

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

JODI TAYLOR

ONE MILLION COPIES SOLD

SANTA GRINT

JODI TAYLOR



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About the Author



Jodi Taylor is the internationally bestselling author of the Chronicles of St Mary's series, the story of a bunch of disaster prone individuals who investigate major historical events in contemporary time. Do NOT call it time travel! She is also the author of the Time Police series – a St Mary's spin-off and gateway into the world of an all-powerful, international organisation who are NOTHING like St Mary's. Except, when they are.

Alongside these, Jodi is known for her gripping supernatural thrillers featuring Elizabeth Cage, together with the enchanting Frogmorton Farm series – a fairy story for adults.

Born in Bristol and now living in Gloucester (facts both cities vigorously deny), she spent many years with her head somewhere else, much to the dismay of family, teachers and employers, before finally deciding to put all that daydreaming to good use and write a novel. Over twenty books later, she still has no idea what she wants to do when she grows up.

By Jodi Taylor and available from Headline

TIME POLICE SERIES

DOING TIME
HARD TIME
SAVING TIME
ABOUT TIME

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S SERIES

JUST ONE DAMNED THING AFTER ANOTHER
A SYMPHONY OF ECHOES
A SECOND CHANCE
A TRAIL THROUGH TIME
NO TIME LIKE THE PAST
WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?
LIES, DAMNED LIES, AND HISTORY
AND THE REST IS HISTORY
AN ARGUMENTATION OF HISTORIANS
HOPE FOR THE BEST
PLAN FOR THE WORST
ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE
A CATALOGUE OF CATASTROPHE

SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT
LONG STORY SHORT

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S DIGITAL SHORTS

WHEN A CHILD IS BORN
ROMAN HOLIDAY
CHRISTMAS PRESENT
SHIPS AND STINGS AND WEDDING RINGS
THE VERY FIRST DAMNED THING
THE GREAT ST MARY'S DAY OUT
MY NAME IS MARKHAM
A PERFECT STORM
CHRISTMAS PAST
BATTERSEA BARRICADES
THE STEAM-PUMP JUMP
AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT
WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER?
WHY IS NOTHING EVER SIMPLE?
THE ORDEAL OF THE HAUNTED ROOM
THE TOAST OF TIME

TIME POLICE digital short

SANTA GRINT

ELIZABETH CAGE NOVELS

WHITE SILENCE

DARK LIGHT

LONG SHADOWS

FROGMORTON FARM SERIES

THE NOTHING GIRL

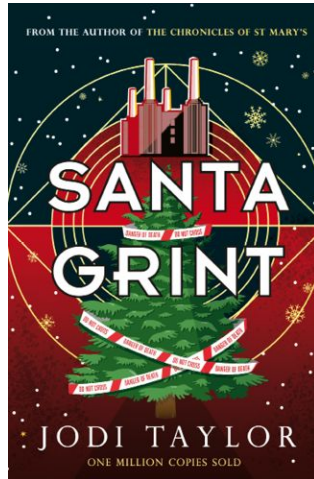
THE SOMETHING GIRL

LITTLE DONKEY (digital short)

JOY TO THE WORLD (digital short)

A BACHELOR ESTABLISHMENT

About the Book



It all begins when the Time Police hold their first Children's Christmas Party. Their most dangerous mission yet . . .

No good deed ever goes unpunished. Lt Grint succumbs to his softer side and soon lives to regret it. The combination of bubble universes, candy floss, a small boy, a toad named Mr Fluffy, Mount Fanboten, £6.5 million, and a love-struck Officer Lockland are all hard enough to believe, but imagine a situation so dire that only Officer Parrish can save the aforementioned Grint from a lengthy stay in prison. At least, he can – but will he?

And, most unlikely of all, has Commander Hay's long-suffering adjutant finally experienced the first faint stirrings of romance? Is such a thing even possible?

Roll Call

TIME POLICE PERSONNEL

Commander Hay	Has had a Brilliant Idea.
Captain Farenden	Unsuccessful reindeer obtainer. On the other hand, he does meet a kindred spirit. Watch this space . . .
Major Callen	Manages to avoid any direct involvement. Smart.
Major Ellis	Is not about to have the best day.
Lt Grint	It's all his fault. Everything is his fault. Even Jane thinks it's his fault.
Lt North	Reluctant enabler.
Officer Curtis	You can't teach children to eat jelly by numbers. I'm sorry, but you just can't.
Officer Rockmeyer	Failing to fulfil the function of four fully trained sheepdogs.
Lt Fanboten	Concussed but does have a mountain named after him so not all bad.
Officer Schultz	Ventured too close to the koi pool and never seen since.
Officer Oti	Dubious sleigh-bell duplicator
Officer Parrish	Member of the by now legendary but for all the wrong reasons Team 236. Phallic balloon creator.

Officer Lockland	Grint's partner in crime. Has a bit of a revelation in the garden shed.
Officer Farrell	In plain clothes again. Can be seen from space.
Miss Meiklejohn	Artificial snow manufacturer. Failed artificial snow deliverer.
Officer Kohl (Socko)	Reluctant Santa Claus.
Time Police helicopter pilot	Refuses to give his name for fear of retribution from the Union of Helicopter Pilots and Associated Trades.
Officer Hansen	Appearing in his alter ego of one-legged reindeer.
Officer Varma	Can hardly believe she's risked her life going out with Team 236. AGAIN.
Commander Hay's box of emergency tissues	A second outing!

MORE NORMAL PEOPLE

Tiffie	Sad. So sad. Her only friend is a toad.
Mr Fluffy	Aforementioned toad.
Fiona	<i>Princess</i> Fiona. And don't you forget it.
Simon	Going to the seaside as soon as his legs are mended. His mum says so.
Receptionist at the Little Petals Residential Childcare Community for Exceptional Children	Bit of a mouthful. No one gets it right.
Francis of Assisi	Who's she?
Raffy and Jugs	Not Brain of Britain material.
Ruth Wedderburn	Simon's mum. Illegal? Not illegal?

	Immaterial, really. Smallhope and Pennyroyal have her in their sights.
Lady Amelia Smallhope	Hello again!
Pennyroyal	Her alleged butler.
Raymond Parrish	Possibly beginning to regret his son's burgeoning sense of responsibility. His <i>expensive</i> burgeoning sense of responsibility.
Ms Steel	Instigator of the psychic link connecting all PAs throughout the universe. And benefits from a rather nice bottle of wine, as well.

Author note to self: write books with fewer characters in future.

Santa Grint

The story doesn't really begin here, but it's as good a starting place as any.

It was Captain Farenden's habit to withdraw to his own office and give his commanding officer a few minutes' peace at the end of their working day. On this occasion, however, and in anticipation of his commanding officer's reaction, he had carefully left their connecting door ajar.

Commander Hay closed her last file, shut down her data table, and reached for her very excellent coffee, freshly brewed in her very excellent new coffee machine which, for some reason never adequately explained, had been installed in Captain Farenden's office rather than her own. She switched on her screen. It was her habit to watch the early evening news broadcast – partly to keep herself up to date, but mostly to discover whether everyone else's day had been as bad as hers.

Closing her eyes, she sipped slowly, relishing the end of an unexpectedly peaceful day. The internal difficulties of last year, while not exactly melted away, had certainly retreated to a safe distance. For the time being. Life, she felt, had improved to the extent that, even after all this time, the unfortunate combination of the Time Police and the partial destruction of quite a large area of the formerly respectable London borough of Mile End no longer featured quite so prominently in the headlines.

Life, however, having lured her into a false sense of security, now prepared to pounce.

This news station liked to end the daily bulletin on a happy note. To brighten the unremitting gloom, they said. The *And Finally* snippet was carefully selected to imply that never mind all the crap just regurgitated for the benefit of the viewing public, there might – just might – be hope for the human race after all, that there was no need to go off and end it all just yet, and look at this adorable skateboarding duck.

Captain Farenden grinned to himself and waited.

‘And finally,’ chirped the newsreader. ‘They’re calling him *The Time Police Officer with a Heart*. In an organisation not known for its humanitarianism, one single Time Police Officer has surprised us all.’

Captain Farenden began an internal countdown.

Ten.

Nine.

The silence from Commander Hay’s office was absolute.

Seven.

Six.

The newsreader’s voice continued. Unfamiliar words such as ‘*Heart-warming . . . Compassion . . . Kindness . . .*’ filtered through the open door.

Four.

‘*Hope . . .*’

Two.

‘*Benevolence . . .*’

One.

‘While no one knows the name of this Good Samaritan, all indications are that the Time Police have finally taken on board the barrage of criticism provoked by their actions in Mile End last year – actions which resulted in widespread damage to property and threat to life – and are even now moving towards a more . . .’

And . . . Lift-Off.

‘*What the fire-truckity fire truck? Charlie?*’

Captain Farenden got up and carefully arranged his face. ‘You called, ma’am?’

‘No, I bellowed. What the fire-trucking . . .’

‘Can I gather you’ve just seen the news, ma’am?’

‘*The Time Police officer with a heart?*’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘I don’t employ people to have fire-trucking hearts. I employ them to be hard-nosed bastards dedicated to keeping the Timeline straight. Who is this pillock? They didn’t give his name.’

‘Well, ma’am . . .’

‘Have him shot and thrown into the river. And then fish him out and do it again.’

‘Well, ma’am . . . actually . . .’

‘Come on – spit it out.’

Captain Farenden paused. Unkind people might have said he was savouring the moment. ‘Lt Grint, ma’am.’

She sagged back in her chair and then recovered. ‘You had me going there for a moment, Charlie. Good one.’

‘No, ma’am. It was Lt Grint.’

She sat up again. ‘They said he was overcome with compassion.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Concerned with the welfare of those less fortunate than himself.’

‘It’s a news bulletin, ma’am. I don’t think they concern themselves overly much with facts.’

She reached for her paper knife. ‘Bring me Lt Grint. Now. I intend to close my eyes and when I open them again, I want to see him standing in front of me. With a more than adequate explanation.’

‘To be fair, ma’am . . .’

‘I have no intention of being fair, Charlie. Get him up here now.’

‘He’s in a briefing right at this moment, ma’am. If you could wait fifteen minutes . . .’

‘How the hell did this happen? I mean – Team 236 – yes. I wouldn’t put anything past those three idiots, but Grint . . .?’

‘Well, ma’am, you’ll remember, there was a fair amount of grief arising from the damage we did in Mile End.’

‘You mean when we displayed exceptional bravery and determination against overwhelming odds, and a heavily outnumbered Team 236 rescued a prominent member of those bottom-feeding, shit-spewing incompetents we’re supposed to regard as a functioning government?’

‘That is certainly one way of looking at it, ma’am. Many prefer to describe it as demolishing her house and those of her neighbours, destroying the road outside, damaging private vehicles and generally frightening the living daylights out of the honest, God-fearing citizens of Mile End.’

‘Didn’t we leave the sewers intact?’

‘We did, ma’am.’

‘Make a note, Charlie. Next time – take out the sewers first. Give them something to really complain about.’

‘So noted, ma’am.’

She sighed. ‘I still fail to see what any of this has to do with a certain recent news bulletin.’

‘Well, ma’am, again, if you remember, there was a meeting at the end of November . . .’

Cue flashback music and wavy images.

Commander Hay, her adjutant, Captain Farenden, and Majors Ellis and Callen were sitting around her briefing table. The Senior Officers’ meeting was drawing to a close. It had gone well. No one was dead. No one was even bleeding. Commander Hay carefully closed her last file. Major Ellis pushed back his chair.

‘Before you go, gentlemen . . .’

Recognising the signs of a commanding officer keeping the best to last, Major Ellis sighed, returned his seat to upright, closed his tray and prepared to assume the brace position. Commonly known as putting your head between your knees and kissing your arse goodbye.

His suspicions were well founded.

‘It would seem, gentlemen, that after Major Callen’s dramatic and slightly overenthusiastic helicopter rescue at Mile End earlier this year – and to try to persuade the government to bear its share of paying for the repairs – it has become necessary to improve our reputation a little. Project a more friendly, compassionate image. I intend, therefore, that next month – December – the Time Police will hold a children’s Christmas party.’

She sat back to await results.

Major Callen blinked. ‘What children? We don’t have any children. None of us do. It’s Number Seventeen in the *Big Boys’ Book of Time Police Rules and Regulations*. Didn’t we all take a solemn oath not to contaminate the gene pool with Time Police DNA?’

Commander Hay waved her hand vaguely. ‘Orphans, then. I believe there are some living almost next door.’

Unwisely, Captain Farenden intervened. ‘With respect, ma’am, you may be thinking of the dogs’ home.’

‘Well, it’s nearly Christmas so there are sure to be some orphans knocking around somewhere. Find them and bring them here for a Christmas party.’

Correctly foreseeing to whom this particular task would fall, Captain Farenden allowed himself a small sigh. ‘Do you have any particular age range in mind, ma’am? Babes in arms, preschool, junior?’ He paused and braced himself. ‘Teenagers?’

‘Good God, no. No one other than teachers or police officers voluntarily engages with teenagers.’

‘Parents?’ murmured Major Ellis.

‘Not if they can help it. No – go for the quite young, Charlie. They’re to be mobile and able to toilet themselves but not old enough to answer back or possess offensive weapons.’

Captain Farenden made a brief note. ‘Yes, ma’am. Will you be calling for volunteers to assist in these . . . festivities?’

‘I can’t think of a quicker way of emptying the building. Inform *all* personnel they will be expected to volunteer. Cancel everyone’s leave just to be on the safe side. Operational requirements aside, I want every officer you can muster. A traditional format, I think. Fancy dress. Games. With prizes. Jelly. Lots of jolly holly everywhere. Carols. Festive joy.’

Ignoring the blank looks on her colleagues’ faces, she added, ‘I’m sure you all know the sort of thing. Allocate everyone a specific task to ensure no one tries to wriggle out of their responsibilities. Inform everyone that biting children is probably against the law. Show them how to smile. Get the press involved. Lots of lovely publicity. Pictures of warm and fuzzy Time Police officers everywhere, all entering into the spirit of Christmas. And make sure everyone is well aware of the results of my displeasure.’

Observing the stunned expressions of Majors Callen and Ellis, Captain Farenden leaped into the breach, saying faintly, ‘Yes, ma’am,’ and shut down his scratchpad before things could get any worse.

Commander Hay gestured. ‘Off you all go, then.’

Three weeks later, the magnificent atrium had been cleared of all things Time Police – any temporal crisis would have to wait now until after the New Year – and glum-faced officers were less than enthusiastically pinning up hastily acquired Christmas decorations. There was a certain grumpiness in the air. This was *not* what they had signed up for. Many of them had refused to vacate their comfort zone and, far from wearing fancy dress, were still in uniform. As a concession to the season of goodwill and, more

importantly, having been commanded to be so – they were unarmed. Commander Hay had issued her first royal decree regarding the potentially fatal combination of small children and lethal weapons. Being gunned down by a bunch of excited ten-year-olds was not how she wanted the Time Police to be remembered.

In response to her second royal decree, officers had bitten the bullet and were wearing either Santa hats or reindeer antlers. Or, in the case of Lt Grint – neither.

Officer Curtis, burdened with a fine set of scarlet reindeer antlers, demanded to know what the fire truck all these crush barriers were for. ‘Are we building a barricade? Battersea is certainly the right place if so.’

Rockmeyer shook his head. ‘It’s to keep the little buggers away from the koi.’

A tinsel-bedecked Lt Fanboten peered into the depths of the award-winning, architect-designed koi pool with its spectacular waterfall. The proud centrepiece of the magnificently landscaped atrium. ‘I’ve always meant to ask – should koi carp have teeth?’

He was joined by Officer Curtis. ‘Actually, sir, we think they might be piranha.’

‘Ah – that would account for a lot. Did we ever find Officer Schultz?’

Luke Parrish, proud member of Team 236 – or *those idiots*, as they were professionally known – was balancing precariously on a wobbly stepladder and doing something cruel and unusual to balloons. His teammate, Jane Lockland, stood patiently at the bottom, festooned with useful implements and offering helpful, constructive and wholly disregarded advice.

Luke sighed as another balloon exploded under his gentle handling. ‘For fire truck’s sake, Jane. Why are we even here?’

‘Well, I’m here because I’m a nice person and I volunteered. You’re here because Major Ellis ordered you to be here in revenge for you giving him lip over . . .’ She paused. ‘Well, everything, really.’ She looked around. ‘I see your blonde from Logistics is here.’ She paused again. ‘Oh look – and there’s your brunette as well. This should be interesting.’

Luke applied himself again to his astonishingly phallic arrangement of balloons. ‘Calm yourself, Jane. I’m keeping them at opposite ends of the atrium. With luck, they’ll never know.’

Jane stared up at him. ‘You do know women talk to each other, don’t

you?’

‘Well, obviously, but if they’re not talking about *me* – which most women are for most of the time – then it’s just knitting patterns, or make-up, or fretting about what they can do to attract my attention.’

‘Go on,’ said Bolshy Jane. ‘Kick that ladder away and watch him split his skull open on the marble floor. You’d enjoy that and everyone deserves a treat at Christmas.’

Fortunately – or otherwise – she was distracted by Luke demanding to know why Matthew wasn’t there. ‘How did he get out of this?’

‘He didn’t. He and Mikey are setting up the artificial snow drop.’

‘Great idea. We bury the little buggers in artificial snow and then swear it was an accident. Love the thinking behind that one. Hey, look, your boyfriend’s here. He must be really keen. Or perhaps he’s just stopped in for a snack. You know – a couple of kids, lightly grilled. Just to keep him going until supper.’

‘I’m going away now,’ said Jane. ‘Good luck with the ladder.’

Lt Grint stepped out of the lift, took one look around and immediately tried to get back in again. His way was blocked by Commander Hay who had come to check on the progress of her brainchild. ‘Not so fast, Lieutenant.’

Grint gestured back over his shoulder. ‘I’ve just remembered something . . .’

‘No, you haven’t.’

‘Ma’am . . .’

‘Do I need to take out my gun and tell you to get on with it?’

‘Why does it have to be us?’ said Grint, seriously aggrieved at the injustice of it all. ‘The SAS are much nicer than we are and would do this so much better.’

‘Drawing my weapon in three, two, one . . .’

Alone and unarmed, Grint turned to face the foe.

Around him, officers for whom Ebenezer Scrooge simply hadn’t been trying hard enough were wrestling with tinsel, paper chains, golden stars and – despite being banned by the Geneva Convention – glitter.

An inadvertently sparkly Officer Rockmeyer demanded to know what he could possibly have done to deserve this.

Curtis shrugged. ‘Because it’s Christmas. You know – goodwill towards

all men.'

'What exactly does that mean?'

'It means we smile as we shoot people. Season of joy and all that.'

'I'm always joyful when I'm shooting people. I don't need Christmas for that.' Rockmeyer paused. 'Do you think Parrish knows his balloons look like giant scrotums?'

'Scrota.'

'What?'

'Scrota – plural of scrotum.'

'It's not.'

'It is.'

'How do you know?'

'Lt North told me.'

'Under what circumstances could you possibly be discussing scrotums with Lt North?'

'SCROTA, stupid. Not SCROTUMS. Oh, good afternoon, Commander.'

An hour later everything was ready. The atrium looked unfamiliarly Christmassy. Balloons hung festively from every surface capable of bearing their weight. Matthew tilted his head to one side and squinted. 'Is it me or do those balloons look like giant . . . ?'

'No,' said Jane quickly.

'It's just that if you squint . . .'

'Then don't squint.'

'Wow, will you look at the size of that,' said Bolshy Jane, squinting for dear life. 'Has he modelled it on himself, do you think?'

'I'm not even looking,' said Jane. 'My only consolation is that most of the dear little kiddies won't understand.'

'You don't have a lot to do with children, do you?' sighed Bolshy Jane.

Three long tables ran down the centre of the atrium, looking festive and bright, covered with red tablecloths adorned with Christmas trees and beaming Santas.

'Good idea – red won't show the blood,' said Bolshy Jane.

'Will you please shut up.'

The tables were laid with paper plates and cups all decorated with cartoon characters – most of whom Jane didn't recognise – together with plates of

sandwiches, sausage rolls, bowls of crisps, jugs of fizzy drinks, jam tarts, fairy cakes, mince pies, slices of Christmas cake, and bowls of quivering jelly in garish primary colours – not a piece of fresh fruit in sight.

‘Great,’ said Bolshy Jane. ‘We can send them all home with scurvy.’

A giant Christmas tree stood at one end of the atrium, sporting a red and white colour scheme, most of which, on closer inspection, turned out to be red and white Time Police ‘Do Not Pass This Point – Danger of Death – Scene of Crime’ tape, although someone with an artistic flair – Officer Curtis blushingly admitted his guilt – had worked it up into a really rather attractive display of bows and festoons.

A hastily assembled throne sat beneath the tree, surrounded by amateurishly wrapped presents. Girls’ presents in pink on the left, boys’ wrapped in blue on the right. The Time Police worldview is very traditional.

Almost unanimously, Officer Kohl – Socko to his friends – had been nominated as Father Christmas. The only two dissenting votes were from Officer Kohl himself – obviously – and Luke Parrish, who had nominated Lt Grint for this honour. Lt Grint had personally destroyed the ballot paper and only with difficulty been restrained from destroying Officer Parrish as well.

Father Christmas’s grand entrance was scheduled after games and food. Even the Time Police knew not to do things the other way around. Lacking access to any reindeer despite all his best efforts – and that was an afternoon Captain Farenden wouldn’t forget in a hurry – the Time Police would deliver Santa in their smaller helicopter. Sadly, the pilot had refused to wear antlers. Or dress as an elf. Or play Christmas carols over the loudspeaker as they landed, because, he said, he had his image to think of. Such actions would, he said, be regarded as bringing helicopter piloting into disrepute and subject him to disciplinary action by the Union of Helicopter Pilots and Associated Trades. When asked what sort of trade was associated with helicopter piloting, he had declined to reply. He and Father Christmas were currently in a holding pattern over Kew Gardens. They had, however, happily consented to their call sign being designated as Slay One.

Suspended from the ceiling high above, a number of cunningly slung tarpaulins held the Mikey-manufactured artificial snow which, according to its creator, would drift slowly and softly over the atrium, giving the whole scene a delightfully festive air. In this she had been ably assisted by Officer

Farrell, who had unaccountably failed to mention that a similar effort at St Mary's some years ago had unfortunately resulted in self-igniting snow, an unforeseen conflagration, and delighted children – because after some years' experience of annual Christmas parties at St Mary's, local children's expectations were high and rarely disappointed. The resulting inferno had been followed by mass evacuation and the spectacular arrival of the fire brigade, who had eaten all the mince pies.

Lt Fanboten tilted his head, listening to his com. 'The bus has arrived. They're heeeeeeeere.'

'How many?' enquired Ellis, noting that Major Callen appeared to have completely vanished.

'Only thirty, sir.'

Time Police officers who had cheerfully charged into quite minor skirmishes where they were outnumbered more than ten to one had drawn the line at putting themselves in a position where they were similarly outnumbered by small humans. A three-to-one approach had been favoured. In favour of the Time Police.

The doors opened to admit a very unmilitary straggle of small children, of varying sizes, shapes, gender and race. They halted uncertainly. The Time Police instinctively assumed Defensive Position Number Three. Both sides eyed the other.

They say that cats can unerringly pick out the one person who hates and fears them, and will then happily spend the entire day lovingly entwined around that person's neck. A similar gift is enjoyed by young children. Within seconds, a subgroup of two small humans had identified their prey and moved in.

Lt Grint stared down at the two little girls. It was very possible he had never seen so much pink in all his life.

'I'm Tiffie,' said the first one. 'I'm sad.' She held up something brown and warty. 'This is Mr Fluffy.'

'That's a toad,' said Grint, far out of his social depth but clinging to this one indisputable fact.

Tiffie clutched at Mr Fluffy, who appeared to be enjoying the process. 'He's my friend. My only friend.'

Grint had no difficulty believing a kid clutching a toad had few friends.

Another little girl tugged at his trouser leg. 'My name's Fiona. I'm a

princess.'

'Um,' said Grint.

Tiffie grinned gappily. 'Will *you* be my friend?'

Grint dragged his attention back to Tiffie. 'Um . . .'

His trouser leg was subjected to further assault. 'You have to call me *Princess Fiona*.'

'Um,' said Grint, desperately looking around for assistance.

None materialised. He was on his own in a sea of pink.

'Can you lift me up?'

Princess Fiona held up her arms.

'And me?'

Tiffie held up one arm. And a toad.

Unable to think of a good reason why not, Grint crouched and rose again, one pink-clad small human in the crook of each arm. And a toad.

Everyone in the Time Police mentally ditched images of a vomit-covered Major Callen as their favourite screen saver for something involving Lt Grint and a lot of pink. And a toad.

'Hey.'

On the grounds that his day couldn't get any worse, Grint looked down.

A small boy looked up at him.

'Um,' said Grint.

'I'm Simon.'

'Um . . .'

 Aware he was festooned with little girls – and a toad – Grint shrugged. 'No arms left, kid. Sorry.' And noticed, too late, that Simon was on crutches.

Simon shrugged back. Grint noticed that in addition to the crutches and the sullen expression, Simon hadn't bothered to remove his coat and woollen gloves.

'He's got bad legs,' announced Tiffie.

'Bad luck,' said Grint.

'Yeah,' said Simon.

Their conversation might have progressed further but the situation was taken out of both their hands as Grint found himself submerged in a tidal wave of pink questions.

Fiona pointed at the tree. 'What's that over there?'

'A Christmas tree.'

‘Why is it tied up?’

Grint sighed. ‘It’s decorated.’

Tiffie pointed to the barriers. ‘Why can’t we go over there?’

‘The fish will eat you.’

‘Do you like my dress?’

‘Um . . .’

‘Do you like my dress better than Fiona’s?’

‘*Princess* Fiona’s. And no, he doesn’t. Do you?’

‘Um . . .’

Simon was grinning at him. Mercifully, at that moment, the first game was announced. Musical Chairs. Tiffie and Princess Fiona were lowered to the floor. Grint was handed Mr Fluffy to hold. The music started up. The game began.

Lt Grint was not the only member of the Time Police to stand stunned. The competitive instincts of the under-elevens are very strong. At one point there was a pitched battle for one of the remaining chairs. The last little boy was eliminated and led away, weeping copiously. Princess Fiona and sad little Tiffie glared at each other over the final chair. Blood was in the air.

‘Do something,’ said Commander Hay, nudging Major Ellis.

He stared at her in horror. ‘I’m not going out there.’ He looked around the atrium, although what he could be seeking was unknown.

‘What are you waiting for, Major?’

‘I’m looking for North or Varma.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m a member of the weaker sex.’

‘Move it, Major.’

Major Ellis made an executive decision and strode into the arena, handed both little girls a prize and instructed Curtis to begin the second game and to be quick about it. Once again, both children and Time Police assumed battle positions.

Party Piñata was a success. Pin the Tail on the Donkey was not and made even more inroads into Time Police medical supplies than the infamous Mile End incursion. Which had involved a helicopter. And several rocket-propelled missiles.

Then came the three-legged race. At their request, and not without major misgivings, Grint lashed together what he suspected would be the

unstoppable combination of sad little Tiffie and Princess Fiona. It was only as Grint was depositing Mr Fluffy next to the jelly – for safekeeping, he told himself – that he remembered the third member of his new . . . for want of a better word . . . team.

Grint looked down at Simon. ‘You up for this?’

Simon looked down at his crutches and then up at Grint. ‘What do *you* think?’

‘Do you want a prize or not?’

Simon scoffed. ‘How?’

‘Trust me, kid. We’re going to win this. Come on.’

Without waiting to see if Simon followed on, Grint made his way to the starting line, where a harassed Rockmeyer was failing to fulfil the functions of four fully trained sheepdogs.

‘Um . . .’ said Rockmeyer, eyeing Simon’s crutches.

‘Hold these,’ said Grint, handing them to him.

‘Um . . .’ said Rockmeyer, but it was too late.

Officer Curtis was addressing them through the medium of a loudspeaker. ‘On your marks. Get set. Go.’

Watched by open-mouthed officers, Grint seized Simon, tucked him under one arm and galloped to the finishing line.

‘Well done, kid,’ he said, lowering Simon to ground level again.

Rockmeyer handed Simon back his crutches. ‘Great technique.’

The winning team was presented with a small cup by a grinning Commander Hay who, foreseeing a time when a little blackmail might prove useful, urged Captain Farenden to record this happy event.

Tiffie glared at Simon. ‘You cheated.’

‘Yeah, but the kid on crutches gets away with it every time.’ He looked up at Grint. ‘That was so cool.’

‘Hmm,’ said Grint, uneasily aware that some might not consider him a good role model for impressionable young people.

Tiffie tugged at his trousers again. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Grint.’

‘No, your first name?’

‘Lieutenant.’

Since Lt Grint suspected six-year-old girls possessed the interrogating skills of Officer Varma, he was greatly relieved when a bell rang

somewhere, and everyone traipsed off to eat.

Except Simon.

Grint looked down. 'You not hungry?'

'I . . .'

'What?'

'Need to go to the toilet.'

'Oh. Right. Over there.'

'Need someone to hold my crutches.'

Grint sighed. 'Come on.'

Entering the facility, Simon stared at the urinals, which had been installed to cater for the needs of men – most of whom were considerably over six feet tall – and which were, consequently, at near chin-height for an undersized ten-year-old.

Grint sighed again and lifted him to the appropriate elevation. Which should have solved the problem, but owing to a slight miscommunication, one of them emerged with wetter boots than when he had gone in.

Nor was that their only problem. They were the last to approach the tables and all the seats were taken. One of them by Mr Fluffy.

'I'll shift him,' said Grint.

'No, don't. She'll scream the place down and I'm not hungry anyway.' He looked around. 'How much longer, do you think? Before we can go home, I mean.'

Grint was surprised to find that someone was enjoying the afternoon even less than he was.

'Wait here,' he said, parking Simon perilously close to the koi. 'And for God's sake, don't put your hand in the water.'

He returned a minute later with an enormous plateful of food. Jelly jostled sausage rolls. Cakes balanced precariously on sandwiches.

'Wow,' said Simon. 'Are you allowed to do that?'

Grint was puzzled. 'It's on a plate. What more do you want?'

'Well, in the home, you can't have cake until you've eaten your bread and butter.'

Grint, whose only experience of orphanages was through the medium of *Oliver Twist*, was unsurprised to hear this.

'Just start at the top and work down,' he said. 'That's what I always do. And here's a Time Police tip – always eat dessert first.'

‘Why?’

Belatedly, Grint realised that *because you never know what might burst through the wall and rip out your guts before you get a chance to finish your meal* might not be entirely age-appropriate under these circumstances, and decided to go with the equally anarchic, but slightly less horrifying, ‘Why not?’

Simon nodded at this seemingly acceptable answer.

Grint contemplated the carnage currently occurring at the tables. No force in the world can withstand a pack of hungry under-elevens. Officers struggled to keep up with demand, but it was hopeless. In an effort to minimise the mess, Officer Curtis was attempting to persuade his charges to eat by numbers.

‘Right,’ he said, in what the Time Police would consider to be an officially encouraging tone. ‘On one – lift spoons . . . On two – no, not yet. Wait until I . . . OK, let’s try again, shall we? On one – oh, you already have . . . All right – moving on . . . On two – no, no, no, we’ve done that. That was on one . . . No, I’m not saying on one again. I’m saying we’ve done on one . . . Yes, I know you’re all holding your spoons. Let’s just . . . On two – take a spoonful of jelly and . . . well, never mind that – it’ll wipe off . . . Yes, I can see yours is green . . . No, it’s all the same . . . Yes, it is. Green tastes just the same as red . . . Yes, it *does*. Look . . . Why are you crying? . . . No, I’m not eating your jelly, I’m just showing you . . . Look – here’s more jelly. And it’s red . . . But you wanted red. Stop crying. Please . . . Look, just swap your jelly . . . With him . . . Yes, you . . . Because yours is green and she doesn’t like red any more . . . Right – everyone sorted? . . . No, don’t put down your spoons. No – definitely don’t eat it with your fingers . . . God, that’s gross – use a spoon, for God’s sake . . . Why are you crying? Why are you all crying?’

‘We’ll stay here, I think,’ announced Grint hastily, and they seated themselves on the low wall around the pool. ‘What do you want first?’

Simon considered. ‘Sausage roll.’

Grint handed him one and then wondered if he should also have brought plates, napkins, a knife, spoons and God knows what else. ‘You eating in those gloves?’

Simon handed them to Grint. ‘Can you hold these for me?’

Grint shoved them in his pocket. ‘Nice gloves.’

‘My mum gave them to me. Just before she went away.’

Grint frowned. His instincts told him this was an important piece of information, but Simon had closed his lips as if determined to say no more.

‘I thought you were an orphan.’

Simon shook his head. ‘I’m a temporary orphan. I’ve got a mum.’

‘Where is she?’

Simon shrugged. ‘Dunno. But she’s coming back. I know she is.’

In Grint’s childhood world, *going away* had meant either prison or death. Sometimes both. ‘When?’

‘Very soon. Because she’s taking me to the seaside. After my op, we’re going to see the sea.’

‘Op?’

‘To make my legs work properly. Then we’re going to the seaside. She promised. When my legs are better. I’ve never seen the sea. Have you? What’s it like? She said we’d go soon. To the seaside, I mean.’

The little voice went on and on. From one extreme to the other. From barely saying a word, it would now appear that Simon was unable to shut up. Grint, watching the big Time Police clock ticking away the slow seconds, opened his mouth to say, ‘Give it a rest, kid,’ then caught a glimpse of Simon’s face and changed what he’d been about to say. ‘Have another sausage roll, kid.’ And made the discovery that kids can talk and eat at the same time. If you didn’t mind flaky pastry going everywhere.

‘And she said if we had a pod, we could jump to when my legs were better.’

‘Really?’ said Grint, suddenly as focused as a gun dog on a plummeting pheasant.

‘Or a jetpack so I wouldn’t have to walk.’

Grint relaxed. ‘Or wings.’

Simon nodded. ‘That would be so cool.’ He eyed the enormous Time Police officer sitting alongside him. ‘Have you got wings?’

Grint shook his head with genuine regret.

After the games and food came the carols. Everyone was to assemble around the still-standing Christmas tree. The Time Police have a procedure for unfamiliar situations. Assemble your team, assess the situation, proceed accordingly. Grint therefore assembled his jelly-smeared team – including

Mr Fluffy – calculated the distance to the nearest exit, caught Commander Hay's eye, and sighed again.

The opening carol was 'Away in a Manger'.

'*Away in a manger,*' warbled Tiffie and Princess Fiona, channelling charming cherubs like champions.

'*No crib for a bed,*' rumbled Grint, causing Luke Parrish to edge behind the Christmas tree for a minute or two. Just to pull himself together again.

And then it was present time. The doors were flung wide.

Officer Rockmeyer, who had been rehearsing his line for the last week, inflated his diaphragm and prepared for his big moment. His attempt to discuss motivation and backstory with Officer Curtis had not gone well and so, at various intervals, his colleagues had been treated to:

'Oh. Goodness. I *think* I can hear someone important coming.'

'Oh. Goodness. I think I *can* hear someone important coming.'

'Oh. Goodness. I think I can hear *someone* important coming.'

'Oh. Goodness. I think I can hear someone *important* coming.'

'Oh. Goodness. I think I can hear someone important *coming*.'

Summing up his audience today, however, he made the wise decision to go with, 'OhgoodnessIthinkIcanhearsomeoneimportantcoming,' before someone was trampled.

This was the cue for Officer Oti to shake a Mikey-assembled contraption, supposedly in an attempt to simulate sleigh bells, although she had her doubts.

One of the coconut shells issued to Officer Hansen to simulate the clip-clop of reindeer hooves had suffered an unfortunate mishap. The subsequent and singular clop . . . clop . . . clop – which so resembled a one-legged reindeer using his last strength to drag himself home for a final, tragic glimpse of his loving family at Christmas – was so heartrending that several of the little kiddies wept, and even Officer Curtis suffered an unexpected lip wobble.

'The best thing about orphans is no parents to complain,' said Commander Hay, producing her box of emergency tissues and instructing a tiny tot to blow. There not being a great demand for tissues in the Time Police, the box had spent many years in the darkness of her bottom drawer alongside the emergency brandy. Which tended to have a much shorter and more exciting life cycle.

‘Ho. Ho. Ho,’ roared Officer Kohl, stunning thirty small children, their helpers and his colleagues into terrified silence.

Each child was duly presented to Santa, who demanded to know – in a manner modelled on the interrogation technique of Officer Varma – whether they’d been naughty or nice.

Every single child perjured their soul and swore they’d been nice, except for Simon, who scowled and said he’d been naughty, temporarily terrifying Father Christmas who, foolishly, hadn’t anticipated this response and had no back-up plan. It was later agreed he’d recovered well with an impromptu, ‘Never mind that, what would you like for Christmas, little boy?’

‘New legs so I can go to the seaside.’

‘Ho. Ho. Ho,’ said Socko desperately, handing Simon a present. Simon took it politely and limped away. Only Grint noticed he never opened it.

The final part of the afternoon was the snow, designed to fall gently on wondering upturned faces entranced by the magic of it all. And on the orphans, as well.

Mikey pulled out the remote and pressed the appropriate control. Sadly, one of the tarps snagged, thus causing a considerable amount of not-as-light-as-you-might-think snow to be deposited in one giant clump, lightly concussing Lt Fanboten, who had the misfortune to be standing beneath it at the time. Everyone cheered as he was stretchered away. Princess Fiona demanded they do it again.

And then the party was over. Slightly stuffed and sticky orphans were escorted off the premises. The tables were cleared away and battle-hardened Time Police officers drifted off for a stiff drink and a bit of a lie-down. The artificial snow was found to have solidified into an immovable mound that had, when mixed with the lifeblood of Lt Fanboten, welded itself to the floor. Where it remained until April. Officers simply worked around it. The formation of a new ski division was mooted on the grounds it was a pity to waste such a wonderful opportunity. Someone – Luke Parrish – planted a small flag on the top, and there it remained until the day Lt Fanboten – possibly seeking revenge – lost patience with continually having to divert around this seemingly immovable obstruction, opened fire with his blaster and Mount Fanboten – as it had become known – melted away. Which was both good and bad. Good in that the Time Police had a large portion of their

atrium back again, and bad because the stink of burning snow was so pungent they had to close the building down for the rest of the day while it was dealt with.

The New Year came and went. Lt Grint – as so many had done before him – formed a series of New Year’s resolutions. The first of them – not kicking the living shit out of Luke Parrish at least once a day – seemed so doomed to failure that he couldn’t be bothered to waste any time on it and so moved on to the second – a daily run around Battersea – something on which he embarked with enthusiasm all through January, February, and a good part of March, as well.

The weather warmed. Daffs bloomed. The trees were covered in a greenish fuzz and Lt Grint, rummaging through his wardrobe one day, discovered Simon’s forgotten gloves still stuffed in his pocket. He stared at them for a long while, then picked up the gloves, put on his jacket and went out.

He must have run past it nearly every day and never noticed it before. A large, shabby building set back from the road. So bleak and forbidding was the exterior he had automatically assumed it was either an ex-nuclear bunker or a religious establishment of some kind dedicated to the worship of one of the less forgiving deities. Which didn’t narrow the field much.

Such gardens as were visible weren’t untidy, but certainly bore the signs of more than their fair share of wear and tear. There were scuffed patches in the grass, a knotted rope hung from a tree branch, and there wasn’t a single flower in sight. A battered sign by the gate informed him – in very small lettering, so as to get it all in – that he was standing outside the Little Petals Residential Childcare Community for Exceptional Children. Grint remembered Simon and his crutches. Tiffie and her only friend, Mr Fluffy. Fiona insisting she was a princess. He looked up at the blank windows and chickened out.

And again the next day.

On the third day, after work, he planted himself in Jane’s path and suggested a stroll through the park. Puzzled but compliant, Jane changed out of her uniform and accompanied him.

That he had a destination in mind was apparent, but she said nothing. Not even when they found themselves outside the Little Petals Residential

Childcare Community for Exceptional Children.

‘Oh,’ said Lt Grint, in apparent surprise. ‘Look.’

Jane obeyed. ‘Isn’t that where . . . ?’

‘Yes,’ said Grint. ‘And I still have Simon’s gloves. He will need those. I must return them.’

Jane cast him a thoughtful glance but agreed that yes, now that winter was over, Simon would need his gloves back and Grint should definitely return them.

The reception area-cum-administrative office was marginally more cheerful than the outside. Accustomed as she was to the Time Police colour scheme of vibrant beiges and greys, Jane halted just inside the door, her eyeballs assaulted by every colour of the rainbow. Reds, blues, yellows and greens were everywhere. Jungle animals stalked the walls, peering suspiciously through once emerald-green foliage and scarlet flowers. By the state of them, the animals, flowers and foliage had been there for some considerable time. The walls were so heavily pockmarked that Jane would not have been surprised to hear a battle had been fought on the premises. The floor covering had been selected for its hard-wearing properties and would certainly skin alive any orphan unfortunate enough to fall on it. A hard bench ran along one wall, with a box of very shabby toys pushed underneath. These were toys at the very end of their life cycle. And the room was chilly. Jane suspected the heating was on as seldom as possible.

A pair of scuffed wooden doors led to what Jane suspected was the orphanage proper.

A well-wrapped woman was seated at the reception desk, typing busily at an ancient laptop. Jane noticed her fingerless gloves. Six or seven filing cabinets crowded the walls. An antique photocopier stood in the middle of the room where it could cause maximum inconvenience to anyone attempting to access the cabinets. Everything was spotlessly clean but cramped. Jane suspected the Little Petals Home for Residential Children, or whatever it was called, had long since outgrown its home.

The receptionist looked up and smiled. Her name badge read *Emily Caldicott*. ‘Good evening. I’m afraid we’re closing in a moment. Do you have an appointment?’

Grint pulled out his ID. ‘Time Police.’

She glanced at it and continued typing. ‘Yes?’

Grint paused. In his experience, the magic words *Time Police* nearly always produced some sort of effect – either good or bad – and the situation would proceed accordingly. He'd never actually encountered disinterest before, and his repertoire of follow-up phrases was correspondingly slim.

'Gloves,' prompted Jane.

'Yes.'

Silence followed.

'Gloves?' said the receptionist.

'Yes.' There was another pause. Grint remembered his words. 'We held a Christmas party.'

The woman stopped typing. 'Oh yes – now I remember. You did. Did one of the children leave their gloves behind?'

'Simon,' said Grint.

'Oh, yes. He would. Such a naughty boy.'

'Not his fault,' said Grint. 'He gave them to me to hold and I forgot them. I've brought them back.'

'How kind. Thank you.' She paused, probably expecting Grint to produce said gloves.

He shifted uneasily. 'I hope he didn't get into trouble for losing them.'

She sighed. 'Young Simon is in so much trouble these days, lost gloves wouldn't make the slightest difference.'

She held out her hand for the still-non-appearing gloves.

Grint frowned. 'He was having an operation.'

'Yes, that's right.'

Grint frowned again, seemingly at a loss what to say next.

Jane intervened. 'I hope everything went well.'

'Yes, yes. He recovered very nicely.'

'Well, that's . . . nice.' Jane turned to go.

Grint didn't move. 'How did he enjoy his trip to the seaside?'

'What trip was that?'

'He told me he was going to the seaside. With his mother. After his operation. He didn't actually talk about anything else the whole time.'

The woman's face tightened. 'She never came for him. And now . . . if you don't mind, I have to help serve up supper. We're somewhat short of space so we have two sittings.' She made gestures towards the front door.

Grint remained exactly where he was. Jane could have told her she was

wasting her time. 'What happened? To his mother, I mean.'

'She never turned up,' repeated the woman. 'As far as I know, she hasn't even contacted him.'

Jane was horrified. 'You mean she just . . . ?'

'Abandoned him. Yes.'

'But he did have his operation?' persisted Jane.

'Yes, he did.' She paused. There was obviously more.

'But . . . ?' said Jane.

The woman pursed her lips. 'He doesn't try. Doesn't try to help himself. Doesn't try to get on with the other children. Doesn't try at anything, really. He's always been a difficult boy, but now . . . he's rude and sullen and won't make any sort of effort at all. The other children won't speak to him. We're looking at other . . . more suitable facilities for him. Ones better suited to his needs.'

'His needs,' said Grint flatly. 'All he needs is his mother and a trip to the seaside. I appreciate you can't magic up his mother, but surely someone could have taken him on a day trip and . . .'

The woman bridled. 'We do have other children here besides Simon, you know.'

'Of course you do,' said Jane, elbowing Grint in the ribs before they could add the distinction of being thrown out of an orphanage to their service records.

Grint surprised everyone. Including himself. 'I'll take him.'

'What?'

'I'll take him since you can't be bothered.'

She flushed. 'It's not a case of not being bothered.'

'Good. Trot him out tomorrow and I'll take him to . . .'

'I can't release a child to you.'

'Why not?'

'Well, for a start, I don't know who you are.'

'I'm a Time Police officer,' said Grint who frequently found this sentence simply melted away most of life's little difficulties.

'I don't care if you're Francis of Assisi.'

Grint had no idea who she was.

'Now, if you don't mind, I need to lock the doors and help get the children ready for their supper.'

Grint regarded her steadily.

‘Look, we’re all sorry for Simon. We don’t know where his mother is. If she doesn’t show, then there’s nothing we can do except try to help Simon as best we can. And we have tried. Are trying. He’s hurt and angry and we’re doing our best for him, but our other children have needs too.’

‘We understand,’ said Jane quickly. ‘It’s just such a sad story.’

‘One of many,’ Emily Caldicott said and, deploying a technique the Time Police themselves might have envied, herded them firmly towards the doors. Seconds later Grint and Jane found themselves on the other side, listening to the bolts being thrown. A few seconds after that, the lights went out.

‘Come on,’ said Jane, leading him back into the street.

‘You go on. I’m going for a walk.’

‘No, you’re not,’ said Jane firmly. ‘You’re thinking of doing something stupid and you’ll be caught and then Simon will never go to the seaside.’

Grint looked down at her.

‘Well, you’re planning something,’ she said. ‘I can tell.’

Grint shifted his weight. ‘No, I’m not.’

Jane made a noise indicative of disbelief.

‘I’m not.’

Jane folded her arms.

Grint sighed. ‘It was just a thought.’

‘It’s called kidnapping and people don’t like it.’

‘I would have brought him back.’

‘You’d be finished in the Time Police. After you came out of prison.’

Grint retreated to his default state and said nothing.

‘These people are professionals. They know what they’re doing.’

Reluctantly, Grint nodded.

‘And his mother might still come back.’

‘Yes.’ Striving for the appearance of a man finally convinced by these compelling arguments, he said, ‘Shall we go and get something to eat?’

Grint was very thoughtful on his return to TPHQ. Fortunately, since he was habitually taciturn, no one even noticed, let alone commented. Jane was initially suspicious, but a couple of slightly hairy assignments – during which things had gone as badly as things normally went for Team 236 –

diverted her attention and the matter of Simon and his trip to the seaside slipped to the back of her mind.

Not so Lt Grint, who, after nearly a fortnight of careful thought, made his way to the Records section and Lt North, where he made his requirements known and braced himself.

North surveyed him for a disconcertingly long moment. Grint reminded himself he had seniority and technically outranked her and that he was a Time Police officer and therefore afraid of no one. Except, possibly, Lt North. And, now he came to think of it, Officer Varma. Not forgetting Commander Hay, of course. Other than that – absolutely no one.

‘Just to be clear,’ said North. ‘You want me to trace a woman – name and address unknown – mother of Simon – surname unknown – who disappeared from an unknown location on a date also unknown.’

‘Yes,’ said Grint, pleased to find his instructions had been so clear. With so little to go on, he had worried there might be a problem. ‘How long do you think it will take?’

‘A year – perhaps two.’

‘Oh,’ said Grint, taken aback. ‘Well, that’s . . .’ Just in time, he remembered Lt North’s habit of shooting people just to make her point, and changed what he had been about to say. ‘. . . Disappointing.’

‘Do you have anything else for me to go on? With which assignment is this connected? Perhaps I can pick up something from there?’

‘Um . . .’ said Grint.

She fired up her data table. ‘Just the reference number will do.’

‘Um . . .’ said Grint.

North stared. ‘Are you asking me to do this off the books?’

‘No,’ said Grint defiantly, and very wisely left it at that.

‘I’m sorry – I can’t. If you had more for me to work with, I might be able to do something, but at the moment I wouldn’t know where to start, especially since I wouldn’t be able to conceal my enquiries among our day-to-day stuff. Not that I would need to do so, after your convincing assurance this is all completely above board.’

Grint’s shoulders slumped. And then unslumped. ‘The Christmas party.’

‘This Simon came to the party?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that’s better. I can access the security clearance list for his surname.’

That's going to make a big difference.'

'I'll come back in an hour.'

'You'll come back when I tell you to.'

'How long?'

'As long as it takes. Your time will be best spent acquiring a gift appropriate to the illegality of what you've asked me to do. Now go away.'

Two days later, he found a handwritten note in his pigeonhole. Good. No electronic trail. Just a name and address.

Ruth Wedderburn. Last known address – 4 Marine Terrace. Rushby.

At last – things were really looking up. Two problems solved at the same time. He could combine reuniting Simon and his mother with the long-awaited trip to the seaside.

What could possibly go wrong?

The Time Police are not overgenerous with high days and holidays. Since very few officers are encumbered with friends and family, this is not usually seen as a problem. Jane's actions, on finding herself with free time, were usually to tidy her room, check over her uniforms and, if time permitted, go out and enjoy a little personal shopping in the sunshine.

Today, however, was a beautiful spring day, and to spend all of it inside would be a sin – Jane's ideas of sin were characteristically moderate – so she picked up her bag and exited TPHQ. Entering the nearby underground station, deliberately designated Terminal Time Police to discourage inadvertent disembarking, she used her ID to obtain the free travel to which she was entitled and stepped on to the escalator.

A very familiar figure stood some ten steps below her. She opened her mouth to call his name and wave but just as she did so, he turned his head and spoke to someone concealed by other commuters. Someone very much shorter than the other commuters.

Simon.

Jane's heart grew cold. He hadn't . . . Surely he hadn't . . . He couldn't possibly be so . . .

Alas – he could and he had.

Lt Grint and Simon stepped off the escalator together and headed towards the platform. Jane abandoned all thoughts of shopping and followed on, easing herself through the crowd. If she could somehow intercept them . . .

use the time before the next train turned up to persuade them to return . . . before any real harm was done . . . while everything could still be explained away . . .

Sadly for these sensible plans, the train pulled in as she emerged on to the platform. The crowd surged forwards and Jane lost sight of them both. She jumped into the carriage anyway, craning her neck for the very distinctive shape of Lt Grint, who had made his way down to the other end. Jane grabbed a handy seat that gave her a good view of him, mentally apologising to any pregnant women in the carriage, and never took her eyes off either of them.

She couldn't get any closer – people were embarking and disembarking at every station. Even when they changed at Tottenham Court Road, the crowd was too great for her to reach them. She would have to wait until she could grab them at the end of their journey, somehow dissuade them from whatever madness the two of them had planned, and return them – Simon in particular – whence they'd come. They could say they'd found him wandering in the park. Or something. Anything. Jane was quite astonished to find she was prepared to lie like stink to protect Lt Grint. And Simon, obviously. The truth could only lead to Grint being dishonourably discharged, arrested, imprisoned, and possibly a guest appearance on the sex-offenders' register. He was ruining his life. What the fire truck did he think he was playing at? She was surprised at the hot anger and panic roiling around inside. Grint, of all people.

She followed them off the train at Paddington and caught up with them before they could access the hyperloop platform.

'Hey.'

Grint was horrified. 'Jane?'

Jane went straight to the point. 'What the f— on earth do you think you're doing?'

'Nothing,' said Grint, too surprised by her sudden appearance to think of an acceptable lie. Actually, he wasn't sure there was an acceptable lie. Not that the truth – *removing a small boy from his place of residence to take him to the seaside for the purposes of pleasure* – was any sort of improvement. On balance, he'd stick with 'nothing'.

'Are you insane?'

'No,' said Grint, pleased to be able to answer this one truthfully.

‘You have to take him back this very moment and just pray no one has noticed.’

‘They won’t,’ said Simon with confidence. ‘They’ll just be pleased I’m not hanging around moping or winding up the other kids. Believe me, it’ll be hours before anyone notices I’m gone. And even then, they’ll just think I’ve wandered off round the park to see the parrots and the peacocks again.’

Jane struggled to regroup. ‘Why would they think that?’

‘Because that’s what I’ve been doing for the last week. So people would get used to me not being around.’

Jane wheeled on Grint. ‘You *planned* this?’

‘Well . . . yes . . . of course we did. Planning is the most important stage of any operation and . . .’

‘*Not in this instance.*’

Grint could only remain silent in the face of such folly.

Jane tried to calm down a little.

‘You have to take him back. Simon, you have to go back.’

‘No,’ said Simon simply.

Jane couldn’t decide which of them to shake first.

‘Simultaneously?’ suggested Bolshy Jane.

Wild ideas galloped through Jane’s mind. Should she scream? Attract attention? Make a scene? She could accuse them of trying to kidnap her. That would certainly get all of them shunted somewhere out of public view. Once there, she could claim it was all a misunderstanding and she was Grint’s girlfriend . . .

‘You *are* Grint’s girlfriend,’ reminded Bolshy Jane, exasperated.

. . . And then she could tell them the whole thing was just a silly row and the authorities would send them all home – embarrassed but probably unarrested.

‘Not your best idea, sweetie,’ said Bolshy Jane, and Jane had to admit it wasn’t.

‘Actually,’ continued Bolshy Jane – Jane made a mental note to visit MedCen – should she ever again have that opportunity – and request medication to make the voices go away. Or, failing that, earplugs – ‘Actually, sweetie, your best course of action might be to let them go. The chances are that Grint will be able to get Simon back unnoticed. Probably. Perhaps. And even if he can’t, the home won’t want the scandal of people

knowing you can just walk in and scoop up an orphan any time you like. They're not fashion accessories, you know.'

'I think you should go with them,' said Wimpy Jane. Jane was completely unsurprised the voices in her head had started ganging up on her. Why wouldn't they?

'And why would I go with them?'

'Chaperone.'

She hadn't thought of that.

'We need to go,' said Grint. 'Our train's due.'

They both looked at Jane. Who looked back. Crunch time. What should she do?

Everything in her power to prevent Grint ruining his life was the answer to that one.

She looked again at their faces and groaned. Fire-trucking hell.

An hour and a half later, they alighted at Rushby. It was a pretty station. Tubs of bright flowers had been placed around the entrance and a nearby plaque proudly announced the station had been awarded Best of Class in its category for the third year running.

Jane considered fainting. Grint would pick her up – she hoped – and she could claim she was too ill to go on. Surely then he'd escort her home again.

'I wouldn't bank on it,' said Bolshy Jane darkly.

Simon disappeared into the gents' toilets and Jane seized the opportunity to interrogate Lt Grint as to his intended plan of action.

'So, he doesn't know his mother's here,' she said when he'd finished.

Grint shook his head. 'No. I thought if she wasn't – or if she'd moved on – or something – then . . .'

'Yes?'

Grint shrugged. 'At least he'll have seen the sea.'

Bolshy Jane rolled her eyes.

Any further discussion was prevented by Simon appearing from the toilet and raring to go.

The station was situated at the top of the town. They stood on the pavement and looked at the award-winning view.

'I can see the sea,' shouted Simon. The first signs of excitement Grint had

ever seen in him. ‘Look – there’s the sea. Wow – it’s so big.’

It’s such a lovely day, thought Jane in despair. Had it been raining cats and dogs, she might have been able to persuade them to come home. She went to say something to this effect and then caught the expression on Simon’s face. He was still the sad, pale child she remembered, but today his eyes shone with excitement and anticipation. Only a monster would deprive a little boy of his first sight of the sea. She could faint later.

And it was indeed a beautiful view. The sun sparkled on the bright blue sea. A few boats with brave red sails scudded about in the water. Fishing boats were clustered in the pretty harbour, more or less enveloped in a crowd of screaming seagulls. A gentle sea fog misted the horizon. She couldn’t see much of the town itself, only lots of red roofs, bright in the sunshine.

The streets were very steep and many of them were narrow and cobbled. Grint looked down at Simon. ‘Let me know if you can’t manage.’

It was very apparent Simon would drop down dead rather than admit such a weakness.

Jane sighed. Apart from them both breaking the law in a very specific and limited way, there was always the possibility Simon might not be physically ready for this and they could be setting back his recovery. Or causing a relapse. Suppose he slipped and broke one of his newly mended legs. What then? And she couldn’t even think about how to handle his possible reunion with his mother.

Grint turned to look at her over Simon’s head and smiled. ‘Thank you for coming.’

Jane refused to be won over. ‘We will be discussing this for an hour or so at the first opportunity.’

Grint nodded gloomily. ‘I thought we might.’

They made their way slowly through the streets. Now that she was here, Jane would have liked to peer in one or two shop windows – after all, shopping was what she had set out to do this morning – but it was very obvious Simon wanted to get down to the sea as quickly as possible.

‘I can smell it,’ he declared, his face flushed with excitement.

‘Or flushed with sunstroke,’ muttered Wimpy Jane. ‘Or flushed with fever because he’s done too much too soon. We really shouldn’t be doing this.’

‘Too late now,’ said Bolshy Jane cheerfully. ‘Ooh – is that candyfloss?’

Jane was consulting a local You Are Here map. Marine Terrace wasn't far. They had plenty of time. And it put off the moment . . .

She and Simon both stared meaningfully at the candyfloss stall and then back at Grint, who sighed and disappeared towards the stall while Jane and Simon wandered along the seafront to look down on the beach below. They could hear the soft hiss of the waves. Gulls paddled at the waterline. The breeze tugged at Jane's hair. She was aware that with only very little encouragement, she might enjoy herself.

'Can I go for a paddle later?' asked Simon.

'Don't see why not,' said Jane, coming to the conclusion that one of them at least should get some fun out of the day before the axe fell.

'Cool,' said Simon. 'I've never paddled before. Or had candyfloss.'

'Neither have I,' admitted Jane.

Bolshy Jane laughed. 'Sweetie, if we stop to list the many, many things you've never experienced, it'll be time to go home before we've finished. You've never had candyfloss, you've never paddled, you've never had a boyfriend before, you've never had . . .'

'Enough,' said Jane.

Lt Grint, meanwhile, arriving at the head of the queue, requested three sticks of candyfloss. Carefully – and not entirely convinced the stuff didn't have flesh-eating properties – which would account for the colour – he made his way back to his travelling companions.

Who were already eating candyfloss.

'Well, this is very generous of you,' said Jane, pulling off a huge lump with her fingers, 'but we haven't finished the first lot yet and I don't think Simon should have so much sugar.'

Grint looked at Simon who had candyfloss in his hair, his ear, between his fingers and down the front of his hoodie. It must have taken him a good few minutes to get himself in that state. And then he looked back at the three sticks of candyfloss in his hand and Jane and Simon polishing theirs off in front of him.

'Jane, where did you get that?'

Jane stopped eating, looked at her own candyfloss, then at Grint, then at the candyfloss he was holding, then at the stall, and then back at Grint again.

'From you. You bought it.'

‘No, Jane, I didn’t.’

‘You *did*.’

‘When?’

‘About five minutes ago. You had three sticks of the stuff. You handed Simon his, and said, “Don’t get it all over yourself and, more importantly, don’t get it all over me.”’

‘Then what did I do?’

Jane was silent for a long time and then said quietly, ‘You walked back over there.’ She pointed to the vendor.

‘Then what happened?’

She frowned. ‘I . . . don’t know . . . I . . . You were standing here. With more candyfloss.’

Grint made to set off back to the stall. Jane caught his arm in alarm.

‘No, no, wait. Stay here. I don’t think you should go anywhere. Stay with us.’

Grint dumped his candyfloss in a nearby bin. Jane followed suit with hers. Simon showed absolutely no inclination to do anything so ridiculous.

Grint and Jane looked at each other. ‘OK,’ said Jane. ‘You’re scaring me now.’

‘I’m scaring myself as well.’

‘I’m not scared,’ said Simon, a long strand of pink stuff hanging from his cheek. He looked like an amateur snake whose skin-shedding had not gone quite according to plan.

Grint edged himself closer to Jane, who in turn, nudged Simon into the space between them and took his hand. ‘Physical contact at all times,’ he said.

Jane nodded. ‘Do you think . . .’

‘I don’t know. It might be a natural Time fault. You do get them occasionally, left over from the Time Wars, but I’ve never heard of anything in this area before. Or – and this would be my first choice – someone’s up to something, temporally speaking. We should check this out.’

‘No, we should leave.’

‘Why?’

Jane indicated Simon.

‘No,’ said Simon firmly. ‘We should definitely stay and check it out. Here. By the sea. And you can buy me another candyfloss. Or a hot dog.’

‘Kid, you’ll be ill.’

Simon grinned pinkly. ‘Yeah.’

‘We should call it in,’ said Grint.

‘As soon as we do that, they’ll know where we are,’ said Jane.

Simon finished the last of his pink fluff and lobbed his stick into the bin, at the same time eyeing the discarded candyfloss speculatively.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ said Jane warningly.

Simon shook his head. ‘No, listen. We should definitely check it out. Whatever it is. Cos then you’ve got a reason to stay here. You’re investigating. And if you solve it, then you won’t be in trouble, will you? See, no downside.’

Grint stared at him. ‘Do you know anyone called Parrish?’

‘No – don’t think so. Do you?’

Jane drew Grint slightly aside. ‘Look, there’s an easy way out of all this. Let’s take Simon to his mother. She can ring the home and tell them he’s safe with her. No one’s going to read anything sinister into your actions if the first thing you do is hand him over to his mother – *probably* won’t read anything sinister into your actions – and once Simon is with her, *then* we can investigate this anomaly, sort everything out, and hope it goes a long way towards mitigating our sins.’

Grint smiled slightly. ‘Thank you for calling them *our* sins.’

‘You said Simon has no idea his mum might be here?’

‘No, haven’t mentioned it – just in case she’s moved on again or something. I thought we could take a casual stroll, knock on the door and see what happens. Simon’s never lived here so he won’t be suspicious.’

‘Suppose she doesn’t want to know? Suppose she has actually abandoned him?’

‘I’ll go first and check things out.’

Jane nodded. ‘OK. You tell him now while I try and clean him up a little. This pink stuff is really sticky.’

Jane produced a tissue and scrubbed as Grint leaned against the railings and endeavoured to manage expectations. ‘Listen, kid – see those steps? Yeah, the steep ones. We thought we’d take a walk up there and look at the cottages at the top.’

‘Then can I have a hot dog?’

Grint shrugged. ‘Yeah, why not?’

Marine Terrace was a tiny row of fishermen's cottages set halfway up the towering cliffs and separate from the town. Simon held tightly to Lt Grint's hand as they tackled the steep steps. Interesting choice, thought Jane, trying not to pant.

Number Four was, astonishingly, the fourth cottage along. Very bright and cheerful with its painted cream walls and blue door and windows, but somehow impersonal. A holiday let, thought Jane.

She halted and stared. 'That's a little worrying.'

Grint nodded. 'It is. Stay here.'

The front door was standing wide open. There might be nothing sinister in that, but nevertheless, Grint approached with caution and tapped politely.

Jane eased Simon behind her and took up a position a few yards away.

Grint stepped inside, straight into a tiny front room with an old-fashioned black fireplace. Shelved alcoves stood to either side. They were empty. There were very few personal items in the room and some of them were on the floor. A small table near the door had been overturned.

Grint frowned. Had there been a struggle? Or had someone been in a hurry to leave and knocked it over on the way out? He trod silently into the kitchen. Stairs led up to the bedrooms. Turning back, he gestured to Jane, still waiting near the front door.

'I'm going to check out upstairs. Wait inside until I give the word.'

Jane nodded.

Standing just inside the door, they listened to Grint's heavy footsteps overhead, crossing from room to room and then back down the stairs again.

Simon looked up at Jane. 'What's happening?'

'We're not sure,' said Jane. 'Let's just wait, shall we?'

Grint reappeared, holding something. He crouched in front of Simon, which brought their eyes to more or less the same level.

'Simon – is this you?' He held out a small, crumpled photo. A younger Simon sat next to a young woman with short, bubbly curls and Simon's eyes.

Simon's mouth dropped open. Slowly he reached out and touched the photo. 'That's my mum. And me. She keeps this in her handbag. In her purse. Next to her driving licence.' He stared at Grint. 'Does this mean my mum lives here?' He looked past Grint at the toppled table. 'Is she . . . ? What's happening? Where's my mum?'

‘She looks lovely,’ said Jane reassuringly. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Ruth. Has something happened to my mum?’

‘We don’t know,’ said Jane, gently taking the image. ‘Let’s go back outside and you can tell me all about her and then we can start looking.’

Grint stood up. ‘The important thing is not to get upset. She wouldn’t like that. All right?’

Simon stared up at him, his eyes huge.

‘You shouldn’t worry too much, kid. I’m wondering if your mother bumped into the table and knocked it over. Perhaps she hurt herself and she’s gone to the doctor.’

‘But the front door was open,’ said Simon, his lip quivering.

‘She was in a hurry to get to the surgery, I expect. The thing to do now is to be brave. I know you can do that because the lady at the home was telling us about you. Yeah, I know you’re a bit different from the other kids, but that’s good. And well done for not being what people expect you to be. Sometimes you just have to say to people, “No, this is how I am. Live with it.” And after a while, they will leave you alone.’

Jane could easily imagine Grint’s childhood being one of solitary defiance.

Simon nodded and reached for the image again. Grint took Jane aside.

‘Two bedrooms – both occupied,’ he said quietly. ‘Women’s stuff in one – men’s shaving stuff in the bathroom. Three toothbrushes. No signs of a struggle upstairs. No blood.’

‘OK,’ said Jane, watching his face.

He lowered his voice. ‘There’s a big bolt on the woman’s bedroom door.’ He paused. ‘On the outside.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Jane. ‘That’s not good.’

‘I shouldn’t have done this, should I? I’ve just made things worse for Simon.’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Jane. ‘If something has happened, then at least we can raise the alarm.’

‘But why? Is Ruth Wedderburn someone special?’ Grint had a sudden inspiration. ‘Simon, do you remember when we were talking about your mum? At Christmas? What does she do?’

Simon looked up from the image. ‘She makes things.’

‘What sort of things does she make?’

‘Things – you know.’

Jane had a thought. ‘Do you know who she works for, Simon?’

He shook his head.

‘Did she perhaps tell you not to say?’

He shook his head again, suddenly miserable. All his sparkle had disappeared. Grint’s right, thought Jane. We’ve only made things worse.

‘I don’t really know what she makes,’ said Simon. ‘She doesn’t talk about it much. I want my mum. This isn’t our house. I want to go home.’

Jane put her arm around him, saying to Grint, ‘We can’t stay here. Well, we can – he can’t. If we’re going to look into this, we need to take him somewhere safe. Police station, perhaps.’

Grint lowered his voice. ‘Jane, when he was at the party, he told me his mum talked about making him a pod.’

Jane stared. ‘Oh.’

‘I didn’t take any notice at the time because he went on to talk about a jetpack. And I think I mentioned wings as well, but the point is . . .’

‘A pod,’ said Jane, in a hollow voice. ‘And a possible temporal anomaly. It’s not rocket science, is it?’

‘No, it’s Temporal Dynamics.’ He sighed. ‘Take him back, Jane. To London. I’ll handle things here.’

‘I’m not leaving you.’ She looked around. ‘We really need to call this in.’

‘We need to get Simon out of here first,’ said Grint.

‘I think it’s a bit late for that. The Time Police will want to talk to him – you know that. We might as well all wait here.’

Grint shuffled his feet. ‘The game’s up, Jane, isn’t it? I’m sorry to have got you into this.’

‘It was my choice,’ said Jane firmly. ‘I could have gone back to the home and reported you, you know.’

‘And now you’re as implicated as I am.’

‘Yeah . . . well . . .’

Grint pulled out his com and went into the kitchen. She could hear his voice through the half-closed door.

Simon was staring around. ‘Something horrible has happened to my mum, hasn’t it?’

Jane crouched beside him. ‘We don’t know that.’

‘That’s why she didn’t come for me. Is she dead?’

‘No,’ said Jane, with as much confidence as she could muster.

‘I spoke to Ellis,’ said Grint, reappearing through the door. ‘He already knew we were here. The home’s made a complaint. A team’s already on their way. ETA ten minutes. They’re coming by helicopter. More discreet. We’re not to touch anything. Let’s wait outside. We can walk down to the beach. You can have your paddle. Would you like that, Simon?’

Simon shook his head. ‘No.’

Grint put his hand on Simon’s shoulder and looked at Jane. ‘I’ve made a complete balls-up of this, haven’t I?’

‘No,’ said Jane. ‘Something is going on here and no one would have known anything about it if it wasn’t for you.’

‘Jane – I’m . . . sorry.’

‘We’ll talk about it . . .’

His mouth turned up. ‘When we both come out of prison.’

Jane cast a quick glance at Simon. ‘If it turns out his mum does have some expertise in certain areas and that has brought her to the attention of someone . . .’

‘Who?’

‘Could be anyone. Big business. A bunch of loonies.’ She paused. ‘Someone like Henry Plimpton . . .’

Grint peered through the window. ‘There’s a garden shed – I’ll just check it out before we leave.’

Opening the back door, he set off across the overgrown lawn towards the perfectly ordinary wooden shed. He reached for the handle and then stopped. Faintly, through the door, he could hear a quiet buzzing. Or droning. That wasn’t good. Not good at all. They should leave.

Now.

Grint spun around and began to run.

Straight into a taser.

Jane saw the two men as they came past the window. Instinctively she pushed Simon behind the armchair in the corner and gestured for him to keep quiet. Once he was out of sight, she shoved the chair as far back as it would go. Simon wrapped his arms around his knees, closed his eyes and held his breath.

He heard Jane say, ‘Who are you? What do you want?’

Then came the sounds of a slight struggle – the table went over again – and Jane being hustled away. The back door banged. Other than a clock ticking somewhere, there was silence throughout the house. An empty silence rather than the silence of someone waiting for him to emerge. Or so he hoped. What should he do? Run? Or stay where he was? If they came back for him, he'd be discovered in seconds.

Simon squeezed out from behind the chair, got to his feet and listened. Still nothing. But for how long? Suppose the door opened and they grabbed him the way they'd grabbed Jane?

Panic washed over him. Everyone had gone. He was all on his own. What should he do? Simon very badly wanted someone to tell him what to do. Taking a deep breath, he yanked open the front door and ran blindly. Along the path. Down the steps. Faster and faster. Faster than he'd ever run before. His legs hurt but he couldn't stop. He mustn't stop. He had to . . .

He never saw the man at all. Not until he ran straight into him, bounced off the railing and sat down hard on his bottom.

Grint awoke to the smell of creosote and compost and found himself face to face with a giant green snake. Someone had taken the opportunity to swap his arms for his legs and vice versa. Nothing appeared to be working properly. A common symptom of over-tasering. Unsurprisingly, it took a lot of juice to put someone like Grint on the ground.

He appeared to be lying on a hard concrete floor. The long green snake thing resolved itself into a garden hose, which was a relief. Grint had no huge objection to forty-foot-long green snakes, but no one ever wants to find themselves eyeball to eyeball with one while lying bound and helpless. Compost, creosote and a garden hose. He was in the garden shed.

The next thing he saw was Jane, tied to one of those cheap plastic chairs people use in the garden. That must be why he was on the floor. They'd never have been able to squeeze him into one of those things. Even supposing it could bear his weight. Jane didn't look particularly comfortable. On balance, Grint reckoned he was better off on the floor.

The only good news in this somewhat catastrophe-laden day was that Simon didn't appear to be present. Although Grint's view was somewhat limited, and for all he knew Simon had been stuffed into a bag of compost.

A large pair of boots filled his vision. Grint regarded them with misgiving.

Boots plus face frequently equalled pain.

The buzzing in his ears resolved itself into voices. Two voices. Two people. Or a ventriloquist, possibly. He squinted up at Jane, who frowned and very fractionally shook her head. Which could mean he wasn't to speak. Which was OK with him. Or possibly that Simon wasn't here. Which was good. Or that she couldn't get free. Which was bad. Or that he should just stay where he was until the situation resolved itself and a clear course of action emerged. Which suited Grint just fine. His arms and legs were still AWOL.

'This is shit,' a man's voice was whining. He sounded very young, late teens – possibly early twenties. And he was very unhappy about something. 'Just shit. I tell you, something's not right. You shouldn't of touched it. Any of it. Look at all those red lights. And what's with that fog? She didn't say anything about fog.'

'She didn't say a lot of things.'

She being Ruth Wedderburn, Grint presumed.

'And neither did he,' continued the whiney voice. 'I reckon we've been stupid to get involved in this. Let's just piss off while we can.'

'He won't be happy with us.'

'Then he should be here, shouldn't he? He's gone. She's gone. This thing's gone haywire. And now the sodding Time Police are here. We should go while the going's good. Walk out the door and don't come back.'

The slightly older voice cut in. 'Look – we'll find her. She can't have got far. We'll bring her back, make her fix it, and job done. We sit back and watch the money roll in.'

'Yeah? If you ask me, we'll see precious little of that. In fact, I bet that's where he's gone. He's off doing a deal right now and we won't see a penny. And now there's these two here and they're fucking Time Police.' He dropped his voice to what he thought was a whisper. 'They've seen our faces, Raffy. The best thing we can do now is to run. And don't look back.'

There was a short silence, during which Raffy, presumably, was considering his options. Grint could still hear a low droning noise, which he was pretty sure wasn't the effect of being tasered. Actually, that was a point. He tried to squint down his own body. Involuntary bladder voiding was a well-known symptom of tasing. Not something he'd want Jane to witness, obviously. Nothing felt warm and wet. Not that that meant he was more

kindly disposed towards his captors. There would be payback later on. Something for everyone to look forward to.

In the meantime, Whiney-voice was continuing. 'And I dunno what you did but now it won't switch off. And the field output's in the red, which even I know isn't good, man. We really need to get her back here. She's the only one who . . .'

There was an unmistakeable note of panic. Grint lifted his head to try to see what was happening.

'Shit – he's awake,' said Whiney-voice.

'Check he's still secured,' said Raffy.

'You check. I'm not going near . . .'

'Just do it, will you? Taser him again if he gives you any trouble.'

A dark shape loomed.

Grint glared. Which did not appear to have any noticeable effect.

Something dropped on to his face and from there to the floor. He swivelled his eyes and focused. His ID.

'So – you're the bastard Time Police,' said the voice.

'I've called it in,' said Grint thickly. 'They'll be here at any moment.'

As he had hoped, Whiney-voice defaulted to instant panic mode. 'Told you. I told you. It's all gone tits up and Joe's disappeared and we'll be carrying the can for all this. I can't afford to be caught again. And neither can you. Not with your record.'

Raffy responded in sudden temper. 'Shut up. Just shut up.'

Sound advice. Without meaning to, Whiney-voice was spewing helpful information with every word. Officer Varma frequently maintained that a successful interrogation could easily be conducted from any location and in any position – including on the floor, it would seem. He now knew there were at least three of them, including the absent Joe. That they'd built some sort of equipment – or rather, Ruth Wedderburn had. Under duress probably, given the bolt on the bedroom door. Had she escaped? And now, whatever she'd built wasn't behaving itself. And Joe, whoever he was, wasn't here. Had he gone after her? Grint tried to flex his arms and felt the plastic ties bite even more deeply into his wrists.

Whiney-voice hadn't finished. 'Raffy. Why are they here? We ain't done nothing wrong.'

Grint could tell from the sound of his voice that Raffy was grinning.

‘Kidnapping . . . ? Coercion . . . ? False imprisonment . . . ? Yeah, we ain’t done nothing wrong, have we?’

‘That the Time Police would be interested in, I mean. What are they here for?’

Grint flashed Jane a glance. She was sitting quietly in her plastic chair, looking her usual unthreatening, slightly nervous self, but like him, she would be listening to every word.

So what *was* going on here? These two – possibly three – men had forced Simon’s mum to build something for them. Given the anomaly at the candyfloss stand, some sort of Time-manipulation device, presumably. And yet neither man considered Grint and Jane’s appearance to be connected with whatever they’d been up to. Not surprising, really. In Grint’s experience, every illegal was always convinced they hadn’t done anything wrong.

The next stage – inevitably – would be for these idiots to decide the best way forward was for them to dispose of unwanted and unwelcome Time Police officers and continue with their plans for the day. He could only hope Simon had had the sense to raise the alarm and wasn’t just paddling quietly in the sea and enjoying his day. Grint’s thoughts turned to methods of escape.

As TPOs, Jane and Grint were tagged. All officers were. A basic precaution. Even the idiots at St Mary’s were tagged. In fact, one of the idiots, given her propensity for unscheduled disappearances, was the proud possessor of at least seven tags – three of which she knew nothing about. Either their captors were not aware of standard Time Police precautions or hadn’t realised the implications.

The good news – and suddenly it *was* good news – was that Ellis and a team were on their way. North could furnish them with Ruth Wedderburn’s address. They might even be here already. They’d find him. Sadly, they’d find Jane, too, but he could lie about that. He’d tell them he’d forced her to come. Against her will. That she was an innocent party. Except Jane would tell the truth. She always did. He sagged. There really was no good way out of this. But first things first . . . Time to continue his interrogation.

The same idea seemed to have occurred to Raffy, who nudged him with his boot. ‘What are you doing here? What do you know?’

‘Nothing,’ said Grint honestly.

Grint had been right. Boots plus helpless Time Police officer equalled a great deal of pain. He curled up as best he could, but a kick to his knee sent agony lancing up and down his leg. His breath hissed. He told himself it was good they were mostly leaving his face alone. Because they needed him to be able to talk. On the other hand, if he didn't say anything – how long before they started on Jane?

Who was forcing herself to sit perfectly still and watch.

'Sweetie,' said Bolshy Jane very quietly. 'He's doing his bit, but I think the next part has to be up to you.'

Jane nodded. She'd come to that conclusion herself. Although physically, she was as helpless as Grint. What was she supposed to do?

The answer came almost immediately. What was it everyone always said about her? *You don't look like a Time Police officer.* And they were right. Despite nearly two years' service under her belt, Officer Lockland still presented the appearance of timid Jane trembling in the shadow of a grandmother who no longer existed.

'I am Jane Lockland,' she said to herself.

'Yes, you are,' said Bolshy Jane, with enthusiasm.

'Daughter of Helen Portman.'

'Yes, you are,' said Bolshy Jane.

'I am Time Police. Hear me roar.'

'Don't get carried away,' said Bolshy Jane.

It seemed to have dawned on their captors that their prisoner wasn't going to talk. Grint, peering up from the floor, saw the same thought occur to them both simultaneously. Slowly, they turned to look at Jane.

'Well,' said Raffy, an unprepossessing specimen of villainhood – short and skinny with greasy skin and spectacularly underdeveloped musculature. 'This could be fun.'

'And pointless,' said Jane. Lifting her chin and channelling Officer North – her role model – she made her voice clipped and authoritative. Someone not to be messed with. 'He's just a grunt. He's not going to tell you anything because he doesn't know anything. Look at him. The only use they would have for him is hitting people.'

The men approached. One of them looked her up and down. 'And what do they use you for?'

'They don't use me at all,' said Jane. 'I'm not Time Police.'

They stared at her. ‘Yeah, you are.’

‘No, I’m not.’

He picked up her ID. ‘This says otherwise.’

Jane nodded. ‘So I should hope, for the amount of money it cost me. I also have the appropriate ID for MI5, MI6, and CP24.’

‘Never heard of that one.’

‘No one has,’ said Jane, amazed at her own fertility. ‘That’s rather the point.’

‘If you’re not Time Police – and you certainly ain’t MI5 or MI6 – then what are you doing with him?’

Jane made her first public attempt at a smirk. ‘Pumping him for information on the whereabouts of Ruth Wedderburn.’

He looked Jane up and down again, plainly disbelieving. ‘You? And that works, does it?’

Jane half closed her eyes and slowly smiled. ‘It does the way I do it.’

Grint looked across at her and held her gaze for a long moment. Battered, bruised and in some considerable pain, he raised one amused eyebrow. Jane fell in love with him on the spot.

‘You said he didn’t know anything,’ said one man, recalling her to the moment.

‘He doesn’t. I’ve wasted over a month on this idiot and trust me, he doesn’t know jack shit.’

‘Even after all that pumping?’

Jane smirked again. Slightly more convincingly this time. ‘Even after what could only be described as *extensive* pumping.’

‘Sweetie,’ said Bolshy Jane. ‘If I thought you had the slightest clue what you were talking about, I’d be impressed.’

‘So what *does* he know?’

‘Well . . .’ Jane attempted to cross her legs nonchalantly, failed, and abandoned the attempt. ‘the Time Police know about Ruth Wedderburn. You slipped up badly there. Worst of all, from your point of view, they know about the candyfloss stall.’

Sitting in the chair, Jane’s view of the shed was better than Grint’s – which consisted mostly of dead spiders and mouse droppings. The two men looked baffled. ‘What about the candyfloss stall?’

Good question, thought Jane. Don’t lose control of this conversation. She

shrugged. 'You tell me.'

'Don't know what you're talking about,' said Whiney-voice.

'If you say so,' said Jane, politely disbelieving. 'Tell me about all this, instead.'

She nodded her head towards the non-horticultural end of the shed – a wobbly trestle table covered with various bits of Heath Robinson electronics, one unit stacked haphazardly upon another, and with three heavily earthed cables running therefrom.

Each of the three cables ran to an equally heavily earthed metal upright pole, around three feet high, which, in turn, was firmly secured to a rubber-legged tripod. The three were arranged as an equilateral triangle. A rubber mat painted with a large X had been carefully positioned at the exact centre. X marked the spot, presumably. What the function of the spot was, Jane had no idea, although she could hazard a horrible guess. X was obviously a carefully designated place in which to stand in order that something should occur. With the memory of Henry Plimpton's disastrous Time-travelling bracelets and the problems they'd caused still fresh in her mind, Jane was convinced she was looking at something amateurish but similar.

Except . . . something wasn't right. What was it he had said? *She never said anything about fog.*

And there had been that sea fog on the horizon. Slowly rolling towards them.

Her mind flew back to her training days and the series of lectures on the many and varied ways of screwing with the Timeline. There had been Time-slips – still occasionally encountered, although not so frequently these days; anomalies – so many different types of anomalies, and new ones were being created all the time; time-stops – only one had come her way so far but one was one too many; Bluebell Time – which required prompt and direct intervention by the Time Police; alternate universes – one wrong word or deed at a critical moment could send the universe spinning down an entirely different Timeline; and last, and certainly not least, the result of bungled Timeline manipulation – the dreaded bubble universes.

These idiots must have attempted Time travel, botched it – hence the candyfloss hiccup – and the universe had created a bubble into which she, Grint and Simon had unknowingly stumbled.

A bubble universe is a physical thing. It exists – right up until the moment

it doesn't. Bubbles are created by the universe to protect itself from the damage caused by idiots who think physics is something that can be messed with. It's a temporary protection while the Timeline does whatever is necessary to resolve itself. Think of it as a giant scab.

The downside is that, sooner or later, the giant scab is no longer required. The damage has been repaired. Rather like a ten-year-old child, the universe gleefully picks off the scab. It has fulfilled its function and is now surplus to requirements, along with everyone and everything else inside the bubble. The original universe, now healed over, continues on its merry way. But nothing inside a bubble universe survives. Ever.

Sometimes it just disappears. Suddenly. Like popping one of Luke Parrish's festive balloons. One minute there – the next minute gone. Along with everything inside it. Sometimes – usually – the bubble slowly shrinks – smaller and smaller – until, finally . . . nothing left.

This is not normally a problem. In fact, it's the universe protecting itself by destroying the unwanted duplicate. But – and it's an enormous but – bubbles are one-way. You can get in – usually by accident – but you can't get out. Not unless you have a pod. And Jane and Grint didn't have a pod. They were trapped here and would share the same fate as all the other inhabitants.

Not that she was likely to live that long. A rich array of possible fates lay before her. Either or both of these half-wits could kill her – by accident, probably. Or the Time Police would track them down and shoot them on the spot. Or – and this seemed most likely – this very dodgy-looking equipment could explode, blowing the shed and its occupants sky high. Because whatever was going on here – whatever the purpose of this equipment was – something had gone horribly wrong, temporally speaking, and a bubble universe had been created. Either by Ruth Wedderburn before she disappeared, or by these idiots attempting to operate the equipment without having a clue what they were doing.

In which case, the question now was – how big was the bubble? Was it still growing? Which it might be if the damage to the Timeline was very great. Or – worst-case scenario – had the Timeline righted itself and the bubble was already shrinking? Meaning this world would become smaller and smaller and smaller until they were all standing on each other in an attempt to escape being sucked into the all-consuming void? Never mind

that. The really important thing was to get out. As quickly as possible. Which could prove problematic, since not only were she and Grint under restraint, but they had no pod in which to escape.

And where was Simon? Finding him must be her absolute priority. And his mother, of course. Wherever she was.

Her second priority must be to ensure no one did any more damage to Grint, because carrying him was out of the question unless someone had a fork-lift truck tucked away somewhere.

And even if they did manage to escape, their problems wouldn't be over, because then would come the challenge of keeping Grint out of prison. And herself. Good grief, when you looked at it, the list was endless. Jane sighed to herself. A woman's work is never done.

'Better get cracking, then,' said Bolshy Jane very unsympathetically. Wimpy Jane, overcome by events, appeared to have gone for a rest in a darkened room.

'Please listen to me,' said Jane, still striving to emulate Lt North without actually sounding like a Time Police officer. 'I can see that things haven't gone quite according to plan for you, and I definitely think your easiest course of action is to let us go. But . . .' she said loudly, talking over their protests, 'I'm prepared to do a trade. You let us go and we lead you to Ruth's son, Simon. Once you have him, I'm certain she'll do whatever you want. I rather suspect Joe will be so pleased at your initiative he'll increase your share. Think about that.'

She watched their faces as they looked at each other. Would this work? Greed often overcame sensible thinking.

Still they said nothing. Jane looked down at Grint.

Grint put things more bluntly. 'Listen to her. You two are in deep shit. I'm Time Police. Kill me and they'll hunt you down. You know they will. And there won't be a trial. Only an execution. She's offering you a way out.'

Jane drew a deep breath. 'Perhaps,' she said, 'if you could tell me what you've done, I could help.'

Whiney-voice said nothing. Raffy was truculent. 'Why should we . . . ?'

Jane kept her voice calm. 'Do you know who I am?'

'No.'

'Good – that means I can let you live.'

He scoffed. 'You're tied to a chair and *you'll* let *me* live.'

‘If you cooperate, yes, I think I can save us all. For instance, are you aware that while we’ve been talking, another three red lights have appeared on the equipment behind you? Gentlemen, I appreciate your reluctance to cooperate, but can I remind you that being dead never solves anyone’s problems? I suggest we pool our resources and prioritise our survival.’

Which, since they didn’t have a pod, did rather beg the question of how they were to survive, but she’d get to that later. Her first priority was to secure their freedom.

Silence filled the shed while everyone thought about this, broken only by the sound of blood bubbling from Grint’s nose as he struggled to breathe. Jane stretched her legs in front of her, striving for that casual captive look. How long did they have? Days? Hours? Minutes? She had no idea.

At about the time Grint and Jane had encountered their unexpected surplus candyfloss anomaly, and – as it turned out – in an entirely different universe, Captain Farenden was working on his spreadsheet for the finance meeting happening the day after tomorrow. Not something that ever put him in a good mood even when there was money in the budget. He sighed. That was a lot of red for just one spreadsheet. To be fair to Commander Hay, she wasn’t one to shoot the messenger, but she still wasn’t going to be happy.

Fortunately – or so he thought at the time – his telephone rang. An outside line – voice only. Sighing, he lifted the receiver. Other than stating his name and rank, he said nothing for a long while. Actually, he wasn’t granted the opportunity. The person on the other end had no intention of being interrupted and after a few feeble attempts, he didn’t even try.

Eventually the flow of words ground down into silence. Deliberately keeping his voice calm, he said, ‘Thank you for this information, Mrs Caldicott. If indeed an officer has removed a child from his place of residence, then he must have had a very good reason. I can also assure you that if this is the case, then the child in question would be in excellent hands. Please allow me thirty minutes to check the progress of this particular investigation, after which I shall contact you with an up-to-date report. In the meantime, please do not be alarmed – Simon will be returned to you as soon as operationally possible.’

He put the phone down, sat for a moment, glanced at Commander Hay’s closed door and then opened his com.

‘Major Ellis, please. Matthew? We need to speak. No – never mind that – we’re in deep shit. I’m on my way. And not a word to anyone.’

‘Why are we being briefed in here?’ demanded Luke. Compared with Team 236’s rabbit hutch, Major Ellis’s office was generously proportioned, but there weren’t that many people currently assembled within it; only Officers Parrish and Farrell, together with Officer Varma representing security.

‘Where is Ellis?’ said Luke irritably. ‘If you call a briefing then good manners demand you at least turn up for it. And where’s Jane?’

‘Day off,’ said Matthew briefly.

‘It was my day off as well,’ said Luke, seriously aggrieved. ‘I had plans.’

‘Blonde or brunette?’

‘What’s the date?’

‘Um . . . twenty-third.’

‘Odd. Brunette.’

Matthew sighed. ‘One day your sins will find you out.’

Luke grinned. ‘But not today.’

The door opened to reveal Major Ellis deep in conversation with Lt North. Their faces were grave. Ellis nodded, glanced at his scratchpad, and said, ‘Yes, I’ve got the info. Thank you, Lieutenant.’

He glanced over his shoulder at the waiting officers and then said very quietly, ‘No, Celia, you’re not included on this one. If this goes pear-shaped then we’ll need you on the outside to organise our defence.’

North nodded, paused for a moment and then departed.

‘Right,’ said Ellis, closing the door behind him. ‘Sit down and shut up. This is serious. I don’t want any wisecracks or arguments. We have a situation. I can’t see any way out of it, but we have to try. Don’t bother with notes – the less evidence against us the better.’

He paused and then, when he had their complete attention, said very quietly, ‘According to information received – unimpeachable information – Lt Grint has kidnapped a small boy and disappeared with him.’

Someone drew a sharp breath but otherwise there was silence. Even Luke Parrish had nothing to say.

‘Exactly,’ said Ellis. ‘I have a possible location and our job this afternoon will be to locate and return them to TPHQ. As quickly and as quietly as possible. The crime has already been committed. There is no way of

covering it up – nor should there be. Our purpose is damage control.’

‘What happens then?’ said Luke.

Ellis hesitated. ‘Out of our hands, I’m afraid, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Civilian dress, everyone. Concealed weapons only. Maximum discretion means we won’t be taking a pod. Report to the helicopter pad in ten minutes. Move.’

There are various interpretations of the phrase ‘civilian dress’.

Luke Parrish, who looked good in everything and knew it, was wearing a casual jacket and trousers. Officer Varma, with her previous experience of Team 236 and their eccentricities, had stuck to a basic black T-shirt and combats, on the grounds that someone was bound to need a good thumping sooner or later. Only Matthew had truly embraced the furtive nature of the mission and donned his traditional undercover gear. He appeared before them now in a death-metal T-shirt that had seen better decades, ripped jeans that were more rip than jean, a backpack adorned with anarchist stickers promoting the end of everything, and orange and purple light-up trainers. An astonishing amount of hair product ensured his never regulation style hair stood out around his head in a manner reminiscent of an exuberant cactus. Far from blending into the background, he could probably be seen from all five space stations. Without the benefit of telescopes.

Luke stepped away from him. ‘I am not going out with you looking like that.’

‘Don’t be like that,’ said Matthew. ‘I quite like *your* outfit. Very age-appropriate.’

Luke looked down at himself. ‘What?’

‘Well, you know – everyone has to grow up. Once they’ve reached a certain age.’

‘Not something you’re ever likely to have to worry about.’

‘Don’t be unkind. As a member of the older generation, you should be showcasing tolerance and acceptance and . . .’

Major Ellis appeared, neat in smart casual. ‘Everyone in the helicopter.’ He became aware of Matthew. ‘Oh, dear God.’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. It’s too late for you to change now. Just get in the chopper before you blind someone.’

Not thirty minutes later, the smaller of the Time Police helicopters, Delta Zero One, set Major Ellis and his hastily assembled team down on the cliffs above the main body of the town, then obeyed instructions and returned to base until called for.

Ellis gazed around. This was a pretty place. Blue sea and sky. Gentle breeze. Charming town. Even the sea fog rolling gently towards land was picturesque. He would like to have visited here with North. They could have explored the antique shops, colourful cafés and busy harbour. He sighed. ‘Farrell, sitrep.’

Matthew activated his tag reader, his eyebrows arching in surprise. ‘I have two faint traces.’

They looked at each other. ‘Two?’ said Ellis. ‘Who on earth would Grint bring with him on something like this?’

Luke and Matthew exchanged glances. Who was the only person not here? Surely not. Not Jane. Why would she . . . ?

‘Can you give me a specific location?’ demanded Ellis.

Matthew frowned. ‘I should be able to but . . . there’s . . . I can’t get clear readings, sir. Perhaps if we can get closer, I could be more precise.’

‘Then let’s try lower down.’

They set off through the town, following, had they but known it, Grint and Jane’s route almost exactly. Minus the shop-window peering.

Ellis consulted Matthew’s tag reader. ‘Can you identify their last known position?’

‘There’s something about two hundred yards south-west, sir. Down in the town. Near the little pier.’

‘Good. A starting point. We’ll check it out. In pairs. We’re not an invasion force, remember. Quietly and quickly, people.’

They made their way separately down to the seafront. Major Ellis went first with Matthew at his shoulder, followed by Luke and Varma. It would seem Luke was unable to resist the challenge of the notoriously difficult Officer Varma, chatting charmingly as they went. Varma, on the other hand, had all the appearance of one barely resisting the temptation to hurl him off the picturesque cliffs.

They twisted their way among the narrow streets, dodging tourists and street vendors alike, eventually reaching the promenade where they paused

for Matthew to reorient his reader. The day was still warm even though the sun had disappeared behind the sea fog being blown inland.

Ellis stared. A memory stirred. He looked back the way they had come. A gentle mist now obscured the top of the cliffs.

‘Sir?’

He shook himself. ‘Yes, Farrell?’

Matthew was frowning. ‘They *were* here, sir. Two distinct readings.’ He moved to his right. ‘No – a definite reading. I’ve got them. They’re up there. At the top of those steps. One of those cottages, probably.’

‘Four Marine Terrace?’

Matthew nodded. ‘Could be. I can give you a more definite location when we get closer. Although they were here . . . for a while . . . and . . .’ He began to rummage in his backpack.

His colleagues looked about them.

‘Ooh,’ said Luke. ‘Candyfloss.’ He set off towards the stall.

‘Stay where you are,’ said Ellis sternly.

‘Aaaw . . . Dad . . .’ said Luke, causing Major Ellis to briefly contemplate drowning him. There was an entire ocean over there. Shouldn’t take him too long.

‘I haven’t had candyfloss in years,’ said Luke.

‘So I should hope,’ said Varma. ‘How old are you?’

‘Old enough,’ said Luke, grinning at her.

Varma set her hands on her hips. ‘You just can’t help yourself, can you?’

‘Can we concentrate, please,’ said Ellis.

‘I think shooting him would greatly aid my concentration, sir,’ said Varma.

‘Varma,’ said Luke, smiling down at her. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever caught your first name.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever thrown it.’

‘I’m thinking it will be something sultry and sexy.’

‘I’m thinking a handful of testicle and twist to the right.’

He grinned. ‘How about Scheherazade?’

Varma shifted her weight. ‘Naz.’

He blinked. ‘Short for Nazreen? How pretty.’

‘Short for Nazgûl.’

Even Major Ellis had to turn his head and pretend to cough.

‘Actually,’ said Matthew, pulling another piece of equipment from his backpack. Anxiously he consulted something that looked as if a coat hanger had mated with a long-armed stapler. To the detriment of both. There were, however, a dramatic number of red lights. ‘We all need to stand very still, please.’

Astonishingly, everyone stood very still.

‘What?’ said Ellis.

‘I’m reading an . . . anomaly.’

‘Of course you are,’ said Luke, rolling his eyes. ‘Why wouldn’t you?’

‘What sort of anomaly? Grint didn’t specify,’ said Ellis.

‘Not sure. If I stand here, I get one reading, but if I stand over here . . .’ he moved over there, ‘I get something completely different. This is odd. One candyfloss stall but two different . . . Look out, Major.’

A small boy had appeared on the steps, running hell for leather, his little legs pumping. His eyes were huge and terrified, his arms windmilling. It was obvious that at some point in the descent, his legs had got away from him and without outside intervention, he would probably end up in the sea.

Fortunately – not the word used by Major Ellis at the time – the little boy ran straight into him, staggered, made a grab for the safety railings, missed, overbalanced on his still not quite properly working legs, sat down with a bump and burst into tears.

Four Time Police officers stared at each other in disbelief while juggling a number of important questions.

Firstly – could they assume this was Simon Wedderburn? How likely was that? In their experience, things were never that easy.

Secondly – assuming this *was* Simon – where was Lt Grint? Was the little boy actually trying to escape from him? And for what reason?

Thirdly – were either Grint or Simon connected to the recently discovered temporal anomaly? And if so – were they victim or perpetrator?

However – first things first. Time Police procedures dictated they secure the suspect/victim/witness/sobbing child.

Ellis motioned to Varma who motioned to Luke who motioned to Matthew.

‘Um . . .’ said Matthew. He approached the sobbing heap. ‘Are you all right?’

The little boy lifted his head. Tears streamed down his grubby cheeks. His

nose was, at one and the same time, both dry and crusty and wet and bubbly. A very unattractive combination. His mouth was outlined in something pink and sticky. There was a matching patch in his hair. And his ear. And something awful was hanging from one cheek.

‘I know you,’ said Matthew, apparently recognising this unappealing heap of dust-covered stickiness. ‘You’re Simon.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Ellis, coming forwards but careful to remain outside touching range. This was a very sticky little boy. ‘Are you actually Simon Wedderburn?’

Simon sobbed and gulped. Or possibly the other way around.

Mindful of the very short paragraph in the Time Police handbook relating to not intimidating nervous witnesses, Ellis crouched alongside. ‘Do you know where . . . ?’

He got no further. Matthew uttered another cry of warning, and at the same moment a voice shouted, ‘GET AWAY FROM MY SON.’ A woman erupted from the shed behind the candyfloss stand and began to rain down a flurry of blows upon Ellis’s head and shoulders.

He fell to one side – more a case of overbalance than as a result of his brutal beating at the hands of an outraged mother – as he would claim in his report. It is possible that his loyal team could have rushed to their leader’s aid slightly more rapidly, but, as they later unsuccessfully explained, everything happened so quickly. Eventually, Varma efficiently pinned Major Ellis’s assailant’s hands behind her back and she and Luke pulled the woman off him.

Matthew helped Simon to stand up and then surreptitiously wiped himself down on Simon’s hoodie. Luke offered a helping hand to Major Ellis and finally everyone was on their feet, no one was hitting anyone else, most people had stopped crying and more or less everyone was the right way up. Varma drew breath to arrest everyone in sight but at least two of the party had differing priorities.

Ruth Wedderburn struggled free and the next moment Simon found himself enveloped in loving arms. Two voices gabbled simultaneously.

‘Simon – what are you doing here?’

‘Mum? What’s happening? Why are you here?’

‘They told me they had you.’

‘Mum, what’s going on?’

‘Never mind that – I’m so pleased to see you but you have to go now.’

‘Where are . . . ?’

‘You mustn’t let them . . .’

‘Time Police,’ said Varma, who, having allowed them a generous seven seconds for a mother–child reunion, was keen to get down to business. ‘You are both requested and required to return with us to TPHQ.’

There have been occasions when the very presence of the Time Police is sufficient to calm things down, restore order, and resolve the situation. This was not any of those occasions. Neither of the potential prisoners took a blind bit of notice, both of them too wrapped up in each other to heed the outside world.

‘Where did you go? I thought you didn’t want me.’

‘Of course I want you, Simon, but these aren’t nice people. How did you . . . ?’

‘I had my operation. My legs are better. I can live with you now. We can . . .’

Major Ellis, listening with only half an ear, stared out to sea. The day was beginning to turn cold. Sea fog was now rolling across the harbour. Again, he experienced a sensation of unease. He was missing something.

On the plus side, however, it would seem they’d found the kid. Sadly, his mother had turned up as well and would be demanding explanations. Worse, there was no sign of Grint. Or Lockland. Could they both have fled the country? Given what he knew of them that seemed unlikely. Jane and Grint might be the most mismatched couple on the planet, but they were both proud possessors of a supremely overdeveloped sense of duty. On the other hand, given the seriousness of the charges against Lt Grint . . . He paused. There was no point in speculating. The situation had changed somewhat. Now that they had secured Simon, their first priority should be to investigate this anomaly.

‘If you’ll excuse me, sir.’ Officer Varma pushed past him. ‘Mrs Wedderburn, for your own safety, we need to remove you and Simon from this vicinity. Will you come with me, please?’

Ruth Wedderburn glowered suspiciously. ‘Why?’

‘We need to carry out our investigations and your assistance would be gratefully appreciated.’

She clutched at Simon, looking both defiant and afraid. ‘No – you’ve got

it wrong.'

'Mrs Wedderburn, you appeared from the shed over there very shortly after my colleague recorded a temporal anomaly. Please, if you would be kind enough . . .'

'How do I know you're Time Police?'

Varma pulled out her ID. 'All right? Although,' she gazed around at her colleagues, 'your confusion is understandable. Frankly, some days even I'm not too sure.' She looked around for somewhere more discreet. 'Let's go in here.'

She led Simon and his mother into one of those glass and wooden shelters from which one could admire the view. Or, in Varma's case, conduct an interrogation. The others remained a little distance away, carefully casual and, as Luke said, probably standing out like a dog's bollocks.

Ruth sat herself down with Simon, who had discovered he wasn't too old to sit on his mum's lap.

'Mrs Wedderburn, would you like to begin?'

For a moment, Ruth hesitated and then she said, 'Yes, of course. My name is Ruth Wedderburn. I've been building a . . .'

'Bubble,' said Matthew, who had remained outside the shelter and never taken his eyes off his mismatched equipment.

Ellis smacked the railing. 'I knew something was going on here. Where?'

'There,' said Matthew, rotating slowly. 'Here. Shit – all around us. That's what the fog is.'

'And we stood here like idiots and let ourselves be surrounded. Expanding or contracting?'

'Contracting. But quite slowly. No immediate danger here except . . .'

'Yes,' said Ellis, grimly. 'We can't get out, can we?'

Matthew nodded. 'We've left it too late, sir.'

'The chopper?'

'Gone, sir. On its way back to base as instructed.'

'Can you contact . . .?'

'No. Sorry.'

'Focus?'

Matthew waved the coat hanger again. 'Over there, I think. North-easterly. Up near those cottages, perhaps.'

'Where you picked up the tag reading,' said Luke.

‘Four Marine Terrace,’ interrupted an exasperated Ruth Wedderburn. ‘Along with a ton of illegal equipment, a couple of morons, and, according to Simon, a giant called Uncle Lieutenant and his friend Jane.’ Simon whispered something and she continued, ‘Who possibly are being held by the aforementioned morons who thought they could force me to work for them.’

Varma prepared to pounce. ‘Which morons and what work?’

Ms Wedderburn stared at her. ‘Which and what what?’

‘What does your work entail?’

She sighed. ‘Teleportation.’

Varma moved in. ‘That’s illegal.’

‘No, it’s not, but yes, the one I built is.’

‘Is what?’

‘Illegal.’

Varma regarded her closely. ‘Just so everyone is absolutely clear: you are admitting you deliberately made an illegal teleportation device?’

Ruth made an impatient movement. ‘No, you’re getting it all wrong.’

Varma compressed her lips and strove for inner tranquillity.

Ruth continued, talking fast. ‘I was forced to design and manufacture a perfectly legal teleport device . . .’

‘Does it work?’ asked Matthew, interested.

‘No – but it wasn’t supposed to. But, yes, I deliberately included an illegal temporal component.’

‘Why?’

‘To attract the attention of the Time Police, of course. Isn’t that why you’re here? To check out the temporal anomaly I’ve been signalling? Why aren’t there more of you? Where’s your pod? And why did those other two bring Simon?’

There was a bit of a silence, during which Simon scrambled off his mother’s lap and wandered over to the railings to look at the sea again.

‘Jane said I could paddle.’

‘It’s a bit nippy, mate,’ said Matthew. ‘You sure?’

‘Yeah. Can I do it now?’

‘In a minute,’ said his mother absently. She turned to Ellis. ‘I know you’d probably like to arrest me . . .’

‘No *probably* about it,’ said Varma.

Ruth Wedderburn was close to losing her temper. 'Look – I've been held in a cottage up there by . . .' She glanced at Simon. 'Someone . . . and so I incorporated something naughty to try to attract your attention. And here you are.'

'Actually . . .' said Ellis heavily.

She looked at him. 'What?'

He gestured at the fog. Now noticeably closer. 'Ever heard of a bubble universe?'

She went white and clutched at Simon. 'This is a . . . ?'

'Yes. I see you know what that means.'

She stared out at the sea for a long moment before saying, 'I can't go back, can I?'

Ellis shook his head. 'I'm sorry.'

'But Simon . . . ?'

'Is not of this universe. We can save him.'

She took a deep breath. 'All right. All right. That's the important thing. Yes.'

'Tell me about your apparatus.'

'It's harmless. It's a teleportation system carefully designed not to work.'

'With a temporal addition,' said Varma grimly.

'Also carefully designed just to attract your attention. Trust me, I know what I'm doing. It's harmless.'

'Well, someone . . .'

'Oh,' said Ruth Wedderburn, suddenly enlightened. 'Of course.'

Varma nodded. 'The two morons tampered. But why?'

'Because . . .' She looked at Simon. 'Someone might be angry that I'd escaped and the morons probably thought if they could get it to work, they wouldn't need me and J— someone wouldn't be so furious I'd got away.'

'How *did* you escape?'

'They were careless. J— They were told to stay with me at all times. Both of them. After a while they became bored. One went out to buy beer. I hit the other one with a table and ran. I hid behind the candyfloss store because . . .'

'Yes?'

'Because that's where the other half of my transporter is. Only, about an hour or so ago, everything went haywire. That must have been when the

two morons tried to start it up.'

'Ah,' said Matthew, suddenly enlightened. 'Anomalous readings issue resolved. Does your transportation thing work?'

Ruth grinned. 'It's actually quite hard to deliberately design something that doesn't work, but I managed it. The whole thing was dead. Inert. Harmless. I don't know how those two morons managed it, but you have to get me up there to sort it out.'

Ellis looked up at the cottages. 'A stupid question to which I'm sure I know the answer, but I'm clutching at straws. If we switch off your device, will that affect the bubble in any way?'

Both Matthew and Ruth shook their heads. She said, 'I don't think so. I think the damage is done. The bubble's been created and must now live out its natural lifespan.'

'Fog's getting closer,' said Luke, appearing in the entrance to the shelter. 'If we're going to move, we should get a move on.'

Ruth caught at Ellis's arm. 'I'm perfectly willing to show you where the equipment is, but I don't want Simon involved in this. I won't leave him here alone.' She looked at Ellis. 'You seem to have a number of people at your disposal. Can one of them take him back to your pod? Out of the way?'

Now didn't seem quite the moment to tell Ruth Wedderburn there was no pod, so Ellis listened instead to the sound of frantically thinking Time Police officers seeking to avoid childcare duties.

'People to arrest,' said Varma, quickest off the mark.

'Hate children,' said Luke.

Everyone looked at Matthew – who sighed. 'Fine,' he said. 'With me, Mr Sticky.'

As before, they did their best to assume an informal formation. Ellis walked at the front with Luke. A few yards behind, Varma and her prisoner/witness/Simon's mother argued over her exact status, Ruth Wedderburn maintaining she couldn't possibly be under arrest since not only had she done nothing wrong, but her actions had actually brought this illegal activity to their attention. Which illegal activity, she said, the Time Police would otherwise have known nothing about. And while they were discussing recent Time Police actions, what exactly was going on with

Simon and why had they involved him in a possibly dangerous situation and questions were certainly going to be asked even if they had to be asked from her prison cell.

At this point she had to stop to get her breath back – they all did – but as Luke said, the steps were very steep and there was no point in arriving at their destination winded and wheezing.

Number Four Marine Terrace gleamed in the spring sunshine. Bright, welcoming, deceptive . . .

They halted at the top of the steps and found a convenient bench, placed there, presumably, to give those using the steps a chance to recover from any temporary cardiac or pulmonary difficulties. The steps weren't high but as had been mentioned, they were very steep.

Ellis turned to Luke. 'Parrish – you go on ahead. Just a casual stroll past the cottages. Check around the back if you can. I want to know what we're dealing with. Farrell, you and Simon will stay here. Don't come any closer.'

'Parrish?' said Ruth Wedderburn in surprise. 'Are you . . .?' and then clamped her lips together.

Luke pushed past them and strolled slowly towards the row of cottages, hands in pockets, pausing occasionally to look around and admire the scenery.

Ellis continued. 'Farrell, report. Bubble status?'

'Still contracting but only very slowly.' As one, they all turned out to sea. The fog bank was very much closer. Gulls still screamed and wheeled but their cries were cries of alarm and it was noticeable that none of them would approach the fog.

'We have an hour, perhaps. Shutting down whatever's causing it might buy us a little more time.' He looked up at the cliffs. 'But no power on earth can prevent its inevitable end. We have to find Grint and Jane and get out. Somehow.'

Everyone looked at Ruth Wedderburn.

'Look,' she said, folding her arms defiantly. 'I'd like to make it very clear – I never set out to build a Time-travel device. I've spent years looking at teleportation and its commercial uses. I'm well recognised in my field. About six months ago, I was approached by a man and woman. Representing a large corporation, they said. They wouldn't give me the name because of commercial espionage, they said, although they'd tell me

everything after I signed. Initially, I didn't want to. I prefer to work freelance and then to sell my work on. That way I retain control over my own projects. I don't like being told what to do.'

She paused, compressing her mouth.

'But . . . ?' said Varma.

'But they offered to pay for Simon's treatment. A private clinic, they said, and as soon as possible.'

'They kept their word,' said Varma, watching Simon running up and down the last flight of steps. 'Which makes me think . . .'

'Yes, you're right.' She motioned with her head. 'The people here are not the same as the people with the contract.'

Varma was astonished. 'These two people offered a contract?'

'They did. They had it with them and we sat down, there and then, and we went through it together. Line by line.'

At the mention of a contract, both Ellis and Varma stared at each other, puzzled.

'They forced you to sign, right?' said Varma.

Ruth Wedderburn scowled at her. 'No, of course not. For heaven's sake, how stupid do you think I am? I'd have been on to the police the very moment they were out of the door. No, they left a copy with me and advised me to have my own legal representative check it over. They gave me a month to find one and gave me their contact details should anyone have any queries and then they went away. Long story short – my legal rep came back to me saying it was a fair contract. Not brilliant but fair. She highlighted several areas I might want to try to haggle over and I did. The date for Simon's op was settled – a golden hello, they said. I signed and . . .'

'And they reneged on the deal.' Varma was still searching for signs of villainous intent.

'Nothing of the kind. As far as I know, the deal still stands. Simon's obviously had his op.'

Varma blinked and gestured towards the cottages. 'So who are *these* clowns?'

Ruth Wedderburn sighed and cut her eyes to Simon, who was some way off with Matthew, gazing at the sea.

'Joe Wedderburn. Ex-husband. Bit of a dead loss. Well, enormous dead loss, actually. And his brothers. Morons, all of them. I don't know how, but

I think he must have somehow learned I was working on something profitable and thought he'd get there first. I don't know. You'll have to ask him. If you can find him.'

'Where is he now?'

She shrugged. 'He's too important to stick around – or so he thinks. He left his idiot brothers to supervise while he disappeared. Presumably to sell me and my work to someone.'

Varma leaned forwards. 'You're definitely *not* building a time machine.'

'Of course I'm bloody not. Why would I? I keep telling you – I'm looking at the commercial applications of teleportation. Or I was until this bunch of thugs turned up. We – Simon and I – were living in my flat in London at the time. I was out shopping. Joe stepped out of a doorway and said hello. I stopped dead, and the next thing I knew I was being bundled into a van. In broad daylight. I was frantic. Simon would come home from school and find me gone. Joe told me he already had Simon and if I didn't cooperate . . . Well, he didn't specify, but he can be nasty if he doesn't get his own way and I wasn't going to take the risk. Joe kept saying if I completed my project then he'd let me go. Which I didn't believe for a second. I don't know whether they would actually have harmed either me or Simon but I couldn't take the chance. I was frantic most of the time because Joe wouldn't tell me anything about Simon or where he was.'

Varma, who had done her research on Simon before setting out, was able to fill in the details.

'Because they didn't *know* where he was. They never had him. Simon took himself off to the police station saying he'd lost his mum, expecting them to find her, and when they couldn't, he went into care. Somehow Simon's operation went ahead – thanks to the orphanage, obviously.'

Ruth nodded. 'Then one day it dawned on me that if I could somehow bring my work to the attention of the Time Police, they'd despatch a squad of professionals . . .'

Ellis and Varma refrained from catching each other's eye.

' . . . to investigate and clear everything up. And tell me where Simon was.'

'You deliberately made your teleporter unsafe?'

'No,' she said indignantly. 'I did not. But I suspect Raffy and Jugs thought they could operate it, and they've done something stupid, so yes, I suppose

it is partly my fault.'

'Small cottage,' said Luke, suddenly back among them. 'Fourth one along. In good nick. Typical holiday let. Some signs of occupation. Empty at present.'

'That's where they've been keeping me,' said Ruth. 'Can we move this along, please.'

Luke hadn't finished. 'Large wooden workshop-cum-shed in the back garden. One door. No windows. Two tag signatures inside. A lot of power going in. None coming out. No one in the houses on either side. Probably holidaymakers out for the day. No access from the rear but that's unimportant because the front door's wide open.'

'Never mind all this,' said Ruth, impatiently. 'The important thing is that my apparatus is in the hands of a bunch of thugs who don't know what they're doing.'

'No,' said Ellis. 'The important thing is that two of my officers are probably inside and we have to get them out of there. And quickly. Before this universe collapses.'

Ruth looked around. 'Well, that's not a problem, is it? Where's your pod?'

There was one of those special sorts of silences.

'You *have* brought a pod. Haven't you?'

The special silence did not go away. Not even a little bit.

'How did you get here?'

'Helicopter,' said Luke briefly.

If possible, the silence became even more special.

She was bewildered. 'But . . . surely . . . I thought you'd come about the temporal anomaly. I've been switching things on and off and on and off trying to attract your attention and when you finally do turn up – you come in a bloody helicopter and now we're all trapped.'

There was more foot shuffling and eye avoiding.

'So why *are* you here if not for . . . ? And to return to the question you keep not answering – *why is Simon here?*'

'Oh,' said Simon, materialising at her side at the worst possible moment and pleased to be able to show off his knowledge. 'Mrs Caldicott said I couldn't go to the seaside without my mum and then Uncle Lieutenant said not to worry because he'd take me, so I escaped from that stupid Little Petals place and we came here. With that lady. Who's his girlfriend, I think.'

Although they don't seem very sure.' He reflected. 'There's no gooey kissing.'

'Wait,' said his mother. 'Wait, wait, wait . . . A Time Police officer took you without permission?' She eyed the Time Police. 'And if you're not here to investigate the anomalies then . . . you're here to . . . what? . . . cover things up? Oh my God – you're only here to get Simon back. You haven't got a bloody clue what's going on, do you? Oh God – come on, Simon. We have to get you out of here.'

'No one's going anywhere,' said Ellis, possibly feeling it was time to reimpose Time Police authority. None of this was panning out as he had expected. In fact, this bore all the hallmarks of a typical Team 236 debacle. With added Grint. 'Farrell – you and young Simon are to stay outside until I give the word.'

'Aw,' said Simon mutinously.

'We'll be protecting our rear from possible attack,' said Matthew swiftly. 'The most dangerous job of all.'

'Cool,' said Simon, eyes sparkling. 'Can I have a blaster?'

'NO,' said his mother, Major Ellis, Officer Varma, Officer Farrell and Officer Parrish simultaneously.

Ellis continued. 'Varma, you and I in the lead. Parrish – you're responsible for Mrs Wedderburn's safety.'

It was hard to tell which of those two were least impressed with the other.

'Right – speed and secrecy, everyone. Hit them before they know what's hit them. Let's move.'

Back in the shed, things had not improved for Jane and Grint.

'Your boyfriend's trussed up like a turkey,' observed Bolshy Jane. 'I think it's going to be up to you, sweetie.'

Jane, who had come to that conclusion herself, nodded quietly.

The Time Police have a procedure for dealing with hopeless situations. If you can't change the situation, then look at reducing the odds.

Her legs were free. True, she and the chair were currently as one, but her legs were unbound. Hoping her face was professionally blank, she began to calculate her moves. Cautiously she flexed her feet and ankles. No pins and needles. Good. Right, then. On three.

'Have at them, sweetie,' cried Bolshy Jane.

Three.

Jane planted her feet flat on the floor and stood up. The plastic chair was light enough but clumsy, and she was forced to bend at the waist, which hampered her vision. She swung around, meaning to jab at their captors with the legs, but misjudged the distance. At least one leg smashed into the bank of equipment on the trestle, knocking her off-balance. Something she'd planned to do to *them*.

She staggered sideways and another leg caught on something else. Everything was taking place behind her – she couldn't see what she was doing – but she felt the impact and heard the shout of pain.

Good. She did it again, swinging her backside from left to right. Someone was shouting at her. Actually, it was Grint.

'Jane, for God's sake, stop hitting me with your bloody chair.'

'Sorry,' she shouted, and swung herself around again, searching for a more legitimate target. She heard something clatter to the floor – flowerpots, perhaps. Something moved to her right.

'Impale the bastards,' shrieked Bolshy Jane.

With no clear idea of where she was, where she was going, or who she was aiming at, Jane ran backwards, impacted something and just kept going. There was an enormous crash and suddenly she wasn't moving at all. By the sound of things, she – or, more likely, the chair – had run backwards into the table full of sensitive and fragile equipment. There was an electrical sort of bang that was probably not good news for anyone.

One of the men grabbed hold of her, chair and all, and hurled her across the workroom, knocking over two of the three rubber-legged posts. Jane's feet became entangled in the rubber matting, causing her to stagger sideways.

The first thing she hit was Lieutenant Grint, attempting to struggle to his knees while still tied up. He fell sideways. Raffy's efforts to avoid a toppling Grint led to him colliding with Jane, who by now had lost all sense of direction, together with any clear idea of what was happening. Her chair caught him amidships, knocking the air out of him. He went down with a crash but not before making a grab for her. Still wearing this year's fashionable look in garden furniture and completely out of control, Jane was dragged in a ragged circle. Her chair collided with assailant number two – Whiney-voice, presumably – who had scrambled to his feet, only to

be propelled back towards Grint, who swung his legs around, attempting to knock him off his feet.

Jane fell backwards, hitting her head on what she thought might be one of the table legs. Which might have been the reason why she wasn't immediately aware of what had happened. Blinking, she attempted to sit up and found that she could. Her cheap plastic chair had shattered on impact. She was tied to a chair that no longer existed.

'Come on, sweetie,' shouted a thoroughly excited Bolshy Jane.

Jane staggered to her feet. Even bound, Lt Grint was a formidable foe and had dealt with his adversary by simply rolling on top of him. Jane just had time to make out – somewhat blurrily – a pair of kicking legs and one arm before the second man threw his arms around her and attempted to drag her away.

Instinctively Jane drew up her legs and, bracing her feet against the wall, kicked backwards. The two of them staggered across the workroom, straight into the remaining equipment. The cheap trestle table proved unable to withstand this final assault. The left set of legs collapsed, and everything – equipment, monitors, cabling, keyboards, electronic bits and pieces, Jane and assailant number two – slid noisily to the floor.

Something went bang. Again. There were sparks. Jane was suddenly very thankful she was sprawled across the rubber mat. Which smelled pretty bad, by the way.

There was beeping. Beeping is never good.

'Stupid bitch,' shouted the man currently sprawled across her. 'Look what you did.'

Jane would have reflected on the injustice of his accusation but there wasn't time. The beeping increased in volume and frequency. Those lights still working were flashing red. Glass and broken pieces of electronic paraphernalia had been scattered everywhere. More sparks sparked and there was that smell of burning fish that never bodes well, electronically speaking. The droning noise was rising in tone and increasing in volume, working its way up to an eardrum-piercing whine.

Jane had a horrible feeling this bubble, originally manufactured to protect the universe, had suddenly been rendered so unstable as to present a direct threat. In which case, it could roll up and disappear at any moment.

She tried to shake her hair out of her eyes and look around. Everywhere

was utter chaos. Four people sprawled across the floor, their limbs entangled and in various stages of dishevelment. Other than the lack of togas and the emperor Caligula, this could have been a small but enthusiastic Roman orgy.

‘Sweetie, you wouldn’t know an orgy if it jumped up and bit you,’ said Bolshy Jane. ‘Roman or otherwise.’

There was a small earthquake as Grint struggled to sit up. ‘Jane?’

‘In a minute,’ she said. ‘You.’ She grabbed the nearest illegal by the front of his shirt. ‘Where’s the off switch? Switch it off before it blows us all up.’

He shook his head to clear it. Blood was running down from a cut on his hairline. Jane very much hoped she’d done that. She shook him. ‘Where’s the trip switch?’

‘Nnggggg . . .’

She shook him again. ‘I’ll do it. Just show me where it is.’

‘Nnggggg . . .’

‘Yank out the cables,’ shouted Grint.

Jane tried to get up, but her legs were pinned by the bleeding man, who in turn was half buried under his colleague, who was himself being used as a ground sheet by the biggest man in the Time Police, who couldn’t get up because his hands and feet were bound.

‘It’s like Fred Karno’s fire-trucking army in here,’ said Bolshy Jane in exasperation. ‘Somebody move or we’re all going to die.’

It was at this improbable but dramatic moment that the door was ripped open to reveal Major Ellis and Officer Varma standing framed in the doorway. Jane was unsure whether this was a Good Thing or a Bad Thing. First, however . . .

‘Quickly,’ she shouted. ‘It’s all going to blow. Whatever it is. Find the trip switch. Cut the power.’

Clear and concise, she thought. Outline the problem, offer a solution, advise the time scale. My last act as a Time Police officer. I’m just getting the hang of it, and they’re about to throw me into prison. Where I might possibly be better off.

‘Oh sweetie,’ said Bolshy Jane sorrowfully. ‘You are so not going to do well in prison.’

Ellis looked down. The floor was full of people. He could see thick black cables but no beginnings or ends. He had no idea what was connected to

what. Yanking at random didn't seem the best idea. On the other hand, they were trapped in a highly unstable bubble universe and there was no doubt they were all going to die. The only questions were when and of what?

He turned his head. 'Mrs Wedderburn, I think we could do with your expertise. And quite quickly, please.'

Ruth appeared in the doorway. 'Shit.'

Without hesitation and ignoring the shouts of pain and protest, she ran across the human carpet. 'I'm not sure what I can do. The regulator's smashed. The field generator's overloaded . . .'

'Cut the power,' shouted Jane.

'Not that simple.'

Jane let her head fall back. Of course it wasn't. People who built machinery capable of destroying the universe and everything in it never thought to build in an off switch.

Luke was staring at the shambles in disbelief. 'I can't believe I'm going to die like this.' He peered hopefully at Varma. 'It's not too late . . .'

'Shut up, Parrish.'

'Don't you want to die with a smile on your face?'

'I could shoot you and put a smile on everyone else's face.'

'You see,' said Bolshy Jane. 'You're the only one holding back, sweetie. Everyone else is just itching to kill him.'

Ellis was looking back out through the door. Behind them, the little cottage was slowly being enveloped in a whitish-grey mist. The droning sound was growing louder with every second. Ellis estimated less than five minutes left. And that was probably being wildly over-optimistic.

What did he regret losing most of all? Well, Celia, obviously, and their carefully conducted relationship no one knew anything about.

(In the interests of accuracy – it should be noted he was completely wrong about this. There are no secrets in the Time Police. Bets had been placed.)

Matthew arrived with Simon in tow, saying quietly, 'The front of the cottage has gone, sir. It's right behind us.'

Ruth Wedderburn put her arms around her son. There were tears in her eyes. 'I should have just given Joe what he wanted.'

'He'd probably have killed you if you had,' said Varma. 'You'd still be dead.'

'But at least Simon might not be here.'

There was no answer to that.

Ellis shook his head in despair. There was nothing anyone could do. Simon was crying with his mum. Luke was cursing everyone and everything. Varma was telling him to shut up because she couldn't think straight with him banging on all the time. The two men on the floor were just screaming in general. It would be reasonable to say there was a fair amount of noise going on.

Over all the babble – or possibly under all the babble – someone said quietly, 'Jane.'

Jane turned her head. She had no knife with which to free him; all they could do was look at each other. Jane thought suddenly, *This is it. This is how I die.*

'Jane . . . I . . . it's been fun.'

She smiled. 'It has, hasn't it.'

'Any regrets?'

Emboldened by the knowledge she was about to die, Jane looked him in the eye. 'Yes. One.'

He frowned. 'Really?'

She waited for the familiar inferno to sweep across her face. Nothing happened. Perhaps, when it has only seconds left to live, the body has other things to think about.

She opened her mouth to articulate her one regret. No one would hear her over the sounds of so many people yelling at each other and the whine of terminally overloaded equipment. She put her hand on his arm. 'I wish we had . . .'

Luke began to shout, 'The fog's coming. The fog's coming.'

Tendrils of mist crept out of the back door towards them.

An unexpected breeze blew cold in Ellis's face. The mist shifted and swirled in the draught.

'I don't believe it,' he said. 'There's something out there.'

Ellis and Varma lined up in the doorway, weapons raised. Luke gently pulled Ruth Wedderburn and Simon to stand behind him. Which would keep them safe for the length of time it would take the mist to snuff out his life. And then it would be their turn.

The sun had gone. There were no shadows. Darkness was falling. In every sense. The mist was almost upon them. Jane tried very hard to rid her mind

of the word *tentacles*. It was very easy to imagine something monstrous emerging from the fog. Perhaps this was how universes ended – not quietly fading away to nothing, nor being swallowed by the void, but consumed by monstrous universe-eating entities. Her limbs would be torn asunder. Her still-beating heart would be tossed aside as something hideously grotesque gnawed on . . .

‘Well, hello there,’ cried a voice. ‘Can we be of any assistance?’

It took a moment. When you’re braced for tentacle-waving monstrosities and the End of All Things, a cheerful voice redolent of Cheltenham Ladies’ College and Mademoiselle Leonie’s Finishing School for Wayward Daughters of the Aristocracy can come as rather a shock.

‘May we come in?’ enquired the voice at the door. ‘Goodness, what a mess. Lots of broken glass, Pennyroyal. Do be careful where you put your feet. We don’t want any nasty accidents, do we? Speaking of which, we are all aware we’re standing in a bubble universe, aren’t we?’

‘We are,’ said Varma, pulling herself together at the prospect of fresh arrestees.

‘Oh, jolly good. Just checking. Now obviously I don’t want to ruin your day, but we really need to be going quite quickly. Are we able to offer anyone a lift?’

Pennyroyal was already making his way among the fallen, pulling those who could stand to their feet and efficiently severing the bonds of the one who couldn’t.

It is worth noting that he and Grint eyed each other professionally, apparently came to the same conclusion, and thereafter steadfastly ignored each other.

Ellis sighed, muttering, ‘This should not be how Time Police ops go down.’

‘You’ll get used to it,’ said Luke comfortingly.

Smallhope mustered them all in the doorway. ‘Follow me, everyone who can.’

Ruth pushed Simon at Major Ellis. ‘Look after him.’

‘Mum?’

‘It’s OK, Simon. I’ll be fine.’

Simon gazed up at her, his mouth slack with shock. ‘Aren’t you – aren’t you coming?’

She smiled sadly. 'I can't. None of us who were here at the bubble's inception can leave. We're of this universe. If I go with you, then there will be two of me and that's very bad.'

Two huge tears spilled over. 'Mummy . . . ?'

'No, no. It's fine. I'll be fine. Your friends will find me in the real world.' She looked at Ellis. 'Won't you?'

He nodded. 'Yes, Mrs Wedderburn. I promise we will.'

'There, Simon. You'll see me soon. Now go.'

Grint picked up Simon, who struggled and kicked out at him. 'Put me down. I want my mummy.'

Ellis was the last one out. He turned back. Raffy and Jugs stared at him. Ruth Wedderburn nodded and then slammed the shed door shut in his face. There was shouting. Ellis turned away.

The pod had made a terrible mess of the garden. The fence had been crushed, along with a garden swing, a barbecue, the fellow of Jane's shattered plastic chair, and a sad clump of fritillaria meleagris.

'Doesn't matter,' said Smallhope, waving an airy hand. 'None of this will exist in' – she consulted her watch – 'one minute twenty-nine seconds. Come along, everyone. Chop-chop.'

Major Ellis led his team into the pod, including the struggling Simon. Grint held him tightly as the first faint tendrils of fog swirled in through the door.

Pennyroyal was last in, taking a final look around outside and then closing the door.

'All present and correct, my lady.'

'In which case . . .'

The world faded . . .

They landed in Battersea Park. At about half past three in the afternoon, as far as Jane could make out. No one screamed and ran away so Jane assumed Lady Amelia had a camo device similar to the one employed by the Time Police.

'Well,' said Lady Amelia, turning from the console. 'Wasn't that exciting? Sorry to have cut things so close. We've had the devil's own job tracking you down. If the other Mrs Wedderburn hadn't had the brains to cause a series of temporal anomalies, we might never have found you, I'm afraid.'

Every Time Police officer present silently noted that just about everyone had been aware of the temporal anomalies before they had.

‘Where’s my mum?’ sobbed Simon. ‘Where did she go?’

‘Your mum’s in Rushby – in the cottage, waiting for us to come and rescue her,’ said Grint.

‘But you left her behind.’ He beat his fists against Grint’s shoulder. Tears ran down his cheeks, cutting channels in the dust, dirt and candyfloss.

‘Give him to me,’ said Pennyroyal. He set Simon down on the floor. ‘Now then, young soldier. That wasn’t your real mum back there. That was a ghost mum. You and me, we’re gonna go and rescue your real mum right now. You’re coming too.’

‘Just a minute,’ said Ellis, his Time Police instincts rising to the surface. ‘Mrs Wedderburn will be arrested for . . . something . . . and Simon must be returned to the . . .’ He paused.

‘Little Petals Exceptions for Residential Children,’ supplied Luke helpfully.

Ellis ignored this. ‘And Grint and Lockland have questions to answer. So, with many thanks to you and Smallhope for your timely intervention, we’ll take Simon and complete our mission.’

Heads turned from Ellis to Smallhope. Who smiled. With just a hint of steel. ‘Oh dear – and we were all getting on so famously. As I am sure you’re all aware by now, Ms Wedderburn is an employee of Parrish Industries and, as such, is entitled to their legal protection. As the victim of a dastardly attempt to force her to work for . . .’ she flicked Simon a glance, ‘. . . nameless miscreants, she and her delightful son have been subjected to a great ordeal. Obviously, Mr Parrish was anxious we locate their whereabouts so they can receive the very best care as soon as possible.’

Ellis, who had a very good idea that once Ruth Wedderburn and her son disappeared into the maw of Parrish Industries, it would prove almost impossible to dislodge them, battled on. ‘I regret, Lady Amelia . . .’

‘Oh, so do I,’ she assured him.

‘But the Time Police . . .’

‘You can have the miscreants,’ she said. ‘A gesture of goodwill on our part.’

Major Ellis was prepared to go down fighting. ‘Nevertheless, the Time Police . . .’

‘Will emerge from this incident with nothing but credit and the highest esteem.’

Ellis was very far from convinced of this. There was still the tiny matter of Grint and Lockland.

‘Quit while you’re ahead, major,’ growled a low voice behind him and Pennyroyal opened the door. ‘Toot sweet, now.’

Ellis made one final attempt. ‘Can you prove that Mrs Wedderburn is actually . . . ?’

‘Pennyroyal, the contract, please.’

Pennyroyal produced a document. No one saw whence it came. Another dimension, possibly. Ellis wouldn’t be at all surprised. He flicked through the document and there was Ruth Wedderburn’s signature. Dated six months ago. Ellis sighed. Smallhope was still smiling. Pennyroyal was still politely at the door. All that could change in an instant, of course. And how much fuss should he make over this? There was still the matter of Grint and Lockland to resolve with the Residential Community for Exceptional Petals. Or whatever. He was conscious this really hadn’t been the best day for the Time Police. And it wasn’t over yet.

With a sigh, he handed back the contract and marshalled his troops out of the pod.

Once they’d checked in at TPHQ, Varma disappeared back to security. Matthew wandered off to find Mikey. In a spirit of pure mischief, Luke followed Ellis, Grint and Jane to Ellis’s office. Where Captain Farenden was waiting for them and looking unfamiliarly harassed. No Hay, thank God. This was all still under the radar, presumably.

Captain Farenden wasted no time. ‘Where the hell have you been? And what have you done with Simon Wedderburn? I’ve had the bloody Little Childcare in the Community for Petals people on at me all afternoon. Hay doesn’t know anything about this yet, but I can’t sit on things for much longer without incurring her wrath, which will increase exponentially for every minute I keep it from her. I’m really hoping you managed to resolve this.’

‘Well,’ said Ellis, who had been thinking. ‘Simon’s on his way to join his mother, who is living in Rushby. The official line will be that Lt Grint, with Officer Lockland to act as the appropriate chaperone, escorted him there for

a family reunion. His mother, apparently, has a position of some importance in Parrish Industries R&D department.'

Luke nodded vigorously even though no one had asked him.

Ellis continued. 'We only became involved because she had been snatched by people who wanted her to work for them instead. When we arrived, Grint and Lockland were already dealing with the miscre— illegals. The equipment has been destroyed along with any evidence. Ruth Wedderburn is about to be returned to Parrish Industries . . .' he crossed his fingers, 'and will – no doubt with the assistance of Parrish Industries' frighteningly efficient legal department – issue a statement confirming all this when she has recovered from her ordeal.'

'That's all very well, Matthew, but what about the . . . Thing for Exceptional . . . Things people? They're out for blood.' Captain Farenden turned to face Lt Grint. 'Worst of all, they tell me you already made one attempt to take Simon out of the home a couple of months ago. You idiot – what the fire-trucking fire truck did you think you were doing?'

Jane wished the ground would open up and swallow her. And Grint. And the bloody Little Petals Thing for Something.

'It was all my fault,' said Grint doggedly. 'Officer Lockland's only reason for accompanying me was to persuade me to return Simon. I wouldn't listen. She did her best. All blame should rest with me.'

'It does bloody well rest with you,' shouted Captain Farenden, reaching for his com.

'Sweetie, you need to think of something,' said Bolshy Jane. 'And pretty damn quick or his life is over. And yours, too.'

'I don't know what . . .'

'For fire-truck's sake – do something. Anything.'

'Um,' said Jane, reverting to type with her usual sunset flush. 'Sirs, I wonder if I could . . . ?'

'You?' said Farenden, apparently just realising she was there. 'What can you do?'

'Well, I'm not really sure I can do anything,' said Jane. 'But . . . um . . . I think I know a man who can.'

'And finally . . .' said Bolshy Jane.

Jane turned to Officer Parrish. 'Luke – I want you—' She got no further.

'Jane – I knew you'd eventually come to your senses. Find somewhere

comfortable, take off your clothes and I'll be with you as soon as I've finished making out my report.'

Other than not being green, it might have been difficult to distinguish Grint from the Incredible Hulk.

Jane closed her eyes and persevered. '... to do me a favour.'

Luke was disappointed. 'Oh. Well, that doesn't sound like half as much fun.'

'That could depend on how you do it.'

He grinned. 'Intriguing.'

Reluctantly, Grint began to assume a more human appearance.

Jane talked for a few minutes, and when she'd finished speaking, it would be fair to say that this was one of the few occasions in his life when Officer Parrish was absolutely gobsmacked.

'You're kidding.'

'No.'

'But ...'

'Just do it, Luke.'

'Jane, your faith in my powers of persuasion is ...'

'Fully justified, Parrish. If anyone can do it, you can.'

'That's very true, but ...'

'Please, Luke.'

Conscious of all eyes on him, Luke stared blankly at the wall for a minute or two, engaged in unfamiliarly deep thought. Then he blinked, grinned, blinked again, grinned again, sat down at Major Ellis's desk and opened up his screen.

'Please could everyone oblige me by not saying a word for the next few moments.' He paused. 'No matter what you hear.'

'Parrish,' said Ellis, 'if you think this is an excuse for some silly ...'

'Hush, please,' said Luke. 'I'm about to push my luck to the limit and enjoyable though that is, I need to concentrate.' He looked at Grint. 'If this goes wrong, I'm likely to be in even deeper shit than you.'

'Unlikely,' said Grint.

Jane was beaming at him. 'Thank you, Luke.'

'I haven't done it yet.'

'But you're trying. Thank you.'

Luke took a deep, steady breath, and called up his father.

‘Luke, my boy – how are you?’

Luke wasted no time with pleasantries. ‘Dad, I want you to fund the complete refurbishment of a local children’s home.’

There was a short silence, presumably while Parrish père replayed that sentence again. And then, possibly, again after that. ‘What?’

‘Fully equipped, up-to-date, all-singing, all-dancing, top-of-the-range facilities for staff and inmates, climbing frames, cattle prods – you know the sort of thing.’

Raymond Parrish blinked. ‘Now?’

‘Well, no need to start carving out the foundations right this very moment, but putting up the cash – yes.’

‘Do we know how much . . . ?’

‘Well, I don’t have a clear idea, obviously, but you did that thing for the Westgate Foundation, so say around the same amount, give or take a bit. Six point five million pounds. Sterling.’

There was another short silence before Raymond Parrish cautiously enquired, ‘Are these facilities to be made of solid gold?’

‘Up to you, Dad. You’re the one putting up the money. Can I say yes?’

‘To whom?’

Luke took a deep breath and went for it. ‘The Little Petals Residential Childcare Community for Exceptional Children.’

‘The what?’

‘To be honest, Dad, I’m not sure I can say that again.’

‘Why?’

‘Because they’re the ones that need the endowment.’

‘I meant, why am I doing this at all? If you cast your mind back two years or so, you will remember I trafficked you to the Time Police precisely to put a stop to your expensive and profligate ways.’

‘I do remember, Dad. How’s that working out for you?’

‘Unexpectedly.’

‘But will you do it?’

‘To what end?’

‘So many reasons. I’m sure you know by now that Mrs Wedderburn and her son are being returned to you and your investment is safe. Courtesy of Lt Grint and the Time Police, Dad.’ He paused. ‘And after Lacey Gardens, we owe Jane.’

The silence went on.

And on.

And on.

And on.

Everyone stood stock-still. Jane hardly dared breathe.

Luke said quietly, 'Are you still there, Dad?'

'I am not entirely sure. Ms Steel, could you confirm that I am in fact sitting at my desk, appropriately clothed, sober, and in full possession of my faculties, please?'

There was a short pause and then the screen split to reveal Ms Steel. 'To the best of my knowledge, Mr Parrish – yes.'

'Ms Steel seems to feel that all is well with me, although I confess, I do still harbour doubts.'

'Dad – I need to know now.'

'This very moment?'

'Yes. Salient points for the publicity people: Simon Wedderburn. Promised a holiday at the seaside. Mother disappeared. Heartbroken. Grint – you remember him? Built like a high-sided artic? Offered to take him. Home wouldn't release him. Grint took matters into his own hands. With Jane. All sorts of shit hitting all sorts of fans. Need to bribe the home. No need to mention that last bit. Hence requirement for masses of cash, Dad. Masses of immediate cash.'

'This does not sound even remotely legal.'

'Doesn't normally stop you. Yes or no, Dad?'

Raymond Parrish appeared lost for words. Luke chewed his bottom lip. The longer this went on, the less chance there was of his father cooperating. And no help from either Ellis or Farenden, both of whom appeared too stunned to speak. He had a horrible feeling this wasn't going to work.

Ms Steel leaned forwards. 'Mr Parrish has signified his agreement, Luke. Flash me the details and I will start the ball rolling. The new building is to be redesignated the Raymond Parrish Facility and there will be an opening ceremony which Mr Parrish will attend. Together with as many carefully selected minor royals and major dignitaries as Parrish Industries and the Time Police can muster between them. If Lt Grint is mentioned at all, it will only be in a very favourable light.'

'Um . . .' said Grint, and was ignored.

‘I shall notify the . . .’ she continued without even the slightest hesitation, ‘supervisor of the Little Petals Residential Childcare Community for Exceptional Children of their unexpected good fortune on completion of this call. Mr Parrish sends his very best wishes for the success of this project.’

Raymond Parrish assumed his *et tu, Brute* expression. ‘Do I?’

‘I’m sure you were about to, sir.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘It is the duty of every competent PA to anticipate and implement the needs of their employer.’

‘You sound just like Captain Farenden,’ said Luke.

‘All PAs are connected by a psychic link. Hurt one and you hurt all. To your detriment.’

‘I think that’s the most frightening thing I’ve ever heard.’

Captain Farenden, who had been staring, stunned, at the screen, cleared his throat. ‘This is Charles Farenden. I am adjutant to Commander Hay.’ He smiled. ‘Ms Steel is not wrong. There is a Code.’

‘Never heard of it,’ said Luke.

‘It is unspoken.’

‘Or seen it.’

‘It is unwritten.’

Ms Steel smiled at Captain Farenden. ‘Every newly qualified PA signs up to the charter upon admittance to the Secret Guild.’

‘In their own blood, I assume,’ said Raymond Parrish drily.

‘Not if we can use someone else’s, sir.’

Major Ellis, who had been watching carefully, leaned forwards. ‘Ms Steel, this is Major Ellis speaking. The Time Police will be delighted to assist in any way necessary, and I feel this enterprise would greatly benefit from you and Captain Farenden getting together – as soon as possible, in fact – to ensure everything is steered to a successful conclusion that will benefit all parties. Captain Farenden is an officer of considerable resource. Allow me to make him available to you.’ He paused and then added blandly, ‘For whatever purpose you may think fit.’

‘Thank you, Major. Your offer is greatly appreciated. Please inform Captain Farenden that I can be with him in an hour and we can work on the wording of the statements. We will need to put together something that

reveals Lt Grint's recent actions to be motivated solely by a selfless desire to do good and benefit his fellow man.'

'What?' said Grint, who had never, in all his life, felt the slightest desire to benefit his fellow man and was buggered if he was going to start now.

Ms Steel ignored him. 'We will need a soundbite, I think.' She closed her eyes. 'How about – *The Time Police Officer with a Heart.*'

'Perfect,' said Luke, before any of his fellow officers could pull themselves together and object. 'I'd definitely run with that if I were you.'

'In one hour then, Captain Farenden.'

'Well, there we go,' said Luke. 'Wasn't that easy? Keep me posted, Dad.' He shut down the screen.

There was a short silence. 'What just happened?' said Captain Farenden, slightly bewildered.

'I think you've been trafficked,' said Major Ellis.

Some forty-five minutes later, a stealthy figure crept soundlessly along the corridor – soundlessly, that is, apart from the occasional 'chink'. Just to make things clear, there was no reason on earth why the figure could not have proceeded in a perfectly normal fashion. The figure had every right to be there and its purpose – if a little unusual – was certainly not illegal. However, this was Luke Parrish, whose main talent, according to most Time Police officers, was making life difficult for himself.

He paused outside Captain Farenden's office, glanced swiftly up and down the corridor and listened carefully at the door. After a few seconds, he tapped gently.

There was no response.

He opened the door and slipped inside, where he remained for some seven or eight seconds. Emerging empty-handed, he cast another careful glance up and down the corridor. A door opened and Captain Farenden's voice was heard informing someone his meeting would commence in fifteen minutes and could he have that information by then, please.

Luke whisked himself off down the corridor.

By the time Captain Farenden returned to his office, it was empty again and almost exactly as he had left it.

With the exception of two glasses and a bottle of very excellent wine sitting sedately on his blotter.

Having caused as much trouble as possible for as many people as possible, Officer Parrish was sitting contentedly in Team 236's office. An illegal coffee, liberally laced with illegal vodka, sat at his elbow as he considered what to put in his report. And more importantly – what *not* to put in his report.

One very unproductive quarter of an hour later, he sighed and stood up, intending to go in search of more vodka, Matthew and inspiration. In that order.

The door opened and Luke found himself eyeball to nose with the mountain commonly known as Lt Grint.

Neither man moved.

Neither man spoke.

Almost certain he was about to find himself drop-kicked through the nearest window, Luke braced himself.

Finally, the mountain spoke. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome,' said Luke, too surprised to say anything else.

Grint nodded and walked away.

Cue flash-forward music and wavy images, signifying a return to the present.

Having opened her eyes and not found Lt Grint standing in front of her, Commander Hay was questioning her adjutant as to his – Lt Grint's – precise whereabouts.

Captain Farenden had prepared for this. 'Alas, ma'am. Lt Grint's mission was bumped up the list and he was forced to depart for Paris, 1811, directly after his briefing.'

'Forced?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'By whom?'

'Operational requirements, ma'am.'

'Really?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'That is unfortunate.'

'Deeply, ma'am.'

‘For you, I mean. Baulked of my prey, I must now rely on you to satisfy my curiosity.’

‘Obviously, I shall do my best, ma’am.’

‘A statement that fills me with the gravest misgivings. Not least because I could be here until midnight while you meander your way through yet another rambling attempt to distract me from something from which you consider I should be distracted.’

There was a pause while they both disentangled that sentence.

Captain Farenden looked her in the eye, saying, ‘I shall be very happy to supply full details, ma’am, should you directly order me to do so.’

Commander Hay held his gaze. ‘Perhaps, in that case, you should confine yourself only to the facts you consider relevant.’

‘Well, ma’am. Christmas party. Shabby orphanage. Officer Parrish mentioned to his father. Raymond Parrish stepped up with appropriate funds. Lots of excellent publicity for him and the Time Police. As, I believe, you requested back in November, ma’am.’

‘And yet, still no mention of Lt Grint.’

‘I believe, given our involvement with the scheme, Parrish Industries were searching for a suitable officer to be the public face of the Time Police for this enterprise.’

‘And they selected Grint?’

‘So it would appear, ma’am.’

‘Who were the other candidates? Herod? Hitler? Vlad the Impaler?’

‘Regrettably, ma’am, I am not privy to that information.’

Having lulled her prey, Commander Hay pounced. ‘Really? Even after all those late-night sessions with Ms Steel?’

Captain Farenden blushed.

Unkind people might have said Commander Hay savoured the moment.

‘Can I take it that Lt Grint has never figured in any of your frequent . . . discussions?’

‘I can honestly say that no one has been further from our thoughts, ma’am.’

‘Understandable, I suppose.’ She looked up. ‘And Lt Grint is to be the public face of the Time Police?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Our – for want of a better phrase – poster boy?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘The best option?’

‘So I firmly believe, ma’am.’

‘Well, yes, it is marginally better, I suppose, than Lt Grint being arrested for kidnapping. Followed by a sordid trial. Followed by prison time for him. And probably Lockland, too. To say nothing of the end of your career for attempting a cover-up. And Major Ellis. Dishonourable discharges for both of you. And a massive scandal that would probably have finished me as well.’

Captain Farenden regarded his commanding officer with resignation. ‘I should have guessed you already knew, ma’am, shouldn’t I?’

‘Yes, you should, but I do agree – yours was an infinitely better option. Good call, Captain.’

‘Thank you, ma’am.’

‘Goodnight, Charlie.’

THE END

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