

Timecrack

By

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Chapter One

The Pyramid

The boy pointed to the eastern side of the pyramid that dominated the early morning skyline. It was partly obscured by the strange blue cloud that had suddenly appeared after the last lightning strike.

Dr Malcolm Kinross glanced down at the boy. 'I see it, Manuel.'

But what the blazes is it? he wondered.

A big man, broad-shouldered and deeply tanned from years of working on digs throughout Mexico, Kinross was fit for his fifty-two years. But he gritted his teeth as a sharp pain shot through his right leg, making him shift his weight onto the aluminium walking stick. Leaning heavily on the handle to ease the ache in his knee, he surveyed the damage done to the campsite. The risks of working through the Yucatan's hurricane season were well known, but nothing could have prepared him for the devastation that lay before his eyes. It was like a scene from a First World War battlefield.

At the height of the storm, lightning bolts had struck the pyramid's flat top and what was left of its once golden column, long since stripped of the valuable metal by ancient raiders. Tons of stone facing blocks had been sent tumbling down onto the camp below where the mestizos slept in their tents. They never had a chance. Several of them now lay dead, their bodies crushed like thin eggshells, while the rest who survived the avalanche of stone fled into the jungle, vowing never to return.

Only Manuel, along with Lucy, had stayed behind to help Kinross try to cover the excavations with tarpaulin and plastic sheeting, but it had been a wasted effort. The trenches were half-filled with muddy rainwater and lay across the dig like sinking boats, with yet more pebblesized drops of rain falling, threatening another deluge.

'Malcolm ... what are we going to do?'

The voice, shaking and frightened, made Kinross look down at his wife. She was on her knees, arms held tightly across her chest, like a shield against what might come next.

They were on a large slab of honey-coloured stone, its wheel-like shape covered with mysterious symbols they had yet to understand. It had been discovered inside the remains of a temple, complete with columns and pediment, once the dig had been cleared of the undergrowth that had hidden it for centuries. Their work had shown that the temple with its wide marble steps, and the pyramid several hundred yards away, had been constructed on two sides of a large square. It was an incredible find by Kinross; nothing like the temple with its Greek-style architecture had been discovered before in the depths of the Yucatan jungle.

As far as he could tell, the stone – the Transkal – had been positioned in the middle of a large room, somewhere inside the temple. It had yet to reveal its purpose, but from the carved images and central trough sculpted into its surface he thought it might be some sort of sacrificial site. Over two feet in height and twelve across, he had named it after his late friend and former head of the department of archaeology at Cambridge, Sir Archibald Transkal, his mentor during

his time at the college. And now they were on the stone that had kept them free from the river of mud that coursed its way through the campsite during the night.

‘I don’t know, Lucy, but we’re finished here for the time being, that’s for sure.’

He could see that she was suffering from one of her headaches again. Her natural, silvery-blond hair was lying mud-spattered against her skull, and her deep-set blue eyes, dull with pain, betrayed her exhaustion. They were both ready to drop, having tried over the past few hours to save some of the pottery sherds and coins they had so patiently excavated near the temple. What they had saved now lay spread out on the stone, a pathetic reminder of how little they had managed to rescue before the torrential rains had forced the collapse of the trenches.

Lucy was groaning. A low, whimpering, child-like sound that warned Kinross she was slipping into a trance, but there was nothing he could do. It was a worrying condition that happened sometimes in her sleep. At other times, like now, she would unexpectedly stiffen and withdraw into another world. A world that might last minutes, or perhaps longer, and then she would recover, claiming she had ‘seen’ things – not dreams, but real events that very often included their two boys, Archie and Richard.

For a brief moment, he thought of the boys at Grimshaws, back in Ireland. Would he ever visit the school again? Would he see them again? *Damn it! Damn this storm!* He gripped his walking stick more tightly and watched Lucy as she slowly closed her eyes, but there was little he could do and nothing to be gained by thinking the worst. He knew he would have to keep a clear head if they were to survive this disaster.

‘Señor Kinross! See there!’

Manuel’s words were almost drowned by an almighty roar of thunder directly above them. Lightning crackled again as it lit up the eastern face of the pyramid, exposing large gaps where the huge stone blocks, already weakened by centuries of neglect, had broken away

‘Look, Señor – *Chac!*’

The boy was pulling at Kinross’s belt and pointing towards the blue cloud. It had drifted away from the pyramid, but now it contained, at its very core, a pulsing bright light, and it seemed to be coming their way.

Chac was one of the most ancient Mayan gods. As a bringer of rain and maize, Chac was still worshipped by Mayan farmers, especially during times of drought, but also a god to be feared as a bearer of thunderbolts and destruction.

‘I don’t think so, it’s only –’

But Manuel wasn’t listening. At the sight of the blue cloud approaching, with its yellow inner light getting brighter by the second, he leapt into the sea of mud surrounding the stone. His little legs buckled and nearly gave way as he struggled through the thick sludge to reach the edge of the jungle, but he made it, glancing only briefly over his shoulder to see the cloud he believed to be Chac.

With a sense of sadness, Kinross watched him disappear into the trees, thankful that the young boy who had been like a puppy around his legs for so long had made it safely out of the mud. He turned to see that the cloud was almost upon them. He was mystified by it, but he could do nothing about it. His leg had stiffened

and he could hardly walk, let alone make his way through the mud. And Lucy was in no fit state to move; she had settled into a trance-like state and was as still as death. All he could do was watch and wait as the cloud slowly enveloped them like some great heavenly cloak.

*

Hidden by an old tree stump and a screen of dense undergrowth, Manuel lay flat on the ground, afraid to raise his head in case the great god, Chac, might see him. He had no idea how long he lay there, but eventually his curiosity got the better of him. Crawling to the side of the tree stump he carefully parted the long wet grass to get a better view of the campsite.

The stone was deserted. He didn't know what it was, the villagers simply referred to it as the 'Big Stone', but he had known since he was little that, like the pyramid, it was a special place. His eyes scanned the campsite searching for some sign of life. It had stopped raining and the blue cloud was gone, but so were Dr Kinross and his wife.

It had come true – the warning given by old Mateo, the shaman in his village, the day Dr Kinross had arrived looking for workers to help him excavate the area around the ancient pyramid. Mateo, who rarely spoke to anyone, had been troubled and had warned Kinross and the villagers:

'Beware the anger of the Gods. Those who would take from them, they also will be taken.'

The young mestizos had ignored the old shaman. They said they were good Catholics and no longer listened to such nonsense. Besides, they would be well paid for their labour, and was this not more important to their families? Now some of them lay dead, and the doctor and his wife had disappeared.

As he prepared to leave the sacred grounds, Manuel prayed that the gods would not be too unkind to the doctor and his wife. Little did he know that Malcolm and Lucy Kinross had embarked on a very strange journey that few would have believed.

Chapter Two

Aristo's Journey

A young man who would understand what was happening to Malcolm and Lucy Kinross was also in a difficult situation, except that he was *looking* for the blue cloud and so far he hadn't found it.

Aristo felt his heart begin to beat more rapidly as he watched the great rhino-like beasts feeding on the leaves of the large flowering plants that grew along the edge of the riverbank. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. They were dinosaurs, with thick, greyish-green leathery hides and massive heads dominated by three fearsome-looking horns. At the back of the head was a large plate-like frill with bony tips that covered the neck like a huge collar. He guessed they were plant eaters, but that didn't mean they were not dangerous. These incredible beasts were over thirty feet long, nearly ten feet tall, and each one probably weighed at least ten tons. If he got in their way, there wouldn't be much left of him to make a decent sandwich.

God! Just my luck to land in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of dumb dinosaurs!

He shook his head in frustration as he lifted his left arm to switch on the Timecrack Tracking Unit. He was careful to leave it on silent mode as he shielded the display window with his right hand, in case it glowed. *If only it would!* The dinosaurs probably wouldn't see it at this distance, but he wasn't about to take a chance on giving away his position before a timecrack fully materialised. Who knew how these beasts would react if they were startled by a strange flashing light.

The TTU, as it was usually called, was built into the sleeve of his tracker suit, with a back-up unit in the other sleeve. He looked closely at the grey neutral display, hoping to see some sign of blue edging into the lower quadrant. *Please ... go blue!* But no matter how hard he wished, the display remained grey.

Leaving the TTU switched on in silent mode, Aristo positioned himself on the ledge to get a better look at the lie of the land. He had fallen onto the ledge earlier, but luckily he had suffered no serious injury. The metallic fibre suit he wore had protected him from the worst of the fall.

Only a short time ago he had been scouring the edge of the forest for edible plants and berries to supplement his emergency rations, when, without warning, the ground had started to tremble and the sound of large boulders smashing their way through the trees had frightened him. Fearing an earthquake, Aristo had run for his life along a narrow path, hardly caring where it led.

With the earth growling and heaving like an angry sea and giant conifers uprooting all around him, Aristo felt something touching him as it crashed to the forest floor behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw that a tree had narrowly missed him. He sprinted blindly along the rough track hoping to find solid ground and shelter from the rocks now hurtling down the mountainside.

Ever since he had arrived in this strange, forbidding world several days before – *Old Earth days*, he had to remember – Aristo had only been able to make headway through the forest by travelling on trails made by the dinosaurs. The lush vegetation, with conifers screened by thickets of broad-leafed ferns, created an impenetrable barrier through which only the huge beasts could trample their way.

Suddenly the ground heaved and burst open beneath his feet with such force that he was catapulted through the air, head over heels, to land on a flat inclined rock covered in green slimy moss. Slithering down the face of the rock he fell onto a wide rocky ledge overlooking a great plain.

Aristo picked himself up and checked his green – now somewhat greener – camouflage tracker suit for any tears or damage to the complex life-support system that had been woven into the special metallic fibre. Everything seemed to be in working order, but he felt stiff and sore from the fall. After the almost impossible hike through the thick forest he was exhausted and needed to rest.

His olive skin, usually smooth and fresh, was smeared with dirt, and his golden curls, greasy and unkempt, lay flat against his brow. His greenish-grey eyes, despite his tiredness, were still sharp and alert for any sign of danger. It was an instinct that had always been a part of him.

As a seven-year-old youth in the city state of Sparta in Ancient Greece, Aristo had been taken from his parents to be subjected to a brutal thirteen-year programme that had been designed to turn Spartan boys into future warrior-citizens, to be feared and grudgingly respected by their enemies. Unfortunately, at the age of fourteen, none of his early fighting and survival skills had been able to prevent him from being taken by a timecrack.

It had arrived when he was fighting with a group of other boys on a hillock near their training camp. The evening light was fading, and so determined had Aristo been to beat the bigger boy he was wrestling he hadn't seen the blue cloud descending on them. It was only when he looked around that he realised the rest of the group had fled back to the camp. Before they had time to even think about following them, the cloud had swept over the hillock, sucking the two boys and everything else in its path up into a crazy swirling mist. Aristo had lost consciousness and remembered nothing of that journey, he only knew that he had strange land, alone, for there was no sign of his fighting companion. The other boy had completely disappeared, as was often the case when people were taken by timecracks, and which was exactly what the scientists back at Mount Tengi were trying to rectify with Aristo's current trip.

But here he was - lost again!

He was twenty years old now (measured in New Earth years), the youngest ever recruit to the Timecrack Research Programme, with everyone hoping he would be the very first traveller to make a successful return to the chamber at Mount Tengi. Unfortunately, the technicians had landed him in the wrong place at the wrong time and outside the return trip coordinates. Now his only way back was to find a timecrack, but so far there hadn't been any sign of one materialising.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes, checking the TTU again for what seemed to be the hundredth time. He needed to get some sleep before attempting to go any further. Stretching out on the ledge he settled into a recess in the rock and closed his eyes.

*

Awakened by the sound of thunder in the distance, Aristo watched as a bolt of lightning zigzagged across the horizon. It left him with a desperate feeling of loneliness in this vast and frightening place. It was the time before humans, a land roamed by dinosaurs and other unknown beasts yet to be discovered. He was just

beginning to realise that he was probably the only person on the planet.

Reaching into one of his thigh pockets he extracted a food concentrate packet that would expand with his drinking water, satisfying his hunger, if not his palate. Water had not been a problem, as there were mountain streams throughout the forest all running down to a wide river not far below. *If only he had some Sticklejuice!* But Dr Shah had vetoed that, saying it wasn't practical to carry any extras on a timecrack journey; only the absolute essentials would be allowed. He finished his meal with a high-energy Actotab; at least it would help to revitalise him and dispel the poor mood that threatened to overtake him.

It was a short time later when he saw the dinosaur herd moving slowly along the riverbank towards dense scrub at the bottom of the mountain. The sight of so many dinosaurs nearby took his breath away, but he contained his excitement and kept a watchful eye on the herd. Although he had heard wild screeches in the treetops and other sounds in the forest that he couldn't identify, the dinosaurs were the first sign of life he had actually seen since his arrival in this strange world. After a few minutes quietly watching the huge beasts, he noticed a track about ten feet below the ledge where he lay. It seemed to lead to the river where some of the herd had stopped to drink. Probably a trail made by smaller animals, and a path, he decided, which he could use to leave the ledge.

Suddenly he sensed a change in the TTU. He looked at his left sleeve – *Yes!* A thin blue band had appeared on the display. It was not very bright – but it was definitely there! Aristo knew that as the blue band gradually spread across the display it would change to yellow and glow so brightly it would be impossible to view without a filter. By that time it wouldn't matter; he would be directly in the vicinity of a timecrack and at the mercy of its force. Considering the situation he was in now, not even Dr Shah or the technicians could predict with any accuracy what would happen next, but when the timecrack appeared it would be his only chance to return to Timeless Valley.

Thick, threatening black clouds were gathering on the mountain above him. The ground was trembling again and small rocks were falling onto the ledge, skittering over the edge onto the path below. By the river, the dinosaurs were snorting and grunting as if annoyed that their feeding had been disturbed. They tossed and twisted their mighty heads, the wicked-looking triple horns stabbing the air, listening to the sounds from the mountainside.

The TTU was sensitive to atmospheric changes up to a radius of nearly a mile, and Aristo was aware that any movement on his part would have to be carefully monitored, otherwise he might lose his position and be out of range when the timecrack materialised.

The herd was moving again and Aristo decided to move with it. He knew that animals were more sensitive than humans to the energy fields that accompanied timecracks. Atmospheric disturbance was a clue to their imminent arrival, and he could see that something was happening near the dinosaurs. He looked at the TTU and saw that the blue band was approaching the yellow sector. It would happen soon – but where?

It was getting dark as he made his decision to leave the ledge and make his way down to the narrow track. The mountain tremors were becoming more violent and Aristo soon found he was jumping every few feet as cracks opened up in the trail

before him. Dense rotting vegetation and large twisting roots slowed him down, and by the time he reached the plain the herd had moved farther away from the mountain.

He glanced at the TTU and saw that the blue band had reached the yellow quadrant. It was glowing so brightly he had to use the filter.

The timecrack was here!

Aristo almost jumped out of his skin as a blinding white flash of light struck the herd, followed almost immediately by a deafening thunderclap. The terrified dinosaurs scattered, several of them charging towards Aristo as he made his way across the plain. The tracker suit was slowing him down, but he had to move quickly and hope that he wouldn't be too late.

He almost missed it. The sky was black with storm clouds and he only just made out the blue mist that was forming by the river, but it had started to glow... and now its centre was turning yellow!

Lightning struck the herd again, and the mountain roared as great fissures opened up sending boulders and trees down onto the plain. It was as if this world was coming to an end. Two of the dinosaurs, maddened by the lightning strikes, had separated from the rest of the herd and were now charging blindly into the glowing bluish-yellow mist. Aristo watched them warily as he dashed from the opposite direction, entering the timecrack as it threatened to disappear as quickly as it had arrived.

Inside the blue cloud the sound of the timecrack was like a thundering waterfall and the yellow light so intense it hurt his eyes. He felt himself being sucked into a passage of blinding brightness. The last thing he saw as he adjusted the headband filter was the strange sight of two great triple-horned dinosaurs spiralling away from him down a very long tunnel.

Chapter Three

Highway Pueblo Motel

Seventy million years later, an unholy row was taking place between two boys in a motel room in New Mexico. Archie Kinross had just lost patience with his younger brother when he returned to the room to discover that Richard hadn't even got out of bed.

'Get up, Richard, it's time to go!' yelled Archie, trying to pull the bedclothes off Richard's bed.

'Go away – I'm tired.'

The muffled voice came from a hump-like figure that had completely disappeared inside the bed sheet. Resisting all Archie's attempts to remove it, Richard was striking out with his fists like a ghost gone berserk.

'C'mon,' said Archie, 'I'm tired too, but we have to get ready to see Uncle John.'

'No – I'm not going!'

'Look, Richard, Marjorie will be waiting for us – so let's go!'

Like a magician opening his magic cabinet to reveal his missing assistant, Archie suddenly grabbed the bed sheet and whipped it away to expose Richard standing in the middle of the bed.

'Give it back!' screamed Richard.

Archie couldn't help laughing at the, thin angry figure bouncing indignantly up and down on the bed. Bright blue eyes glared furiously at him through long, fair hair that rippled across a slim angular face. They were quite different in appearance and temperament in nearly every way. Archie at sixteen, was three years older and taller, stockily built, with brown eyes and brown curly hair, and not so short tempered.

Ever since their parents had gone missing in Mexico, Archie had become more protective of Richard, but for the moment he was keeping his distance, at least until his brother decided to give up trying to punch him. Richard was hard to handle when he really got mad, especially if he thought Archie was trying to boss him around.

He couldn't blame Richard for being tired and irritable. Neither of them had had a decent night's sleep since leaving Grimshaws, their boarding school outside Enniskillen in Northern Ireland, four days earlier. What with delayed flights and missed connections between New York and New Mexico, the journey had exhausted the two of them. Especially for Archie, having to listen to Richard moaning about something every five minutes. If they hadn't had Miss Peoples, one of the new tutors at Grimshaws, with them to help with all the paperwork that was needed to get into America, Archie felt he would have been driven mad. When their uncle, Professor John Strawbridge, had phoned the school looking for a paid volunteer to look after them, it was Miss Peoples who had jumped at the chance. As she explained later to Archie:

'It's a wonderful opportunity to see New Mexico *and* meet your famous uncle!'

Just as well, thought Archie as he reflected on all the problems and delays they had experienced getting to Las Cruces and the Highway Pueblo Motel.

Although Richard was as thin as a rake, he had a ferocious appetite, so when Archie threatened him with no breakfast, Richard finally, but reluctantly left the bedroom.

Miss Peoples – or, as she had suggested that while they were away from Grimshaws, the boys should call her Marjorie – had given them some money for the vending machines situated in the motel foyer, and now Archie was standing in front of one of the machines wondering what to select.

‘I want a Coke – and some of those,’ said Richard, pointing to a crowded display of pink, green and yellow sticky-looking pastries, stacked in little white plastic trays.

‘I don’t know...’ muttered Archie, flicking a strand of hair away from his forehead.

‘C’mon, Archie, I’m *starving!*’

To keep the peace, Archie reluctantly put some coins into the slot, made a selection and gave Richard what he wanted. They went outside where, although it was early, the New Mexico sun was already unbearably hot.

‘Phew, I’m burning here. Let’s sit over there in the shade,’ said Archie, pointing across the driveway.

Opposite the motel entrance was a small garden bordered by a low stone wall, with several tall soap tree yuccas overlooking a wooden bench where they could sit and wait for Marjorie.

‘I wish this place had a decent restaurant,’ said Archie.

Having decided against the dubious offerings provided by the vending machines, he was beginning to feel his stomach rumbling with hunger.

‘I don’t care – these are great,’ said Richard, sucking sticky crumbs off his fingers into an already stuffed mouth.

Watching Richard demolish his so-called breakfast, Archie shook his head in despair at his young brother’s eating habits. To avoid watching him eat, he cast his gaze around the pink, native Indian-style building that formed the bulk of the Highway Pueblo Motel. Uncle John, with whom they had always spent some part of their holidays for as long as he could remember, had arranged that they stay here for the first night until a driver came to collect them after breakfast.

As he enjoyed the early morning sun, Archie thought how different this place was from Ireland. Grimshaws was set in the beautiful lakelands of Fermanagh, and the outdoor sports had more than made up for the unpredictable rainy weather. For a time, while their parents explored the jungles of the Yucatan, they had attended one of the European International Schools in Mexico, but after their disappearance, Uncle John had sent them back to Grimshaws.

He had never thought of his parents as famous archaeologists until they had gone missing, and when reporters started arriving at the International School trying to interview them, he knew mum and dad must be something special. Uncle John had explained how excited their parents had been when traces of a lost pyramid in the Yucatan had been discovered, but in a world obsessed by wars and disasters the press and media hadn’t really shown much interest in a lost pyramid – not until after Malcolm and Lucy Kinross had mysteriously disappeared. Three months later, when

there was still no word or sign of what had happened to them and with reporters still pestering them at the school, Uncle John had decided it would be best to send the two boys back to Ireland to complete their education at Grimshaws, before going on to university. They never talked about it, but Archie was fairly certain that his uncle thought his parents were dead.

Richard tugged at Archie's T-shirt and asked, 'Can I have another Coke? I'm really thirsty.'

'Take it easy with that stuff. You're better off with water,' said Archie, trying to ignore him.

It was very hot, and Marjorie had warned them to dress properly and drink plenty of fluids, but Archie was sure she hadn't meant copious amounts of Coke.

She arrived shortly afterwards carrying a backpack. Handing over a bottle of sunscreen lotion, she gave them an appraising look.

'Morning, boys, it's going to be a scorcher, so make sure you use plenty of this – I've more in my backpack when you need it.' She nodded approvingly, as she looked them over. 'You should be OK in those outfits.'

Archie and Richard were both wearing khaki shorts and yellow T-shirts printed with GRIMSHAWS across the chest, and she had managed to pick up bush hats to protect them from the sun. Especially, she warned them, later in the day when they crossed the desert landscape of White Sands on their way to see Uncle John.

Reaching for the sunscreen, Archie stared at Miss Peoples as if he had never seen her before. Her crinkly red hair, instead of being tied up in a bun at the back of her head, was now loose around her shoulders and, like the boys, she wore sunglasses and a bush hat. A shortsleeve, open-neck, white cotton shirt and a blue, split denim skirt exposed her lightly tanned skin. Gone was the image of long black robes, dark stockings and flat brogue shoes.

'Good morning, Miss... er... Marjorie... You look... er... different...' said Archie, feeling strangely flustered.

'Well, it was good to get out of those travelling clothes, Archie, and I don't think my school gown would have been appropriate here, do you?' said Marjorie, grinning at the look on his face.

'Er... no... I suppose not.'

Sitting on the wall, Richard wiped his mouth clear of crumbs.

'Will we get to see the Space Shuttle, Marjorie?' he asked.

'All in good time, Richard, Professor Strawbridge said he would make arrangements to visit the shuttle sometime during our visit.'

At that moment, a gleaming red pickup truck entered the motel driveway and stopped at the entrance to reception.

'Hey, take a look at that!' said Richard, jumping to his feet.

That was a '99 Dodge Ram Sport Pickup, and it was huge. It was so high off the ground, with no running board, Archie reckoned you would need to take a running leap to get into it.

That is one terrific machine, thought Archie, leaving the bench to take a closer look. The driver's side cab door, printed with EFTF in black letters inside a gold circle of small stars, opened and the driver waved to them.

'Are you folks the Kinross people?' he asked.

The voice sounded to Richard like a cowboy's drawl. He joined Archie at the open door of the cab and looked up to see a man wearing a white Stetson, old worn denims and a blue checked shirt, looking down at them.

Richard was so surprised, he blurted out: 'Are you a *real* cowboy?'

The man, his face deeply tanned and with a mouth framed by a drooping brown moustache, laughed outloud.

'Only when I'm on a horse, son.' Tapping his large leather driving seat, he said, 'This is a sight more comfortable than a saddle, I can tell you.'

'Hi,' said Marjorie. She stood by the boys and looked into the cab. 'Are you Mr Winters from the Facility?'

'That's right, ma'am, just call me Chuck. The professor sent me to collect you first thing – before it gets too hot. Come on round and climb aboard.'

The boys didn't need a second invitation. Chuck opened the passenger door and they rushed around to climb in, but the cab was so high off the ground they couldn't make it the first time and Archie fell back onto Richard. Archie tried again and managed to get hold of the front passenger seat. He was about to haul himself up when he felt Richard thump him on the back.

'Stop hitting me!' yelled Archie.

'I want up front – you always go up front!' shouted Richard, making a grab for the back of Archie's T-shirt.

'No I don't–'

'Hey, take it easy, pardners.' Chuck decided he'd better interrupt them before they started swinging punches at each other. 'I tell you what – why don't you take turns up front?'

Archie caught Marjorie's eye as she nodded in agreement.

'OK, OK, I'll go in the back,' he muttered, feeling annoyed at having to give in to one of Richard's tantrums.

Marjorie climbed in beside him, smiled and mouthed a silent, 'Well done'.

'Chuck, what about our things?' she asked.

'No problem, ma'am, I'll call later to collect anything you need. In the meantime, I have to pick up some equipment for the professor, and that'll take up most of the truck space back there.'

Chapter Four

White Sands

Nearly an hour later they were heading east on Highway 70 towards the White Sand Monument. Travelling through hundreds of square miles of dazzling white landscape and nothingness gave little clue to their eventual destination.

‘What’s that?’ asked Richard, pointing to something that scurried across the road.

‘A bleached earless lizard,’ said Chuck. ‘It’s one of the few things that can live out here in the desert. Except for some grass and yucca out on the edge of the dunes, there’s not much else.’

Marjorie began to wonder why anybody would want to come and work in such a desolate place. As if in answer to her thoughts, Chuck explained to the boys that test missiles were fired here and that twice a week the road was closed to all traffic.

‘NASA has a lot of test programmes around here, and the Space Harbor is the main training centre for the space shuttle pilots, as well as a landing site.’

‘That’s what I want to be – a shuttle pilot!’ declared Richard.

‘Well, the professor is a pretty important man around here; maybe he can fix it for you,’ said Chuck, smiling.

‘Chuck, why does Uncle John need all that equipment?’

Archie had been wondering exactly what it was that his uncle did out in the middle of the desert. It was something Uncle John had never discussed on his visits to the boys and their parents, as if it were a secret project he couldn’t talk about.

They had stopped at a warehouse outside Las Cruces to collect four, large wooden crates marked TEST EQUIPMENT, now stacked in the back of the pickup, and Chuck had taken his time making sure the crates were well secured. He stroked his moustache with his thumb and forefinger before answering.

‘It’s a good question, Archie, but I can’t rightly tell you the answer to that. All I can tell you is that he’s been having a lot of strange problems with that machine of his lately.’

‘*Machine?*’ said Archie, his curiosity piqued.

‘*Strange?*’ said Marjorie, equally as curious.

‘Yes, ma’am, his new machine has been causing him a lot of headaches these past few weeks. It seems there’s some interference that keeps creeping in, but the test equipment back there should sort it out.’

‘What kind of machine is it?’ asked Archie.

‘Oh, you’ll have to ask the professor that when we get there.’

Archie had the feeling Chuck didn’t want to elaborate, and for a while nothing more was said, all of them absorbed in their own thoughts as they gazed at the empty white desert from the air-conditioned comfort of the pickup.

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Chuck turned the Ram Sport off the highway onto a narrow road with fine white sand blowing like talcum powder over a hard-packed gypsum surface.

A large white sign bearing the same gold logo enclosing the letters EFTF stated:

ENERGY FIELD TEST FACILITY
ENTRY PROHIBITED
U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY

Ignoring the sign, Chuck drove on for another mile when, suddenly, they all heard a dull, whirring whumph-whumph sound somewhere overhead.

'Hey, look over there!' said Richard, excitedly.

Swooping to a point about fifty yards to their right, a sleek black helicopter, its main five-blade rotor fanning effortlessly, hovered like a huge hawk ready to descend on its prey. With its rear rotor fully encased in the tail and showing no undercarriage, the angular fuselage had the futuristic look of a stealth aircraft. The helicopter, displaying a US army emblem, held its position near the pickup, low-flying over the sands, just as a series of *bleeps* sounded in the console next to Chuck.

'What's happening?' asked Archie.

'It's a Comanche attack helicopter, one of the latest types they use here,' said Chuck. 'Nothing for us to worry about.' He reached into the console between the front seats for a microphone attached to a two-way transmitter. 'Hi, Spot Two, Chuck here,' he said, after flicking on the switch.

'OK, Chuck, just checking in.' The Comanche pilot came in low and close and stared at them for a few seconds. 'Your package all clear?'

'Yep, the package is Purple Three and all clear,' answered Chuck.

'OK, you are clear to go.'

'What's a Purple Three?' asked Richard, mesmerised by the sight of the helicopter flying so near to the pickup.

'That's the security code for this trip – you three and the cases back there,' said Chuck, switching off and replacing the microphone in the console.

'Security code?'

'That's right. If we hadn't used the right code and cleared, they would've forced us to stop.'

'Would they have shot us?' Richard's eyebrows were raised, his imagination fired up by the prospect of the Comanche helicopter shooting them to smithereens.

'Would –'

Richard's next question was suddenly drowned by the noise of the Comanche as it roared directly overhead. It soon left them behind as it sped towards a fence that could be seen some distance ahead on the horizon.

A short time later, they reached a high metal-mesh fence that seemed to stretch forever in both directions across the white sands. An imposing metal gate held by two stone pillars displayed a yellow and black sign that warned:

AFTER ENTERING THE COMPOUND
SWITCH OFF THE ENGINE AND
LEAVE THE VEHICLE

The gate swung open to allow the pickup to enter a secure enclosed area. At the far end they could see another gate that would allow them to exit the compound. They stopped next to a wooden one-storey building where several soldiers stood outside on a sheltered veranda. Some, armed with pistols, stared at them through reflective sunglasses, another, holding a clipboard, approached the pickup.

'Hi, Chuck, good to see you – been demoted to driver again?' asked the grinning soldier, taking some documents that Chuck handed him.

'You know me, Brady, whatever the professor says, I do!' replied Chuck, smiling and adjusting his Stetson as he leaned out of the window.

Sergeant Brady allowed them to stay in the pickup with the engine and air-conditioning running while he checked the documents.

'Don't we have to get out?' asked Richard, feeling a little nervous as two of the soldiers started inspecting the crates and underneath the pickup.

'Special treatment for guests of the professor,' said Chuck, winking at Marjorie, who by now was getting very restless stuck in the back of the cab.

'This place seems to be run like a prison, is all this really necessary?'

'Well, ma'am, I suppose it does seem a bit like that, but the work that the professor is engaged on is highly classified, and this particular facility is under *extra* strict security. So, I'm afraid, you will see a lot of this sort of thing around here.'

After ten minutes, Sergeant Brady handed the documents back to Chuck and waved him on.

'You're cleared. See you later.'

'Thank goodness for that!' exclaimed Marjorie, shifting impatiently in her seat.

'Don't worry, folks, we're nearly there. You'll soon be able to get a cool drink and a bite to eat in the canteen,' said Chuck, as he took the pickup through the second security gate.

Accelerating the Ram Sport into top gear he covered the last couple of miles in a few minutes. When he finally slowed down, Archie and Richard were amazed to see the size of the building that loomed up in front of them. It was a gigantic, white and blue, hangar-like structure that would easily have towered over St Paul's in London.

'Hey, look at that – it's *huge!*' cried Richard.

He was almost out of his seat, straining to get a better view. As usual, his curiosity was getting the better of him, but he couldn't help wondering what they might see inside.

'We're here, folks – and there's the professor,' said Chuck.

He drove them over to an imposing entrance of four, very tall, tinted glass doors that opened automatically onto wide marble steps as a busy stream of people walked in and out of the building. Standing at the top of the steps was a well-built man with stooped shoulders and rugged features, a misshapen nose giving testimony to his younger days as an Irish rugby international. Running his hand through thick sandy hair turning grey, he was frowning and seemed deep in thought.

'Uncle John! Uncle John!' the boys echoed, jumping down from the pickup and then running up the steps to meet him, leaving Marjorie and Chuck to follow.

Startled, he glanced down, allowing his glasses to slip to the end of his nose. He grinned as he saw the two excited young boys about to charge into him.

'Archie! Richard! You're here at last!'

Reaching out with two powerful hands he grabbed them and held them tightly against his deep broad chest.

‘It looks as if you’ve got your hands full, Professor,’ said Chuck, turning towards Marjorie. ‘By the way, this is Miss Peoples.’

‘Delighted to meet you, Miss Peoples. I’m deeply indebted to you for looking after the boys.’

‘Not at all, Professor Strawbridge, considering all the delays we had, they have been marvellous.’

‘Uncle John – I can’t breathe...’

Richard couldn’t believe how strong his uncle’s arm was – it felt like a vice. They all laughed as the professor let the boys go.

‘I’m sorry, Richard – I’m just so glad to see you both here.’

The boys removed their bush hats and sunglasses, as the professor stood back to look at them. He ruffled their hair, seemingly reluctant to stop holding them. Archie had the feeling that Uncle John was thinking about their parents. That he missed them as much as he and Richard did. It was nearly eighteen months since they had all spent a wonderful Christmas holiday together in Mexico, little realising what was ahead of them.

‘Right, let’s get out of this heat and go over to the canteen,’ said Uncle John. ‘I’m sure we could all do with a cold drink.’

‘I have to unload the crates, Professor, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll see you folks later.’ Nodding towards Marjorie and the boys, Chuck climbed back into the pickup and drove towards a loading bay at the end of the building.

Following their uncle, Archie and Richard, with Marjorie trailing behind them studying the surroundings, the group made their way along a paved path to the canteen. It was a modern, tinted glass and concrete structure situated in an extensive landscaped garden of large white boulders. Yucca plants in all sorts of stunning shapes and sizes bordered the path on both sides, with Native Indian carvings set against dune grasses, placed throughout the garden, creating an unusual soothing effect.

‘This is beautiful, Professor. I never expected to see anything quite like this in the middle of the desert.’

Marjorie had stopped to take a closer look at a small ornamental pond that had been formed in the middle of the garden.

‘Yes, it is unusual, but as many of us spend most of our time here at the Facility, it was felt that it would be nice to have somewhere restful to relax. I’m glad you like it.’

Inside the cool, airy and spacious canteen they made themselves comfortable at a table with a panoramic view of the garden and the desert sands. They ordered a light lunch of grilled spicy chicken and salad, served with iced fruit drinks, followed by large banana splits. The meal was so delicious Marjorie felt able to relax for the first time since arriving in America, without having to worry about what Archie and Richard might be up to. She waited until the boys and the professor had finished their drinks before posing the question that had been niggling at her.

‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, Professor Strawbridge, but is all this security because of what *you* do here?’

Archie saw the surprise in his uncle’s face at Marjorie’s question, but he too had wondered about what his uncle actually did here. After the threatening

appearance of the stealth helicopter and then the armed soldiers, he was beginning to think that Uncle John was working on some kind of secret weapon. Maybe that's what's inside the huge building, he thought.

The professor looked curiously at the young woman who had asked such a direct question. The filtered sunlight streaming through the tinted glass walls made the golden tones in her hair shine like burnished brass. She was certainly very attractive, and he could see that the boys were fond of her, but as a lifelong and confirmed bachelor, he had always been a little nervous in the company of women, young or old. He guessed, rightly, that this young woman wouldn't be fobbed off with his usual response of pretending not to hear the question.

'Well, Miss ... May I call you Marjorie? Good. Well, to answer your question ... If you look around, you will see there are dozens of scientists, technicians and engineers here apart from myself. There are also many more at the Facility, all of whom are working on a project of immense national importance – *that* is why we have so much strict security.'

Marjorie suspected he was being modest about his own role in whatever the project was, but she decided not to pursue it. After all, if it was top secret, he was hardly going to tell her very much about it – was he?

'I can see that ... it's just that, it's all so ... overwhelming,' she said.

'Yes, I agree that it can seem that way at first, but tomorrow morning I'll take you on what Chuck calls the "Ten Dollar Tour".'

'What's that, Uncle John?' asked Archie, enjoying another iced drink.

'That's Chuck's description of the restricted tour of the Facility that we give to VIP parties that visit us from time to time.'

'Is Chuck a cowboy?' asked Richard. He was still curious, wondering what a cowboy would be doing in a place like the Facility.

'Not really, Richard,' said Uncle John. 'Believe it or not, he's one of the most important people around here. He's the head of a government security team based at the Facility, and he's one of my closest colleagues – I couldn't do without him.' He stood up, pushing his chair away, obviously not wanting to say much more. 'Now, if everyone's had enough, I'd better get you settled in. I've arranged for you to stay next to my place in the civilian quarters not far from here. Chuck will bring your things round later.'

The professor's house was in a beautifully landscaped development, and located next door was a complex of several guest apartments. Further along, they could see a sign over the entrance to a health club and swimming pool. Nearby was a bowling alley next to a cinema advertising an old Arnold Schwarzenegger movie.

'I'm sure you'll like your accommodation. We have visitors from all over the world who come here to see what we're up to, so we try to make them as comfortable as possible while they're here.' The professor hesitated, looking a little guilty as he explained to them: 'I'm sorry to leave you to your own devices, but we are scheduled for a full-scale test of some new equipment tomorrow, and I need to be on hand this evening to make sure everything runs smoothly.'

The professor told them the preparations would go on all night and as director of operations he had to be there. However, he would meet them in the morning for breakfast and afterwards he would take them on the tour.

Chapter Five

The DONUT

Archie patted his stomach as if he was ready to burst. 'I'm stuffed! Do they always have such big breakfasts here?'

'You shouldn't have eaten so much,' said Richard, his mouth still full of grilled steak and sausage. 'Mum always said you didn't know when to stop.'

'What! That's not true! Anyway, that's a bit rich coming from you—'

'OK, OK, boys, take it easy.' Marjorie was getting used to nipping these arguments in the bud, and she wasn't about to let one start now. 'They tend to serve generous portions in America, but it doesn't mean you have to eat everything that's put in front of you.'

It was early morning and they had just left the canteen after helping themselves to an enormous breakfast. They were walking slowly towards the Facility with the professor, and he was about to tell Marjorie something of his work. He waited until Archie and Richard quietened down before explaining the importance of what he was doing.

'You see, *most* of what we do here is highly classified, but I can tell you a little of what we are trying to achieve. Broadly speaking, we're looking for an unlimited source of energy to meet the world's present and future requirements. As you may know, the demand for energy is increasing daily and at an accelerating rate as more countries such as China and India expand their economies. We are, in fact, using up all known oil and other valuable energy sources more rapidly than has been appreciated until now. Now the danger is that we are approaching a point when these resources will no longer exist, and nuclear energy is still proving to be unacceptable in many parts of the world.' He said nothing for a moment to let them think about what he had just said. As they approached the Facility he pointed towards the sun. 'If only we could harness a fraction of its energy, we would have a limitless source of power.'

Marjorie looked sceptical. She glanced towards the sun, shielding her eyes with her hand.

'I've read about that sort of thing before, Professor, but is it *really* possible?'

'I believe it is. For over twenty-five years I have devoted my life to this Facility and accomplishing just that.' The professor walked beside her, shading his eyes to look at the sun, then continued: 'We may well be on the threshold of a major discovery – hence the security you asked about.'

They arrived at the entrance to the Facility where he ushered them into a large reception area. Inside, one of several security guards welcomed them from a booth containing an array of monitors that surveyed various parts of the building.

'Good morning, Professor,' said the guard. 'I have your guests' tags ready.'

The professor nodded and took the ID tags he had arranged the day before, and passed them over to Marjorie and the boys.

'Just clip these on and follow me.'

He led them through a turnstile and walked to a metal door at the end of the room. He keyed in some numbers and placed the palm of his hand on an illuminated

panel next to the door. The door slid silently to one side to reveal a long narrow corridor.

From somewhere above them a high-pitched metallic voice announced: 'Please enter.'

Richard experienced a strange fluttery feeling in his stomach as he stepped, hesitatingly, into the corridor. He didn't know what it was, but something about the Facility made him feel strangely apprehensive. He was about to say something, when Archie shoved him forwards.

'Get a move on, Richard.'

'OK, OK, I'm moving, stop pushing!'

'Quiet, boys!' scolded Marjorie, turning to stare at them.

'Sorry, Marjorie,' said Archie, nudging Richard again.

They waited before being allowed to proceed through another metal door at the end of the corridor. Uncle John explained that each of them were being scanned by a hidden security identification process before the metallic voice would confirm their entry to the next room. After a few seconds, their IDs were confirmed and they walked through to a scene that made Archie and Richard stop and gasp in amazement. Nothing could have prepared them for the size of the room in which they now stood, even the size of the exterior belied what they saw before them.

The corridor had opened onto a wide terrace with a guardrail overlooking a vast cathedral-like interior with walls that plunged into the bowels of the earth. Above them the walls soared to a vaulted ceiling covering a complex so big that the place reminded Archie of an ant colony, with countless men and women going about their various tasks taking the place of worker ants. A large number of them, dressed in yellow coloured overalls, were sitting in front of rows of computer screens on a terrace several levels below them. Technicians in blue overalls, carrying odd-looking pieces of equipment, swarmed along the inner metal catwalks which circled a gigantic tyre-shaped cylinder as it rose up out of the depths of the room.

'Is that the *machine*?' Archie was spellbound as he watched the people below him go about their duties. 'I've never seen anything like this before.'

'It's gi ... normous!' said Richard. He was whispering, as if the machine was a great sleeping beast that might come awake at any moment.

The terrace gave the group a commanding view of the heart of the Facility and a network of catwalks criss-crossing the centre of the cylinder, where more technicians could be seen talking to a man wearing a red overall.

'What in heaven's name is it?' asked Marjorie.

'The technicians call it the DONUT – aptly named I think,' replied the professor, smiling, 'but what you see is only a fraction of the Facility. The rest is several levels below ground – this is just the tip of the iceberg.'

'Professor Strawbridge!'

The man wearing the red overall had called out as he dashed along the catwalk to join them.

'What is it, Ed?' asked the professor.

'It would look as if our problem has returned, Professor. One of the technicians has reported seeing some blue smoke on one of the lower levels.'

'Not again! What about the new test equipment – can't it help us trace the source?'

'Not so far,' said Ed. He was wearing an ID tag that described him as a Facility Engineer, and he looked upset at having to report a fault. 'Besides the smoke, everything appears to be perfectly normal.'

'This is frustrating, but unless I have a confirmed source, I will *not* abort the test.' The professor turned to Marjorie and the boys to explain. 'During the past few months every time we've attempted a full-scale test there have been reports of blue smoke near the DONUT, but when we investigate, there's never any sign of smoke or fire. It is totally mystifying.' He shook his head and turned back to his engineer. 'Ed, keep an eye on the monitors and call me immediately if anyone spots *anything* unusual. I'll take our guests across the catwalk to the visitors' centre for refreshments then I'll head down to the lower levels. If –'

Before he could finish, the professor heard someone shouting. He turned round to see Marjorie supporting Richard. He was slumped against the guardrail and had gone deathly pale as if he were about to faint.

'Is he all right?' he asked Marjorie.

'Yes, I think so.'

Richard straightened up. He pushed Marjorie away, looking a little embarrassed at the concerned faces around him. He mumbled: 'I'm OK.'

'Let's get him over to the visitors' centre. I think a cold drink might help,' suggested the professor.

They left Ed on the terrace and proceeded across the catwalk, with Archie and Marjorie both keeping an eye on Richard as they did so. He seemed to have recovered from whatever it was that had troubled him, when suddenly he stopped again to stare down into the centre of the DONUT.

'What is it now, Richard – are you feeling sick?' Archie peered down over the guardrail to see what it was that had caught his brother's attention. 'This is like being on the edge of a volcano. I hope it doesn't erupt,' he said jokingly.

'Maybe it's going to ... *look!*'

Richard pointed below the catwalk to a small cloud of blue, swirling, smoke-like mist rising up from the centre of the cylinder. The professor and Marjorie rushed to the guardrail to have a look.

'What is it, Professor?'

'I don't know, Marjorie, but it must be the problem I told you about. I've never seen anything like it before.'

He stared down at the blue mist that was growing larger and rising rapidly every second. Its centre had started to glow with a bright yellow light that made them turn their eyes away.

'Whatever it is, I think we'd better get off the catwalk!'

They were too late. A deafening explosion and a flash of light engulfed them. Archie suddenly found himself twisting and turning in mid-air inside a brightly lit tunnel, with the others tumbling around him. He saw them disappearing, one by one, into the mist, before he closed his eyes against the brightness of the light.

When he opened them again he was on his hands and knees and his head ached, but that started to ease as he rose, a little unsteadily, to his feet.

As Archie looked around, he was astonished to find that he had ended up in the middle of a forest glade, alone. The Facility and the others had, somehow, disappeared. And he was slowly becoming aware that someone, somewhere beyond the trees, was screaming, and that it sounded very much like Richard.

*

At the Facility, Chuck Winters rushed into the control room of the DONUT to find that nearly everyone was running around in a state of panic.

‘Ed, what the hell is going on?’

‘I don’t know, Chuck. One minute the professor and the girl with the kids were up on the catwalk – the next, they were gone!’

‘What do you mean? Gone?’

‘I can’t explain. The blue smoke appeared again, and then there was an almighty explosion – but the strange thing is, there’s no sign of any damage.’

Chuck looked at Ed as if he might be losing his mind. The engineer was clearly agitated as he pointed towards the catwalk.

‘Chuck, I’m telling you ... the professor and the others have completely disappeared!’

End of extract. Purchase your full copy of Timecrack at www.williamlongbooks.com