

# **A Capsule of Time**

**by Martyn Bedford**

# 1<sup>st</sup> Instalment

## Max

I'm last out of the House after call-over, cutting it fine for Physics. Of course I am – I have a reputation to uphold. Anyway, you could trip down the steps of the Stanley and land face-first in Physics, so I'm still on schedule to arrive in that segment of the Venn diagram where my circle of acceptable lateness intersects the circle of Mr Curran's idea of punctuality.

Curry will say something like, 'Young man, if you ever turn up when you are meant to, I shall know that a cataclysmic breach has occurred in the space-time continuum.'

'Time is a construct, Sir,' I'll reply. 'It has no tangible value.'

'Much like yourself, then, Maxim.'

And so on, until the time spent discussing my lateness will exceed by a factor of four the number of minutes by which I was actually late.

Alice is outside, her pleased-to-see-you grin as wide as mine. We're still waiting for the others to grow bored of teasing us about how *lovestruck* we are; or the fact that I was sixteen back in October and Al won't be fifteen for another two months. Only last week she went to the railings outside the Orange to find someone had fitted her bike with stabilizers.

'Hey,' she says.

'Hey.' We kiss, we hug.

Barely into March but Spring is springing: crocuses are scattered everywhere, like so many yellow and purple paper-darts, and the birds are chirruping in the woods over the way. Lit by the afternoon sun, Alice's blue eyes are chips of sky.

She takes a step back, strikes a pose. 'Well?'

I look her up and down but can't spot the latest uniform infringement. Yesterday, it was a bracelet, tucked out of sight beneath her shirt cuff. Today, who knows? I'm about to give up when I notice her feet and burst out laughing.

Odd shoes. Regulation black, regulation “sensible” – but not a pair.

‘Nice one, Al. Subtle.’

‘Wasted on Mastodon, though.’

Alice has Art, now. She could turn up with a Union Jack Doc Marten on one foot and a pink flip-flop on the other and Miss Masterson wouldn’t notice. Art teachers. If you ask me, they spend too much time in close proximity to paint fumes and solvents.

As we head off, Al tugs my hand and I glance up to see Lewis Roberts tracking across the lawn between Stanley and The Kilometre. A third-former; a Founder (his father died in Helmand; IED). Lewis is in headphones, sweeping the grass with his metal detector. He got it for Christmas and has been searching the school grounds ever since. History project, he says: *A Metallurgical Archaeology of Wellington College*. Apparently, his room in the Picton is so cluttered with coins, bottle caps, rusty horse-shoes, tent pegs, drinks cans, bicycle clips and the like that it has established its own magnetic field.

“Screwy Lewis”, some of them call him.

He spots us. ‘Scotland,’ I say, quickly, seeing his unease.

He pulls the headset free and lets it hang round his neck. His gingery-brown hair sticks up in clumps and his ears are red where the cups pressed against them.

‘Scotland,’ I repeat.

‘Edinburgh,’ he replies, but the knot of flesh between his eyebrows remains tight and I realise Alice’s presence is bothering him.

‘Venezuela.’

‘Caracas.’ Lewis relaxes a little.

‘Georgia.’

‘Tbilisi.’

And he’s there. He’s okay.

You have to do this with Lewis. If you just start talking to him he'll go from nervous to full-blown panic attack in 5.7 seconds. So, you name a country and he tells you the capital. Lewis knows the capital of every country in the world. If he's not too anxious, you can settle him with an easy one; the more agitated he is, the more obscure the country has to be. The first time I introduced Alice to him, she had to go straight in with Papua New Guinea.

'Hey, Lewis,' I say. 'Found anything today?'

Rummaging in his blazer, he produces a folded sheet of paper and hands it to me. Al and I look at it together. Each day Lewis searches a different location, using a hand-drawn map of the site and marking it off with a grid – placing a cross in each square where he fails to unearth anything and a circle to denote a "find". The plan of the area around the Stanley is already filling up with crosses. I pass it back to him.

'Shouldn't you be going to class?' I ask.

The suggestion that he's skiving off, or about to be late for a lesson, almost triggers a relapse and I have to throw in a swift France to calm him down.

He gestures at the metal detector. 'Mr Blake said I could. For my Project.'

Just then, a van turns into the Stanley; it's one of the workmen who've been installing new showers. The driver's window is open, releasing a blast of radio-noise: *In America, the focus on economic recovery, which has marked the early months of President Obama's second term in office, intensified today with the announcement of...* The van crunches to a halt on the gravel driveway, engine and radio cutting off simultaneously.

As though snapped out of a trance, Alice says, 'Max, it's twenty past.'

Lewis has already pulled the headphones back on and is methodically trawling the lawn again as we turn away towards the teaching blocks. We've barely crossed the road when he lets out a whoop. We hesitate.

'It won't be anything interesting,' I say.

‘No,’ Al agrees.

We look at each other.

By the time we rejoin him, Lewis is on his knees, digging into the turf with a trowel. I can almost taste his excitement. ‘It’s big,’ he tells us, scooping out another divot.

We stand over him as he digs. I’m just about to query whether the detector could pick up anything so deep when the tip of the trowel clinks against something metallic. Setting the tool aside, Lewis reaches into the hole and scrabbles with his fingers. When he finally works the object loose, he straightens up, raising his find from the ground, cradled in both hands as though it’s a relic from an Egyptian tomb.

It’s a cylinder or canister of some kind, about 30cm long and 6cm or so in diameter. The surface is caked in mud but where the metal is exposed it’s whitish-silver.

‘Aluminium,’ Lewis says.

‘What d’you reckon it is?’ Alice asks.

Lewis blushes, won’t look at her. ‘I’d s-s-say it’s a—’

In the instant before he utters them, the words pop into my head:

A time capsule.

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Instalment

## Alice

Lewis plans to take it to Mr Blake, unopened, and let him decide what to do with it. The time capsule is school property, he reckons – probably buried in an official ceremony. Max listens. Nods. But I can tell from his face there's *absolutely no way whatsoever* we aren't opening the capsule right here, right now.

'Can I have a look?' he says.

'Max.'

He frowns at me. 'What?'

'Lewis found it. Not us.'

'I only want to see if there's anything written on it.' He turns back to Lewis, holds out his hand. 'Let me wipe the dirt off.'

Lewis doesn't want to give it up but is too in awe of Max to refuse him. I like Max – a lot – but I don't like how he uses strength of personality to get his own way; especially with someone like Lewis. Self-assurance is very attractive. But it can sometimes be very ugly.

Lewis hands him the metal canister.

'Hey, it's really light.'

'Max, please don't open it,' I say.

'I'm not going to.'

He sounds tetchy, and I think this might be our first quarrel. The first time he's spoken like that to me, anyway.

He raises the capsule to his ear and shakes it. Lewis shoves a hand through his hair and takes rapid breaths, like Max is holding a kitten and is about to hurl it to the ground.

Whatever is inside the tube makes no noise.

'Curiouser and curiouser,' Max says, with that dimpled smile of his.

He scrapes off the worst of the mud, rotating the capsule, squinting at it, searching for an inscription or some kind of identifying mark. But there's nothing. He shows us: the sides, the ends, are entirely blank – just smooth, soil-smeared silvery metal.

'You'd think it'd be rusty,' Max says. Lewis informs him that aluminium, being non-ferrous, is resistant to oxidation. Max grins. 'So the top should unscrew nice and easy, yeah?'

Before either of us can react, he gives the lid a twist.

Lewis looks like he's about to cry. I offer him Libya, he gives me Tripoli; we swap Canada for Ottawa, Cuba for Havana. He calms down. A little.

'Okay,' I tell Max, 'give it back to him.'

'Oh, right, like you don't want to see what's inside?'

*You're meant to be on my team*, his expression says. Right now, I'm not. Okay, of course, I'd like to know what's in there – but not if it means upsetting Lewis.

'It feels . . . wrong,' I say. 'Someone buried it for a reason. It could've been down there two hundred years for all we kn—'

'Actually,' Lewis cuts in, 'the process for manufacturing aluminium on a commercial scale wasn't developed until the late 1880s.'

Max and I both look at him, then back at each other. Max does that thing where he jerks his head to shift his fringe out of his eyes. Even now, after five months, I get caught unawares by how gorgeous he is. Today, it irritates me. I want to be cross with him.

'Max, it's not ours to open.'

'Says Miss Odd Shoes. Miss Rule-Breaker.'

Then, he opens it. His eyes never leaving mine, he tightens his grip on the cap and, with another sharp twist, it screws off altogether.

I can't explain what happens. I'm not sure anything *does* happen. Is it possible for something to happen and not happen all at once?

He peers inside, wrinkles his nose. Takes a closer look, angling the thing this way and that. Tips the canister upside down. Nothing comes out. He gives it a shake. Still nothing.

‘Empty,’ Max says. ‘Not a time capsule, just a capsule.’ He hands it back to Lewis, as though the disappointment is somehow his fault. ‘Come on, Al, we really are late now.’

I felt it. I know Max did as well, for all that he’s acting casual. Lewis, too. The only way I can describe it: that lurch in your stomach when a car drops down a dip in the road.

I don’t know. Maybe I just imagined it.

## **Max**

Then the sky turns white.

Alice and I are hurrying towards the science and arts blocks when it happens – she’s blanking me; I’m making a hash of apologising for bossing Lewis around. At that moment, the school clock chiming the half-hour echoes across the grounds.

Two-thirty. We should’ve been in class ten minutes ago.

Al has stopped. ‘Look at the light,’ she says.

We’re outside Physics. I ought to be going in, she ought to be legging it to Art. But she simply stands there, next to the memorial stone, gazing all around her, tilting her face towards the sky, arms spread wide like she’s catching snowflakes in the palms of her hands. Only, it’s sunny. At least, it was. Just now, on the lawn with Lewis, everywhere was rinsed in Spring sunshine and the sky stretched above us in a perfect blue sheet.

Not anymore. The day has darkened, as though dusk has suddenly fallen.

‘What’s happening to the sky?’ Alice asks, pointing.

I've never seen anything like it. Blue is dissolving to white – not the lumpy, greyish-white of unbroken cloud cover on an overcast day, or the grubby white of thick fog, but a silvery, glistening sheen. The sky is turning the colour of pearl.

No.

As I go on staring, I realise what we're looking at isn't the sky at all but something else – a kind of milky, filmy skin forming overhead, blotting out the sky altogether.

'Max.' Al takes hold of my hand, gripping so hard it hurts. 'What *is* it?'

'We should get inside,' is all I manage to say. Inside. Away from whatever that is, floating above us; away from whatever is going on.

I remember when I was about eight, seeing TV news footage of the moments before a tsunami. Those holidaymakers on a beach, watching the water retreat as though by magic; filming the phenomenon on cameras and phones, totally unaware that the sea was gathering itself to return in a great tidal wave that would sweep them all to their deaths.

'In here.' I pull Alice towards the entrance, no longer caring about Physics or getting to Mr Curran's lesson but just anxious to be indoors as quickly as possible.

We don't even make it through the doorway.

Because, as we're about to enter, everyone else is leaving – a steady, unstoppable flow; not running or in a panic, just streaming outside as though this was a fire drill, trailing animated chatter in their wake.

Each of them, without exception, is gazing up at the place where the sky used to be.

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Instalment

## Alice

Mr Curran takes charge. He's struggling into the brown-and-yellow check jacket he always wears; trying not to look flustered. We are to head to the Dining Hall, he announces, once he has yelled us into silence. The fact that he shouted is almost as shocking as what's happening overhead. We're in "emergency procedure". Not that anyone knows what the emergency is, as such. Or whether this counts as an emergency anyway.

The weird sky-that-isn't-the-sky just hangs there, doing nothing. With the sun blotted out, the day is colder and duller, but that's all.

If Curry has any theories, he's keeping them to himself. 'No questions, no fuss.' His voice is higher-pitched than usual. 'Just get into line and follow me. And no running.'

So, in the unnatural creamy light, Max and I join the Physics refugees, filing along the path in the direction of the main buildings. I'm shivering, although I can't tell whether it's from the drop in temperature or delayed reaction to the fear that flushed through me just now when I realised how scared Max was.

'Did *we* cause this?' I ask.

'The sky?' He lets out an odd laugh. 'You think opening an old metal tube—'

'Max, it happened right after.'

Adopting his boy-talking-down-to-girl tone, he explains the difference between coincidence and cause-and-effect. I don't know if he's trying to convince *me* or *himself*.

'You felt it, didn't you?' I say. 'When you took the lid off that capsule.'

'Felt what?'

'Some kind of . . . shift. I saw it in your face.' Max doesn't answer.

We continue along the path in silence, our numbers swollen by groups pouring out of Art and Chemistry, like tributaries feeding into a river. We pass the Picton, which makes me

think of Lewis; I wonder where he is and whether he has been rounded up with the rest of us. I look for him in the raggedy column but it's hopeless.

The false sky is unchanged; motionless, save for a faint shimmer – too solid-looking to be gaseous, too hazy to be solid. Fifty metres above us? More? It appears to curve, like a giant dome, but that might just be an optical illusion. Or down to the fact that I've read *The Hunger Games* six times.

A couple of paces ahead, a fifth-former is checking her iPhone, going online to see if there's a news flash, or something to explain what's taking place.

'It can't just be us,' she says.

Others are doing the same – or trying to send texts, or make calls, to their parents. One after another, they report the same problem: no signal, no connection. Some of the phones are going crazy. Peering over the shoulder of the girl in front, I see her screen is a blizzard of scrambled images and text and dazzling lights, and each time she swipes it with a fingertip there's a loud, staticky buzz.

'Nostradamus predicted this, actually,' a boy behind us says. 'And it will come to pass that, before the world endeth, so shalt Orange, Vodaphone and O2 be smote down.'

Some people laugh. But not many.

## **Max**

The Dining Hall is already crowded when our contingent arrives. By the time the groups from the outlying classrooms squeeze in, the place is rammed. At least it's warm in here.

And we don't have to see that "sky" anymore.

Perhaps it's this, or the camaraderie that comes from a packed gathering (like at a gig or a rugby match), but I detect a lifting of the collective mood. Fear has given way to a frisson of nervous energy. Safety in numbers, I suppose. Whatever's going on out there, we're all inside – and everyone's okay.

I try to act like I am, too. 'Is that your foot I'm standing on?' I ask, mouth against Alice's ear to make myself heard above several hundred conversations.

'I'm not sure my feet are actually touching the floor,' she says.

We're crammed in by one of the drinks machines, nose to nose like two commuters on a rush-hour tube train. Nose to armpit, given our height difference. The coconut scent of Al's shampoo competes with six varieties of body odour from the surrounding crush.

None of it erases the smell from the time-capsule. Sugary, musty, sickly; like rotting straw warmed by the sun. It has clung to me ever since I removed the lid and took a peek.

Al's right, I did feel something.

Not a "shift", more an association. A sudden, unbidden memory; like a gas leak, filling my nostrils, making my eyes smart, leaving a sour-sweet taste in my mouth that's still there when I swallow. The only time I'd smelled anything like it was at my grandmother's bedside in the hospice, when I took my turn to place a farewell kiss on her forehead.

'You okay?' Alice asks.

'No, not really.'

Before she has a chance to ask why, there's a loud rapping from one end of the Dining Hall and the background din dies down as everyone cranes to see what's causing it.

It's the Master, standing on a table, bashing a serving ladle against a plastic food-tray and calling for silence. Dr Maurice manages to appear dignified while doing this – as though it's a perfectly natural way to bring us to order. From my position I can't see the table, so it looks like he's levitating vertically above the hundreds of heads now turned his way.

He sets down the tray and ladle. Adjusts the jacket of his pale-blue suit. Raises both hands and slowly lowers them, ushering away the last burbles of noise.

‘Young ladies, young gentlemen, esteemed colleagues,’ he begins, in his honeyed baritone, which always reminds me of Stephen Fry putting on a Scottish accent, ‘at times of bewilderment and anxiety, we turn to our leaders for words of explanation and reassurance.’ He trawls the room with his steady gaze. ‘I am your leader. And, I have to tell you, I haven’t the foggiest idea what’s happening out there or what the bloody hell to do about it.’

The timing, the deadpan delivery, are as characteristic as they are perfect. Even so, it takes a moment for his remark to detonate the first, tentative, snorts of amusement. Can Dr Maurice really be joking? About *this*? Once it dawns on us that, yes, he can and, yes, he is, the laughter reverberates around the Dining Hall in a great explosion of relief.

He waits for the noise to subside. ‘Now, evidently, “normality” is in abeyance until we confirm the nature of this, ah, meteorological anomaly. So, this afternoon’s classes are suspended while—’ Cheers, whoops, applause. Dr Maurice raises his hands for quiet once more. ‘While our security staff, with all the courage and fortitude of a polar expeditionary team, venture into the grounds to investigate.’

A few boys call out names of teachers they’d like to see join this expedition.

Damping down another bout of laughter, the Master goes on to explain that efforts are also being made to re-establish external communications.

‘Landlines must be out, too,’ Alice whispers. ‘Not just mobiles and the internet.’

I whisper back, ‘None of this makes any sense.’

Others must realise this as well because pockets of discontent – or, at least, unease – have begun to break out here and there.

‘Of course, it is not practicable,’ Dr Maurice says, voice raised above the muttering, ‘to keep a thousand of you here in the Dining Hall while this, ah, situation persists. So, you

are all to return immediately to your respective Houses for call-over and to remain there until further instruction. Once there, you are not – I repeat *not* – to go back outside until we are sure that it is entirely safe for you to do so.’

No-one dares to put up a hand and point out that, *Sir, we have to go outside to return to our Houses*. But I can’t be the only one thinking it.

## Alice

It takes an *age* to clear the Dining Hall. We’re among the last fifty or so to shuffle out, Max and I sneaking a goodbye kiss on our way through the self-serve area. We’ve been awkward since the business with Lewis and the time-capsule but all of that melts away. Any moment now, we’ll go our separate ways – Max, to the Stanley; me, to the Orange – for however long this “anomaly” lasts. With the phones messed up, we can’t even text.

‘I shall miss you terribly while you’re at the Front, Maxie,’ I say, super-posh

‘And I you, Aliciana my sweet. But this pesky war will be over by Christmas and–’

Max breaks off. Tilts his head to one side, as though listening.

‘What?’

He shushes me, shouts for everyone else to be quiet. A hush falls over us, funnelled together in the narrow passageway leading to the exit. In the lull, I hear what Max has heard. From the faces of those around me, the others do too.

Voices. Laughter, overlapping conversations. The clink of cutlery against crockery.

It’s the sound of hundreds of young people eating in the Dining Hall we left just a few seconds ago . . . and which we can see through the doorway behind us is completely deserted.

# 4<sup>th</sup> Instalment

## Max

There are voices at the Stanley, too; echoey, disembodied, indecipherable. A sound montage, just as in the Dining Hall, as if innumerable recordings are being replayed simultaneously.

If I was the only one to hear them I'd think I was going mad.

'Ghosts,' one boy suggests.

The spirits of long-dead Wellingtonians returning en masse to haunt the place. Could that be it? I don't think so. To me, the voices seem to issue from the living, not the dead.

Who they are, I've no idea.

We've been back at the house for about an hour and, if we could, we'd gladly shut off the sound, or drown it out. Or distract ourselves.

But there's nothing to do. Nothing works. Laptops, iPods, iPads, CD players, radios, tablets, netbooks, kindles, phones, iPhones, Blackberries, PCs – all the electrical equipment is dead or scrambled. In the lounge, where most of us have congregated, Mr Karel, the House Master, is failing to get a picture on the TV in the hope of picking up a news broadcast.

Outside, the filmed-over sky is unchanged, casting its ghastly white shadow over the school grounds. But stabilized, at least.

'I don't see why we have to stay indoors,' says Oliver, a tall, skinny fourth-former, known as Milky Way (or MW) because of the constellations of acne across his face. 'I mean, it's not like the sky-thing is actually doing anything.'

I don't answer. We're standing side by side at the window, gazing out.

'The doors aren't locked, MW,' someone says. 'Feel free to take a stroll if you like.'

Oliver doesn't want to, I can tell. None of us does. Yet he's right: there's nothing to stop us except the fear of the unknown, the strangeness. It's enough. Besides, the voices are out there as well, so it's not as if we can escape them by heading outdoors.

I wonder what Alice is up to.

The Orange is almost literally a stone's throw away, and yet we might as well be a hundred kilometres apart. After what happened earlier, I'm not sure she even likes me anymore. I'm suddenly struck by the thought that I'll never see her again – a feeling so strong I have to swallow it down before I call out her name in front of everyone.

'Ohmigod, it's Barmy Baum,' Oliver says.

I look where Oliver is pointing and pick out the figure against the backdrop of trees: a stooped old man, scuttling along the road from direction of the Mordaunt Gate. With his stick-thin bare shins and forearms poking out from that mud-brown, knee-length poncho and way-too-big grey fleece hat flapping on his head, he is unmistakable.

'Baum's *outside*?' someone asks.

'Yomping along The Kilometre,' Oliver replies. 'I've never seen him move so fast.'

'Who's Barmy Baum?' a third-year boy asks.

'Used to teach here,' Mr Karel says, still fiddling with the TV. 'He retired years ago but he's been allowed to stay on in his flat. And it's *Professor* Baum, if you don't mind.'

The twins join us at the window. Will and Harry. Or "Prince 1" and "Prince 2".

'What's he doing?' This is Harry who, confusingly, resembles Prince William.

'What he always does,' Will says. 'Wandering the grounds, muttering to himself.'

Not today. Prof Baum has a purpose, a place to be. That place is the lawn in front of the Stanley; the hole Lewis dug. The old man comes to a halt, head bowed, hands clasped, gazing down at the hole and the adjacent heap of unearthed soil like a mourner at a graveside. After a moment, he tips his head back to study the false sky.

'In a movie,' Will says, 'this is the moment when he gets fried by a thunderbolt.'

Baum isn't struck by a thunderbolt. He simply raises his hands to his head and, loud enough for us to hear him through the glass, bellows like a cow in a slaughterhouse.

‘What on earth’s going on out there?’ This is Mr Karel, kneeling in front of the TV.

‘Sir, look,’ someone says.

On the screen, the fuzz of interference has given way to a shadowy shape that slowly resolves into a grainy, black-and-white picture of a middle-aged man’s face. A newsreader, his expression solemn, his voice heavy with gravitas.

*President Kennedy’s motorcade was passing through Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas at 12.30pm Central Standard Time today when the shots were fired—*

The picture breaks up again. The screen snaps to black.

No-one speaks for a moment, then Mr Karel says, ‘It’s the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination this year. They must be showing old newsreel footage from the time.’

‘It’s March, Sir,’ I say. ‘JFK was shot in November.’

## **Alice**

‘Look.’ Charlotte holds out her hands; they’re shaking like mad but I can see she’s doing it on purpose. ‘Know what that is?’ she asks.

‘A pair of hands.’

She does the withering-look thing. ‘Cold. Turkey.’

‘What?’

‘Withdrawal. Symptoms.’ Charlotte has a habit of speaking in one-word sentences. It avoids the need for grammar, is one theory doing the rounds. If you ask me, it’s so she can perform her sexy little sucking-in-breath between each word, lips slightly parted. Her lips are permanently slightly parted, actually. I swear she thinks she’s Kristen Stewart. She makes her

hands shake even more. ‘No texting . . . For. More. Than. An. Hour. No Facebook . . . For. More. Than. An. Hour.’

‘Char, if it wasn’t for all this . . . weirdery, you’d have been in class for the past hour.’

Charlotte looks at me like I’ve just won first prize in a stupidity contest. ‘But, Liss, I. Haven’t. Been. In. Class. Have I?’ I’m surprised she doesn’t hyperventilate. She sighs, lowers her hands. ‘Anyway. “Weirdery”. Isn’t. A word.’

We’re in my bedroom at the Orange. Charlotte *Dropped. By.* to keep me company.

I don’t *want* company. If I did, I’d be downstairs in the lounge with the others. My suspicion is that Charlotte is here because no-one down there paid her the attention she feels entitled to. Even when the world has stopped making sense, it still revolves around her.

‘Is. That. Prep?’ She nods at the book open on my lap. I’m sitting cross-legged on the bed, she’s swinging one-handed from the doorframe like a pole-dancer.

‘No, it’s a diary.’

‘God-uh. Diaries. Are. *So.* Yesterday.’

‘That’s partly true. At least one date in here is definitely yesterday’s.’

‘Do. You. Write. About Max?’ she asks, with a sly smirk.

I ignore the question. I don’t tell her, but I’m writing about the weirdery. I have this urge to record what’s happening; an eyewitness account, in case . . . of what, I don’t know. But it feels momentous, historic, and historic events need to be written down or they’re not historic at all. That’s quite good. I must remember to put it in an essay.

‘Well, thanks for dropping by, Char. I really apprec—’

‘Why are you being so crabby with me?’

Yes, why am I? Her superficiality doesn’t usually annoy me *this* much. Her guard has slipped for a moment and she looks so hurt and lonely, standing there in the doorway.

She has even forgotten to speak in one-word sentences.

What it is, I'm freaked by the whole business. The sky. These voices. *I'm scared, that's why I'm being horrible to you, Charlotte.* I don't say it out loud. Just like I don't say I'm worried that we caused this, whatever this is – me, Max, Lewis – and, even if we didn't, what *is* it? I'm missing Max, too. Something else I don't tell her.

'Sorry, Char,' I say instead. 'I'm just tired.'

'Can I come in, then?'

I want to say no. But I shrug and close the diary.

'Apparently, Barmy Baum. Is. On. One. Of. His. Walkabouts,' Charlotte says, lips parted again. Doing the sippy-sucky thing. She crosses the room like she's ice-skating and glides to a halt in front of the mirror. Checks her hair, her fake tan. Speaks at her reflection. 'Lydia. Saw. Him. From. Her. Window.'

'Someone should go and check he's all right.'

According to Charlotte, Sylvia, the Matron, went outside to speak to him – he was upset, raving at her. Told her we were all doomed.

'Doomed?'

'S'what. Sylvia. Said.' Charlotte leans closer to the mirror, plucks at a stray eyebrow hair. 'Is. It. True. He. Killed. A boy?'

'An accident, is what I heard.' There was an explosion in a science lab, I tell her, and a fourth-former, Darius Cadamarteri, was in there at the time, acting as Prof Baum's assistant. 'They never even found his body.'

'Calamari?' Pluck, pluck. 'What. Kind. Of. Name. Is. That?'

'*Cadamarteri.* You must've seen his memorial stone outside Physics.' From the face her reflection pulls at the mention of Physics, Charlotte has never paid attention to anything inside that building, let alone outside. 'Anyway,' I go on, 'that must've been fifty year—'

'What the HELL!'

Charlotte leaps back from the mirror like she's been electrocuted.

She screams. I can feel a scream ready to rip from my throat, too. Because there in the mirror, where Char's reflection should be, is the face of an old, *old* woman. Creased, gaunt, toothless, gluey-eyed, scraps of flaky scalp shining through grey hair as thin as candyfloss. She could be anywhere between eighty and a hundred.

Char takes another step back, and another. Her hands shake for real now; her whole body is trembling. She's whimpering, murmuring incoherently to herself.

The old woman opens her mouth.

'Liss, make her go away.' Char's voice is hoarse. '*Please.*'

Before I've swung my legs off the bed, Charlotte explodes in a million particles of flesh and bone and hair and blood – a plume of pink mist that hangs in the air for a moment before being sucked into the mirror in a great swoosh. All that's left is a pair of shoes and her school uniform, in a crumpled mess on the floor where she stood.

# 5<sup>th</sup> Instalment

## Max

I wasn't looking when it happened and so he was gone before I knew anything about it.

Mr Karel.

One moment he's staring at the blank TV, trying to recover the picture. The next, an old guy's face materialises on the screen – not the newsreader, apparently, and not “on” the TV as such, but like a reflected face exactly where the House Master's should've been. Then, a microsecond later, Mr Karel . . . evaporates.

So say those who witnessed it.

Not that all of them are able to talk. Some simply sit or stand in silence, white-faced, mouths shaped into cartoon Os of shock; one boy has dashed to the bathroom to be sick and another (Oliver, Milky Way) hasn't made it that far and is retching loudly behind a sofa.

Will and Harry debate whether, scientifically speaking, the House Master evaporated or disintegrated, or disintegrated *then* evaporated. Or whether, in fact, he vaporised.

‘What's the difference between “evaporate” and “vaporise”?’ Harry asks.

‘*Guys,*’ I say.

The twins pause, chastened. They gaze at Mr Karel's clothes, in a small heap in the spot where he vanished; all of us do, as though he might suddenly reappear. The realisation that he won't – that a man we liked has just died (horribly, inexplicably) right there – quietens us, apart from the sniffs and whimpers of two or three boys who have started to cry. And Oliver's behind-the-sofa impersonation of a buffalo giving birth through its mouth.

‘Please tell me we imagined it,’ someone says.

None of us answers. Will is on his hands and knees in front of the TV, like a police forensics officer, conducting a fingertip inspection of the carpet, the television itself, the immediate area. By the time he makes his announcement, we've already figured it out: even

though most of the boys in the room saw Mr Karel shatter to smithereens, there is no trace of him whatsoever. Not a speck. Just his shoes, trousers, a shirt, a tie, a jacket, socks and boxers.

‘He swallowed him,’ Oliver says. He has surfaced from behind the sofa, wiping his lips on his cuff, eyes watery, his usually florid, spotty complexion bleached greenish-grey.

‘What’re you talking about, MW?’ Will says.

‘The old man on the screen.’ Oliver points. ‘He opened his mouth and swallowed Mr Karel. Just . . . hoovered him right up.’

Several others say they saw it too.

‘Look,’ says a boy by the far window. ‘There’re *more* of them.’

We turn as one to behold the sight of three, four, then five figures – all male, all middle-aged or old – looming translucently on the window-pane. Their gazes latch on to a knot of boys at that end of the lounge.

‘Don’t look at them!’ Harry shouts.

Too late. Almost in unison, the faces in the window open their mouths and all five boys detonate like rose-tinted fireworks, cascading against the glass in a sequence of sharp hisses and disappearing so completely there’s nothing left to suggest they ever existed.

## Alice

I race downstairs, almost fall down them – yelling for help, the words broken up by my sobs and shrieks. I can barely see. Just that pink mist burnt on to my retinas.

Careering round the foot of the stairs, I nearly crash into two girls running full-pelt towards the exit. I try to stop them, to tell them about Charlotte and what happened in my

bedroom just now. But the words won't come and, anyway, the girls just barge me out the way, one of them screeching at me to,

*'GetoutgetoutgetOUT!'*

As I wheel in their wake I see girls pouring from every doorway, all heading out of the Orange as fast as they can. In the pandemonium, I pick out the appalling *pop-sssss, pop-sssss, pop-sssss* from bedrooms, bathrooms, the lounge. The sound of other girls dying, just like Char. After ten, I lose count.

How long have I been standing here? Seconds, probably, but it feels like I've been in a trance for hours and only just snapped out of it.

The corridor is almost empty and if I don't turn and run after the stragglers I'll be the only one left in the building. My legs are so stiff, though – my feet, my arms, my whole body; every muscle heavy, every joint locked. A flush of foul-tasting saliva fills my mouth.

*'Alice, come on!'*

If the girl didn't grab my wrist and pull me with her, I might still be frozen to the spot. She sprints to the exit and I half-run, half-stumble after her, tripping over shoes, catching my feet in the clothes strewn everywhere.

*'Charlotte—'* I start to say, but she cuts across me.

*'Never mind about Char – we have to get outside.'*

Sylvia, the Matron, is at the door, back braced against it – holding it open, ushering each girl through with a sweep of the hand. We're the last. As we draw near, I see a shifting shape directly behind Sylvia in the glass panel of the door. Her reflection. Only, instead of the *back* of her head, there's a *face*.

The face opens its mouth wide.

For a fraction of a second, the girl and I are enveloped in the cloud of fall-out from the Matron's exploding body before it's all whipped away into the glass.

## Max

I don't know how many of us make it out of the Stanley. Twenty-five, maybe thirty.

Where now?

No-one knows what to do, where to go, who to turn to for help – the compulsion to flee (somewhere, anywhere) is held in check by mass bewilderment. It's as though someone fired a pistol and the runners sprinted out of the blocks in half a dozen different directions at once before being called back for a false start.

'Wait!' Will cries out. But most of us have stuttered to a halt already. 'We have to stick together,' he says, 'or they'll pick us off one by one.'

I think of those five boys by the window. They were together.

'Who *are* those faces?' someone asks.

We've reformed into a loose group on the lawn, beneath the single oak, its branches spread above us like cracks in the great white plate of the false sky. It's darker than before. Colder. I do a quick head-count. Twenty-one. All pupils, no staff. The handful of boys who kept running have already dwindled into the distance, spectral figures in the twilight.

'It doesn't matter who they are,' Harry says. 'We just have to get away from them.'

'Where, though?' a boy asks, his voice ragged with sobs. All around me, the other boys' eyes are wild with fear and panic and confusion.

'We could just stay outside.' This is Oliver. 'Away from the buildings.'

From the windows, he means. From TV screens and anything else in which the images of those old men's faces might appear.

‘What about the woods?’ someone suggests.

But no-one likes it out here, beneath that sky, and with the thrum of disembodied, overlapping voices reverberating all around us.

‘Look at that,’ Will says, pointing at the white van on the drive.

The driver’s door is open, the engine idling, a buzz of static coming from the radio. Slumped on the seat, a set of navy overalls. From the expressions, it’s not just me who pictures the workman trying to escape only to be obliterated by a face in the windscreen before he had time to put the vehicle in gear.

Less than two hours have elapsed since the driver pulled up there while Alice and I chatted to Lewis, yet it might be a scene from another lifetime.

I have to find Alice. Make sure she’s okay.

The thought has barely entered my head than a straggle of pupils appears along the path – girls from the Orange, along with a few Picton boys – running flat out. Near the back, hand-in-hand with a girl I don’t know, is Alice. Her face is streaked with tears and she looks as though she won’t make it much further without her legs giving way.

I reach her before that happens.

## **Alice**

It was Max’s idea. Everyone was arguing about what to do when he said,

‘We have to leave the school grounds.’

‘How do we know it’s any different out there?’ I’m not sure who asked this; one of the Prince twins, I think.

‘We don’t,’ Max told him. ‘But we know what it’s like here.’

That pretty much ended the argument.

So, here we are, heading along the Kilometre towards the nearest exit, Mordaunt Gate. Maybe fifty of us, sticking so close you’d think we’re shackled together. The air is dead still, the “sky” lower than it was and thicker, like a vast arched ceiling of ice. Everywhere is so *quiet*. Just those weird voices and the scuff of our footsteps on the road.

I haven’t let go of Max’s hand since I more or less collapsed on him outside the Stanley. I squeeze his knuckles; he squeezes back.

Each time I breathe in I smell Sylvia. The taste of the Matron coats my tongue, the back of my throat. I know I must be imagining this because I saw her vanish into that face reflected in the door’s glass panel – every last particle – but if I ran my fingers through my hair I can’t believe they wouldn’t be sticky with tiny bits of her.

‘You’re shaking,’ Max says.

I try to tell him about Sylvia but it’s as though each word is a cotton-wool ball glued to the roof of my mouth.

He squeezes my hand harder still. ‘We’ll be okay, Al.’

Even as he says it, though, any flicker of reassurance is snuffed out by the sight of Mordaunt Gate in the murk up ahead. The dense, milky haze that blots out the sky curves right down to the ground, here, to form a screen across the road. A shimmering barrier that seals the gateway and stretches away to either side as far as the eye can see.

It *is* a dome, then. And we’re trapped inside it.

# 6<sup>th</sup> Instalment

## Max

A handful of girls from the Hopetoun are already gathered in front of Mordaunt Gate, staring at the opaque white wall. Not too close, though.

We join them, fanned out across the road like protest marchers on a demo. This . . . phenomenon is slap-bang in front of us – two, three paces and I could touch it. Featureless, immobile as it is, the effect is hypnotic. No-one speaks. No-one breathes, or so it seems. No-one can take their eyes off the whiteness.

Alice whispers in my ear. ‘What’s it made of?’

‘No idea.’

It doesn’t appear to be made of anything. The surface looks as smooth and solid as plastic but as insubstantial as smoke; the “wall” could be a few millimetres thick or several metres, it’s impossible to tell. It makes no sound, gives off no odour, no heat, no chill, and casts only a faint, uniform glimmer. Like a night-light in a child’s bedroom.

‘Is it dangerous?’ someone asks.

‘Let’s find out.’ I recognise Harry’s voice. ‘Anyone got something to throw at it?’

‘How about M.W.?’

‘Not funny, Will,’ a Hopetoun girl says. ‘People are dying.’

‘How about this?’

Alongside me, a Picton sixth-former called Fifty-Metre Peter, on account of his ability to convert penalties from the half-way line, tugs off a shoe and lobs it at the wall. There’s a collective flinch, a sharp intake of breath, as though we’re expecting the shoe to combust in a shower of sparks.

In fact, it simply hangs there, in mid-air; a bug caught in a spider's web.

After a moment, Fifty-Metre Peter steps forward, stooping to study his shoe like a gallery visitor inspecting a curious piece of installation art.

'Don't touch it,' someone says.

But he does. Gingerly, Pete rests the tip of an index finger against the shoe and gives it a prod. Nothing happens. He gives it another, less gentle prod. Again, nothing. The shoe, and the white wall itself, seem entirely inert. Harmless.

Then he places his palm against the whiteness. Another collective gasp.

'What does it feel like?' Harry asks.

'Nothing,' Pete says. 'It's like touching the air.'

'Can you shove your hand through?'

Pete tries. 'No.' Has another go. 'How . . . ?' He laughs. 'There's nothing there!'

Harry steps up and presses a palm against the wall, too. Then his other palm. Leans his whole weight into the whiteness. 'This is just *too* bee-zaar.'

Others follow suit – in ones and twos to begin with, then en masse, until two-thirds of the group are lined up with both hands raised, fingers spread over the unfathomable surface, like they're trying to push it over.

Not me. I take half a pace before Alice pulls me back.

'I don't like this,' she says, whispering again, as though the whiteness might overhear.

Before I can reply, it happens.

The faces appear. The mouths open. And every single person touching the wall is vaporised with an enormous *whumph* and a simultaneous burst of crimson that splatters the surface – only to be erased in an instant, leaving it as pristine as a field of freshly fallen snow.

## Alice

I haven't a clue how long we've been running. Max's watch has stopped and mine is going crazy – from 4:05 to 10:20 to 6:47 in the time it has taken us to cover a couple of kilometres; the second-hand just vibrates, stuck on the number 5.

We've reached Pollock Bridge.

My lungs are scorched and, although it's really cold, the sweat is streaming off me. As for my legs, they're pretty much working on autopilot.

After the others . . . after what happened to them, we took off into the woods, me and Max. No discussion, we both turned and pelted into the trees – no idea where we were aiming for, just trying to put as much distance as possible between us and what we'd seen back there at Mordaunt Gate. We got as far as one of the lakes before we stopped to catch our breath. My tights were ripped, my skirt too. My forehead stung and, when I touched it, my fingers came away sticky with blood where a branch must've whacked me.

'It's here as well,' Max said, panting, gesturing across the water.

Right along the opposite shore, the whiteness reared up like the wall of a huge dam. I told him my dome theory and he nodded. But I could tell he didn't believe me, or didn't want to. Maybe he needed to find out for himself.

'We have to keep moving,' he said.

Why, or where to, he didn't say; but I was glad not to hang around beside the lake, its surface mirroring the false sky. Any moment, those faces might appear on the water.

On we ran, the two of us. I couldn't say how many survived Mordaunt Gate, or where they went, but it seemed as though none of them had followed us into the woods. We skirted the lakes, careful not to stray too near, then round the outdoor pool towards Beresford and Talbot, the white wall off to our right the whole time – unchanging, unbroken.

I hoped we'd come across some other pupils or staff but the buildings were deathly quiet and there was no-one outside either house, just a scattering of shoes and clothes.

The dome wall was here, too, forming a barrier along the inner edge of Waterloo Road then curving into Duke's Ride. We pressed on, jogging parallel to it – past Raglan (empty-looking; more clothes outside), then West Gate (a *lot* of clothing, in a line directly in front of the whiteness), then Bowman Court and along to Wellington Business Park . . . or where the business park would've been, if it wasn't hidden behind the whiteness.

We saw no-one. No signs of life, only of death.

The wall curved again to follow the railway line. We shadowed it on the woodland track that brought us here, to Pollock Bridge. For the first time since the lakes, we stop.

Did Max hope we could cross the bridge into Derby Field and escape that way?

If he did, he doesn't now. The whiteness is here, too, cutting the footbridge in half. Dotted along the walkway are several sets of clothes, like stepping stones, tinged a sickly colour by the reflection of the dome's dull gleam off the green-painted sides of the bridge.

'You're right,' Max says. 'It's all around us.'

He sits down on the stone steps, his back to the bridge. I do the same.

We could press on, following the railway line to Ambarrow Bridge, then up Farm Lane, past the golf course, and all the way to Back Drive. But, without either of us having to say so, we know it would only tell us what we've already figured out. The whiteness – the dome – has sealed the entire school grounds. So, we sit. I'm not sure it's safe just here – if we're out of range of the wall, or even if there *is* a range – but I'm so worn out I must rest.

Must think.

*We are capable of great feats of rationality, Mr Pullman is always telling us, in Philosophy, yet so much of our behaviour is dictated by emotional or physical impulse. Since Charlotte vaporised in front of me, my behaviour has been dictated entirely by panic. By fear.*

‘Where can we go?’ I ask, after a moment.

Max, beside me, head hanging down between his knees, grunts a reply. ‘We can’t go anywhere. That’s the point.’

‘I mean *inside* the grounds. If we can’t leave, where can we go that’s . . . safe?’ No answer. ‘We can’t just sit here, Max.’

‘If we keep our backs to the—’

‘Nuh-uh.’ I explain about the Matron, facing away from the door, oblivious to the face in the glass panel in the instant before she was zapped. ‘Even just being outside . . .’

I let the sentence trail off. Max doesn’t need me to tell him it isn’t safe outdoors.

Most of the deaths, as far as we know, have taken place near reflective surfaces or close to the whiteness. But not exclusively. We’ve spotted clothing heaps in the woods and on the lawns and sports fields, too, well away from any buildings or the sides of the dome.

‘How can we hide when we don’t have a clue what we’re hiding from?’ Max says. ‘How can we run from something that isn’t even chasing us, it’s just . . . everywhere?’ He raises his head and I see that he’s crying. ‘What *is* this, Al? The voices. The faces. *This*.’ He jerks a thumb towards the footbridge, the white wall. ‘What the hell is happening?’

I’ve never seen him like this. ‘I don’t know,’ I whisper, drawing him into a hug.

A hush settles over us like so many leaves of silence fluttering down from the trees. Even the voices are quieter. At least, there seem to be fewer of them. The background hum is definitely more intense in some parts of the grounds than others. Like a regular school day, I guess, when the noise is loudest where there’s the greatest concentration of people.

Here, I swear it’s almost possible to pick out individual voices, individual words.

‘It’s funny,’ I say, ‘the voices sound young but the faces are nearly all old. Older, anyway. Charlotte’s must’ve been about a hundred. But the one who zapped Sylvia wasn’t. It looked a lot like *her*, actually – or like a sister who’s a few years older.’

‘Who are they?’ Max asks. ‘Why do they want to kill us?’

I just shrug. After a moment, I ask, ‘D’you think anyone else is left?’

It’s too awful. The thought that, in the time it has taken us to run most of the way round the grounds, every other pupil and teacher, the security team, the cooks and cleaners and office staff, the maintenance guys, the gardeners – the whole school – might be dead. That it’s just the two of us, now. Me and Max, waiting our turn.

‘Don’t talk like that,’ Max says. ‘We can’t be the only ones.’

We’re not. As though timed to answer him, a bell rings out in the distance. We both recognise it right away – it’s not the one above Main Gate but “George”, the new hand-bell in the chapel. Someone is ringing it like crazy.

# 7<sup>th</sup> Instalment

## Max

As we approach the chapel, Alice and I have already been joined by other refugees – three fourth-form girls from the Anglesey, four Benson boys and a couple of sixth-formers from the Apsley – who'd been hiding out in the woods between Vaughans and Bigside. We're traversing the lawn opposite South Front when, up ahead, I spot several figures filing in through the chapel arch and a few more heading that way from various directions.

“George”, mounted on its stand in the porch, has done its job – gathering up the survivors from all corners. Running, every one of us. A curious, crouching trot, as though we're commandos expecting to come under enemy fire at any moment.

Which we do: two of the boys from the Benson are vaporised simultaneously at the edge of our group and sucked fully thirty metres into the library windows. Amid yelps and shrieks, the rest of us break into a sprint, covering the remaining distance to the chapel in a mad dash and storming the entrance like a SWAT team.

Two burly guys from the upper-sixth are guarding the door. They crash it shut and shoot the bolt across as soon as the last of the stragglers crosses the threshold.

‘Go on through,’ one of the bouncers says. ‘Chapel’s safe.’

‘What about all the windows?’ Alice asks.

‘Nope – been here least an hour and not one zappo. The faces can’t get to us.’

‘Is Rev Kev here?’ I ask.

‘Quad.’ The guy nods towards the door. ‘He’d gone to fetch a group from the V&A. Never made it back.’ Then, with a shrug, ‘There’s no staff here. No adults. Just us.’

I picture Father Kevin’s lopsided smile, the tuft of dark hair that stuck up on top of his head no matter how much he tried to slick it down. Only this morning – a few hours ago, but

another lifetime – the chaplain cracked the latest of his irreligious gags that marked the end of the daily service. It was about a man who overheard his son saying his bedtime prayers.

‘Dear Lord, please may I have a new iPad for my birthday?’

‘Son,’ the man said, going into the boy’s room, ‘That’s not how God works. You have to *steal* an iPad . . . then ask Him to *forgive* you.’

One of his better jokes. Now he’s just a heap of clothes in Princes’ Quad.

Along with the other new arrivals, Al and I shuffle through into the main part of the chapel. I’m shaking, although I’m not sure if it’s nervous tension after the run through the woods from Pollock Bridge, or relief at making it inside, or delayed shock from those two Benson boys. One of them was right next to me when it happened.

‘Is this all of us?’ someone asks.

Pupils are scattered among the benches in the North Aisle, a few more in Benson Aisle, with others milling about the nave or by the altar – at a guess, no more than eighty in total. Hundreds are dead, then; or still out there somewhere, being picked off by those faces. This must hang over everyone because it’s eerily quiet. Subdued. Nobody’s in the frame of mind to celebrate the fact that we’ve found sanctuary from the horrors outside.

Nobody swaps stories of their escape or speaks of what they’ve witnessed.

Nobody is organising us, discussing what to do, formulating an action plan. There is nothing to discuss. No action plan. No way of fighting back. We just stay here, safe, and wait for this – whatever it is – to end.

Or we go back out there and die.

The gloom doesn’t help the mood. The lights aren’t working, we’re told, and, with the pall cast by the false sky, the great arches of stained-glass have lost their brilliance. Candles flicker here and there, their flames guttering in the draught.

‘Let’s sit down,’ Al says. ‘I’m done in.’

‘Can you see any Orange girls?’

She surveys the clusters of people. ‘A few.’

I spot a handful of guys from the Stanley sitting in the North Aisle and we exchange nods, waves. None of my friends are here, though. David, Philip, Rowland. All gone.

As I follow Alice up the steps, she says, ‘Look who’s here.’

## Alice

Lewis is alone in the back row, beneath the Crucified Christ sculpture that some OW made way back before any of us were born. A rotting corpse crossed with a Dementor from Harry Potter. I usually try not to look at it but, after the stuff I’ve seen, it isn’t half so scary today.

Lewis looks terrible. I can’t believe how pleased I am to see him, to know he’s still alive; it’s all I can do not to throw my arms round him. He has one of the hymn books open on his lap and raises it in front of his chest like a shield.

‘Macedonia,’ Max says.

‘Nng.’

‘Macedonia, Lewis.’

‘Sk-Sk-Skopje.’

‘Liberia.’

‘Monro-via.’

‘East Timor.’

‘Dili.’

‘East *where?*’ I ask.

‘Timor,’ Lewis says, clicking into gear. ‘Former Portuguese colony in the Indonesian archipelago.’ He lowers the hymn book but keeps his eyes on the pages, as though reading aloud. ‘Invaded by Indonesia, 1976. Gained independence, 1999, following years of—’

‘Mind if we join you?’ Max gestures at the bench.

Lewis frowns. Shuffles along to make room.

‘How you doing, Lewis?’ I ask.

‘No. Nono.’ He shakes his head, avoiding eye-contact. I can’t figure out if he means he isn’t doing too well or that he doesn’t want to talk about it. ‘It makes no sense,’ he says.

Max shuts his eyes, tips his head back against the wall. ‘You can say that again.’

‘Why should I say it again?’

‘It’s a figure of speech, Lew.’

‘No, it literally makes no sense. There’s no rational or scientific explanation for these phenomena.’

‘Well that’s a relief,’ Max says, ‘because I could’ve sworn they were happening.’

‘They are observable, yes. But I’m referring to their verifiability.’

Max’s eyes snap open. ‘Go out there – you’ll get all the verification you need just like that.’ He clicks his fingers on the final word.

Lewis looks like a puppy that’s been whacked by its owner and can’t figure out why.

‘Max, go easy on him,’ I say. ‘He’s been through the same as us.’

We sit without speaking, the three of us in a line. Below, in the nave, a couple of boys are handing out Jaffa Cakes from several packs they must have snaffled from the stash Father Kevin is known to keep in the vestry. Once, he used one to illustrate a sermon on love. *If we have not love in our hearts*, he said, raising it above his head with due reverence, *we are no better than a Jaffa Cake without the smashing orangey bit in the middle*. Then he popped it in his mouth like a communion wafer.

How long can we hold out, in here, if that's all the food we have? Is there water?

The chapel appears darker than when we arrived. I imagine the whiteness thickening outside, the dome lowering over the school grounds. There's nothing we can do to help ourselves, it seems, but I wonder if we have a hope of being rescued by anyone beyond the white. Police, Army, whoever. Do they even *know* what's happening here?

I think about Mum and Dad. My sister. For all I know, they're just the other side of the dome, figuring out a way to get in. Or totally oblivious.

I want to be with them more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

Lewis holds out his wrist for us to see. 'My watch isn't working.'

'Ours aren't either,' I manage to say.

He frowns. 'How am I meant to know when it's time for Enrichment? Or House Meeting and Call-Over?' He's getting himself into a state.

'Lewis, I really don't think—'

'Or First Prep?'

Max swears. Says he's going to get some Jaffa Cakes and stomps off down the steps. I go after him, grab him by the arm.

'Why're you being like this, Max?' It's a whisper that comes out as a hiss.

'Like what?'

'With Lewis. D'you think all this is his fault?'

'Well, clearly, you think it's mine.'

He looks so sulky. Maybe it's this expression, or the fact he's standing one step below me, but Max seems like a child all of a sudden. I turn away and go back to sit with Lewis.

## Max

I'm near the head of the queue for the Jaffa Cakes when it suddenly gets darker, the frail light at the stained-glass growing weaker still – as though a great cloud is passing over us – and a wind whips up and buffets the windows. The big, bad wolf, trying to blow our house down. The candle flames flicker more violently and a few go out, spiralling acrid smoke in the air.

As others do, I glance at the arched windows, expecting to see the faces at their tinted panels. Peering down at us. Opening their mouths.

The faces aren't there. I release my breath in one long stream.

Then, a thud-thud-THUD on the door resounds through the chapel. A voice bellows.

'Open!'

As though triggered by the word, the light dims further still and the wind outside strengthens, renewing its assault on the windows – on the very walls and roof, causing the building to creak like an old sailing ship in a stormy sea. I swear the floor lurches beneath my feet. People shout. Someone screams.

More thumping at the doors and that voice booms again. 'Open! You must OPEN!'

I recognise it now. Others do too, the name murmuring its way round the chapel: *It's Barmy Baum. Barmy's out there. Barmy Baum. It's Barmy Baum.*

There are competing cries of 'Let him in!' and 'Don't open the door!' If we leave him there, he's sure to die – but, if we let him in, will the forces gathered round the chapel swarm inside? The sixth-former guarding the entrance doesn't wait for the arguments to play out.

He slides the bolt back and opens the door.

From the nave, I see Baum cross the threshold. In the instant before the door shuts again, one of the boys in the vestibule is obliterated, the pink mist of his remains sucked through the crack with a hiss that echoes through the chapel.

The Professor doesn't flinch or show any sign that he even registers what happens.

The other pupils in the entrance back away from him, as though he'd killed that boy himself with his bare hands. He simply stands there – in his knee-length brown poncho, but minus the fleece hat – staring intensely at each face in turn. Without the hat, his bald head glistens with sweat, the few remaining grey hairs sticking out like kindergarten scribble.

'Is he here?'

A hoarse whisper but, in the pin-drop silence that has fallen in the wake of his appearance, his words reverberate with the force of a shout. Now he does shout.

'Is . . . he . . . here!?'

The boys in the vestibule retreat still further, creating a space that Prof Baum steps into. His bare shins are mud-spattered, his battered sandals slapping the stone-flagged floor as he strides into the chapel proper. Those fierce eyes dart about the place, seeking out faces. Spindly arms outstretched, cruciform, he bellows his question again.

'Is who here, sir?' someone dares to ask.

'The boy who caused all of this!' Prof Baum's gaze alights on the pews at the back of North Aisle and he extends a long, bony finger. 'You, boy. You. Lewis Roberts.'

# 8<sup>th</sup> Instalment

## Alice

The guy takes a few more paces down the nave, eyes never leaving Lewis. Fires the words at him over the heads of the pupils scattered about the pews below us.

‘Stand up when I’m talking to you.’ Lewis does as he’s told. Stammers an apology.

‘Where is it, boy?’

‘I d-d-don’t have it, Sir.’

With a gesture outside, Baum says, ‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done?’

I’ve always thought of him as a feeble old man shuffling around the grounds, as if a gust of wind might whisk him away. Right now he’s strong, determined. In that poncho and sandals, he looks like an angry monk. Apart from me, Max and Lewis, none of the others can have a clue what he’s on about. I see Max slip out of the food queue and move towards him.

‘Sir, it wasn’t–’

‘Young man, I’m talking to Lewis Roberts.’

‘Lewis only dug up the capsule. It was me who opened it.’ He flicks a look at me as he says this and I wonder if he’d have owned up if I hadn’t got cross with him just now. Then I feel bad for thinking it. Whatever, he has Baum’s full attention, along with that of everyone else in the chapel. Max goes on, ‘But I don’t understand how it can possibly have caused–’

‘What have you done with the capsule?’ the Professor asks.

‘It’s in . . .’ This is Lewis. He clears his throat, starts over. ‘Sir, it’s in my room.’

Baum rounds on him again, squinting in the gloom. ‘House?’ When Lewis doesn’t answer immediately he yells, ‘Boy, which bloody house?’

‘Nng . . . Picton.’

## Max

If Prof Baum had his way, he would haul Lewis off to the Picton immediately. But Alice and I won't let him and, amidst the clamour from the other pupils demanding to know what the hell is going on, it's clear that no-one is leaving the chapel just yet. Lewis is close to breaking down altogether and I can hear Al muttering obscure countries to him.

She raises her hands and calls for quiet. She gets it. I'm impressed. Has she always been so sure of herself and I just never noticed it before? Or never took the trouble to?

'Let's go into the Vestry,' she tells the Professor.

The four of us, she means: Al, me, Lewis, Baum. A guy from the upper-sixth comes too – Sebastian, a Prefect at the Picton, who appoints himself 'like, an independent observer, yeah?' on behalf of the rest of the pupils. Bastian, he calls himself. Known behind his back as Alf, on account of being such an Alpha Male. Plays No.8 for the first XV, opens the batting for the cricket team, wrestles baddies on the roofs of speeding trains.

We're sitting around a large table, Lewis hunched forward, forehead pressed against the surface. Beside him, the Professor is twitchy and restless. Impatient. With the candles dotted about the room we could be staging a séance.

'Tell us about the capsule,' Alice says to Baum, straight to the point. Taking charge.

'It must be sealed again,' he says. 'That's the only thing that matters now.'

'Okay,' Bastian cuts in, 'so let's switch to English here because all I'm like picking up is Troll-speak.'

I give him a brief summary of what happened on the lawn outside the Stanley.

'The white-sky thing happened right after,' Alice adds, when I'm done.

Bastian smirks. ‘A *metal canister*?’

She ignores his sarcasm. Ignores him. ‘Professor, the capsule was empty.’

‘It was sealed when you dug it up. Yes?’

‘Yeah.’ She nods in my direction. ‘Max had to give the lid a real twist to get it off.’

‘Then, no, it was not empty.’

‘You weren’t there,’ I say. ‘You don’t know what was in it.’

‘I know precisely what was in that capsule, young man, because I was the one who buried it in the first place.’

‘You? When?’

‘November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963.’

Bastian says, ‘But that’s like . . . sixty years ago.’

‘Nearly fifty, in fact.’ Prof Baum shoots him a look filled with disdain. ‘But not a bad attempt, considering you performed the arithmetic without the aid of a calculator. Or a brain.’

I can’t believe we thought this guy was crazy.

Alice asks, ‘Why did you bury the capsule?’

‘Because of poor Cadamarteri,’ he says, quietly. His face has sagged and he suddenly looks ancient. ‘And because, if I *hadn’t*,’ he indicates the window, darkened by the whiteness beyond, ‘*this* would have happened.’

Lewis lifts his head from the table. His forehead is livid pink. ‘In memory of Darius Cadamarteri (Blücher),’ he says, quoting the memorial stone outside Physics, ‘who lost his life in the pursuit of knowledge, the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of November, 1963. *Requiescat in pace.*’

Baum nods. So softly I have to strain to hear him, he tells us what happened that day.

In the early 1960s, he was an up-and-coming physics master at the school, with a first from Oxford, a PhD published to international critical acclaim and a visiting professorship at University College, London. His specialisation was Time. He could’ve bagged a permanent

post at any of the top universities in the world but, as an Old Wellingtonian, and good friend of the then Master, he stayed loyal to Welly. His reward: the lightest possible teaching load and the facilities and funding to pursue his research.

But his work on Time evolved into a fascination with the concept of Time *Travel* and the international scientific community began to distance itself from him.

‘From genius to crackpot. Don’t imagine you are the first to call me Barmy Baum.’

We look a little sheepishly at one another.

By 1963, he was obsessed with proving his hypothesis. ‘Time travel had always been seen as a problem of moving mass through time. My idea was that it could be effected by moving time itself.’

His eyes glitter as he explains how he set up a laboratory in the Physics department in which he conducted a series of experiments using a machine he designed and built himself, capable of extracting, condensing and storing an atmospheric imprint of time.

‘Just as a homeopathic medicine appears to contain only water, so a capsule of condensed time appears to hold nothing but air,’ the Professor tells us. ‘In fact, they are both impregnated with a microscopic but nonetheless potent ingredient – in this case, the essence of the time in which the extraction took place.’

To begin with, his experiments were small-scale – thirty seconds, a minute – but, when the canister was reopened after an hour, the results were startling: a clock that reset itself to the previous time; a radio reverting to an earlier broadcast. Next he experimented with a live mouse in a cage and a two-minute “capture”. An hour later, Baum made a mark on the mouse’s back and replaced the cage in the lab for the unsealing of the capsule. The mark vanished. When the captured time had lapsed, the mark reappeared.

‘For two minutes, the mouse was the earlier, unmarked version of himself,’ he says. ‘You see? That mouse travelled forwards in time by one hour.’ In his animation I make out

the euphoria he must've experienced on that day nearly half a century ago. 'I had relocated time and taken mass with it. I had transported two minutes of the past to the present.'

'Sir,' I cut in, 'where does Darius Cadamarteri fit into all of this?'

His face clouds over again. 'My research assistant. Only a fourth-former, but by far the brightest, ablest and keenest of my Physics students.'

Cadamarteri, it was, who volunteered to be the first human to undergo "time-capture and relocation", to establish whether a subject had any conscious awareness of the process. Sitting in a chair in the lab during extraction, he reported no signs of anything unusual taking place. Later, returning to the chair for the unsealing of the capsule, it was evident from his responses to carefully constructed questions put to him by Prof Baum through a speaker, that the Cadamarteri in the lab was the one of an hour ago.

'And afterwards?' Alice asks. 'When he came back out?'

The Professor shakes his head. 'He had no recollection whatsoever of the two minutes in which he had been his former self.'

Baum sits back in his chair, looking exhausted. No-one asks the question, not even Bastian, but it's clear that we are all waiting for him to tell us how Cadamarteri died.

'I should have left it at that,' Prof Baum says, after a moment. 'There was more than enough evidence to publish.' He sighs. 'But I wanted to extend the extraction period – to see just how much time it was possible to capture and relocate and what the consequences might be. So, Cadamarteri sat in that lab for five minutes. Then ten. Then thirty. Then an hour.'

The tears come – unchecked, unwiped – and he has to break off.

'What happened?' Alice asks, gently, once the Professor has composed himself.

'I'd already observed that, at around three minutes, the air in the lab became hazy.

The cause was unidentifiable but, as there appeared to be no harmful effects, we continued to

extend the duration. Progressively, the haze thickened – still with no discernible ill-effects – until it formed a kind of translucent seal around the interior of the lab.’

‘Like the whiteness, yeah?’ Bastian says.

Prof Baum disregards him. ‘The boy assured me he was all right. But by fifty minutes the haze beyond the viewing panel was so dense I was worried about losing visual contact.’ He pauses again, scrawny shoulders trembling beneath the poncho. ‘I was about to shut down the relocation when I saw Cadamarteri stare at the wall – or where the wall would have been if it wasn’t whited over.’

Baum looked there, too, and saw the face of an old man. That face opened its mouth. He can’t get the words out to describe what happened next. He doesn’t need to.

‘I immediately reversed the process, switching the machine from “relocation” to “capture”, in the hope that I might somehow recover him.’

But, as the haze and whatever remained of Cadamarteri were sucked back into the capsule, its sudden resealing created an abrupt and massive differential in air pressure which caused the laboratory to implode, collapsing in on itself like a house of cards.

When the emergency services searched the wreckage they found no trace of the boy.

‘There was a police investigation, of course,’ Prof Baum adds. ‘But, with little or no hard evidence – and the Master’s influence in high places – it was deemed a tragic accident rather than a case of criminal negligence.’ He shrugs. ‘I keep my job, most of the facts don’t make it into the newspapers and the boy’s parents’ civil action against the school is settled out of court with a generous payment. A cover-up. The whole thing, tidied away out of sight and we all carry on as if nothing happened.’

It’s clear, though, that the Professor didn’t “carry on” or tidy this away; he looks like a man who has spent every day of the past forty-nine and a bit years hauling his guilt around like a sack of stones. And that no amount of remorse will ever free him from his torment.

His words hang a silence over us. Alice looks pale, distracted; she won't meet my gaze, as though, on top of everything else, I'm somehow to blame for Cadamarteri's death.

'Call me stoopid,' Bastian says, 'but, like, I still don't get what literally happened.'

It's Lewis who answers. 'A time rupture.'

Prof Baum looks at him; the expression of a teacher pleasantly surprised by a pupil's intelligence. 'Exactly that,' he says. 'Time has a degree of tolerance to small amounts of slippage and displacement – it can adjust, resynchronise – but the prolonged leakage in that final experiment caused too great a build-up of stress for the fabric of Time to withstand.'

'And so it ripped?' I suggest.

'Not ripped, no – it attempted to *prevent* a rip by sealing off the leak. That "white stuff" is Time's way of containing a rupture between past and present to stop it spreading.' The Professor searches my face, as though for signs that I understand. 'By switching the machine into reverse I broke the seal – or rather, I created my own, new seal.'

'The capsule,' Lewis says.

Prof Baum nods. 'In that canister was the essence of a rupture in Time. I retrieved it from the wreckage and buried it in the ground that day.' He turns his attention from Lewis to me. 'You released that rupture, young man, when you twisted off that lid.'

He looks sad more than angry.

'If we don't restore the rupture to the capsule and reseal it,' he continues, 'we will die just as Cadamarteri did. All of us, one by one. And that white dome will close up altogether, cauterizing Time's wound, erasing every last trace of the school, the buildings, and all of the staff and pupils who have ever worked or studied here. To the rest of the world, it will be as though this place never existed.'

# 9<sup>th</sup> Instalment

## Alice

We clear the vestibule, ushering everyone else into the main part of the chapel. After what happened as Prof Baum entered, there's no point risking a needless death on the way out.

The five of us gather by the door: me, the Professor, Lewis, Max and Bastian.

Bastian is all set to open it, then shut it again and shoot the bolt across as soon as we're outside. I half-expect him to offer to come with us – Alf, the alpha male, playing the hero. But he doesn't. The guy looks like a team of Sumo couldn't wrestle him through that doorway. He even tries to talk *me* out of going.

'Why? Because I'm a girl?'

'No, actually.' Pointing at Baum, Lewis and Max in turn, Bastian says, 'He buried the capsule, he dug it up and he opened it. So, I'm like, why do *you* have to go out there, yeah?'

'He's got a point, Al.' This is Max.

I fix him a withering look. 'If I don't go, who's going to take on the role of spraining their ankle at a vital moment and saying, "Go on without me!"?'

'I can do that,' Lewis says, matter-of-factly. 'I'm always twisting my ankle.'

Max lets out a snort. 'Hey, Lew, did you just make a joke?'

'No, I have weak ankles. Why would I make a joke ab—'

Just then, the roof shudders and the stained-glass lining the vestibule rattles so hard I can't believe it doesn't shatter. The door jolts like a great beast is trying to batter it down.

'The dome,' Prof Baum explains. 'It's contracting.'

I recall a scene from a film: a man trapped in a room as the ceiling slowly descends.

'You guys are seriously going out there?' Bastian asks, braced against the door.

'We must,' the Professor tells him.

'But the chapel's safe.'

‘It’s holding for the moment, that’s all.’

‘Because of God?’ Bastian wants to know.

‘More likely Faith,’ Baum says. ‘A continuum of faith is enshrined in this building – an ancient belief system, its symbols and rituals – creating a simulacrum of agelessness.’

‘A simu-what of what?’

‘A temporal anomaly, if you like.’ The Professor cups his hands. ‘A protective seal which resists the pressure of events taking place outside these walls.’ He uncups his hands, lets them fall to his sides. ‘But the greater force will inevitably prevail.’

‘How d’you know which is greater?’ I ask.

‘Time,’ he says, simply. ‘It existed before Faith. It was here from the beginning, and it will be the last thing to end.’ The Professor pauses while another onslaught shakes the chapel around us. ‘It will not cease until the capsule is sealed and Time has been re-set. If we don’t do it, Time will do it for us. And we will be annihilated.’

## **Max**

As the door opens, I’m expecting exactly that – annihilation; rendered useless by fear, so that it’s all I can do not to shut my eyes, fall to the ground and give myself up to death.

But I go outside. I run. The others run and so do I. I am not annihilated.

Prof Baum leads, agile for his age, loping into Combermere Quad, poncho flapping so that in the spooky light he looks like a fleeing vampire. Each of us has been instructed where to go, what to do. The idea is that if two or three of us are killed, at least one might survive long enough to re-seal the capsule.

It's not the greatest motivational speech I've ever heard.

No-one has been taken so far and we're already half-way across the quad, skirting the huge horse-head sculpture and aiming for Poet's Gate. The quad is littered with the clothes of the dead, though. And the faces are here.

'My God, look at them!' Al yells, above the clamour of the voices.

It's noisier than before and colder still. The dome is so low if you climbed on to the roof of one of the buildings you could almost touch it. The white is leaking, too, and some of the faces loom like holograms in the tendrils of mist that swirl around us. I flinch each time, dreading the worst. They ignore us, though – scudding by like scraps of cloud in a breeze.

Old faces, for the most part. But not in every case.

Chancing a glance back over my shoulder, I see scores of them hovering in the wispy ether that now envelops the chapel. 'Who are they?' I shout. We are entering the passage that runs down the outside of the Common Room. My voice echoes off the walls.

'They are us,' Prof Baum calls back, the words fractured by his breathing.

'Us?' Al says.

'All of us.' He has to pause at the end of the passage, leaning against the wall and struggling to haul air into his lungs. 'You . . . me . . . everyone,' the Professor wheezes. 'They are our faces at death, come . . . to claim us.'

'What d'you mean?' I ask.

'The time rupture,' Lewis says. 'We've let them in.'

Prof Baum nods. 'If you think about it, all that stands . . . between us and Death is the barrier of Time. Now . . . thanks to you,' he points at me, 'there *is* no Time. Only Death.'

I think of the smell from the capsule, with its reminder of my grandmother on her death-bed. 'So, each of those faces—' I point back towards the chapel.

'Belongs to one of the people inside,' the Professor says, completing my sentence.

He straightens up, swabs his sweaty brow with the back of his hand. ‘That’s what young Cadamarteri saw on the whited-out wall of the laboratory: the face of his dead self, freed from the future by my corruption of Time.’

Opening its mouth. Vaporising him. Sucking him in.

## Alice

We’re running again, to the front of the Picton, skipping between heaps of clothing and (far more upsetting) the scattered toys and plastic tricycle of the Housemasters’s son.

Yet another face swoops down – but, like the rest, it hasn’t come for us.

Are we just incredibly lucky or are we protected? By what, I’ve no idea. Unless it’s Baum. Is he immune after what happened in 1963, his immunity somehow shielding us? Or maybe we’re immune as well, as a result of being there when Max unscrewed that lid and inhaling whatever leaked out. Because one thing the three of us have in common with the Professor, apart from still being alive, is that we’ve all stood next to a time rupture.

Whatever, we’ve made it safely through the front door of the Picton. All four of us.

The Prof is doing the wheezy thing again, so I agree to stay with him while Max and Lewis fetch the capsule. It’s not enough just to screw the lid back on, we first have to “trigger a reversal” of the rupture. Baum has the equipment in his flat, he told us – a machine like the one that killed Cadamarteri; he rebuilt it in secret in the hope that, one day, he’d figure out how to bring the boy back.

His breathing really is bad. ‘Are you feeling okay?’ I ask, as Max’s and Lewis’s footsteps clatter on the stairs above us.

‘My dear, I’m . . . seventy-nine,’ he manages, with what I think is a laugh. ‘I haven’t felt okay for . . . twenty years.’

The voices are loud in the hallway, echoing off the walls so that it’s hard to hear each other speak. I ask if the voices, like the faces, belong to our dead selves too.

The Professor shakes his head. ‘What we are listening to is every conversation, every utterance, by every pupil and teacher who ever walked these buildings, these grounds.’ He gulps down a breath, gestures vaguely in the air. ‘These are the voices of the past.’

‘Sir, how can you be so sure of all this?’

He gives me a fierce look. His eyes are bloodshot, his lower lip trembles, flecked with spit. ‘Because there isn’t a day since that boy died when I haven’t thought about it.’

We’re vulnerable, standing here. A face could take us at any moment. I feel strangely calm, though. Unafraid. Maybe my emotions have shut down in the face of so much danger. I picture myself in a car after a bad crash, not sure if I’m in pain, or if the blood pooling around me is mine or someone else’s; content to lie in the wreckage and take what comes.

‘It was the face of a very old man,’ Baum says, after a couple of minutes’ silence.

‘What was?’

‘The face Cadamarteri saw just before—. It wasn’t his face as it was *then*, it was *old*.’ He turns to me with a pleading look. ‘It’s the one shred of hope I’ve clung to all this time.’

‘I’m not sure I understand.’

He sounds exasperated but also excited. ‘It wasn’t his time to die. D’you see?’

Right now, Baum *does* seem barmy. I can’t hold his gaze. ‘I should go up there,’ I say, glancing at the staircase. ‘They’ve been gone too long.’

I don’t wait for his approval, I just head up those stairs. I realise, though, that I’ve no idea which is Lewis’s room, so I have to trek down one corridor after another calling their names, peering round doors. The evidence of dead Pictons is everywhere; I take care not to

step on any of it. On the top floor, I hear something above the hum of voices: a boy in one of the rooms. Sobbing.

Lewis's room. The name-card looks like a child of ten drew it. The door is ajar, but not enough for me to see if it's Lewis or Max who's so distraught. I can guess why, though. Standing outside, fingers curled round the handle, my throat tightens so I can barely swallow.

'Max? Lewis?'

No answer, just the muffled sobbing. I push the door open and go in.

Max is kneeling on the floor by the window, as though praying, his hands filled with Lewis's clothes; pressing them into his face, mumbling to himself between sobs.

My own eyes film over with tears. 'Oh, Lewis,' I whisper.

No protection, then. No immunity. Just luck. And Lewis's has run out.

Without turning round, Max lowers the bundle of clothes to his lap and points to the window. 'It was right there, when we came in. Waiting for him.'

The glass is blank, now. Beyond it, spirals of white drift by like smoke.

I try to focus, to shut out what's just happened to Lewis. I stop myself picturing him, his clumpy hair and that frown of concentration he always wore, sweeping the ground with his metal detector. I don't say Argentina in my head, or hear him reply with Buenos Aires.

I should go to Max and kneel beside him. Hold him. I should cry, too.

No. We knew this was likely, that one or more of us wouldn't make it.

'Max, where's the capsule?' No answer.

I scope the room. Every flat surface is filled with metal objects of all shapes and sizes. Hundreds of them. I spot a desk in the corner laid out with pieces in rows. Dead centre, in pride of place, is the capsule, stood upright with the lid set neatly in front of it. It looks no more harmful than a thermos flask waiting to be filled with tea and placed in a picnic hamper.

I cross the room, put the lid back on the capsule and pick it up.

‘Come on, Baum’s waiting downstairs,’ I say, laying a hand on Max’s shoulder. Sounding more determined than I feel. ‘Max. We have to go.’

‘No!’

Max springs to his feet, shrugging me off, and flings the

## **Max**

clothes across the room, knocking some of Lewis’s collection off the desk.

‘No! No! NOOOO!’

The first two punches don’t do it but the third propels my fist right through the glass, bashing out a jagged hole. I punch again and again until the window sill, floor, wall, curtains are spattered with blood and shards of glass. I’d go on punching but Al grabs my arm

## **Alice**

to stop him and, right then, a middle-aged man’s face materialises in the mist outside the smashed window. His mouth yawns wide and, with a *whumph* and a hiss, Max vanishes.

All I have of him is a heap of his shoes and clothes at my feet and a blazer, dangling from my hand by the empty sleeve.

# 10<sup>th</sup> Instalment

## Alice

We're in Farm Lane, I think, but the whiteness is so thick I can barely see him stumbling ahead of me. Most of the way, I've held on to the tail of his poncho so I don't lose him.

In the other hand, I have the capsule, gripped so tight my knuckles ache.

It's all that matters now. That's what I have to tell myself. I can't won't mustn't let any other thoughts in. But they come all the same.

Max. *Max.*

If Baum hadn't come to find me, I'd still be there, holding that sleeve; waiting for my own death-face to appear beyond that broken window. It took him a second to work out what had happened to Lewis and Max and a lot longer to make me drop the blazer and come with him, just as I'd urged Max to leave a moment earlier.

'They're gone,' the Professor said. Just like that. *They're gone.*

'Here.' I offered him the capsule. 'You do it.'

He wouldn't take it from me. 'No. You have to come with me in case I don't make it.'

'I just watched him die!' I indicated Max's clothes, crumpled on the floor; furiously, uselessly, wiped away the tears. I shoved the capsule at him. 'Take it. I'm done with this.'

'This,' he said, lowering his voice rather than raising it, 'is more important than you, or him, or me. Any of us.' He held my gaze. 'I'm sorry. Truly. But you are not done with it.'

So here we are, on Baum's doorstep, shrouded in mist. The guy fumbles for a key on a cord around his neck, getting me to repeat the step-by-step procedure to install the capsule and work the machine. He briefed the three of us at the chapel and has been testing me again on the way here from the Picton, paranoid that he'll be zapped before he sees this through.

I mutter the words like a mantra. I have no idea what I'm saying any more.

We step inside his flat and the Professor hurries me through a lounge and a narrow kitchen to what must once have been a utility room, with bare walls and a tiled floor. No sink, washing machine or tumble-dryer, though. Just a framework of tubes and cables built around what looks like an engine or pump. If it had wood-and-canvas wings it could pass for one of those early flying machines that always crashed on take-off.

‘The whiteness is indoors, now,’ I say.

Baum looks where I’m looking: at the threads of haze hanging beneath the ceiling like cobwebs. The colour has leached from his face. ‘We’re near the end,’ he says.

The descent of the dome, he must mean – blanketing, smothering, erasing the school grounds and everything in them. Closing the breach in Time. Sealing us off from the past, the present, the future. Annihilating us.

We work together, the Professor handling the tricky stuff and leaving the easier bits to me – barking instructions at me, even so; checking and double-checking everything.

‘We have one shot at this,’ he says.

By the time the machine is set up, the room is as steamy as a sauna. Only, this isn’t steam, it’s *dome* – leaking through the window, the walls, the ceiling. It’s so icy in here. I could pretend to myself that’s the only reason I can’t stop shaking.

Baum flips a switch.

I expect the equipment to spring into life with a whirr of action and noise, but the machinery remains motionless and, if it wasn’t for a low hum, you’d have no idea the thing was on. I notice a stirring in the white, as though it’s disturbed by the slightest of draughts.

‘A sample of the Time contained within the dome is being extracted,’ he explains.

‘This will be condensed to an essence which will, in turn, be captured and sealed away. More precisely,’ he points to the metal canister, docked in its mounting, ‘encapsulated.’

‘Then what? Everything returns to normal?’

‘Not normal, no. I very much doubt that.’

‘So . . . what, then?’

‘The temporal anomaly – the rupture – will have been rectified and Time reset.’ He hesitates. ‘Beyond that, I’m afraid, is uncharted territory with a breach of this magnitude.’

‘You have no idea what might happen, do you?’

‘The previous rupture was shorter and more confined: less than an hour in one, sealed, laboratory.’ He pauses to check a gauge and to adjust one of the controls. ‘It’s quite possible that the 1963 anomaly resulted in no seepage.’

‘Seepage?’

‘Seepage of Time through the membrane of this “whiteness”. The dome is Time’s way of limiting the damage and extent of a rupture, containing it at site where it occurred.’

He waves a hand. ‘The world beyond the dome is protected from the rupture and its effects.’

The humming of the machine seems to become more intense, setting up a tremor that causes the whiteness to shudder and makes the floor vibrate beneath my feet.

‘But this one is different?’

He nods. ‘It happened out of doors, for one thing – not in a controlled environment. And it has gone unchecked, un-reversed, for several hours.’ Another pause while he tinkers with the equipment again. ‘So, you’re right – I have no idea what the consequences of this reversal will be, if it succeeds. Or what manner of alteration might have taken place in the world these grounds will be restored to.’

‘Or who’ll be alive and who’ll be dead,’ I suggest.

Baum doesn’t answer. Instead, he says, ‘The course is set. You can go now.’

‘What? Go where?’

‘As far away as possible from this building.’

I almost laugh. ‘There’s nowhere to go. It’s just dome out there.’

‘Once the reversal is complete, there will be an implosion,’ he says. ‘And on a much bigger scale than the one which killed Cadamarteri.’ He softens his tone. ‘Believe me, Alice, you won’t want to be standing here in a few minutes from now.’

It’s the first time he’s used my name. ‘What about you?’

‘I have to stay. If my calculations are correct, I’m an essential part of the process.’

It’s impossible to tell where I’m going. The whiteness outside the Professor’s flat is total.

The only way I can be sure I’m walking in a straight line is by the hardness of the road beneath my feet. Each time I stray on to the grass verge, I shuffle back on to the asphalt. I have my arms out like a zombie in case I bump into something.

One time, not long after we first started going out, I walked to chapel with Max on a really foggy morning; I remember he held a hand up in front of his face and said,

‘Wow, you can’t even see your hand in front of your face.’ It made me laugh.

It wasn’t true, of course. Today, it is. I wish Max was here to witness it.

I wish he hadn’t opened that capsule. I wish he’d been kinder to Lewis. I wish I’d had the chance to say goodbye. Because it *was* goodbye. I feel it. Whether the reversal works or not, and whatever happens, I don’t believe there’ll be a Max-and-Alice the other side of it. This was our moment.

Walking. On and on, into the white, listening for the blast.

I must be two or three hundred metres from Prof Baum’s flat when a woman’s face looms in the mist directly in front of me. I stop. Hold her gaze. She’s a bit like my mum, only older. So that’s what I would’ve grown up to look like.

I wonder if it will hurt but, otherwise, I have no fear.

She opens her mouth.

I smile at her. ‘You took your time.’

# **Final Instalment**

## Max

I'm last out of the house for call-over, cutting it fine for Physics. Of course I am – I have a reputation to uphold. Anyway, you could trip down the steps of the Stanley and land face-first in Physics, so I'm still on schedule to arrive in that segment of the Venn diagram where my circle of acceptable lateness intersects the circle of Mr Cadamarteri's idea of punctuality.

Old Cadders will say something like, 'Young man, if you ever turn up when you are meant to, I shall know that a cataclysmic breach has occurred in the space-time continuum.'

'Time is a construct, Sir,' I'll reply. 'It has no tangible value.'

'Much like yourself, then, Maxim.'

And so on, until the time spent discussing my lateness will exceed by a factor of four the number of minutes by which I was actually late.

Barely into March but Spring is springing: crocuses are scattered everywhere, like so many yellow and purple paper-darts, and the birds are chirruping in the woods over the way.

Lewis Roberts is tracking across the lawn between Stanley and The Kilometre. A third-former; a Foundationer (his father died in Helmand; IED). Lewis is in headphones, sweeping the grass with his metal detector. He got it for Christmas and has been searching the school grounds ever since. History project, he says: *A Metallurgical Archaeology of Wellington College*. Apparently, his room in the Picton is so cluttered with coins, bottle caps, rusty horse-shoes, tent pegs, drinks cans, bicycle clips and the like that it has established its own magnetic field.

"Screwy Lewis", some of them call him.

He spots me. 'Scotland,' I say, quickly, seeing his unease.

He pulls the headset free and lets it hang round his neck. His gingery-brown hair sticks up in clumps and his ears are red where the cups pressed against them.

‘Scotland,’ I repeat.

‘Edinburgh,’ he replies, and the knot of flesh between his eyebrows eases. He’s there. He’s okay.

You have to do this with Lewis. If you just start talking to him he’ll go from nervous to full-blown panic attack in 5.7 seconds. So, you name a country and he tells you the capital. Lewis knows the capital of every country in the world. If he’s not too anxious, you can settle him with an easy one; the more agitated he is, the more obscure the country has to be.

‘Hey, Lewis,’ I say. ‘Found anything today?’

Rummaging in his blazer, he produces a folded sheet of paper and hands it to me. Each day he searches a different location, using a hand-drawn map of the site and marking it off with a grid – placing a cross in each square where he fails to unearth anything and a circle to denote a “find”. The plan of the area around the Stanley is already filling up with crosses. I pass it back to him.

‘Shouldn’t you be going to class?’ I ask.

The suggestion that he’s skiving off, or about to be late for a lesson, almost triggers a relapse and I have to throw in a swift France to calm him down.

He gestures at the metal detector. ‘Mr Blake said I could. For my Project.’

Just then, a van turns into the Stanley; it’s one of the workmen who’ve been installing new showers. The driver’s window is open, releasing a blast of radio-noise: *The funeral service took place in Washington this morning for former president John F. Kennedy, who died last week at the age of 95. Mr Kennedy, who survived an assassination attempt in Dallas in 1963 and went on to serve two terms in office, was described by the current U.S. president Sarah Palin as a “towersome figure in the history of . . .”* The van crunches to a halt on the gravel driveway, engine and radio cutting off simultaneously.

‘Right, I’m off to class. Happy detectioning.’

Lewis has already pulled the headphones back on and is methodically trawling the lawn again as I turn away towards the teaching blocks.

I find Rowland sitting outside Physics, sneaking a Kit-Kat.

‘Show some respect,’ I say.

‘What?’ he replies, through a mouthful of chocolate.

I point. ‘That’s a memorial stone, not a bench.’

He leaps to his feet, makes a show of acting surprised. ‘Well I never, so it is.’ Then, standing to attention and saluting the stone, he recites the inscription: ‘In memory of Prof Laurence Baum, who lost his life in the pursuit of knowledge, the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of November, 1963. *Requiescat in pace.*’

‘If you’re struggling to finish that, Rowlando, I’m willing to help out.’

He sighs, breaks off a piece of Kit-Kat and hands it to me. ‘Old Cadders would have my kidneys for supper if he caught me sitting on the memorial to,’ he puts on a quavery voice, ‘*the most brilliant scientific mind ever to grace this fine institution.*’

I laugh. ‘So brilliant he blew himself up.’

Rowland scrunches up the wrapper and stuffs it in his blazer pocket. Drops his voice to a whisper. ‘See that girl?’

A fourth-former passes us, heading towards the Art building. ‘What about her?’

‘Look at her feet.’

‘Yes, she has feet. Two of them.’

‘Odd shoes, Maximus. That girl is wearing odd shoes.’

I look again. ‘Oh, yeah. Hah. D’you think she realises?’

The girl shoots a glance over her shoulder. ‘Of course I realise, you goons.’

‘Ah,’ Rowland says. ‘She wasn’t out of earshot, then.’

‘Seems not.’ I watch the girl disappear down the path. ‘Did she just call us goons?’

‘That was certainly my impression.’

I tut. ‘Kids these days. No manners.’

At that moment, the sound of the school clock chiming the half-hour echoes across the grounds from the main building. Two-thirty. We should’ve been in class ten minutes ago. We quickly finish the last of the Kit-Kat and turn to go inside. Just then, Lewis lets out a whoop from the lawn over by the Stanley.

Rowland and I hesitate, look at one another.

I say, ‘It won’t be anything interesting.’