

Untold History

By
Chris Riley

Chapter 1

1st September 2021

“You’re firing me?” I glared at Peter, then back to the unfolded letter clasped in my hands. “This can’t be right.” A fiery rage catapulted bitter bile into the back of my throat. My restless feet continued to shuffle beneath my seat.

I’d assumed Peter needed another report when he called for me, too work-shy to compile it himself, but now I understood. A smug smile played on his lips, it told me everything I needed to know: he was enjoying this.

For a moment he appeared devoid of life like the bare walls and dusty blinds of his office. His clasped hands rested on the edge of his precious mahogany desk, but he remained silent, my questions unanswered.

I looked at the typed stationary, my mouth open and dry. I’d flogged forty units of our company’s software in the last month, putting my colleagues to shame. The licensing revenue was enough to pay my wage, so where had this come from?

“What’s going on?” I dropped the redundancy notice onto the desk.

“You’ve been here a long time, Mark, you know how it works. The business isn’t producing the results it should, we need to adapt.” My jaw clenched. “We’ve been forced into this situation.” To my annoyance, the corners of his mouth twitched with delight. “Look,” standing, “we want to make this as easy as we can for you.”

“This *has* to be wrong.” Shaking my head.

“I am sorry.” No sympathy in his voice.

“After seven years of service, you’re just going to let me go?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, once again, turning his back to me, gliding to the window as he employed his classic avoidance tactic. For the past few weeks he’d been treating me with extra care, I should have known he was up to something.

“I’m the best one in the team – you said it yourself, three weeks ago when the latest figures were released.” He remained impassive at the window, it was as if he didn’t care to hear me. I changed tact. “How did you get this past Bob?”

“This is *my* business, not my father’s!” He snapped round to face me, his eyes appearing to bulge. Veins on his neck pulsed, his designer stubble hiding what I thought might be red cheeks. Everybody in the company knew it was Bob Malone’s business, despite his son’s denial.

“Don’t take me for a fool!” My angry bellow did nothing to move him. “What lies did you spin, I want to know? Did you show him fudged statistics, tell him I’d been stealing...what?” I watched the corners of his mouth turn up as an inane grin formed, his trademark. It sent the heat in my cheeks soaring in frustration.

“Like I said, the business isn’t producing results...”

“You’re a fucking weasel!” I was surprised by the strength of my anger and for just a moment there was a look of sheer panic in Peter’s eyes. He was afraid of me, petrified of what I might do. I grabbed the letter from his desk and stood, shaking my head in disgust.

“It’s a good deal,” Peter said as I yanked open his office door.

“Fuck you!”

When I got to my desk, I found my belongings packed into a cardboard box.

“Well thanks a bunch!” I roared. The office ground to a halt, a stunned silence filling the air, the malodorous stench of unease in my nostrils. I didn’t want their sympathy.

I dropped my company mobile onto the desk with a clatter before I left the building, never to return.

2

Just like that, my job was gone.

In the blink of an eye, my whole world changed and I struggled to comprehend, my mind devoid of thought. I'd wasted years of my life, there was no going back. Still fuming, I crossed the main Exeter road and burst into Café Nevada.

Beth glanced up from behind the counter, startled, almost spilling the pot of tea she was setting out for another customer.

"What's the matter with you?" She asked, as she came across, tray in hand, as I took my usual table.

What's the matter? I yelled inside my head, wasn't it obvious?

As soon as Beth finished serving, she came across and set herself down opposite me. Her warm smile welcomed me and part of my anger melted away.

"You told me earlier it was going to be a good day, what happened?"

"It was meant to be," I let out a heavy breath. "But Peter was back." I couldn't stop my lips curling into a sneer.

"Oh." A knowing head bob. "Shall I fix you up a cappuccino." Beth read my mood, I didn't need to respond.

I watched Beth work, her hands glided in a seamless motion, her slender arms busy preparing the ground coffee. Underneath her white apron she wore dark trousers and a pale cream shirt, which suited her natural tan. She looked fantastic for her thirty-five years, not a single worry-line to show. Being a waitress didn't have the same toll on the body as the high-pressure of sales in my world. When I looked in the mirror these days, all I saw was the tortured face of hard labour.

“You ready to talk?” Beth set the foaming mug on the table. The fragrant aroma of the fresh drink brought me out of my daze with a snap.

“Peter screwed me over,” I said with contempt. “He let me go.”

“No!” Beth let out in a sharp puff of breath. Her legs dropped from under her as she pulled herself into a chair in a single movement, well practised I guessed. “Tell me what happened.”

“I thought he was too lazy to be manipulative,” I said though gritted teeth. “But just shows you can’t trust what you see of people.” Beth tensed. “I didn’t mean...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Beth took my hand in hers. “Have you given any thought to what you’re going to do?”

It hadn’t even crossed my mind, and now it exploded into full view and I felt a fresh wave of anger. Only earlier in the morning I’d been planning a few beers in the local with the lads from work, but that meant nothing now. I didn’t have a job, and the bills still had to be paid.

Beth must have known what was going through my mind, she squeezed my hand, bringing me back.

“You don’t need that place, right?” She said with optimistic cheer. “It was only a stop gap, now you have the chance to find something you really enjoy.” Beth was right, it had been a temporary position, but after seven years I’d still not found my ideal job.

“I’d rather not think about it yet.” I’d never been out of work, I didn’t even know what I was meant to do. I shook my head, clearing my thoughts.

“I know what’d make you feel better,” Beth said. “I’ll get you some of my special chocolate cake.”

“Thanks Beth,” I said. “You really know how to cheer a bloke up.”

“Well, that’s what my ex-husband used to say.” She chuckled, swiping her long hazel brown hair out of her face. I returned her cheer but knew her laughter covered up for the emotional scaring of her husband’s torment, always keen to fix other peoples problems but never facing her own.

Beth sat with me as I chomped my way through the cake, there were few customers around. I felt calmer with Beth around, and it was obvious from the length of time she spent with me that she felt the same, even if we’d never said as much to each other.

I polished off the last of the cake, and downed the bitter dregs of the coffee before getting up to go, ready to tackle the world head on, but Beth grabbed my arm as I stood.

“You can’t go yet.” A gentle scolding, but she looked concerned. “You don’t want to be alone right now do you?” Her words were manipulative, but I understood the sentiment. “I’m off in half an hour.”

“You’re right.” I sank back into my seat. “I could use the company right now, but I’m not up for much.”

“Let me take you to a movie,” she smiled. “My treat. You need to cheer up, things probably aren’t as bad as they seem. You’ve got a real chance to change your life. Most people would love to be in your position.” I didn’t argue although I disagreed with her. In my experience, change was the biggest cause of stress.

“I knew Peter was devious, he always picked on Lee until he left, but I wasn’t expecting him to start on me.” I felt the injustice stirring, so changed the subject. “A movie would be good. It’ll stop me thinking too much.”

“I promise you, by the end of the night you won’t care.” Beth winked as she got up and went back to work. My mind wandered, replaying the events. I still didn’t understand how I’d ended up unemployed.

“What d’ya know!” Joe’s unmistakable gruff voice. He owned the café. “Shouldn’t you be at work or something?” He glanced at his watch. I said nothing.

Beth shook her head as Joe took his position behind the counter. I heard her muted voice scolding him.

“Oops,” Joe let out a short embarrassed laugh. “I hope you gave him a free drink. That’s our best damned customer we’ve just lost.” He tutted and shook his head.

“She’s taking me to the pictures,” I said.

“You might as well head off now.” He pulled on an apron, tightening the strings. “I don’t mind the extra few minutes.”

“Thanks,” Beth said patting his arm.

Joe just nodded.

A few minutes later, she hovered over me.

“We’d better get you home first.” He eyes cast over the junk from my desk.

“You sure?” I felt relieved. It gave me reason to get out of my work clothes and put the day behind me in more comfortable jeans and trainers.

“Of course, I don’t mind the drive over. It’s gotta be better than catching the bus.” I relaxed, glad of the ride. My car, a dusty run-around, sat unused in the garage until the weekends. Keeping it running now was the least of my worries.

3

“Thanks again,” I said, opening my front door. “And I don’t just mean for taking me to the cinema.”

“I’m glad to be of service.” Beth rubbed my arm, it was reassuring.

I felt awkward, somehow my confidence had seeped away and I’d become a teenage version of myself. I steadied my nervous hand as I put the key into the lock with a click.

“Do you want to come in?” I clapped my hands together. “For a drink I mean?”

“Alcoholic beverages? In your state?” She laughed. “Sure.”

Envelopes waited on the doormat as I pushed open the door. I didn’t bother looking at them, tossing them onto the side next to the telephone, bills could wait for another day.

I took Beth’s coat, watching as she ran her hand through her hair, plumping it up. The television was on when I joined her in the lounge with a bottle of wine. She’d selected a DVD from my collection. Beth took the bottle from me and examined it before she popped the cork.

“A fine choice,” she said, sniffing the air before pouring two glasses.

“Cheers.” There was a clank as we toasted to nothing in particular.

“Cheers.” I gulped a mouthful of wine. It was dry, but the quicker I drank it, the less I noticed. The background noise of the television drowned out my thoughts and I sank into its world.

“I’m glad you’re here.” I finished my glass, reaching to pour myself another from the second bottle we’d opened. I gazed into Beth’s eyes and felt an invisible force, attraction perhaps, pulling me towards her. She looked hopeful and I knew she felt it too.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” Her eyes fluttered. “Because if you are, you’ve succeeded.” She chuckled. I placed my glass on the table and stooped to kiss her.

“You know you want to.” She used her best sexy voice and it made me giggle. I found her smile irresistible and I kissed her again, feeling the heat of her lips upon mine. I took her in my arms, her breasts grazing across my chest. At last our lips parted and I looked into her wide eyes, seeing her arousal.

*

In the early hours of the morning I stirred to find Beth creeping silently across the room. I rolled over and she froze. After a moment she lowered herself onto the edge of the bed, her head in her hands. I reached out, my hands brushing across her back. Beth jumped to her feet in an instant.

“Sorry,” I yawned. Even in the dim light I saw her frantic eyes, darting back and forth. “Is something up?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she shuffled her feet with unease. “I went downstairs for a drink.” I said nothing. There was something about the way she spoke, so quickly. Maybe I’d startled her more than I first thought.

Beth shivered.

“You’re cold,” I peeled back the covers, motioning for her to get back in. Beth lay next to me, her tremors shaking the mattress and I wrapped my arms around her.

“I should get some rest,” was all Beth said. I remained awake until I heard her soft rasping breath.

4

In the darkness of my dreams, I opened my eyes.

I stood at the foot of two ancient weathered pyramids, their beauty had followed me throughout my life. Sometimes there were strangers, lost in the deserted world, remnants of life that had settled there perhaps. Most of the time I was alone with the pyramids, built tall and proud for their unknown purpose.

They looked like those found in Egypt. A small glowing river swept across the barren land, flowing strangely between the two structures, as it eased up the gentle incline.

It was a peaceful world, somewhere I could escape the mundane pace of life. Today, it was much welcomed. Whilst I'd dreamt of this place for many years, as I aged, they became a more infrequent event, but I was glad when they returned.

Whilst I understood the dreams had no involvement in my life, I couldn't help associating them with my own reality. The nearest I'd got to understanding them was to believe they acted as symbols to shore-up my own self-confidence. Tonight, I believed that more than ever.

Seated on the bank of the river, I watched the shimmering liquid flowing along its strange course, my anger and annoyance trickling away with it. Soon I felt the bliss of the dream.

In the quiet I heard movement, sand shifting under foot. It was unexpected, and I leapt up. Hovering above the shimmering river, coming towards me, was the partially shrouded figure of a man, little of his face visible, but I saw his bright blue eyes gazing at me. An echo flickered in my mind, but as I chased the memory, it faded. Defeated, I focused my attention. The haunting figure drew closer.

My voice caught in my throat as I tried to speak.

Why did I recognise his eyes? I'd never seen him before, I was sure of it.

Fear welled up. I felt like I'd insulted this figure by haunting his home all these years.

Wait, *his* home? Where did that come from? Who *was* he and why would this be *his* home?

"It's been a long time." The voice came from the man, but his lips did not move. "Do not be afraid." At this I dropped to my knees, cowering.

"Who are you?" I called out. "What do you want from me?"

"One day you will remember your Magi." The figure dissolved into the river in an intense flash which twinkled across the rippling water.

"Wait!" I called after him. "Come back. Tell me what you want from me!"

But it was too late.

"Well, that was new." I settle back onto the shore. A sense of anticipation stole over me as I considered my unanswered questions in the depth of sleep.

*

When I woke in the morning, I could taste fermenting wine. A headache pulsed across my temples and my stomach felt raw. I yawned, throwing back the covers and hauling myself out of bed. As I stretched, I rubbed my forehead. The image of the man from my dream flashed into my mind and the events of my vision flooded back.

What was a Magi and why would I remember him?

A pile of notepads waited on the bedside cabinet. I took the top one, brand new I noticed, and went to remove the pen from the spine. I blinked. It was missing. Maybe I'd forgotten to replace it when I converted to the new pad. Whatever, I'd search for it later, for now any old thing would do. I found one, covered in dust, resting on the shelf opposite.

I jotted down the details of the dream, along with my thoughts. It was a routine from childhood.

Aged twelve, my harmless dreams I'd had since birth became malevolent nightmares. It wasn't the garbled messages I'd scream in the dead of the night that freaked me out, it was the panic in my mother's eyes when she came to my aid. She pleaded with me, insisting I must see a child psychologist. Their advice was simple; record all my dreams and thrash them out in the daylight.

Even now, my dreams made no sense to me. They rarely changed. New faces had not appeared in a long time, and until now it was unheard of for them to speak to me. This was a major development, worthy of my time.

Is this the breakthrough I've been waiting for? I scribbled on the pad. *I wish I knew the answers, I want to understand what you mean to me.* I dropped the pen and frowned, hearing the steady stream of shower water.

It took a moment before quick disjointed images filled my mind, parts of the evening flooding back, like water cascading from the shower. Beth. I grinned with delight, I'd finally found the courage to make my move, but another part of me scolded myself for not remembering.

My mind replayed the kiss I remembered, feeling it all over again, her warm lips against mine.

I got up, beaming still, and went downstairs to grab some breakfast.

Beth glowed when she stepped into the kitchen, I took her in my arms and kissed her.

"I'll pick you up after work and we can go out, get a drink or something."

Beth said gathering herself together. "We can call it a date if you like?"

"That'd be good," I said as Beth left for work.

Chapter 2

The green figure flashed green and I dawdled across the street, making my way home from the Job Centre. A car revved its engine, summing up my own mood. I'd wasted an hour and a half of my life. I could handle that, it was the clerk I had a problem with. He'd treated me like scum, glaring at me over his glasses and asking me question in his superior tone. I wasn't just there to hold out a begging bowl, I didn't want to be out of work.

The busy world passed me by as I considered my options. I needed to secure a job within a couple of months, if only to stave off my own boredom. It crossed my mind I could always ask my mother, but I dismissed it, I couldn't face speaking to her.

No, there was no question, I needed a job.

Maybe Beth could get me a part-time job at the café, just something to tide me over and lessen the decay of my redundancy package. Whilst I knew I was a long way from finding a position, I felt it was only a matter of time before something came along. Beth was right. I could do anything I wanted, I just needed to consider what that something might be.

Wafting on the breeze, as I approached my house, was the musty smell of cats. The next door neighbour had two of them. I opened my door quickly and saw yet another pile of mail waiting.

With a steaming mug of tea to hand, I poured through the post, it didn't take long for my patience to wear. I dropped them to the floor, littering it with debt. One thing was certain, I'd need to economise. I couldn't fritter the little money I had on things such as cable TV anymore, I'd have to find a better balance, Peter's payout was the minimum required by law.

The large sums I owed were depressing to look at. Desperate to escape, I stared at the corner of the room. I was about to switch the television on when I remembered the other mail waiting from the previous day and I groaned. I needed to see how deep my troubles were and forced myself to get up and grab the post from the telephone stand. I flicked through the envelopes and stopped. Written on the front of one of them were the simple words, Mark Besant, hand written, no return address.

I ripped it open, unfolding the letter. A flyer fell to the floor. There were no distinguishing marks on the letter, not even a corporate logo or signature.

We would like to congratulate you, Mr Besant, on your acceptance into the SARA training programme. You are requested to attend at the address below in ten days time. Please read the enclosed literature carefully.

The address was in the small Devonshire village, Dunsford, stretching into the Dartmoor National Park. It was roughly an hour's drive from my door on the outskirts of Exeter.

"SARA?" I said, re-reading the letter. Who were they and what did they want from me? I placed the letter to one side and sat in silence, bemused by its bizarre contents.

Was it just a coincidence that I'd lost my job the same day this landed on my doorstep? *Nobody would go to that amount of trouble would they?* I laughed it off, it was ludicrous, but still...

My attention turned to the leaflet, there was a logo, the blue outline of a man holding a rocket. Below it was the caption; *Welcome to SARA, delivering tomorrow's space technology today.*

For a moment my mind drifted, considering the infinite possibilities of our universe. Somewhere, there was a man with my name, the same dark hair and blue

eyes, and he was an astronaut. It was weird to think I was essentially the same person. I shook the thought from my head. I wasn't an astronaut, any notion of that had come from my father's fantasies when I was a child, but they had died along with him. I continued reading.

As part of the SARA family you will be working in the new office development in Dunsford, specially built for the training and development of personnel for space exploration.

I laughed, unable to control myself. *Was this for real?* I looked over the pamphlet cover once again. There was an old RAF base in Dunsford which I knew was being renovated, but I'd read in the papers it was a new aviation training facility. It could have been misreported, I supposed.

Intrigued, I flicked on my computer and brought up an internet search. I typed in 'SARA'. The words 'no direct results' blinked back, but it offered me 160 million similar matches. After scrolling through the first few pages I gave up, most results were for animal rescue centres.

I kicked back from the computer, considering the contents of the strangest junk mailings I'd seen. Maybe it was all a rouse to get a group of suggestible people together in one room and brain-wash them. I laughed at the stupidity of my own imagination.

2

Am I still dreaming? I thought as I looked out through my open eyes. The confusion passed as reality bit down, the cold air taking hold of me and I shivered. I took my dream journal from the side of the bed and recorded the afternoon events.

I stood at the pyramids as usual, but I did not feel at peace. The river was stagnant, I could taste the decay. I reached down and touched the slimy film of the

water. It shimmered like diamonds in the sand, but it felt so strange, tingling like I was picking up an electrical current. The feeling of raw power surged inside my body, my tongue prickled, flooded with the coppery taste of old coins.

It was like holding the energy of life itself, like I could cast new stars into the sky.

When I turned round there was a figure standing to the side of the pyramid. He had something in his hand, a disc shaped object. I watched him vanish through the wall of rock. There was no obvious opening in the pyramid. I am sure...

I blacked out the last few words. *I am not sure if the man I saw was the same one from last night.* I frowned as I reread my scrawling, things were getting a little strange.

The dreams were intense and with a frequency I'd not experienced since I started having them. I was beginning to see new information, but I was no closer to understanding their meanings. The psychologist had told me that our sub-conscious mind creates a dreamscape to make us listen. If that was true, I really wasn't paying attention to my inner-voice.

A pounding knock made me jump.

Dazed and still sleepy I stretched before getting up and opening the door. Beth glaring at me as I yawned.

"Do you always keep a lady waiting?" Her voice was tough, but I could see the corners of her lips twitching. "I've been waiting for the past fifteen minutes. I heard you snoring through the letterbox." She laughed. "You don't half make a racket."

After a shower my body felt a little more responsive, even if my head didn't.

Coming down the stairs I caught Beth thumbing through the SARA pamphlet. She dropped it to the table as I stepped into the room, but it was too late, I'd caught her snooping. I said nothing, deciding I didn't want to start our first official date with bad feeling.

"Let's eat," she said slipping off the sofa.

3

Dinner weighed heavy on my stomach rendering me useless and my eyes heavy. The colourful images of the television did little but to rock me further towards sleep and I snuggled up to Beth.

Beth's grip tightened on the television remote, her hands almost white.

"Is something wrong?" I yawned, lifting myself upright.

"No." She had a smile stapled to her lips, the same fake customer service smile she had around rude customers. "Honestly, it's nothing."

I knew that 'it's nothing'. I'd hated my teenage years, spending much of it cooped up, trying to deal with the death of my dad, but never finding an outlet for my emotions. It tortured me and ripped me and my mother apart. It was the same 'it's nothing' that kept us separated.

One day I was sure I'd grow up and open up.

"You don't mind do you?" Beth changed the channel, stopping on the news. I said nothing, blinking back another yawn. Beth tensed and I followed her gaze to the screen.

"We take you live to a joint press conference in Washington DC held by NASA and by a video link to the RKA in Moscow." The newsreader spoke. It hooked my attention – what could be so important that it'd taken over the usual looping feed of news. *"Our Washington correspondent Timothy Witting has all the latest."* The

newsreader swivelled to face the video screen behind him. *“What can you tell us Timothy?”*

“I’m live in Washington DC where all the chiefs for NASA have gathered this afternoon. Nobody has yet given any indication of what is about to be announced, but it is fair to say that this is an unusual move. There is immense anticipation here, waiting for the conference to get underway at any moment...”

“We have to stop you there Timothy, as we go over live to the conference...”

The newsreader’s voice cut into the correspondent’s piece to camera.

The picture changed and I saw a group of stiff-collared, middle-aged men sitting in front of microphones, cameras flashing in their eyes as photographs got their pictures for the morning papers. I was surprised to find the conference hadn’t already begun as often the case with these things.

“Good afternoon and welcome to NASA Headquarters Washington. I am Roger Bates, the Administrator for NASA. Also joining me today I have Deputy Administrator of NASA, Charles Humber, along with the director of Flight Crew Operations, Sakib Khan and joining us by a video link from England is General Patrick Thacker, U.S. Air Force Chief of staff. By satellite phone from Moscow we also have the General Director of the RKA, Gregori Sokolov.”

“Thank you Roger.” According to the name at the bottom of the screen we were now looking at Charles Humber. *“After a number of years of negotiations which I am pleased to have been part of, myself, Roger and the president of the United States have signed a contract with the General Director of the RKA and the President of Russia. Today, this contract builds a new united Space Agency for Russia and America, SARA...”*

Blood pumped in my ears, drowning out the conference as it continued. My heart pounded as I made the connection. I sat forward in my seat as the words sank in.

“Are you okay?” Beth asked as I stood up, one hand on my hip.

“No,” I shook my head still watching the screen. Mouths were moving but I’d stopped listening to what they were saying. As the camera flashes continued in the conference hall, I found myself drifting further from reality.

In a flash I found myself at the computer, my fingers stumbling as they typed SARA into the search engine. The screen filled with results, the first was a page on the NASA website and when I clicked it open, it displayed the same logo from the brochure – the blue outline of a man, holding onto a rocket.

I remembered the letter, it suggested I possessed useful skills. Now I knew SARA was real, I couldn’t help question what these abilities were. I once dreamed of being an astronaut, but I’d known for years why that was. It had been my father’s idea, he’d encouraged me, feeding me knowledge from his mountain of books. It went beyond this though, my father spent his free time – most Sunday afternoons – playing games with me, dressed as the Spaceman, wearing a tin-foil helmet I’d crudely fashioned and a red cape which was an old bed sheet. Remembering, it brought me a brief moment of joy before being replaced by confusion, once again.

The information I’d absorbed of space and exploration had long since gone. As far as I knew, I had nothing. As I hovered over the computer, it became too overpowering.

“I’m going out for some air,” I said, leaving Beth in front of the television and stepping out into the cool September evening breeze. I perched on the edge of the porch, the stench of cats filling my nostrils once again.

It was all too impossible and I felt the meltdown rising as my mind wrestled. Everything faded as shadowy butterflies fluttered across my vision. As the butterflies cleared I heard voices. They were talking to me.

I stared upwards at the blurred faces that were floating into view and then I felt a hand holding mine, pulling me upright. My eyes focused and I saw the figure standing over me. I'd expected to see Beth and blinked when I found myself in the strange dream world that usually occupied my sleep.

"Do not be afraid," A voice I recognised from previous dreams. As before his lips did not move, his face vaguely familiar.

"Who are you?"

"Don't you recognise your Magi?" He asked, but I said nothing. The figure seemed to shrug with his eyes. "My name is unimportant for now." Slowly I felt my body ease and I struggled to get to my feet.

"Tell me what you want from me."

"We need you." The figure said simply. "You will remember, my child. If you rediscover the memories of your past, it will all make sense."

"Sense?" I laughed. "None of this makes sense."

"Listen," he said, "You only have to look to the past to understand the future." His figure vanished, draining into the sand of the desert. I was alone, standing before the pyramids in the strange world from which I now felt disconnected. Except deep in my heart, there was something...

My arm shook and I yelped in pain.

Then it came again and again and...

I screamed as another face shot in front of me. Out of fright I jumped up, pushing over something in the process. I looked back and saw Beth holding her face, tears in her eyes, a red patch where I'd elbowed her.

I blinked, confused by the sudden intervention of the real world.

4

"I'm sorry." I apologised again, trying to end the uncomfortable silence. We sat at opposite ends of the sofa. "I hope it doesn't come up as a bruise." The image of Beth's swollen, purple face flashed before my eyes.

I'd never seen Beth look so troubled since she'd had all the problems with her ex-husband, maybe she was getting cold feet about our relationship, maybe it was too soon, after all his abuse went further than the healed dark welts.

"You know my history." Beth spoke with venom. Her eyes remained fixed on the floor, avoiding my gaze. This annoyed me, why couldn't she share her feelings and with me.

It was a vivid and disturbing memory, only the second month I'd known Beth. Even before I'd pushed my way through the lunchtime crowd to the counter, I'd seen the bruises extending from Beth's jaw to her hairline, a size ten boot matched the bill. There was sorrow in her eyes and all thoughts of my appetite vanished.

I'd waited until the busy rush was over before calling Beth to my table, pushing out the seat opposite. Without a word she'd sat and I just stared, mentally questioning her. It didn't take long for the tears to come, and I took her in my arms. I'd trusted her with my secrets – my dreams – it was her turn.

"He caught me packing my bags..." She'd told me, needing to say no more, the images of her ex-husband's blunt fists and kicking feet hanging in the air between us.

“I really am sorry,” I said shaking my head, bringing myself back to the present. “I was in a daze.” My apology fell on Beth’s deaf ears. “It was an accident.”

“Your words mean nothing,” Beth snapped.

“What do you want me to say?” I attempted to keep cool, but my temper frayed. “I’m not your ex.” She shot me a cool look and I felt I’d over stepped the mark, but I couldn’t stop now. “What do I have to do to show you that? It was just an accident.”

“Don’t!” She jerked away from me as I inched closer, attempting to put my arm around her. “Just get away from me.” I felt shut-out, but I guessed she was questioning if she’d stumbled into another abusive relationship. I turned away, frustrated.

“We can talk some other time.” I studied the silent television in the corner of the room, the images it had shown still fresh and haunting in my mind. When I turned round, Beth’s fragility was clear, tears streaming down her face, the pain all too obvious.

“Maybe it was my fault,” Beth said through her tears. “I try to be strong but...” Right then I understood how she’d stuck by her ex-husband, allowing herself to succumb to his barrage of insults for so long. Somehow Beth believed she deserved the pain I’d inflicted, regardless of how accidental it had been. It was all too easy for her to accept.

I approached her cautiously, taking her in my arms. Her eyes told me she was shouldering the blame and she responded to me, her guilt preventing her from seeing the truth, I’d struck her.

I kissed the red patch below her cheek, feeling her pain as she tensed.

“Sit with me,” she said. “I don’t want to be alone.” I felt uncomfortable doing so, knowing that I was taking advantage of her vulnerability. “I shouldn’t have punished you like that.” Her eyes caught mine and I looked away. “I’ll make it up to you.”

I wanted to tell her to stop, to think about what she was saying, but my words stumbled. I was only human, astonished by her performance.

We sat in silence.

A little while later Beth excused herself to use the bathroom. After ten or so minutes, I went upstairs to check she was okay, I didn’t want to leave her alone too long in her fragile state.

As I padded up the stairs, I heard her elevated voice, “he’s not as easy to handle as I first thought. He’s unpredictable.” Was she referring to me? I didn’t think I was hard to handle or unpredictable. There was a pause and then a forced, “yes sir.”

Sir, just who was she talking to?

“Truth,” I heard a muffled groan. “Oh Beth, you don’t even know the meaning of the word.” A moment later the bathroom door burst open and I jumped.

“Are you okay?” I shifted my weight, leaning against the banister. “I heard you talking.”

“It’s nothing,” she said. “It was one of my friends checking in.”

“Sounded pretty heated to me.” Beth brushed past me.

“You know how it can be.” She dismissed my concern with a wave of her hand. “Some people just can’t take no for an answer.” As Beth disappeared down the stairs, I stood alone, considering. Beth’s mood had jack-knifed all evening, and I felt

exhausted and out of the loop. I'd definitely heard her shouting, she never spoke to friends that way and I was confused by what I thought I'd heard her say.

Not wanting to cause any further imbalance, I made a mental note to question her about it further, in the morning perhaps. I returned to the sofa without a word.

“What do you want to do?” Beth looked up.

I took a moment to think about this. So much had happened in a short few hours and I didn't feel like I'd had the room to stop still. Could I stop now? I guessed not, the decision made.

“Hand me that leaflet,” I pointed to the table. “I'd better find out what's going on.”

“What is this?” Beth's face brightened as she peered at the leaflet as if she'd never seen it before. I was annoyed at Beth's lie, but said nothing, dialling the number.

It was engaged.

I tried again, but the line remained busy.

“I guess everybody's left for the day.” I relaxed into the sofa and dropping the phone. It would have to wait.

Chapter 3

The sun shone through the open curtain revealing another cloudless September sky. The bedside clock read eleven. I rolled out of bed and gazed out the window catching a blackbird flutter past, diving to the lawn where it bobbed back and forth for a moment.

I stretched out in the warmth emanating through the glass. It was too pleasant to stay cooped indoors, so I gathered myself together and went out for a walk, following the trail to the park and then east along the path. It led down into a valley, shaded on all sides by the overhanging branches of tall oak trees. To my left a brook burred, full of overnight rain. There was a rustle of leaves in a tree above me and when I stopped I saw two squirrels chasing each other, jumping from branch to branch. I took a deep breath, inhaling the peaceful morning air.

The path continued for a while, and I relaxed, taking in the wildlife. In the distance I heard a car horn honking in frustration on a nearby road, but even this didn't break the peace. For the first time in years I felt I could enjoy nature without witnessing it through the second floor window of an office block. Up ahead the track forked and I came to an abrupt halt. I took the second path, having never followed it before. It led me across the brook and into a tangle of overgrown brambles. I pushed through their thorns, moving them aside, I felt like an adventurer deep in the jungle, unknown dangers waiting for me in the bushy cover. A grinned with child-like ambition.

Fighting my way through the dense undergrowth of the forest floor I realised I never took risks, I didn't have adventures anymore. Before my dad died we'd go

camping or trekking through forests and moorlands. I missed all that, I was still lost without him.

Maybe SARA could bring some adventure my way. I stopped in a clearing, standing tall, my mind settled. I'd try calling SARA again when I got home, but first I needed a way out. The explorer in me took over, it was my first sweet taste of freedom.

I was still grinning to myself, pulling thorns from my clothes, as I rounded the corner and saw my mother leaning up against my door. I froze, recognising the back of her head from her short grey hair, the same tuft sticking out. It looked like she'd rolled from her bed to my doorstep. She hadn't changed.

"Mum." Unable to hide my surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Is that how you greet all your friends?" A frown crossed her brow. Her fingers fidgeted at her sides in the awkward silence. I stood in the warm breeze for a moment longer, my eyes failing to meet my mother's. Seven years was a long time, I didn't know how to act around her anymore.

The deep ravine running between the two of us had its roots in my father's diagnosis. I was thirteen when the cancers struck him. Maybe it would've been easier to handle if we hadn't been so close.

I let myself in, pushing past my mother and her handbag, leaving the door wide for my uninvited guest. I went straight into the kitchen and began organising a cup of tea for myself. When I heard the door close, I assumed my mother had left. Relief washed over me until I turned to see her standing in the kitchen doorway, watching me.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” I said, “but what are you doing here?” She stepped closer, took the kettle from my hands and placed it on the table before taking hold of me. Tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

2

My mother, Margaret, sat at the kitchen table, opposite me. She had hold of my hands, her silence reinforced my dread.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally.

“For what?” I snapped. “Why are you here?”

“Can’t a mother visit her child?”

“No mum,” I said. “*You* can’t.” It was harsh, but I couldn’t deny the truth, life had been better without her. I had fewer arguments. “The floor is yours, I assume you came here for a reason.” I knew she was too proud to break the silence of our arrangement on a whim.

“Oh let’s stop this,” she said, slamming her fist onto the table, her wrinkled face tightening in anger. “Why can’t we just get along, like we used to?” Her fist unclenched and she let out a sigh. “When Leon was around you’d never have spoken to me like this, your father wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“It’s been seven years.” I shook my head. “But fine, I’ll be civil. So what brings you here?”

“I found something of yours I thought you’d want back.” I was intrigued, it had to be important, she’d broken the silence for it. Besides, I’d taken all my stuff when I’d left home. She retrieved a plastic bag from her handbag and handed me the aged sheets of folded paper, the edges of the pages frayed and dark.

“Where did you find this?” I asked opening it and staring at the pyramids I’d painted when I was seven. A small glittery river ran between them and I traced it, feeling the tranquillity of the scene, old glitter falling from my hands.

“I discovered them in a box of your father’s things,” she said.

“What were they doing there?”

“He kept them for you.” I frowned, sure she wasn’t telling me the whole truth. She hadn’t just found these, there was more to it than that. “I’ve thought about this for so many years, and I’ve never found a way to say it, so I’m just going to show you...” She pulled out a second sheet of paper, this one much older.

“What is this?” I took the page and unfurled it, revealing another image of the same pyramids. I didn’t recognise it as my own work. “Where did you get this?”

“It was your father’s,” she said.

I looked at the picture of the pyramids, the river with glittered specks. It was identical to the one I’d drawn. I shook my head and sucked in a deep breath, trying to keep my cool.

“Did he draw this?” I asked dangling the picture before my mother. “Did he have the same dreams?”

“Yes,” she said, biting her lip. “And your grandfather.”

“Okay.” I took another deep breath, suppressing my rising anger as I remembered how she’d made me believe I was possessed by an evil spirit, she’d frightened me. I felt it all over again. “Why were you so concerned about my dreams?” I needed to know. “You made me see a psychologist. You treated me like I had an illness. Why did you do that, when dad and grandpa had the same dreams?”

“I was scared.” She pushed her cup around the table, the liquid slopping over the side and onto the table. “Your father was involved in...things.”

“What things?” I snapped, my temper fraying.

“I...”

“I can’t believe you!” My voice louder. “You put me through the ringer. I thought there was something wrong with me, that I wasn’t normal. The other kids teased me, their names used to hurt, but not like this. Why are you doing this to me mum?”

“You’re not normal.” Tears streamed down the deep wrinkles of her cheeks to her chest, staining her blouse. “You’re special.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I flinched at the strength of my own voice. “What does that even mean?” I shook my head in disbelief as she avoided my gaze. “Why are you here? Why now? You’ve had all this time to tell me and now you expect me to listen to your half truths. You really are unbelievable!” I slumped back in my chair with a huff, she was making this too difficult.

We sat in silence for a moment, tears still seeping from my mother’s eyes. I didn’t enjoy seeing her in that state, her face screwed up, her blouse spotted. I studied her, where had things gone wrong for us? A wave of sadness washed over me, why was everything so difficult and uncomfortable between us? I’d hoped time would heal the wounds, but it had only driven us further apart. *Well, no more running. It’s time to face the truth.*

“Why do we do this to each other? Why can’t we get past all the pain and hurt. Dad’s gone. We should be able to move on from that, right?” I looked into my mother’s eyes for just a moment and saw a glimmer of acknowledgement, I smiled back. “I wish you’d treat me like an adult.” I spoke gently, leaning forwards and taking her hand into mine.

“I’m sorry,” she said wiping her eyes and recomposing herself. “You’re right, we’ve spent far too long blaming each other for what happened. It was tough when your father died. Do you know how excruciating it was to look at you? I always saw his face, people always said you looked alike and I never saw it until he’d gone.”

“You could’ve told me.” I squeezed her hand, but she shook her head.

“I used to look at you and part of me wished it’d been you.” For the first time, the truth was open to see and I blinked. “I couldn’t help it and I didn’t mean it.” She tried to limit the damage, but I wasn’t hurt, I actually understood having thought the same thing about her. “When we had arguments, I wished Leon was still alive, I convinced myself it would be better for me, that I could live without you.”

“And?”

“It hurt,” she said.

“But we’ve survived,” I said. “Christ, we’ve gone seven years.”

“I know.” Her eyes dropped to her twiddling fingers. “I respected your space, giving you distance. Sometimes that’s all people need. You are your own man, you didn’t need me holding you back.”

“And now?”

“I’m not deluded,” she said. “I know we can’t mend things overnight, but I want you back in my life. You’re the only part of him I have left.” I was touched by my mother’s words, they’d taken a long time to arrive and now I felt disappointed by the years we’d missed. I realised I’d never once stopped to think how she was feeling or how she was coping, it’d always been about me.

“I should’ve been more supportive,” I said. “I’m sorry for that.”

“You were young.” I stood, taking her in my arms and hugging her tight, the sweet scent of her familiar perfume filled my nostrils, the memories flooding back.

“So, the truth from now on?” I caught my mother’s eyes. “You can start by telling me everything you know about these dreams.”

3

“Your father was a good man.” She blew into her fresh tea before taking a sip. “But his job dictated certain things. He signed agreements ensuring his silence, nobody could know the details of his work.”

“I don’t understand.” I frowned. “What has that got to do with his dreams? Anyway, dad used to tell me about his job all the time, where he’d been and the equipment he’d used.” I remembered his trips to the Antarctic, the Himalayas. He was always travelling. He’d spent almost three full months in New Mexico the one year.

“I’m not proud of our lies,” she said with a slow shake of her head. “But you have to understand we had to tell you something. At some point you were bound to question your father and it was better to create the lie before.” Her eyes pleaded with mine. “We never meant for you to get hurt. If you believe only one thing, you have to believe that.” There was truth in her voice. “Your father came up with the job in the oilfields, it gave him reason to tell you about the places he’d been, that’s how much he wanted to involve you in his work.”

“So what did he do?”

“Some things I didn’t even know until late into your father’s illness,” she said. “It took me a while to understand. Both your father and grandfather worked for the same agency, a silent branch of government.” My eyes narrowed. “His travels were real, he went all over the world, monitoring extra-terrestrial phenomena where it happened. The government were jumpy, anything unexplained, they wanted to know about it.” For a moment I thought she was playing more games with me and I

laughed, but her face remained serious. Slowly my smile faded as the impossibility of her words sank in. *Was she still lying to me now?* I studied her, looking for clues of her deceit but finding none.

That didn't matter though, I felt a rising sense of unease. Could I trust her?

"I don't understand what any of that has to do with anything. Are you trying to ruin the precious few memories I have left of dad? Do you want to destroy everything of him in me?"

I'd never seen my mother hit anybody until her hand struck my cheek with a resounding snap. I reeled backwards, knocking the chair over. It stung, but it was the shock that hurt the most. I imagined this was how Beth had felt the first time her ex-husband laid his hands on her, and this was only a taster.

"I'm sorry." She stood and came to my side. My cheek burned. "I shouldn't have done that." She took me in her arms. "Please forgive me." I remained silent, stunned by her actions. "I'd better leave."

"Wait," I said, moved once again, reining in my anger and resentment. She turned back and looked into my eyes. "Please stay, I still want to know the truth."

4

"Here," I said handing my mum a rosy glass of sherry, the only alcohol I had in the place. Its heavy aroma clung to the air, cloying at the back of my throat. "Why are you telling me all this now, after all these years?" I held up the picture of the pyramid my father had drawn, comparing it against my own. I shuddered at the eerie likeness.

"There are some truths you need to hear before..." Her sorrowful eyes caught mine, my mind finishing her sentence, knowing she never would. My dreaded suspicions were right. I took her hand in mine and squeezed. She sniffed loudly.

"Oh mum." My voice tender.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, taking her hand back and wiping her face. “I’m not here to talk about that. You wanted the truth and there it is.” From the lack of discussion I assumed some form of cancer. “Your father saw things even before I knew him. Dark images. He used to say I brought them to life, giving them colour.” Her lip quivered for a second. “I thought he was trying to charm me, but he believed it proved we were meant to be together and the moment you started drawing the same images I knew he’d been right. I never believed in fate until I saw it first hand. Your dreams are sharper still, you’re very special.”

“You think this is a gift?” I pointed at both the images.

“I felt it was a curse.” She shook her head. “But your father was right, it is a gift and it’s *your* gift. You gave it to him.” I considered her words in silence, but I could not stop a frown from creasing my brow, was she saying I was genetically inevitable? “I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive us for the lies we told.” I thought about this and everything I’d said to my mother minutes before. After hearing her truth I knew I couldn’t refuse to accept it.

“I can.” Even though I felt a little resentment for the lies, I knew I couldn’t fault her honesty, I’d asked for it. “I wouldn’t like to live without my dreams. They bring peace to my life.”

“You sound just like him.” She reminisced. “Leon was a good man.”

“Yeah, he was.” It was a shame he’d left us before his time. “So why did you come here today, besides your illness?” I asked, vocalising what she wouldn’t.

“I...” Her words stumbled. “Your father was working with someone in America before he was diagnosed,” she said. “When this man found your father he was very interested in his dreams. He had a theory about them. I don’t recall the details, but I remember him saying they were connected to some ancient events.”

“Do you know who he was?”

“I met him once.”

“Maybe I could get in contact with him, see if I can make light of his theories.”

“That’s the thing,” she said. “He’s already tried to make contact with you.” I looked at her, frowning.

“Who?”

“Pat Thacker.” Her eyes met mine before dropping to her glass.

I struggled as I tried to place the name, and then it clicked. He’d been at the press conference for SARA and then everything fell into position, the anonymous SARA letter had been from him.

“Did he ask you to come here?” The question lingered, her eyes avoiding mine. The silence told me everything I needed to know.

5

After my mother left, I grabbed the SARA pamphlet and dialled the number. I was determined to get the truth out of Thacker, but I knew I needed to remain sceptical. He’d gone to a lot of trouble to get hold of me, that much was clear, but it was one thing to send me a letter, a totally unacceptable other to manipulate my sick mother. If he’d gone to that amount of effort, it was no more unbelievable to consider he’d arranged for the termination of my employment – and the thought fuelled my anger further.

“Good afternoon, how may I direct your call,” A female voice answered. I thought about launching into a tirade of abuse, but that would have been no help. Instead my words caught in my throat. “Hello, can I help you?”

“Yes.” I finally got out. “My name is Mark Besant...”

The words barely left my lips before the woman interrupted. “I will connect you straight away, Mr Besant.”

The phone rang.

*

“Ah, we finally get to speak.” A gruff male voice spoke with a mid-western American accent. I suspected he’d smoked far too many cigarettes over the years. “I thought we’d never hear from you.”

“Who am I’m speaking to?”

“Pat Thacker.” I swallowed my anger. I’d gotten the truth out of my mother and now I wanted the truth from him.

“I know your work well.” Venom in my voice.

“I take it you’ve spoken with your mother.” I could hear his sneering smile.

“What do you want from me?” I asked, bringing his psychological game to an end. “What possible use am I to you? And another thing, who are you? I mean, what’s your involvement with this SARA thing?”

“One question at a time,” he chuckled. “I am, or was, the Chief of Staff for the US Air Force, but I’ve accepted the position of Administrator for SARA.”

“Okay,” I said. “So what do you want from me?”

“It would be best if we could discuss this in person.”

“I’m not getting involved in anything until you answer my questions.” I couldn’t ignore his blatant attempt to skim over my concerns. “What is this about?”

“You may be younger, but you’re the same man as your father; he couldn’t walk away and I’m willing to bet you can’t either.” I felt insulted, who was he to tell me what I would do. “Tell me; don’t you want to know about the dreams? Your father was very interested and we made progress on my theories.”

“What theories?” He understood how to hook my attention.

“I believe it’s in your blood and even stronger with you than it was in your father’s case. I know, because I feel it too.” He paused. “It is part of who we are. Part of our untold history and if you’re the man I think you are you want to know why.”

The line went silent.

“Will you at least meet with me?” Thacker paused. “You are a hard man to get hold of.”

“What right have you got...” I stopped. Thacker had given me nothing so far, getting annoyed was not the right approach. If I really wanted to get to the bottom of things, I’d have to play his games. “I’ll give you an hour to convince me,” I said. “But I want assurances, my decision is final. No more games or messengers. Agreed?”

“I’ll arrange everything, then we can discuss things properly and you can make your decision.” He avoided answering my question. “No pressure.”

Of course not, I thought.

6

I was aware of the weight of the duvet, pinning me in position.

My eyes opened and I glanced across at the empty space next to me, Beth’s body absent, the covers peeled back and lumped on top of my own. I hauled myself upright, rubbing my face with one hand whilst reaching for the lamp with the other.

I squinted in the light, noticing my dream journals were also missing.

The bedroom door was ajar, a slither of light coming in from below. I got up and padded across the carpet in the relative darkness towards the open door. It was

silent below as I stepped out onto the landing. Over the banister I found the source of the light, the kitchen. I went downstairs.

Beth glanced up from the kitchen table, her face flushed with rosy colour: I'd caught her in the act. I followed her gaze down to my dream journals sprawled out in front of her, some open at seemingly random pages, others closed, stacked neatly to one side.

"What are you *doing*?" I plucked one of the journals from the table to take a closer look. It was open at an entry from a few days before, the words caught my eyes *what is a Magi?*

"I..." I thought I heard her gulp. This was akin to reading someone's personal diary, an invasion of my privacy. I opened my mouth to tell Beth how I felt, when I realised we were in a relationship. I'd told her about my dreams before, I'd trusted her then, wasn't this just an extension to that?

"You could've asked me first." I said, switching the kettle on. I might as well have a drink, it would be a while before I went back to sleep. Beth didn't say anything until I sat in front of her with my steaming mug.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I woke up..."

"Don't." I was too tired to argue. "Just ask in future." I relaxed into the back of the chair, stifling a yawn. It felt uncomfortable for a moment as I studied Beth, her eyes fixed on me, and then her guilty look faded. "Did you find anything of interest?"

"I don't have a theory, if that's what you're asking." She stretched with a yawn of her own. "I'm almost done anyway."

I took another sip of tea before I realised I wasn't in the mood for it after all.

“I won’t be long,” Beth smiled as I got to my feet. I went upstairs and crawled back into bed, curling up in the warmth. I remembered Thacker had mentioned something about a theory?

A theory, I thought as I drifted off to sleep.