

RAVEN &
XERCES **LUCAS**
RATHBONE



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FÜHRER-IOUS

RAVEN



A Short
Story By

SAFFRON
AMATTI

& JENNIFER

BRASINGTON-CROWLEY

A Führer-ious Raven

-a short story-

Written by

Saffron Amatti

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Copyright

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Written by Saffron Amatti and Jennifer Brasington-Crowley

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A Special Thank You

Jennifer would like to say thank you to the writing community and to my reader friends for your constant support and encouragement. Thank you to Saffron Amatti for allowing me to barge into your world and upset your characters for a day. This story is dedicated to those of you who have been following Raven and his escapades all these years.

Extra giant shoutout to the Topsy Turvy Book Tour and especially hosts Elen Chase, TL Brown, Saffron Amatti and Robin Castle for hosting the writing challenge that prompted this story.

Find these indie authors on Instagram:

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Robin Castle (@robincastle55)

Elen Chase (@elenchase)

Another Special Thank You

Jennifer, Saffron would like to say a huge thank you for inviting her to come along on this crazy journey. Raven is truly one of her favourite characters and having him in her fictional English village has been a wonderful, hilarious experience.

She dedicates this story to her characters, who may never recover from the experience. Sorry, guys. Might happen again.

Chapter 1

Raven Xerces sat across the booth from Stanzie, eating cannoli and drinking coffee at Sal and Sally's Italian Bistro. He couldn't keep his eyes off her, this woman he had just met that morning on an airplane home from Chicago. She was unlike any woman he'd ever known, and all he wanted now was to get to know her even better.

"So, we even now?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are we good? Have I made up for ruining your business trip?"

"Almost." She smirked at him.

"Almost? Jesus Christ, lady, what else do you need?" He feigned exasperation.

"I still need my belt."

He let his hands drop loudly on the table, rolled his eyes, shook his head. "You and that goddamned - hey Sal! I need the check, man. Gotta get this lunatic her goddamned belt."

She covered her eyes with her hand and shook her head. "Oh my gosh," she groaned. "You're impossible."

"I'm impossible? You're the one who won't shut up about that belt."

"And I won't shut up about it until I get it back," Stanzie said strongly. "Even if you have to build a time machine and go back to 1960 and fly to Morocco and buy another one just like it, you're returning my belt!"

Raven stared at her. The corners of his mouth twitched, then turned into a smile that turned into his hearty laugh. "If I build a time machine, I'm killing baby Hitler, not buying a fucking belt."

Raven did indeed lose the belt, and because of this, traded the original demo reel of Cherrybomb to director Steven Spielberg for one round-trip ride in the Back to the Future DeLorean time machine.

"There's only enough plutonium for one trip," Steven Spielberg told him. "So make it count."

Raven sat in the DeLorean and punched a date into the dash. November 1, 1960. He should be able to find Stanzie's grandma's belt, no problem. If that's what it took to win her back, he'd do it.

He couldn't for the life of him figure out why she had left him. They had the most amazing day together, hadn't they? Surfing and dinner and dancing, the sea turtles. It was one of the best nights of his life, and this Stanzie woman was turning out to be nothing like the angry person he met on the plane. She ignited something in him he hadn't felt before. Purpose. Maybe, dare he think it, love. If he could give her back her belt, maybe she'd give him another chance.

But before he hit the gas, he thought about what he had told her. He only had enough plutonium for one trip. Was he supposed to use it to buy a belt? No, he had to kill Baby Hitler. It was his civic duty. Everyone said if they could time-travel, they would kill Hitler to stop WWII and the atrocities that befell it; he couldn't *not* do it. Stanzie's belt would have to wait.

However, not being a history buff, and barely passing the classes, Raven did not know when or where to look for the infant Führer, so he absently punched in the year 1928, gunned the car and traveled to a little town in England called Castlebury Magna.

The DeLorean came to a stop in a grassy field and spooked a few cattle, but no one was worse for wear. Well, no one except for Raven, who was rattled to the core.

"I need a drink," he muttered to himself after hiding the car behind a barn.

No matter the city, country or apparently the century, if Raven knew anything, it was how to sniff out a bar, and soon found himself within the stone walls of the Brewer's Thumb pub. It was nice enough - Raven had been to some dives - low ceiling, wooden floor, a few tables scattered about and a few locals, too. Seemed everyone had a pint in their possession.

He sat at the bar, next to a rather grumpy young man in a wrinkled suit talking to himself. The man seemed a little shifty, giving irritated side glances to an empty chair behind him and waving his hand like batting away a fly.

Raven knew enough drunks who heard voices. He had heard them before himself, especially after taking that--- but anyway, back to Baby Hitler.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asked, sounding like a character Raven once played onstage in Oliver!

"Oh man," Raven thought out loud. "It's the twenties, so you guys put cocaine in everything, right?"

The barman raised his eyebrows and the man next to him choked on his beer.

"You know the meme," Raven said. "Old timey doctors, 'you got ghosts in your blood; you should do cocaine about it.'" He looked expectantly at the faces that looked even more confused. Giving up on them, he placed his order. "Give me a Jack and Coke, extra coke," he smiled.

After his overdose in the fall, Raven had spent several months in rehab and was technically clean now, but if cocaine was a legal substance, by god he was going to get some.

The bartender put both hands on the bar top and looked Raven in the eye. "I don't know where you're from, sonny, or where you got that ridiculous getup, but we don't serve gypsies or circus freaks."

Raven looked down at his attire: black Slayer t-shirt, black jean jacket, blue jeans, combat boots. He looked like he always did. "Circus freaks?" Raven looked at the schizophrenic man next to him.

"Probably your..." The man gestured to Raven's tattoos and piercings. He gave an apologetic half smile. "Don't get many of your sort around here."

A woman Raven assumed was his nurse took a seat next to the young man. She was young and quite pretty, her hair in a bob. She wore wide-legged tweed trousers, a smart cream-colored blouse, and an affectionate smile as she brushed dust off of the man's shoulders.

"Fuck you, Blarney Stone," Raven said to the barman. "You're telling me you won't serve me a fucking drink?"

The schizophrenic shot Raven a dark look and put his hands over his nurse's ears, but she shook him off.

"Really, Joe!" the nurse scolded the man behind the counter. "This... *sailor* must be parched after his time at sea. Give the poor man a drink."

"I'm not a sailor," Raven said to the woman, "but you're right, I could use the drink."

"Of course you're a sailor," she said with a very sure nod of the head. "With your tattoos and, uh, *colorful* language. Lucas gets offended easily," she explained, as the man in the wrinkled suit protested to the contrary, "so please watch your mouth around him."

"I just don't think there's any call for that sort of language around a lady," grumbled Lucas.

"Darling, it's no worse than I hear at the office every day," she said, leaning forward and pecking him on the cheek.

Very forward, these 1920s nurses. The only nurses Raven met in rehab were like Nurse Ratched. Maybe if he had OD'd back here, he could have scored one like this. There was still time; there were two seats in the DeLorean, after all...

"Come on, Joe," said the woman wearily. "Just serve the fellow, would you? I'm sure his ship sails soon. What did he order?"

“Whiskey and cocaine.”

Her eyebrows shot upward. “Oh,” she said. “Right.” She cleared her throat and turned to Raven. “You must have been at sea for some time,” she said. “I’m afraid you can’t even get cocaine at the apothecary anymore. My grandmother, God rest her, said it did wonders for her arthritis - but surely you can get him a whiskey, Joe?” she added, addressing the barman.

“You know it’s not policy to serve... vagrants,” replied the young bartender, glaring at the interloper.

“Will you get this man a drink,” said the woman evenly. “Or do I have to go back there myself?”

Yes, Raven definitely liked this kind of nurse.

With a grunt, the man begrudgingly served Raven a whiskey.

“I’m Clara Jenkins,” she said, holding her hand out to the newcomer. “And this is Lucas Rathbone.”

“Raven Xerces,” He shook hands.

Clara tilted her head at him. “Zair-Zees? What an unusual name. You sound American. Is it an American name?”

Raven was American, and it was his name, so he said, “Yes,” and added, “It’s nice of you to look after him,” gesturing to the man she called Lucas.

“Well, somebody has to,” she giggled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lucas asked.

“Nothing, darling,” she said appeasingly, patting his hand and smirking at Raven.

Ah, so he was one of *those* nut jobs, the ones that were so whacked they didn’t even realize it. He’d have to keep an eye on this Lucas. You couldn’t trust people like that.

“So, Raven,” Clara asked, “What brings you ashore?”

He took a sip of whiskey and thought about what to tell her. She seemed eager to help, so there was no harm in saying, “I’m looking for Baby Hitler. Do you know where I can find him?”

Clara and Lucas looked at one another in confusion.

The war hadn’t happened yet, so there were probably a lot of baby Hitlers out there, so he added, “Adolf Hitler?”

“Isn’t he in prison?” Lucas remarked. “I remember reading in the paper about a failed coup in Munich.”

Raven was a little surprised the man knew how to read. Maybe he wasn’t *that* kind of disabled.

“No darling, he got out and his political party has just taken a few seats in the recent election,” said Clara.

“Has he? Well, I don’t suppose it matters much...”

Raven shook his head. “No, I need the *Baby* Adolf. Bad comb-over, little Hitler mustache.” He held his finger sideways above his lip.

“Oh, you mean Mrs. Higginbottom’s Baby,” said Clara, the confusion on her face clearing.

Lucas shuddered. “He’s an ugly child if I ever saw one.”

Clara kicked him in the shin. “Lucas! You can’t say that. All babies are beautiful.”

“Not this one,” he said, more to Raven than to his nurse. “Though my mum would know for sure if it’s the Higginbottom goblin you’re after.”

Clara said her grandmother used to have cocaine. Maybe all the old people did. “Does your mom have any cocaine?” Raven asked.

“Certainly not!”

Raven shrugged and said to Clara, “I thought maybe it would help his schizophrenia.”

“My *what*?” Lucas exclaimed.

Raven lowered his voice so only Clara could hear him. “You know, the voices? I heard him talking to himself before you came in.”

“Oh yes, he does that. But he’s harmless, don’t let it bother you,” she said with a grin. “Anyway, this baby you’re looking for, he isn’t *yours*, is he?” she asked slyly. “Only Mrs. H. has a bit of a reputation for, ahem, entertaining gentlemen whilst her husband is away. He’s a sailor, just like you, and she gets lonely when he’s at sea for a long time.”

As much as Raven appreciated the thought that he might have knocked up some Victorian lady, he wasn’t about to put his name next to The Führer’s.

“Ew, no,” he shook his head. “You see, here’s the deal—”

He stopped, thinking perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to spill the beans after all. Clara seemed nice, sure, but that milquetoast acquaintance of hers may very well be a Nazi sympathizer.

"Uh, I just wanted to extend my congratulations," he lied. "I brought him a little something."

Clara clasped her hands. "Isn't that sweet, Lucas? Darling, do you remember where Mrs. Higginbottom lives? It's Mulberry Street, isn't it?"

Lucas shrugged. "Mum would know. I'll ask her later."

"Better yet, let's go now," Clara exclaimed, telling Joe to put everyone's drinks on her slate as she yanked Raven and Lucas off their stools by the hand.

Chapter 2

Raven could hear whispering ahead of him while he stopped to light a cigarette.

“Have you gone mad?” Lucas whispered, glancing over his shoulder. “I’m not introducing some filthy pirate to my mother. She’ll have a fit.”

“He’s got something for the baby. He might be a little *unconventional*, but I think he’s sweet.”

“You and your waifs and strays,” grumbled Lucas. “Joe was right, he looks like a circus freak. And what on earth is he wearing? Looks like a flour bag, but I don’t know a Slayer brand flour.”

“Not everyone can afford nice clothes,” she said, looking Lucas up and down with a judgmental eye. “Maybe your mum has something for him. Sounds like he must have some painful arthritis.”

Raven caught up with them again, and soon they arrived at a quaint terraced house built of old red bricks, with a beautiful front garden filled with a mishmash of flowers on every side. The front door was open, probably because of the warmth of the day, and Clara walked right into the narrow house with a merry, “Hallo, Hettie! Put the kettle on, Lucas and I have brought a friend.”

“Friend?” hissed Lucas, glaring at her. “I don’t think so, and we are not having tea. We are asking the whereabouts of the ugly child and this ruffian will be on his way. Promptly.”

Mrs. Rathbone, who proved to be a pleasant, motherly looking woman in a floury flowery apron, stepped out of the kitchen with a grin on her face, hugging each of the visitors, even Raven, which made him wonder.

She might not have cocaine, but perhaps this Hettie woman had ecstasy?

Before he could ask, she’d turned back to the kitchen, saying, “Please come in, and I’ll get the tea. Raven, dear, are you related to Tommy Kilbourne?”

Raven shook his head. “Uh, I didn’t get one of those DNA tests done, but I don’t think so.”

“Hettie,” said Clara, “This is Raven Xerces. He’s here to visit Mrs. Higginbottom’s baby.”

Mrs. Rathbone grimaced. “What an unfortunate-looking child.” She shook her head.

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Raven, holding out his hand. She hugged him again before heading back to the kitchen. Yes, she was definitely on something that made her affectionate.

Jason said meth did it for him, but he couldn't imagine the mom doing any of that. Maybe some of that Mother's Little Helper the Stones sang about.

"Any friend of Lucas is a friend of mine," she called above the clatter of crockery before calling for Clara to help her.

"He's not my friend," Lucas grumbled.

"Hey man, no, I get it," Raven said to the man. "I just need the address and I'm off. I don't even like tea. More of a coffee guy. Actually, more of a bourbon guy."

But when the women reappeared a few minutes later, they didn't just carry a pot of tea. Clara brought that, along with an assortment of mismatched, chipped teacups and saucers, but Mrs. Rathbone carried a tray filled with sponge and marmalade cakes still warm from the oven, and finger sandwiches an assortment of which Raven had never witnessed: egg and watercress, cucumber, cheese and beetroot. In fact, it was more food than Raven could remember seeing in one person's living room when it wasn't for a wake.

Lucas's eyes bulged at the sight. "Mum, you've outdone yourself," he said, reaching for one of the marmalade cakes as she walked past him to the living room.

She turned the tray away from him. "Guests first, Lucas. My word, where are your manners?"

"Or maybe I can stay for a minute," Raven said, sitting down in Lucas's favorite armchair and helping himself to Lucas's favorite snacks.

Lucas groaned as he sank onto the sagging sofa instead. "He's like some lingering ghost."

Chapter 3

Mrs. Rathbone ousted her son from the comfortable sofa where he'd been joined by Clara. Lucas moved to the only free chair, which creaked and wobbled alarmingly.

"So, Raven," Mrs. Rathbone said, sipping her tea and simultaneously smacking Lucas' hand away from the finger sandwich Raven reached for. "How do you know the Higginbottoms? I assume you must have sailed with Jethro at some point, as Gwendoline never mentioned anyone on her side in the Navy."

He wasn't going to argue anymore about not being a sailor, especially since the women were being so kind to him. That, and he still hoped the older one had some opium or something squirreled away. Though the mother of the grumpy, mentally ill man, Mrs. Rathbone – Hettie – wasn't much older than himself. Under those old-timey clothes she had a bit of a MILF thing going on that did not go unnoticed.

He could definitely charm her out of some opium if there was any in the house. Maybe whatever it was that made her keep hugging him. It was his luck to go back in time just in time for drugs to be outlawed.

But first, Baby Hitler.

"Oh, we go back a long time," he said, not wanting to think too hard on a backstory. He wasn't a good liar, so the less said, the better. It wasn't a lie, really. He had learned about WWII a long time ago. Taking a sip from the teacup, he grimaced. Why the English enjoyed this dishwater so much was beyond him.

Mrs. Rathbone must have noticed his face because she said quickly, "Is the tea okay, dear? Clara, what do you think?"

"What about me?" Lucas said. "Don't you care what I think?"

"Son, you think everything tastes fine."

Raven felt sorry for the guy; he couldn't help being mentally ill. But then again, people treated the disabled a lot worse back in these days. He turned to the man and said slowly and loudly, "Your opinion matters, Lucas." Then added, "Good boy," for good measure. He really had no practice speaking to the mentally handicapped, but everyone liked praise.

Lucas gave him a dirty look, but assured his mother the tea was superb.

"I'm just not much of a tea drinker," Raven said, then remembering those Johnny Depp movies, added, "We pretty much just had rum on the ship."

Hettie nodded knowingly and rose from her seat to rummage through a chest in the corner of the room. “I don’t drink it myself,” she called from the depths. “But there’s some sherry Flora and I quite enjoy if that’s any good to you?”

Now was his chance. “You got any opium?” he asked.

She poured him a ridiculously tiny glass of the sherry and handed it to him. “Oh, you poor dear. Clara was telling me about your arthritis when we were in the kitchen. But I’m sorry, I have nothing of the sort. I could make you a nice salve out of some herbs. Lucas, go to the garden and—”

Raven stopped her. A bundle of garden herbs wouldn’t do anything for his *arthritis*.

“I’ll be fine,” he said, rubbing his wrist for good measure. “Thanks for the drink.” He downed the glass and looked longingly at the bottle setting just out of reach. But he couldn’t concentrate on getting wasted, he had to get to Baby Hitler.

Lucas rose to his feet and snagged the last slice of marmalade cake before Raven could get to it. He smiled smugly and popped the entire thing in his mouth, much to his mother’s horror.

“Clara,” he said with his mouth full, “Can I talk to you in the kitchen?” The strange look on his face made Raven assume the man’s schizophrenia was acting up.

After the younger two left the room, Mrs. Rathbone – Hettie - moved to the edge of the sofa next to Raven’s chair. She, too, had swapped her tea for sherry and was on her second glass. After she refilled his glass, she took his hand between hers and began rubbing his wrist with her palms. If he’d been back home and back in the twenty-first century, he would have thought she was flirting with him.

“I’m sorry I don’t have any medicine for your pain,” she murmured, “but maybe this will help.”

Perhaps that’s just what women did in the twenties, he told himself, but there was a mischievous twinkle in her eye that suggested otherwise. And the singsong quality in her voice when she said, “I assumed you were based at Southampton, but you sound American. Who do you sail for?”

He really didn’t want to lie to her, so he simply said, “I am American. I just came over on the, uh,” he paused, downed the second glass of sherry, “Titanic.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t know they built another one.”

“I fucking, uh, freaking hate flying.”

“That makes sense, if you’re in the navy. And so many people have died trying to cross the Atlantic in those aeroplanes.” She released his wrist to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, but he felt something else and noticed the toe of her stocking foot lightly touching his ankle. “I hear flying is really dangerous.”

Yes, she was definitely flirting.

Not that he didn’t think she was attractive, but he’d just met that zookeeper lady and he sorta liked her. Not that having a girlfriend had ever stopped him before, and Stanzie wasn’t even his girlfriend. He just met her. Still, the thought of Mrs., uh, Hettie and her smooth toe on his ankle was enough to distract from whatever feelings he had been developing for the zoo lady.

He cleared his throat. “Do you, uh, mind if I smoke?” Before she answered, he pulled a cigarette from the front pocket of his jacket and lit it. There may not be an abundance of drugs, but he knew for a fact that everyone smoked in the twenties.

“May I?” she asked and held out her fingers for a cigarette, which he dutifully handed to and lit for her. While she exhaled the smoke into the air, she added, “I don’t usually, but every now and then...” She took another draw on the cigarette and closed her eyes. “This takes me back,” she said with a faint smile on her face.

“Oh yeah?” Maybe he could flirt back a little, it wouldn’t hurt anyone. He leaned in close to her and asked quietly, “Back where?”

She looked off to the distance just for a moment, but shook her head back to the present and changed the subject. “Did they give you those tattoos in the service?” With her free hand, she stroked the black star tattoo on the back of his hand. Before he had a chance to answer, she ran her fingers over his, leaned over and fluttered her eyelashes. “Clara was just telling me about this nail painting trend. I wasn’t aware men went in for it too.”

With her fingers on his, he allowed himself to lightly touch the balls of her fingertips, trace the smooth lines of her feminine hands. They were hardworking hands, like his own, but delicate and ladylike. He then wrapped his hand around hers and gave a gentle squeeze, which was returned with a coquettish smile.

“Mother, what on *earth* are you doing?!”

Lucas and Clara stood in the living room door, his medical problems clearly resolved for now. He was white with anger, but Clara was pink with apparent glee.

Hettie faced her son without faltering. “I’m having a discussion with our guest about current trends and events.” She took a long drag from the cigarette.

“You’re smoking?” cried Lucas. “Since when do you smoke?”

“Dude,” Raven attempted to calm the man down, a little afraid of what someone as unhinged as Lucas was capable if provoked. “It’s just a smoke. It’s not crack or anything.”

Lucas spotted the empty sherry glass. “And you’re drinking?” He checked a wristwatch that had clearly seen better days. “It’s three in the afternoon! What are you thinking?”

“Lucas James Rathbone,” Hettie scolded. “I am a grown woman. I can have a drink and a cigarette whenever I’d like.”

Clara nudged him. “Perhaps you should have another drink yourself,” she suggested sweetly.

Lucas blushed, perhaps realizing that he had no room to talk, having just come from the pub himself. “I only had a half of bitter,” he argued. “It’s hardly the same.”

“It’s hardly different though, is it, darling?”

“I think it’s time we got Mr. uh, Raven, to Mrs. Higginbottom’s ugly baby,” said Lucas, looking daggers at his mother.

“But she’ll be putting the unfortunate creature down for a nap any time now, I’m sure,” Hettie protested with a wave of the cigarette, smoke blooming in its wake. “I think it’s a much better idea that Raven stay the night and go in the morning.”

“Fine,” Lucas huffed. “Clara and I will walk him to the Thumb and he can book a room.”

“I meant he can stay with me.” Hettie winked at Raven and now there was no question it was flirting.

Lucas nearly fell over, but Clara held him upright. “No, absolutely out of the question.” He snatched the cigarettes out of both Hettie’s and Raven’s hands and stubbed them out on Raven’s plate. Then, grabbing a hold of Raven’s arm, he hauled him out of the chair, saying, “Maybe Henry can escort him. And sleep on our doorstep just in case.” He glared at Raven.

“I’m sure my brother has more pressing things to do at the police station than escort a fisherman to the Inn,” Clara protested.

“Now he’s a *fisherman*?” Lucas gaped at her. “He is most definitely a pirate. A pirate who escaped from the circus. Navy man at best.”

Raven shrugged the man off him. “You know what? I really should get going and find this baby. I appreciate the hospitality, Hettie,” he nodded his head to her in the most gentlemanly way he could without a hat to tip. “And as tempting as it is to stay the night,” he winked back at the woman while sidestepping Lucas’ lunge, “I should pay the baby a visit now, before he gets too big to, uh, smother.”

“Smother?” Clara repeated, eyes wide.

“You know, with, uh, kisses and shit.”

Clara gave Lucas a look and whispered something to him that Raven couldn’t hear.

“So, anyway,” he continued, “Mrs. Higginbottom lives at...?”

“Mulberry Street, number seventeen,” answered Hettie, standing up and going in search of a piece of paper and pen, before handing it to Raven. “Here’s her address,” she leaned in close and whispered, “and mine is on the other side, if your ship passes back through.”

He cleared his throat and glanced at Lucas. Seeing he was out of reach of the lunatic, Raven put his mouth close to Hettie’s ear and whispered, “Here’s hoping,” and brushed his lips against the exposed skin behind her ear where her hair was pinned up. He felt her shudder as she exhaled, but before he could do anything else, Lucas’ hand grabbed his upper arm.

“Right, time for you to leave,” Lucas said between clenched teeth. “Better hurry before it gets dark.”

“Okay, okay,” Raven said, palms up in defense as he made for the front door. “Thanks again, it was nice meeting you all.”

He slipped out into the late afternoon air and looked at the address Hettie had provided, wondering how on earth he would find Baby Hitler.

Chapter 4

Raven walked through the pretty front garden, feeling sure a plan would form by the time he reached the gate. When nothing materialized, he stood in the dusty road for a few minutes, just in case his genius was running late. If it was, it had had an accident somewhere along the line, because nothing of any help presented itself.

He had an address. He just needed a map. Luckily, he had remembered to bring his cell phone and pulled it out of his jeans pocket and pressed the map icon, but something wasn't working right because the app wouldn't open. Probably needed to reinstall it, but the app store wouldn't open, either. Fucking iPhone. Most days he wished Roger had never made him get the damn thing.

It wasn't getting any lighter, and though he didn't give a shit about walking down a dark alley at night, he was afraid that Hettie was right, and that lady would be putting Baby Hitler to bed. *She should be putting it to sleep*, he thought to himself.

Pretzel would know what to do. She was the smartest person he knew. She could probably even type in the address on her phone. Surely the street names hadn't changed since the twenties. He pressed her contact and held the device to his ear. Nothing. No signal. Perfect.

A lady carrying a basket laden with groceries appeared from his left and stared at him. Not like the people back home who stared because they recognized him. No, this woman's eyes bugged out of her head as she stared without trying to hide it in the least.

"Y'all get any service around here?" he asked her.

She continued to stare at him, so he waved the device at her. "Cell service?"

"Gun!" she shrieked and hurried away as quickly as her basket would allow.

"Oh, come on," he scoffed. "I know the phone was already invented." He huffed. "Moron," he said under his breath.

Without Pretzel to help him out, his mind spun. The woman had come from his left and carried groceries. A cashier would know the neighborhood, could get him to Mulberry Street. Hell, they probably had a pay phone with a phone book hanging off of it. Back in the day, he was always tearing maps out of phone books.

And besides, he'd seen Boardwalk Empire, and knew those nineteen twenties shop owners always had some kind of black-market thing going on the side, right? So, perhaps he'd be able to get something a little stronger to take the edge off before tracking down the demon spawn. Besides, he needed some more smokes.

When he took the road where the woman had come from, it wasn't a grocery store, but a stupid bakery that had nothing he needed. Although after he bought half a dozen custard tarts, the

baker pointed him in the general direction of Mulberry Street. He figured he'd better actually have something to give the baby when he arrived. Can't just show up off the street and smother someone's baby like a cold-blooded murderer, could he?

Checking behind him every so often, it seemed Lucas and Clara weren't following him like he'd feared. As he searched for the demon child, he kept his eyes peeled for a more suitable store for cigarettes.

A young man exited a storefront ahead of him and stopped to light a pipe. Bingo.

Raven approached the man and asked, "Hey man, they sell smokes in there?"

The man inhaled a few times to draw the flame into the tobacco and tossed the used match to the ground. "Yeah, they pretty much have everything."

"Thank god. I was afraid I'd have to resort to this fucking vape." He pulled the device Pretzel bought him out of his pocket.

The man stared at it with wide eyes.

Realizing now that the vape might look like some sort of futuristic weapon, and after the woman screamed at him about the phone, he quickly shoved it back in his jacket pocket and said, "I mean, my electronic screwdriver. You know, Doctor Who? You guys love that shit."

"Doctor who?"

"Exactly. Anyway, you said they sell everything in there?" Now was his chance to ask. "They got any cocaine?"

The man didn't answer right away. After thoroughly glancing around for listening ears, he leaned close to Raven and said, "No, but I might know where you can get some."

"Oh yeah?" Now that the prospect of pure 1920s cocaine was right in front of him, he had second thoughts. Had he really come this far just to get sucked back into the high again? As good as the temporary fix would make him feel, was it worth it? If it were still legal, that would be one thing. But now... He thought briefly about the zookeeper and how it had felt being out with her in the ocean without any stimulants except her smile. Was she worth it? Keeping clean?

"On second thought," he told the man, "I think I just need the cigarettes for now."

"If you change your mind," the man held out a card. "The name's Kilbourne. Tommy Kilbourne. I can get you more than just coke, too, if you're interested."

"Thanks man." He shoved the card into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the scrap of paper with the addresses, but it slipped from his fingers and fluttered to the sidewalk.

Tommy picked it up for him and read the name. "Hettie Rathbone, eh? Good for her. She's been on her own for a long time, it's about time she found someone to keep her toes warm at night." He winked and gave Raven a little nudge. "But if you don't mind me saying so, you don't seem her type." He looked Raven up and down with a discerning look.

Raven suppressed the urge to say *Go fuck yourself. Not her type? Do you even know who I am?* If that fucker knew the number of women he turned down - but instead, he said, "Oh, no, she's not - we're not," and looked at the address on the back. "Do you know how to get to Mulberry Street? I'm looking for the Higginbottom baby. Adolf."

Tommy winced. "Oh dear, that unfortunate child."

"My thoughts exactly," Raven said, thinking about the unfortunate events that were about to befall the child. "So, you know the Higginbottoms?"

"Oh yes," said Tommy, grinning broadly. "But I usually only visit when -" He stopped himself, suddenly looking suspicious of his new companion. "Your name again?"

"Raven. Raven Xerces." He shook Tommy's hand.

"Raven? Must be an American thing. But here, why don't I show you the way? Seeing as Jethro's back in the Navy for a while, I wouldn't mind giving my regards to the lady of the house... if you know what I mean."

Raven could not imagine anyone wanting to give their *regards* to Hitler's mother, or giving her anything else for that matter, but he could use the help navigating the streets. And if Tommy really did have underground connections, he could be quite an ally.

"That'd be great, man, thanks," Raven told him. "Let me just grab some smokes first. Oh, hey, I can't get any service on my Apple around here. You guys in England use Android or something?"

Tommy's face made Raven reword his question.

"I can't get my Apple to work. What do you use?"

After a moment with a questioning look on his face, Tommy said, "It's market day tomorrow. Maybe you can get a, um, working apple there? Or pears, or plums, or whatever you like, really. There must be some benefits to living out in the sticks, I suppose."

"No, not the fruit, I meant..." Raven stopped. Since Tommy said he'd show him the way to Mulberry Street, maybe he didn't have to worry about his phone just yet. "Yeah thanks, I'll do that. I'll just get the smokes for now. Thanks, man."

"No problem," said Tommy, looking over the newcomer's shoulder. "I've just spotted someone I need to have a word with anyway."

Chapter 5

“We can’t let that man go to the Higginbottom’s alone,” whispered Clara, dragging Lucas outside and in the direction the pirate had gone.

“Why not?” asked Lucas, digging his heels into the dusty road. “Seems like a good way of getting rid of him.”

“Lucas!” cried Clara. “Didn’t you hear what he said? About smothering the baby?”

“Yes, with kisses and - stuff,” said Lucas, glancing over his shoulder in case his mother heard him about to repeat the vagrant’s bad language. Not that Lucas would take so much notice of her correcting of his minor faults in the future, not after her performance earlier - but she could still throw a slipper pretty hard when she wanted to, and Lucas was bigger target nowadays than he had been as a nipper.

“I don’t think with kisses *and stuff* is quite what he had in mind,” said Clara, peeking around a corner and ducking back quickly. “I think he’s going to kill Mrs. Higginbottom’s baby.”

“Why on earth would he do that?”

“How should I know?” said Clara crossly, peeking around the corner again, then stepping out and following the strange man down the street until the cover of the next building. “Maybe he’s a schizophrenic, like he thinks you are.”

“You could have corrected him,” grumbled Lucas, following her.

“I should have told him you were arguing with a ghost, should I?” said Clara sarcastically. “Yes, I’m sure that would have helped, especially in the middle of the pub...”

“Oh, all right,” grouched Lucas, peeking around the corner again. He groaned. “Is that Tommy stepping out of the newsagents? I thought he went home.”

“No, mum said he could stay an extra night. Said he seemed very down at the thought of going back to his lonely boarding house, and that he could use another night of motherly love and home cooking.”

“Hmm,” said Lucas disapprovingly, as the strange man fell into conversation with the circus freak. “Hopefully that schizophrenic pirate will latch onto him instead and forget all about this Baby Hitler.”

“That’s another reason we shouldn’t let him visit Mrs. H.,” said Clara, watching Raven and Tommy talk about something. They looked very suspicious as they chatted, though Lucas thought this Raven fellow was suspicious in a thousand different ways, and Tommy in at least

two thousand, so he was probably imagining it. “I thought she named the baby Adam, after her father.”

“Adam Higginbottom, Adolf Hitler. Easy enough to mix up, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m not sure,” said Clara thoughtfully, watching Tommy hand Raven his business card - a treat to himself, after deciding to take his career a little more seriously. She was rather proud about that.

“Come on, Clara, what business is it of ours anyway what this fellow wants with the kid? It probably is his brat, whatever he says. You know what Gwen is like for entertaining the troops. Let’s leave him to it.”

“Aren’t you at all curious about what’s going on?” said Clara, leaning around the corner to make sure Raven hadn’t vanished.

“As it happens, no,” said Lucas, following her. “He shows up here from goodness knows where – I know you think he’s a sailor, but he’s not like any sailor *I’ve* ever seen. How many sailors do we get through here anyway? We’re miles from the sea. There’s Jethro Higginbottom and that’s about it, and that’s only because he grew up around here and is sentimental about the place.”

“Fair point,” said Clara, after a pause. “But still -”

“And,” interrupted Lucas, getting the main sore point with this Raven fellow, “and he comes over to my house—”

“Your mum’s house,” corrected Clara, waving at Tommy, who jogged towards them as this Raven fellow stepped into the newsagents.

“And he tried to seduce my mother,” hissed Lucas, ignoring her input.

“Well, there you go then,” said Clara, stepping forward to meet Tommy. “He clearly can’t be trusted, so we should see what he’s up to.”

“Yes, you have a knack for finding untrustworthy fellows,” muttered Lucas, not quite under his breath. “Speaking of which, hullo Tommy.”

Clara frowned at him, before turning to her friend.

“Is the circus in town?” asked Tommy, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the newsagents.

“That’s our new friend Raven,” explained Clara, ignoring Lucas’ protestations to the contrary. “And Mrs. Rathbone took a shine to him,” she added, giving Lucas an impish look.

“So I gathered from how he had her address in his pocket,” said Tommy, looking rather amused by Lucas’ quite justifiable scowl. “Anyhow, what’s he want with Gwenny’s baby?”

Clara raised her eyebrows at him. “Gwenny?”

“Yes, we ran into each other in the bakers a couple of weeks ago. Quite literally, she hit me with her demon spawn’s carriage. Looks like a pug, doesn’t it? A damn ugly pug, at that.”

“Not all of us are blessed with your good looks, Tommy,” said Clara, as Lucas sniggered into his sleeve.

Tommy shrugged. “Alfie Higgson certain doesn’t.”

“Hah, see,” said Lucas triumphantly. “If Tommy can’t remember the hellspawn’s name, it’s no wonder that lunatic - not you, Tommy, but if the cap fits... ow, it was a joke,” he added as Clara stepped heavily on his toe. “Anyway, my point is, maybe it’s not so strange after all that this Raven Circus keeps calling Adam Higginbottom Adolf Hitler.”

“Adolf Hitler?” said Tommy, glancing over his shoulder. “Like that fellow in Germany, the rabble-rouser?”

“Quite surprising that he was allowed to head up a political party, really,” said Clara.

“Oh, he’ll never get anywhere,” said Lucas dismissively. “People like that are always just a storm in a teacup, aren’t they? Quite alarming, but they fizzle out soon enough.”

“Maybe,” said Clara, chewing her bottom lip thoughtfully - always a bad sign, in Lucas’ experience. It generally meant she was about to say something he wouldn’t like. “I have an idea,” she started, confirming his fears. “It’s rather a strange one, so I don’t want to tell you until I’ve worked it out for sure, but - Tommy, can you find an excuse to stay with Raven, and—”

“If that’s even his name,” interjected Lucas.

“Why would it not be?”

“I can’t imagine it’s the name his mother gave him. Whoever heard of a chap being christened Raven Cervix?”

“That’s not a name *anyone*’s mother gave them, darling,” said Clara, smirking.

“I know a fellow called Robin,” said Tommy, not helping at all.

“And Jay is another good name that’s after a bird,” added Clara. “So why not Raven?”

“Next you’ll be telling me that, I don’t know, *Cayman* is a perfectly acceptable bird name for a fellow to run around with,” grumbled Lucas.

“Cayman is a crocodile, not a bird, so it doesn’t count,” argued Clara. “Anyway, *as* I was saying before I was so *rudely* interrupted - Tommy, please can you stop Raven from doing anything he shouldn’t?”

“Of course,” said Tommy, a grin spreading across his face. “It’s been too long since I paid my regards to Gwenny, *if* you know what I mean -”

“We all know what you mean,” said Lucas coldly, as heat rose above his collar.

“—and I hear her husband is at sea, so it’s the perfect time to go, ahem, *visiting*,” finished Tommy, smirking at a scarlet Lucas.

“Tommy, behave,” scolded Clara. “Go and find Raven, before he does something dreadful. What if he’s already gone whilst we were talking?”

Tommy shook his head. “He went to get cigarettes from the newsagents. You know how Mr. Featherstone likes to chat with anyone new, so he’s probably still in there.”

Right on cue, there was a commotion across the street and a rather flustered looking Raven was thrown forcibly into the street.

“I don’t like people trying to pass off fake money, and I certainly don’t like anyone who uses language like *that* in a respectable establishment,” said the newsagent loudly, brushing his hands symbolically. “Get out of here, and don’t come back.”

“Told you,” said Tommy, clapping Lucas on the arm and winking at Clara. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on him whilst you do whatever it is you’re going to do. Meet you at Gwenny’s later.”

With that, he trotted back across the road to soothe a seething Raven who was giving a rather rude hand gesture to Mr. Featherstone’s doorway.

“All right,” said Clara, turning to Lucas. “Here’s my theory...”

Chapter 6

Lucas rubbed his forehead irritably.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, frowning at Clara. “You think this Raven fellow is from the future, sent back in time to kill the baby version of a minor political figure in Germany?”

“Correct,” replied Clara.

“Then why is he in England in 1928, instead of Germany—”

“Austria,” corrected Clara.

“What?”

“Hitler is Austrian.”

“Then why is he obsessed with making Germany great again?”

“How should I know? Maybe he was dropped on his head as a baby.”

“That’d explain a lot,” grumbled Lucas. “Anyway, my point is, if he’s been sent back to do that, he’s wildly out, isn’t he?”

“Maybe he’s a bad time traveler?”

“He was probably drunk when he was putting the details in.”

Clara shrugged. “But it’d explain a lot, wouldn’t it? His strange way of speaking—”

“It’s not his fault he’s American,” argued Lucas.

“That’s not what I meant. Haven’t you noticed how he keeps referring to us as being ‘back then,’ and that kind of thing?”

“No,” said Lucas, who hadn’t.

“And he mentioned DNA tests, which I’ve never heard of—”

“Could be an American school thing,” said Lucas. “I assume they have school over there, anyway, though if they have this Raven chap isn’t a good advert for them.”

“And his clothes,” continued Clara, who clearly wouldn’t be distracted from her ludicrous theory, no matter how much Lucas tried to goad her away from it.

“You said yourself that not everyone could afford to dress well,” he said, trying one last time.

“Yes, but there’s dressing poorly, and there’s... *that*,” she said, pulling a face. “I’ve never seen anything like that, have you? And you see all sorts in London these days, let me tell you.”

Lucas shrugged. “But that doesn’t mean he’s from the future, does it? And if he was on some sort of special mission, wouldn’t he have been, I don’t know, schooled in the era and dressed in the right clothes? So he wouldn’t draw attention.”

Clara frowned and bit her lip. “Good point,” she conceded. “Maybe he got lost? Maybe he’s looking for a different baby Hitler?”

“How many can there be?”

“I don’t know, but I know there aren’t any in Castlebury.”

“What made you think of time travel anyway?” asked Lucas.

“Well, I got this book out of the library, *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells, and—”

Lucas held up a hand to stop her. “Say no more. I should have known it was some crazy idea you’d read somewhere.”

“What if it’s true, though?” argued Clara. “What if Wells himself is a time traveler?”

Lucas closed his eyes and counted to five. “Anything is possible,” he said, concentrating hard on not saying anything he might regret later.

Clara brightened instantly. “So, you think Raven could be a time traveler after all?”

“That’s not quite—”

“Where do you think his time machine is?” asked Clara with more enthusiasm than Lucas thought healthy. “I suppose it must have been made to look like something from our time, so it wouldn’t stand out.”

“But I thought he was lost?” said Lucas, deciding it was probably easier to play along. If she was right, he’d never hear the end of it anyway, and if she was wrong, they’d find out soon enough and they’d never have to mention it again.

He could only pray she was wrong.

“Oh yes,” said Clara, frowning again. “It could look like anything, then.”

“Could it look like a silver box on wheels?” said a familiar voice only Lucas could hear.

He gave Mrs. Bird a curious look and repeated the question to Clara.

“I suppose so,” she said. “What made you say that?”

“I think Mrs. Bird might have seen it.”

Clara’s face lit up. “She’s here? Say hello for me, darling, won’t you?”

“She can hear you, you know,” he said, before passing on the ghostly greetings from the smartly dressed Edwardian lady who had appeared at his side.

“I know, it just seems a little unfair to leave you out of it, that’s all,” said Clara.

“Believe me, if I could stay out of it, I’d be a very happy bunny.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, child. It’s an honour and privilege to serve the spirits,” said Mrs. Bird, as she had a thousand times already. “And this poor lost time traveler man.”

“Don’t you start,” muttered Lucas. “But all right, let’s play along. Mrs. Bird, could you show us where this ‘silver box on wheels’ is please? Then maybe Clara and I could get back to our quiet day.”

“Which has already been interrupted by that ghostly fellow in the pub,” Clara pointed out.

“Oh yes, I’d forgotten about him,” said Lucas thoughtfully. “Some soldier or other. Been on the pop if you ask me, kept going on about a chariot appearing in the sky in a clap of thunder. I mean, it’s September, we don’t get thunder this time of year.”

“So I don’t see what difference it makes if our day is further interrupted by some strange man wearing a flour bag,” continued Clara triumphantly.

Lucas muttered something rude under his breath, making sure it was so under his breath neither woman could tell what he said. Nonetheless, Clara thumped him in the arm, on principle that he’d said something he shouldn’t have.

“Ow,” he complained.

“I don’t see why it’s okay for you to meet interesting people and I can’t.”

“Hear, hear,” agreed Mrs. Bird, which Lucas didn’t share with his dearly beloved. It was bad enough them ganging up on him, but they didn’t both need to realize they were doing it.

“The *interesting* people I meet are all dead, and I don’t want to meet them anyway,” argued Lucas. “It’s not like I can get rid of them easily either. And you always want to help them. I’m sure word gets around about that.”

He glared at Mrs. Bird, who he knew for a fact spread the word about Lucas’s ‘gift’ to any new spirit of her acquaintance. She returned a completely blank, vaguely innocent stare that told him this arrangement would not change any time ever.

Cursed, that’s what I am, thought Lucas glumly. *Cursed to forever have bossy women overrule me and make me help ghosts.*

“All right, let’s get it over with,” grumped Lucas. “Seeing as I’ve clearly no choice in the matter...”

“Glad you agree,” said Clara cheerfully, grinning as she pecked him on the cheek.

“Hmm,” he said, unconvinced. “Come on, Mrs. Bird, where’s this thing to think you’ve found?”

Chapter 7

As Tommy and Raven made their way to Mulberry Street, Raven considered the most effective ways to smother an infant and not draw attention. He hadn't really been around babies before, but he knew they were delicate. Mike and Sadie had been trying to get pregnant forever, so Mike was always spouting off something or other, and it seemed some of it stuck. That soft spot on their head and not being able to use their necks or whatever. Something about not being allowed to let them sleep on their stomachs.

Would it be that easy to snuff out the kid? Just put it on its stomach and walk away? Like a turtle, but opposite? Sweet Jesus, that would be perfect. But this was Hitler he was talking about, not just some dumb baby. He needed to do the job right, otherwise, he may as well have taken the DeLorean to Morocco for that ugly belt.

He briefly wondered what the zookeeper was doing right now. Was she thinking about him, too? Probably not. Probably just thinking about her goddamn belt. He didn't get it. They had an amazing day together. Maybe the best day he could ever remember. Why in the hell did she leave him like that? Maybe it would be best to have gotten her the belt after all. But it was too late now. Only enough plutonium for the one trip. He'd better make it count.

"So, what do you know about babies?" he asked Tommy.

"They smell and are always sticky - and the further away from them I can get, the better."

"Yeah, but they're delicate, right?"

"Uh, maybe?"

"And they have that soft spot on their head. If I pushed on that, do you think it would kill him?"

Tommy stopped dead in the street and swore loudly, a thing Raven didn't realize those nice, overly polite Brits did in the 1920s. Good to know. "Why the ever-loving hell would you ask that?" he said in disgust.

"I just want to be extra careful, that's all," insisted Raven. "Don't want to accidentally squish its exposed brain, you know?"

"So that dreadful child not only has a face like a chimpanzee's arse, but part of its brain is exposed?" Tommy grimaced. "Poor Gwenny, I had no idea."

Raven shrugged. "That's what I heard. So, you think it would die if I pushed on it?"

Tommy gave the question a worrying amount of thought before answering. "No idea," he said at last. "Can't imagine it'd do the poor little bugger any good though."

“Hmm.” Raven kept walking and Tommy moved on as well. “I’ll be extra careful, then.”

If the soft spot wouldn’t do it, he’d have to be more direct. Of course, not being of a violent nature, he didn’t want to do anything bloody – he’d witnessed enough of that with his dad – but it had to be successful. And if he could get away with it without getting caught, that would be best. Now that he’d gained the attention of several people in town, it would be more difficult to run back to the time machine unnoticed.

“Since it’s the twenties,” Raven said.

“You keep saying that,” said Tommy, eying him suspiciously.

“Yeah, but there’s like mafia dudes everywhere, right? Gangsters and shit?”

Tommy got very quiet and narrowed his eyes at Raven. Perhaps this wasn’t such a surprise though. He did say he could get cocaine and other things, so he was probably worried Raven was an undercover cop or something.

Could be Tommy was mobbed up himself. They must have organized crime in England too, right?

Even better.

“For example,” said Raven, deciding to test this theory, “if I’m holding the baby by the front window, what are the chances the mafia would drive by and shoot up the place?”

“What the...?” Tommy held his arms wide and looked around the quiet village street. “Does this look somewhere gangsters live?”

“Hypothetically speaking,” added Raven hastily.

“Are you a wanted man, Mr. Xerces?” Tommy asked coldly.

Raven gave a short laugh. “Do you know who I am? Everybody wants me. In fact, just last week, I was at this movie premier and this girl, god she was so fucking young, she was like—”

“I meant are you wanted by the rozzers?” He must have noticed the confused look on Raven’s face, because he added, “Bobbies? Bluebottles? Come on, man!” he cried, losing patience. “The police, for God’s sake, are you wanted by the police?”

Raven had to think for a moment. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I mean, yeah, I’ve spent a night or two in jail for sure, and yeah, I guess there was a warrant out that one time for indecent exposure just because I masturbated on stage. But who hasn’t, am I right? I mean, for the record, I was fucking high as a kite, not to mention horny after taking that...”

The horrified look on Tommy's face made him stop talking. And thinking back to that time, to the things he did while all hopped up on amphetamines and god knows what else, yeah, he definitely wouldn't be asking the man for any cocaine. He was done with that for real.

"So, what are the chances of the mafia shooting up the place?" he asked again.

"Pretty slim for...what you did." Tommy smirked. Prude. "Where did you say you were from?"

"I don't think I did say."

"Where are you from? Besides America. I can tell that."

Raven cleared his throat. Though he rather liked Tommy, he had better go along with the story Clara assumed. "When you're on the high seas, you feel like you're from just about everywhere."

"Not belonging anywhere? I know that feeling."

"But I was born in some shithole in Tennessee."

"I see. And you know Gwenny how?"

"Who?"

"Gwendoline Higginbottom?" said Tommy, eyeing Raven suspiciously. "You know, the woman whose baby you're so anxious not to accidentally kill?"

"Oh, her. Yeah, we go way back. My mom and her mom and...you know how it is."

"I don't. How is it exactly?"

At this point, Raven was about to just tell the man the truth. This lying business was not for him. He couldn't keep up with it and every lie just turned into a new one and he couldn't keep them all straight. He looked at the box from the bakery in his hands. "My mom knows her, actually. Mrs. Higginbottom. She's sick, so she can't visit herself, and asked me to take these to her and kiss the baby for her."

"Huh." Tommy nodded his head, though Raven wasn't sure he was entirely convinced by the flimsy excuse. "Well, let's get a move on before she puts little demon down for his nap."

Chapter 8

Lucas and Clara stood in a dilapidated barn at the bottom of Farmer Edwards' field, staring at the most bizarre contraption they'd ever seen.

It was indeed silver and had four wheels, just as Mrs. Bird had said, but it was a strange wedge shape, and had a wire thing sticking out of the top. There were glass windows, and some sort of black blocks at the rear of the car, where the luggage usually sat. There were pipes and hoses everywhere, and the lights were an ugly rectangle shape set into the front, rather than the pleasing hemisphere of perfectly good cars from their own era.

"It's beautiful," whispered Clara, stepping forward with her hand outstretched as though it were a dog. Lucas caught her sleeve and pulled her back.

"It could be dangerous," he said. "What if it's possessed or something?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Possessed?"

"Or something," corrected Lucas, realizing how silly his suggestion had been. "Or electrified. People get nasty shocks from those electric toasters, you know."

She stepped back and gave the thing an apprehensive look. "You could be right."

"I am?"

"I said could be, it's not a guarantee."

Mrs. Bird cleared her throat. "I might be able to help," she said. "It can't do anything to me if it's electrified."

Lucas relayed this to Clara.

"But what if it's possessed?" said Clara, smirking at him.

He stuck his tongue out at her for what good it would do, but there was no way she'd let that slide for a while.

The corner of Mrs. Bird's mouth twitched upwards. "I'll take my chances."

"It's probably not possessed," said Lucas, feeling distinctly got at by this point. "Mrs. Bird," he added, turning to the ghostly lady. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, naturally I had a look around as soon as I found it," she said. "It's very strange inside. There's seats, and a steering wheel, like one of those automobiles—"

"She says it's a car," said Lucas for Clara's benefit.

“It’s not a car,” said Mrs. Bird crossly. “I know what a car looks like. This is strange.”

“A strange car,” Lucas told Clara.

“If you’re not going to listen to me—”

“I’m sorry,” said Lucas quickly, not wanting to touch the thing the horrible pirate man arrived in. He’d probably catch something. “What can you tell us about it?”

“There’s a lot of wires all over the place, and dials, like the pressure gauges on a steam train—”

“That doesn’t sound good,” said Lucas frowning, and told Clara about this. She nodded calmly.

“Just like the machine in the book,” said Clara, looking worryingly excited. “I was right.” She reached out her hand again.

“Don’t touch it,” said Lucas, pulling her back again. “What if it zips you through time and I never see you again?”

She gave him a disparaging look. “Darling, you need to twist dials and press buttons and things, you can’t just accidentally time travel.”

“This was a work of fiction you read, wasn’t it?”

“Well, yes...”

“So, you don’t know how it works in reality.”

Clara sighed. “It makes sense that you couldn’t time travel by accident though, doesn’t it? Otherwise, you’d never build one, because you could end up, I don’t know, in the middle of the plague, or a war, or having to run away from dinosaurs or something.”

“Perhaps,” conceded Lucas reluctantly.

“And it must take a lot of energy,” added Clara. “Newton’s Third Law, equal and opposite reaction, and all that. You can’t move yourself and a time machine through time and space without a lot of energy.”

“Oh, I suppose not,” said Lucas, releasing his grip on her sleeve.

“So, it’s perfectly all right for me to touch it, isn’t it,” said Clara, lunging forward before he could stop her and placing her hand on the door handle.

“There,” she said, grinning as Lucas’ knees wobbled. “Told you nothing would happen.”

“Also, that strange man managed to touch it all right,” interjected Mrs. Bird.

“But he’s a freak of nature,” hissed Lucas, before explaining this outburst to Clara.

She shrugged and pulled the door handle. “He looks perfectly normal to me.”

The doors swung upwards.

“Unlike that,” she breathed, eyes shining. She stepped forward, as though to get into the contraption. Lucas caught her sleeve again

“You can’t get in there,” he said. “What if it starts up and you end up in a completely different time? What if it takes you to whatever monstrous time this Raven fellow hails from? It must be somewhere a long way in the future for things to have got bad enough to produce him.”

“Or the past,” said Mrs. Bird. “I always thought it must have been terrible in the past, with all that famine and lack of washing.”

“Mrs. Bird says no, too,” added Lucas. “And if Mrs. Bird thinks we shouldn’t help—”

“I never said that, young man,” snapped the ghost. “I merely said it’s terrible how they used to live. Can you imagine a time without all of those conveniences you have now, like gas ovens and telephones? You’ve even got one in your office.”

“Yes, but we haven’t got a telephone at home, and it’s hardly convenient to go to the phone booth near the pub,” replied Lucas. “But that’s not the point,” he continued, turning back to Clara. “The point is, it could be dangerous, and I don’t want to lose you.”

The determined expression melted into something rather softer. “Lucas, that’s very sweet,” she said, putting a hand on his cheek.

He smiled, a touch embarrassed. “I am, you know,” he said, taking her other hand. “And it’d kill me to lose you, which I’m scared is what’ll happen if you get into that thing.”

Clara looked at the thing. “Come with me, then.”

“What? No!” he cried, pulling her away from it again. “That’s not what I meant. Can’t we just find Raven, if that is his real name, tell him we know he’s come from the future in his silver box on wheels, and ask him to leave again?”

“But what if his mission is terribly important?” asked Clara, finally stepping away from the possible time machine. “What if the fate of the world depends on him killing this baby?” Her eyes went wide. “What if it’d prevent another war, maybe one even worse than the Great War?”

Lucas shook his head. “They said nothing like that could ever happen again. All those millions of men dead? It’s impossible to think of that a second time around.”

“Maybe this Raven is from so far in the future they’ve forgotten all about the War?”

“Unlikely. We have Armistice Day to remind people, and people will pass the memories on for generations. It’ll never, ever happen again. Trust me. There are memorials in every town and village. We’ve got one with the names of twenty-seven men and boys who never came back to Castlebury from the trenches.”

“Including our fathers,” said Clara sadly, slipping her hand into Lucas. He squeezed her fingers sympathetically.

“Yes,” he said solemnly. “Almost everyone who went off to fight, in fact. Those who came back weren’t exactly well off. Arnold Smithers has never been right since, poor lad – shell shock, they call it, and Daniel Wykes lost an eye, and—”

“But Lucas, what if that is what’s going on?” said Clara, picking up an old newspaper that had been thrown into the barn. By coincidence, it related to the German election early in the year. She held it out for Lucas to examine, and he read this Hitler chap’s party had won a dozen seats in the Reichstag. “What if Raven killing Baby Hitler is the thing that stops it all from happening again? Shouldn’t we help? Surely one life is better than millions?”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear you say there was any justification for killing an innocent baby,” said Lucas, reading the article. “Although I don’t see what some tinpot politician from a weakened state could do that warrants him being killed as an infant.”

“What if something terrible will happen if the baby grows up?” asked Clara, showing a worrying acceptance of infanticide.

“But if they killed the baby before he grew up and did those terrible things,” said Mrs. Bird thoughtfully, “How would whoever killed him know to go back in time?”

“What?” said Lucas, frowning at the ghost and holding up a hand to Clara to stop her cutting over the woman she couldn’t see. “Well, they’d... they’d...”

“They’d what, darling?” asked Clara.

Lucas asked her the question Mrs. B. had just asked him.

“Huh,” said Clara thoughtfully. “I don’t suppose he *could* know, because if none of those terrible things have happened, there wouldn’t be the motivation for him to time travel.”

“What does your book say about things like that?” said Lucas.

“I thought we weren’t paying any attention to that because it was a work of fiction?” replied Clara with a smirk.

“Yes, but it’s the only thing we’ve got,” said Lucas, checking his watch anxiously. “Come on, we’ve left Tommy and that loony alone for almost an hour, who knows what terrible things they could have done in that time?”

“Well,” said Clara, returning to the original question, “the story was about someone going *forward* in time, so it didn’t really say anything about what’d happen if someone went *back* and changed things.”

“My guess is, it’d change all of history, forever,” said Mrs. Bird, sounding quite unconcerned about the prospect. “At least, the part going forward from when the change happened. People who should have been born wouldn’t have been, and vice versa, and things that should have happened wouldn’t have happened, and again, vice versa. Something even worse than this Baby Hitler person might happen.”

Lucas relayed Mrs. B.’s theory to Clara.

Clara’s eyes went wide. “That’s true,” she said in a horrified whisper. “You don’t know what could happen if you start messing around with history. Think about all the things that wouldn’t have happened had the War not taken place.”

“Well, our dads would still be alive for one,” said Lucas. “Our mothers wouldn’t have been widowed, and we might have had happier childhoods.”

“But,” said Clara, “if that had happened, would we have been such good friends?”

“Maybe not,” he admitted.

“Definitely not,” said Clara, slipping her hand into his. “You looked after me when I was sad about Daddy. I never forgot that. I think that’s when I truly fell in love with you.”

“Was it really?” he said, looking at her with a fond smile. “You know, I felt terribly protective over you after that. I mean, you were my best friend’s sister so I always looked out for you, but after that day, I wasn’t going to let anything hurt you ever again, if I could help it.”

She stretched up and pressed her lips softly to his cheek. “You’re very sweet, darling.”

“But if that hadn’t happened,” he mused, “I wonder if we’d have, you know, fallen in love the way we have done.”

“Possibly not,” said Clara. “After that day, I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. Not that I really knew what love was when I was twelve, of course, but I felt a strange attachment to you. I wanted to be around you, you made me feel safe and happy. I knew I could be myself with you, that I could be vulnerable, and you wouldn’t mind, or think any less of me. And of course, I miss Daddy, and I’d never wish him dead, but—”

“Sometimes good things come out of bad things,” finished Lucas, squeezing her fingers gently.

“Yes,” said Clara, smiling up at him. “Sometimes you’ve got to look for the sunshine in the clouds. You’re my sunshine, and you chased away a very dark cloud.”

Lucas took her in his arms and held her tightly. “Same to you,” he whispered, kissing her just above the ear. “I hate to think what my life would have been like without you.”

“So don’t,” she said, hugging him back.

“Wasn’t that rather my point?” said Mrs. Bird, who Lucas had quite forgotten was there.

“Er, yes,” said Lucas, feeling a touch embarrassed at this terribly un-English show of emotion. “So, shouldn’t we stop Raven from doing anything that might alter the course of history?”

“Maybe,” said Clara, sounding rather more doubtful than Lucas liked. “But the thing is, what if he’s *supposed* to come back and kill baby Hitler?”

“He is not supposed to come back and kill anyone,” said Lucas hotly. “I’m fairly sure anything like that would change history to a point where he wouldn’t *need* to come back and kill Baby Hitler, so he wouldn’t *know* he had to go back and kill anyone, so he *couldn’t* go back and kill anyone, so it *can’t* be something he’s supposed to do. Can it?”

“Oh,” said Clara, frowning as she untangled this thread. “Yes, I suppose it’s a bit of a whatcha call it, a parasite.”

“Paradox,” corrected Mrs. Bird, shortly followed by Lucas.

“Oh yes, of course,” she said, giving him a curious look. “Been reading the dictionary instead of the Boys Own Annual for a change?”

“Something like that,” he said. “But my point is, we can’t let him do that. It seems like a bad idea.”

“You’re right,” said Clara, grabbing the newspaper and his hand before pulling him out of the barn. “We’ve got to go and find him and Tommy before it’s too late.”

Chapter 9

The Higginbottom house was in the center of Mulberry Street, and looked nothing like the house Raven would imagine Baby Hitler being raised in. Something like the Amityville Horror House seemed more likely, somehow.

This home was quaint and well-kept, with blooming flowers in the front yard and a charming garden in the back. It was newer than most of the buildings Raven had seen on his trip thus far; in fact, the entire street seemed fairly new, with brick homes lined up neatly side by side.

“Here we are,” Tommy said as he bounded up the front steps and knocked on the door.

Raven finished his smoke and tossed the butt in the bushes. Being this close to Baby Hitler made his stomach churn. Could he really do it? He’d snuffed out his dad, sure, but that was in self-defense, right? Right.

He didn’t have time to think anymore because a young woman answered the door, and with a squeal of delight, invited Tommy inside, who in turn, invited Raven inside.

The interior of the home was just as delightful as the exterior, and Mrs. Higginbottom was a delight as well. Quite young, barely twenty-two, she was a petite little thing, looking more like a girl than a woman. She wore a simple yellow shift dress and had her blonde hair pinned up. It was hard to believe she had just had a baby. She immediately put on a pot of tea, though Raven wished they’d been offered something stronger. He glanced at his new friend to see if Tommy felt the same, but despite his offers of drugs, the man seemed quite pleased at the prospect of that weak leaf juice those Brits were obsessed with.

He’d been here nearly a day, and he still felt like a fish out of water. Who’d have thought an ocean and nearly a century could make such a difference? He was beginning to feel quite homesick and regretting not going for the belt instead. Surely he would have been home by now and probably even had another date lined up with Stanzie. Stanzie. Man, how was he going to see her again now? But he had a job to do. Time to get it over with and get out of this godforsaken place.

“Raven, isn’t it?” Mrs. Higginbottom said, shaking him back to the present. She finished scurrying around making her guest comfortable and sat down opposite the two men to pouring them each a cup of tea. “What an unusual name.”

“Yes, it’s good to meet you,” he said. He really wished these English people weren’t so proper and hospitable. It was going to make smothering her child much more difficult. “I brought you these danishes.” He extended the box he bought at the bakery earlier. “Pumping out babies is hard shit, isn’t it?”

Tommy coughed loudly, shaking his head, so Raven added, “I mean, congratulations.”

“How do I know you?” she asked. “Tommy said your mother sent you?”

He cleared his throat, took a sip of tea, and grimaced. Tea had not gotten any easier to drink after his day in the country. “Yes, uh,” he tried to find the words to say that would allow him privacy with the child. After laying eyes on Mrs. Higginbottom, there was no way he could kill her baby with her watching. “Yeah, my mom heard you had the baby, and she’s sick, so she wanted me to bring you something and give the little guy a kiss for her.”

“And your mother is?”

His eyes darted around the room. Who was a woman she would know? If Tommy wasn’t there, he’d have been tempted to say Mrs. Rathbone, although she was much too young to be his mother. Who were some other English people? Matt Damon? No, he was from Jersey. Hugh Jackman? No, he was Australian. The Queen! No, she’d never believe he was royalty. Hmm, he was in the navy, he came over on the Titanic. “Kate Winslet,” he said.

Tommy groaned quietly, but Raven assumed the foul-tasting tea had finally hit the poor man’s tastebuds.

Mrs. Higginbottom looked at him skeptically, her head tilted to the side. “From the garden association?”

“Uh, yes. That’s her.”

“Didn’t she turn ninety-three last week?” Mrs. Higginbottom asked Tommy.

“Yup,” said Tommy, giving Raven an unimpressed glance.

Damn.

“Yeah, that’s my mom,” said Raven, forcing a grin. “Adopted,” he added, hoping this might explain a few things. “Late in life. Act of charity, really.”

Mrs. Higginbottom looked him up and down in a way that led him to believe Kate Winslet from the garden association would not approve of him. Probably the piercings.

“Well, tell her thank you from me. It’s very kind of her.” She stood from the sofa and walked over to a basinet in the corner of the living room. “Would you like to see the baby?”

Raven perked up. “Yes, very much. I would love to hold the baby.”

Tommy and Mrs. Higginbottom couldn’t keep their eyes off each other, which gave Raven a brilliant idea. If he could get them to go off in private somewhere, it would give him the opportunity to do something to the baby. What, he still hadn’t decided. Smothering the child with a pillow would probably be the best. No blood. No crying. Then he could simply put the baby on

its stomach and Mrs. Higginbottom would think that's why he died. He'd be back in the DeLorean and to a WWII-free future in no time!

With a spring in his step, he walked over to where the woman held the ugliest child imaginable out to him. How Mrs. Higginbottom's first name wasn't Rosemary was beyond him. But as demonic looking as the baby was, it didn't look like Adolf Hitler. At all.

He took the baby in his hands and held it at arm's length, not wanting to get too close to the beast, and looked into its dog-like face. This baby wasn't weaselly with greasy black hair. It was a beefy child, with yellow hair that stuck up like it had been struck by lightning, thick pink legs and a chubby horrible face. It didn't even have a mustache. Was this really the infant Führer in his arms?

Before he had a moment to think, that schizophrenic guy and the unfortunate nurse assigned to him burst into the living room.

"Has he done it yet?" said Lucas rushing right passed Raven and Mrs. Higginbottom and addressing Tommy as though they weren't in the room at all.

"Hello to you too," grumbled Raven, scowling at the man. He might be mentally ill, but that didn't give him a free pass to be rude.

"Give me some credit," replied Tommy, who at least had the courtesy to glance at Raven when he was talking about him. "I said I'd not let the circus freak do anything, didn't I?"

"Woah woah woah," said Raven, offended. They were clearly talking about him. And here he thought Tommy was just being friendly. He handed the baby back to its mom. "This lunatic told you to babysit me?"

"Well, actually *I* asked Tommy to keep an eye on you," said Clara. "I was worried you might, you know..." She glanced at Mrs. Higginbottom, who looked very confused. Well, what did she expect, giving birth to a monster like that? She should have known better and not got pregnant in the first place.

"This is bullshit," said Raven, crossing the room to where Clara and Lucas stood. "I came here to perform a, a, a charitable act to humanity, and this is the thanks I get? Well, I can't *not* do it, now that I'm here. Mrs. Higginbottom," he said, turning to the lady in question. "Let me have Adolf again."

"Who?"

"Your baby?" said Raven, puzzled. He thought they'd taken all the really interesting drugs out of everything, at least according to that nurse Clara, but everyone he'd met so far seemed completely whacked.

“My baby’s name is Adam,” said Mrs. Higginbottom, understanding dawning on her face. “That’s why I didn’t recognize you, you’ve got the wrong house. You want Barbara Mapperley at number 38, her baby is Adolf.” She lowered her voice. “Her grandfather was a *German*, you see,” she said, as though this were some terrible, shameful secret. “And despite everyone’s advice, she insisted on naming the poor little scrap after him.”

“Yep, sucks to be him,” said Raven, stepping towards the door. “Number 38 you said?”

“Wait,” said loony Lucas, stepping in front of him. “You don’t want to do that.”

“Pretty sure I do,” argued Raven. “That’s exactly why I came here. To, uh, say hello to little Adolf.”

“We know who you are,” said Clara.

Raven threw his hands in the air. He’d just about had enough of these people, and was starting to think that Lucas wasn’t the only crazy one in the bunch.

“Oh my god, no matter where I go, it’s the fucking paparazzi! Of *course* you know who I am!” he exclaimed, exasperated. “Everyone knows who I am. Jesus Christ, I can’t go anywhere or any time without someone asking for a goddamn selfie! I have more important things to do right now than sign your fucking panties.”

Everyone in the room stood in silence. Even baby Adam had a look of shock on his hideous mug.

Though really, it was hard to tell with that child. Either way, the damn thing started screaming, and Mrs. Higginbottom smiled apologetically before taking her hellspawn into the kitchen.

Clara wouldn’t let the obscene outburst sway her, though, and poked him in the chest. “I know why you’re here,” she said, just proving that insanity was catching in these parts.

“We can take a good guess, anyway,” said Lucas, patient zero in the insane asylum. “You’re an assassin from the distant future, sent to stop some dangerous person from doing something terrible. We think. She thinks, anyway.”

From the corner of his eye, Raven saw treacherous Tommy half pull a small brown envelope from the breast pocket of his jacket. “Nope, still there,” he muttered to himself. “Not that they’re junkies, but you never know...”

“Tommy, what have you got there?” said Clara sharply.

Ah, that’d explain a lot. She was the keeper for both of them. Or possibly the three of them had absconded from the local nut house. Either way, caution was advised.

“Hmm? Nothing,” said Tommy, a little too innocently to be believable. “Definitely not snow. But, um, what was this you were saying, about assassins...?”

“I don’t have time for this shit,” Raven said, and tried to push out of the way, but Tommy grabbed a hold of his jacket.

“The Adolf Hitler you want is in Berlin,” Lucas said, throwing an old newspaper article on the table for Raven to see. “He’s leader of the Nazi party, whatever they are. Won’t get far though, only won twelve seats in the election in May.”

Raven was stunned. He read the headline and looked at the photograph that accompanied it. It really was the Führer before he was the Führer. “If that’s really Hitler—”

“—It is,” confirmed Lucas.

“Fuck,” Raven groused. “Well, now what am I supposed to do?”

“How did this all come about anyway?” asked Clara. “I can’t imagine someone planning something of this scale without actually *planning* it. I mean, had you planned correctly, you would have known to travel back to 1889 Austria, not 1928 Castlebury Magna.”

“Yeah, well, that wasn’t the initial plan,” Raven admitted. “See, I met this girl.”

“Of course there’s a girl,” Lucas muttered.

“It’s always a girl, isn’t it?” said Tommy, slapping Raven on the back. “Some of the things I’ve done in the name of se—” Clara coughed loudly, “Um, love,” he corrected.

“Yeah,” continued Raven. “And I lost her belt and she said I needed to go back in time to get it for her.”

“Go back in time for a *belt*?” Clara said. “Sounds rather ...”

“Obsessed,” said Lucas.

“Crazy,” suggested Tommy.

“Drastic,” said Clara, frowning at the men.

“That’s what I thought,” Raven agreed. “Which is why I told her if I was going back in time, I’d kill Baby Hitler. So, when I was in the time machine, even though at first, I thought I was actually going to get the belt, I changed my mind and instead of going to 1960s Morocco, I came here to kill Hitler.”

“Rash decisions are rarely well thought-out,” Clara said, and everyone agreed.

“Are you going to Morocco now?” Tommy asked.

Raven shook his head. “I only have enough plutonium for one round-trip. I have to go back where I came from.”

“No Hitler and no belt?” Lucas said. “What a wasted trip.”

“Tell me about it,” said Raven, running a hand through his hair. “Now that girl’s never going to talk to me again. And I was really starting to like her.”

“Hmm.” Clara put a finger to her chin and pursed her lips. “I have an idea,” she declared. “Come with me to the haberdashery and we’ll find her an even better belt.”

“Good idea,” said Lucas, making a beeline for the front door. “As soon as possible, in case whatever that baby has is catching.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Raven, following on his heels. “Later, Mrs. H. Thanks for the tea. Sorry about your baby.”

Mrs. Higginbottom poked her head out of the kitchen with the now snotty and blotchy brat in her arms. She waved her unexpected guests goodbye, and looked curiously at little Adam.

“Hitler or not,” Raven whispered to Lucas, “someone should put that poor thing out of its misery.”

“Tommy,” Clara called. “Are you coming?”

Tommy looked at the group, then back at Mrs. H. “I, uh, think Gwenny and I have some catching up to do,” he said with a wink. “I’ll see you back at your mum’s house.”

Chapter 10

As the three walked back out onto Mulberry Street, Clara asked Raven, “So, where are you from in the future?”

Raven was no good a math, especially in his head, but took a guess and said, “About a hundred years?”

Clara’s eyebrows skyrocketed. “A hundred years! No wonder your car has wings.”

He waved his hand. “Nah, that thing’s from the eighties. Never really did catch on.”

“Was it really so bad, what this Hitler chap did?” Lucas asked as they walked back toward town.

“The worst,” Raven replied. “Like, anytime anyone does something bad, they compare them to Hitler. You should probably stop him if you can. Maybe get the people to stand up for what they believe in, you know? Don’t just go along with the crowd.”

“Are there still wars a hundred years from now?” Clara asked.

He shrugged. “Yeah, there’s always a war somewhere.”

Clara looked pensive. “You know what they say about history.”

“It’s boring as fuck?”

“It repeats itself,” Lucas corrected with a scowl.

This was way too solemn for Raven, who drew a cigarette from his pocket and lit it before saying, “You say there’s a belt store around here?”

Lucas looked at his watch. “We’d better hurry. It closes in ten minutes.”

Raven sighed, thinking about the zookeeper and her belt. She’d already told him she didn’t want just a belt. She wanted *her* belt. Man, what he would do to live that day with her all over again.

But he had a time machine. He had all the time in the world.

“On second thought,” he said to the two. “I don’t think I’ll be buying her a new belt. I’m just going to get back.”

“Really?” said Clara, frowning. “Seems like she really wants that belt, and if you need to get back into her good books...”

“Well, good luck to you,” said Lucas quickly, all but pushing Raven along the street. “Wouldn’t want you to be late.”

“He’s got a time machine, he can’t be late,” said Clara as they turned into the field where Raven had dumped the DeLorean.

“Yes, well... Best not to risk it.”

Raven smiled. They might just be some fruit loop and his nurse, but he envied their easy relationship. Maybe one day, if he was very lucky, he’d find that for himself.

He certainly hoped so – and there was no time like the future.

As they approached the DeLorean, Clara put her arm through Lucas’ and nuzzled his neck in a very unprofessional way. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Thanks for everything,” Raven said. He leaned in close to Clara and said, “I don’t mean to be rude, but you might want to watch how close you’re getting to your patient. I don’t know how things are in the twenties, but where I’m from, you could get fired for that.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she grinned at him.

He grinned back at her and opened the door. “Hey, Lucas?”

“Yes?”

“Say hi to your mom for me.” Raven winked.

“I’m not convinced he’s in any for state to operate that thing,” said Lucas, watching Raven climb into the strange silver car. “Hasn’t he been drinking?”

“That was hours ago, and I only had whatever it was your mom gave me.” Raven scrunched his nose up at the memory of the strangely musty, sweet liquor. “I’ve driven in worse states, anyway.” He gave a final wave and shut the door.

“And he’s going away, isn’t he?” said Mrs Bird, eyeing the stranger with undisguised repulsion before stalking off. Probably to the pub, knowing her.

Lucas smiled fondly after the old dear. She struggled enough with modern - er, 1928’s fashion, seeing something from 2028 must seem quite frightful. One of her greatest complaints was how women nowadays didn’t tight-lace their corsets any more - even worse, most of them didn’t wear corsets at all.

This, apparently, was an abomination and a sign of the end of times, though Lucas must have missed that particular sermon. In fact, he was rather glad the rotten things had gone out of style. Not only did they look hellishly uncomfortable, but he’d also been so nervous the first time

he and Clara had, well... *you know*, that had she been wearing a corset and not an old pair of pajamas previously belonging to her older brother and cut down to fit, Lucas suspected he'd still be trying to unlace the damn thing.

No, progress wasn't always a bad thing...

"Lucas," said Clara, snapping him out of this pleasant recollection, "Aren't you going to say goodbye?"

"Good riddance, more like," he muttered under his breath, before forcing a grin and waving enthusiastically. "Goodbye," he called, and the car magically started - saving a bit of time with all that cranking business fellows usually had to do. This didn't seem quite sufficient for seeing a time traveller on their way, even one like Raven, so he added, "Hope you had the time of your life!"

"What?" said Clara, giving him a confused look. "You've never said that before."

"First time for everything," muttered Lucas. "Where's he taking that thing, anyway?"

"I don't know," she replied. "He explained it, but he started saying crazy things about getting up to 88 miles an hour - as if a car could even go that fast - and fox caterpillars, or something, and I'm afraid I got rather lost."

"Never mind," said Lucas, watching the vehicle pause near a long stretch of flat grass. Thankfully, Farmer Edwards had moved the cows to a different field or that damn pirate would make minced meat out of them - or more likely, himself.

Hitting a tonne of living beef at any speed was probably a bad idea when you were in a tin can on wheels.

"I wonder if we'll ever see him again?" said Clara thoughtfully, as the car growled.

Lucas looked at the direction the car was pointing. "Probably, seeing as he'll end up in the river if he goes that way. Do you think he's realized?"

The car made a thunderous roar, like nothing Lucas nor Clara had ever heard before, and raced off.

"If not, he will soo—"

The end of Clara's sentence was cut off by an almighty clap of thunder from the clear blue sky, and the car vanished. All that was left was a twin strip of flame burning in the dry grass.

Lucas blinked, then again, then a third time, just in case. Nope, it was definitely gone, along with the man who caused them so much trouble all day.

He could have cheered, but there wasn't time - at least, not if they didn't want Edwards to end up with a charred field.

Once the fire had been thoroughly stomped out, Lucas and Clara looked at each other.

"Did that really happen?" she whispered, her eyes wide.

"Judging by the scorched landscape, *something* certainly happened."

"It's only a bit scorched," she said, trampling a stray ember. "Um," she added, not quite meeting Lucas' eye, "and it was definitely because of the car, not a stray bolt of lightning or something?"

"From where?" asked Lucas, spreading his arms wide and looking up at the dazzling blue sky.

"Yes, quite," said Clara, chewing her bottom lip anxiously. "So, uh, do you really think he was, you know, from the future?"

"I suppose he must have been," said Lucas. "Do you think he'll remember us?"

"Probably not," said Clara, linking her arm through his. "He's falling in love. Everything else will fade into the background for a while, even this."

"And I'm pretty sure he was taking some kind of drug," said Lucas, turning them around to walk back to the village. "Probably several. Most likely he'll think it was a hallucination."

"You don't think—" She paused, looking around. "I mean, is it possible...?"

"Spit it out, girl," said Lucas playfully, the prospect of going back to normal cheering him up immensely. "Is what possible?"

"Well, what if *we* were drugged," she said. "And this is all just a dream?"

"Oh, I see," said Lucas. "Pinch my arm."

She obliged with more enthusiasm than he thought necessary.

"Ow," he complained. "No, I don't think it was a dream."

"Gosh," she said. "So it's really possible? Time travel?"

"I suppose so," said Lucas. "I bet they do it all the time, where - or should I say, when, Raven is from."

“Yes, that must be very interesting,” said Clara. “Where would you go, if you could go anywhere in time?”

Lucas thought about this for a moment.

“You know what, I wouldn’t,” he said at last, unlinking their arms and putting his arm around her shoulder. “I like right here, right now very much indeed.”

She stretched up and kissed him on the lips. “Me too.”

Inside the DeLorean, Raven punched in the date and turned back the clock so that he might be able to relive that perfect day with Stanzie all over again. He couldn’t mess it up any more than he already had, but just the chance to see her again was all that mattered. He hit the gas and when the car hit 88 miles per hour, the farm in Castlebury Magna disappeared and became the outskirts of Chicago, Illinois.

After parking the DeLorean in the long-term lot, he ran to the gate for the flight leaving Chicago for Los Angeles. They had just finished boarding first class. Perfect timing.

Pulling his duffle bag behind him, hiking up his pants, he spotted her sitting in the wrong seat. In his seat. Stanzie. There she sat in her ugly khakis, nose in a book, blocking out the scene around her. When the flight attendant told him to pull up his pants, he smiled, but remembered how it had gone down, so immediately fought back, raising his voice, causing a scene. And when the zookeeper lady stood up and grabbed him roughly by the arm, his heart swelled.

“Take my belt,” she hissed in his ear. “I am not going to miss my connection because of you. Pull up your damned pants so we can get going. Take my belt.”

He looked at the belt in her hands. That psychedelic hippie belt straight out of an acid trip, orange and yellow and blue and green and purple and red threads clashed together in an abomination of colors. He smiled to himself.

That crazy schizophrenic Lucas and his nurse were right. History was bound to repeat itself.

The End

Bonus Scene by Saffron Amatti

As Jennifer put her characters into my book, it only seemed fair that I put mine into hers. Here's a quick scene showing what happened when I dropped Lucas and Clara into Bird Song...

'Where's this?' asked Lucas, looking around an unfamiliar landscape.

'Tennessee,' replied Clara, proving she'd read the notes I give them. She stared at a grimy trailer fifty yards or so away.

'Why?'

The trailer door flew open and a skinny lad looking barely eighteen tumbled out, blinking in the bright sunlight. In one hand was a duffel bag, and the other held up jeans drowning his frame. His auburn hair was long and unkempt, and even at a distance, an unhappy patchwork of bruises was visible under the freckles dusting his cheekbones. He slammed the door and started across the dusty lot as the trailer shuddered.

'That's why,' said Clara, stepping forward. 'Come along, and let me do the talking.'

The boy froze as they approached, eyes darting this way and that.

'It's all right,' said Clara reassuringly, holding up her hands. 'We're here to help you.'

She nudged Lucas until he nodded.

The kid laughed bitterly. 'No one helps me,' he said.

'We do,' insisted Clara, and she introduced herself and Lucas.

'Robin,' replied the boy, looking wary. 'Look, I'm sure you mean well, but -'

'There's someone we'd like you to meet,' said Clara.

'I've got a bus to catch.'

Clara smiled. 'Get the next one. This won't take long.'

They led Robin through streets that started off familiar, but gradually, inexplicably, became quite unfamiliar. He thought he knew every inch of Chattanooga, but he didn't recall stone-built cottages, and red-brick terraces, and a place called The Brewer's Thumb.

He made a note of this last one in case he could score coke, or at least bourbon, there later.

‘Mum,’ called Clara, stepping into a snug house filled with the smell of fresh baking. ‘He’s here.’

A woman in old-fashioned clothes and a flour-dusted apron stepped out of a back room and wrapped her arms around a stunned Robin.

‘Good to see you,’ she said, taking his face in her hands and beaming at him. ‘Come through, Hettie and I made you a cake.’

He looked around with confusion, and his new friends made encouraging motions.

Robin shrugged. What harm could it do? Especially as his belly was growling.

And there’d always be another bus.

Thank you so much for reading! Can't get enough of Raven? Full length Raven Xerces novels *Raven Song* and *BirdSong* available on Amazon either paperback or eBooks.

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About the Authors

Saffron Amatti lives in deepest darkest England, where she can be found drinking oversized cups of tea, burning unhealthy amounts of incense, and plotting how fictional people can murder each other and (almost) get away with it. This last point may be the reason why her friends and family have been exceptionally nice to her lately, which really isn't the way to discourage such behaviour.

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Jennifer Brasington-Crowley is an author, illustrator and Slytherin. She is a little obsessive about things like music and animals, and can't help but sneak miniature biology lessons into all her books.

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