than show an iota of concern, the biker was laughing, roaring laughing in fact.

The racer shifted his body around and looked through the back of the window. This was it, the other cars were hurtling toward him and seconds away.

He turned to face the front and gripped his head as a sickening crunch of metal tore through the stadium and the cars collided. The crowd whooped and wailed as the sound of crunching metal tore through the stadium.

The cars had turned into a twisted metal of a mess and the crowd were lapping it up.

Thankfully, Felix and Axel had both managed to swerve at the last second, missing the wrecks of cars by inches.

The remaining cars were still hurtling around the track; however, the woman who had never driven a car before had run into trouble. Somehow, she had made her first lap, swerved the wreckages at the start line and was now on her second, but it was clear that the others were about to start overtaking her very soon.

Out in front was Crusher and an unknown racer, locked in a head to head battle, followed closely by Felix, Axel and Hornet and the remaining cars.

Rolling into the third lap the female racer was battling to grip the wheel, there was no power steering and the car simply seemed to drift.

She glanced in her cloudy rear-view mirror, Crusher and the unknown driver were coming up fast behind her, she fought with the

steering wheel to keep steady. As they passed, both cars ran dangerously close to her, forcing her into the outer edges of the track.

Sparks flew as she skimmed the outer wall and screamed for dear life.

As the cars overtook, the woman sighed with relief. She clipped the wall, sending her car spinning in the middle of the track at a stomach-churning rate. Around and around until it slammed to a stop in the middle of the track, facing the opposite direction.

The woman screamed as Felix headed straight toward her like a thundering rocket ship. At the very last moment, he slammed his car to the left, sending one of the other racers into the middle field and swerving past the terrified woman.

Next to pass was Axel and Hornet who both managed to skim past the woman along with two more racers.

However, the next racer slammed the side of her car into the screaming woman's and it shot straight into the middle of the stadium. The screaming woman could take no more, cars or no cars she was getting out. She climbed out the window, leapt onto the track and scrambled to the outer wall, flinging herself over and collapsing on the floor in a jittery mess.

Out in front, Crusher and another driver were now locked in a head to head battle as they tore toward the finish line. Crusher chuckled to himself as he spotted what was up ahead at the finish line. The destroyed cars were still sitting at the start. He swerved at the last moment, slamming into the other driver and causing his car to hurtle straight into the stationary lumps of metal. Crusher wailed like a banshee as his car rattled over the finish line and the other car smashed like a hammer into the other cars.

The rest of the cars were now scrambling toward the finish line, Felix and Hornet were locked in a final moment feud while Axel and two other cars were going head-to-head with several more behind.

Felix and Hornet made it over the finish line but there was a huge problem for Axel and the other two cars. They were all flying toward

the finish. Axel was in the middle car and knew what was coming, he turned to the driver of the inner car and screamed through the windowless motor. 'Break, for God's sake break,' he shouted. The other driver looked at him for a second or two before the realization hit him. He was about to smash straight into the cars that were stuck on the start line. He slammed his foot on the break but it was too late. Another sickening metal crunch rang out as his car exploded into the pile-up at the start line.

Axel ground his car to a stop after reaching the finish line, his hands shaking and body still pumping with adrenaline.

'Out, get out of your car.' A biker dragged Axel from his vehicle.

Across the way, Axel could see the rest of the surviving racers were being dragged from their cars and led to the middle of the field where a floodlight lit a small stage. The bald biker was there with a microphone.

'Say hello to your latest and greatest members of the Outlaw Island Bikers gang,' she shouted to the crowd.

Crusher was the first to embrace his place as king of the road, he threw his arms up and began howling like a crazed wolf. Hornet began cheering and punching the air, followed by Felix and the rest of the races.

Axel, however, got the wrong end of the stick. He wrapped his arms around Felix's waist, while Felix was busy punching winning fists in the air. 'Axel. Axel. Get off you idiot,' he said, prising the overexcited turnip off his waist.

'Now what, now what,' said Axel, jumping up and down.

'We drink piss.'

'No way, you're joking, right. You're joking.'

Felix's face remained very still.

* * *

While stood on the stage in complete silence, Axel averted his attention toward the ceiling. The Dome on the Promenade Shadow, now headquarters to the Outlaw Island Bikers, had managed to retain much of its 1920s crumbling architecture, Axel had concluded after a quick sweep of the ceiling area; however, Satan had definitely been round the establishment with a paintbrush. Black brick walls, red ominous graffiti, skulls, crossbones and Outlaw Biker memorabilia on every wall. Axel was not going to sleep very well tonight.

It wasn't long though before he'd run out of things to look at on the ceiling and was forced to revert his attention back to the crowds. They were still the same, still stood there in deathly silence, hundreds of them, like evil biker statues following each and every move that he and his fellow racers who were lined up on the stage were making. Only one thing passed his mind. Am I gonna have to drink piss?

Once more this terrifying thought was romping wildly around his mind, eating him alive, so much so that he just wanted to scream like a raving lunatic back to the crowds. 'No. No, I will not drink piss, you've got no chance'. The desire to shout this at the top of his lungs became overwhelming, ready to spew out of him at any moment like a gigantic volcanic eruption, showering like red-hot lava over the waxwork biker crowd and quashing their piss drinking plans.

But rather than holler any kind of manly king-of-the-jungle roar that he'd been vividly imagining, Axel accidentally let out a high pitched squeak that caused Felix to stare Axel down from the corner of his eye.

Axel, having once practiced the art of ventriloquism, decided now was a perfect time to revisit this skill.

'I'll have a pina colada,' he mumbled to Felix.

In return, Felix let out three low, extremely angry mumbles that loosely translated into "shut", "bloody" and "up", and Axel, having caught straight onto Felix's muffled grump, responded with two even

looser mumbles that translated into "grumpy" and "bum". Felix could feel his eye beginning to twitch. *How the hell did I get stuck with this guy*, he thought to himself.

Thankfully though for all involved, the last fifteen minutes of painful silence was about to come to an end as, from the back of the room, the sound of metal doors dragging open signalled that the welcoming committee was entering the room and heading toward the stage.

First up was the President, Banshee, a seventy-something female biker who almost certainly had never seen the likes of a skin suit. She was medium height, grey fizzled hair, covered in Satan inspired tattoos and sported pointy black teeth. She shuffled forward, letting out sinister snarls as she divided the crowds with her demonic eyes.

Closely following her, Iron Hawk, also known as the Vice President. Was she female or male? Absolutely nobody could tell due to the mass of floppy brown curls that swallowed up her face and two-thirds of the body.

Next the Treasurer, Poison, a tall, thin woman with deeply sunken jowls and sharp eyebrows. Behind her, Slinger, the Road Capitan, the same woman who had so nicely welcomed the racers at Onchan Stadium, still chewing on a toothpick.

The final member of the committee, the Sargent at Arms named Roadkill, lurched from side to side as she walked toward them. She leapt onto the stage and slammed her feet into the wooden floors.

'Three thousand and eight,' Roadkill said as she casually strolled back and forth. 'One thousand years since the first ever race held here in this hell hole. And here are our newest members'.

Roadkill pointed over to the line of expressionless new recruits who remained perfectly still.

Axel read the situation wrong again, feeling this was a perfect opportunity to let out a winning smile as everyone turned their attention in his direction.

It was not. Axel swiftly straightened his face.

'A chance to forever change your life,' Roadkill continued. 'A prize so incredible that life as you know it will never be the same again. Last

year the winner took home one billion and the four runners-up twenty million each. But this year it's a chance to make history as the first riders to ever race in space? To become the first humans on earth to represent our world in the Intergalactic Space Races. To be champion of the universe.' Roadkill raised her voice and roared at the crowd. 'Do you think they can do it?'

The crowd returned a half enthusiastic growl back.

'It's possible,' she quipped. 'Provided they don't die, that is. Tomorrow is the practice race. Make sure your bets are placed no later than ten minutes before the start.'

'Get off the stage,' Slinger shouted to the new recruits.

Everyone leapt from the stage as a frantic heavy metal band bounded on behind them, flinging their instruments together and launching into thundering screams and heavy acoustics.

The crowd began moshing wildly, beer sloshing in waves above head, bodies slamming into each other as they lurched like beasts. People were being hurled over the tops of the crowds, hundreds of hands springing floppy bodies from one side of the room to the other.

It was a lot to take in, and while the rest of the recruits were huddled together trying to process the bedlam, Felix realised that Axel had suddenly disappeared.

'Axel?' Felix said, spinning around.

From amidst the ear-shattering death metal, Axel's voice rose from the stage and Felix caught sight of one ridiculously happy looking Axel, arms spread wide, about to leap.

'Check me out,' Axel screamed as he threw himself head first into the crowd.

Felix, Hornet and Crusher all put their hands over their faces as they watched Axel crowdsurf. 'Oh for the love of...'

'Drink?' said Hornet, turning her back on Axel's shenanigans and facing Felix and Crusher.

After fighting their way to the bar, they each got a drink and watched as Axel bounced gleefully over the tops of the crowds, giving each of

them one of his jolliest waves as he surfed on by.

'Someone tell me how,' said Horner. 'That guy is one of the best racers in the world.'

'At least neither of you have to share a room with him.'

'That's true.' Horner stroked her long ponytail and leant in. 'Tomorrow night, 9 pm, we meet at the ghost train, right?'

Felix and Crusher nodded.

'Did you see me? Seriously that was crazy. Did you all see me?' It was Axel, back from his crowd surfing adventure. He bounded through the crowds, dragging a female biker behind him. 'And look who I've found,' he said, whipping a wide-eyed woman with short ruby-red hair and a pearly white smile from out from behind him.

'Hydra, right?' said Horner.

'Yep, hi everyone,' Hydra said while doing a miniature wave. 'Congrats on getting in'.

Felix and Crusher raised their glasses.

'Yeah, we just met, crowd surfing actually. Looking forward to tomorrow?'

'Something like that,' Crusher mumbled.

'Hey, don't worry about it. I will be in the paddock tomorrow, show you all around and all that'.

'You racing?' Felix said to Hydra.

'Of course.'

'Seventh, she came seventh last year. Hey, please tell me you're riding the two-twenty slicer tomorrow,' Axel piped up.

'Are you kidding? Yeah, I literally wouldn't race without it.'

'Oh my, I cannot believe it. Can I take a look.'

'Sure'.

Chapter 7

The 3008 Practice Race

Axel's mouth dribbled a little, he was face-to-face with a two twenty slicer, mouth hanging and arms akimbo. The engine purred a sweet song as he slid his fingers over the warm, polished body.

He stepped back, a thousand twinkling stars stamping on his eyelids as he consumed every inch of the floating metal beast that hovered effortlessly before him.

It was gunmetal grey, slinky, sleek, with a huge round jet engine firing warm, red-tinged air from out from the back. Using the same technology to launch space rockets, the two twenty slicer used a mix of hydrogen and oxygen combined, this machine was capable of delivering a top speed of 2000mph, reach 0-500mph in two seconds flat, with a turbo boost function ten times faster than any other slicer ever made.

'Sit,' said Hydra, ushering Axel onto the slicer.

The slicer sank slightly as Axel took a seat, rising back up as it compensated for his weight. He revved the engine.

'This is incredible. Absolutely incredible.'

Axel pressed a red button in front of him and a see-through circular screen shot up from the handlebars, covering the front of the bike. Hydra pressed into the screen and the bike began processing the view in front of it.

'See,' Hydra said as the screen began flashing all manner of information in green and red. 'It has an updated heat seeker and x-ray vision, meaning I can see around corners before I've even taken it. And I can tell who and where everyone is in the race. It's linked to the leader board. And here,' Hydra picked up a wrench from the floor and smashed the clear screen. 'Totally unbreakable.'

'You two ready.' It was Felix, leathers on and heading to the pre-practice race meeting with Crusher and Hornet.

Axel hung back from the others as they made their way through the paddocks, gawping incessantly at the adrenaline pumped stadium which was teeming with spectators.

Despite it being nearly a thousand years since the first race, the layout of the Grandstand had remained the same; however, it was now a hundred times bigger and a thousand times more vibrant. In fact, it was the only part of Outlaw Island to make use of modern technology.

No more was the leader board run by small men in white jackets and glasses, it now ran on an enormous array of instant electrical information, beaming out across the crowds.

Robots floated back and forth with the images, statistics and odds of this year's races and Axel watched as one lowered down the main road, grounding to a stop when it realized it had his attention. It shot out a 3D image of Felix and a computerized voice began speaking to Axel.

'Place your bets. Place your bets. Felix Anthony Dibble, first year at Outlaw Island, 6ft, 200lb..'

Axel put his hand up. 'Wait. Now, how old is he?'

'Forty-five years, sir,' said the robot. 'This is his first year racing and with odds of...'

'Forty-five, he never is.'

'Let me check that.' The robot took a moment. 'Yes sir, I can confirm he is. Now Sir, would you like to place a bet?'

'Well stone me, I had him down as fifty.'

'Axel. Stop talking to the bloody robot and come on,' Felix shouted.

Inside the shed, now an enormous stone, windowless container, the place was packed out.

'How many racers are there?' Axel whispered to Hydra.

'Two hundred and five this year. Pretty busy,'

The meeting seemed to fly by for Axel who was paying almost no attention to Roadkill and her unimportant pre-race prep-talk. Instead, Axel's attention was on the rest of the races in the room. There seemed to be an endless array of them, all different sizes, shapes and ages, but there was something quite strange, Axel didn't know a single one of them. He scoured the faces in the room searching for at least one other familiar face that he could recognize.

Axel had watched the racing on the gambling channels before but for some reason, the only people he could remember were Felix, Hornet and Crusher. Strange, Axel thought to himself, but most likely it was the excitement of the race messing with his mind and there was a lot of them. He was about to take part in the biggest race in the world, he didn't really need to be worrying about remembering people's faces right now.

* * *

At one end of the grandstand, a lonesome and rather outlandish gust of wind began to whip dust up from the main road, swirling in circles before charging south down the wide dirt track. It skimmed past the thirty-something empty slicers which were lingering mid-air at the start line, gathering momentum as it frolicked freely past the pit stops, but sadly for the lone gust of wind, it's dancing days were about to be over. Up in front of it, heading north, was a wall of leather-clad riders making way to their machines.

With faces of chiselled steel, helmets balanced seductively on hips and a steely pace, the troop marched forth with the robustness and vigour of a charging army. On impact the breeze shattered into thousands of tiny air pockets, sweeping through the slow-paced biker catwalk and sending their un-kept hair, and the overpopulated stadium, into a furious flap.

In unison, the two hundred something riders took a seat on their slicers to the sound of sickening spit-filled cheers. It was a surprise,

Axel mused to himself. That no one in the stands had wet themselves by now... or had they?

Axel, of course, was right, you see the visitors of Outlaw Island had everything riding on today's race, billions upon trillions of pounds of it, and this wasn't even the main race, this was just the practice.

So big had it become that every second of its tension-filled action was being beamed into every home, office, shop and stadium on the planet. Each and every inhabitant on earth had stopped what they were doing and were watching on with bated breath. But what was most surprising about the whole thing, not that Axel - who was still calculating the ratio of seat wetters in the stands - could have ever imagined at this point, but right now, across twinkling galaxies and endless solar systems, the whole universe at this very moment was tuning in and turning up the volume.

Axel placed his helmet on and gave Felix, a few spaces to his left, a nod. Felix nodded back and then turned his attention forward where he spotted Hornet and Hydra putting their helmets. Overhead the camera drones lowered themselves into their ready position, scanning the riders faces and beaming them back to the masses.

Hydra sank into her bike, applying pressure to her rumbling slicer and causing the red air at the back to increase.

Two long beeps sounded.

From out of nowhere, a man leapt over the fence from the arena and shouted to the riders as a mass of biker guards chased him in hot in pursuit.

Hydrda desperately tried to listen to his muffled shouts through her helmet. 'You've been tricked,' but that was all she caught, the sound of his voice abruptly ended as all at once the gang of biker guards became airborne and landed on top of him with a sickening thud, dragging him away to the sidelines.

At first there was a few moments of quiet as everyone processed the moment of madness, but Hydra had to forget it. She took in a deep breath, sunk into position and squeezed the handlebar once more.

The ear-piercing beeps began. This time, on the third and final beep, each and every slicer tore like the wind from the starting line and fired down Glencrutchery Road.

In a matter of moments, the racers had reached the tight turn of Quarter Bridge and headed toward Peel.

Hydra tightened her grip and increased the pressure as she hit a welcome straight through the blackened, beaten roads. She was tenth, doing well, but there was no time to contemplate her position, her slicer weaved and turned at incredible speeds, skimming the overhanging bushes as she navigated the tight roads.

On hitting the straight just after Kirk Michael, Hydra put on more pressure as she saw another slicer closing in on her, she had to keep her position. She held straight, feeling the air pressure as the other slicer skimmed past her toward Ballaugh Bridge.

Hydra began to break, ahead of them both the Ballaugh Bridge was nothing but a high bump in the road and the slicer in front was too low to the ground as it attempted to gather speed. The back end of the slicer in front clipped the bump of Ballaugh Bridge, barely was there a noise as she watched the slicer in front slam into the ground and begin to cartwheel forward in front of her.

Left or right?

She swung left, all the time gripping the break as her two twenty slicers clipped the right side of the out of control machine in front, sending her into a wild spin and hurtling straight toward a brick wall.

Unaware of what had happened to Hydra, Felix whizzed toward Ramsey.

Up until now, he'd been taking it easy, getting used to the twists and turns. On the next straight, he turned up the heat. He was going so fast that even his drone began lagging behind.

The Ramsey turn was a sharp but after that it was straight up to Snaefell Mountain and that was where they could battle it out.

By halfway over the mountain Felix was down to eighth place.

There were two bikes in front of him, both weaving the road so that he couldn't pass.

There was only one thing he could do to overtake, lower to the ground and take the wider edge.

They passed the old railway tracks.

The bike in front saw his first manoeuvre and matched his position in the road, blocking his first attempt. Felix fixated his eyes, attempted to overtake him again and then suddenly swung left, he made it.

It was now between him and the slicer in sixth place, and Felix was not happy with seventh.

They fought the whole way down the mountain and onto the final bend where Felix spotted his chance. He positioned himself to the left of the slicer in front, waited until he was making the heavy turn and then undercut him, forcing the other slicer to veer right and into the field.

Blasting into the stadium Felix was closely followed by Axel and Hornet. The crowds were foaming at the mouth as Felix pulled up in the stadium, followed by Axel and Hornet.

Felix removed his helmet and leapt off his bike, cheering as he taunted the near-manic crowds.

Hornet rushed up beside him gripped him tight, as if offering a hug. 'Are you insane. You just sent Crusher into a field. What the hell were you thinking? It was a bloody practice race. What the hell Felix?'

Felix smiled and continued to cheer and mumbled back. 'Should have been quicker then, shouldn't he?'

'Have you heard?' shouted Axel. 'It's Hydra, she crashed.'

Everyone watched as a slow-motion crash was taking place on the enormous screens; a drone had recorded everything that had taken place at Ballaugh Bridge. The slicer in front flipped forward, sending the rider flying from his machine. They watched as Hydra broke for dear life, suddenly swinging left and the right corner of her bike clipping the tumbling bike in front of her. In front, there was a brick wall.

Axel covered his eyes.

Luck was with Hydra, her slicer had slowed by the time it hit the wall, meaning only the right side smashed into it. She sat for a moment in complete shock. 'I'm okay,' she shouted up to the drone. 'I'm okay'.

'She's okay,' screamed Axel. 'Oh thank goodness'.

Chapter 8

Montague's Fair

Later that evening, at the beer tent on the Promenade, Crusher turned his back on everyone, hanging his arms over the metal barriers at the side of the tent and focusing in on a line of inexperienced vintage motorcycle riders, who were pulling off mildly dangerous stunts in the middle of the road.

With each and every dying cat scream from the deathcore band behind him, his face sank farther and farther into a contorted angry sulk.

'Are you even watching them or are you plotting his death?' said Horner.

Crusher's top lip curled. 'Both.'

'Oh, for goodness sake, Crusher.'

'So, guys and girls, what's on the agenda tonight? Beer or partying? Or both? Oh my God, I nearly forgot, Montague's Fayre is here. We should so go to that.' It was Axel, expertly balancing a single beer in each hand as he breathed in deep and squeezed through the crowd toward them.

'I say we mosh,' said Hydra, throwing her hands in the air and wobbling around.

Horner eyed one of Axel's beers. 'Is that for me? Thanks, Axel.'

'Erm... erm...' Axel lowered his beers and stared at them with a sad face. 'Erm... oh fine I can't mosh with two.'

'I'm not moshing, no way,' said Felix.

'Cheating though, you'd do that.'

Together everyone howled at Crusher. 'Come on Crusher. That's enough.'

'Do you think we could like just have fun?' said Hydra.

Crusher downed the last of his pint and smashed his glass into the ground. 'Nope,' he said as he stomped away and disappeared into the crowd.

'Erm... erm... well, shall we just like mosh or something? Moshing always cheers me up,' said Axel.

'Let's do it,' said Hydra. 'You two coming?'

Hornet and Felix both shook their heads. 'We'll stay here.'

Gripping tightly to their drinks, Axel and Hydra threw themselves into the shadowy mosh pit near the front of the stage.

'No way are they going to hang onto their drinks,' said Hornet.

'Which is a point, drink that quick, we need to meet Crusher at the Ghost Train. It's nearly nine pm.'

Hornet and Felix tripped over strewn rubbish as they exited the tent, past a legion of armed biker guards and straight onto the promenade front. They breathed in deep, placed their shades on and covered their faces with baseball caps.

'That is seriously hectic in there,' said Felix.

'Well don't get too comfy here comes the fair.'

Up ahead, along a half-mile stretch of promenade, lay the world's wickedest fairground. A packed out, dark and beaten, debauched neon mess, where Manannan's cloak was mingling freely amongst the depraved excitement.

Montague's Fair was the work of a travelling family called the Montague's. Set up around one thousand years ago, Montague's Fair had grown into an international phenomenon. There were copycat Montague Fairs all over the world but none measured up to the real deal.

Felix and Hornet walked at a steady pace, taking in as much as they could of the world-famous attraction as they could. They passed

cages of sweaty, half-naked wrestlers from behind metal bars, sword swallows, past sword throwers, twisted magicians, scream-inducing fairground rides with no real regard for health and safety, beautiful women with too many legs, beautiful men with too many eyes, werewolf people, talking octopuses, dancing gorillas, zombie stall attendants in striped waistcoats and straw hats who kept randomly bursting into haunting choir songs, torture chambers, harrowing screams, demented fairies, possible-death-dunk tanks, hook-a-man, hook-a-woman, coconut shy with heads, trippy candy floss, vodka popcorn and a human lasso game with no apparent rules.

As they approached the final attraction, the sky darkened and the clouds seem to crackle as they came face to face with the mother of all fairground rides - an oversized, death inspired ghost train called "Let's Hope You Make It".

Hornet grabbed onto Felix's arm. 'You are joking, we have to go in there.'

Felix gulped. 'Sure. Looks fine to me.'

Hornet slapped Felix on the arm. 'Does not. Oh for goodness sake, this is madness. What's the deal with this guy anyway?'

'You mean Montague?'

'Yes, Montague.'

'I dunno. He hates the Outlaw gang, that's why he's going to blow this place up.'

'Yeah, so. I know that much. But why does he want to take the Outlaw gang down?'

Felix scratched his head. 'Well I think, or so I've heard, it's because Montague's family use to own the Island and the Outlaw Biker Gang have taken over and get all the money from it. Montague wants to own the races which he thinks are rightfully his.'

'Is it?'

'Is it what?'

'Felix. Does he own the land and are the races rightfully his?'

'Well I dunno do I? Who cares anyway. All that matters to us is he hates the Outlaw Biker Gang and that means he's helping my Mom, and us, to get our hands on the time machine and get Betsy from 1928. Rest doesn't matter does it?'

Hornet stared at Felix in the face. 'We've been sent on a mission but you don't know one hundred percent what's going on. Felix, you can't be..'

'Oh come on. It's my Mom who's sent us here. I think if we can trust...'

'Yeah, but it's a bit weird isn't it. If you really think about it. Why don't we know more..'

Springing from the shadows, a male demented fairy with a frightfully ill-timed hop, skip and a jump, bounded over in Felix and Hornet's direction. Unable to stop himself, he crashed straight into them with an almighty thud, apologizing profusely from underneath his alcohol tinged breath as he used them as an anchor point to steady himself.

On achieving a more vertical position, he began circling them whilst doing an awkward high-kneed-fairy-inspired-skip, with claw-like hands spread out wide. On his second successful full circle, sure that he now had momentum and the capability of adding a further layer to his fairy-like skills, he burst into merry sounding song.

'You're gonna die, you're gonna die, I'm not gonna lie,' he chirped away in a gruff man's voice as he continued to circle them. 'You better get the ghost train cause I'm telling you why, you gonna die, you're gonna...aaaaaargh.'

Felix had grabbed the demented fairy round the neck, causing his little fairy feet to hang off the ground and his sad fairy wings to sink down.

'If I hear one more merry song from you, you're gonna die. Right?'

'Felix, let go of him now.'

The fairy coughed and spluttered.

Felix let go of the fairy and he dropped to the floor like a hot brick, rubbing his neck as he stumbled back to a standing position.

'We're going, now,' Hornet said, dragging Felix toward the ghost train, but as they made their way forward the drunk demented man fairy wasn't letting anything go.

He rose to his feet, lifted one fist in the air and shouted over to Felix in one of the gruffest voices ever heard. 'Yeah, whatever you massive horses ars...'

Felix lifted his hand and pointed back. 'Don't even think about it fairy,' he roared.

The demented man fairy scampered back into the shadows.

Hornet went first up the uneven steel steps of the ghost train, reaching a small toothless grey haired fairy who was sat crouched in the undersized toll booth. 'Two tickets,' she said, slamming down a pair of white tickets in front of them both.

'No,' said Hornet. 'Two tickets for Felix and Hornet.'

The fairy snatched the two tickets back and slid two black tickets out in front of them, flashing them her blackened teeth in a way that could almost be mistaken for a smile. Felix and Hornet took a seat in a screaming clown seat and the safety bar lowered.

'Did, did you hear something?' said Felix.

'No, hear what?'

'My name, was someone shouting my name?'

Felix and Hornet tried to look back out on the promenade but it was too dark. The only thing they could see was shadowy bodies roaming all over the place, but there was no more time to look, their clown cart began to roll forward slowly, a huge blast of warm air from above hit them and they were swallowed whole by the creaking metal structure.

'Felix, Felix,' shouted Axel as he ran up to the ghost train too late.

'I know, let's get on too,' said Hydra.

'Yeah, but we'll miss them again.'

'Oh yeah. Mmm... I know, let's play some games and we'll wait for them to get off. Ah, ha, hook-a-man. Let's do that,' said Hydra.

'Yeah, I'll do hook-a -woman. No, wait. You do hook a woman, I'll do hook-a-man.'

'Oh yeah, okay.'

At the hook-a-man and hook-a-woman stand, Axel and Hydra both kept tabs on the ghost train whilst simultaneously trying to hook screaming strangers out of two slimy green ponds. 'You can't not get one,' Hydra shouted over to Axel as she battled with a ten-foot rod.

'What do you mean? I don't think I can anyway, they're too heavy.'

'You can do it.'

'You're doing great.'

'Concentrate harder,' a pond full of desperate men shouted as they splashed around.

'Because,' shouted Hornet as she managed to hook a woman.

'These are visitors to the Island who have broke the rules. If we catch one then they get let off. If not then...'

'Got one,' shouted Axel.

'Then they have to stay in these ponds.'

'Ah, ha. Oh my, you're kidding. Ha, ha.'

So began a giggling fit from Axel, which then set Hydra off.

'No, guys, stop laughing,' came the desperate cries of the two people that they'd managed to hook. 'Ahh, come on, you can do it.'

They really couldn't. Hydra and Axel both sunk to their knees with rods shaking as tears of laughter rolled down their faces and both people landed back in the water with a splash.

'Losers,' the people in the ponds shouted.

Axel and Hydra rolled off the hook em game in fits of giggles and headed back toward the ghost train. As they did, an effortless fairy covered in sparkly glitter glided around them on roller skates. She smelt like a summer breeze intertwined with butter popcorn and had huge fluttering eyes.

'Popcorn,' she said in a squeaky voice.

'Yes please,' said Axel, grabbing a delicious smelling box of warm popcorn from her hands. 'Hey this is nice, we can have this while we wait.' They both dug in.

Five minutes later, as they polished the last remnants of popcorn off, Hydra squinted as she slammed her hand onto Axel's shoulder to steady herself. 'Is that ghost train moving.'

Axel began giggling. 'I think. I think I'm drunk.'

'Oh, oh me too,' said Hydra as she roared with laughter.

Out of the shadows, the drunk demented man fairy began circling Axel and Hydra while doing his obscure skipping song and accidentally bashing into them at random points. 'You're gonna die, you're gonna die,' he began to sing in his terribly off singing voice, causing Axel and Hydra to howl even harder with laughter, but just as they thought they might wet themselves from laughing, a frightfully strong force suddenly squashed them all together.

'What, what's happening?' shouted the demented man-fairy.

'We're trapped,' wailed Hydra.

From a darkened platform above head, that nobody had noticed, somebody had thrown a cracker of a lasso, hooking all three of them in at once. Successful cheers from the platform above rang in everyone's ears. They were trapped, all three of them squashed together like a trio of smoked kippers on a hook, regretting wholeheartedly that they had ever met that bloody magical fairy and her alcohol laced popcorn.

Inside the ghost train, Hornet grabbed Axel's hand tight. 'I hate this. I really hate this.'

Felix kept quiet. He hated it too but there was no way he was owning that.

Ghostly figure's leapt from the darkness, slime dripped from the ceiling and zombie hands sprung from the shadows. It felt never-ending, like a huge dungeon that they were never getting out of, when suddenly their clown carriage ground to a halt.

'What's happening?' said Hornet as the safety bars lifted back over their heads.

In one sharp and swift motion, the clown carriage tipped forward and they were thrown into a black twisting slide below. Barely had they time to catch their breath as they hurtled down the slide and slammed into the ground, landing in an uncomfortable intertwined mess on the padded floor.

'I really hope that hurt,' said Crusher as he stood over them with arms crossed.

Hornet shoved one of Felix's legs off her and began waving two bits of crumpled black paper in the air. 'And the point of these two black tickets was?'

Chapter 9

F.O.R.T

Underneath the ghost train, the sound of a sonar beep echoing around the room was the first sign that this wasn't any old ghost train. Hornet and Felix prised themselves apart and stood up straight to witness an incredible sight.

The room was wall-to-wall with machines, maps, sonar displays, video surveillance, computer screens and consoles. Countless demented fairies rushed back and forth in an air of military-style concentration. They pressed buttons, printed long sheets of paper which they huddled around and studied, moved pins on maps, monitored cameras and huddled in small groups.

'What on earth is this?' Hornet said.

'It's a control room, a tactical epicentre, a, a..."

Crusher finished Felix's words. "It's called the FORT, short for a Demented Fairy Tactical Operation Room. F.O.R.T.'

Hornet shook her head. 'Nope, that doesn't work. For a start, what about the word demented and the capital letters are all mixed up.'

'Lovely of you to drop in,' a male voice shouted from the opposite corner of the room.

'Then you tell him,' Crusher said.

'Montague at your disposal.'

Sliding out from behind a machine, Montague barely bent his knees as he sashayed toward them, introducing himself to each as if he were a theatrical show host announcing the arrival of a Hollywood star. He made a beeline for Hornet, kissing her hand gently and dishing out compliments aimed mostly at her ponytail.

Whilst Hornet's knees were swiftly weakening from Montague's Latin love-god demeanour, Felix's knees, on the other hand, remained

perfectly still.

Of all the people in the world, Montague the third was everything that Felix despised in a man, in particular, his designer flowery ensembles, which Felix felt almost certain he had been ripped off for, were of great displeasure to his eyes.

Montague's social media outlets were equally as repulsive too. He referred to himself as a 'trend-setter', an artiste, a guru, spoke mainly in third person, sent a torrent of selfies down his news feed, documented the 'effort' he endured for his toned, hot body, balanced those pictures out with pictures of him acting goofy, pictures of him being all 'normal' (in the form of him baking delicious looking vegan, paleo, caveman cakes from ground dirt and growing suspiciously good looking vegetables from his sprawling mansion in Hollywood Hills), told daily of his past struggles in trying to 'make it', supported endless causes by requesting his broke lower-class fairy fans support the causes, and was frequently papped with other famous folks.

The worst part of all, for Felix at least, was that Montague, despite being an average five foot eight, had managed to amass billions upon billions of shorter fans of whom he fondly referred to as fairy brothers.

Somehow, some way, Montague had managed to tap into the shorter market, reaching out and snaring them in like no other person had ever done before. They adored him, loved him, followed him, believed in him, and followed him everywhere.

All but a lucky few would raise up the ranks from a fairy brother to become a fully fledged demented fairy. It was the ultimate prize for any doting fairy brother who got to leave their sad lives behind and work for him full time.

In return, Montague said he loved them back, sent endless photos of them worshipping him down his news feed, told them he loved them daily and proved it to them by taking precious minutes out of his busy life to create endless video messages telling them so.

Each and every video message would start with him shouting 'hey guys' while waving fanatically at the camera, then consist of him

belting out a heartfelt classic followed by sobbing near the end.

As Felix looked on, his heart sank like a brick, realizing he too had inadvertently contributed to over one hundred trillion billion bloody views for the biggest damn viral video ever to exist.'

You must be Crusher,' Montague said to a stoic-faced Crusher.

'That's 'ma name.'

For the briefest of moments, Felix and Crusher locked gaze with one another, just long enough for Felix to realize that Crusher hated him too, and just long enough for Crusher to realize that Felix hated him even more than he did.

It was now Montague's turn to say hello to Felix but already Montague had picked up on the icy death stare that Felix had been shooting in his direction. He studied Felix's middle age spread with a scowl before offering up the only compliment he could conjure up. 'Nice jacket.'

'So, let me get this straight, you're going to take down the entire Outlaw Biker Gang with a bunch of demented fairies?' The demented fairies gasped loudly in Felix's direction.

'Really Felix,' said Hornet.' Hornet swiftly kicked Felix with her right foot.

'I can assure you that my fairies are highly trained machines. Do not mock them.' Montague rested his hands on his hips and sighed. 'Oh I hope this isn't a mistake, now then, we don't have time for this, where's Pixie. Ahh, Pixie will you come a brief us, my dear.'

'Hello, friends.' Pixie the demented lady-fairy leapt off her seat and skipped toward them. 'I am so happy to finally...'

'Just get on with it Pixie,' said Montague.

'Well, well,' she said, shuffling some papers and fixing her spectacles. 'We've had some, some, well, issues, really. You see the time machine was located on Magnetic Hill. But, you know, ha ha, well, like, you know, the bikers worked it out.'

'Magnetic Hill? Worked out what, that a hill's magnetic?'

'Magnetic hill is where the machine was buried in 1928. It went undetected for many years but the locals, well they realized that when they parked their cars or bikes on the hill that something was causing their machines to roll slowly up the hill backwards. It was the anti-gravity. Eventually, though, you know, Eagle and her gang worked it out. Now, well, you know, now it's...' Pixie's face crumpled. 'It's located in the headquarters of the...'

'You said you had it.' Felix swung his attention to Montague.

'You can't be serious, we have to go in there?' said Hornet.

'We do have it. It's just going to take a little more work than first expected.'

'No one said anything about us having to go in there. Why can't you send one of your demented fairies in if they're that highly trained?' Crusher said with a scowl.

Montague tapped his fingers together. 'Not possible is it.'

'Is it not?' said Hornet.

'No. We can't have one of the demented fairies getting caught, it would compromise the whole operation this end. You lot get caught, then, ah well.'

Hornet's nostrils began to flare.

'Well, we have a plan to get you in,' said Pixie. 'If you just look at this monitor here. You see, underneath Douglas are abandoned tunnels. The promenade you just walked past. They have old Victorian toilets underneath, these toilets lead to tunnels and the tunnels lead to all of the houses, you, you can make it, we're monitoring everything.'

'Do you have the earpiece your Mother gave you?' Montague said to Felix.

Felix gripped the package in his pocket. He ripped the paper off and pulled out a necklace with a silver tear-drop shaped pendant. 'A necklace. She let me pass those guards at the station with that.'

'She didn't tell you.'

'No.'

'You know what, everything is riding on this. Do you know how hard we have all worked? All of us?' Montague pointed at Felix, Crusher and Hornet. 'Just get on with your job. It's not like I particularly want to work with you lot either.'

Hornet stepped forward with a face like thunder. 'Don't want to work with us? So why are you then? Why are you helping us get the time machine?'

'Because,' Montague stepped closer to Hornet. 'You are the only ones who know how to work it and you lot having it means it won't be in the hands of the Outlaw biker gang. Obviously if they could time travel, I have a problem.' Montague pointed sharply at Hornet. 'So just get on with your job.'

'You listen to me, you little snake. You had your part of the job and you haven't delivered. We're doing ours. I can't quite work out how you think we're the problem since you haven't delivered. You'd think with all this high-tech crap and your demented fairy fans would have it together by now.'

Unbeknown to Hornet, she had only just gone and hit a sore point. Pixie's demented fairy wings sprang to attention and her red eyes began piercing Hornet's soul. 'Don't you ever. Don't you ever speak to my Montague like that or I will kill...'

In a flash of the eye, the other demented fairies dragged Pixie out of sight. In her place, replacement demented fairies began covering her evil outburst by calmly waving their arms in swooshes and doing feather light tip-toe circles - as if nothing had happened.

Montague clapped his hands together and took a deep breath. 'Now then, it was a pleasure to meet you but I really...'

'Did she just?' Hornet pointed in the direction of Pixie. 'Just, threaten to kill me?'

'I'm afraid you must be mistaken. Now then we really must hurry you along.'

Hornet, her eyes wide open, turned to Felix and Crusher. 'Is this happening? What's happening?'

'The clouds. The mammatus clouds are forming. We have to go,' one of the demented fairies shouted.

'Now,' said Montague. 'We have a slight problem with your friend Axel and Hydra who have followed you both here. But not to worry, we have a demented fairy trailing them and so far we have hoopladed them. It's safe to leave now though, they're all asleep on a bench.'

* * *

On the bench outside, Axel pushed the drunk demented fairy man off him. 'Hydra,' wake up. 'I think I see them.' Axel looked down at Hydra but she was snoring. 'Oh, I will come back for you, wait here.'

Axel stood up and watched as the shadowy figures of Felix, Hornet and Crusher disembarked from the ghost train. *That's weird*, Axel thought to himself. *Crusher wasn't talking to Felix. Why was he with them?*

The demented fairy man jumped to his feet. 'Where are we going?'

'To find my friends,' said Axel.

The demented fairy man stumbled forward. 'Hey, you wanna stay with me?'

'No, I want to find my friends.'

Axel began walking forward but another magical fairy began circling them. She smelt like a summer breeze intertwined with candy floss.

'Candyfloss, anyone,' she said in a squeaky voice.

'No,' Axel wailed as he stomped forward, doing his best to keep the others in sight.

'I will,' said the demented man fairy, whipping the candy floss out from underneath the nose of the magical fairy as he passed. Axel struggled to keep up with Hornet, Crusher and Felix, the thick mist swamping his view.

'Where are they going?' said Axel.

'I don't know,' the demented man fairy said as he munched on candyfloss. 'Looks like a gate they're going through. Hey, you want to stay here and eat candyfloss with me?'

'I don't get it, what are they up to and why would they be going in there?' said Axel. They were an awfully long time in that ghost train.'

'Who's going where?' said the demented man fairy, as he staggered behind Axel.

In the underground toilet, Felix placed his earpiece in. 'Hello Felix,' a voice from inside it said.

'Hello Mom,' said Felix. 'We're in the toilet. Where to now?'

'Find the cleaner's door. There should be a small room, it's where the toilet attendants used to sit. Go through and there will be another door. Go through it and down the tunnels.'

Felix rattled the door handle. 'It's not opening,' he said. Stepping back, he scanned around the door frame.

'Move,' said Crusher. With one powerful thud, Crushers foot went straight into the door and the door crashed open.

'That's how you do it,' said Hornet, waltzing in.

Dim emergency lighting lit their way through the twists and turns until eventually, the trio arrived at a heavy wooden door.

'You're going to need to get through that door,' said Felix's Mom.

Everyone chipped in, dragging the door open, just enough so that they could squeeze through.

'Now, you're currently the cellar in the main Headquarters of The Outlaw Biker Gang, on the Promenade Shadow -it used to be called

The Dome back in the day. The room above is where the machine is. Now, I can't tell if anyone is in there with it so you need to be careful.'

Inside the room was empty except for a table where they immediately spotted a small metal box with scuff marks and buttons all over it.

'We need to be fast.' Felix rushed toward the table.

'Guys, what the hell are you doing?' It was Axel and the demented fairy man who was still munching on candy floss.

'What the hell are you doing, Axel,' said Hornet.

'Um... following you.'

'There's no time, there's no bloody time,' Crusher wailed. 'Just go now.'

The voice of Felix's Mom crackled through his earpiece. 'Ignore everything around you. Click the black switch on the right of the machine. A long ariel will shoot up.' Felix did just that, watching as a thin wire sprouted from the machine. Now set the time.' Above them, they began to hear a deep rumble of thunder from outside. A blinding light began to fill the room, crackling down from the ceiling as Felix gripped the machine. The noise and light filled the room.

'What happening,' shouted the demented man fairy with a piece of candy floss hanging out of his mouth. He stumbled forward, falling straight into Axel and sending Axel and himself flying straight into Felix.

Chapter 10

And The Plan Is?

3 DAYS TO GO

1928, Onchan, Isle of Man

The first thing that Felix noticed was the warm breeze that tickled his face. He held out his hands, grasping at the summer air that surrounded him. 'I'm here, I'm really here.'

'Where?' said a gruff voice from behind him. 'Literally, where are we? A map, a compass, did anyone think this through? You have a plan right? You totally know what you're doing right?' With hands on hips and still dressed in his demented fairy costume, the man fairy stood all but a stone's throw behind Felix in a ditch, flapping away rebounding reeds that kept smacking him back in the face. 'And the plan is?'

'And the plan is. There's Snaefell Mountain,' Felix said pointing across some empty green meadows. 'Meaning the plan is we need to go that way,' he said, pointing the opposite way, over more barren meadows.

'And. That. Is. Your. Plan?'

'Basically.'

The demented man fairy gripped his head and began jumping up and down in anger.

'I'm sorry, what's the plan?' Axel raised up from amongst the grass like a waking vampire.

'Look, it's not like we can get lost or anything, this is the Isle of Man.'

'Lost? Lost? But what about after that. What is the plan after that?'

'Ahh... now.' Felix scratched his head. 'Yeah, you're totally right, there's no plan after that.'

The demented man fairy let out a tormented scream, causing nearby grazing sheep to spread out and run for their lives.

Axel stumbled to his feet. 'So, what are we doing exactly?'

Axel seemed dazed, his expressionless face lolling side to side as he looked around in complete bewilderment. Felix stepped closer. 'Do you know who I am?'

'No?'

'Who are you?' said Axel.

'You're Bastian remember, no wait, Sebastian. I think Bastian is your real...'

'Bastian. That's a nice name,' said Axel.

Felix looked to the floor and lowered his voice to a whisper. 'Bastian, yes, that's it.'

'Ah, ha.' The demented man fairy charged toward Felix with one finger pointed straight at him. 'You've forgotten his name.'

'No. No I haven't. It's Bastian.'

'Are you sure, 'cause you know what he said to me when we were following you to the headquarters. "I have to go find my friend". Ah, ha, and you have forgotten. Some friend you are.'

'So, like, what are we doing exactly?' Axel piped up.

The demented man fairy squinted his pokey eyes in Axel's direction, lowered his already low gruff tone, and stared at Axel, in an upward angle, squarely in the face. 'You're Bastian. I'm Stan. He's Felix, he said, pointing at each of them. 'There's been an outbreak of a genetically modified virus, which turns people into walking zombies who eat people. We're the last known survivors on earth and probably going to die soon... because we don't have a plan.'

Axel's whole body froze, his hands hovering in mid-air.

'How's that funny?' Felix frowned at Stan.

'Fine,' Stan said. 'This is nineteen twenty eight. We've all, mostly accidentally, just travelled from three thousand and eight, where Felix was in the middle of a secret operation to bring a woman called

Betsy Grace Doolish, one of the greatest motorcycle riders to ever exist, from this year, nineteen twenty eight, to the year three thousand and eight, so that she can take her place in a team of riders who are currently being put together in three thousand and eight who make up the best racers to ever exist on earth and who will represent earth in the greatest race in the universe: The Intergalactic Space Races. Her father, Walter Doolish, is currently making a time machine in nineteen twenty eight, where we are now, and we have to use it to send Betsy into three thousand and eight, and us back there too. All of which Betsy knows totally nothing about and almost certainly won't believe us because that is just about the wildest story anyone has ever expected anyone to believe, especially in 1928. Oh, and you were a racer in 3008 and now you're just going to have to help us complete this mission because I might have tripped up and we both fell face first into the time machine. Got it?'

Axel began grinning ear-to-ear. 'Really? That sounds great. No zombies though. I don't like zombies.'

Stan face-planted the palm of his hand. 'Someone has got to be shi....'

'And you know what, Stan,' Felix said, pointing his finger right back at him. 'Do you think you could grumble quietly, considering it's your own bloody fault you're here.'

Stan removed the palm of his hand from his forehead, his jaw hanging dangerously low and sucking in air at an alarming rate. 'My fault,' he screamed as he exhaled. 'My bloody fault.'

Quietness fell rapidly as Stan gripped his little fists together and glared back at Felix with bloodshot eyes. With only the sound of scarpering sheep as they fled past and nothing else to focus on, Axel squirmed where he stood, desperate to find something else more interesting but at the same time dying to see who'd buckle first. After a few moments of intense staring, Stan began to roll his eyes to the back of his head. 'Oh. Oh right, yeah. Well I didn't know if we touched you that we'd time travel too. Did I?'

'Another thing, do you think you could take off your pathetic fairy wings and tutu? Don't think they have very many demented fairies in 1928.'

'Fine.' Stan ripped off his wings and tutu and slammed them to the ground. 'Anything else?'

'Yeah, do you think you could try being less grumpy?'

'Me?' As if like a ticking clock, Stan's brain began to tick into focus. 'I am grumpy. Really grumpy.'

'Ya think?'

Walter's house was a fair trek away and it would be fair to say that Felix had enjoyed better walks in the countryside than this one, the summer sun beat down, drying his parched mouth and fuelling his banging headache even more.

Leading the way, Felix kept a fast pace, partially in the hope he'd lose Stan but mostly because he knew that time was upon them. *Was Axel going to get his memory back? How could he have forgotten his own name and why did he and Stan know theirs? Why did he have to end up with them two anyway? How will Betsy take the news that their from the future? Actually, a plan would be really great right now. What's wrong with me? Was Stan right?* Felix's mind churned.

A few steps behind him, Stan was also deep in thought. *What was I thinking eating laced candy floss? Felix is a really fast walker? His face is so annoying. I better get a bonus for this crap. I hope there's no magical fairies with popcorn in 1928. That would be nice. I am so grumpy. Why am I so grumpy? Does that idiot behind me still think we're in a zombie apocalypse?*

A few yards behind Stan, Axel was also quietly coming to terms with the sheer madness of the situation he had found himself in. *Zombies or time travel? Zombies or time travel?*, he silently wept, his ongoing, fleeting moments of internal terror further compounded by Stan's impromptu impressions of walking zombies as he attempted to keep up.

* * *

After trying the front door of Walter's house, it became apparent that Walter was nowhere to be seen. The house itself was in darkness whilst all around the house only the rustle of grass in the wind could be heard.

'I saw a garage out the back,' said Stan, 'let's try that.'

'How are you not tired?' said Felix as they made their way to the garage.

'Fairy training.'

'Oh really?' said Felix as he was about to knock on the garage door. He paused. 'You know what, we need to think this through, you know, we can't just tell him we're from the future and he needs to hand over the time machine so we can fire it up in the middle of the final TT race so we can send his daughter to three thousand and eight, he'll freak out.'

Stan leant in. 'Wait, you mean to say that we need a plan?'

'Stan, give it a rest? I know, we will tell him that we are scientists from America and we know he has the machine and that we want to help him build it.'

'Wait.' Stan spread his arms out wide. 'Did we just, like, make a plan?'

'Stan, you seriously need to shut the hell up.' But in Felix's mood he didn't knock on the door, instead he flung the door to Walter's garage open and stepped right in.

Felix gripped each edge of his leather jacket on his chest. 'I think you need some help building a machine.'

Walter scurried to pull an old sheet over a metal contraption on the floor. Without so much as turning around, he listened to Felix's voice.

'I think you need some help building a machine.'

'I can fix these motorbikes myself, thank you,' Walter said, squeezing a wrench tightly in his right hand.

'I'm talking about the time machine.'

Walter took a few moments to answer. 'Then pray tell me,' he finally said. 'I'm sorry, what's your name?'

'Felix.'

'Then tell me kindly Felix, something about what I know that could prove to me that you are telling the truth.'

'The mammatus clouds that you use to power the machine are caused by space thunderstorms. Solar flares and solar wind combine, penetrating our earth's protective atmosphere causing auroras or, in extreme cases, thunderstorms here on earth. These solar thunderstorms are unlike any standard thunderstorm, they sit in heavy concentrated, electrical charged clouds, causing a unique drooping cloud formations. This unique, concentrated formation explains why despite it being a sunny day, mammatus clouds are free to roam above head, searching desperately for a place to fire away their electrical charge. Your machine being the perfect receptor.'

'Well, I thank you kindly for the information, good day to you all.'

'I could of course share this knowledge with the rest of the world. I am sure they would be interested in what you are building. Now we are looking for some accommodation. We are of course very tired after a long journey.'

'And how exactly did you know that I was building a time machine?'

'This isn't the first time machine somebody has tried to build.'

Walter turned away from Felix, Axel and Stan, to think for a moment.

'You know how to build a time machine.'

'Mostly. I think I could get it going.'

Walter squeezed the wrench he was holding even tighter. He needed them and he knew it. 'Then I will show you to the outhouse. You are welcome to stay there.'

Walter showed Felix, Axel and Stan around the outhouse. The place was rather empty, with sparsely scattered ornate furniture and flowery front room curtains. 'Now,' he said as he left to let them rest up. 'My daughter is visiting and I expect that nothing will be said to her. As far as anyone is concerned you are friends visiting and you are here to enjoy the TT festivities. Are we clear?'

'Perfectly,' said Felix.

No sooner had Walter closed the door than Axel gripped the sideboard and then swayed as he made his way to one of the bedrooms. 'I have to sleep.'

Stan flung himself onto the couch and began pounding one of the cushions. 'Something,' he said as squashed himself into a fluffy cushion. 'Is not right with that man.'

'I need a drink.' Felix rushed into the kitchen, returning seconds later and gulping down water. 'Do you trust him?'

'No. My fairy senses don't like him.'

'Can't you be serious?'

'I am. Look, you told him about the mammatus clouds, right? He said nothing. You would have thought he'd be happy for the help or maybe ask a few more questions. Another thing, that whole scientist thing has holes all over it. Of all the stupid excuses you could have come up with.'

'Then why didn't you say something?'

'Yeah, I could have, but I didn't. Anyway, he's up to something. What about if we just told him we were from the future. Get it out there.'

'No, not right now. I think we need to keep an eye on him and Betsy. We risk not being able to get Betsy to ride in the final race. See what they get up to. It's not long now till Cane's father is murdered and Walter dies too. I think we should work out who kills Cane's Father and trail Betsy and Walter, just to be sure. Besides what are we going to say to him. "Hi, we're from the future and you're about to die very soon." He'll flip. Most importantly, we need to get that machine working and get ourselves in that final TT race so we can get it working and bring Betsy back to 3008. There's so much to do.' Felix rested back on his seat. 'And Axel, what the hell are we going to do with him?'

'Nothing, he's too stupid.'

Felix scowled at Stan. 'What's your problem?'

'I'm fine, what's yours?'

Felix put his head in his hands, the last thing he felt like was an argument with Stan, but as he took a moment to think, something rather monumental began to spring into realization. 'Stan?'

'What now.' Stan opened one of his eyes.

'Why do you think Axel has lost his memory?'

'Either, it's cause he's stupid or maybe because he doesn't have any memories in the past. They're all in the future. It might have affected him and not us. We're all different. Different hair, different, brains, different, face. It's not like that time machines been perfected yet, is it?'

'Another thing. Why were you or Axel never mentioned to me when I was briefed about the mission? Or about the chance of memory loss for that matter?'

Stan opened both eyes. 'What do you mean? Me and Basitan didn't exist at this time? Hold on, we do go back to 3008, don't we?'

'Nobody mentioned either of you.'

Stan sat up. 'Nothing. Nobody mentioned us. Yet here we are. We must have existed in the past, it's not possible for us not to. You can't

change the future, right? You know what else, I'm really annoyed. When we landed in that field, I felt like killing someone.'

'You're telling me, back in 3008, your happy all the time, and now you've landed here and you're grumpy.' Felix burst into laughter.

'Yes, yes, that is exactly what I am telling you. I was the happiest demented fairy ever to have lived. Actually, there's a lot of things you don't know about me. I'm not just guy in a fairy costume you know. God you're so annoying.' Stan slammed his fists into the couch.

'Oh alright, calm down. You know, I actually feel a bit funny myself. Can't quite put my finger on it. Probably that smack to the head when we landed here.'

A short while later, a loud knocking on the door caused Felix to spring from his sleep.

'Who's that?'

'I'll get it,' said Stan as he bounded toward the door.

'No, I don't think that's... ' Stan flung the door open to find Betsy stood on the other side.

'Well now, don't think we've met. Name's Betsy and who might you be?'

'Bruno,' shouted Felix as he rushed over. 'He's Bruno, I'm Felix. Lovely to meet you.'

'Now then, I will be heading to town on tomorrow evening and require a lift. I expect one of you gentlemen will be available to drive myself and my friends. Seven-ish, I expect.'

'Bruno would be happy to,' said Felix.

'Does Bruno not speak?'

Stan began mumbling and forced his best smile.

'He's not very vocal, but I assure...'

'Betsy, Betsy, what are you doing?' Walter rushed up behind Betsy.
'I'm very sorry to have bothered you all.'

'Not at all,' said Felix. 'Bruno was just offering his driving services to Betsy.'

'Now Betsy, these are my guests not my staff.'

'Then where are your staff?'

'On holiday, I will be able to find you another...'

'Not at all. We insist,' said Felix. 'In fact it is arranged, think nothing of it.'

A confused look crossed Betsy's face. 'Then who exactly are you both?'

'I am a racer, taking part in this year's race. Felix Dibble. Looking forward to racing with you.'

'Now then, I had no idea,' said Betsy with a smile on her face.

Walter gripped Betsy by the arm. 'We must go. I can find another driver..'

'We insist,' said Stan with a sullen face.

'Then seven it is. We're off for a short say in Niarbyl but on my return. Good day to you both.'

Stan closed the door in a single sweeping motion using one finger. He turned to face Felix with eyes of lasers, shooting straight in Felix's direction. 'Bruno. Of all the bloody names you called me Bruno. Isn't that a dog's name?'

'What else could I have called you?'

'Oh, I dunno, Tank, Spartacus, Brute, Winston. Take you pick. Anything but Bruno.'

'They're all dog names.'

'Except they're cool dog names. Big difference.' Stan threw himself back onto the couch.

Chapter 11

Operation Fairy Stalker

2 DAYS TO GO

1928, Walter's House

Stan didn't let up, squeezing the car's rubber horn repeatedly while staring out of the front window with a murderous scowl. With each and every harrowing, long winded hoot of the horn, his face grimaced, the ear-piercing noise sending torturous electrical shocks over the front of his forehead.

. But despite Stan's misery he kept going, because right now anything was better than listening to the tear inducing high pitched giggles that were emanating from the back seat. Finally, and not a moment too soon, Betsy emerged from the house and trotted into the back of the open top motor, plonking herself down smack-bang in the middle of her cackling girlfriends. Stan thanked the Lord, fired up the engine and sped like a raving lunatic in the direction of Douglas.

This, as far as Stan was concerned, was bloody dreadful. More worse than running out of popcorn on a Saturday night and way, way worse than when he realized he was stuck in 1928 with Felix Anthony Dibble.

Stan had spent all day planning this mission, deploying his demented fairy skills, debriefing Axel within an inch of his life, plotting maps, precision timing, weather assessments, back up plans followed by code words and further back up plans. This was his baby, his calling, his reason for being.

Their objective?

Track Betsy Grace Doolish on her night out in Douglas and discover who was going to kill Cane Lugh's Father. It sounded simple but Stan had certainly not accounted for this. There was no power steering, his feet barely touched the peddles, his damn driver's hat

was crushing his head, and to top it off, the inhumane giggling emanating from the back seat felt like an extinct form of torture.

'Why couldn't I have been the bloody barman?' he grumbled away to himself.

Whilst sporadically throwing murderous scowls via the rear-view mirror, Stan noticed Betsy was wearing nothing short of one of the grumpiest faces he'd ever laid eyes on. Stan felt a pang of sympathy, at least he was on the front seat.

The motor car and its noisy passengers found themselves descending down the steep and winding road of Summer Hill which lead straight onto the Promenade. As the car neared the bottom though, something rather strange began to tingle in Stan's body, his mono-brow began to shudder and the top left side of his lip to rose to a whimper. There, right in front of him, chaos and carnage were unfolding like a dream right across the promenade, people were fighting for position on the road, screaming at one another, being outright inconsiderate and inconspicuously trying to run each other over.

'Heaven,' Stan whimpered. 'I'm in heaven.'

Stan knew exactly what to do. At the stop sign at the bottom of Summer Hill he slammed his foot straight into the accelerator and merged onto the Prom, after jumping the queue he lifted one fist in disgust at the car behind him and then began tailgating the car in front whilst cackling to himself.

'Oh, what fun,' he wept as he argued his way over the promenade at a snail's pace. But in Stan's excitement, he'd been paying no attention to what was taking place in the back seat of the car.

'Jump Betsy, jump,' voices shouted from a slow-moving horse tram beside them.

Stan looked in the rear-view mirror and saw Betsy staring back at him with a begrudging look of disappointment wiped straight across her face. Oh crap, he thought to himself. What do I do? Plan B, no plan C, no plan, E, F, G...oh my hat, oh for fu...'

Stan gripped his undersized hat, which was about to spring off his head. As he did so, Betsy leapt to her feet, stuck one foot on the back seat, the other on the door of the open top motor, and propelled herself into the slow-moving horse tram. For a moment, Stan barely breathed as he watched Betsy become airborne and the realization hit him, he'd lost the whole bloody lot of them in one fell swoop to some hotshot horse and a tram squashed full of idiots -this was a total disaster.

Steam poured from the back door as Axel slipped inside and shimmied down the corridor. On reaching a sickly wall of humidity at the far end he stepped around the corner.

It was mid-evening and underneath the Dome the kitchens were in full jungle-swing. Axel watched as pans flew wildly between cooks, gravy flowed like the Congo, gorilla screeches echoed around the swampy food laden floors and hideous rugged faces darted back and forth.

Up ahead, an extremely long yet exceptionally orderly line of penguin-suited waiters trotted down a metal staircase and into the corridor, each one skimmed the outer edges of the kitchen, swept two plates of spuds and herring up from the hot plates and then returned to march back up the stairs.

It was an endless loop of waiters, akin to the march of the penguins except the only thing they got at the end of it was to keep their job. Axel had no choice, he was going to have to join in. On straightening his own penguin suit, Axel snatched two plates from the hotplate and flung himself in line.

Axel looked up at the never-ending feat of twisting metal. It was almost vertical, a cruel spiral of unforgiving steps which had quite

clearly built by those who had total disregard for those less healthier than the rest.

Axel cursed as he gripped to his spuds and herring and slammed his foot into the first step. 'If a penguins can do it,' Axel raged with bloodshot eyes. 'Then so can I.'

On the way up, Axel followed suit from his fellow waiters, watching in awe at their unflinching faces as they flashed passed him on their way down. The sound of hundreds of polished shoes hitting the metal stairs rang in unison in his mind, creating a strange, trance like dizziness. Clip, clop, clip, clop.

As he neared the top though it was even worse, the pain tore through his legs, the spuds kept trying to escape and the air thinned. And to top it off, the waiter in front hadn't faulted for a second and neither had the waiter behind him, so much so that even Axel's bum was picking up the warmth from the plates.

Just before reaching the top step... clop, clop, clop. Axel stumbled forward, still gripping tightly to the plates his feet fumbled like a show horse on ice below him. Passing waiters gripped their chests and gasped as they watched Axel about to fall, but his feet came through, slamming themselves firmly to the second to top step with one enormous clop. His whole body froze in an awkward arched over position, still facing forward, still gripping tightly to the plates.

Ahead of him he watched as the last waiter disappeared through the door to the main room.

The first thing Axel felt was a warm plate of spuds and herring bashing into him from behind, then the clop, clop sound of stumbling feet, then he listened as the sound of clopping shoes and smashing plates grew bigger and bigger. It was like the worst game of dominoes anyone had ever played. Axel winched with each clop and a smash until, after what felt like an eternity, the sound faded into the distance leaving Axel still hunched over and all the other waiters making their way down the stairs.

Axel locked eyes with one of the waiters to his left. 'What do I do,' he cried. 'What do I do.'

'Run,' the waiter whispered back. 'Just run.'

Axel didn't need telling twice. He took to his heels with his two plates of now questionably placed spuds and herring, leaping over the last step and bursting through the main doors of the Dome.

'Get on the bar,' a waiter shouted to Axel as he swiped the plates of spuds and herring from his hands as he passed. The waiter suddenly stopped, staring oddly at the plates of food and looking back at Axel.

'Oh forget it,' the waiter eventually blurted out. 'Just get on the bar now.'

Axel breathed deep as he stepped behind the bar. The dome was in full swing, hundreds of patrons dancing to the beat whilst behind the bar a sea of stressed waiters rushed to and fro.

'Young man, whisky, no ice,' said a patron.

'Certainly,' said Axel, fumbling to find anything that even remotely resembled a whiskey.

As Axel discreetly sniffed bottles of stuff, the sound of clicking fingers began to fire into focus. He looked up, his eyes immediately fixating on a much more important and angrier looking waiter than the rest who, by Axel's stroke of bad luck, was heading straight for him with clicking fingers and Betsy in tow.

'It's the manager,' a shaky voice said from out of nowhere.

Axel stepped back, the colour draining from his face as panic gripped his eyeballs and forced his ordinarily droopy eyelids right up his face. He looked around, searching desperately for the gaze of his fellow waiters who were working either side of him but there was nothing, absolutely nothing. Like slithering snakes his co-workers had dissipated into thin air, leaving Axel no choice but to look back up at the finger that was now firmly pointed straight at him. He gulped as his mind whirled. There was nothing for it, he was going to have to try again. Once more Axel looked around, scowling at his quivering co-workers.

After taking a large glug of something he was holding that tasted a bit like whiskey, he dropped the drink he was already pouring,

grabbed a bottle of bubbly and five glasses and leapt over the bar, causing his feet to slam into the wooden floor like something out of a spaghetti western. With arms spread out wide and still hanging onto five glasses and a bottle of bubbly, Axel scanned the tables in the VIP area for a free table -every one was overflowing with jolly guests. But Axel wasn't about to let that stop him.

In one almost long and continuous sweeping motion, he ran up to a random table, slammed the bubbly and glasses down, shook the seats clear of customers, wiped the table down, stuck one hand in the air, caught a lighter that shot from behind the bar, lit the candle, poured a glass of bubbly and held up the glass to his angry manager's face without so much as a second to spare. The relief washed over him like a bucket of icy water, but as it did the glass began to shake, his knees weakened and his bottom lip began to blubber. He'd lost his nerve. The manager swiped the drink from Axel and spun around to Besty, handing out the drink to her and shielding a pasty looking Axel from view.

'I don't think I can take any more,' said Axel as he made his way back to the bar with his hands in his face, but as if from nowhere, a hand slammed into his back.

'Young man, that was about the finest bit of bar work I have ever seen in my life.' It was Axel's fellow barmen. 'That was incredible.' 'You're my hero'. 'What a waiter.' they all said. 'What's your name?'

'Bastian,' said Axel, straightening his back. 'Name's Bastian.' A small smile swept Axel's face.

Axel raised his head once more and spotted a thirsty looking gentleman mid-way down the bar. 'Sir,' Axel shouted, pointing at him with the confidence of a Trojan horse. 'What can I get you?'

'Ahh... whisky please,' said the thirsty looking gentleman. 'No ice.'

'Why certainly.' As Axel was putting his foot forward to serve the gentleman, his foot slipped on some water, causing his feet to sweep from underneath him and his body to slam to the ground.

'Bastian, hello, Bastian. Young man, open your eyes, are you well?'

The first thing Axel noticed was the pain. 'Oh my head, it really hurts.'

'Come on, let's get you up.' The rest of the Axel's fellow waiters helped him to his feet. 'Are you okay, that was quite a tumble?'

'Yes, fine. A little dizzy but I'm fine.'

'Tell you what, you polish the bar for now. Nothing too heavy,' said Axel's fellow waiters with sympathetic eyes. 'We can serve the customer's. You take it easy.'

'Well that's, that's very kind of you all,' said Axel with a slur. 'The, the comradery-ry round here is nothing short of top, topped notched.'

Axel continued to mumble as he stumbled forward and slammed a cloth onto the bar. In a hunched over position, he began polishing in large circular motions with his face held inches away from his hands. Amidst Axel's dazed confusion, something rather spectacular began forming in his brain. He looked up, across the dance floor, heading toward the bar and taking a seat was Betsy Grace Doolish and Finlo Gilroy. He immediately began polishing in larger circles as he shuffled over to them, lurking at arm's length as he listened to their conversation. He spotted someone else out of the corner of his eye. Axel polished his way over to two other people at the other end of the bar.

'Betsy won't be riding tomorrow,' the high-pitched voice said. 'My father will be making sure of that. We have a plan for tomorrow's meeting. You see...I'm sorry, can I help you?' Cane Lugh spotted Axel, who by now had forgotten to polish and was simply stood gawping.

'I. I. No sir, have yourself a fine evening.'

Axel turned and walked out from behind the bar, charging past his fellow waiters and cutting through the crowds. He burst through the front doors of the Dome and out into the street where he was caught up in the frantic crowds that were trying to enter the club. Axel fought his way past them and into a thin, cobbled lane on the opposite side of the road. He held his hand out, running his fingers over a cold metal sign on the edge of the lane, which said "Guttery Gable".

'I'm here, I'm really here,' he said, laughing to himself.

* * *

In the garage, Felix and Walter were hard at work fixing the time machine.

'You have to get us on tomorrow's practice race,' said Felix.

'I can't get Betsy on that race. What do you expect me to do?'

'I don't know, think of something. We need to practice. If you want to time travel then the only chance we have is when the clouds are forming in the final race. We all need to practice. We can't just chase the mammatus clouds around that course and set off a time machine without practice. Can we?'

'Well it's not hard is it?' said Walter.

'Well I wouldn't know,' said Felix. 'I've never raced a motorbike before, only slicers, so I presume I might have some difficulty.'

'Slicers, what are they?' Walter stopped what he was doing and stared at Felix.

'Slicers? I never said that, motor cars. That's what I said.'

'I quite clearly heard you say slicers.'

'Look it's late. I'm just tired. Bikes, I meant.'

Walter slumped back. 'You're not a rider at all. Do you know how impossible this will be?'

'Do you know how impossible this will be without me? If something goes wrong I'm the only person to fix it.'

Walter knew Felix was right, so far Felix had turned out to be invaluable. His knowledge on building a time machine was incredible

and Walter didn't know when mammatus clouds would be back. Felix was needed. 'I signed Betsy up when she was younger, as a member of the club. I'm going to have to go in and argue that. You're not a member, but you need to be. The thing is about them is that they hardly remember who turns up one year to the next, provided you're male that is. Women riding bikes, that's the real problem round here. I say you just turn up, sit at the back, stay quiet and pretend that we don't know each other. We will use an old name from the member's list and I will register you and your friends.'

Felix smiled. 'Now we're talking.'

'It looks like I'm going to have to get in that practice race too then if I want to time travel. You have to qualify in the practice race first.'

The garage door opened and Stan walked in with his head hung low and grumbling in a low tone. 'Just to let you know that Betsy has been dropped off safe and well.'

'Well, thank you, Bruno,' Walter said. 'Most kind.'

'Just quickly, while your both here. We're either of you at my kitchen window the night before last, just I thought I saw someone?'

Stan and Felix both looked at one another and shook their heads. 'No,' said Felix. 'Not us, I'm afraid.'

'Okay, no matter. I must be mistaken.'

'Well, may I bid you both goodnight.' Stan swung his leg toward the door and followed it swiftly out of the garage.

'Felix, is there something up with Bruno?'

'Him, no. Absolutely not, he's just a little strange, that's all. Bit of a loner. Now then, I think I will have to call it a night myself.' Felix yawned. 'If I'm to race tomorrow then I need some rest.'

Felix headed straight for the outhouse where he found Stan with both feet up on the couch, supping a hot chocolate.

'What's wrong?'

'With what? Nothing,' Stan replied, slurping his hot chocolate.

'Stan, what are you not telling me?'

'Look, I dropped her off, everything went fine, that's all that matters.'

'Dropped her off where?'

'On the Prom.'

'And then what? Where did she go?'

'Ahh... now, that's all I, blub, blub, blub.' Stan began talking whilst drinking his hot chocolate, making no sense at all.

Felix bent down and faced Stan straight on. 'You lost her didn't you?'

'She jumped onto a moving horse tram at high speed, while I was in the middle of driving. What was I supposed to do?'

'So you're telling me that Stan, the highly trained super fairy, who had 24 hours to prepare a plan, lost the person he was tracking in five seconds flat. You want to hope she ended up in the Dome where Axel can track her.'

Stan glared into his steaming mug of hot chocolate. 'Does it even matter if Cane Lugh's Father dies? It's not like we can do anything about it. Why are we trying to find that out anyway? We don't need to know.'

'The more we know at this point the better. Besides, you two need something to do. It's not like you're supposed to be here, is it?'

'The past has already happened, we know that. We can't change anything. Walter's here, with us. So it's not him. And so it might be someone Betsy is connected with but there's nothing we can do about that now. It's not our mission is it? I mean it could be one of those screechy women she hangs out with but they all looked pretty flakey to me. Unless he died from hearing loss.'

Felix threw himself into the chair and rested his head back. 'No, he was stabbed. I know we can't change the past. It's going to happen no matter what. It would be good to know though. I mean who on earth would want Cane's Father killed. It makes no sense.' Felix raised his head. 'So, fairy training, what did that involve.'

'Why are you asking? You don't care.'

'I do. Why don't you just tell me. I'll keep asking if you don't.'

'Fine, same as special forces training, military training, you know, then branch out and specialize into stuff, tactical operations, data science, slicer training...'

'What did you specialize in?'

'Slicers.'

Felix lifted one eyebrow. 'You're telling me, you're speciality is slicers, you ride them, fix them, or do you look at them?' Felix giggled. 'As if.'

Stan sat forward and watched the side of Felix's face as he stared at the ceiling. 'That's exactly what I'm telling you. I ride and fix them.'

Felix turned his head toward Stan. He felt a thousand questions on the tip of his tongue but couldn't seem to think of a single one.

Stan stared back, waiting for it, waiting for the penny to drop, but it never came.

'Huh.' Felix flung his head back on the seat.

'Why do you follow Montague?' Felix said. 'The guys a prat.'

'To you maybe. To me he's my saviour.'

'Saviour from what?'

'People. You did notice I'm five foot one, didn't you? You want to try being slightly shorter than everyone else, I don't fit in, everyone picks on me 'cause I'm not the same as them. The world's a horrible place you know. Montague saved me; I owe him everything.'

'He's not even remotely short, he's a total slimeball too, and so far up his own ars...'

'What the hell do you know anyway? You think you've got everything worked out. You haven't you know. You're just as stupid as the rest.'

'Oh come on, you're just as bad as that crazy Pixie one.'

Stan sat forward. 'Pixie, what do you mean just as crazy as her?'

'When we were underneath the ghost train, well, Montague had told us he had the machine, he didn't, it was a lie, it was in the biker's headquarters all along. Well Hornet got mad and said something not so nice to Montague. Totally deserved of course. Well Pixie, she

went crazy, foaming at the mouth as she went for Hornet, said she'd kill her. The other fairies dragged her away.'

'You mean she broke code?'

'What's breaking code?'

'It's not the demented fairy way. We live by a code of conduct. We never behave that way, it's called breaking code. We're all about being nice and spreading love. Saying you would kill someone is breaking code, it's one of the worst things you can do.'

'Shut. Up. You do not spread love.'

Stan scowled. 'Yeah, I've been pretty grumpy since I got here but I'm not normally. I did tell you that. I can't believe she did that, over Montague too. Wait, what did Montague say?'

'Nothing, he pretended like it never happened. It was really weird.'

'He did nothing?' Stan's bottom lip hung down. 'Why would she go that mad over Montague. We all love him but going that mad, no one does that, we're trained to handle that.'

"Cause she's in love with him maybe?'

Stan raised his voice to a shout. 'What the hell do you know? That's not true. Stop making stuff up.'

Felix gasped. 'You're in love with her, aren't you?'

'No. No I am not.' Stan crossed his arms as sat back with a face like thunder.

'And she's in love with Montague.'

After a few moments of breathing out heavy, Stan relaxed his arms.

'Do you think that's what it is?'

'Are you kidding? They're totally at it.' Felix relaxed back on the chair and closed his eyes, but a few moments later a loud bang from the front door jolted Felix from where he lay.

'Stan.' Felix scanned the room, Stan was gone.

It was the dead of night when the sound of footsteps woke Felix from his sleep on the living room chair. 'Axel, what time is it?'

Axel froze to the spot, mid-creeping pose. 'Like, I don't know.'

'So, what happened with Betsy at the Dome?'

'Nothing, she was just with her friends, had a few drinks then left. I couldn't follow her afterwards, I had to clean up.'

Felix squinted. 'Clean what up?'

'The bar. I did have a job you know.'

'Axel, your job was to trail Betsy, not clean the bar, that was your fake job.'

'Well, you know, I couldn't, could I? That manager guy was a down right slave driver. I couldn't get out of it. Anyway, I'm going to bed.'

'Axel, are you okay? You're a bit short with...'

'Sure, I'm just tired, you know, bar work is harder than you think.'

Chapter 12

The 3008 Practice Race

1 DAY TO GO

The next morning, Stan stared out of the kitchen window as he waited for a pan to boil, a super strong coffee was on the cards. Then he noticed something very strange.

It was Axel, hovering by one of the windows in the house, making his way over to the garage and sticking his ear to the door. On pouring his rocket fuel he went to investigate.

'Problem?' Stan stuck his ear to the door beside Axel.

'No. Nothing.' Axel jumped back, standing up straight and glaring at Stan. 'Do you have a problem?'

'Yeah, your face. What's up?'

'Nothing. I'm going in that's all.'

Stan stood up straight and took a mouthful of his drink. 'Really. Open doors with your ear do you?'

'Yeah, I do actually.' Axel turned the handle and stepped inside. 'So,' Axel said loudly as he entered. 'Which bike am I riding today?'

'There's two bikes over there. I will find three names on the members list and we will pretend you're them. Just make sure you stay out of my way at the meeting.'

Axel took one of the bikes out into the yard, fired it up and began inspecting it as Stan whispered to Felix. 'A word, I need a word.'

Felix and Stan stepped outside and Stan leant in. 'Something is wrong with Axel.'

'Oh really, still stupid is he.' Felix tutted. 'Fairy senses gone wild have they?'

'Are you trying to wind me up? Actually, he was listening to you and Walter before he went into the outhouse and he was spying on the house. I'm telling you, something is up with that idiot.'

'You know what Stan. My patience is shot with all this fairy rubbish. Just give it a rest.'

As Felix began to walk back into the garage Stan felt a bubble of anger sweeping his stomach. 'Told him the truth, have you?'

Felix stepped back and whispered angrily at Stan. 'For some reason, that he won't tell me about, he wants to travel into the past. If I tell him the truth then we could end up in big arguments with him. I don't need to tell him anything anyway, it's not like he lives long enough.'

'And what about Betsy, told her she's going to travel into the future. At what point do you think you're going to drop that one? Mid-race. Oh Betsy, by the way, you're not actually going to win the TT race, like you think, you're actually going to time travel into the future. Ta-dah.'

'What the hell Stan. It's all under control. I know what I'm doing. We know everything turns out fine because we're from the future. What the hell is your problem?'

Stan puffed his chest. 'My problem is that there is something wrong with everything right now. Things are not adding up. Where was Axel last night? Why is he spying on everyone? Nothing feels right here. Plus,' Stan added as he pointed sharply in Felix's chest, 'you're doing my head right in.'

Felix breathed in deeply and locked eyes with Stan. *He's not worth it*, Felix thought to himself. *Just not worth it*. Felix walked back to the garage and slammed the door behind him.

Inside the garage Felix watched Walter as he tinkered with the machine. 'Walter, about when we time travel. Why do you want to travel back in time?'

'Felix,' Walter said in a low voice, without so much as turning around. 'For the final time, don't ask me for my details and I won't ask you for yours.'

At the practice meeting, Axel and Stan squashed into the undersized shed near the back and watched with wide eyes as the events unfolded. Betsy was eventually voted in and then the local policeman burst in with the news of Cane Lugh's father's death. As the news broke of the murder though, Stan caught sight of Axel. There was an unmistakable smirk on his face, a worryingly smug look that shook Stan to the core. Outside the noise from the riotous crowds tore through the shed as Stan followed Axel outside and over to the start line.

Before getting on his bike, Stan made a run for Betsy just as the race was about to start. 'Betsy, something is not right with Axel, I'm worried.'

Betsy ignored Stan. She placed her helmet on and stared forward, locking her eyes onto Finlo Gilroy who was on the bike in front of her. Stan stepped back, it was if she didn't care, wasn't interested. What on earth was happening?

But at that point there was nothing he could do or say to anyone. His fairy senses were in overdrive but no one was listening. Stan did the only thing he thought he could do at this point, trail Axel. When the beep went Stan made sure he would lock speed with him and lag behind.

At first the race went well, Walter fired ahead, lost in the distance along with a couple of other bikers. But lagging behind there ended up Finlo, followed by Betsy, followed by Axel then Stan. Something wasn't right with this even, Stan thought to himself.

Betsy was the better rider out of anyone. Why wasn't she out front? It was as if Betsy was trying to hang back, trying to stay behind Finlo.

Eventually they made it to the mountain where the roads were quiet and there were little in the way of spectators. As they weaved around the bends, Betsy squeezed the handle and gained speed, heading straight for Finlo with a dark look of determination on her face. At several points her bike swerved dangerously close to Finlo's, but, as if from nowhere, she spotted Axel coming up fast behind her. She suddenly remembered what Stan had said.

Watching helplessly from behind, Stan gasped.

Axel was heading straight toward her with no sign of slowing down, he managed to align his bike right next to hers and then began to swerve sharply in Betsy's direction. They were going 50mph and everything was unfolding in the matter of seconds. Betsy veered left to avoid being hit by Axel's bike. Again and again he just kept coming until suddenly he took a swerve wrongly and lost control of his bike.

Betsy slammed her brakes on as Axel and his bike tumbled forward, rolling over and over again, smashing to pieces on the ground.

Up ahead Finlo spotted the smoke in his mirror behind him. He immediately stopped and looked back. As far as he could tell, Betsy had crashed.

Moments later, Stan pulled his bike over to Betsy and took off his helmet. 'Are you okay, I told you there was something up?'

In front of them Axel lay on the ground, his eyes wide open and with no hope of being alive. Betsy sat still and stared at the lifeless body of Axel.

'Betsy, Betsy, I thought you had crashed. Are you okay?' It was Finlo, he'd pulled up his bike and was running straight toward Betsy.

Betsy took off her helmet and threw it to the ground. 'Okay,' she screamed. 'Okay. You killed her. You killed my sister and your own father. How can you live with yourself?'

Stan grabbed onto his bike to steady himself. 'What the hell is going on?' Stan shouted. 'Killed who?'

'Him. Him,' he killed them both. 'My sister and his own father.'

Finlo gripped his helmet with two hands as his eyes filled with tears. 'But Betsy, I didn't. I feel guilty every day because I was there and survived but it wasn't my fault.'

'How wasn't it your fault? You shouldn't have messed, you were a kid but you shouldn't have done it.'

'No Betsy, you have that wrong. I didn't touch anything. All I had done was open the door to the garage, that's why I survived the explosion. I wasn't anywhere near. I went back into the main house'

Betsy looked to the ground. 'I... I don't understand. I was told you were messing with stuff in the garage.'

'No, you're mistaken. I was on the porch, I followed my father into the garage but he sent me away again, that's it.'

Betsy gripped her mouth and turned her back on Finlo. 'Sorry. I'm sorry Finlo. I don't know what's wrong with me,' she muttered.

Finlo held out his hand and touched her shoulder. 'We were friends remember, you know I wouldn't have ever hurt you.'

'You know I think I need a rest,' Betsy said as she picked up her helmet and got onto her bike. She gripped her hands tightly to stop them shaking and wiped away the tears. 'Sorry, I just need to go home.'

Stan jumped on his bike and followed Betsy. 'I will let someone know what has happened if you just wait here with him,' Stan shouted to Finlo.

Back at Walter's house, Stan stepped onto the back porch to see Betsy sat on the back step with her head in her hands. Across the way, in the garage, angry voices from Walter and Felix were floating out onto the lawn.

Stan sat himself down next to Betsy. 'I'm sorry about your sister, I had no idea.'

Betsy looked up. 'I nearly killed him. I was going to kill Finlo. That's why I came back to the Isle of Man, not to take part in the races, to kill Finlo because I thought he had killed my sister. All this time, my whole life.'

'How did you end up thinking it was him?'

Betsy lowered her tone. 'My father, my lying father. He told me it was Finlo.'

As a child Betsy had always enjoyed being the centre of attention. The positive side to this personality trait meant she had enjoyed star roles in school plays and generally coming first in everything due to her ruthless requirement to be noticed; however, on the flip side it meant that she felt it her right to be included in everything, couldn't keep her nose out of anything and had absolutely no comprehension of the word no.

Needless to say when her Father told her one day, in no uncertain terms, that she was to stay out of the garage due to important work being carried out she, being Betsy, took no such notice.

Instead Betsy undertook a lone surveillance operation which involved, as she was only eleven, sitting outside her Father's garage door with a makeshift listening device crafted from a plastic cup.

After weeks of meticulous and underhand spying, Betsy had uncovered her Father's and Finlo's Father's plans to build a time machine.

This was a monumental discovery, meaning that every inch of her wanted to burst in and scream 'I know what you're doing and I want

to build a time machine too.' But unfortunately for Betsy, her Father was not the type to take lightly to that sort of behaviour. He was a provider and an old fashioned man who spent practically all of his waking hours on important work related business with his best pal, Finlo's Father.

Together they ran a successful bike company, founded the TT races and were avid stargazers. It was an overwhelming amount of work and as such Betsy, her Sister Isbal and her Mother Irene were all left to their own devices.

Walter expected tea on the table, although he barely rose from his garage to eat it, expected the house cleaned, although he hardly slept in his bed, and his wife and children to be grateful and disciplined, despite him barely acknowledging their existence. On the odd occasion Walter and Finlo's father did include Betsy and Isbal in their stargazing adventures, Betsy was the happiest she ever was. Her Father would talk endlessly about the stars and Betsy basked in the attention -but all that was about to change dramatically.

One day Betsy was in her bedroom when she heard the voice of Finlo's Father in the back garden, she knew exactly what that meant: spying time. She grabbed her plastic cup and hovered by the window, watching as Finlo's Father made his way across the lawn and into the garage. All she needed to wait for now was her own Father to go in and the coast was clear, but instead she spotted Finlo following his Father in the garage.

Betsy squealed with delight. Finlo being allowed in, or so she thought, could only mean one thing -they were unveiling the time machine.

Within a matter of moments, Betsy had run out of her bedroom and made it to the ground floor corridor when an almighty explosion from the back yard tore through the house, causing dust to rain from the ceiling.

The plastic cup in her hand crumpled as the windows at the back of the house obliterated into a thousand pieces, sending a plume of dust and dirt pouring through them and into the corridor where she stood.

At first there was a hallow quietness amidst the ringing in her ears, the type you expect if you just tripped up in the middle of the Tate museum and went head first through Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper -an eerie blur of disbelief chomping itself around the surrounding atmosphere.

But it didn't last long, a blood curdling scream from Betsy's Mother snapped her frozen body back into action. The next thing she knew she was on the back porch, still gripping her plastic cup with trembling hands. Walter tore past, diving into the rubble where he began ripping up rocks until his hands bled.

At that point it was hard to say what Betsy expected, everything was happening so fast, but when Walter pulled Isbal out it could be said that she was the absolute last person she believed to be hurt.

There was however a fleeting thought everything would be okay, a miracle would happen, just a scratch, nothing bad. But when Walter wailed like a banshee over her lifeless body she just knew, there and then, the future and everything in it would never be the same again.

After the events of that day, Betsy watched her whole world plunge into silence.

It started at the hospital with this blank, tortured look that fixated itself over her parents faces and then never left. It was as if the world's saddest song kept playing on repeat, one so captivating that it drowned out the rest of the world and trapped them in that first ten seconds of hopelessness when they realized Isbal was dead.

Even at the funerals of Isbal and Finlo's Father, this silent song seemed to mute and swirl the very fabric of time and space, devouring it's prey as it swept effortlessly throughout the mourners. But the worst part of it all was at home, where this woeful dirge rose with the emptiness in the house into a full orchestral extravaganza.

One day though, some weeks after the accident, Irene hurled Betsy's coat at her and ordered her to sit on the stairs. Betsy listened as her Mother and Father raised their voices at each other from the front room. Irene was being perfectly clear: she was leaving and she was taking Betsy with her.

Walter rushed out. 'Betsy, listen to me you have to go with your Mother.'

'But Father I don't want to go..'

'Listen to me. You must. You must do what I say, it's for your own good.' Walter straightened his face and looked away from Betsy. 'I will hear none of it, you hear me.'

Betsy nodded amongst flowing tears.

'That accident, Betsy. Well, you should know, Finlo had been messing with something in the garage. And well, you know, it wasn't a place for children but Finlo's Father let them in. I said that it wasn't a place for children and I meant what I said. Well it is what it is.' Walter leant into Betsy. 'I can fix this though. I will fix this though. I promise.'

Out of nowhere Irene's hand shot from behind Walter and grabbed onto Betsy's arm. 'Don't you fill her head with any of your bloody nonsense.' And with that Irene smashed the delicate porch doors behind them and dragged a tearful Betsy into a waiting car.

As the years passed Betsy often thought back to the events of her Sisters death. Some say trauma takes time to heal but Betsy never understood this because, as with age, the reality of the events seemed very different to her as an adult as they did a child.

It was if the trauma evolved, a deep, indescribable pain that kept re-fuelling itself on her ever changing reality of Isbal's death.

When she was eleven her Father was doing something magical and ground breaking, something that could change the world: making a time machine. That meant anything could be broken but everything could be fixed.

But as she grew this reality changed: time machines and time travel were the thing of fairy tales.

The reality was that her Father was delusional, a mentally unwell person with a penchant for machinery and motorcycles. Someone who worked so hard that he neglected his family and someone who was sick in the head enough to dream up wild ideas such as time machines.

And because of her Mother's inability to so much mention Walter's name, let alone help Betsy come to terms with it, this festering misery evolved into bitterness and hate as her mind grew to accept the much more painful truth: that her so called friend, Finlo, who had ruined her family, got to live his life and be happy.

It went without saying then, that when Betsy's Mother died, adding the final match to her already contorted mind, Betsy would set in motion her evil, calculated plan without so much as a shadow of morals to stop her.

Never mind being the first female in the world to win the coveted TT races, the real reason she went back to the Isle of Man was to get revenge.

Her plan was to race against Finlo where she would drive along side him, mid-race she would swerve into him at top speed. Both Finlo and her would die. That was justice. No more pain, no more living with these terrible memories. And it was simpler than she thought, a quick call to Walter and before she knew it her two feet would be standing on Douglas docks waiting for her Father to pick her up.

But things did not run quite so smoothly as planned, on her journey over there were no seats on the boat, which did nothing for her mood, and amongst the battling crowds at the docks her bag boy had rather inconveniently fainted and lost her luggage, which was the last thing she needed.

What's worse, on arriving home her Father had insisted that they spend time together out Niarbyl. Considering time was of the essence, this unforeseen hindrance had slowed her down considerably. But eventually Betsy did return from Niarbyl and headed down to the Dome with her friends where she met Finlo and gained his trust.

Everything seemed to go to plan and at the end of the night she left the Dome with him, stopping off at Finlo's home for a night cap before returning home.

But when Finlo turned his back to make the coffee, the last eleven years of hate began to bubble and spew from every pore, she lifted a sharp knife from the side and pointed it in Finlo's direction.

Out of nowhere Finlo said, 'I've missed you, you know,' as he stirred the coffee. 'You were my best friend for a long while there.'

Betsy quietly gasped for breath as she stood behind him poised for the kill -of all the things he could have said.

She slid the knife back on the sideboard, and without so much as taking a sip of her coffee, made her excuses and tore into the night.

On arriving home, Betsy's had no plans for sleep, instead she chose to pummel the living daylight's out of the huge oak tree in Walter's garden. Unbeknownst to Betsy though, Stan, still angered from his own failed surveillance mission that evening, and the irritating conversation he had just had with Felix only a minute prior, was in the garden trying to calm down.

Stan walked over to Betsy. 'If you close your fist you can get a good hit with the far side of your hand.'

'Most kind.' Betsy said, returning to her tree bashing with a closed fist.

Stan watched as she beat the living hell out of the tree.

'Well, good night to you,' Stan quipped as he turned to walk away. The whole evening had been such a disaster and he honestly couldn't be bothered with this on top of it.

Only as he was walking away, he heard a loud thud of wood hitting the ground.

Stan glanced back, Betsy had lifted a huge plank from the garden and was dragging it toward the garage.

'What are you doing with that?' Stan said.

'Murdering a time machine.'

Stan immediately stopped walking. That time machine was his only ticket back to 3008.

'Betsy, now Betsy. Put the plank down. For God's sake, don't do anything crazy.' Stan rushed up beside Betsy with arms spread out wide. 'Calm down. You don't need to do that. Let's just think about this now.'

Betsy took no notice as she charged forward, her eyes fixated on the garage.

'Listen to me,' Stan began to say before he remembered a crucial point. Felix hadn't told her they were there to take her into the future yet. In fact, Felix had said nothing and had specifically told Stan not to say anything. He'd already messed up the surveillance operation. Whatever happened now, he couldn't mess this up too.

Stan followed Betsy inside the garage as she headed straight for the time machine and lifted the plank. 'You can't, you can't because if you do the whole world will end.'

Betsy stopped mid-swing, her arms hovering over her head with the plank still in her hands. 'Are you telling me this thing works?'

'Well, well, not right now, I don't think, but it will.'

'So, what your saying is then that it doesn't work then. I'm okay to pummel it. Thank you for that.' Once again Betsy began to swing.

'It works, it works. Just stop it.'

Betsy rested the plank down. 'Fine, make it work then.'

Stan studied Betsy's face, she was deadly serious.

At this point what could he say? He could fight her off but judging by the crazed look in her eyes he didn't fancy his chances. But there was one thing he knew the machine needed that they didn't have. 'Well,' Stan said in the most sarcastic tone he could muster. 'I would if I had mammatus clouds, wouldn't I?'

Betsy leant into Stan. 'Well Bruno,' she said, in an equally sarcastically tone. 'I do, so if it doesn't work then I get to smash it up, deal?'

Stan lifted his top lip into a snarl, where the hell was she finding mammatus clouds at this hour. There was no way. 'Fine,' Stan grumbled back with a little chuckle.

'Fine, to Snaefell mountain it is.'

Before Stan knew it, he and Betsy had inched a couple of Walter's bikes and were stood on the summit of Snaefell Mountain. The bright

moon lit their rocky accent to the top while above rolling black clouds swirled in the blustery night sky.

'So,' shouted Stan over the whistling wind. 'Where's the clouds?'

'There.' Betsy pointed straight up to the black looming sky that rattled above them, the wind tearing at her jacket.

'How, how...' Stan struggled to speak as the night air filled his lungs. 'How do you know they're mammatus?'

'The formation. Look at the dark formation, like cow's udders drooping down, they're up there, I can see the outline of them. I spotted them on my walk home earlier, moving west.'

Stan gripped the time machine and struggled to look up, he didn't know what mammatus clouds looked like. 'How do you know what they look like anyway?'

'Who do you think my father is?'

Stan grumbled to himself as he sat the time machine down, hunching over it and staring intently at the dials and buttons. What the hell was he thinking, he didn't know how to use the time machine? And how on earth did she find mammatus clouds at this hour too? The only mammatus clouds he knew of would be visible during the final TT race. If she did actually find them that is.

'Hurry up then. What are you waiting for?'

'I'm doing it, just wait will you.'

Stan turned a couple of knobs and an aerial sprung out from the machine. 'You have to hang onto it too,' shouted Stan. That bit, Stan remembered.

Betsy crouched down with her hand touching the machine and waited. However apart from the sound of bellowing wind there was nothing. 'Well,' shouted Stan as he looked to the sky. 'Looks like your cloud thingymajigs didn't work.'

Betsy scowled at Stan as she fought to keep steady, her hair flapping in her face. 'Wait. I think we should just wait a moment or two.'

'Fine.'

As they crouched over the machine, Stan's smug face turned to a look of sheer terror as a cackle echoed from a dark shadowy cloud above their head. His eyes darted back and forth across the night sky. 'Did you just hear something.?'

'I think, I think....'

And then came an incredibly deep lingering rumble, one that bellowed through the whole mountain, sending shivers straight down Stan's neck. The sky lit, the black clouds above began dancing with a thousand small lightning strikes, which joined together and shot straight toward the aerial on the machine.

Stan leapt to his feet. 'No Betsy, let go, let go. This isn't supposed to happen. We can't do this!'

In the last second, just as the lightning shot down from the sky and connected with the time machine, Stan removed his hand from the machine, leaving Betsy's firmly in place.

A blinding light exploded in Stan's face and he stumbled back and fell on the floor. The white light began to clear and piece by piece the darkness of the night began to come back into focus. 'Betsy, Betsy where are you. Where are you?'

When Betsy came back into focus, Stan could see she was stood over the time machine holding a large rock over her head. 'Well, looks like I get to murder the time machine doesn't it?'

'No Betsy, no.' Stan grasped at the air in front of him.

He could just make out the outline of Betsy but his eyes were still struggling to see.

'This thing has ruined my life, everything is gone because of it.'

Betsy dropped the rock and staggered backwards, dropping to the floor. 'Everything my father ever cared about was this bloody machine. His whole life. I hate it. I hate it.'

Back on the back porch of Walter's house, Betsy finished her story amid the shouting still emanating from the garage. 'That machine has ruined everything. That's why I wanted to smash it up last night. That's why today I got up and carried on with my original plan -to kill Finlo today. But now I find out it wasn't Finlo who killed my sister. My father told me that when I was eleven. How could he do this?'

Stan buried his head in his hands, he had to tell her before she went and did something else completely stupid, even if it meant breaking protocol. 'Listen, Betsy, there's some things I didn't tell you because they sound pretty crazy and Felix really didn't want me to tell you, so just hear me out. The thing is, that time machine does really work. Me, Felix and Bastian are from the year 3008, we have travelled back in time using that time machine so that we can bring you into the future. You see you're one of the best racers in the world and there's this incredible race taking place in space and you've got a place.'

Betsy scrunched her face to one side and stared back at Stan.

'Okay, just hear me out. So, we land here using the time machine from 3008...'

'Stop right there. Then there would be two time machines. Not saying that I believe you but there would be two. One that works that you brought from 3008 and the original one that my father is working on.'

'No, it doesn't work like that. There's only one time machine and the machine doesn't travel with you. Your father only built one machine and we need to make the original work. Here's the thing, as you already know, we need mammatous clouds to make it work and the next ones will happen at the final TT race, tomorrow.'

'You mean while we're in the middle of racing..'

'Exactly. We need you to race and time travel at the same time.'

'Bruno, are you and my father in cahoots...'

'Betsy, I know this is hard to take in but just hear me out. There's another problem. Well, your father, he's been, well..'

'Difficult?'

'That's a good word for him. You see your father was acting pretty strange when we first met him. We knew he was hiding something and he was intent on going into the past so Felix just went along with everything rather than tell him the truth.'

'So, my father will be racing with us tomorrow so he can time travel?'

'Exactly.'

'Now that makes sense. That's why he rode the practice race.'

'But surely my father's building it to go back and save my sister. If this is true, and I'm not saying that it is because this is just about the wildest thing I've ever heard, then why can't we go back and save her?'

'Because the future has already happened. Betsy your sister is not in it. We cannot change that.'

'How. What are you talking about we can't change it. That's what this machine is for. Isn't it?'

'Think about it. If we had saved your sister then she would be here right? If it was at all possible then that would have happened. If it's possible at any point in the future then she would be here now too. Wouldn't she? We can't change the future. We simply can't.'

Betsy sank back. 'So my father thinks that we're travelling back in time tomorrow. Doesn't he?'

'Yes. Look, Felix realized if we told him that we were going to the future then he wouldn't have any of it. It's all planned. Mid-race we need to lock bikes together, at speed, and follow the mammatus clouds, setting the machine off as we ride underneath them. That is all we know from the future. If we could go back and save your sister first then we would, but you're our mission, you have to be the one that goes one hundred percent. You will have control of the machine and what time it goes to. You're the better rider out of any of us anyway and there's no way your Father will be able to tell. You have to be the one in charge of it when we travel, that much we are certain of.'

'And so we're simply just not going to tell him?'

'No. Say nothing. Let's not rock the boat. For now, at least. Look at it like this. We have this dreary party to go to tonight. Tomorrow's the race. It's not long, if you can just hold up doing anything stupid or having it out with your father till after then. Please just hold it all in. If you don't travel to the future then obviously I'm crazy along with Felix and your Father. If I'm not, which I'm not, then you're going to be slicer racing in space.'

'What's a slicer?'

'A futuristic motorbike with a jet engine that reaches speeds of up to 2000 miles per hour.'

'Well Bruno...what's your second name?'

'So, like... Mars.'

'Well Bruno Mars, I don't think I believe you but for some reason I really rather like you. I shall resist any temptation to kill anyone and drive that time machine for you in the race tomorrow. You have my word.'

Stan smiled.

Both Felix and Walter stepped out from the garage.

'Well now, looks like we're all time travelling tomorrow, which should be fun.' Betsy shouted loudly to them both.

Felix's face dropped. 'You told her, what the hell Stan?'

Stan slapped his hand into his face. He couldn't do anything right.

'We are going nowhere with these two, they're both leaving.' Walter walked toward Betsy. 'Not after their friend has tried to kill you.'

'Yes, we are father. Bruno and I are friends so I will hear nothing of the sort. It's not their fault their friend turned out to be a crazy person. I'm racing tomorrow. With them. That's final. And we all have that damn party tonight. Who's is it again? The governor or something?'

Walter folded his arms and stared down at his feet. 'It's the Governor, I don't know who he is or what he does, he just has lavish parties

and he's holding this year's pre-race party.'

Stan piped up. 'Isn't the governor like the President of the Isle of Man? And you don't know who he is?'

'Well now...' Walter scratched his head. 'I think it may actually be the First Minister who's in charge but no, we don't know who he is either.'

'You mean no one knows who's in charge.'

'That is rather strange now you mention it,' said Betsy.

Walter leant in close to Betsy. 'Listen to me Betsy. I don't want you mixing with those two, do you hear me?'

Betsy's face twisted with anger as she looked Walter straight in the eye. 'I don't think you should be advising me of anything. Do you? Besides, if you want to catch some mammatus clouds then you're going to need me to do it.'

At the same time, Felix squared up to Stan. 'Think you could just try stay out of trouble and do what I say?'

'Me? I'm just trying to help. At least she knows now. How did you expect to pull off tomorrow without her having a clue?'

'Oh I don't know. Engage my fairy senses, something like that?'

Stan's face dropped. 'I was right about Axel though, wasn't I? I told you he was creeping around the house too. Do you think, maybe...'

'Oh what, that he murdered Cane's father, you mean?'

'It was him at the window of the kitchen, it has to be, creeping around the house and all that. When we got the news about Cane's father's death at the meeting. I swear he was smirking. Who else could it have been?'

'It was me at the window you idiot. Not Axel. I was looking into the kitchen at what was going on. No, you know what. No way. You never liked him from day one, did you? All he's done is take the corner wrong on the race. Betsy's could easily be mistaken about this. We don't know that at all. You can't tell me this whole time he was lying to me.'

'Not saying that am I..'

'Then what? What the hell are you saying, Stan?'

'I am saying that something happened here. Like he got his memory back or something like that.'

'And how,' Felix stepped even closer to Stan. 'Are you able to know that. Another one of your damn fairy senses going off again?'

'Go to hell, Felix.'

Chapter 13

Outside The Mean

Stan gasped as he stepped into the enormous circular entertaining room of Governor's house in Niarbyl, the place rattled with well-dressed guests who mingled among the smooth jazzy beats in the room.

Felix spotted the most beautiful sight he had ever laid eyes on, the twinkling milky way in the background, out past the endless open doors that surrounded the room and over the balcony, the black night sky was lit with sparkling stars and swirling clouds.

Besty spotted Felix staring over the crowds. 'Really rather special, I'd say.'

'Mmm... I suppose.'

'Of course, we can see the Northern Lights from here, you know. Now that's a sight to be seen.'

'Really, I don't think I've...' Somebody caught Felix's attention, so much so that he wasn't able to muster another word. It was Gorrry, his blond hair still on the rampage and dressed in his leathers. Despite the effort everyone else had put in, Gorrry clearly hadn't got the memo.

'Ahh, Betsy. Sorry to hear about that lad. A friend was he?'

'Not mine, this gentleman's here. Gorrry meet Felix from America.'

'Well now, all the way from America. I'm sorry to hear about your friend.'

'I, well, thank you, you know, we worked together but, you know, we didn't really know each other too well. But thank you.'

'Betsy, can I have a word.' Finlo rushed up to Betsy and ushered her away.

'Look, what happened today, I didn't realize you thought it was me who caused the explosion, you must have been so angry. I...'

'No, I'm sorry Finlo.'

'Look. That day...'

'Forget it. Let's just...'

'No. Let me tell you. For once and for all. That day Isbal had run into the garage, my father spotted her and ran in behind her to stop her. I heard my Father shouting and followed him too but he sent me away before I could enter. I don't know what they could have been working on for such a fierce explosion to happen but that's what happened. There was nothing anyone could do. It was just too late. The thing is...' Finlo looked to the floor. 'She ran past me. I had no idea she was going to the garage. I was by the back door, I wasn't looking, I didn't spot it. If I had realized I could have stopped her. I was facing the house. The first thing I knew about it was when my father was in the hall. He was walking toward me, he must have spotted Isbal behind me heading in. He shouted so loud and ran past me. I'm sorry Betsy, I'm so sorry I didn't stop her. I have felt so guilty about that my whole life.'

Betsy rested her hand on Finlo's shoulder. 'You lost your father and I, for some reason, thought it was you in the garage. I shouldn't have ever thought that.'

As Betsy hugged Finlo, she stared at her chattering father over his shoulder.

Walter swilled his whiskey around his glass as he stood chatting amongst a small group of well-dressed men.

'It's madness, that's what I say,' a highly opinionated man to Walter's left said. 'To ride a machine that could kill you, for entertainment.'

Madness. What makes you do such a thing?'

'Well,' said Walter. 'I do not feel it is such madness. Rather a skill that I have acquired. I certainly do not think I will die and I am certainly not mad in any way, shape or form.'

'Yet people do die. No matter the skill. And that is fact. So, the only conclusion I draw is that you are suffering madness in some way, shape or form. It is merely a process of thought that leads you to conclude that you will not die despite the fact that skill does not come into this and you likely will.'

'Well sir, I can assure you...'

Another voice in the small crowd interjected. 'Walter Doolish, I can vouch for you my friend as I believe you not to be mad. Rather, you are, without a shadow of a doubt, outside the mean.' It was Gorry, puffing on a cigar and having somehow found a pint of beer amongst the champagne and canapés.

'Ahh Gorry,' Walter said. 'Never short of an opinion.'

'Well now,' Gorry stepped into the middle of the small crowd with his chest puffed out. 'It has been a few years since my school days but I seem to remember something about Aristotle's Golden Mean. Aristotle said that to act with moral virtue is to behave in such a manner between an extreme and a deficiency. Let me see. So, I feel courage would be a virtue to you Walter. To have excess courage would be reckless and to have too little cowardice. Of course, you clearly have an excess of courage and therefore a recklessness of sorts that could quite easily be confused with madness. Another fine example would be Cane Lugh, everyone's favourite rider.'

The crowd chuckled.

'Now that man has ambition, too much I would say, and therefore an excess of greed that powers him to the finish line. And let's take Betsy over here...' Betsy crossed her arms as all heads turned her way. 'An excess of modesty I suspect.'

'Or,' said Betsy, waving one finger in the air. 'Could my father's recklessness be confused for obsessiveness. Could his love of bikes, or anything for that matter, result in an excess of love which

results in an obsession. In his attainment of perseverance, he has stepped over the line and become obsessed?'

Everyone remained quiet as Betsy stared at a stoic faced Walter. It was difficult to work out if she was joking or not.

'And myself for that matter,' she quipped. 'It is presumed by Gorry, here, that our virtues are admirable. Courage. Ambition. But what if mine is neither? What if my virtue of righteousness indignation is off balance and I am powered to the finish line by envy, or if my composure is tainted with irritability. If we are all off balance then wouldn't we all be considered, as the gentleman here originally suggested, a touch mad?'

Everybody remained in total silence and Betsy kept a straight face.

'Of course, I am only joking.' She followed up with a small smile. 'Because that would mean Gorry over here had a desire for wittiness yet an excess of buffoonery and we all know that couldn't be true.'

The crowd let out a relieved giggle.

'Walter Doolish, how are you?' A woman's voice broke the chatter. It was Edith Pratt, the uncompromising cook.

Walter shifted where he stood. 'Edith, I am well thank you.'

'And how is that cooking of yours coming along. I have some recipes due in the Douglas Metropolitan next week which I am sure you will enjoy.'

'Walter you cook?' said Gorry. 'By jove you've never mentioned that.'

The small crowd sniggered into their sleeves, cooking was not something that men did, let alone middle-aged bike riders. 'Well you will have to show my wife a thing or two in the kitchen. She could do with a couple of tips,' said one of the men.

The opinionated man to Walter's left couldn't help but give out his thoughts. 'And you say that you are not suffering madness. Maybe Betsy has a point.'

Walter straightened his composure. 'Now then Edith, I am not sure that I understand what you are talking about. Good evening to you.'

Walter walked away.

Some while later the Governor arrived and Stan watched on as a small crowd gathering around him. As the bodies dispersed and the Governor stepped fully in the room though, the glass in Stan's hand slipped through his fingers and smashed on the floor, his fingers began to twitch and he began doing his strange whimpering thing.

The Governor, with an overwhelming Jesus look about him, barely bent his knees as he sashayed toward them, introducing himself to each as if he were a theatrical show host announcing the arrival of a Hollywood star. Stan gripped his little mouth.

'It's him, it's him. The original Montague. I can't believe it.'

Without thinking for a second, Stan began walking straight toward him with his arms held out wide, his lip still whimpering and eyes filled with tears of joy. Rather than Montague acknowledging his existence, Montague threw his coat over Stan, which swallowed him up whole, and asked him for a glass of champagne. Montague pushed past Stan and headed straight for Walter.

Stan pulled the coat free from his face.

Felix, who had seen everything, stepped forward. 'Hey, Stan, look I'm sorry, you know...'

'He didn't acknowledge me. I'm little. He said he loved little people. What and he just thinks I'm the waiter. Like I'm some sort of servant.' Stan shook his head in utter disbelief as he stepped back, still gripping the coat.

'Stan, that guy is a loser. Why don't you.;..hey...where are you going.' Felix raised his voice. 'Stan, what the hell are you doing?'

'I'm gonna sing,' Stan shouted with one finger pointed in the air.

'No Stan. No whatever you do don't sing. You're a terrible singer. You're bloody terrible don't do it.'

But Stan was fast, his small body slipped through the crowd and onto the stage where he gathered the band and gave them some short, sharp directions. He then glided over and plonked himself down on the oversized piano stool, looking back at a Felix who was now stood in the crowd, shaking his head and with two hands over his mouth.

Then, with a determined yet crazed look in his eye, Stan hovered his fingers over the keys before slamming into the piano and rocking his head side-to-side. 'Don't go changing, to try and please me, you never let me down before....'

Felix's hands dropped and his mouth widened. He was absolutely amazing. As in, he had the voice of an angel, a pitch perfect, note rich tone that carried through the room sending everyone's hearts beating in time to his angelic melody.

Stan finished the first few lines of his beautiful song and stepped away from the piano, as he did each of the band members behind him began singing. Their voices rang like a heavenly choir in the background as Stan took centre stage, his hands hanging down, his bum jutting out slightly and his winning smile lighting up the room.

'Aaahahaaahaaa,' one of the band member's sang in the back ground as the rest of them continued with 'do, do, do, do.'

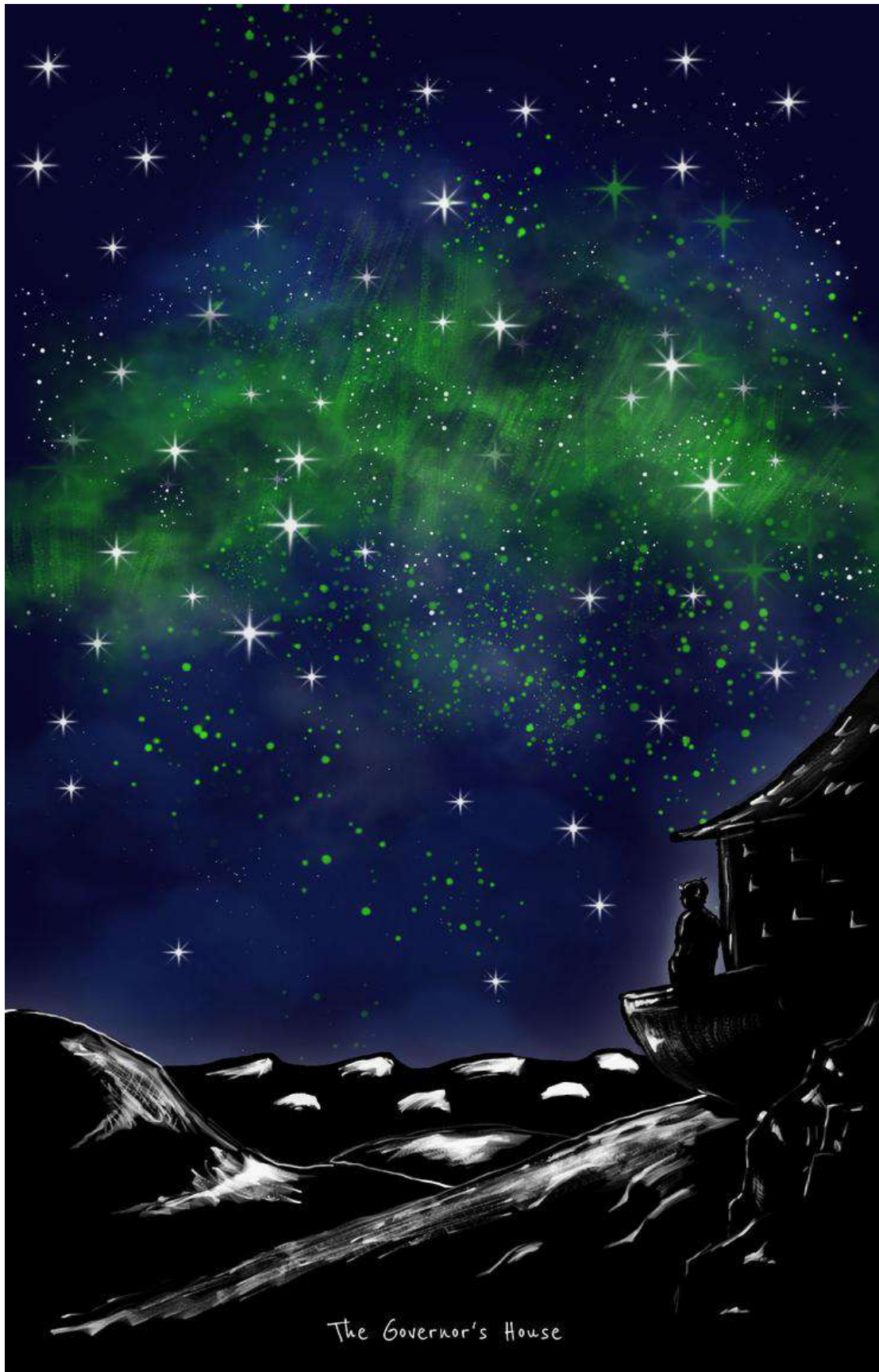
'You would not believe your eyes, if ten million fireflies, lit up the world as I fell asleep, 'cause they'd fill the open air, and leave tear drops everywhere, you think me rude but I would just stand and stare...'

Stan had truly captivated the room, his little arms swaying side-to-side and his winning smile beaming to all corners of the room.

Mid-way through the song, Felix noticed something from the corner of his eye. Something green lighting up the sky.

He stepped outside and onto the balcony where the emerald green Northern Lights danced amongst the twinkling stars. Felix gripped his head, what the hell was happening? The angelic voice of Stan flowing onto the balcony.

Felix rested his hands over the rail of the balcony as he looked to the sky. It was if, although not possible, or that he could really believe it, as if the sky had heard Stan's song and he had lit the world above. Each star shone brighter than it had ever done before, flickering with the beat, joining in the dance as the emerald streaks flowed with the music. For those brief few



The Governor's House

moments, Felix felt a profound connection to the universe, a realization that there was more going on than what he could see, that everything he knew, really wasn't as it seems.

'That's something special, isn't it?' It was Gorry, wandering toward him having successfully managed to source a second pint of beer.

'Yes, you know I don't think I've ever seen the Northern Lights before,' Felix said as he rubbed his temples. 'But I feel like I have, you know it rings a bell but I can't quite put my finger on it.'

'Well you can't have seen them then. There's no way you'd have seen the Northern Lights and forgotten something this spectacular.'

Gorry looked at Felix's face. 'You know you remind me so much of someone and I can't quite put my finger on it.'

Felix laughed. 'Well then maybe I don't look like them otherwise you'd remember.'

Gorry chuckled. 'That lad can really sing, great song although I've not heard it before. Must be American. Oh, it's finished.'

'Finished? Where's Stan?'

'There. There he is, in front of the Governor.'

Gorry was right, Stan had stepped off the stage and headed straight toward the Governor. But rather than acknowledge Stan's efforts to impress, the Governor had instead asked Stan where his champagne was. Felix watched as Stan's covered his mouth and ran out of the door.

'Excuse me Gorry, I have to go.'

Outside Felix caught up with Stan who was stomping away from the house and into the darkness.

'Come on Stan, wait up, that guy is an idiot. Don't be like this.'

'Go to hell.' Stan charged forward, gripping his fists as he slammed his feet into the ground.

'Come on. Just stop will you. Listen to me. That Montague guy is the world's biggest tool. He doesn't know anything, all he thinks about is himself, he's just a fake, a total fake. Just forget about him.'

Stan turned back to Felix. 'A fake,' Stan said, pointing at him. 'A bloody fake. You'd know all about that wouldn't you. You blithering idiot.'

'What the hell do you mean by that?'

'I mean,' Stan said in a deep growling voice. 'That you're the king of idiots. And you're the fakest person I've ever met. Who are you Felix? Who the hell are you?' Stan raised his voice to a shout. 'Tell me that. Who are you?'

'I'm Felix Anthony Dibble from New York City. I know exactly who I am. What the hell is your problem?'

'Oh really.' Stan stepped closer. 'Then tell me where you were born.'

'I erm...'

'Or where you went to school.'

Felix began to breath heavily. 'I went, I went...'

'And tell me Felix.' Stan stepped even closer and stuck his pointed finger into Felix's chest. 'Tell me where you lived as a child?'

Felix gripped his chest where Stan had just pointed. 'I know who I am. Oh my God. Who am I? How's that possible? Stan was absolutely right. Felix had no memory of anything. 'I've forgotten. I've just forgotten.'

'No, you haven't. Could you be any more stupid? We were briefed by Montague not to ask you, Crusher or Hornet questions because then you would need some answers. Your idiots, pawns in the mission. That's what he said. We would be the ones taking down Outlaw Biker Gang and you lot were just getting in his way. But he said we needed to help you to find the machine and whatever we did we must not ask you questions. It makes sense now, because you don't remember anything and it makes sense about Axel too. If we asked

you questions then it might jog your memory. You simply accepted what you had been told about the past as the truth. Answer me this. Why was there mammatus clouds last night and we didn't get to use the machine? Why does it need to be tomorrow, mid-race, that we use the machine?'

'How do you know there were clouds?'

'Because Betsy showed them to me on Snaefell Mountain. I saw them. It's like they know. They know the future and this is all a huge set up.' Stan gripped his mouth. 'This isn't right, I'm telling you this isn't right.'

Felix suddenly gripped his head. 'What are you saying then? That I'm like Axel. That I've spent all this time here and not questioned who I am or where I came from. Did Axel suddenly remember who he is and then turn into a murderer? Or was he evil all along. What are you saying, that Axel and me are the same? That I might turn into a murderer. I would have questioned it. I would...'

Stan slammed his foot into the ground. 'NO. You wouldn't. You're deluded,' he shouted. 'Just like everyone else in the world, completely deluded. Everyone thinks they question the past, it's the greatest illusion to ever exist, if you have no past then would you question the past? We're all been told about what happened before us, told there's a universe around us, told there's a God above us. And we look for answers again and again. Is there a God? What planets haven't we discovered? What really happened to the Roman Empire? But what about before all this, before Earth, outside our universe, before God was created. We even think that we question those concepts but we don't. Think about it. Are the only concepts you question something already suggested? Or are you beginning to question that there could be more concepts? Or, and here is where my real point lies, are you only questioning those concepts because I was the one who suggested it? If you really think about it, we only question what's in front of us. Questioning things that we don't want to accept or lies that we have already accepted is not what any of us do -ever.'

'If that is the truth, then what does that make faith, a lie?'

'No, an answer.'

Felix scowled. 'You don't know what I was referring to. It wasn't God if that's what you think.' Felix buried his head in his hands. 'Me, I meant me. Faith in myself, faith that I'm not this terrible person that destroys everything, destroys people. Faith everything will work out, faith that I will always do and did the right thing. I can't be that other person that Axel turned into, if that's what happened, I just can't. We're doing something good here; saving the world.'

'Then you have already given yourself the answer. Because that is all that faith is, the answer to any question. Choose that if you want. I won't stop you. But you're never going to find the truth if that's your only answer.'

'I could have faith that everything will be awful, that I'm really some nutter. That I'm...'

'Still faith. Just another answer.'

Felix gripped his hands as he looked to the floor. Stan was right. Felix did only have one answer in his mind, the alternative was too terrible, but where did that leave him? And who was he really? And then it hit him. 'I'm nothing,' Felix suddenly blurted out, 'I'm nothing, right now I'm nothing, aren't I. That's the answer.'

'Are you?'

'Because all I am is my thoughts. All of us, that's all we are. Take them away and we're nothing.'

'I wish I was nothing right now, that would be so much easier.'

Felix studied Stan's face, every line was steeped in sadness, his eyes hollow, an emptiness in his expression. 'You have no faith?'

'No, not any more. I used to, growing up I always thought things would get better, I'd be successful, happy, you know, the house, kids, fall in love. It got me through the bullying at school, the loneliness in my teens, the rejection at work. The thing is it never stopped. Then I found Montague, I thought I belonged, they were the same as me, accepted me, I thought that was it, forever. But it was all lies. That's why I ate so much popcorn, I couldn't take it. I see that now. I was so nice all the time and they used every last piece of me up. If I could

just wake up tomorrow and not be me, that would be my answer, I'd give anything to be you and not know who I am right now.'

'But you're switched on, how didn't you see it?'

'Because questioning things that we don't want to accept is not what any of us do.'

'So what are you saying, that you have no faith, not even in yourself?'

'Not any more.'

'But Stan, at least I have an answer. Not having an answer must be the saddest place in the world.'

Stan turned his head away from Felix and snuffled into his sleeve. 'No, realizing the truth was.'

Even as a young child, Stan the now ex-demented fairy was no crier, he turned away from Felix and carried on walking.

As Felix watched him in the shimmering moonlight, a dark thought tore through his mind. *This is my fault.* Felix couldn't stand Montague, the whole time he had spent with Stan he had been tearing his world apart, the sarcastic comments, the put downs, he'd been chipping away at him without a single thought that it might be slowly destroying him. And all that faith that Felix held about himself not destroying other people -he'd already done it.

Stan turned back and shouted over to Felix with one finger pointed straight at him. 'But you know what, you're no better than me Felix Dribble.'

'Dibble, it's Dibble, I think.'

'Whatever. You're no better than me. Where's your faith in anyone else. The only person you care about is you. Why aren't you destroyed that Axel turned out to be someone he wasn't. It would have killed me. The saddest place in the world? You, Felix Dibble, have been in it all along.'

Stan continued walking into the night as Felix gripped his churning stomach. *I'm me*, Felix said to himself. *I'm not a terrible person.* Felix shouted back at Stan. 'You're wrong. You're wrong about everything.'

I know who my Mother is. She wouldn't do this. I... I.' Felix lowered his voice. 'I'm not a terrible person, I'm really not.'

* * *

That night Stan walked the long journey into Douglas alone, reaching the promenade where he sat amongst the glittering sunken gardens where beautiful flowers bloomed and endless water features danced to the sound of the happy crowds that passed.

Stan took a seat on a bench and watched as smiling faces and embracing couples passed him by. As the minutes turned to hours, his thoughts were consumed with anger and sadness. Why couldn't he be as happy as other people? He wanted to belong so desperately. And just when he did it seemed Felix had to be the one to pull the rug straight from under him. Maybe that's why he was so angry at Felix. Although, Stan quickly realized, he had also pulled the rug out from underneath Felix too.

But above all, Felix wouldn't believe him. And that certainly made him angry.

Eventually the glittering fairy lights from above were turned off and dark emptiness of the night set in. As Stan sat in the misty darkness on the bench, with not so much as a soul for company, he slammed his hands into his face and began to sob.

Chapter 14

The Final Races

0 DAYS LEFT

8am, 1928, Walter's House, Isle of Man

Felix stood deathly still in the front room of the outhouse. The morning sun burst through the windows and lit up the hovering dust that hung in the air. Not a single noise could be heard. He checked Stan's room but his bed was still made-up. Then he checked Axel's room, but, again, not that Felix expected anything less, his bed was still made-up. Felix let out a sigh, left the outhouse and headed over to the garage.

'Have you seen Stan, I mean Bruno?'

'No,' said Walter. 'Is something wrong?'

'He's not slept in his bed.'

'Well that's one less person to worry about.'

Betsy entered the garage. 'What's wrong?'

'It's your friend, Bruno. He's gone missing,' said Walter.

'Well that's one less person we need to worry about,' Betsy said in a very matter-of-fact tone.

Felix lifted an eyebrow. 'Thought he was your friend?'

'Well now, he is, of course. I just mean that we're going to have to pull off a dangerous manoeuvre to get this time machine working, aren't we? The less people the easier it is.'

Felix looked to the floor. 'I suppose, I just hoped that...'

'Did you two fall out last night, is that why he walked back?'

Felix shrugged his shoulders.

‘Well now,’ Betsy said. ‘There’s still time. He might turn up.’

9am, 1928, The Grandstand

A short while later, Walter, Betsy and Felix sat silently in the shed at the paddock in preparation for the big race. Once again, bodies of the riders and their race teams squashed together and from the low murmuring in the room it was clear to all that something was wrong. Cuthbert stood up.

‘Moghrey mie lads, it’s blowing a hoolie in the skies today. Electrical storms above head, so we’re going to have to sit this out. The day is with us though and I have word that it will clear up at some point. The race could go at any point so I ask that all of you don’t leave the paddock area.’

Everyone let out a small moan as Gorry raised his voice. ‘Traa dy liooar, Cuthbert.’

‘Traa dy liooar,’ shouted Finlo. ‘Time enough. That’s right, maybe there is enough time. Time for you to get a sleep in before the race.’

The rest of the crowd let out a chuckle.

‘All right, lads, we’re in for a long wait by the looks of it. Time enough there is.’

6.30pm, 1928, The Docks

Plooms of smoke bellowed from the passenger ferry and onto the docks where Stan stood waiting in line for the boat. All around him men, women and children rushed back and fourth with their suitcases. He stepped out of line and attempted to glimpse at the start of the line but the queue was enormous. On stepping back in line he sighed deeply and caught sight of a news board to his left, which declared that that racing was delayed due to weather.

As he continued to wait in line, a little girl with pigtails and a pink dress smiled at him, but as she did so an identical little girl with pigtails and a pink dress stepped out from behind her. Their mother then called to them and they disappeared into the crowds.

How cute, Stan thought before turning his head away. But then Stan's eye began to twitch. 'Twins, identical twins,' he said out loud.

Stan stepped out of line and looked behind him down the length of the docks. He remembered Betsy's story about when she'd first arrived on the Island. The bit where she had stepped off the boat and onto the docks. The bag boy had fainted.

What if, Stan thought to himself. *What if when they used the time machine on Snaefell mountain that it had actually worked. That Betsy did travel in time. They thought it hadn't but it had. That the bag boy had seen something so unbelievable that he had passed out right there and then.*

Stan gripped his mouth and began walking faster and faster down the docks, away from the boat and toward the exit. With every step, more and more of the jigsaw began piecing itself together in his mind.

Then it hit him. His body jolted still and he gripped his chest as the bodies of other passengers crashed into him as they swept past.

'Walter is lying,' Stan said as loud as day to himself.

He began pacing the floor and rubbing his head as he continued to speak. 'Walter is lying. That means if he's lying...if he's lying then.' Stan dropped his hand to his mouth. 'Then what if Betsy is lying. If Betsy is lying, then, oh my, oh my..'

Despite the rush of passengers around him, one man in the crowd spotted the distress on Stan's face. He stepped toward him. 'Now then, lad, is there something I can help you with.'

'Their lying.' Stan gripped the front of the man's suit and began shaking him. 'Their lying and they are in so much danger. Felix is in danger.'

'Now then, lad, let go of me and I am sure will be able to help. Who's in danger..'

'The race. Has the race started..'

'You mean the TT race?'

Stan scoured the platform and spotted a couple of men huddled around a radio as they sat on their luggage. He let go of the helpful man and ran over to them. 'Are you listening to the TT race. Has it started?'

'Just about to..'

Barely had the man finished his sentence before Stan had taken to his heels down the length of the docks.

Chapter 15

The 3008 & 2008 Final Race

6.30pm, 1928, The Grandstand

Betsy, Walter and Felix straddled their bikes on the start line and began revving their engines. Felix took a few moments to look at the other riders at the start line before placing on his helmet. There was absolutely no sign of Stan. Felix gave Betsy and Walter a nod, and with the drop of a flag, the racers fired from the from their starting positions and down Glencrutchery Road.

3008, The Grandstand

Above head the drones lowered into their positions and began recording the faces of the riders at the start line. Hornet and Crusher placed their helmets on and sunk into their slicers as the incredible din from the crowds rattled through their helmets. They gave each other a sullen nod, just as the sound of the long starting beeps began. On the third beep, each and every slicer soared from the start line, leaving behind spit filled roars from the stadium.

7pm, 1928, The Grandstand

Stan panted as he pushed people aside at the pit stops and ran toward the racing teams. 'Where are they? Where are they?' he shouted to anyone that would listen.

One of Castletown's racing team stepped forward. 'About to take their second lap. They're coming past now. There's been no problems though, they're going for another lap without stopping.'

Stan looked over to the racing track, he watched as Betsy, Walter and Felix on their motorbikes flew past to the sound of wailing fans.

'A bike,' Stan shouted. 'I need a bike.'

'You can't just jump in the race. Your too late. No one starts the race on the second lap.'

Stan scoured the pit stops and spotted a lone motorbike. He ran over, jumped on and fired it up. Voices began shouting at him as he moved at speed toward the track, nearly running people over as he swerved to avoid hitting anyone.

'Hey, you can't take that..'

'Make room,' Stan shouted as he pushed forward. 'Get out of the way..'

7.15pm, 1928, Fairy Bridge Road

Betsy held her head down and applied pressure to the accelerator as she headed toward Fairy Bridge Road. As the countryside blurred past her, she spotted smoke billowing from a bike in front. She closed in.

'No brakes,' Gorry screamed as Betsy caught up with him. 'I can't stop.'

Betsy checked her rear view mirrors, Walter and Felix were not far behind and they could see everything. If she didn't help he would

almost certainly die and they would see that she let him.

'Get on, you have to get on the back of my bike,' Betsy shouted.

Gorry swung his bike toward Betsy but his arms and bike shook as he battled keep it straight and jump at the same time.

Suddenly Gorry felt the bike steady, a hand had gripped onto the other side of his handlebars and steadied it. It was Finlo, he had lined his bike up perfectly next to Gorry and was helping.

Just in time before the turn onto Fairy Bridge Road, Gorry leapt onto the back of Betsy's bike whilst Finlo kept hold of the handlebars of Gorry's and slowly ground the two bikes to a halt at the roadside.

Walter and Felix safely whizzed passed Finlo and made the turn onto the long road that was Fairy Bridge Road.

A few moments ahead, Betsy looked to the sky. Above huge looming black clouds crackled with white electricity.

'This is it,' shouted Felix as he caught up with Betsy. 'Lock bikes now.'

Betsy smashed her hand into the aerial button of the time machine which was secured to the front of her bike, just as Felix locked bikes with Betsy. Moments later Walter approached Felix's bike from the far side and locked bikes with him. The trees and meadows zipped past them as they began to hit top speeds on the straight. On the back of Betsy's bike, Gorry began to scream.

'What the hell are you all doing? That's the Devil's Elbow at the end of this road. It's a cliff at the end. We're going to die. What are you all doing.'

All of a sudden, above their heads, a deep murmuring crackle from the clouds began, followed by small flashes of light that shot into the air..

'No,' screamed Stan as he pulled his bike up behind Felix's, but nobody could hear him, the noise from the other bikes and the cackling clouds overshadowed any noise he was making.

Stan held tight to the accelerator as he moved his body into position and jumped from his handlebars and onto the back of Felix's bike.

As he did a huge jolt of lightning shot from the cloud and began shooting down the aerial.

'Let go,' Stan screamed to Felix as he sank into position on the back of Felix's bike. 'Let go.'

As Stan sat fully on the back of Felix's bike, Felix could feel the terror in his grip and instantly let go of Betsy's arm.

'No,' Walter shouted on the other side of Felix. 'Don't let go.'

Walter was using his left arm to hold onto Felix's arm, the current was supposed to pass through Felix to him. Without warning, a bright light exploded all around them. As it cleared, everyone looked toward Betsy.

'It didn't work,' Felix shouted. 'Our bikes are locked, I can't stop them.'

'The dates are wrong,' Betsy screamed. 'I got the dates wrong. Keep going a second longer.'

Betsy turned the date of the time machine and another enormous volt of electricity fired down from the sky.

'Grab Betsy's arm,' Walter shouted to Felix.

'No Felix,' Stan screamed back. 'No, break, break.'

'The roads ending,' Gorry wailed as the brightness began to clear. 'We're going to hit the Devil's Elbow. Break, break'

7:15pm, 1928, Niarbyl

Out at Niarbyl, Betsy and Walter sank into their seats and watched as the Northern Lights shot across the early evening sky. 'There are things I have to tell you Betsy,' Walter said.

'Look, father, you have been under so much pressure, just.'

'It's about a time machine.'

Betsy sighed. 'You mean the time machine you were making when I was a kid. Father.' Betsy looked Walter in the eye. 'You must stop this time machine business. If we are ever to get along then you must stop talking about this.'

'You knew about the time machine?'

'Yes, I used to sit outside your garage and listen to you when I was a kid. Look, I just don't think it is right to think all these wild thoughts such as time machines. I want us to get along, for you to be...'

'But it's true...'

'Father, there's no truth in time machines, please...'

'Just hear me out and then we never have to speak of it again.'

'You promise?'

'I promise.'

'Fine.' Betsy sank back into her chair. 'Tell me about the time machine. But after this I am hearing nothing more of the sort. Father, I have spent the most wonderful time with you since I arrived back in the Isle of Man. Why can't you always be like this. I come home and everything has been so wonderful. Now you want to ruin it with some time machine nonsense.'

'I was here, with Finlo's father one day, watching the Northern Lights when something hurtled to the ground from the skies. We both searched in the darkness for it and I came across this other person amongst the reeds. It was me, Betsy. An exact copy of me. The other me tried to run away and as he did a huge flash of light from the skies poured down on top of him. When it cleared, Finlo's Father had found us both. At first, we all just stood there staring at one another until finally we worked it out. This little piece of something that had hurtled from the skies repelled gravity and attracted solar electricity. We took it home, hid the fact there was two of us from your mother and spent all of our time in the garage trying to contain and recreate what had happened. We built a small machine around it, one which would attract and control the amount of solar energy from mammatus clouds. Except one day I made the most awful mistake. I left the garage door open and your sister got in. She set

the machine off and it exploded. Betsy I am so sorry I told you it was Finlo. I was trying to stop you from hating me or being angry at her. I thought it was better if you thought it was Finlo. And I thought then I could fix this...'

'Father, I have spent my whole life thinking it was him. That was worse. How could you do that?'

'It's just that, well, I couldn't fix this. Again and again, my copy and I tried. It is all we have worked on since you and your mother left. You see your mother, well, she worked it out. She saw us both together after the explosion had happened, me and my copy. She lost it. Screaming at me, she'd dated so many men in order to find the best of the best and she realized I was a liar and wanted nothing to do with me. She hated everything about me. That's why she took you. I thought it was for the best. I was going to fix everything with the time machine anyway.'

Walter gripped the front of his head.

'The thing is, me and my copy are different. While he just wanted to work in the garage and fix the machine, like an obsessed maniac, over time I realized that we weren't going to change the past. We had so many arguments about this until finally I stopped working on the machine. From then on in, I spent my all my time in the kitchen cooking and cleaning while he stayed in the garage. When you phoned that day I answered the phone, and well I couldn't have been happier. My copy was so mad but there was nothing he could do. I'd already said yes. When you arrived and I met you at the boat and he stayed in the garage. After arriving home, we took your new bike out for a test drive, you were so excited and we stopped off down here at Niarbyl...'

'Father what are you talking about. You never met me at the boat, I walked home. Remember?'

'Except, please let me finish, here was where I had the real problem. When we were down here I got a phone call from my copy who was at home working on the time machine. Somehow a copy of you had arrived at the garage from the boat and there was a real problem. The copy of you wasn't exactly the same as the original you either.

The copy was softer, sadder, more emotional. My copy couldn't cope, all he cared about was work and was determined to finish the time machine. So he swapped places with me and I went home and looked after your copy while he came down here with your copy. Then, after one night we swapped places. We came down here knowing that repairing your relationship with me as oppose to riding would be more important to you. Leaving the other two to continue in the garage and take part in the race. The thing is Betsy... we're the copies.'

Walter leant forward. 'That's why we're together down here. Something about making a copy doesn't come out the same. Betsy look at my arm.'

Walter lifted his sleeve to show Betsy a feather like pattern of red scars down it and Betsy pulled hers back too. 'Bees, father, bees.'

'No Betsy, we're the copies.'

Betsy sat forward, 'The berry pie must be cooked now,' she said. 'I shall bring some out.' With eyes still fixated, Betsy stood up and walked toward the cottage.

'Betsy, I hope you know how sorry I am.' Walter's voice drifted over to Betsy as she made her way to the cottage. 'If I could take everything back then I would.'

'Father, I...I..'

In the far distance, the sound of an explosion ricocheted toward them. Betsy squeezed her eyes as she strained to see over the tops of the forest at some billowing smoke that was shooting up from the shoreline.

'Is that.. Can you see clouds forming there... Was that an explosion?

'Betsy, listen to me. I'm sorry for everything, I really am.'

Betsy flattened her dress, took a huge breath in and began walking toward the cottage again. 'I don't want to know, Father. It all is what it is, we can't change what has happened. Besides, that pie smells great. I can smell it from here.'

7.18pm, 2028, Fairy Bridge Road, Isle of Man

Betsy and Gorry's bike was still locked onto Felix's and Walter's as a huge jolt of electricity leapt from the clouds above toward Betsy and the time machine. The edge of the cliff neared as everyone, except Betsy, screamed. 'Break, break.'

Underneath Betsy's helmet, the muffled screams of everyone else faded away. She squinted her eyes, focused her mind and squeezed the throttle as far as it would go. Next to her, still with locked bikes, Walter and Felix clung tightly to their breaks as they screamed for Betsy to break. Smoke billowed from Walter and Felix's bikes as Betsy's bike dragged the other two over the cliff.



Fairy Bridge Road

'I'm sorry,' Felix shouted to Stan as their bodies toppled over the edge. 'I'm so sorry.'

3008, The Grandstand

Crusher squeezed the breaks sharply on his slicer as he ground to a halt just after the finish line. He immediately began pounding the handlebars of his slicer before collapsing over the machine.

Felix stepped forward. 'Listen, Crusher, I'm sorry, was she a close friend.'

Crusher looked up, his face flushed red. 'You can't be for real.'

A sudden cheer broke their conversation. Just ahead of them stood the winner who was punching the air in celebration. He removed his helmet to reveal his wispy beard and fairy wings that flapped in the breeze. It was Stan, with a winning smile and a small crowd of demented fairies jumping up and down around him. A loud continuous alarm began to sound through the stadium.

'Evacuate. This is an emergency evacuation. Will all attendees please make their way immediately to the station for evacuation,' a voice over the tannoy said.

Loud explosions in the distance began rattling through the stadium and bullets began to shower down on them.

Felix ducked down. 'They've started blowing the place up already. We need to get to the station immediately.'

2963, Onchan, Isle of Man

In a field, somewhere near Onchan Village, Betsy and Gorro landed on the ground with a thud. Gorro tore his helmet off. 'Are we dead? Is

this heaven?' he said, looking around at the unfamiliar landscape.

Betsy stood up. 'No, we've actually time travelled. Stan was telling the truth. I don't believe it.'

'Time travelled? No Betsy I think we're dead.' Gorry turned in circles as they tried to recognize anything even remotely familiar. 'Betsy, explain the time travel thing to me. One minute we're on a bike. Now we're here.'

'Well Gorry, I'm not really sure where I'm supposed to start with that, the demented fairies or the time travel.'

'You can start with where are we. Look around us. Look at those buildings, they're strange, we can't be on the Isle of Man.'

'Look, it's vitally important that we make it to the station. Stan told me this place will be blown to pieces very shortly and we don't want to be in the middle of it.'

Gorry gripped his head. 'I've lost my mind, that must be it.'

'We need to run, Gorry, now.'

As they neared a road Betsy began to notice the serenity of the place. *For somewhere that's supposed to be blown up it's really rather quiet*, she thought to herself. Betsy stopped running and inspected the surroundings. In the middle of the road a large, smooth and shiny see through ball rolled passed them. It had people inside who nodded as they smoothly glided down the road.

Betsy gripped Gorry's arm. 'We've got it wrong.'

'Did I just see a family of four roll down the road in a ball?'

Betsy spotted a grey haired lady in a beige skin suit across the road. 'Excuse me, excuse me could you please tell me the date,' she shouted to a woman on the other side of the road.

'The eighth,' the woman shouted back.

'I'm sorry, what year.'

'Erm... well, it's 2963,' the woman shouted back.

'Most kind.' Betsy turned back to face Gorry. 'There we are, 2963.' But just as Betsy said it, to her horror she realized the mistake. 'Oh

no, oh no, no, no.'

'Betsy, I literally don't know which bit I should not be okay with. I feel like you think it's fine that it's that year but also I feel like you're going to tell me something else is wrong.'

'Gorry, we are forty-five years too early. We're in the wrong time.'

'Okay, well let's think about this. If this is true, and we're not in heaven, which I think is much more likely at this point, then how do we get back.'

'We don't, we don't unless we find the time machine. But we don't find the time machine until 3008. Felix and Bruno find it. That is how we get here. We can't change the future - that is what will happen.'

'Okay, I'm not sure I'm really got my head around all of this but I'm sure it will all work out.'

'Gorry, you're not listening, we cannot change the future.'

3008, Douglas, Isle of Man

In a back lane somewhere in Douglas, Betsy and Gorry landed with a thud. Both Betsy and Gorry immediately jumped to their feet.

'Are we dead? What on earth happened.'

'Right, now, Gorry, I know this is a bit hard to swallow but we're in the year 3008 and we must get to the station before this whole Island blows up.'

Gorry's body jolted as an almighty explosion fired off in the background and something black and pink flashed past him in the lane. 'I'm sorry, where are we? And did I just see a ninja fairy with an AK47 just run past me.'

'Let's go.' Betsy grabbed Gorry's arm and started running. 'I will explain on the way.'

As they ran toward Douglas Station, rubble rained down as they dodged burnt out cars and whizzing bullets that flew over head.

'Run,' Betsy shouted. 'Just keep running.'

Gorry screamed back to Betsy as he attempted to keep up. 'Betsy, those ninja fairies are everywhere and they're trying to kill the scary looking men in leather jackets. Whose side are we on.'

'The d... demented fairies side,' Betsy said as she dodged a flying bullet.

'There's demented fairies and ninja fairies. This is terrible news Betsy what are we going to do?'

Betsy struggled to shout as they kept running, her eyes darting all over the place. 'Why. Why is it bad news?'

'Because there are no demented fairies anywhere. Just ninja ones and they're the ones with the AK47s.'

They arrived at Douglas Central and Betsy and Gorry ran like the wind toward the platform. The place was crumbling all around them, bullets flying and debris falling from the ceiling. They spotted a man stood by what looked like a giant metal bullet.

'Run,' he screamed to Betsy and Gorry, ushering them inside. 'This is the last carriage.'

Gorry and Betsy leapt onto the bullet and almost immediately it fired from the platform. Once inside their faces dropped as they caught sight of something out the front window. An enormous red ball of fire was shooting from the platform and their carriage, and everyone in it, were heading straight toward the ball of flame.

7.23pm, 1928, Niarbyl, Isle of Man

Betsy carried two bowls of berry pie back out of the cottage and made her way over to Walter, who was still sat in his chair and wrapped in a blanket. 'Father, this smells delicious.'

However, Betsy tipped her head and screamed as she neared him.
'No, no.'

She dropped the bowls and ran over and pushed Walter's body back into an upright position.

His face was still, with not so much as a single breath leaving his body.

3008, Penn Station, New York

Felix's mom tapped her foot on the cold stone floor of Penn Station as she watched bullet after bullet of passengers pull up at the platform. Surrounding her stood sullen looking men and women in black suits and earpieces who also watched as hordes of passengers leapt from the trains and ran for the emergency exit tunnel.

'Finally,' Felix's mom shouted as she spotted Felix and Crusher stepping off one of the bullets. 'Second and third, are you both ready for space?'

'Of course.' Crusher smiled.

'I've cars waiting for you both outside.'

'Great.'

As they were speaking a bullet pulled into the station, the doors swung open and Axel and Hydra stepped off. Axel gripped his head as Hydra led him straight toward the exit tunnel.

'Axel's hurt his head. We will see you both at the next practice race - team mates,' she shouted.

'No way. You're both in?' Felix shouted.

'Axel was fourth, I was fifth. Look forward to working with you.'

'See you both in space,' Felix shouted back.

Axel gave a small wave and they both disappeared through the exit tunnel.

The station rumbled as another bullet pulled into the station, this time Montague and his fairies stepped off. As they headed toward the exit, Montague shouted over to Felix's mom. 'Lovely doing business with you.'

'All mine,' Felix's mom shouted back as she flicked her grey hair away from her face. She turned to Felix and Crusher and lowered her voice. 'Gosh I hate that guy, don't you? Now, who has the time machine.'

'I do.' Crusher lifted the small metal box from a backpack he was carrying and handed it to one of Felix's mom's security guards.

'Oh, that necklace you gave me, here, you can have it back. Thanks for the warning,' said Felix, holding out the necklace to his mom.

She studied the necklace with a scowl. 'Necklace?'

Crusher interjected. 'No, no. It was Hornet who gave you the necklace, not your mom. Sorry, I wasn't clear. It was from Hornet. You keep it.'

'Yes, terrible news about Hornet but she wasn't the strongest of riders. I am not surprised really.'

While Felix's mom was talking, Felix gripped the necklace back and shot a confused look toward Crusher. 'Right, sorry, that was my mistake.'

'Look, mom, I'm sorry about the mission. I'm sorry it didn't work. But you know now we have the machine we can try again. I'm sure...'

'It has to have happened. We're in the future and it already has. Unless...' Felix's mom gripped her mouth. 'Unless you did do it. Unless it worked all along.'

'What do you mean? I don't...'

A rumbling noise suddenly broke their conversation, it was another bullet rolling into the station. It made a long-winded screech as it rattled to a stop, smoke bellowing from its blackened body. The doors creaked open and everyone watched as passengers jumped

out and ran for the exits. The final people to step out were Betsy and Gorrry. Betsy looked straight toward Felix. 'Felix, you're here. How did you...'

Felix scowled. 'I'm sorry, who are you?'

'Felix, it's me. Betsy.'

Felix turned to his mom. 'Betsy? I didn't finish the mission. How is she here?'

Felix's mom smiled. 'It did work. It worked all along.' She turned to the men in black suits. 'Move. We need to move now.' Together they rushed around Gorrry and Betsy and led them toward the exit. 'I will see you both at headquarters. We've got a race in space to win, ' she shouted back to Felix and Crusher as she left the platform.

Felix turned to Crusher and looked straight in his eyes. 'Crusher, do you know something I don't? What's with the necklace. I know my mom gave that to me, now she doesn't remember.'

Crusher breathed deeply.

'What's going on,' Felix said. 'Look, whatever it is I won't say a word. My mom gave me that necklace. I saw her. And how is Betsy here? The mission didn't work remember.'

'I hope I don't regret this,' Crusher said, glaring back at Felix.

'You won't, you really won't.'

'Don't freak out, whatever you do. The thing is, she's not your mom, she looks just like your mom but I don't think she is. I think the woman who gave you that necklace is your mom. For some reason, you don't remember anything. Neither did Hornet. I was the only one who did, I just pretended that I forgot, went along with it all. Something was wrong, we were on a mission and it all went wrong.' Crusher rubbed his eyes. 'I can't believe this. I can't believe you can't remember.'

'Remember what?'

'Felix do you remember where you went to school, where you grew up, anything about your past.'

Felix stared at his hands and then gripped his face. 'Oh my God, I can't remember anything. Then who is that woman. How isn't she my mom.'

'She looks like your mom. But I'm sure she's not. You were just so difficult since the moment we arrived. I tried to jog Horner's memories but she got upset. I thought, you know, she would blow it, start crying so I stopped trying to jog her memory. Just played along.'

'Then who is Horner?'

'Felix, she was your wife.'

'Wife. I don't remember. And now she's dead.'

'Felix, I'm your best friend too. We've been friends since we were kids.'

Felix looked down toward his hand. The necklace was glowing. 'Felix, I think that's your mom. Answer it,' Crusher said.

Felix lifted the necklace to his ear. 'Hello.'

A voice crackled on the other end. 'Hello Sebastian, this is your mom here.' Her voice was fraught with emotion. 'I hope you're okay. You've done really well. I know you can't remember everything right now but you will. It will all make sense very soon.'

Her voice began to break up as Felix looked toward the exit tunnel. He spotted the back of Stan the demented fairy man who was skipping toward the exit. The fairy stopped and turned around with claw like hands spread out wide, his little fairy wings sinking down and his wispy beard fluttering in the breeze. He locked eyes with Felix, just for a moment, just long enough for a tiny fragment of something in their memories to fire into action. After a second though, Stan suddenly turned back toward the exit, shook his head and continued skipping.

'You have to finish the mission now though,' continued Felix's mom. 'You will be racing in space and I will be watching you. The thing is, we have to change the future. I know it sounds impossible, but together we need to find a way.'

As Felix listened to his Mom's voice something caught his eye. He lifted his arm and carefully studied his wrist. Crusher pulled up his sleeve and held his arm out next to Felix's.

There was no mistaking it, both men had a red feather-like pattern running from their wrist up their arm.

