

# Dragonfly Illusion

by Peter Bond

## Prologue – An Unheard Silence 1996

The peculiar silence of a car after it crashes can be disturbing. Only the ticking of metal settling into its new form or perhaps the dripping of unconfined fluid intrudes. Emergency vehicles' sirens eventually mask that silence, so it reigns only briefly. First responders never know it. Such was the case when a nondescript sedan skidded sideways off a wet Hampden Road and slammed into a large River Red Gum tree.

The first police officer on the scene quickly assessed the situation and mentally added two to the tally of car crash deaths he'd witnessed. He knew lifeless bodies when he saw them but thought better of telling the medics not to bother hurrying. It wouldn't look good. More interested in the peculiar device hanging from the car's petrol tank, he pressed the call button on his radio.

'443 to base,' there was a momentary pause, 'get someone from E Section here, fast. Junction Victoria and Hampden. And backup. Area needs to be cordoned off.'

E Section had no permanent staff, but any officer with explosives training could be assigned to that group, and two were always on call. Officer 443 had correctly surmised that the curious apparatus was what they called a vehicle-borne explosive device. Regular officers would secure the area to keep curious onlookers, already gathering, at a safe distance.

Before the car crash that killed them, Roger and Jan Sugarman appeared to be a regular, middle-class couple. Comfortably installed in their conventional home in an ordinary suburb, even their friends matched the public persona that Roger wanted to project.

After the crash, those friends in particular, and the public more widely, weren't sure what to make of it. A local newspaper published a report in which a police spokesman made

the mistake of calling the accident ‘bizarre’. He revealed that had the impact with the tree not taken their lives instantly, the explosive charge fixed to the petrol tank of their 20-year-old Ford Cortina would have done the job only four minutes later. At least, it would have if the collision hadn’t jammed the timer. A nameless bureaucrat reprimanded the public relations officer for releasing this information.

There was much speculation as to why two ‘ordinary citizens’ should be targeted in such a way. By the time the joint funeral was held, many were convinced that the Sugarman’s were Russian spies or homegrown revolutionaries. Others insisted they were master criminals. The Victorian Police issued a press release saying that the Australian Federal Police, ASIO and the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs had confirmed that Roger and Jan Sugarman were not persons of interest. No editor chose to publish that statement.

Newspaper interest eventually died away with the lack of new material. The press replaced the story with the softer subject of what would happen to the Sugarman’s eight-year-old son and only child, Jack. A close family friend organised a series of fundraising events. Jack’s godparents adopted the young boy as soon as they could arrange it, but Jim and Angela Walker were not in a solid financial position. The community rallied around them, and within weeks – they were told public sympathy wouldn’t have lasted much longer – a trust fund boasted a balance sufficient to ensure Jack’s safe upbringing until he was 18.

The police determined the accident was just that, an accident. They ruled out suicide, putting it down to inattention, poor judgment or just plain bad luck. Official conjecture faded when an investigation into the explosive charge led offshore. An explosives specialist identified the material as RDX, also known as cyclonite. The expert reported that the Australian Army used a version known as RS-RDX, the prefix indicating, perversely, reduced sensitivity. When analysed, a sample of residue from the Sugarman’s car displayed a

different chemical profile and ‘wasn’t manufactured in Australia.’ To pad out the report, he added that Germany had patented RDX in 1898. Britain, the USA and Germany used it with striking effect during the Second World War.

The police found it difficult to find background material on Roger Sugarman. They could compile a picture of his work only with high-level clearance and assurance of strict secrecy. Roger himself had maintained confidentiality within the bureaucracy and in his private life. His official biography was a short one.

To anyone who asked, he worked in administration, which, for most, was sufficiently vague and dull to avert any further enquiry. If anyone persisted, he was a conflict archaeologist and ‘you don’t want to know’ ended the conversation. Roger worked in a shady world of government investigation, answered to no minister and worked in no particular department. A committee directed his activities, or more accurately, the committee's chair. They rarely met, which suited Roger. He hated meetings. Written reports and the occasional phone call were his preference.

Officially, he was a special events coordinator with a team put together by a task force jointly managed by the offices of the Premier and the Governor. Occasionally, genuine events were attributed to his management skills. Roger insisted that such attribution was verbal only. He didn’t want to steal other people’s thunder.

His latest investigation was into what started as a routine cross-jurisdictional irregularity. His targets were often described as irregularities. It always meant illegal. This one involved four departments, three ministers, two government business enterprises and several contracts. Roger had identified 14 contracts having been awarded well outside Treasury directions. Many millions of dollars were involved, much of which the accountants couldn’t trace. He had already delivered an executive summary of his findings but wanted a

few more days to complete the full report. On the draft of that report, he'd scribbled 'Tears before bedtime.'

The crash investigation ceased after a month, and the case was suspended but not closed. Jim and Angela took to their new role as Jack's foster parents with dedication. Several sessions with a child psychologist seemed to help the youngster recover from the death of his parents. She suggested that a complete change of scenery might help even more. The Walkers agreed and moved from their Melbourne suburb to the more temperate climate of Tasmania. Jack quickly adapted to his new surroundings and school and easily made new friends, although he was just as happy spending hours alone with his books and stamp collection.

A few months later, the Walkers were surprised to receive a package in the mail from Stan Wright, a name they didn't recognise. It contained a letter and two heavily sealed envelopes boldly marked 'Jack Sugarman. DO NOT OPEN TILL AGE 18.' The letter identified the sender as a police officer who had been involved in a small way in the investigation of Jack's parents' accident. Stan was the officer who removed and catalogued the personal items from the wrecked car.

The letter read: 'It was mostly the usual stuff you'd find in a car, a street atlas, service logbook, a few receipts, box of tissues and such like. A few coins under the seats! But there was a briefcase as well. Inside was a folder with a long document but nothing to say who it was intended for, so we couldn't pass it on. I made a photocopy for head office to look at, but that never got sent on either. The original went to our secure evidence room.'

'When the case was shut down, I read the report myself to help fill in a quiet night shift. It was probably his father's last piece of work, and I figured Jack might want to have it, but it's not the sort of stuff for a young boy. Actually, that's making rather light of it. Jack's father was investigating corruption in government and the public service.'

‘This might sound like a spy novel plot or loony conspiracy theory, but the more I read, the more I was convinced that someone wanted Mr Sugarman silenced. I can’t take this any further myself, but maybe Jack will want to when he’s old enough. The smaller envelope is a letter explaining what I’m telling you now but with more detail. You’ll see I’ve marked it OPEN FIRST. The papers I copied are in the larger one.’

The letter ended by expressing the hope that the Walkers would keep the envelopes unopened for Jack and not simply destroy them. Angela was full of curiosity and wanted to open them there and then. Jim was more receptive to Stan’s wishes, and after a lengthy discussion, the Walkers decided to honour the strange request. So it was that they secured the two envelopes in their deed box with their legal documents and sundry other papers. A short letter of reply to Stan confirmed they would indeed hold the documents and give them to Jack in 2005. It seemed so far away. They heard no more from Stan Wright.

Thirty years later, the unheard silence of the Sugarman’s crash would become all too loud.



## Chapter 1 – The Asquith Documents

An expected phone call never came, and his friend was late. His friend was often late.

‘Always on a Monday,’ Jack thought as he waited impatiently in the Blue Café. Only a good coffee helped alleviate his irritation.

Before his friend finally arrived, a nondescript chap wearing a Harris tweed jacket and flat cap and carrying a polished briefcase arrived precisely at eight o’clock. Jack had never seen him before and tried to determine his age but could only come up with 40-ish. Flat Cap paused momentarily to assess the geography of the place, spotted his quarry and shuffled, somewhat uneasily it seemed, to Jack’s table near the window.

He ordered an espresso on the way. With the briefest pleasantries, he moved a chair to afford a view of the café interior, particularly the front door, and sat down. Uncomfortable not being in command of his surroundings, he had already established an escape route should that be necessary. It wasn’t required this time, but he’d been caught out before. He produced a large envelope and slid it across the table, placing the briefcase on the floor to his left side, out of reach of passersby.

‘Mr Sugarman, this contains some documents and photos and a USB drive. There’s little point in a detailed briefing until you’ve reviewed this material, but I had to deliver it in person.’

‘Very nice. Do you have a name?’

‘I needed to see you to warn you.’

‘Warn me? About what?’

Flat Cap shifted nervously and glanced out the window. The rain hadn’t let up.

‘There’s nothing as specific as a vague threat, is there? Truth is, this material, this information,’ he tapped the envelope and paused, ‘is likely pretty dangerous to anyone who has it.’

‘Wonderful, and you kindly thought I might enjoy that, did you?’

Jack tried to guess what the subject matter might be but almost immediately decided it would be a futile exercise. His orderly mind demanded more information, but he was pleased that there seemed to be plenty of reading. He liked a visual reference, even if it was primarily documentary.

Flat Cap’s espresso arrived.

‘Please accept my apologies for landing you with this. You’re probably of interest to people you’ve never met and may never know. See that black SUV over the road? There are two men in that car. They may be watching me, looking for you, or maybe both. I haven’t come across this pair before, but I know I’ve been under surveillance for a while.’

Jack eyed the SUV but couldn’t make out either of its occupants.

‘Is that why you’re giving me this stuff?’

‘I’m compromised. And this is too big for me now. I’ve lost the edge, but it’s not a game we can afford to lose.’

The switch from ‘I’ to ‘we’ was intentional.

‘We?’

‘It’s all in there.’ He tapped the envelope again. ‘Someone will contact you, probably tomorrow.’

‘Come on, give me something here. What and who on earth are you talking about? The government? The police? I’d like to know where I’m starting from. How many letters?’

Flat Cap sipped his coffee, replaced the cup in its saucer and took up the crossword analogy, ignoring the ‘what’ half of the question.

‘I don’t know for sure, but I’ll tell you this. It must be a group. I doubt it has any initials we’ve ever heard before, and I can guarantee it’s not in your database, across or down.’

‘My database is quite extensive. Maybe you know that.’ Jack was fishing but suspected he wouldn’t get anywhere.

‘Extensive is rarely enough. Maybe you know that.’ Flat Cap displayed a hint of a smile. ‘It’s all here, and my time is up.’

‘All right, we’ll play it your way. But tell me your name.’

‘Oh, sorry, no secret there. Asquith, Derek Asquith, very pleased to finally have made your acquaintance, Commander Sugarman.’

Jack winced at the use of Commander, an honorary rank. He recognised his visitor’s name and nodded. They’d had dealings before but hadn’t previously met. Until today, Asquith had been content to provide information by email and post.

‘Ah, so you’re the secretive Mr Asquith.’

Asquith nodded, leaned sideways slightly and looked intently out the window again. The hint of a smile faded.

‘Indeed, but,’ still studying something of interest outside, ‘I must away.’

With that, he downed his coffee and left the café, leaving a handful of coins on the counter.

Jack tried to take in what he’d just heard and realised it was pretty well nothing other than that he was now in some unspecified danger from someone unknown, for reasons unidentified. So, the usual. He also tried to assess the peculiar man, but gave up after determining his age, vaguely, as 50-ish. The contents of the envelope invited and menaced at the same time. He didn’t notice his visitor cross the road, nor see him being bundled unceremoniously into the back seat of a second black SUV that neither had spotted. Mr



Asquith's prediction that Jack's next contact probably wouldn't be himself may have been chillingly accurate.

The waitress, a young law student in her other life, smiled broadly as she delivered Jack's breakfast.

'Your usual Mr Sugarman, French toast, crispy bacon, banana and plenty of real maple syrup.'

'Thanks, Angie. I'd better have another coffee, too.'

'Sure, one double shot decaf almond cappuccino with butterscotch and easy on the chocolate sprinkles coming right up.'

It was a standing joke between them. Angie went to make his strong long black, and as usual, he spent a few pleasant seconds watching her alluring figure weave gracefully between the tables. Jack Sugarman's day brightened a little, even though the rain still showed no sign of letting up.

'It's settled in for the day, I reckon.'

This was the visitor he'd been expecting. The bearer of vague warnings and large envelopes was momentarily forgotten.

'Leon, mate, I didn't see you walk in.'

'I know, you were too busy perving on the waitress.'

'I wasn't perving. I was admiring her shoes.'

'Yeah, right. God hates liars, you know.'

'Never mind. Such is my fate. Anyway, have some breakfast. It's always good here.'

Angie returned with Jack's second coffee.

'What can I get you this morning, sir? I wouldn't have the raisin toast. They must have been standing on the mountain when they threw in the fruit today.'

‘Raisin toast without raisins, eh. OK, I’ll have a toasted brioche and some tea. Irish Breakfast. No, wait, Prince of Wales. Nice shoes, by the way.’

With a quizzical smile, Angie nodded and oozed back to the counter. This time, two pairs of eyes followed her on her short journey.

Leon Trapman and Jack had been friends since high school. He was sometimes called Leon Leon, a reference to his penchant for the music of Duran Duran.

‘Heavy sigh, Mr T.?’ Jack asked.

‘Heavy sigh indeed, Mr S. Is this your briefcase?’

‘What, ah, no, my first appointment must have left it.’

While devouring breakfast, Jack described his previous encounter, admitting to not knowing much about his caller. Derek Asquith might be his real name, but Jack called him Mr Nutter on the sound basis that he may be one. In his emails, he appeared confident and displayed considerable knowledge about subjects of which most people knew nothing. From this single meeting, though, Jack thought him somewhat awkward despite the obviously rehearsed presentation.

‘He fancies himself as some kind of investigative whistleblower, always looking for a Watergate or something. He’s really just a bit of a conspiracy theorist, but he has given me some useful stuff, as much by accident as design. So for that alone, I was glad to meet him.’

‘Well, if he was the bloke wearing a flat cap, his friends didn’t seem to have much time for him, judging by how he was shoved in that car.’

Jack dropped his fork with a clatter and sat up, alert. The envelope suddenly seemed far more interesting. Perhaps his Mr Nutter had stumbled onto something after all. He made an educated guess.

‘Black SUV?’

‘That’s the one. Range Rover, I think.’

‘Pass me that briefcase, will you.’

A quick inventory revealed another large envelope, another USB drive, a few personal documents, and a newspaper.

‘That’s odd.’

‘What’s odd?’

‘This paper is two weeks old. Why would someone carry around a newspaper for two weeks?’

Leon ignored the rhetorical question. Angie brought his brioche and Prince of Wales. This time, Jack and Leon let the waitress retreat without a visual interrogation as they enjoyed their breakfast, and both hid their concern for Derek.

‘So, what did you want to see me for?’ Leon asked.

‘Thought you might like a walk in the rain. No, it was about a case I’m about to take up. Do you still have your contact in IT? The hacker.’

Leon grimaced at the word hacker. ‘If you mean Trousers, yes, I see him all the time. Why?’

‘I’m looking into a tasty little share trading thing. Just need an expert technical opinion. That can wait a bit, though. No hurry. I’m only on it because of Sayer. It won’t hurt him to practice a bit of patience for once.’

‘Sayer?’ Leon asked.

‘You remember. The famous Detective Inspector Terry Sayer, Tasmania’s finest. Finest according to him anyway. People call him D.I. Doom. We have a certain understanding that I don’t quite understand. You know I get a pension, don’t you?’

‘Yup.’

‘Well, it’s not really a pension. Sort of a retainer. Sort of. See, technically, I took early retirement – very early – but technically, Sayer has some dirt on me. That’s something you don’t know. Anyway, it behoves me to take the odd case he can’t handle. Or won’t.’

‘What dirt?’

Angie walked past. Jack paused.

‘Damn fine shoes those, don’t you reckon?’

‘OK, you’re not saying. But why do they call him Doom?’

‘Partly because it’s never good news when you see him, and partly because he hates it. Why Trousers anyway?’

Leon explained that Trousers’ real name was Henry Ford, which he didn’t like, and happily adopted the nickname when it emerged as a youngster. He was the first to wear long trousers in his group of friends. That those trousers were his older brother’s cast-offs mattered not. He had other names, but Leon usually called him Trousers.

Investigating odd cases was something Jack liked to do, though. He called them varieties in deference to his stamp-collecting interest. They were often cases that regular authorities didn’t much care about or wouldn’t touch but couldn’t let go. Some situations called for activities the police couldn’t officially undertake or those a government didn’t want to know about, formally or otherwise.

Commander Jack Sugarman was uniquely qualified – experienced, efficient, discrete and tenacious. He’d worked for the Navy, National Security, CIB, Serious Crime and at least one authority that didn’t officially exist. He’d also taken on more than a few private cases.

His rank was entirely honorary, bestowed by the grateful president of a country with more admirals than capital ships. Telling the story of this particular adventure invariably resulted in a free drink or two, which adequately compensated for the hollowness of being called Commander by the few people who knew he held the rank.

In his field, information was a valuable commodity, and it paid to maintain a network of friends in the corridors of power and the back streets of commerce. Most of his friends weren't directors or highly placed officials, though he knew many. They were clerks, messengers, drivers, secretaries, IT people, and cleaners. In other words, the heart and soul of any organisation. Jack's friends were seen more often in the corridors than in the offices those corridors led to.

It was also helpful that he had accidentally become wealthy. Having decided to make a small share investment, he'd phoned an order to his broker only to have it, as he described it, 'stuffed up something chronic.' Rather than buying 20,000 shares in a mineral explorer called Blackaby, he received a contract note for 20,000 shares in Black Bay, a minor oil producer. He was the proud owner of a tranche of shares costing \$1.50 each rather than 15 cents.

Before he could phone his broker to correct the mistake, he was involved in a road accident when a van, appropriately a black van, ran a red light and rammed his car. The car was a write-off, and for the only time in his life, Jack enjoyed the facilities of the nearest hospital and the benefits of private health insurance. The pain and discomfort were somewhat forgotten when, the following day, Black Bay announced a significant oil find that promptly tripled the share price. Within hours, a takeover bid had moved Black Bay to six dollars a share. So, an intended \$3,000 punt on a penny dreadful had resulted in a \$120,000 windfall and, courtesy of a carefully chosen insurance policy, a new car. It wasn't black. He told Leon an abbreviated version of the story as they finished breakfast.

'What did you do with the cash then?' Leon asked.

Jack enjoyed this part of the story.

'My broker phoned when I was in hospital, but I'd gone off Blackaby and told him to put my money into Southern Iron, you'd know it as the Big Sir, just for the dividends. Nice and safe. I think I said after the previous experience that it was the best option. When the

order got to whoever was supposed to process orders, what I intended to be my original three grand in Southern became the whole lot, 120 large, in what they thought was the best option. That turned out to be a call option, deeply out of the money.'

'No idea what that means, Jack. Do I need more tea?'

'You need more tea. By the end of the day, I was down 20 thousand, and I thought I was set up to lose it all very quickly.'

'I think the Irish Breakfast.'

'By chance, commodities had a good day that night – does that make sense? – the company announced a profit upgrade, and there was talk of an exploration report showing significant results. Over the next several days, the shares rose very nicely. The options went up heaps, and then they went up heaps more. I chickened out when I was looking at \$800,000 and sold half. The rest kept on going up and made me comfortably well off. Haven't touched the share market since. Of course, I have forgiven the bloke who stuffed up my orders. I've told you all this before, haven't I?'

Jack wasn't telling the whole story. He'd left a sizable sum in a discretionary account on the proviso that the broker who made his profits was to have sole responsibility for his investments. He was officially Operator 5, but he called himself Midas, and he continued to make serious money for over two years. Operator 5 then retired, sold up and moved to Barbados, or Bermuda, a week before the world's share markets started a lengthy decline. His timing was outstanding. By then, Jack Sugarman was a millionaire, having taken his profits safely out of the market. As far as his past employers were concerned, he was retired, but for purposes of the census and any casual enquiry, he admitted to being a master smoke grinder. If anyone ever asked what that was, he was ready to explain it was an acid etching process for printing detailed line drawings. But no one ever asked.

Angie returned with Leon's tea.

In government and public service circles, Jack's preference for dealing with his friends in low places was at first inspired by his dislike and mistrust of the alternative. He had worked closely with people in the higher echelons of power and found them to be, at best, only moderately competent and usually no more than occasionally reliable. The lowly clerk and humble receptionist carried out the business of government, if not with passion, then certainly with a higher degree of efficiency. Their bosses demanded more competence from staff than they could deliver themselves. Members of Parliament and very senior government officials, in his experience, were on the wrong side of that blurred line that divided the necessary business of government and the generally deplorable affairs of politics. Jack was often accused of being cynical. He preferred to think of it as a 'highly refined scepticism, carefully developed after years of objective assessment.'

Jack explained to Leon as he nursed his Irish Breakfast.

'The more senior the person, the less creative they are. They just rearrange what already exists or rehash an already failed program. No imagination, you see. I left every job I had because I kept seeing people coming in, full of the enthusiasm of youth, educated above their intelligence and promoted beyond their abilities. Time and time again, I was introduced to so-and-so, eager to please, robotically adopting a positive attitude towards any old crap dumped in front of them...'

'There's nothing wrong with being positive,' Leon chipped in.

'There is when you're presented with some "innovation", a bright idea that's failed already, sometimes twice. If at first you don't succeed, give up and don't be a Wally, I reckon. There are too many people in this business with too little experience. They're passionate, all right – how I hate passionate people – but they haven't got many clues. Take away their project templates, and they're utterly lost. Some of the drongos I had to work with. Honestly, you wouldn't feed them.'

‘Not on the same page then?’

‘Same page? Half of them couldn’t find the library if you drew a picture and drove them to the front door. Anyway, set up a Trousers meeting, would you?’ Jack grimaced slightly and added, ‘That didn’t quite sound right.’

Leon made a call. Trousers answered immediately, which meant he wasn’t working on anything important. If he had been occupied, he was likely not to answer at all, and Leon would have to leave a message, which, just as likely, wouldn’t be dealt with for hours or even days. After a preliminary exchange, he told his friend that Jack wanted to meet to discuss his share trading question. Trousers regarded discussions as consultations and offered noon at the usual rate, which was a free lunch. Leon passed on the offer to Jack, who nodded in agreement. They wrapped up the call with the further agreement that they would meet at the New London Arms, where could be found the finest selection of beers on tap in Hobart.

During the phone call, Jack scanned one of the Asquith documents. He handed Leon four neatly hand-written pages headed *The Evacuation of Skara Brae – 2,500 BC*.

‘Here, read this. I’m going to add it to my *Dark History* files. Have to get in touch with this Asquith bloke, too. He’ll want his briefcase back and I’d like to make sure he’s OK. But first, I must visit what Americans insist on calling the bathroom.’



This text is from an unidentified university magazine published by a campus literary group. It appeared as a contribution to an ‘800 words or fewer’ short story competition under the title *The Evacuation of Skara Brae – 2,500 BC*. The copy I have is a badly faded photocopy. I later found an expanded version reading more like non-fiction. It was undated, so I can’t tell whether it preceded the short story.

‘Schama knew there was too much power. He knew, too, that he wasn’t in control.

Some elders doubted their understanding even before they realised their influence was



ineffective. Warnings had been dismissed. They were the elders, after all, and would not be swayed by mere novices.

This was different, though. The dull vibrations were more noticeable; no one had heard the deep rumbling sounds before. It seemed disturbingly ominous. There was nothing more personally threatening than a general threat. Several nervous observers had already moved a prudent distance from the circle. One or two of the novices, eyeing an escape route, spotted a black dog observing them from a rocky outcrop nearby.

Schama reverently held the holy icon he always carried before him and walked into the circle. At the fifth step, he stopped. His knees buckled. Briefly, he knelt, dropped the relic to his side and fell forward without a murmur. No one realised that he was dead before he hit the ground. The sounds grew louder, and the younger men ran away. The remaining elders glanced at each other, shaken, then stared at their fallen companion.

The hard ground shook. Dust rose. Pebbles danced across the dirt, and larger stones moved aimlessly through a thickening mist. Schama's body writhed. As one shoulder sank, his head turned, and lifeless eyes stared at a darkening sky. Slowly, his body was enveloped into what was now a pulsing, eerily dry morass. Torn between comprehension and fear, the tallest elder threw his own holy cross into the seething ground. It disappeared instantly. Encouraged by this act of devotion, the others followed suit.

As the ground settled and stopped moving, the vibrations ceased, and the sounds faded. Mere minutes had passed, but it seemed time had stood still for the observers. An angry growl coming from the rocks broke the silence. Few noticed the dog until its anger was replaced by a persistent yelping as it ran off in pain, or fear, perhaps both.

The council had been intrigued, even mesmerised by their visitors' new knowledge, but now only feared what they could not understand. Some thought the gods were displeased and that this must be a sign of their anger. Several knelt in fervent prayer. Others silently followed the younger devotees who had fled earlier. Should they ever return, the visitors would not be welcome.

In the coming weeks, the elders placed a huge stone over the spot where Schama had been taken to Cob's underworld. Twelve smaller stones represented the remaining council members and marked the perimeter of the sacred circle. For years, the tale of the Taking was enough to persuade most to avoid the standing stones. Only the very curious, brave or the inebriated would venture into the circle of stones, and then only briefly.

In time, the younger children would treat the Tarken Stones as a play area. It was no more frightening than the nearby Glowing Tor, which provided a spectacular and harmless display of waving curtains of light every 11 or 12 years. Some years later, there was a second occurrence at the same place. This time, no one died, but the elders, recalling the first occurrence, decided that somehow, they had again offended the gods. It was time for the Skerra people to leave their ancient homeland. They moved to Big Island.

Imperceptibly, the tale passed into the half history of folklore, changing from time to time as storytellers modified details to suit their own prejudice for science, magic or sensational fiction.'

The dating of this story at 2,500 BC coincides with the generally accepted time that settlements on Orkney were abandoned 'possibly due to climate changes.'



Jack's *Dark History* was a collection of articles and stories concerning occurrences that neither science nor any other conventional rationale could explain. These were some of his *varieties*, and he relished them. While presented as fiction, the *Skara Brae* story earned its entry in his files because of the reference to a non-fiction version and particular elements in the tale that intrigued him. He wondered if it had won the short story competition.



Somewhere outside the city, Derek Asquith was fielding questions. Some questions bordered on the bizarre and didn't warrant his free if unwanted, ride. He sat somewhat uncomfortably in a sparsely furnished office in a near-empty warehouse. The two heavily built men throwing questions at him displayed little patience. Based on their build and demeanour, Derek anticipated they would not be disinclined to use physically persuasive techniques in their interrogation. His answers were constructed to suggest to whoever these interrogators were that they had the wrong man.

He effected a graceless awkwardness that matched his appearance. He suspected that he'd been taken by the wrong side and could only hope they weren't convinced he was the right man. He'd handed over most of his information to Jack. Incomplete as it was, there was enough for someone with Jack's connections to reach what he suspected the conclusion must be. Leaving the briefcase behind, which he hadn't planned to do, might have been a happy accident.

'Who's your controller?'

Derek wondered if his captors had been watching reruns of *Callan*, but the word controller was a giveaway.

'Controller? What are you talking about? I'm a freelance journalist.'

'Bullshit. Controller. Name.'

‘I have no controller. I work with editors. You must be confusing me with someone else.’

The larger man leaned forward. He adopted a tone of mock refinement.

‘Ooh, confused am I? Do I look confused? I don’t think so, Mr Asquith. Mr Derek Asquith, recently of Sydney by way of Melbourne.’

The aggression returned.

‘What’s your real name?’

‘It’s Asquith. Really. Derek Charles Asquith. Really. My parents preferred old-fashioned names. My brother is Eric John, and my sister Irene Emily. What chance did I have? Even their cat’s called Graham. Our family is famous for it.’

The interrogator loomed even larger as he moved menacingly closer.

‘OK, Mr Famous Family with a cat called Graham, tell me this. Who did you pass your famous files to? Other than famous Mr Sugarman, that is.’

Derek didn’t show his surprise that they knew about Jack. He wondered if Jack was now in immediate danger from his kidnappers or whoever they worked for.

‘What files?’ was all he could think of to say.

Number two took over. The back-handed slap hurt like blazes but was quickly forgotten when he saw the second man open a smart-looking case.

‘This is getting us nowhere. I’m using the drugs. Can’t stand the smell of burning flesh.’

His mind raced, and he guessed the equipment he’d seen under a tarp as his assailants dragged him to his seat was an oxyacetylene blow torch and gas tank. He also imagined a neat, clinically clean syringe. He decided drugs might be better than the burning flesh option. He needed to know which side was paying these two sadists.

‘Look, you really have the wrong man. I haven’t been to Sydney since the Olympics. I was a volunteer. Got a certificate somewhere.’

His tormentors appeared not to be listening. The syringe looked particularly threatening close up. He tried a long shot and pulled a name from the papers he hoped Jack would be studying.

‘OK, OK, Southwood. His name’s Southwood.’

‘Go on,’ the syringe thug demanded with more mock politeness.

‘I don’t know. Mr Southwood. He was always just Mr Southwood.’

Derek had encountered the name before. The first time led to an unpleasant experience, and it looked like today would be no different. It was a calculated guess that Southwood might be behind this interrogation. He hoped the two hired thugs would wonder if they might have taken one of their own people. Secrecy within their organisation sometimes worked against them.

All three exchanged glances.

The heavy with the syringe carefully replaced it in its little case and pulled out his mobile phone. Derek watched as he speed-dialled a number. There were no pleasantries when the call was answered.

‘Mr Asquith,’ he used the name with some respect, ‘says he’s working for Mr Southwood. What the bleedin’ hell’s going on here?’

Derek could hear a voice but not make out what was said. He thought it was an English accent, matching that of his interrogators. The conversation was virtually one-sided and lasted only a minute.

Syringe Thug put the phone back in his pocket, almost imperceptibly touched the side of his neck and nodded to his associate, who promptly and painfully secured Derek to his chair. Without the preliminaries of a sterile alcohol swab, he was injected in the side of the

neck with a second syringe and rendered unconscious in a matter of seconds. With frightening efficiency, the strange little man in the flat cap was removed from his familiar world. Both thugs knew there would be no lasting effects, but weren't about to let their victim know that.



## Chapter 2 – The Dragonfly Blog

Back in his apartment, Jack dropped Derek's briefcase beside a chair and spent the rest of the morning going through his newly acquired material. Shortly before midday, he left for the 10-minute stroll to the New London Arms and his meeting with Trousers. The rain had stopped. The roads and footpaths were steaming themselves dry. He usually walked quickly, weaving between the slower pedestrians, intent on reaching his destination. Today, though, the improving weather dictated a more sedate journey. Jack's training and experience paid off within a minute, and he decided at least one man was shadowing him.

He could take a few routes to the pub and decided to go via the post office, where he rented a private box. Twice crossing roads unnecessarily and watching reflections in shop windows, Jack confirmed that just one man was following him at a constant distance. A black SUV also followed slowly but was beaten by traffic lights and then a one-way street. Jack made little effort to avoid him, figuring it might be better that his pursuer thought he hadn't been spotted.

Had anyone been asked to describe his pursuer, they would be hard-pressed not to say 'average'. Height, weight, appearance and dress were all unremarkable, ideal for a man wanting to follow another discreetly. Arriving at the New London Arms, Jack stopped at the bar close to the door. He had named his follower Trevor for no good reason and wanted to determine how good Trevor was in his shadowing role.

The New London Arms was popular with locals and tourists alike. Named after one of Hobart's oldest inns, now long gone, it was still one of the city's older licensed establishments. The building dated back to 1861 and was old enough to have stables, now used as a garage with disgracefully non-period roller doors. The current proprietor had to convince the licensing authority that, despite what the registered document dictated, they

didn't need to employ an ostler and stable boy to tend to their guests' horses. There was no accommodation anyway, so there were no overnight guests. Some regulars called the hotel The Post Office, the bar was universally known as Moderation, and the little bistro enjoyed the nickname Gracie's. Grace was a cook there many years ago, affectionately referred to as Poison Grace, a punned allusion to her old-time elegance and reference to an unfortunate food poisoning incident involving some organic produce that turned out more organic than intended. Jack was always amused at the *Free Lunch: \$20* sign on which someone had scribbled +GST.

He knew the girl behind the bar from many previous visits and asked for a pint of Guinness after a few words of greeting. The time it took for his drink to be poured provided an excuse to stay at the bar. As planned, Trevor entered while the stout performed its black magic, and Jack was able to study him while pretending to peruse the lunch menu. Jack concluded that he was about 25 years old, fit but not especially well-built, and took some pride in his dress and appearance, but not excessively so. 'European,' Jack thought. His clothes weren't quite typically Australian.

The Guinness settled into its familiar welcoming blackness, and Jack made his way to the rear of the pub where he preferred to eat. The girl behind the bar, unknowingly committing an act of secret revenge for Angie at the Blue Café, watched his departure, thinking, 'Hmm, nice bum.' Jack had no idea. While he regarded himself as ordinary, most women found him attractive. Men considered him good-looking too, in that any man might consider it at all, but not so much that they saw him as competition in social situations. He also had no idea what Trousers looked like but guessed the untidy man sitting alone at a table set for two was probably his target. He was in his late twenties, scruffy, well-built and looked more like an outdoors man than an IT expert. Jack surmised he could look after himself in a tangle. He didn't look like a typical nerd.



‘You must be Mr Ford, I’m Jack Sugarman.’ Jack thought he looked the worse for wear but made no comment.

‘I guess I must be, not that I get called that very often.’

‘Better known as Trousers, I understand.’

‘Only by a few. It’s Henry, but Harry to my family. My girlfriend calls me Steve, and others call me John. I don’t know how all that happened.’

Jack was amused. ‘I’m so pleased. There’s no way I was going to call you Trousers, so Henry, you shall henceforth be Harry Steve John. Or Harry, for short. You don’t have a drink. What’s your preference?’

‘I’ll have one of those, cheers,’ said Harry, indicating the Guinness. Jack caught the eye of a barman and pointed to his drink. The barman understood and nodded. Meanwhile, Trevor had settled himself at the bar with a light beer, and while pretending to occupy himself with his mobile phone, he closely watched Jack and his companion. He managed to take a few photos without being obvious about it. Jack noticed, though. He’d been trained to see such things.

Partway through briefing Harry on the share trading question, the second Guinness was presented with a degree of ceremony. The barman was a fan. Harry promptly pulled his glass closer and scribed the letter H into the foam with his index finger. He looked up, ‘Sorry, I always do that.’

‘No worries, won’t change my life.’

Jack continued with his story just as the admirer of his posterior asked if they were ready to order. Neither had looked at the menu, but it wasn’t an expansive document. After a quick scan, they almost simultaneously ordered the fish and chips with mushy peas. Jack asked if his follower at the bar had ordered any food. He hadn’t. A toasted ham and cheese sandwich was added to the order.

Harry tried to come to grips with the issue.

‘Let me see if I have this clear in my mind. The chronology might be important. First, we get a report of some stolen money. Then a report of stolen shares.’

‘The shares were stolen first, then the money, only it wasn’t really stolen,’ Jack corrected him.

‘OK, but the sequence of reporting wasn’t the same as the sequence of events. Maybe that’s not important. In any case, you say the shares weren’t really stolen, just borrowed. How does that work? Sounds more like an irregularity than a crime.’

‘It does, doesn’t it.’

Jack had considered this, too. The case had been passed from one police unit to another and back again. Each had tried to liaise with the police of two or three other countries, found it too complicated, too big, or not in their jurisdiction, and finally handballed it to Tasmania for no apparent reason. Jack had seen the file in his capacity as a consultant, a title he relished as it covered everything but said nothing. His role in this enquiry was neither recognised nor acknowledged by any department of any government. He explained why he had the case.

‘It’s actually two cases, but I reckon they’re linked – cause and effect sort of deal. I have a theory. Not quite sure which is which yet.’

‘I like theories. Theories are good. Life gets interesting when you have theories. So give me the goss, and I’ll let you buy me lunch.’

‘One Thursday, the stock exchange computer system was hacked. After the close of trading, every sale of shares in the top 20 traded companies was redirected to the wrong client.’

‘Buyers or sellers?’ Harry asked.

‘That’s the odd thing. Every trade was registered to the wrong buyer. Just the one buyer, mind you, and if you think about it logically, a hacker would want the proceeds, not the shares.’

‘But that couldn’t work,’ Harry suggested, ‘The buyers would know when they didn’t get their share certificates.’

‘You don’t get certificates these days. Both sides of a trade get a contract electronically and a statement from the share registry at the end of the month. The transfer of money and shares is computerised and automatic. Here’s the clever bit, though. This all happened the day before Good Friday. First, pre-Easter trading is usually pretty hectic, and volumes are high. Second, the two working day settlement period is pushed out by the four-day weekend.

So, for nearly a week, someone had something like \$6 billion worth of shares to their name. Now, this was never going unnoticed and the shares couldn’t be on-sold anyway, but they could be used as collateral for a loan on the short-term money market. We don’t have the actual numbers, but imagine that kind of money borrowed from a zero interest rate country like Japan and deposited with a higher rate country…’

‘Like Australia?’ suggested Harry.

‘Like Australia, yes, interest rates are higher here. You’re maybe looking at an easy profit of three to four million. Useful, eh?’

The fish and chips arrived. Jack noticed the toasted sandwich being presented to his follower, still at the bar, with the waitress saying, ‘With Mr Sugarman’s compliments.’ Trevor adjusted himself on his stool slightly, annoyed that he’d been spotted. He nodded vaguely in Jack’s direction. Harry didn’t doubt the story’s accuracy but wondered how such large sums could be transferred between countries without being tripped up on currency restrictions.

Neither Jack nor the local police knew the same thing had been pulled off simultaneously in several other countries. Commercial embarrassment, political humiliation, and national pride served to bring down a veil of silence around the world. Official information was as good as non-existent, and the little talk that circulated was either ignored or casually denied without explanation. No one ever found out exactly how much money had been made by this operation. It was in the tens of millions. Why Tasmania seemed to be ground zero was also unknown.

Jack was comfortable talking with Harry as both of them were inclined to activities that, put politely, were ‘legally inconsistent’. Both considered the situation while demolishing fish and chips and enjoying their drink. Jack took the conversation to the next level.

‘I believe you’re one of the best hackers in the country. Can I say hacker? No offence meant.’

‘None took. I also know others in the “best” category and some of the worst. Some of them are pretty good, but some of *them* are, shall we say, presently paying their debt to society.’

‘In a disappointingly analogue way, no doubt,’ Jack sardonically replied while checking a text message.

The two finished their meal while Jack filled in some details of his story.

‘That was Leon. We’re meeting again at my apartment. If you’re still free, we can talk about this some more.’

They left the New London Arms, Jack settling the bill with a generous tip, enamouring himself even further to the girl behind the bar. As they passed Trevor, Jack couldn’t resist a parting comment.

‘We’ll be back at my apartment soon. No need to be discrete about following me this time. Hope you enjoyed the toastie.’

Before Trevor had any chance to respond, they were out the door. They would never see Trevor again. He had already made a phone call, taking himself off the job, and would be replaced with someone who, he hoped, was better than he had been at discrete surveillance. Jack asked Harry to walk on slowly, saying he'd catch up with him in a few minutes. Ducking into a café bakery, he bought three pastries while watching for Trevor, who didn't appear.

Jack caught up with Harry, explaining his mission to buy some tasty comestibles and watch for his unsuccessful follower.

'No idea who he was or who he works for. He was German, though, I think. Spotted a Bayern Munchen badge on his jacket lapel. Bit of a giveaway.'

'Buy earn what?' Harry asked, puzzled.

'In English, Bavaria Munich, but usually called Bayern Munich in some half-arsed nod to the language. Bavaria is a state of Germany, Munich is the capital. Bayern Munich is a football team – soccer to you probably – in the Bundesliga.'

'Very observant of you,' suggested Harry, showing only slight concern.

The rain held off, and they walked casually towards the waterfront and Jack's apartment. He kept an eye out for another follower but saw no one. At Wellington Walk, a couple of tourists stopped them and asked for directions, saying this was their first visit to Hobart, but somehow, this part of town seemed familiar, as if they had been here before. Jack pointed them in the direction they needed, then enlightened Harry on this part of the mall sometimes being called Déjà Vu Lane or Boulevard, though the latter hardly applied for those obsessed with definitions. Many visitors experienced the same thing as Jack's disoriented travellers. That they were German tourists was not lost on Jack, who wondered about the coincidence.

Jack's apartment was a luxury penthouse, bought with the proceeds of his accidental millions. Despite its location on Davey Street, which was often busy with trucks and buses, double glazing effectively kept out the traffic noise, not to mention the sometimes icy winds blowing in from Antarctica. Jack bought the apartment after just a few minutes' inspection. The view over the waterfront was enough motivation to make the decision. When there was little activity on the water, it was relaxing and when busy, like today with much of the fishing fleet in port, that was relaxing too. Jack's father suggested he didn't know what hard work was. He responded that he knew only too well, which is why he chose not to do any but could sit and look at it for hours. This was taken in the right spirit, and the matter was never mentioned again.

They arrived at the door to find Leon waiting, and Jack ushered them into his private lift.

Leon spoke first. 'Hey, Trousers. You look like shit.'

'Yeah, well, I should. I've been up all hours trying to fix some moron's software cock-up. I don't know how these banks survive. I really don't.'

'Jack briefed you, I guess. Any ideas?'

After a cursory 'This is my place' tour, Jack made a large plunger of coffee and placed his pastries on three plates.

Harry adopted a thoughtful look.

'I have to tell you I already knew about this, but around the traps, it was thought to be just an urban legend in the making. You just confirmed it. I'd say it's doable. Not quite sure how you'd get around all the money transfer crap, but yes, technically, it's a piece of cake for the right bloke.'

'Piece of cake, you say?'

‘Well, a nice pastry then.’ He reached for an éclair. ‘But a bloody complicated recipe. You’d need ingredients you’ve never heard of, but the short answer is yes, it can be done. Your next question will be, “Do I know who’d have the resources and contacts to do it.”’

He paused, coaxing an indication of interest.

‘Go on.’

‘Well, I can give you three possibilities. One’s supposed to be dead, the second found Jesus OS, and number three,’ he paused again, ‘number three is me. But it wasn’t me. Too sloppy for me.’

Harry shared a similar personality to Jack. He was meticulous in his work and sometimes considered the process as important as the result. From what Jack had told him, executing this particular scheme would have needed too many people and too much precision for him to be happy with any plan he could devise.

‘What about Jesus?’

‘Last I heard, he was saving souls in Kenya or Uganda or possibly Florida. It’s not him anyway. You don’t want it to be him. He’s a dirty player. Makes Vlad the Impaler look like a school bully. Take my word for it. It’s got to be number one.’

‘The dead guy?’ Leon asked.

‘He’s been dead before, and he’ll be dead again, eventually permanently, but till then, it’s just a convenient way of avoiding unwanted attention. Being considered dead has advantages, provided you’re not dead, that is.’

Jack repeated Leon’s question.

‘And the dead guy is?’

Harry and his hacker colleagues shared a loyalty. It was never defined but generally regarded as between the officer and gentlemen creed of the better regiments and honour among the better class of thieves. Most hackers were just larrikins out to cause mischief for

no other reason than to see if they could. Some even managed to earn good money as IT security consultants. Others, though, were guided by that other great motivator, greed. This group gave the rest a bad name, or rather, a worse name. Generally scorned by the public, they weren't highly regarded amongst mainstream hackers either. Harry's loyalty was dictated by the hackers' peculiar version of ethics.

'The man you want,' he paused, 'I can give you an identity, but not a name. If you can ever find it, he puts out a blog under the name Dragonfly. And a number, which he changes all the time. The latest is 618, but they're random.'

'What did you mean by if you can find it?'

'Just that. You can hide a website from search engines if you want to by alternating servers, changing providers and using the Stealth Net Protocol. There's the dark web to deal with, too. So unless you have the latest URL and a password, you've got Buckley's. I've managed to get in a few times, but only a few. And I'm good,' he added modestly.

Harry detailed how he'd tried to out-hack Dragonfly but with minimal success. His blogs were cleverly written and gave few indicators to the person behind the name. No one could tell whether the clues were calculated red herrings or genuine, if unintentional, hints.

'As best as I can work out, your man is a heterosexual male in his twenties, well educated, English is his first language, lives in the southern hemisphere, likes good food and fine wine and is probably pretty well off.'

Jack took all this in but wondered how to start searching.

'Very Sherlock Holmes. Anything else?'

Harry explained how several clues if taken at face value, suggested that this mysterious hacker followed English soccer and Formula 1 motor racing. References to various names matched actual players and drivers. There was a cryptic reference to driving a Senna pod,



which Harry took as a nod to Ayrton Senna. Chances are such a car wouldn't be a cheap sit-up-and-beg hatch but something worthy of the name.

‘Anything more precise than southern hemisphere?’

‘Well, yes and no. I'm fairly sure he lives in Australia. Don't think he's Australian, though. OK, I'm looking at yesterday's blog now... what?... ah... that's interesting. Give me a few minutes, will you.’

He took a bite of his pastry as Jack presented three coffees, neglecting to ask if anyone wanted milk or sugar. No one did. One of Harry's colleagues had managed to open the Dragonfly blog and copied the entries from the last few days for him. While he read, Jack and Leon took their coffee and pastry to the balcony and admired the view.

Jack indicated the fishermen hosing down their boats, cleaning up the week's worth of mess and making minor repairs.

‘Those blokes could tell you how they know when the weather's going to be good for fishing. When there's almost no cloud cover, you'll sometimes see a wisp in front of the organ pipes early in the morning. Just a wisp. That's their cue. It'll be a nice day. Don't ask me how that works. I don't understand it at all. Not in Hobart.’

The organ pipes are collectively an impressive geological feature that dominate the high face of Mount Wellington, the otherwise modest 1,269-metre mountain behind Hobart. Tourists are often advised to ride the cable car or take the half-hour drive to the summit and enjoy one of the most spectacular views in Australia. Anyone visiting Jack was treated to this low-cost indulgence, snow and cloud permitting.

Jack knew, too, that some fishermen avoided certain areas of the estuary. They'll tell you there are no fish there. They won't say *why* there are no fish, but only because they don't know. If pressed – and encouraged with whiskey – one or two will relate half-true stories of deep holes and cold water sites. The Derwent is generally a cold river anyway. Even on warm

summer days, a little depth provides enough chill to sufficiently cool the beer essential to engage in that popular pastime, recreational fishing. But this cold water is something else.

After two whiskeys, a talkative fisherman might tell you the ‘deeps’ get clogged with silt and weed and can’t be found. Three whiskeys will tell you the tale of a foreign aircraft carrier that visited in the nineties. In trying to raise the anchor, the captain found it so firmly stuck in mud that it had to be abandoned, the chain cut and left behind. Divers sent to investigate reported it so deeply embedded in mud that it was ‘not economically salvageable.’ They also noted that the water was extraordinarily cold. The anchor was never recovered and is contentedly rusting away under a significant volume of the Derwent’s finest mud. Anything after four whiskeys it just gets silly. The better fishermen will never let the constraints of fact stand in the way of a good story or a free whiskey.

Jack had heard many such stories. He trusted one fisherman in particular, Mick, who fancied himself something of an amateur astronomer. Mick told the aircraft carrier story many times, embellishing it occasionally with something ‘just remembered’. On the last occasion, he ‘just remembered’ that this event occurred during a period of high sunspot activity. A week later, Mick was temporarily lost at sea; his boat capsized by a freak wave. He and his crew survived but spent a few days in hospital. His fishing boat *Hermes* was found a fortnight later where it should never have been, the hull curiously distorted. It was still afloat but overturned. *Hermes* was written off and sold by the insurance company for scrap.

Harry appeared on the balcony. ‘Hey Jack, you got a tablet or laptop? I can’t do this on my phone.’

Jack pointed to a drawer. ‘In there. You’ll need the power cord. The battery’s bugged and won’t hold any charge.’

Harry returned to his research, and Jack noticed a black SUV parked nearby. He couldn't be sure it was the same car that appeared twice in the morning but made a note of the number plate. Jack muttered 'Black Range Rover' to himself but let it go and returned to the kitchen. He asked Leon what he thought of the *Skara Brae* story.

'Yeah, not a bad little read. Not really my thing, though. Set back a bit too far. Why?'

Jack told him of similar stories in his *Dark History* collection.

'It looks like Harry's settled himself in for a while. I'll show you another one, more recent. Hang on.'

He delved into a drawer set into the base of a ceiling-high bookcase and returned with a sheaf of papers.

'This one isn't quite so old. Only a century ago. Have you heard of the Tunguska Event? 1908.'

'Sounds familiar,' Leon replied. 'Remind me.'

'This is one of the earliest stories I held on to just because it was interesting. At the time, I wasn't collecting and didn't record the name of the bloke who gave it to me. He was a Russian sailor visiting Hobart for one of the Wooden Boat Festivals. I wish I knew his name. It's one of my favourites and since going through the papers I got this morning, I see it in a new light. You might see why when you read it. Won't take long.'

Leon settled in an armchair, coffee in hand, and read.



Only a few witnesses of the Tunguska Event of 30 June 1908 were ever interviewed. One such witness was Mikhail Krutovsky, who was 14 years old at the time. Little is known of Krutovsky apart from what he revealed in his interview, and that he was

briefly a minor official in the Provisional Siberian Government and later the Provisional All-Russian Government.

That chaotic period in Russia's history is reflected in the jumbled accumulation of archives scattered around what is now the Russian Federation. There are suggestions that Krutovsky was involved in the White Movement until 1921. Apart from his interview, in about 1958, there are few references to Krutovsky in official archives.

No English language record of the full interview seems to exist, but fragments have survived. Only modern reprints appear. Krutovsky may have spoken Russian, although Evenki was undoubtedly his first language. With the discrepancies of twice translated documents, this is part of his story.

'My people are Evenks, from eastern Siberia. My family kept reindeer for milk, about 30, more than most in our community, but we were a large family. And horses, of course, we had horses. Everyone had horses. We hunted and fished and traded furs. Me and my brothers cared for the young reindeer in our encampments. They trusted us, not so much the others, but they trusted my family. No one knows why.'

Mikhail continued this preliminary to his story for a few paragraphs, clearly proud of his traditional way of life and the community spirit enjoyed in their semi-nomadic lifestyle.

'In the early spring of 1908, we had moved to an area west of Lake Cheko – the lake wasn't there then, of course – for the reindeer calving time. We always went there. Very nice land. On the last day in June, I was tending our herd and looking after the calves. They were very young, and some were still suckling.'

The day before, the herd had been very unsettled, so I slept outside with them. They seemed to like me being there, but at sunrise, it was hard to keep them together. I remember the ground was very cold, colder than usual, I mean. I was sitting down eating – it was after eight o'clock – and I noticed many small animals running towards the south. Birds, too, all flying south.

A very bright light appeared in the sky, not the sun, but it created its own shadows. There were no clouds. I could see the birds very clearly.'

There are a few paragraphs about the reindeer's behaviour at this point.

'The light stayed there for 10 minutes but didn't move. It was like a tall jar (Probably meaning cylindrical. – ed.), but I couldn't see it very well. It was too bright. As I watched, the jar exploded, and there was a terrific bang, many bangs, like artillery going off. More than 10 times, 20, more. Bang, bang, bang. I thought the army must be nearby. The soldiers sometimes camped near Karelinski village.

'Then it got hot, very quickly it got hot. Cold ground, hot air. It didn't make sense, but so very hot. I took off my coat and went to the stream to drink. There was ice forming at the edges. Nothing made sense. Some of the reindeer ran off, but the new mothers wouldn't leave the young who couldn't walk well yet.'

Another gap in the story here.

'I was sheltering by the steep creek bank when the wind came. It blew harder than the winter winds but hot, so very hot. I couldn't hear the reindeer over the noise and later saw they had all been killed, blown away like the trees. All the trees were knocked over, all in the same direction – fallen away from the light. After this, my memory is not so good. 50 years ago.

‘All my family was killed. All of them. My friends too. The whole encampment, all gone. They say no one was killed, but they don’t care about Evenki. No one cared. I don’t remember what I did next. I was 14 then. Don’t remember much after that.’

There is another gap in the translated interview, and the story continues for later years.

‘I was working with the Duma then when I met Leonid.’

The Duma likely referred to the Siberian Regional Duma and Leonid was almost certainly Leonid Kulik, a mineralogist who undertook a survey mission for the Soviet Academy of Sciences. This was the first known expedition to the site of the Tunguska Event. It was 1921. The event was commonly thought to be a meteorite strike, and the survey was primarily a search for a large crater. No such depression could be found, though many smaller ones were identified and thought to be caused by meteorite fragments.

Mikhail’s story continued.

‘He (Leonid) needed guides, and some Evenki hunters took him most of the way. They wouldn’t take him all the way. They said it was an unlucky place, but it was because they were scared of the Valleysmen. I found two new guides for him and joined the group. I hadn’t been back since 1908, but still knew the way.

‘We found the trees still standing at the centre but with no branches, and the trunks burned. All dead. They were all dead. About eight kilometres across, it was like that. All dead. I took them to Lake Cheko after that. They didn’t know about Lake Cheko. It wasn’t on their maps. They only had old maps. It was a new lake. Something had fallen from the sky to make it, I think, something very big. There were no fish in it, though. No fish in Lake Cheko in those days. Plenty now.

‘When Leonid finished his survey, I led him back to their camp and said goodbye. Then I tried to find where my family had been. I found the creek where I had sheltered, but everything else was all gone. No tents. Nothing there anymore. All gone. I never saw poor Leonid again, either. He died in the war.’

Mikhail told the interviewer – we don’t know who that was – the rest of his life story, up to the late fifties anyway. He stayed in the general area but moved from village to village, never staying anywhere very long. His time in the civil service lasted only a few years. It is known that he never married and died in 1980, aged 86. Mikhail Krutovsky was possibly the last surviving witness to the Tunguska Event of 1908.



When he’d finished reading, Leon realised he’d been so engrossed that he’d forgotten his coffee, which sat patiently beside him.

‘Nice story, Jack. Bit sad. I’ll tell you this for nothing. Lyn would want to read that. She loves that sort of stuff, and she’s Russian too, I think. Or Hungarian. Something like that.’

Leon liked to think Lyn was his girlfriend, but she didn’t know about that. Jack did. He photocopied the five pages and handed them to Leon.

‘There you go. For Lyn. Good excuse for you to see her again. I want to meet her sometime, too. You mention her often enough.’

‘I will if I can get hold of her, she’s hardly ever at home. You know, you can see her place from here, up Mount Nelson on the bends. You’d need binoculars.’ Leon gazed out the window. The road up the northeast side of Mount Nelson, which was hardly a mountain at all, was a narrow, winding affair called Nelson Road. Most locals call it the bends.

Jack doubted she was Russian or anything like it. Her surname was McKellyer, and Leon had never mentioned a husband, current or ex. He changed the subject.

‘Harry, old son, what are you up to there? I don’t have to delete my browser history, do I?’

Harry had been busy reading and, for the last few minutes busily working on the keyboard.

‘Ah, yes, no, I mean. First, I’ve updated your operating system and some other software. It was about ready for a museum. No charge for that, by the way, unless you’ve got any more pastries.’ Jack shook his head.

‘Right then. The interesting bit. Seems the Dragonfly thing has blown wide open. It’s been shut down, but not before my mate downloaded loads of stuff. I’ve copied some of it to your laptop – I see you call it Doctor Watson, think I know why – but the rest is encrypted. Encrypted bloody well, too. Might take me a day or two, but I’ll get the rest to you sometime. Now your share scam thing. That was mentioned a dozen times, but a name kept cropping up. Southwood, sometimes South Wood, two words. Mean anything?’

Jack shook his head. ‘No, nothing.’

Harry continued.

‘So it could be a person, a place, an organisation, or a code word for something. Might even be a school. Doesn’t help much, does it? Look, thanks for the lunch and stuff, but I have to nick off and see a man about a dog.’

Jack said he was about to kick both of them out anyway, as he had an appointment with Detective Inspector Sayer about the case he was on. He didn’t know whether to mention the Southwood reference. Leon took his cue.

‘OK, I know when I’m not wanted. See you around, eh.’



Jack showed them out, having first checked to see if the black Range Rover was still there. It was. He told Harry and Leon about it.

‘When you get downstairs, take the back door through the guest car park.’

They did.

♦

## Chapter 3 – ‘What’s the Joke, Terry?’

Before leaving for his appointment, Jack made a call.

‘Billy, hi. It’s Jack. I need you to check... yeah, another one. Fox Sierra 9866, black Range. I think I know what the answer is.’ He waited for only seconds and heard what he expected.

‘Cheers Billy, you’re a champion. How’s Sally? Good, good. I owe you a beer. Take care, mate.’

Jack knew that this series of Tasmanian car number plates ended in 2008 with the FS prefix and, thanks to Billy, also knew that several fake sets were circulating.

His appointment with Sayer was three o’clock and he arrived a few minutes early but knew he’d be kept waiting. Sayer kept everyone waiting. Jack thought he should have been a doctor for that reason alone. The opening riff from *Smoke On The Water* alerted him to a call. It was Leon, but ‘Detective Inspector Sayer will see you now’ intervened, precisely at three o’clock, before he could answer. He’d have to call back. The P.C. knocked and opened the door. ‘Mr Sugarman to see you, sir,’ she said and left, closing the door again. Jack liked the office. On the fourth floor, it had a view over the city towards Mount Wellington which Sayer enjoyed when on phone calls, which was often. A bookcase was full of titles on policing and detective theory, as well as many neatly labelled ring binders. One shelf held a small bronze bust of Sherlock Holmes, complete with the famous calabash pipe.

Jack sat down, uninvited. Sayer placed a file in his desk drawer and looked at him glumly.

‘What’s the joke, Terry?’ asked Jack.

‘Joke, Sugarman?’

‘You never see me on time. It must be a joke. Or is it something serious? Go on, surprise me. You know how I like surprises.’

‘This *is* something serious, very serious.’ He paused as if carefully considering his next words. ‘Look, I know we don’t exactly get on, but it looks like we’re going to work together on this, and it will be a lot easier if we both drop the hostility and try to, well, work together. Neither of us sees us as allies, but perhaps, in this case, we can at least agree to be cobelligerents. For the duration, as it were.’

Jack was amused at the ‘cobelligerent’ reference as he’d heard it used recently in a Winston Churchill documentary on TV. He suspected D.I. Sayer had watched the same show. Terry Sayer was considered a consummate professional by his superiors, based on his record for achieving a result practically on demand. He could seemingly meet any deadline within any budget but was as interested in looking good as achieving a good result. As far as Sayer was concerned, an arrest and a charge were all that mattered. A conviction was down to someone else. However, the high regard he was held in by the upper echelon of the force was not shared in the other direction. Some of the lower ranks thought him aloof and uncooperative.

Jack had worked with Sayer before and found his methods irregular. He knew he didn’t want the share market case. He had no time for it, thinking it was outside his jurisdiction, but having failed to pass it on to any other agency, had been advised – which meant ordered – ‘to get on with it, bring in a consultant if you have to.’ Jack was that consultant.

If only for a more peaceful life, Jack was prepared to bury the hatchet.

‘OK, it’s a deal. No more fighting in the quadrangle, but no more of your infamous shortcuts, eh. We’ll be the best of friends. Now, what’s the goss? Sounds like you have some more intel.’

Sayer continued. ‘Until yesterday, you had...’ he cleared his throat, ‘all the goss that I had. But that was yesterday.’ He retrieved the file from the drawer but didn’t open it.

‘This isn’t one case. It’s many cases. The same thing happened in the UK, Ireland, Italy, Hong Kong, Germany, France, South Africa, New Zealand, fourteen exchanges that we know of. Probably anywhere they have public holidays at Easter. Some countries aren’t talking. Must be – no - *is* a global embarrassment. None of my guys can even guess how it was done. I’m thinking it’s a one-off. The exchange tech blokes are working overtime to figure it out. Problem is they’re not talking to each other. I guess some of them can’t, anyway. Language barriers and that. We’ve never had to work with Italy before, and we don’t have an Italian-speaking liaison.

‘My commissioner wants you in because – these are his words – you’re like a toothbrush that reaches parts others can’t. Funny man, my commissioner.’

Jack raised his eyebrows, indicating he thought he wasn’t funny at all.

‘You can get away with stuff that we can’t. Now, I’m not giving you a free hand, but we need a result, and we need it fast. I’ve been authorised to release certain documents to you.’ He tapped the file. ‘This is a copy. The originals are being scanned now for you. Remember, you’ve signed our confidentiality agreement. But there’s something else.

‘Our finance guys reckon this little exercise would have netted hundreds of millions. Australia is small fry. They’ve been trying to find unusual movements of money, big money I mean, but nothing. Whoever designed this did a good job hiding the cash. It’s probably in God knows how many accounts. You have to wonder what’s going to happen to it all. Maybe it’s going to finance something even bigger.’

Jack hadn’t known about the worldwide extent of the scam but wasn’t surprised to hear of it. If it worked in Australia, there was no reason it couldn’t work anywhere else. There were no clues about the size of the organisation. Their conversation was interrupted by

Sayer's phone ringing. Annoyed, he answered it brusquely and swung his chair around, as he always did, and again admired the view over Hobart.

'Sayer. Yes, yes, go on, briefly, please.'

Sayer listened, saying very little. Jack took the opportunity to assess his cobelligerent's library and determined that he either read very little or very carefully. He maintained his own books in as-new condition and charitably decided that Sayer was a similarly inclined bibliophile. The phone call concluded as Jack was adjusting Sherlock's pipe, which wasn't sitting quite right.

'It always does that. A bit loose,' Sayer apologised.

Jack couldn't resist telling him that the calabash pipe was something of a furphy.

'You know that it was William Gillette who created the Calabash connection with Holmes? Doyle never mentioned it.'

'I did. It seems we have an interest in common, apart from detective work,' Sayer suggested. 'That call was some background stuff. It'll be in the material I'm getting for you. Have you got anything for us?'

Jack told him of Harry's thoughts generally, without mentioning his name, and said he was still reviewing it. He decided to share two things.

'One tip. In two parts. Have someone check your records. See if you have anything on Southwood, one word or two, and Dragonfly. I'm dead-ended on them for now.'

'Where'd you get those names from,' Sayer demanded, ever the policeman.

'Found 'em at the bus stop, Terry,' Jack replied, a standard response when he wanted to protect someone's identity. 'By the way, you'd have a contact in Traffic. Get them to keep an eye out for a black Range Rover, rego FS9866. It's a fake plate. I checked. Anyone in it might be handy with their size 10s, so tell your boys to watch out.'

Sayer raised a quizzical eyebrow.

‘Been following me about,’ Jack continued. ‘They could be German. If I’m right, they’ll probably have diplomatic passports, but they’ll be fake too, I reckon.’

Jack left the building, having been handed a USB drive by the same constable who had shown him into Sayer’s office. He noted her ID tag, P.C. Blackman, and decided the easiest way to remember her name would be by association. Honor Blackman of *The Avengers* TV show would achieve that. He also tried to imagine what she would look like out of uniform and with her hair down. Walking back to his apartment, Jack remembered Leon’s phone call. He would call back later. On the way back to his apartment, Jack spotted the two German tourists he had assisted earlier. The man was taking photos and appeared to recognise Jack from their brief encounter. He waved. Jack waved back. ‘Germans’, he said to himself and again wondered about the coincidence. There couldn’t be many German tourists in Hobart on any given day. He contrived to walk by them as they hovered around the docks, photographing the fishing boats.

‘Good afternoon, again. Did you find what you were looking for? I directed you to the Botanical Gardens earlier.’

‘Yes, we did, thank you, I have many lovely photographs’, he said, patting the Nikon hanging from his neck.

‘Your accent. Berlin?’

‘Berlin? Nein. Meine Frau, she is from Munchen, Munich. I am Austrian.’

Jack was happy with that. ‘Ah, Austria, I have never been to Austria. I must visit one day,’ he replied. ‘Well, enjoy the rest of your visit.’

From this brief exchange, Jack determined the couple were each about 35 years old and possibly not married as neither wore a wedding ring. ‘No football club badge,’ Jack thought, ‘how uncooperative.’ He wasn’t convinced they were bona fide tourists. There was a camera but he saw no maps or local shopping bags. At this time of day, most visitors would have

succumbed to the temptation of a souvenir or two. He decided, until proven otherwise, that they had been following him. For the time being, they were New Trevor and Mrs New Trevor. Jack smiled at his thought process. He wouldn't forget *their* names and recalled P.C. Blackman, pleased that he'd remembered hers. At the door to his apartment, he looked back in the direction of his German and Austrian followers. They had disappeared.

Without trying, Jack had amassed a volume of documents and decided to devote the evening to going through it all, starting with the Dragonfly documents that Harry had unearthed. His original case had expanded considerably, and now he knew it was global. He wondered whether it might be even more significant than anyone realised. Despite the size of the haul, the massive level of organisation required most likely wouldn't be wasted on a single enterprise. Derek's unwelcome departure still irritated, and Jack decided to follow it up tomorrow.

He switched on the laptop Harry had upgraded for him, probably illegally. Some new icons appeared briefly before his familiar display opened. In the Dragonfly folder on the desktop, 112 documents appeared in the Name column. 'This is going to require music and wine,' Jack said aloud to himself. He checked his watch. 'Wine first, it's gone four.'

With a glass of red wine poured and *Groovy Laid Back Jazz Volume 1* playing softly, he settled down to read. A minute later, the intercom buzzed. It was P.C. Blackman. Jack was surprised but pleased.

'Take the lift. I'll let you up.'

Jack's apartment occupied almost the entire floor so he had security access to the lift, a luxury he relished. The doors opened with no alerting sound. He'd had that deactivated.

'Welcome. Come in, come in.'

Blackman was dressed in civvies, clearly no longer on duty, and had brought more documents and some photos that hadn't been ready when Jack left Sayer's office.

‘D.I. Sayer keeps on about how big this case is,’ she said, ‘so I thought I’d bring this lot around, rather than wait till tomorrow. I pass this way anyhow.’ She handed him another USB drive.

‘Thanks, I think. I thought I had enough to read as it was. Glass of wine? You’re off duty, obviously.’

‘Don’t mind if I do. But just a half, I can’t stay long. Got a cat to feed.’ She wandered to the balcony window and admired the view. ‘I like your place, Mr Sugarman. I’m Sarah, by the way. Don’t want you calling me P.C. Blackman when I’m undressed. Out of uniform, I mean. Sorry, a private joke amongst the girls at work.’

Jack handed her a glass. ‘Then I shall laugh only privately. Cheers, clink and all that. And call me Jack.’

Wine was another of Jack’s passions, especially Tasmanian wine.

‘Oh, that’s nice,’ Sarah said, ‘I like a cabernet.’ Jack was pleased she could tell the grape variety and thought he might have accidentally found a new friend, or perhaps more than a friend. Sarah was more attractive than any uniform could display, a fact not lost on Jack, who approved entirely. She wore her hair down, a rich auburn, just shoulder length.

Jack plugged in the USB drive, copied the documents to his desktop – he would organise them later – and returned the device to Sarah. He noticed his new reading matter was in two directories, one named SMS and the other Dragonfly. Sarah explained that she wasn’t part of the team that had initially worked on the case but was instrumental, as D.I. Sayer’s assistant, in compiling the data that had been accumulated. SMS stood for Share Market Scam. The police had yet to allocate a code word to the case. She sat down, nursing her glass of wine.



‘Now then,’ she sounded more serious, ‘the Dragonfly folder is a collection of random documents that aren’t from the police database. These are extras, with my compliments.

Sayer doesn’t know about these, and I’m not sure they’re directly relevant anyway.’

Jack was intrigued.

‘Not Sayer’s? Whose then?’

‘Most are from Derek. You might have some of them already. I know you met this morning. I’m a bit worried, Jack. He seems to have disappeared.’

Jack leaned forward in his chair. ‘Derek Asquith, you mean?’ Sarah nodded.

‘Derek said someone else would contact me. I didn’t think it would be so soon. But how do you come to be working with him anyway?’

Jack had a dozen questions but stopped there. Sarah enlightened him.

‘We met years ago at a UFO convention in Sydney. He was obsessed with flying saucers and such like. I was dragged along by my boyfriend,’ she added and stressed ‘ex-boyfriend now. I wasn’t much interested in UFOs, but Derek intrigued me, so we met up from time to time. He had some wonderful stories, all factually accurate, supposedly. We just got on famously. What Derek didn’t know about UFOs, ley lines, knowledge of the ancients, clairvoyance, resurrection, levitation, race memory, well, he could have written a book – several books probably. Maybe that was his plan. A very private man, though, so I can’t tell you much about him. I moved to Hobart a few years ago, but he did only recently, so mostly we communicated by email. He liked to use the post, don’t know why, so I got a lot of actual documents. I’ll go through them for you and scan anything that might be useful.’

She interrupted herself, ‘Oh, Euge Groove, I love his work. I think this is from one of his earlier albums. I can’t think which one.’

Jack said he didn’t know; it was a playlist a mate put together for him, but he agreed it was an excellent track. Sarah continued.

‘I was able to feed him a couple of local cases, all very unofficial, of course, but they weren’t sensitive matters. You may have heard of a local fisherman, Michael Something, and his boat, *Hermes*. Caused quite a stir in certain circles, but wasn’t really a police matter. We got a report from the search people, though, so it’s all on file. One of the papers kept calling the boat *Herpes*, which amused everyone at the station. I think it was a deliberate mistake.’

Jack was still amazed at the coincidence, if it was a coincidence, that Derek’s forecast contact was a policewoman who worked with D.I. Sayer. He accepted it at face value and also realised that, somehow, the share market scam was connected with Dragonfly, whatever that turned out to be.

‘I have a lot of reading to do,’ Jack said, adding, ‘More wine?’

‘Thanks, but no, I have to meet a girlfriend at the gym later. I shouldn’t have had this one, really, but it was very nice.’

She put down her glass and, to Jack’s surprise, added, ‘Perhaps you’ll offer me the other half sometime.’ There was the slightest sparkle in her eyes, and Jack suspected she was flirting a little. He didn’t mind at all and took the hint.

‘Of course, though I doubt this bottle will outlive the evening’s research.’ He pointed to the laptop. ‘I have an older vintage, but that one is better with food. Maybe a meal sometime?’

‘Yes, maybe,’ she teased, heading to the lift, ‘Sometime. I’ll see you again soon. Sayer wants to be kept up to speed on this. His bosses are applying pressure. Good luck with the reading.’

‘Have fun at the gym, and don’t forget to feed your cat.’

The lift door closed quietly, and Jack was alone again.



Earlier that afternoon, Leon had driven up the bends to call on his would-be girlfriend, Lyn, planning to give her the *Tunguska* story Jack had copied. Despite neglecting the courtesy of a phone call first, he was warmly welcomed, and conversation flowed easily when he handed over the document. Any hopes for a coffee and, therefore, an excuse to stay a little longer were dashed, though, when Lyn asked for a lift into town. He gallantly agreed and tore himself away from her window where she had an expansive view over Sandy Bay, Battery Point and the River Derwent.

‘Shopping?’ he asked.

‘No, hairdresser, just a trim.’

‘Oh right, I have a few things to do in town as well. I can give you a lift back home if you like. I’ll be free after an hour.’

They agreed to meet at about two o’clock. Lyn never kept that appointment. After some unanswered calls to her home phone and mobile number, Leon drove back to Lyn’s apartment to see if she had made her own way home. The doorbell went unanswered, and Leon looked through a curtained window. He didn’t like what he saw. He made another call. It was three o’clock. That was the call that Jack didn’t answer.

While Lyn had been receiving the expert attention of her hairdresser, the two men who had been watching the Blue Café that morning were systematically searching her apartment with no consideration for orderliness. Drawers were upended, bookcases emptied, and clothing scattered around. Thoroughly and quietly, they went about their task without speaking. They ignored the phone when it rang twice. After the 30-minute search, what had been Lyn’s neat little home was reduced to chaos, undamaged but a mess. The search revealed a few letters and a computer hard drive, the former of interest only because of their length and that they weren’t written in English. Someone else would assess their value. Nothing of any monetary value was taken. The men looked at each other.

‘Done?’ one asked.

‘Done, this is it,’ the other replied, indicating the modest haul. They left Lyn’s apartment, carefully closing the door, the lock of which they had easily picked. Without undue haste, the two housebreakers drove their black Range Rover back to base to report to their boss. They spoke little. Thirty minutes later they pulled off the sealed road heading to Richmond and continued along an unsealed road boldly signposted PRIVATE PROPERTY PRIVATE ROAD. The road eventually led to a secluded establishment of no apparent function. A small cottage was in poor repair and unoccupied, while a collection of sheds appeared to have been built randomly wherever was deemed appropriate.

Pulling up at the largest shed, the driver reverse-parked next to another black Range Rover with similar fake number plates, FS9886. Ignoring the high roller door, they entered by a side door and paused briefly to let their eyes adjust to the dim light. It was a windowless construction lit only by a few clear roof panels. The shed seemed bigger than it was, being substantially empty. Only a few pieces of equipment and two cars were stored there, everything neatly covered by dusty tarpaulins. Opposite the side door was a small office where a man worked on a computer. He looked up distractedly through the dirty window and waved the two men in. A second internal room was securely padlocked. Derek Asquith rested uncomfortably and still sedated in this room.

The small office looked even smaller with the two men standing at the desk, waiting for instructions. The third man was younger, wore a suit, and steel-rimmed glasses, and carried an air of superiority. He finished what he was doing and leaned back in his chair.

‘Excellent timing, gentlemen, what have you got for me?’

The larger of the two placed the proceeds of their search on the desk.

‘Papers and a hard drive, Mr Hall. Nothing else, the place was clean apart from this. Not very clean now, though,’ he laughed. His companion grinned broadly.

‘Save the humour. This is too serious for humour right now. We have a situation no one is happy with.’

Mr Hall inspected the goods just delivered.

‘I’m guessing you have no idea what these documents are.’

‘Nuh. Just thought you better have them, being foreign.’

Mr Hall was pleased with that.

‘Good thinking, well done. It looks like Serbian. That makes it harder.’ He explained, ‘Serbian is a synchronic digraphia language. That means more than one writing system. In this case, Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. Most of this is handwritten, and it’s all over the shop. I’ll have to send it to our people in Sydney.’

Mr Hall paused and looked carefully at each page.

‘Oh, sit down, won’t you? Grab a coffee if you want.’ A steaming kettle and jar of instant coffee sat on a bench. Both declined.

‘A straight translation is easy enough, but interpretation may take a while. Too easy to slip coded messages into Serbian. It’s a real prick like that. We got nothing from Asquith. He either knows nothing or is a shit hot actor. Hard to tell. You gave him too much stuff.’ Mr Hall motioned with his hand, indicating an injection in the side of the neck. ‘I’d say he’ll be out till tomorrow.’

‘Sorry, Mr Hall,’ said the syringe wielder.

‘Not important. If he’s one of us, it won’t matter, though I reckon he’ll have a word with you two about it. If not,’ he paused, ‘he’ll be dealt with. Right, anything else?’

Both men shook their heads.

‘OK, we’re watching Sugarman, so you two can call it a day and do whatever it is you do in your free time. Something alcoholic, I’d guess. We’ll need you tomorrow, so try to be sober, eh.’

Both men nodded and left. In their Range Rover, they looked at each other.

‘New London, Mr Johnston?’ one asked.

‘New London, Mr Boucher.’ Mr Johnston replied, adding, ‘Damn that synchronic digraphia, eh.’

‘Right, it’s a real prick, isn’t it.’

Both laughed, and they headed to their favourite pub.



Jack had been sorting, indexing, and reading his many documents for three hours when he decided it was time for a break. He ordered a pizza.

‘Large meat lovers, deep-pan, extra chorizo. Yes, that’s it. No, no garlic bread. No drinks, nothing else. It’s Jack Sugarman. Is Jim working tonight? OK, get Jim to deliver, will you? He knows where I am. Cheers.’

Jack hated being asked if he wanted garlic bread or drinks. He never ordered extras but knew the staff were only doing what they were told, so he kept it polite despite wanting to suggest that had he wanted garlic bread and drinks, he would have asked for them. Besides, the girl who always seemed to take his order sounded very pleasant and called him sir. The documents so intrigued Jack that his wine had sat virtually untouched for at least an hour. He topped up the glass and wondered whether he would see Sarah again and get to cook her the meal he half promised. Smiling at the thought, he was about to return to his studies when he remembered the call he’d ignored from Leon and picked up his phone. Leon answered promptly.

‘Leon. Sorry I couldn’t take your call this afternoon. Been a crazy day all round. What’s occurring?’

Leon related his excuse for visiting Lyn and her not showing up later in the day.

‘I went back to her place. She’s not there. The door’s locked, and the windows seem OK. She’s probably just decided to stay with a friend. I was a bit worried but it’s probably nothing. I’ll try calling again tomorrow. What are you up to tonight anyway?’

‘Just stopped researching. Right now I’m wondering why I ordered myself a large pizza. You eaten? Come round if you want. There’s some fascinating stuff here. I’d like to know what you think.’

In 20 minutes, Leon announced his arrival over the intercom. A few minutes later Jim did the same with a piping hot meat lovers’ pizza and, ‘with compliments of the management’ garlic bread. That meant ‘with Jim’s compliments’ and that some other customer didn’t get their garlic bread that night. Jim knew Jack always tipped well, so the occasional freebie seemed appropriate. Jack offered Leon a drink.

‘Wine?’

‘I’d rather have a beer. Can I help myself?’ Leon asked. Knowing there was always beer in Jack’s fridge, he relieved it of one stubbie.

‘Yes, help yourself. Oh, you already have,’ Jack responded with mock indignation. Now, wrap yourself around some of this tucker.’ He pushed a plate over. In a very short time, most of the pizza and all the garlic bread had gone, and Leon twisted the top off another beer.

‘You’re getting a bit low on beer,’ he advised helpfully, ‘thought you should know.’

‘Very remiss of me, I shall rectify that with all haste. Here, sit in the comfy chair and read this. It’s more recent, slightly, than the Tunguska story and a bit closer to home. It’s not long.’

Jack’s expanded collection of documents included an unpublished and untitled article. With only the initials PDM to indicate its author, it was as intriguing as it was brief, and he cursed the lack of detail. It was now safely saved in his database as *The Sunken Church of Linda – 1912*. Leon settled into an armchair, put his beer on the side table and started reading.



‘Ask anyone in Tasmania if they know Linda, and you’ll probably not be told about the town of that name. Driving to Queenstown on the A10, you will pass a sign identifying a town no longer there. Once a sizable settlement, it was populated mainly by workers at the North Mount Lyell mine. In 1903, the mine was taken over, and a slow decline began, a not-unusual story for mining towns. The residents gradually moved their families to nearby Gormanston.

In October 1912, a fire broke out in the North Mount Lyell mine. On that fateful day, 170 men were working underground and 42 were not to return to the surface alive. Many had lived in Linda just a few years before. The disaster rates as one of the worst in Australian mining history, and despite the passage of time, debate continues as to what caused the fire. A Royal Commission report was inconclusive, leaving survivors and bereaved family members with little satisfaction.

Any two-paragraph description of Linda will tell you little more than that, perhaps adding that the small town survived for a few decades and the post office closed down in 1966.

Now beyond the realm of living memory and with scant written references, the other mystery of Linda is all but forgotten.

The fire broke out on Saturday, 12 October 1912, consuming the interest and activities of all mineworkers and hundreds of nearby residents. What no one seems to have noticed until the following day was that the solitary church of Linda had been ‘taken to the depths of Hell’, as one contemporary writer reported.



Stories of sunken churches abound, particularly in Europe, and they usually, but far from always, have a conventional explanation based on geology. Churches were built on land selected for a strategic, imposing or otherwise convenient position. Little consideration was given to the security of foundations. Many churches were positioned on land ill-suited for the construction of anything significant. Subsidence, flooding and sinkholes have taken a fair share of churches, sometimes centuries after their construction.

Predictably, though, not all such events can be so conveniently dismissed. The church at Linda is one such event. Solidly positioned on a mountain range nearly 300 metres above sea level, finding a building site at Linda that wouldn't provide a secure foundation is almost impossible.

The dozens of locals who found their local church in ruins and half-sunken into what was thought to be solid rock were already distressed, and this only added to their anguish. With the tragedy of the mine fire still being played out, though, it proved to be but a minor chapter in the area's history. The church was never rebuilt, and few people could now say where it was. The stone was salvaged for other projects but was found to be strangely brittle. It was primarily used for fencing purposes.

The mystery of Linda's sunken church is found only in the works of those left-field historians who like to chronicle the unusual, the unexplained and the bizarre. Few of those writers have managed to uncover the single record of another enigma of the day. Also on that 12 October night, all the dogs of Linda disappeared. A few lines in the diary of an elderly resident described how her faithful Max, having been unusually quiet for about a week, suddenly became agitated, ran into the hills and never returned.

Several dogs were found over the next week, all dead but with no apparent injuries.’ –  
PDM



To that story, someone had appended an observation that the sunspot cycle was ebbing and due to bottom less than a year later, in August 1913. Whoever wrote that also noted, with a string of question marks, ‘Is the level of sunspot activity a guide to the timing of such events.’ Jack knew that sunspot activity was measured in large cycles and smaller cycles within those. The present Modern Maximum has been in play since 1900, a period of *Dark History* reporting.

Leon put down the papers and reached for his beer. ‘Do you see any connection between that and Tunguska?’ Jack asked. Leon thought carefully before answering, staring at his stubbie label for inspiration.

‘You obviously do, or you wouldn’t ask. Apart from the fact that both involve disturbances of the ground, no, I don’t. There’s no geographic link. They’re four years apart, in Olympic Games years, but I doubt that’s relevant. Both mention animals. No, that’s it. What do you make of them?’

Jack was pleased with Leon’s observations.

‘You got the two biggies, ground disturbances and animals. I’ve read a lot of those kinds of stories, and they have common themes. Much older stories often mention a black dog or more than one. Even in Australia, Aboriginal stories mention black dingoes...’

‘Black dingoes?’ Leon interrupted, ‘I thought they were all sandy-coloured. Or tan, whatever you call it.’

‘Most are. You get white ones as well, and cream. Most people know that animals can sense danger better than we can. They seem to be more attuned to their surroundings. As for

ground disturbances, that includes ocean events. Plenty of weird stuff is happening on the oceans, and under. I must write that book one day.'

Jack and Leon discussed a few more cases and theorised on links, trying to find a common denominator, but they kept coming back to ground disturbances and animals. However, aerial phenomena were regular components of the stories. The Tunguska event was an extreme example. Eventually, the wine ran out, as did Jack's beer, and his friend decided to call it an evening.

'Do I have to leave by the back door this time?'

'Hang on, better let me check,' Jack said as he scanned the road outside. 'No, it should be OK. There's not much happening out there. I'd say my limpet friends have packed it in for the night. But watch yourself, eh.'

With his friend gone, Jack returned to his research. It was well after midnight before he realised he was absorbing only half of what he read. A final inspection of the street revealed no late-night surveillance. Only beeping traffic signals and a solitary jogger disturbed the serenity. He waited until the jogger ran out of sight.

'Idiot,' he said to no one and went to bed.

