

PROLOGUE

Jack's dad was a wacky inventor, his mother was a dotty professor of economics, his sister was too snooty and clever for her own good, and his younger brother was a constant pain in the neck. Jack was convinced he was the only reasonable, normal person in the house. He was at the moment helping Roger, his father, in their basement, which served as Roger's workshop. Jack wasn't assisting his dad out of any sense of duty, but because he knew if he was anywhere within the call of his sister, he would have to give her a hand with vacuuming the bedrooms of their Victorian house. Jack hated housework.

'Hand me the small torque wrench,' said Roger, from underneath the veteran motorcycle he was rebuilding. 'It's the shiny one with the black grip.'

Jack did as he was told, saying conversationally, 'I might join the army when I leave school. Or the navy.'

If he was expecting an argument from his dad, he got it typically in the form of mild sarcasm.

'Why not the Royal Air Force? You can kill more people with bombs dropped from a jet plane.'

'It's not all about killing people. You learn to do a trade.'

'And what trade would you like to excel at?'

Jack had recently been impressed by a television advertisement, aimed at young men who liked action and adventure.

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'I dunno - telecommunications?'

Roger nodded and banged his head on the exhaust pipe.

'Ouch!' He sat up and rubbed his temple, then looked at his son. 'All right. Go ahead. Join the army and communicate. Then perhaps we'll get some communication out of you when they let you come home on leave. Your mother says all you do these days is grunt at her when she asks you a question.'

Jack shrugged. 'She always asks such daft things.'

'Like what?'

'Like "How did your football kit get so dirty?" What am I supposed to say to that? "Well mum, I don't know. We played in this enclosed white dome, with a sparkling clean floor and white walls. I'm mystified by how mud got on my shirt."'

'There's no need for sarcasm. You don't hear me using it.'

'Ha!'

'What's that supposed to mean? Pass me the flathead screwdriver. No, that's a Phillips. The flathead's the one with the straight tip. Thanks. So you think I'm sarcastic?'

'Only all the time.'

'OI! YOU TWO! DAD? CAN I HAVE A BIT OF TOAST?'

The yell came down from above, from the mouth of Davey, Jack's younger brother.

Roger sighed and said, 'I swear that young man was born with the voice of an elephant. Go and tell him all right.' He rose from the floor, covered in grease. 'Your sister's probably finished the housework by now, so you needn't worry about coming back.'

THE HUNDRED-TOWERED CITY

Jack gave his father a hurt look. 'Dad, whatever do you mean?'

'You know what I mean, mister.'

As well as being a brilliant inventor, Jack's dad Roger Kettle was a motorcycle enthusiast. Being British, he especially liked those bikes of old - the Vincent Black Lightning, the Ariel Arrow and most of the BSA models - which his own father had ridden in his youth. So naturally, having invented a time-travelling device, Roger chose to attach it to a veteran motorcycle in order to disguise its true purpose from prying eyes.

Roger was a brilliant man. He was one of those people who locked themselves into their workroom and had to be bullied or coaxed out for meals. When he was in the middle of an invention, he slept on a sofa-bed in the basement. This time he had surpassed himself. Having read all there was to read about the feasibility and theory of time travel (which many scientists thought impossible), Roger went off and followed a line of discovery all his own. That was what he always did. He listened to what others had written, so he knew what the laws of science said, then thought his way along a completely different path.

His reward here had been to discover that time did not travel in a straight line, but was a spiral groove, as on an old-fashioned vinyl record. To travel in time all you had to do was jump from one groove to the next, if a device could be made in order to accomplish this feat. He couldn't help himself once he had come across this amazing discovery and simply had to tell his family, who all thought it was fantastically mind-boggling, even Mum, who occasionally

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became impatient with these strange scientific explorations of her husband, which it had to be said very often produced quite extraordinary but valueless inventions.

Roger's mind blazed with triumph when he made this discovery. Feverishly, he worked for two whole years on a device which enabled the user to hop across the grooves. The device was quite small, about the size of a mobile phone, and fitted easily into Roger's favourite machine. The motorcycle could still be used as an ordinary motorbike as well as a time machine.

A sidecar was added for the use of extra passengers.

'You understand what we're doing here, Jack?' Roger said to him, as Jack climbed the stairs. 'I'm building a *time machine*.'

Jack smiled inwardly at his father's attempt at a drama.

'Sure, Pop. A time machine. Brilliant. I've read heaps of stories about time machines. Read a new one only the other day.'

Roger went a bit sniffy. 'H.G. Wells was the original,' he said, rather predictably. 'All the others are copies as far as I'm concerned. Oh, here's your sister. Coming to help, Annie?'

Annie, one year younger than Jack, had poked her face around the doorway above. She screwed up her nose.

'As if,' she replied. 'I'm off out, Dad. OK? Going to the cinema with Josie.'

Even before Roger replied she was back to texting on her mobile.

'You might learn something,' he suggested.

'I already know everything.' She flounced away.

'Women!' muttered Roger. 'Thank the Lord there's only two of 'em in this house.'

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Jack grinned. 'We outnumber them.'

After Jack had sorted out Davey, he went back to the serious business of helping with the time machine, which was nearing completion. He did little more than hand spanners and calipers to his father, but he loved the fact that he was in on a new and great invention. Time machines had been talked about for a very long while and now his father - *his* father - was close to producing one. Roger had often said that science fiction hardware was fantasy one day and fact the next. 'Witness the geostationary satellite,' he had told Jack, 'first fictionalised by Arthur C. Clarke and later becoming fact. Now there are satellites up there for television and telephones and you name it.'

'Where are we going first?' asked Jack, handing his dad a set of Allen keys and marvelling at the shiny machine under construction. 'Or should I say *when*?' He spoke as if it were to be a Sunday outing, a picnic in the country or a trip to the beach.

'We? You're going nowhere, young man. Much too dangerous. We might have the machine but we know nothing about the travel or what might happen when we arrive. There are all sorts of unknown hazards, from ending up in a terrible situation - the middle of a battle, for instance - to catching the plague on landing. No, we have to proceed with caution, Jack. I will do some short-hop experiments and we'll see where things lead us from there . . .' Both Jack and Roger looked up at a sound from the doorway. Ten-year-old Davey stood there, eating toast and covered from head to foot in foul-smelling slime.

'Hi!' said Davey brightly. 'I fell in the compost pit. That's

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dangerous, that is. You should have a cover on it, Dad. People could get killed.'

'The compost pit is behind the garden shed. You can't fall in it unless you climb over the fence. Were you climbing on the fence?'

Davey made no reply, crunching his burnt toast.

'If your mother sees you up here like that,' said Roger, '*you'll* be toast. Get to the bathroom, chuck those clothes in the basket and shower before she comes in. Uh-uh, there's the door now. Quick.'

Davey scuttled away. A female voice floated down the stairs. It was Kate, Jack's mum.

'Anybody in? Someone come and help me get the shopping out of the car. It's heavy.'

'I'll go,' said Jack. 'If Davey goes, he's dead.'

Roger nodded, absorbed by his task once more.