

Silent Meridian

The Time Traveler Professor: Book 1

Elizabeth Crowens

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Edinburgh, 1898

Scotland was just barely crawling its way out of the nineteenth century. I was a naïve, but ambitious student studying music at the University of Edinburgh hurrying over to meet Arthur Conan Doyle, the man who would change my life forever.

“John Patrick Scott, sir,” I said as I approached Mr. Doyle, who was already seated at a back corner table where he hoped he wouldn’t be recognized. He had picked the Deacon Brodie, the pub that inspired the Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

I extended my hand to greet him and removed my rain-soaked hat, while my overcoat slipped out of my hands and fell on the floor by accident. It was still hard to believe that good fortune had finally brought us together, but we were both nervous.

“The pleasure is all mine.” Doyle responded like a father to his son.

“Mr. Conan Doyle, or should I call you Doctor Doyle?” I said unsure how to address him.

Doyle scrutinized me from top to bottom as he signaled the waiter. “John, call me Arthur,” he said casually, ignoring the tension I couldn’t control.

“Sir, I’m so honored that you agreed to discuss this matter. Perhaps you can enlighten me in a way that I’ve failed to comprehend.”

I wanted to ask him about my unusual turn of events straight away but he caught me off guard and was dead set on pulling me into the swift current of an unexpected conversation.

“Can I assume you believe in the transmigration of souls?” he asked.

“Until now, I haven’t given it a lot of thought,” I said, unsure as to which direction he was leading.

“Did you ever read those books about that Swiss doctor who felt his body and soul had been taken over by a Benedictine monk? That presented a curious case. He claims that he was approached by the spirit of an elderly monk before he died, and that the monk needed to rent his body to continue his spiritual mission.”

“Rent?” I choked in disbelief.

“We truly don’t take anything with us when we pass on, do we? This monk knew that he was dying, and therefore had to replace his physical body with something more youthful and vital.”

“That’s incredible. It debunks the theory that you have to die and be reborn as an infant to carry on your spirit,” I said.

Mr. Doyle had the tinge of excitement in his voice.

“John, here’s another instance. I’ve had my suspicions about a famous musician who had an obsession about a notorious and controversial mystic. You’d surmise by his overwhelming attraction to that person that he might’ve been him in a previous lifetime, but facts were clear that he was born three years before the mystic died. My understanding is that the mystic knew he didn’t have long in his present incarnation. Therefore he made plans for some sort of partial soul transference while he was still alive

to imprint his essence upon the child. That would've allowed him to carry on and accomplish unfinished business that couldn't have been executed otherwise. Essentially he had the ability of being two places at once."

"Sounds more like Spiritualism," I replied.

"Honestly, John, I don't think there are any steadfast rules when it comes to this matter. That's what makes it so intriguing."

I sensed he had a secret agenda.

Doyle reloaded his churchwarden pipe with fresh tobacco and continued, "This is not at all like anything you've ever read from H.G. Wells or Jules Verne. We're poking holes in every treatise written on the subject—the idea of being able to reincarnate a part of yourself while you are still alive into another soul."

Our conversation was quickly becoming like a speeding train ready to jump the tracks. Realizing this, Doyle slowed down the pace and took a deep breath. He carefully composed his next statement.

"Fiction it may seem to be but it's not hocus pocus. Don't you also find it strange that you somehow found yourself initiated into a mystical order on a commuter train bound from London to Edinburgh when the instigators kept on mistaking you for me? There are no accidents."

I became silent for a moment, stalling for time as I slowly raised my glass of ale to my lips. As soon as I fished a small red book out of my coat pocket and placed it on

the table in front of us Arthur eyed it intently. It had been the source of intrigue that led me to Doyle in the first place and had piqued his curiosity as much as it did mine.

“Could I have done something terrible in my youth that caused this to happen?”

“You have no recollections, John?”

I bit my lip as internal chaos wrested with memories. “I remember so little of my childhood. I wish that I could.”

“You’re a smart young man. I’m sure you’ll come up with a clever deduction.”

Mr. Doyle paused to relight his pipe. He had an unnerving look in his eye, which I vainly tried to read into, but he took me for a spin when he brought up the next topic.

“On another note, John, have you ever considered that people have the capability of communicating without speech, and I’m not talking about writing letters?”

“Pardon me?”

“Imagine communicating by mere thoughts. I’ve always wanted to experiment with someone open to these concepts. God knows—my brothers at the Society for Psychological Research certainly talk enough about it. My wife, Touie, has been an unwilling subject and is not the most objective choice.”

I looked at him, somewhat perplexed. “Are you asking me to accurately guess what you’re thinking?”

“Come now. We’ll play a game. I’ll form an image in my mind, and for the next

minute I will try to project it into yours. Clear your thoughts of any distractions and be as receptive as possible,” he explained.

As much as I tried, I couldn't have been more preoccupied. Images of that fateful event flashed through my brain. Once again, my recollections revealed my rain-soaked train ticket in hand. I kept arguing with the steward that I thought he was putting me in the wrong cabin. An erroneous judgment had been made when three strangers insisted that I was Arthur. He and I couldn't have been more different in physical appearance. He was a large, athletic man with a distinguished moustache. On the other hand, I had baby smooth skin and couldn't grow facial hair to save my life. I was nearly twenty years younger and much shorter with wild auburn hair that resembled Maestro Beethoven's with the exception of premature strands of gray.

It was impossible that I could've been mistaken for him, so why was I singled out? Was there laudanum in my brandy? Details spun like a whirlwind. I must've been in a drug-induced stupor but I was initiated into some secret Masonic-like society, and when it was all over those mysterious men were gone. What remained were an engraved silver ring on my finger and an ominous red book on the seat beside me.

“Looks like you've seen a ghost,” Arthur said breaking my trance. He realized my thoughts had been elsewhere.

“I felt like I had,” I said, barely able to articulate. I tried to tame my wild mane in place. Visions faded in and out. Timelines jumped. So I gulped down another swig of ale to focus on the present.

Arthur leaned in closer. "I can see you're still worried about that event on the train. Those men have been after me for some time. Why? It's hard to fathom. I'll dilly-dally with notions here and there about Sherlock Holmes and his partner, Watson, who fancy themselves as detectives. Me? I'm just a simple doctor and writer with interests in Spiritualism trying to find scientific explanations for the unknown."

"Arthur, what would anyone want with an unassuming music student like me?"

"Personally, I don't think this was A Case of Identity," Arthur replied with a smile.

Obviously he meant to say that my dilemma was not a case of mistaken identity, not the name of one of his famous Sherlock stories. He was pleased that I caught the humor of his play on words.

"Perhaps it has something to do with that book," he said pointing to the one I had brought.

"I'm concerned that it's dangerous, that it's a curse. I wish I had never found it," I replied as I shoved it back into my pocket and drained my glass.

* * *

One week later as I was returning home from school, my landlady, Lydia Campbell, yelled from the kitchen as I trudged my muddied shoes through the front door of her boarding house. "John, a letter from Undershaw arrived for you today! I wonder whom it could be from? You don't know anyone from Undershaw, do you?"

Oh, yes I did. I snatched the letter and ran upstairs so fast that I nearly tripped on my muffler and fell on my face. I poured myself a glass of port to calm my nerves, doffed my wet garments and sank into my most comfortable brass-studded leather chair that I affectionately called my thinking chair, where I had created many a melody in my head, could think deep thoughts, and drift off to dreamland.

* * *

Dear John,

I wholeheartedly enjoyed our conversation at the Deacon Brodie and kept my promise of a prompt reply. By now, you are well aware of the fact that my passion to explore the realms of Spiritualism and related paranormal phenomena far surpasses any personal interests involved with Sherlock Holmes. Public demand for my writing, however, exerts a strain on how much I can overtly reveal to even my most trusted colleagues. Whenever I indulge in any activity, be it a simple séance, investigating a revered medium or attending a meeting of the British Society for Psychical Research, it never fails to raise the eyebrows of my wary publishers and critics. I truly believe in many of these inexplicable accounts. Even my father painted beautiful renditions of fairies, which I trust that he witnessed with his own eyes. The betterment of mankind rests on embracing such theories once they are proven to exist by the scientific community. Thus, I suspect I'll have to continue more controversial and debatable endeavors in utmost secrecy, or at least for the time being until more evidence can be brought to light.

Since you seem to be an open-minded young man who has already experienced some effects of the preternatural, this is my proposal: At midnight every night, we should conduct a variety of remote operations with the primary purpose of communicating through means of telepathy. Since I have a tendency to travel, we'll have to make some sort of adjustment to take into account the different time zones. Of course, you must share this secret with nobody. Besides us, only my wife will know, although she will not participate.

When you shared the account of the strange incident onboard that commuter train that was enough to convince me that you would be the perfect partner for this private undertaking. Most assuredly, there was something you had done in the past in the realm of the arcane to warrant that chain of events. That was not mere happenstance, and now since you possess that enigmatic red book, I'm sure it will affect your life in ways that you've never imagined.

My intentions have been to also perform similar trial and error enterprises with Harry Houdini, a rising star whose stage performances have been astounding audiences, but his busy schedule has made it nearly impossible so far to coordinate such engagements with any sort of regularity. One of these days we'll catch up. Meanwhile, I collect whatever news comes from across the herring- pond. I suspect that at one point, he and I will develop a special relationship based on mutual interests.

Regarding the two of us, however, we'll back up our observations with letters or telegrams as often as possible as proof of results, but those must be destroyed as soon as they are read. Once again, I cannot overemphasize the importance of confidentiality.

Whenever we know that we will be otherwise engaged, we should attempt to communicate with each other in spirit to apprise the other of that fact. Regardless, we must keep a faithful agreement, as skill will come with practice.

If you are willing to put aside any apprehensions regarding trains, I'll pay for you to travel down to Undershaw and visit me on weekends whenever possible. My driver can meet you in London at a pre-arranged time. You'll stay in one of our guest bedrooms, and as long as you don't mind the children and can tolerate what our kitchen staff provides, you'll be well taken care of. That'll give us the opportunity to expand our repertoire and commence further psychical experimentation with ectoplasm, spirit photography and astral projection. And bring that book. I'd like a chance to look at it.

I've also desired a partner to accompany me for ghost sightings and occult investigations. For all we know, with the knowledge gained, we might even break through the barriers of time. That would certainly give Bertie (H.G. Wells) a shock to the senses, proving that his imagination does not merely dwell in the realm of fiction. He and I have been at odds on this topic for years.

Regarding telepathic technique, I can only suggest that you conduct yourself in a way as you see fit. Personally, I don't believe in things like magical amulets, but if it helps to have an etheric link with me, use this letter you hold in your hand, as it contains my heart, soul and signature with a drop of blood, which I have added to the ink. You might wish to reciprocate.

Let's raise our glasses to honor the quest of conquering the unknown.

Arthur Conan Doyle

* * *

Arthur apparently was serious when he first brought up the subject. When he and I left the pub, I really didn't know what to think. After all, he was a famous author, and I was merely a student. What possessed him to choose me for such an engagement?

I shuffled through my schoolwork to find my pen and ink and a fresh sheet of paper. Blood, I needed blood. Ah, my razor! That would work. I fetched my shaving kit and winced as I drew a few drops. I scribbled a swift, affirmative reply with the blood-tainted ink, mailed the letter the following day, and looked forward to our first otherworldly encounter.

* * *

Conscious Sleepwalking

Since Arthur firmly believed that death was not the ultimate finality, who was to say that the two of us hadn't experienced a significant encounter in a previous existence, and this wasn't the first conscious time we had set foot on earth? Time travel became a never-ending fascination. I was unstoppable. My curiosity was limitless, and I desperately sought ways to find proof. Considering the fact that one of my favorite stories was H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, I took it upon my own initiative and built my own construction, which was no easy undertaking. There were many thwarted attempts before I could confidently say that I had achieved any success, whatsoever.

How this time machine worked was another mystery. What I never expected was that in my pursuit of perfecting this invention, I got more than I bargained for. Metaphorically speaking, it was like saying that I was attending the university to get a degree, but I unwittingly learned how to sprout wings and fly to the moon in the process. Once enough magic doors were opened, whether I liked it or not things changed. I began to transform into something unexpected, which I was assured was for the better, although often I begged to differ. Personal ambitions unraveled. Friendships and associations fell apart or felt shallow and worthless. Nightmares appeared more real than they had before and manifested in physical form on my doorsteps. Many times I'd venture either into the past or the future, and I'd bring back a souvenir. Sometimes it was a tangible object. Other times it was merely unlocking a long obscured memory, and often it wasn't welcome.

The recently discovered Neptune was considered the planet of dreams. Whether or not you believed in astrology, it induced many prominent Victorian scholars to explore new frontiers. Darwin's theory of evolution toppled religious dogma, but in reaction to the Industrial Age, that mysterious planet also influenced an interest in exploring the depths of the human mind and the realm of the unknown, challenging the limits of scientific knowledge. Tables were tipped. It was like having a clever stage magician swiftly yanking off the tablecloth of perceptual reality, but leaving the candelabra intact with all observers wondering how it was done.

Discovering facts about the past was amusing, but even more exciting was being able to capture glimpses of events to come. The future was never absolute. It could be changed with the blink of an eye. It was mutable and quite dependent on volition and free

will. Nonetheless, it was an obsession, and I'd conduct test runs in any which way possible using a variety of techniques, some benign and others not, but regardless I was always treading into dangerous waters to see what the future might bring.

I hurried back to my flat after class and dumped my book bag atop my cluttered worktable causing a haphazardly stacked pile of books to tumble to the floor. These books were atypical of a student aspiring to become a composer and concert pianist—ones on elementary physics, astronomy, earth science, and, of course, a brand new copy of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*.

With my motley assortment of research material, sundry gears and machine parts, lamp fixtures and the guts from broken clocks, I meticulously set up my own version of a time machine fashioned from an old hand-cranked electroshock device. I had jerry-rigged together a mechanism consisting of an old leather belt with magnets running alongside both lobes of my brain facing their polar opposites. However I wanted the magnets to move and not simply bolted or glued, so I inlaid small grooves with a set of gears that would move them side by side almost like a tiny train going down its own track. To power that motion I would drop in special mineral pellets. I really had no clue what they were, but the man in the shop who sold them to me said that once I tossed enough of them into water that they would instantly cause the water to boil and create steam, and that's what would cause those tiny gears to move the magnets along their course.

I must've forgotten to refill its canister from the last time, but all was well as my timepiece indicated that I had spent way too long dallying in extracurricular activities, and it was time to head off to my next class. It wasn't really vital that I utilized such an

elaborate construct, but if it was theorized that it could give a boost to my currently developing psychic abilities, I was all for the chance to test it.

In fact, my flat was beginning to look more like an alchemist's den. Of course, I still had my upright piano in the corner with its metronome perched on top, as well as, scores of sheet music and books on music theory. How could I not? But now I was gradually collecting a strange assortment of rare books, mostly procured from back alley establishments as well as trinkets found in curio shops. There was also unconventional laboratory equipment, as well as herbs and minerals that I'd acquire from the medical and science colleges, often bribing the lab assistants for their discards. Alas, I continued to curse the day when I elected not to take a chemistry class. It would be reassuring if I fully understood the nature of the elements I'd be working with and not feel like I was groping blindly in the dark.

Lydia, my landlady, was beginning to wonder if I was becoming an eccentric. I finally requested that she knock first before bringing tea, rather than barging in without warning. This put me in the habit of locking my door more often, something I hadn't thought about previously.

The very first time it happened, it was like watching a novice weightlifter struggling with barbells way beyond his capacity. I looked to see how long, if at all, it would take for my time travel experiment to work, and the first thing I noticed was that the second hand of my timepiece started wobbling like the needle of a compass near a lodestone. Almost like Atlas shouldering the burdens of the world (and very similar to the experience I had when I encountered a strong headwind the other day, catching me dead

in my tracks unable to advance forward), my watch's second hand, against all odds, started trudging backwards. Its minute hand followed suit using leaden baby steps, eventually pulling the hour hand in tandem.

My lungs were barely able to function. At first I drew a few quick breaths through my nostrils and choked down a few gulps of air, fighting against suffocation.

Instinctively I dispelled my panic, slowed down my heart rate and took very long, slow, controlled breaths deep from my abdomen. Although everything around me seemed to be spinning out of control, I needed to be operating in slow motion. Houdini knew this technique. I was certain of it. This was one of those magician's secrets whereby slowing your vitals and heart rate you could survive the odds of extreme heat, severe cold or being buried alive. I think the Hindu mystics even performed this when averting pain while lying on a bed of nails.

Perhaps, one day I wouldn't need an elaborate or expensive scientific contraption to catapult myself beyond conceivable physics. Wouldn't it be great to prove H.G. Wells wrong and that traveling through time was more of a mental journey? Maybe he just romanticized it as a physical machine in order to make it more believable. It was reassuring, yet scary nonetheless, to know it was a lot easier than depending upon an elaborate assemblage.

Not to say that I didn't love science. I loved science, but I was never a man of science like Arthur who was impressively trained as a physician. I understood music theory, tempo and a scientific explanation behind sounds. I was also willing to accept ideas that tonal vibrations had their intrinsic metaphysical qualities linked with planetary

rhythms that scientists failed to understand or find proof. It might've been an act of faith on my part combined with so much arcane material handed down by the ancients, but time travel defied all rationale. Deep down inside I knew that the possibility of it existed on some level or another. In that effect, one might have accused me of being as mad as Arthur was in his quest for proof that there was life after death, that spirit photographs could be made of the dearly departed, and ectoplasm could be documented spewing forth from mediums' mouths.

Even Houdini's head would turn if he were able to experience what was happening to me now. My first results took me back only five minutes, which didn't seem all that significant except for the physical sensations of fighting an enormous force of gravity. Each successive exercise became a little bit easier, and as long as I was able to achieve the proper state of mind, projecting into alternate dimensions became as easy as slipping on a fresh change of clothing. Eventually, I was able to develop a semblance of procedural consistency. Was I finally prying open the door to my past that wished to remain shut? My subconscious had unlocked a vault pointing to another institution of knowledge, not the University of Edinburgh, but one arcane and forbidden, but as much a part of my soul as the blood coursing through my veins. Finally, I was remembering.

Not too long ago, I was having a fitful and sleepless night. My landlady's cat woke me hours before sunrise. Drowsiness caused rationality to fly right out the window. But as I reached for my diary to jot down an account of the perplexing dream I had woken from my attention was diverted to that peculiar red book that I had acquired after that unsettling incident. Something about that book transcended the barriers of time, but left a permanent impression that I'd carry back with me to the present.

In my dream I had stepped back into the past. No longer did I look like a redheaded Scotsman. Instead, I appeared slightly older as an employee of the Imperial Palace in ancient China named Jiang Pan Sheng.

“Jiang, you were supposed to have attended the arrival ceremonies of the Emperor’s third cousin from Nanjing!” Li Zhi Wen shouted as he stormed into the room.

Calmly, Jiang Pan Sheng, a revered scribe of the court, placed his brush and bottle of ink aside. He had been fastidiously working on a lengthy book, one of many for the collection of the Imperial family. This book, quite different from most, was an elaborate anthology of fables. Some were about mythical creatures. Others were about people from foreign lands. This one told the story of a young explorer, and he titled it in Japanese, not in his native tongue. It was called *Shokunin, The Thief of Tales*—the same name of the book that I had back in Scotland!

Undaunted, Jiang quietly went over to a washbasin to remove excess ink that had spilled on his fingers, then returned to sit upon his silk cushion.

“She was the fifth cousin to his grandmother on his mother’s side, not the Emperor’s third cousin. Besides, no one informed me about it, so I remained here and continued my writing,” Jiang replied.

“All Imperial affairs demand your presence no matter who they’re for!” said Gao Xun An, the other man from the welcoming party.

“I was never notified. Therefore, I’m blameless. Perhaps, one of you should take the fall if questioned?” Jiang suggested.

His two associates looked at each other in horror. Such an indiscretion, depending on the Emperor's mood, or one of his aides acting in his behalf, could come with the penalty of death.

Li spoke first. "Jiang, your apathy may one day cost you your life."

"I do not fear I will die from an insult to the Imperial court. I fear that I might die of a broken heart, instead," Jiang replied as he smiled and carefully folded his hands in his lap.

His two colleagues looked at each other, rather disturbed. Imperial court servants were always under the watchful eye of someone above them who monitored and observed their personal affairs down to the very last detail. Being part of the court carried way more privileges than merely being a simple farmer or a town merchant, but restrictions came hand in hand.

Li Zhi Wen took out his fan, a hand-painted one edged in gold with a long red tassel dangling from the end. He whipped it around and angrily struck Jiang across his forehead.

"Ouch!" cried Jiang. "What's that all about?" He rubbed his head. A stinging red mark remained.

"Next time it could be worse!" his friend warned him, but suddenly all three of them were interrupted by a fairly large group of children that ran into the room chasing a small monkey with a ball. Li and Gao promptly exited and left Jiang to contend with this unexpected surprise.

Amused, Jiang arose from his comfortable seat as the children filled the room following the monkey that had stolen one of their toys. He quickly gathered his brushes and his ink to prevent the children from knocking them over and proceeded to carefully take his manuscript with its ink still wet and place it out of harm's way. Like a lively circus parade, the children circled his study several times before they chased the monkey out of the room. Just as Jiang reached over for his workbook and was ready to return to his tasks, another uninvited and quite peculiar group of youngsters wandered into his room.

Immediately, Jiang noticed a remarkable contrast in their attire, and that they were not Chinese, but foreigners from different lands, ones that he had never been to and didn't know much about. Their garments were made from cotton and wool, not silk, and it was clear to him they were neither acquaintances nor members of the Imperial court. They looked more like peasants or villagers, but certainly not from anywhere nearby.

The children, on the other hand, eyed Jiang Pan Sheng as strangely as he must have looked at them. They entered his chambers and examined all of the novel objects and surfaces while boldly running their fingers over the unknown textures of silk, porcelain, carved cinnabar and jade, and of cherry wood and imported teak. They spoke in languages that he failed to comprehend. Some had dark hair, but nowhere near as black and silky as his, and they all wore it significantly shorter in a variety of coifs but in hues of chestnut, red and even gold—colors he had never seen before and never knew that hair could be.

Spellbound, Jiang returned to his cushion and observed them in quietude unsure if

these were ghosts, or perhaps fantastic human- like creatures, which had stepped from the pages of folktales and legends—the characters of dreams and of flights of fancy.

“Come, we should go,” the oldest boy called out as he gathered the group together from exploring Jiang’s private quarters. “We shouldn’t be here, and we don’t want trouble.”

As the other children rallied to his side, Jiang silently put his finger to his lips indicating that he wouldn’t breathe a word about them to anyone else, but before they parted, one last boy, a precocious little lad, who was a bit shorter than the rest and had a head of curls like Jiang had never seen, approached Jiang. He pulled a strange coin from his pocket. It appeared that the child was trying to offer him the coin, but as soon as Jiang reached for it, it disappeared.

Jiang was confused and shook his head. He looked down on the floor to see if it had slipped out of his fingers, yet he never heard it drop. Then the curly-haired boy held out his closed hand. Slowly, he opened his fingers to reveal the missing coin. This completely surprised Jiang who looked up and saw a huge grin on the child’s face. Once more, the boy handed him the coin but somehow magically, the coin would disappear and then reappear again in the boy’s hand.

Finally, the oldest boy called out, “Erik, come!” Erik ignored him, intent on tricking Jiang one last time. “Erik Weisz, come here at once!” the oldest boy shouted, angrily. Finally the small lad ran off to join his friends, and they all scampered from the room. Jiang was now alone and unsure of what had transpired and where those foreign youngsters came from. Then an Imperial messenger arrived and spoke with a sense of

urgency.

“Jiang, a captive has arrived from Japan. You’ve been summoned to assist the prison wardens. They suspect he was involved in a shipwreck.”

“Very well,” Jiang replied, as he reached for his hat and heavy silk outer garment. Japan was one of the very few countries Jiang was familiar with, as he had traveled there several times with the court as a goodwill ambassador. He was also the only member of the Imperial court who had studied and learned their language, which looked similar when written, but sounded very different on the tongue. With that, Jiang reached for a scroll bound with colorful red string and followed the court messenger out the door.

* * *

After I was done entering these accounts in my diary, I stared at that ominous red book once again, but this time it bothered me so much that I put it away and hid it in a drawer. My mirror revealed that not only had my auburn hair had grayed prematurely, but I must have appeared twenty years older than my actual age. The cat hopped onto the credenza and pawed at it wildly, as if trying to tell me I was supposed to turn my mirror around facing the wall. I eased back into my favorite chair, the one I called my thinking chair, and became lost in my thoughts thinking about all of the strange dreams I had for more years than I could remember.

Soon I began to feel the soft, warm fur of Lydia’s cat rubbing up against my side, but she started to scratch and dig her claws into my left pants pocket. I threw her off, but she insisted on jumping back on my lap. There was no food inside; so what could she

have wanted?

Something, which I didn't recall being there before, dug into my thigh. I reached in and felt a smooth, round metallic object— a coin, but not one I'd normally be carrying. United States of America was engraved upon it, a place I had never been, and on its face was the head of one of the American Presidents. I soon learned that often, when I traveled in time, I'd bring back a physical memento to prove that I actually had gone elsewhere or elsewhen.

“Erik Weisz, that curly-headed child from the dream? Wasn't that Harry Houdini's real name?”

Dreams? Dreams powered my time machine, or so I was beginning to suspect. There was an etheric alchemical power that tied into the workings of the universe. Not steam, not interlocking gears, clock mechanisms or bizarre sundry gadgets I'd construct. This limitless force was way beyond that.

* * *

Partners in Crime

It was way past midnight, cold and damp with the fog so thick I could barely see my feet, and I felt like the village idiot. While all the sensible and sane residents of Edinburgh had crawled under their covers to go to sleep, I was shivering in front of Bluidy George Mackenzie's mausoleum at Greyfriars Cemetery. I had thrown my waistcoat over my nightshirt, donned my overcoat, wrapped my muffler tight around my neck and done a miserable job of hiding the pieces of my homemade time travel device

under my tatty top hat. Popular rumors were that his angry spirit haunted the kirkyard. I closed my eyes, took out my grandfather's heirloom silver timepiece and focused my concentration to make the second, minute and hour hands of my watch go backwards against all odds, as I was determined to find this ghost, jump back in the past, and meet him when he was still alive.

That plan backfired. "John, open your eyes!" I must have leapt three feet in the air. "You're not Bluidy Mackenzie!" I shouted, realizing at once

I had to tone it down not to alert any of those amongst the living. "Who do you think you are? Some kind of Time Traveler Professor?" Finn laughed. "Don't you think you ought to be in bed at this hour?"

Quickly, I tore off my miniature brain launcher and stuffed it into my threadbare overcoat pocket. "Do you always have to follow me around?" I argued.

"You're quite aware that you can't go anywhere without me," Finn quipped and casually hopped off the adjacent headstone. He was so tall and lanky compared to me, I felt like I was standing next to a skeleton.

"John, I honestly don't know why you're wasting your time trying to contact Mackenzie. You have no debts to pay off to that man. Why don't you plan your travels where they may better serve you?"

"Come again?"

He wiped his filthy hand on my shoulder. It was full of damp moss and mud from

the rain-soaked tombstone he'd been sitting on. "You were meant to break the barriers of time, and your success was not meant to be for entertainment. Otherwise, I would've never permitted you to continue."

I shoved my mechanical apparatus a bit further into my pocket as it kept inching out.

"You mean to tell me it wasn't pure ingenuity that helped me discover the secrets of time travel?"

"There are smarter men and women than you are out there, and they've never managed to do it," Finn replied.

"Then why was I one of the lucky ones?"

"I'm not saying the task is easy, John. It's not, and in your case, you certainly weren't an easy specimen. You had to return quite a few times after death."

"Specimen? Now I sound like I'm a science experiment! How many times have I lived before?"

"More than you've realized," Finn replied. "Oh, and one more thing. Do yourself a favor. Next time you're ready to meet your Maker, don't have any regrets. If you entertain any thought whatsoever that you never had time to do this, or you wish you would've done that instead, that'll almost guarantee that you'll transmigrate and have to play the game of life with all its suffering once again."

I was completely perplexed. Finn made a hasty exit.

So, who was this intruder, and why the bloody hell was I sitting in a graveyard attempting to contact an infamous man known throughout Scottish history for witch trials and persecutions? My ungovernable meddler was Finneas Fertle. Some could've called him my invisible friend, but he claimed he was assigned to me from the beginning of time. Yes, and that meant long before I remember taking my first baby steps upon the cobblestone streets of Edinburgh. I was supposed to believe that I had lived many lives before this one, and he apparently was some sort of trustee—someone responsible for keeping me on the straight and narrow whatever that was supposed to be. Every person had one, although most weren't aware of it.

My memoirs would never be complete without introducing my other partners in crime. Besides Arthur Conan Doyle and Finneas Fertle, I had to include Whit and Wendell Mackenzie, not to be confused with the ghost I just tried to contact.

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