

The Number Four

Nathaniel J. Nelson

Lance wasn't particularly satisfied with his life, but any happiness he retained disappeared when he got his hands on a time machine.

Only a month had passed since the untimely death of President John F. Kennedy and the timely death of his assassin. Apparently, Lance had come to realize, America had become such a superpower in the last two centuries that everyone in the world was required to give a shit about their internal affairs.

Lance didn't care about JFK. He didn't much care about England's politics either. He just wanted to get through his daily routine without any serious incident.

The sun had set when Lance departed the firm, a thick jacket wrapped around his body. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, he pulled the collar of his jacket tighter around his neck. He was only forty-three, but he could already feel old age creeping up on him. The passing years manifested themselves in the form of increased irritation at the world and an inability to tolerate extreme temperatures.

"Hey. You."

Lance came to a stop beside a particularly dark alleyway. The streetlights did nothing to illuminate its negative space, and he could just barely make out the figure standing only feet away.

This is not what I need right now, Lance thought, though there wasn't really anything going on that precluded him from interacting with people on the street.

"What," he said aloud, folding his arms and staring at the filthy man. He was obviously homeless, and not the sort of eccentric drifter who might teach Lance a valuable lesson about the power of kindness.

"I'm starving," the man said, his voice tinged with misery. "Can you spare a quid? Anything?"

"I don't have any money," Lance replied automatically, not bothering to wonder if this was true. He wasn't even sure why he was humoring the man.

"Anything?" the man begged. He seemed to have all his teeth, Lance noticed, and they weren't *too* yellow – perhaps he had been a regular bloke until very recently, until a divorce or a termination had dropped him to the gutter.

"Want a fag?" Lance offered, almost shocked at his own generosity.

The homeless man looked dubious for a moment, then shrugged. "Never really been a smoker, but why not?"

Lance fished a couple of Marlboros out of his coat pocket, first lighting up then giving one to the vagrant.

The two of them stood there in the semi-darkness, and Lance allowed himself to accept that he actually wanted to strike up a conversation with the man.

“Can I ask...?” he began.

“Ask what,” the man said, taking a shallow drag off the cigarette. He didn’t inhale.

“How...*this* happened,” Lance replied, gesturing towards the man.

The vagrant seemed to think for a moment, then shrugged. “A lotta shite happened all at the same time,” he said.

“Sorry to hear that,” Lance murmured. He wasn’t sorry so much for the man, as he was at the prospect of the man’s fate befalling him as well. He made it sound so...*possible*.

“I’ll survive,” the man said, looking down at the ground.

They stood their in silence, just on the alley’s threshold, the smoke from their cigarettes drifting up to mingle with the city fog. Finally the homeless man finished his and dropped the butt, putting it out with his shoe. A half-minute later, Lance followed.

“Thanks again,” the filthy man said, trying to meet Lance’s gaze. “Hey, I’ve got something you might take a liking to. Wanna see it, then?”

Lance looked up. The homeless man wore an expression of interest, as if he had been planning this question out since their meeting. He probably had.

“Not particularly,” Lance returned. “I’d better fuck off back home, my sister’s –”

“Just trust me,” said the homeless man. Lance caught a particularly bad whiff of his odor. “Stay here, I’ll be back in a mo.”

Lance didn’t know what it was that kept him standing there, prevented him from disappearing and never thinking of the vagrant again; but stand there he did, and a few seconds later, the man reappeared.

“Look here,” he said, producing a bundle of brown paper.

Hesitantly, half-believing he was looking at a bomb, Lance took the package. “What is it?” he asked. The man just nodded, prompting Lance to open it. Carefully, he began peeling off the bags, dropping them on the ground as he did.

Inside was an object that Lance could only describe as something out of science fiction – a prop from one of the extravagant films that were so popular the decade before, or from that new program about the doctor that had debuted last month.

The object was vaguely rectangular, though its four corners were rounded out like a loaf of bread. Its main body was made of a crimson metal, scratched and dented from what looked like years of abuse. Out of its left side protruded a thick, rusty gear, whose cubical teeth jutted

THE NUMBER FOUR

out to four degrees. On the top part of the device was a bubble of green-tinted glass: a hemisphere that, like the metal, had been scratched and marked.

On the machine's face lay two horizontal plates of glass, behind which Lance could pick out hand-painted digits; three beneath the top glass – **2 7 4** – and four beneath the bottom – **0 2 6 1**. Beneath the glass plates was a large red button, and corresponding to them was a pair of dials on the machine's right side.

Feeling the weight of the metal device in his hands, Lance looked up at the filthy man. "The hell *is* this?" he asked.

"I dunno," the man replied. "I just found it in the alley."

"It looks..." Lance struggled to find the right words as his eyes flicked back and forth across the device's face. "It looks like a toy. But like...a *real* version of a toy." He turned the object over; on the back, drawn with bold strokes in what looked like black paint, was **#4**.

"You want it?" the man asked.

"Why would I want it?" Lance replied. He was curious now – at least more curious than he was when the man disappeared – but if neither of them knew what the device was for, then what use was it to him?

"Lord if I know," the man said. "Just thought I'd offer, seeing as you're the only one who'd even talk to me."

Turning the device all around in his hands, Lance noticed for the first time that someone had etched a swastika into the metal, just below where the gear protruded from the body.

Nice, he thought. *Maybe it's a German war machine.*

Someone passed the alleyway, and the two men looked up. They must have seemed right stupid, Lance thought, standing there and gawking at some children's toy.

"You don't got any idea what it is?" Lance asked.

"No idea," the man grunted. "Obviously a machine of some sort, but hell if I know what it does." A pause, then: "I think it's something to do with the dials."

I could've told you that, Lance thought, but he gave the top dial a twist.

With some protest, the corresponding digits began flipping around, like the cards on a Rolodex. They went from **2 7 4** to **2 7 5**, then to **2 7 6**; after a minute of rotating the top dial, Lance had made it to **2 8 0**. He tested out the bottom dial, and successfully moved the lower digits.

It took Lance a minute to recognize the change in the device, but once he noticed he couldn't stop feeling it. The device – the machine, the toy, whatever it was – had begun to buzz. It was a similar feeling to

the hum of a car just starting up, or of a woman's hairdryer as it worked its magic.

"I think something's happening," Lance said, suddenly excited. Whatever the machine was, he had never seen anything like it, and he wanted to know what it did even if it was no more than a toy.

"Keep turning the dials," the homeless man suggested. His voice was casual, disinterested; as Lance fiddled with the knobs, he wondered vaguely if the man actually did know what the machine was for.

Lance was about to point out that nothing much seemed to be happening other than the hum, when he did a double-take and realized that a pinprick of light had begun to shine through the scratched green glass of the top dome. He barely registered as the homeless man grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him deep into the alley.

"Something's happening," Lance said again as the light grew bigger. A greenish tint was projecting through the glass, illuminating the dark alleyway.

"Why don't you try the button?" the man suggested.

Lance's right hand shifted from cradling the device to hovering over its single round button. He paused, almost feeling as if he didn't want to know.

But temptation was too great. Lance pressed his index finger down on the button, depressing it to the surface of the device, already thinking of how he would relate this story to his family.

The light glowed brighter than ever, and the alley was almost clear as day. The homeless man stood there, watching with some semblance of interest, as Lance struggled to hold onto the vibrating machine.

A point of darkness appeared on the brick wall across from Lance, and he frowned into the light. The darkness began spreading out in a circle, growing and absorbing the green until it was a good two-and-a-half meters in diameter. Something was moving within the darkness, Lance could swear he saw it: something that defied shape, defied the laws of physics.

It was only after the circle of black stopped growing that Lance realized he had no idea what was going on.

"What the hell *is* that?" he cried, his eyes never leaving the apparition. If he just understood *what* he was seeing, he might be able to form an opinion on whether or not he believed it.

The man nodded, a smile flickering across his lips. "Well," he said. "Go ahead."

"What do you mean, go ahead?" Lance cried. "Go ahead where?"

"Into the black circle," the man replied, nodding. "You can walk right through. Just try."

THE NUMBER FOUR

Lance felt his brain working fast, trying to understand everything that was being thrown at him. The black circle – it was only a shadow, right? or else, something inside the glass, blocking out some of the light? The darkness – and the green light itself – was being projected onto a solid brick wall. There was no way he could...

He took a step forward. Then another. The device dropped to his side. Lance reached out and shivered as his fingers brushed empty air.

He turned back to the homeless man. “How is this possible?” he asked. It was like a science fiction movie, one of those that his sister would have begged him to go see with her kids: *unassuming security guard is duped into a high-stakes battle with time-traveling space warrior disguised as London vagrant.*

The man held out his hands to either side, as if to indicate the entire world. “Who knows?” he called above the whirring of the device. “It just is. Now go on through, yeah?”

The adrenaline and shock that pumped through Lance’s body wouldn’t allow him to be afraid, but a bit of wariness wasn’t out of the question. “Why *would* I?” he demanded. “I have no bloody idea where it leads! I don’t even know if this is *possible*! I should just get the hell out of –”

By the time Lance saw the homeless man lunging towards him, it was too late to move. His arms pinwheeled wildly in the air for one comical moment, then his feet left the ground and he felt himself falling backwards, into empty air, into coldness, into an inky black –

Lance’s back hit the ground, sending wracks of pain through his aging body.

His eyes were shut, he realized. He didn’t want to open them.

Nothing happened, he thought. *I just hit the ground. Maybe that bloke will rob me and this can all be over with.*

Lance opened his eyes and saw daylight.

Jesus, he thought, shielding his gaze. *How long have I been out?*

Slowly, groaning all the way, Lance pushed himself into a sitting position. The first thing he noticed was that the sun had come up. The second thing was that the ground wasn’t asphalt – it was dirt. Brown, untampered dirt, with disparate patches of dead grass scattered around. A faint whiff of something foul struck his nose.

When he raised his eyes, he saw people.

They were scattered around the alley, standing close by but trying to push themselves away from the unknown man. Their faces were shocked, mouths spread open and eyes wide. Lance wanted to tell them to calm down, to tell them it was just a mistake; but when he saw their clothes, his voice caught in his throat.

Lance wasn’t an expert on historical clothing – he hadn’t given *any*

time period much thought since university – but he could almost swear that he was looking at a group of Dark Age peasants.

“Hello,” Lance muttered, scrambling to his feet. The peasants continued to stare at him. “No. This isn’t right. This is – ” He felt his throat close up, and he let out a dry, sickening wretch. “This isn’t right,” he said again, his voice like sandpaper.

Right or not – it was real. As he struggled to maintain his balance in the sheer impossibility of it all, Lance grew ever more positive that he wasn’t hallucinating. The ugly, machine-made towers that jutted up into London’s ever-cloudy sky had been replaced by tiny houses, their walls irregular and obviously the product of human hands. In place of concrete and steel were thatch and daub; where there should have been asphalt, there was nothing but dirt. The sounds and smells of the city had been replaced with the sounds and smells of chickens.

He planted both feet firmly on the dirt ground. His head was swimming and his gut felt wrenched; but the last thing he planned on doing was giving in to panic.

A few of the people in the crowd had moved away, but most were still staring at him. And why shouldn’t they – he was wearing bizarre clothes, was quite a bit taller than the tallest among them, and had apparently stepped into existence on a busy street. Plus, if this really was the Dark Ages, then at forty-three he was quite a few years past the average life expectancy.

“Hello?” he said again, the greeting addressed to anyone who might be willing to speak. “You all speak English, yeah?”

The peasants continued to stare at him. Most of them were holding their eyelids so wide open that he could see the diameter of their eyeballs.

Lance had never been one to wax philosophical, but he found himself wondering – in his desperately inconsistent mind – whether someone from the modern day would have such an extreme reaction to a man from the future stepping into existence. Probably not: exposure to science fiction – and all kinds of fiction, for that matter – had desensitized modern folks.

He took a step. The crowd shifted, everyone trying to keep their distance. He took another. They made way for him, allowing him free passage out of the alleyway. If the space between two single-story thatched buildings could really be considered an alleyway.

Once he was on the street, Lance understood that the de-evolution of London wasn’t an isolated incident. The entire city stunk, and all the buildings were miserably old-fashioned. Not a single car was visible on what had, minutes before, been a busy street; now, people walked, their unaesthetic clothes swishing back and forth, or rode in

THE NUMBER FOUR

wagons pulled by sickly-looking horses.

“Well shit,” Lance said aloud. Out on the street, the citizens were giving him weird looks as they passed – presumably because of his security guard uniform and shoes made from real-life cows – but none of them had seen him appear out of nowhere, so none of them stopped to stare.

He glanced down at the machine in his hand. He had almost forgotten he was holding it.

Turning it over in his hands, he could just see the painted #4 in the darkness. “Number four,” he said aloud. What the hell did that mean?

And who cares? Why was he grasping at straws when something incredible, something completely impossible, had happened?

He was in the Dark Ages. The goddamn *Dark Ages*. Either this was some elaborate prank involving dozens of actors and a huge movie set, or he had Rip Van Winkle'd himself into a post-apocalyptic future of medieval-looking civilization...or, somehow more likely than the other two options, he had gone back in time.

“First man in history to go back in time,” he muttered, slumping against the uneven wall beside him. “Doesn't feel too great, does it?”

And it didn't – the smell of medieval London was foul, the people were already pissing him off, and anyways he was supposed to be planning Christmas with his sister.

“Let's see about getting me back to the present,” he said. A grubby woman passed by with her equally-grubby sons in tow.

Lance began twisting the dials on the Number Four. The printed cards flipped around, their numbers rising. The bubble of green glass didn't start to glow, but Lance had no reason to think it wouldn't.

His fingers twisting the dials blindly, Lance began watching the peasants move back and forth, on their way to market or church or whatever the hell it was they did for fun before television and radio.

Across the street, just visible behind a thick cloud of dust, was a small boy. He sat outside one of the low buildings, all by himself, his face blank. In one hand he held a stick, which he alternately thumped against the ground and used to trace abstract designs in the dirt.

All of his exposed skin – and there was plenty of it – was covered in grime. He seemed to be staring directly at Lance, and Lance stared back from all the way across the street. It wasn't until several minutes had gone by that he noticed the boy was missing a foot.

“Okay,” Lance muttered to himself. “Time to go back.” He looked down at the Number Four and felt his stomach drop as he realized the green glass hadn't lit up yet. He slammed the button down, but nothing happened. He twisted the dials some more. Pressed

the button again. Still, nothing. “Come on come *on*,” he hissed, feeling the panic rise in his chest.

He didn’t care if he was the first person to travel through time; he just wanted to go back. Maybe when he learned to control the Number Four, he could have plenty of incredible adventures through time and space; but for now, he had to –

“*Goddammit!*” he cried, throwing the machine on the ground. It skidded through the dirt, finally coming to a stop against the nearest building.

Maybe it just had to charge, he thought. Maybe it could only be used once a day, or once a week, or –

Once a lifetime.

Though the thought first came to him in that moment, it took Lance another two years before he finally admitted to himself that he could no longer deny the truth.

The Number Four was a time machine. It could be used to travel to any point in history – but only *once per person*.

It was like in childhood, he thought, when one’s mother insist they share the swing with their siblings. “*You all get one turn*,” she would say, “*That’s only fair*.” Whoever had invented the Number Four – as it was plainly created by man, not some sort of naturally-occurring phenomenon – was like a mother to them all, to those coming after who would find the Number Four and feel its wrath. “*You all get one turn. That’s only fair. You can go to any point in the past, but you have to stay there forever.*”

The homeless man. If he was even really homeless. He would have been from the future, wouldn’t he? The 1970s or the 1980s or the twenty-first century or perhaps even later. He had been lucky enough to send himself back to modern day – or what was modern day to Lance – rather than a time before even the lightbulb had been invented.

Lance almost drove himself insane by admitting he would never return. But he came to accept this fact, in time, and was able to move on with his life. His *new* life, that was, in the *old* world.

He was a blacksmith now. After deducing that he was in the year 1542, and still holding out hope that the Number Four would one day be functional again, Lance had decided to have some fun and get into the spirit of the Dark Ages. He had bought – well, stolen – new clothes and tried to pick up the dialect of the times. When it became apparent that the Number Four wouldn’t be working anytime soon, Lance had dumped his wallet in the River Thames and procured an apprenticeship under a London blacksmith. The smithy had at first believed that Lance was too old for such an arrangement – he was, in fact, older than

THE NUMBER FOUR

most of London's population – but Lance had insisted, and when the blacksmith died of something easily curable, Lance took command of the shop.

The 1540s came and went. Lance grew to be known in the city, becoming somewhat wealthy in his trade. He was a favorite among the men, and the women adored him for his method of flirting that wouldn't be developed for another four centuries. He never took a wife, figuring the repercussions may be disastrous.

Lance died in the year 1553, also of an easily-curable disease. But before his body shut down, he made sure to leave his mark on the world – or, more appropriately, on the Number Four.

Taking a particularly sharp piece of iron from his shop, he scratched a message into the back of the red machine, just above the black #4. He wrote “*YOU CANT GO BACK!!*,” the words as visible as he could make them. He also labeled the top row of digits “*DAYS*” and the bottom row “*YEARS*.” He wasn't totally sure those were what the numbers represented, but he made an educated guess for the sake of posterity.

Lance never again saw the green glass of the Number Four light up. When he died – three hundred and sixty-seven years before his birth – everything in his shop was sold or stolen. The Number Four was carried off by a thief, who thought it looked bizarrely alien. He sold it to a merchant, claiming it was a good luck charm. The merchant discovered this was not true when he was murdered by bandits, who took the Number Four and tried to break it open to explore its contents. When they were unable to break the red casing, they carried it with them.

The bandits were arrested and hanged, all their belongings becoming property of the crown. Queen Elizabeth herself admired the Number Four's colorful aesthetic and carried it as a scepter, before it was stolen by a court musician. When the musician was discovered, he dropped the Number Four in the Thames, hoping to escape sentencing. He was put to death anyway.

The Number Four sank almost ten meters down the Thames before coming to a stop, held in place by several centuries' worth of raw, coagulated sewage.

Three hundred years passed. Following a two-month period where the Thames' nauseating stench infected the whole of London, efforts were made to clean the river, eventually resulting in the discovery of the Number Four. It was pocketed by one of the workers, who passed it on to his daughter, never understanding its function. When his daughter grew up and had children, she forgot to formally present the Number Four to them. After her death, they discovered

the machine in her belongings and donated it to a museum. It sat in the museum's storeroom for several decades, only being discovered in the 1950s.

The curator at the time had been taking advantage of his position to steal from the museum, and quickly added the unknown device to his collection. He would later trade the Number Four to a bartender in exchange for a bottle of whiskey. The bartender would present the Number Four to a historian friend of his, a man named Max.

On July fifteenth, 1959, Max figured out exactly what the Number Four was and used it to travel back two hundred years and zero days.

On July fifteenth, 1759, a man appeared out of nowhere in the middle of a London market, just as another man had done two hundred years earlier.

Max had already deduced that he would have little chance of returning to the present. He set himself up as a London merchant, having no trouble picking up the culture of the time.

When he had explored everything there was to explore on the mysterious device, Max passed it on.

On August seventh, 1760, Maxwell, the enigmatic merchant who had literally *and* figuratively appeared out of nowhere, met a young man named David.

David was fifteen, a new recruit into the British navy. He was acting as a midshipman aboard the frigate *Laurel*, but wasted no time in explaining to Maxwell that he planned on being a captain very soon.

"I just can't imagine what it would be like," David said as they stood there, on the London docks, surrounded by the wares Maxwell had been able to scrounge up in the last year. "To stand on the quarter-deck and maintain command over an entire vessel." He shook his head, lost in the image. "I can't imagine anything I would enjoy more."

"I might know something," Maxwell said before he could stop himself. Was this boy really who he wanted taking control of a time machine? A *fifteen-year-old*? In Max's own time, fifteen-year-olds weren't even allowed to drive cars, let alone travel freely through the fourth dimension.

But then again, he thought – wasn't that the spirit of the Number Four? He couldn't say what its original purpose was, or who had invented it – but as far as his main theory went, the Number Four had been making its rounds throughout history for...well, for some time. There wasn't any real way to measure time when considering a device that could go back instantly, all the while moving forward at a rate of one second per second.

"I don't believe you," David replied, a smile playing across his

THE NUMBER FOUR

young face. He was handsome, Maxwell thought – in the 1950s, he would have always been surrounded by a gaggle of young women. But here, wearing slop trousers and smelling like fish – plus the natural odor of the time period – Maxwell didn't think the midshipman would have much success in that department.

"Would you like to make that a bet?" Maxwell asked. Glancing around the docks to make sure no one was watching them, he reached into his purse and withdrew a key, which he used to unlock a small chest he had ordered in custom dimensions. He pulled open the top, removing the Number Four.

David's eyes seemed to struggle between widening in surprise and frowning in confusion. "What is this?" he asked.

Poor kid, Maxwell thought. At least when *he* had been introduced to the Number Four, it had been in a time period where everyone was familiar with colored metal and the entire concept of buttons and dials. "It's a magic item," he explained, feeling a rush of excitement. He had been waiting for this moment ever since accepting that the Number Four only went one way.

"Magic?" David repeated, meeting Maxwell's eyes. "You mean the Devil's work?"

"No." Maxwell shook his head kindly, holding out the Number Four. He went on to explain both the concept of time travel and the truth of his origins. At first, David couldn't grasp either of these tall tales; but eventually, he caught on.

Maxwell showed David how the Number Four operated, how to use the dials in conjunction with the big red button. He explained that some previous user must have scratched the words "*DAYS*" and "*YEARS*" into its surface.

What he didn't explain was the cryptic note, written in ugly lines above the #4. Maxwell knew what "*YOU CANT GO BACK!!*" meant, but he didn't want David to understand. If he knew he could never return to his own time, he might never use the Number Four; and if the machine never got used, it would never continue its circuit through time.

David set sail on the frigate *Laurel* soon after. When he returned and found Maxwell, he revealed the bad news: he had lost the Number Four, over the side of the ship, just before he planned on using it. He had left his bunk during the night and gone up on deck, where he began fiddling with the controls; the current watch had noticed him and asked him what exactly he was doing, startling him into dropping the device over the gunwale.

The Number Four once again found itself sinking into deep, cloudy darkness – this time, instead of the mucky waters of the

sewage-infested River Thames, it floated down into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean, where it was molested for centuries by bottom-dwelling animals. The pressure of the deep sea threatened to break its glass plates while the salt tried to clog up its gears; but still, the Number Four waited, unbroken, for its next user.

A pair of lights shone through the darkness, wandering around nearby and eventually training directly on the Number Four. An arm reached out – cold, mechanical, like the Number Four itself – and grasped onto the machine.

The little red device was dragged up, up towards the surface, up towards the light it hadn't touched for centuries. Its dials spun freely as the pressure was released and the Number Four finally broke out of the water.

“What the hell is it?” Padma called, frowning at the red shape clutched in the mechanical arm of their drone.

“Hold your horses,” Jake grunted, yanking on the pulley's chain. Their drone broke free of the water and a couple of the others guided it safely onto the deck. Its headlights went out and its mechanical arms lay still.

“Dibs!” Robb called – as if he *wasn't* the leader of this mission – stepping up to the drone. He crouched down in front of it, carefully removing a clump of seaweed from the red object before taking the object itself out of the drone's claw.

“What is it?” Padma asked again, crouching beside Robb. Jake and the others gathered behind them.

“I have no bloody idea,” Robb replied, turning the device over in his hands. “‘You can never go back,’” he read. “‘Number Four.’”

“It looks old,” Greg pointed out. “Like...1950s.”

“Are you kidding?” Jake shot back. “If anything it looks like it's from the *future*.”

“Actually,” someone else countered, “It looks like something from the 1950s that's supposed to *look* like it's from the future.”

“You mean like something from *Star Trek*,” Robb suggested.

“Exactly.”

Padma stared at the device in her boss's hands. She could definitely see the similarities to all three theories; and yet there was something totally alien, totally enigmatic about the device, as if it was not only from the future, as *well* as the past, but it was also from somewhere else entirely, some kind of alternate world, an alien planet or a parallel universe.

Robb stood up, the device still in his hands. “I'm gonna go check this out,” he announced. “Looks like a storm, so we'll call it a day. Greg?”

“Sup,” Greg replied.

THE NUMBER FOUR

“Get Robb Jr. back into his case. And the rest of you...” He waved his hand around, as if to suggest he didn’t remember what it was they were supposed to be doing, but that they better get a move on. “Do something. Dismissed.”

The four other men dispersed throughout the *Sea Cucumber*. Robb turned and stepped into the salon, taking the device with him. Padma stood there, on deck, feeling the chill of the upcoming storm through her layers of work clothes. Finally she turned and went after Robb.

She found the captain down below, in the small cabin they used for preliminary examinations of artifacts. Or, the small cabin they *would* use, in the unlikely scenario that they actually found something important. They had been going out on the *Sea Cucumber* for almost four months now, sending Robb Jr. down to the depths of the ocean in search of lost treasures from days long past.

Robb had initially put together the team because of one man, an amateur diver, who had allegedly discovered a pirate’s cutlass on the ocean floor nearby. That had been last summer – Padma remembered the date well, August second, 2026 – and the crew of the *Sea Cucumber* still hadn’t found anything. But Robb was wealthy and bored, so he kept paying them to come out here and look with him.

Finally, four months later, it looked like their search had paid off: they had found something that looked vaguely important, though it certainly wasn’t from the same era as the cutlass.

“1950s, or the future?” Padma asked, stepping down into the cabin.

Robb, leaning over the single desk, cast a glance over his shoulder. “Don’t see how it could be from the future,” he replied. “The future hasn’t happened yet.”

She went to stand beside him, casting her eyes down at the mysterious device that lay on the desk. There *was* a strangely 1950s vibe to it, though she couldn’t quite place where that came from. Maybe the rotating tiles, or the red metal; maybe the rubbery dials and the big red button. The gear that jutted out of its left side was more Industrial Revolution in appearance, she thought, while the notes scratched into its hull seemed to be from all ages.

“Turn it over?” she suggested. Robb obliged, and they were greeted with that somewhat disturbing note over the big black digit. “What do you think ‘*Number Four*’ means?” she asked.

“I’m honestly more concerned with what ‘*you can’t go back*’ means,” he replied.

Padma reached down and turned the device onto its side, revealing a symbol scratched into the metal just below where the gear protruded: a swastika. “Oh, nice,” she muttered.

“Yeah I saw that,” Robb told her. “But look, it’s countered by...”

He took the device out of her hands and turned it over, revealing its underside. Another symbol was scratched into the red field: a Protestant fish.

“Alright,” she replied. “So it was owned by both a Nazi and a Christian.”

“You think we should make our own mark on it?” he asked. “Like in *Paddle to the Sea*?”

“What,” she replied, “You mean like *Robb was here*?”

He shrugged, seeming to contemplate this idea for a moment before reaching across the desk and grabbing a pair of wire cutters, which he dug unceremoniously into the front of the machine, to the right of the big red button. The sound of metal on metal was excruciating, but in five strokes he was done: a foreign symbol had joined the swastika, Jesus fish, and various English words that covered the red surfaces of the device. It wasn’t a symbol that anyone particularly understood – just one that had arisen recently in the graffiti subcultures and could be found scrawled on flat surfaces all across the First World.

“Well that’s not trendy,” Padma said. Then, pointing to the words scratched above both glass plates: “Look. Days and years. It’s a time machine.”

Robb looked up at her and their eyes met. He was probably hoping for a dramatic moment, but she wasn’t feeling it. What she had meant was that the device was probably supposed to *look* like a time machine, or it was supposed to look like what a time machine *would* look like.

“So you think if we press this big round button it’ll shoot us back in time, yeah?” he asked.

Padma shrugged. “Might as well, right?”

“Well I already *did* press the button,” he told her, fiddling with the dials. “Couple’a times. Didn’t do shit.”

“Robb!” she cried, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice.

“What, what?” He met her eyes again, and she gestured down towards the machine. He turned to look as the glow became brighter, illuminating the green glass and filtering out into the cabin. Determined, he continued to twist the dials; the top Rolodex numbers flew past **9 9 9** and returned to **0 0 0** as the bottom ones edged up on **5 0 0**. Padma couldn’t say whether the digits were meant to be read separately or as whole numbers, but the shoddily-written labels – DAYS and YEARS – suggested the latter.

The green light continued to grow exponentially, until it had bathed the entire cabin in its tint. A glance behind them told Padma that the others had come to the door of the salon and were looking down with interest.

“Try the button now,” she suggested. Whatever the machine was,

it seemed to have been woken up from its slumber. The top line of digits read **0 6 1**; the bottom, **0 4 7 6**.

Without hesitation, Robb pressed his thumb down on the fat red button. For a tense moment, it seemed that nothing happened; then Padma saw, in the middle of the green glow, a circle of darkness, beginning to spread in thin air.

“What the...” she murmured. It was all so otherworldly – so unlike anything she had ever seen before.

The black oval, constantly shifting and thrubbling like water, finished growing as its top hit the cabin ceiling and its bottom the deck. Growing up with science fiction TV, Padma could guess what it was – a portal of some kind, possibly to another dimension – but nothing was visible inside. Just pure, inky darkness.

Robb, still holding the machine, glanced up at his crew-turned-friends. “What d’you think, lads?” he called. Padma realized that the machine was humming loudly. “Shall we see what’s inside?”

The others were surprised and scared: she could see both emotions etched in their faces and washed out in green light. They didn’t know what to say.

So she said it for them.

“Do it!” she cried.

Robb turned to look at her.

“This is what you’ve been waiting for!” she reminded him. She knew it, Robb knew it...they all knew it. He had always wanted something extraordinary to happen in his life, something that defied everything everyone knew. This inane search for sunken artifacts was no more than a façade, a means of dispelling the disappointment in his life. “This is your cutlass!” she cried.

Robb nodded, a smile flickering across his lips. He saluted her. Then, stuffing the machine inside his coat, he turned and faced the black hole.

Above them, the others made sounds of protest as Robb stuck his hand directly into the blackness. “It’s cold!” he called back to his crew, taking another step forward. His entire right arm and shoulder were engulfed in the blackness.

He turned back, taking in the sight of Padma, his men, and the *Sea Cucumber*. “This is one small step for man,” he called above the noise of the machine, “And one giant leap for – ”

Stumbling on his own feet, Robb fell backwards and was engulfed by the black hole.

For a brief instant, he saw blue sky, and wondered what infinite possibilities there were for him now. Then, he fell in the ocean and his nervous system shut down.

His last thought before his lungs filled with seawater was *Damn you, Number Four*.

Thanks to a storm that whipped up out of nowhere, Robb's body washed ashore only a couple days later. He was picked apart by gulls, who also tried to steal the bright red device out of his coat; but, finding it too heavy, the gulls abandoned what they believed could be a new kind of shellfish and flew away.

Months later, scavengers from the North came across what they soon discovered were human remains, wearing torn-up clothes of a material never seen before in Ireland. The body had been washed ashore and pulled back out by the tide more times than the scavengers liked to consider; but it wasn't the body they were interested in, it was the bizarre metal device that lay in the sand nearby.

The Number Four made its way across Ireland, changing hands in exchange for money. No one even came close to understanding its purpose, but they all thought it was quite aesthetic. Eventually, the Number Four was traded to an English merchant in exchange for a couple of fish and a swig of liquor. This merchant took the device to London, where he sold it to a young man who seemed mighty interested in it.

The young man was an apprentice named Richard. His master called him Tricky Dick. He didn't know what Tricky Dick meant, but he liked the way it sounded.

On that day, Richard spent twice his monthly allowance to buy the Number Four. His purchase of a new musical instrument would be delayed again, and he would have to forgo that month's appointment with his favorite lady of the night; but it would all be worth the price to see his master's face.

"Master?" Richard called, stepping into the foundry and closing the door behind him. They hadn't been open for business very often, not since the old man had grown sick. He held the red object behind his back and couldn't keep a grin off his face. "Master, are you in here?"

There was a horrible retching sound from the back of the building – from the old man's bedroom, where Richard wasn't allowed to go. "I'm back here, Tricky Dick," his master called in a hoarse voice.

Richard stepped up to the curtained doorway separating his master's room from the rest of the foundry. "Here is something I would like to give you," he said, his face held close to the curtain.

"Come inside," his master called.

A thrill ran through Richard. He had never been allowed inside the master's bedroom before. This was new, he thought, new and exciting – but, he reminded himself, not nearly as exciting as the idea of showing his master the red object, whatever it was.

THE NUMBER FOUR

With hands trembling in excitement and suspense, Richard pushed open the curtain and stepped inside.

The master's bedroom was small, smaller than he had imagined it, with a straw bed in one corner. There were no windows; the only light came from the candles spread around the foundry, or the wide door on days they were open for business. Richard was almost disappointed at how simple his master's enigmatic room really was – until he saw the etchings on the walls and his curiosity returned in a flash.

All across the three plastered walls of the room were pictures drawn in charcoal or lead, designs that Richard couldn't even hope to understand. One looked like a great bird, with a thin body and powerful wings – on closer inspection, it looked as though there was a group of people inside the bird's stomach. Another drawing looked sort of like a house, but very tall and thin; more buildings were scattered around it, some of them tall and some of them small. A block of words was transcribed on the wall; Richard couldn't read, and he was surprised to discover that his master could write.

But the most shocking image was the one just above the master's bed, taking up nearly the entire wall: it was a perfect illustration of the red object that Richard held behind his back.

"What is it?" the master asked. Richard looked over, almost surprised to see him there. He was so wrapped up in the etchings that he had almost forgotten why he came.

He stepped over to the bed. The master looked older and weaker than ever, even more so than he had the day before. His beard had been growing out for several months as the hair fell out of his head; he now resembled how Richard had always pictured God Himself.

"I have something for you," Richard said. The master blinked his watery eyes open and struggled to keep them there.

With a thrill of excitement, Richard took the red object out from behind his back and held it out in front of him.

Without an instant of hesitation, the master's eyes flew open wide and he leapt back, scooting into a seated position against the wall, holding out an aged finger as if he was being confronted by Death himself.

"It is just like the one you described," Richard said, confused at his master's fear. "Remember when you paid those men to look for it? I found it for you! See?"

"Get rid of it," the master hissed. "*Get rid of it!*"

After the Number Four had disappeared from his foundry three years earlier, Lance hadn't thought he would ever see it again. But now it was here, before his eyes, and he felt the sight of it pushing on his aged heart like a hammer.

"I'm sorry," Richard said, surprised and hurt. "I thought you wanted to find it again. But if you don't, I will –"

"Wait," Lance said, forcing himself to calm down. He was only fifty-two; in the twentieth century, he could have downed some meds and been alright. But now, in the middle of the sixteenth century, he could feel the life slipping out of his body. He didn't know exactly what disease he had contracted, but he knew it was fatal.

The Number Four, he had realized three years earlier, was an unfaithful mistress. He had dutifully waited seven years for its power to return and send him back to the 1960s; but in November of 1549, the entire machine had disappeared. It hadn't just been lost or stolen – Lance had taken the Number Four out of its protective chest and was actively fiddling with it when it seemed to fade away, splitting into a million particles, like sand in the wind.

And now it was back. Three years later, it was back.

Slowly, trying not to overexcite himself, Lance took ahold of the machine that had destroyed his life. It was heavy – heavier than he remembered it being. Or perhaps he had just grown weaker. The swastika was still there, just below where the gear protruded from the metal; someone had added another symbol, one he didn't recognize, beside the red button. Above the glass windows, someone else had added the words "DAYS" and "YEARS." *Lord God*, he thought, *I wish those had been there when I used it.* Turning the machine over, he saw another few words: a message that, if he had seen it in that alleyway all those years in the future, would probably have saved his life. "YOU CANT GO BACK!!," it read, in thin letters etched just above the big black #4.

"Bury it," Lance said.

"What?" Richard asked. His breath caught in his throat.

"I may not be in this world for very long," Lance told him. "But before I move on, I want you to bury this infernal device as far beneath our shop as you can. I want you to move everything in the shop and start digging, dig until you can't dig anymore. And then I want you to drop this machine into the hole and fill the hole back up. You cannot ever tell *anyone* that it's down there."

Richard nodded, barely understanding. He didn't know what a *machine* was, but he assumed it was some sort of curse word.

"Do you swear, Richard?" the master cried, grasping the boy's hand in his. "Do you swear that no one will ever know about it?"

"I swear!" Richard squeaked, suddenly afraid. Had his master gone completely insane?

Insane or not, the master was insistent, and Richard completed his task as he had promised, digging a hole deeper than he was tall in

THE NUMBER FOUR

the center of the foundry. After one final look at the mysterious object, Richard tossed it into the pit and began covering it in dirt.

In the year 1553, Lance the Blacksmith died. The Number Four remained buried beneath his foundry, even as all his possessions were sold or stolen.

For centuries, no one knew of any small red device. Queen Elizabeth was quite contented with the scepter she had, and her musicians were quite alright with not stealing from the crown, thank you very much.

In the eighteenth century, a man named Max stepped into existence. As he did, the small red device he held in his hands dissipated into thin air, off to rejoin its current self buried beneath London.

Four hundred years after Lance's death – and about thirty years after his birth – a London museum curator was arrested for stealing from his place of work. When asked if he had sold any of his stolen artifacts, he replied that he had traded a vintage pistol to a bartender in exchange for a bottle of whiskey. The bartender had presented the pistol to his friend Max, who had done the right thing and returned it to the museum, going on to live a decent life and dying in the year 1989, almost two hundred years after he had died.

In November of 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. A month later, a man appeared in an alleyway. He had come from the year 2012 with the intention of stopping the president's death; unfortunately, he had miscalculated and ended up being a month late. This was not a mistake he was able to correct, as his time machine disappeared into thin air just after he arrived. A week later, a man named Lance would walk by the time traveller, now living as a vagrant. They would not even look at each other.

Fourteen years later, after the demolition of a derelict movie theater on the outskirts of London, one construction worker would discover what appeared to be a metal hook, uncovered in the dirt beneath the construction site. He would take his find to a museum, which would positively identify the hook as being more than four hundred years old.

After this discovery, construction of the ShopMart that was meant to be built on the remains of the movie theater was delayed. A team of archaeologists took control of the site, feverishly turning what had been a theater into an impromptu dig.

The man who found the Number Four as he worked, the earth's surface higher than his scalp and his back baking in the sun, immediately dismissed the machine as some modern contraption – some modern *toy*, presumably, it did maintain a vaguely Etch A Sketch or Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots vibe – and it was only saved by a friend of his, Brenna, who saw the Number Four and examined it herself.

It was on that archaeological dig, underneath a hastily-constructed tent in the middle of London, that a familiar scene played out – one that had been reenacted many times throughout history, throughout the future, in timelines that no longer existed. When Brenna activated the Number Four, its top slideshow digits read **1 5 4** and its bottom ones **0 0 5 6**.

When Brenna stepped through the black hole and disappeared from existence – leaving the Number Four behind in the tent – her fellow archaeologists could only stare in surprise. But their confusion was nothing compared to the jaw-dropping shock of seeing a half-naked woman appear in the street, narrowly missing death by Model T.

On the seventeenth of July, 1977 – and subsequently, on the thirteenth of February, 1921 – Brenna wore jean shorts, boots, and a button-down shirt, rolled up to expose her midriff. In her own time, she looked like just another one of the archaeologists trying to dig up some old metalwork before the ShopMart corporation pushed them out; but nearly fifty years before the advent of feminism, she stood out like a sore thumb on a hoofed animal.

Aaooogab! cried the mechanical beast in front of her, slowing to a stop. She turned around as the world spun; faces stared down at her, eyes wide and mouths gaping. People shouted – their voices came at her from all directions, unintelligible sounds from the entire emotional spectrum.

“I’m – I’m sorry!” she cried, feeling her balance give way. All she saw was a wash of gray, with no discernible objects or shapes.

Then, a hand on her arm. She turned around, forcing herself to stay calm as a human figure swam into view. It was a woman, she saw, but the knot in Brenna’s stomach and the jitters throughout her body wouldn’t allow her to take in any more of the stranger.

She felt herself being pulled away, saw the ground moving past beneath her. She kept her head down, ignoring the stares of the crowd.

“Now where did you come from?” asked a voice.

Brenna looked up, blinking in the dim light. She and the stranger stood in an alleyway. The other woman was heavysset, she saw, with short curly hair mostly hidden beneath a bell-shaped hat. She was wearing a thin jacket and a long scarf; her skirt came down just past her knees. Brenna noticed that her cheeks were red from embarrassment.

“I – I was at the dig,” she mumbled, though she had a feeling this woman wouldn’t understand what she was saying. Somehow – *dear God, say it isn’t true* – Brenna had traveled back in time.

It didn’t take her long to figure this out: everything was gray and depressing, even more so than in modern-day London. The clothing was far more conservative, and there weren’t half as many cars on the

street; the one that had almost hit her couldn't have been moving at more than twenty miles an hour.

This is impossible, she thought, even as she recognized the stranger's outfit as one of the 1920s. The middle-aged version of a flapper, almost.

"What are you talking about?" the woman asked, obviously flustered. She was struggling to keep her eyes on Brenna's face, and not stare in horror at her exposed midriff and mostly-bare legs.

"I – just..." Brenna took a deep breath, trying to stop the flutter of her heart. She steadied herself against the brick wall of the alleyway. A man in a thick moustache walked by on the sidewalk, giving Brenna a double-take when he noticed her skin-to-clothing ratio. "What year is it?" she asked.

"1921," the woman said, her voice desperately confused.

Brenna nodded. *Alright*, she thought. *Don't freak out*. She swallowed, and realized that she wasn't in any danger of freaking out. While she pictured something like this happening – as everyone did at least once in their lives – Brenna had always imagined having some sort of mental breakdown and spending an entire day acting insane; but now that she was here, feeling the cold brick against her back and watching the ancient Fords drive by outside the alleyway, it all felt just as real as the world of 1977. Maybe even more so.

"What's your name?" the stranger asked.

"Brenna," she replied. She would have said something else, something more concrete for the poor woman, but she suddenly felt herself going through an entire rainbow of emotions: satisfaction, surprise, panic, desperation. It was the red machine, of course, that had brought her back in time; but *where was it?*

It was on the table, under the tent. Back at the excavation. Fifty-six years in the future.

Brenna fought down a wave of panic. That couldn't be it. There had to be more to the story, more to the concept of time travel. It just wouldn't be fair to get stuck in the past just because it hadn't occurred to her to take the machine into the portal.

"Can we go get something to drink?" she asked, swallowing and trying to keep a steady tone. She flipped one of her ponytails over her shoulder.

The heavy woman stared at her. She didn't seem totally in shock, but neither did she seem particularly at home. This was pretty much the reaction Brenna would expect after rescuing a woman who had appeared out of thin air.

"You can't go out like that," the woman spluttered. This was obvious, Brenna thought: the 1920s was no place for short shorts. But

still, she couldn't help but thinking that her new friend was focusing solely on her clothes as a way of ignoring all the mysteries inherent in the situation.

Brenna's new friend seemed desperate to send the younger woman on her way, but she was eventually persuaded to run out and buy a more respectable outfit. After changing her clothes in the alleyway – much to the other woman's chagrin – Brenna demanded to be shown where she could find a drink. As it turned out, the pub favored by her archaeology team existed in 1921, though it was under vastly different management. This seemed inconsistent, almost, as if pubs shouldn't be the same in a time period where a movie theater had been replaced with a city street.

The few time travel stories she had read suggested to Brenna that she keep to herself and not tell anyone what happened, at least until she got back to the present. But she was already exhausted from the dig, and now she found herself in a version of London that existed thirty years before her birth; she could allow herself the freedom of telling her new friend.

The woman's name was Ruth. She was a widow, and the single employee at a small London bakery called Kowalski's. At first, she seemed totally confused at Brenna's story – she wasn't familiar with time travel – but Brenna managed to recount the plot of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* in her own words, allowing Ruth to grasp the general concept, then related the story to her own, explaining that she had traveled a mere fifty-six years in time, rather than the eight-hundred-and-something-thousand years depicted in the novel.

"I just can't figure out how to get back," Brenna concluded. They sat together at a rickety wooden table, Ruth sipping a cup of tea and Brenna nursing her second draught. A few patrons sat around the pub, some at the bar and some at tables, generally ignoring the two women. The bartender, an archetypically buff and moustached man, kept to himself.

The pub was completely different than it was in modern day, completely devoid of jukeboxes, rubber-capped stools, and scantily-clad waitresses. Not only had the world not yet discovered women's rights, they hadn't even discovered the concept of sexualizing them for profit.

"So you just found that...*thing*," Ruth began.

"Time machine," Brenna replied. "I don't know where it came from or how it worked. I just started fiddling with it, and one second I was in 1977, then I was almost getting hit by a car in..."

"1921," Ruth reminded her.

"1921," Brenna repeated. Despite the fear, the total departure from stability she felt, there was more than a little excitement too; how

many people could say they had traveled backwards through the fourth dimension?

Probably more than I think, she admitted to herself. After all, the machine had looked ancient and well-loved.

"It's a remarkable story," Ruth said. "So you'll forgive me if I don't immediately believe you."

Brenna shrugged, the epaulets of her period jacket nearly touching the rim of her hat. She missed the feel of allowing her legs and stomach to show, but she had to admit that the period style was enjoyably high-class. There were worse time periods to end up than the 1920s, she knew – the Middle Ages, for example.

"You don't have to believe me," she said. "Actually, it might be better if you didn't. But you have to ask yourself where the fuck I got short-shorts in the Twenties."

Ruth cringed at Brenna's use of the F-word, and a couple male patrons looked up.

"Sorry," she muttered. "I forgot birds aren't allowed to cuss here."

"What do you mean *here*?" Ruth asked.

Brenna leaned forward. "I mean in the 1970s, women are allowed to *do sh* – " She caught herself. "...do stuff."

"What are they allowed to do?" Ruth asked, her eyes wide.

"Well at this point," Brenna explained, trying to remember back to her days minoring in history at the University of Manchester, "It's a-okay to pay women less than men. But where *I* come from, that's illegal."

"Wow." From Ruth's reaction, Brenna surmised that she didn't spend a lot of time thinking about equal rights.

"Course, some blokes still do it," Brenna said. "But it's not legal. The law passed seven years ago – I mean, seven years ago where I'm from. Made a pretty big deal about it. I was at university, so we had a bit of a carousal."

"You've been to university?" Ruth asked, surprised. She took a sip of her tea.

Brenna nodded. "University of Manchester, Class of '72." A pause, then: "Oh, I suppose not a lot of women go to school here."

Ruth made a noncommittal expression. Brenna realized that only three years had passed since women were first allowed to vote in the United Kingdom.

Reaching into her jacket, Ruth pulled out a small tin and opened it up, revealing a line of cigarettes. She selected one, then replaced the tin and pulled out a book of matches.

"Could I have a fag?" Brenna asked.

"Sorry?"

Brenna held out two fingers in Churchill's victory sign, and Ruth obliged her by sticking a paper tube between them. She had never been more than a social smoker – she was just reaching womanhood when they were proven to cause cancer – but being sucked half a century back in time was enough to make her want one.

The two lit up their cigarettes and smoked them silently for a few minutes.

“Do women really dress like that in the future?” Ruth asked, sounding almost embarrassed.

Brenna nodded. “A lot of the younger chicks do,” she replied. She also felt slightly embarrassed, as if she was looking for validation from the people of this backward time period. “Like, I was working and it was hot out.”

“I don't think I like that,” Ruth murmured.

“Well that's the decent thing about the Seventies,” Brenna told her. “Most people can do whatever they want. Women, black people...they can all do whatever and the Man won't tell them not to.”

Ruth frowned. “The Man?”

Brenna swallowed. Right. They didn't have the Man here. “I just mean it's easier to be who you are,” she said. “For people who are different.”

“That does sound nice,” Ruth admitted.

Over the next few weeks, the two would become closer than Brenna had planned. Every night, Ruth would come home from the bakery and make a pot of tea; the two women would sit down and the older one would beg to hear stories of the future: of the eighty-mile-per-hour cars, the movement towards social justice, and the unbelievable upswing in technology.

A year passed with no way back to the future making itself known. Brenna found a job as a librarian, and came to know all of the local children by name. With every day spent in the library, and every night sleeping on Ruth's couch, Brenna felt the 1970s drifting away, as if she were moving back in time rather than forward.

By the anniversary of her arrival, a vague, newfound ambition had taken over her thoughts: she couldn't return to the present, she figured, so she might as well have some fun in the past.

Her first idea – one that she came to regard as stupid and juvenile – was to track down F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* wouldn't be written for another four years, and she was determined to befriend the legendary writer and convince him to rename *Gatsby's* antagonist, Daisy Buchanan, after her. This idea went pretty much out the window when she realized that, not only was Fitzgerald an ocean away, but also that she was probably the only woman in the world currently named Brenna.

THE NUMBER FOUR

As she worked in the library and stayed with Ruth, Brenna thought of more and more ideas to manipulate history, most of which she knew didn't make a lot of sense. Maybe she would kick off the feminist movement early, or maybe she would invent television. Maybe she would write an award-winning autobiography and reveal the existence of time travel; or maybe she would –

Maybe she would stop World War II.

And why not? She was a fish out of water, a woman out of time – she had been given this incredible opportunity, one that no one – except past owners of the time machine, if there had been any of those – would ever know. Eighty million people died in World War II; seven million of them Jews. Brenna's people. Systematically tortured and wiped out by one man's sick ideals. If she could help – especially if she was the *only one* who could help – didn't she *have to*? Wasn't that her duty, her *responsibility*, as part of the targeted group? as a representative of the future? as a *human being*?

When Brenna's mind was made up, she began plotting out a course. This proved to be even more difficult than she thought it would, which was saying something.

Although her history courses at Manchester had spent plenty of time on the Holocaust, and World War II in general, Brenna couldn't seem to remember any important dates. None, at least, that she could use to get close to the Big Short Man in Charge. And this was the most important part of her plan – the *only* part of her plan, when she came right down to it. The only way she could imagine ending World War II before it began, the only way to ensure that seventeen million people would not be systematically destroyed: she was going to kill Hitler.

Brenna knew that the war wouldn't technically begin until 1939, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain would declare war on Germany, and more specifically the National Socialist German Workers' Party. This gave her another seventeen years to commit the one murder that could prevent millions more. And, more importantly, a good window of time to plan it out.

The answer came to her one night, just as she was falling asleep beneath her thin blanket. She had perhaps overdone the brandy that night, but she wasn't working the next day and felt like she owed herself.

Just as the cool air of Ruth's living room began to fade into the warm darkness of sleep, three words popped into Brenna's mind: three words that she hadn't thought of once since her graduation in 1972. Her eyes popped open and her stomach twisted, though she couldn't perfectly remember what the words meant.

Beer. Hall. Putz. These words ran through her mind on a loop, on

endless pages of ticker tape, flashing in neon signs and demanding to be recognized. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep after the words had so rudely forced themselves into her mind, but she also knew she was too tired for any critical thought.

The next morning, Brenna recognized the obvious fact that the last word wasn't *putz*. That particular slang term – exclusive to her people – wasn't around in the Twenties. At the same time she knew that the word couldn't be *putz*, she knew what it was: *Putsch*. At the moment, she couldn't remember the word's English translation, but she now saw the words for what they were: three parts of a single name. *Beer Hall Putsch*. It was an event, she knew, one that her subconscious mind had decided was important to her mission.

Over the next few months, Brenna tried to remember. She got her hands on a German-English dictionary and found that *Putsch* translated to *coup* or *revolt*. This revelation helped her along the way of remembering what, exactly, the Beer Hall Putsch was.

The ninth of November, 1923. That was the date she would put her plan into action. She was fairly sure this was the right day, but made her plans to accommodate for false memories. For the first time in her life, she wished she had paid more attention in history class.

Brenna had more than a year and a half to prepare. First, she got her finances in order, determining how much money she could save if she ate very little and stayed in London most of the time. She stopped any plans she'd had to acquire her own apartment, and told Ruth she was making quite a bit less than she was. Ruth, being a generally hospitable person, allowed Brenna to continue living in her home for almost nothing. Brenna didn't feel great about lying to her only real friend, but when she put this into perspective – one continuous falsehood to prevent the deaths of eighty million people – her conscience promptly shut the hell up.

When she was fairly certain she'd be able to save up enough money, Brenna moved on to the next part of her plan: learning the language. She didn't expect to become fluent in German over less than two years; neither did she think this was necessary. As long as she had some general knowledge, and could keep up a rough conversation, she would be fine.

In May of 1923, just over two years since her arrival, Brenna propositioned a man she knew, asking him to do her an immense favor, which wasn't much of a favor at all considering how much she was willing to pay him.

Jonathan was a wealthy man, probably somewhere in his thirties, who had taken to frequenting Brenna's library. She wasn't entirely sure what he did for a living, but she could tell he had money to spend.

THE NUMBER FOUR

Either his, or his parents', it didn't really matter. As a woman, she wasn't ready to take the risk of buying a gun herself.

"What are you planning to do with it?" Jonathan asked, his eyebrows arched in partially-false suspicion.

"Well that's what I'm paying you not to ask," Brenna replied. They sat in a restaurant, the kind that neither Brenna nor Ruth would have been able to afford with a week's wages. Jonathan wore a luxurious jacket that didn't quite go with his jodhpurs. He had just returned from a morning with his horse, Lily, and hadn't expected to meet anyone he knew, when Brenna saw him and suggested they have lunch. Brenna, for her part, had completely immersed herself in the fashion of the day, complete with a bob haircut and plenty of jewelry.

The two smoked cigarettes and enjoyed their meal of watercress salad, baked ham, stuffed celery, and, finally, Bakewell tart. Brenna hadn't eaten this well since her arrival in the Twenties, and found herself desperately craving a hamburger from the Woolwich McDonald's.

"How can I be sure that you won't use the gun to kill *me*?" Jonathan asked, his voice low and conspiratorial. Brenna thought his question was approximately twenty percent serious.

She took a long drag off her cigarette and allowed the smoke to drift from between her lips. *I must look so far out right now*, she thought, savoring the mental image of her as a flapper. Maybe it wasn't too late to seduce F. Scott Fitzgerald.

"Why should I want to kill you?" she asked, tapping the end of her cigarette holder into an ashtray.

"To get at my considerable fortune of course," Jonathan replied, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"So," she replied, hoping that, as someone who was generally considered *dorky* in her own time, she was able to pull off *coy*, or at least *demure*, in this time. "You believe my plan is to pay you money, which will allow me to murder you, and steal your money as well as my own?"

The conversation went on like this, back and forth, with Brenna silently comparing Jonathan's flirtation with that of modern-day men. He was less obvious, less brazenly focused on one particular eventuality. She liked it, to a point, but still wished she could find her way home to a world where she was treated as somewhat of an equal.

Eventually, Jonathan agreed to buy her a gun, and agreed to keep his silence. He allowed her to pay him for this service, but she got the feeling that he was mainly helping because he was interested in her, either romantically or in response to the mysterious air she couldn't help but maintain.

After some research, Brenna settled on the *Pistole Parabellum 1908*, invented by George Luger almost three decades earlier. The Luger was small, weighing in at only two pounds, and had a firing range of around fifty meters, which hopefully would give Brenna some leeway. Eight rounds in the magazine meant eight chances for her to hit her target, though only technically. She had two, maybe three tries to kill the bastard, depending on how crowded the titular beer hall was that night.

When the gun arrived by post, Jonathan rang Brenna and invited her over to his home. She went round immediately, thankful that, in this time period, she could at least assume that when a man invited her over, he wasn't looking for that now-legendary ONE THING that all men of the Seventies seemed so hellishly focused on.

Jonathan offered to show Brenna how to use the pistol. She accepted, gladly, and spent many hours over many days learning a quick draw and an even quicker aim.

As far as Brenna's feelings towards her upcoming homicide went, she had managed to convince herself over the last two years that killing Adolf Hitler would have all the moral repercussions of swatting a mosquito; less, in fact, because mosquitos didn't have much free will to speak of.

At the end of October, 1923, Jonathan began to speak casually of such issues as marriage, romance, et cetera. Brenna found herself flattered, but made sure he understood that she had something very important to do, something that might not end well for her. Jonathan begged her to explain not only her mission, but who she was and where she was from. He had long suspected that there was something off about her, something alien about the way she kept almost using slang that hadn't yet been developed, or referencing books that hadn't yet seen an English translation. Jonathan, while learning to love Brenna, had kept his mouth shut on all these questions. But now, when she insisted that she couldn't pursue any sort of romance thanks to her all-encompassing mission, he couldn't bear to be kept in the dark any longer.

When he finally asked, Brenna felt her heart going out to the poor, innocent man – this man who was both ten and fifty years her senior – and she told him some of her story. She explained that, for reasons she couldn't get into, she knew that a very bad man was plotting a hostile takeover of a foreign country. This couldn't be allowed to happen, she explained, because it would mean death and destruction across the entire planet. (Over the course of this discussion, Brenna accidentally referred to the last great conflict as *World War I*, a mistake which wasn't easy to explain away.)

THE NUMBER FOUR

Jonathan, predictably, asked Brenna to take him along. She refused, but she promised that, if she were to return safely, she would see him immediately.

On the twenty-ninth of October, 1923, Brenna boarded a ship from Dover to Calais, France; from there, she took a train to Munich. The entire ride – approximately six hours through Europe – her body felt both stiff and jittery, as if she was experiencing the negative effects of a caffeine overdose. Around Reims, she lit herself a cigarette, still refusing to believe that she had come to rely on them for stability. She shifted in her seat – she was thankfully devoid of any neighbors – and turned to stare out the window. The moon was almost full, and everything she saw was tinted in a blue, otherworldly light. France in the moonlight seemed as foreign and uninviting as the black hole of nothingness that had brought her back in time.

The Luger was tucked inside her jacket, ready at a moment's notice. She still had almost two weeks before she would have to use it – that is, if she had remembered the dates correctly – but she wanted to keep the gun as close as possible.

Brenna wasn't able to sleep much on the train. Her thoughts, refusing to focus on the matter at hand, continued to drift around vaguely, landing on old memories and old problems that didn't affect her anymore. Ruth, for one: Brenna felt guilty at packing up and leaving without giving her friend any real explanation, but she knew her mission was far more important than one woman's feelings. She had never told Ruth about Hitler, or about the impending war – this wasn't the sort of thing a struggling woman wanted to look forward to. Death, destruction, poverty...these were only vague concepts to someone from Brenna's time, even after the bloody shitshow that was Vietnam. She had grown up reading about the deadly war that had ended only five years before her birth; but her earliest memory was of watching television for the first time, not of feeling the earth begin anew after almost tearing itself apart.

If she didn't succeed, it was people like Ruth who would suffer. Innocent, hard-working people of the Free World who only understood Nazism as a spectral threat, an army made up of ghosts rather than flesh-and-blood people. Ruth herself, Brenna thought, may very well have died in World War II. She could have starved to death as London fell victim to rationing, or, perhaps more mercifully, been served a quick demise in the Blitz.

"I, will, kill you," Brenna murmured, pounding her hand on her thigh with every syllable. "I will kill you, Adolf Hitler." She didn't care if anyone overheard her; it wasn't as if anyone would recognize that name in 1923, even if they had understood the English words

preceding it.

After arriving in Munich, Brenna found herself a hotel room for less money than a cab ride across London would cost in 1977. If only, she thought, she had been allowed to empty her savings before traveling back in time.

The sun was just beginning to rise as Brenna stepped into her room, dropping her single bag to the floor. The Beer Hall Putsch, she believed, even if it *did* happen much earlier than she thought, wouldn't have occurred during the day. She definitely had time to take a nap.

When Brenna woke up, the sun had switched positions in the sky. It was the evening of October thirtieth, 1923.

Donning one of her few outfits, Brenna left her room and approached the hotel's main desk, where she asked the clerk, in probably very rough German, about nearby beer halls. His reply was slow and careful, but she still made out only a couple words. Luckily, one of those words was *Bürgerbräukeller*: exactly what she was looking for. The complex, double-umlauted word brought her back in time – or forward in time – to her history course at Manchester, the one where they had covered the rise of the Nazi Party. Ever since remembering the Beer Hall Putsch, she had known that the failed coup took place in one of Munich's largest drinking establishments, but hadn't been able to remember its name.

"*Danke*," she replied. Then, realizing that knowing the name of the beer hall wasn't quite enough: "*Wo ist das...Bürgerbräukeller?*" She cringed inwardly at her own pronunciation – not to mention her grammar – but the clerk didn't seem to care. Recognizing the language barrier, he wrote down the address on a slip of paper. "*Danke*," she said again, leaving the hotel.

When she found the Bürgerbräukeller, night had already fallen. Thankfully, there was no crowd of Brownshirts outside, which suggested to Brenna that the Putsch would not be taking place that night.

Still, she stepped inside and found an empty seat in the corner of the room, watching in silence as hundreds of men on all points of the sober-drunk spectrum debated politics in the angriest of languages.

Brenna returned the next evening – Halloween – the Luger tucked inside a German woman's coat she had bought. This, along with a wide-brimmed hat and a coat of blood-red lipstick, ensured that she wouldn't stand out in the more Eastern parts of Western Europe.

Again, nothing happened at the Bürgerbräukeller aside from the allotted fistfights and verbal assaults. This, Brenna thought, quietly sipping on her beer, would *never* go down in the present day. Several hundred drunk men and their dates, all yelling at each other about

politics? How did *that* make any sense? She tried to imagine the hippies of her teen years, drunk and stoned off their minds, yelling at a hundred of Richard Nixon's conservative Establishment buddies.

"Far out," she muttered into her beer.

The next night, Brenna could have sworn she heard the word *Nazi* being tossed around; but she could hardly understand the Germans when they were speaking one at a time, let alone shouting at and over each other. A year and a half of studying by herself had been enough for some decent understanding of the language's mechanics, but she doubted if even a native speaker could understand the cacophony of the Bürgerbräukeller.

For a week, nothing happened. Brenna would spend the day in her hotel, trying to read a novel she had picked up at a Munich bookstore, or contemplating whether or not she would actually want to marry Jonathan.

It wasn't until the seventh of November that everything came to a head.

She had just sat down in her usual spot when she noticed someone else entering the room. This wasn't unusual – people came and went in the Bürgerbräukeller like clockwork – except that this patron was wearing a hood pulled down over his face, concealing his identity from a crowd that didn't even notice him.

Brenna leaned forward, beer in hand, staring through the arguing crowd to where the hooded stranger came to sit, at an unoccupied table in one corner of the room. He sat there, unmoving, for several minutes, before he was joined by another figure, this one nearly his opposite. While the hooded man was short, stocky, and concealed from sight, the second man was tall, broad, wearing nothing on his head but a pair of old-fashioned sunglasses. He was completely bald, and wore what Brenna thought were regular civvies for this time and place.

The bald man joined the hooded man, and a waitress appeared. The latter looked up to see her, allowing the hood to slip down his cheek.

It was as if an electric jolt had gone through Brenna's body. She had to force her hand to stop shaking long enough to set her beer down, then took several deep breaths into the collar of her jacket.

She knew those doughy cheeks, those squinty eyes, and – dear God – that perfectly square moustache. He was there. Just across the room. The man who would, given sixteen years, begin a war on humanity and wipe out millions of innocents. One man – one tiny, insignificant man – would kill millions.

"It's now," she whispered to herself, feeling the Luger, hard against

her chest. In that moment, she remembered: the Putsch was to take place on the eighth, not the ninth. That was tomorrow. Today was her last chance to kill him before his failed takeover went down.

She reached into her collar, felt the cold metal of the gun on her fingers.

The entire room – hundreds of screaming voices – seemed to grow fainter and less important as she walked, as if on autopilot, towards Adolf Hitler and his bald companion.

Her hand wrapped around the Luger's hilt, and her index finger found its trigger. She was closing in. Ten yards. Nine. Seven.

Neither Hitler nor his companion had noticed her among the other patrons. She had to be quick, she knew. Shoot, and run. She didn't have the faintest hint of a plan for her life after the murder, but right now, she wasn't worried. Providence had smiled on her – *God* had smiled on her – and she was about to claim victory for herself.

She began to slide the gun from its pocket, just as Hitler looked up. Their eyes met; hers set, determined, angry, and his moving from curious to panicked as he recognized her stance.

Then a voice yelled her name. She spun around and saw nothing but a hundred confused faces staring her way. Something slammed into her and she felt herself being pushed towards the door, out into the cool night air.

“What the fuck were you *thinking?*” a voice yelled, in English, inches away.

Brenna forced her body to recognize this new change in scenery and righted her posture, turning to face the man. For the second time in two minutes, she felt a shock run through her body. “*Jonathan?*”

He looked dubious. “Is that my name?” he asked, then shrugged. “Huh. Whatever. It's cool, I guess.”

Brenna just stared at him. It was Jonathan, no question: he wore the same black coat, the same riding trousers – black, with a red stripe up each leg – he had worn on the day he promised to buy her the Luger. In addition, he wore a top hat and a pair of goggles: she recognized these as his driving goggles, which were considerably out of style by the early Twenties, but which he felt better wearing.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. In the back of her mind, she figured that, as long as they stood near the door, Hitler couldn't escape.

“Stopping you from making a huge mistake,” Jonathan replied, as if this should have been obvious. “Killing Hitler? Seriously? It's like you're *trying* to be cliché.”

“Why are you talking like that,” she demanded. A few passersby glanced at them, but said nothing.

“Like what?” Jonathan asked.

“Like – like me!” she cried. “You’re talking like someone from –”

“From modern day?” he completed. “You should know by now that modern day for you isn’t modern day for everyone. For me, modern day is November seventh, 1923. Modern day means being buried under a road in London.” He took a breath, sounding almost exasperated. “Anyways, you fucked up big time not taking the machine with you into the past.”

“You’re not Jonathan,” she murmured, the truth hitting her even as she said the words.

He shrugged again. “Everyone who meets me calls me something different.” Then, admiring his thin body: “But I do like this look. There’s a certain classiness that went out the window when Elvis happened.”

“You’re the machine,” she said. Suddenly, the concept of murdering Hitler and preventing World War II was not the craziest idea on the table.

“It’s called the Number Four,” Jonathan replied. She could see her face, confused and pained, reflected in both his lenses. “I thought you would’ve gotten that, since it’s literally written on the back.”

“What *is* it?” she demanded. “Who made it? How can I use it to get back?”

Jonathan shook his head. “Can’t tell you that,” he replied. “My job is just to stop you from screwing up the timeline too badly. Guy from the 1960s ends up in the Dark Ages, that’s fine. Guy from the end of the world wants to live in the Seventies, that’s fine too. Girl from the Seventies wants to kill Hitler...that’s something else.”

“I’d be saving tens of *millions* of people!” Brenna cried. She didn’t care about the pedestrians staring at them, or the occasional drunk patron who would stumble out of the hall. She only cared that for two and a half years, nothing had happened; now, in the space of one minute, she was faced with both the triumph of her mission and a possible explanation to her new life.

“You can’t take that risk,” Jonathan explained. “I know you feel like you’re doing the right thing, but you can’t imagine all the different ways things could happen. What if someone who died in World War II would’ve grown up to be even *worse* than Hitler? What if you killed Hitler and one of his followers took his place? There’s just too many possibilities. With the Number Four, you can do pretty much anything – that’s why I’m here. To make sure you don’t.”

The weight of his words, Brenna knew, would come crashing down on her as soon as the adrenaline wore off. Two and a half years spent preparing for this night, and it had all been for nothing. She would be mad, she would be *furious* – but right now, she wanted justice.

“If you’re not going to let me do what I came here to do,” she said evenly, “You have to give me another chance. Let me use the Number Four again. This time, I won’t try to change anything. I won’t try to help anyone. I just want another chance.”

Jonathan stared at her for a long moment, before letting out a deep sigh. “Usually that would be impossible,” he said. “But since you left it back in 1977...”

Then, without finishing his sentence, he disappeared into thin air.

Brenna was left, alone and shivering, in a foreign country and a foreign time.

More than five decades later, the Number Four was dug up by a team of archaeologists. It was on that dig, underneath a hastily-constructed tent in the middle of London, that a familiar scene played out – one that had been reenacted many times throughout history, throughout the future, in timelines that no longer existed.

“*Brenna!*”

The young woman holding the Number Four jumped at the sound of her name. She turned to see a young man standing before her, one she didn’t recognize. He was dressed like someone from the Victorian era, or the early twentieth century, with a top hat and a pair of goggles covering his eyes.

“Uh...hi,” she said, surprised by his sudden appearance.

Before the young man could speak, another voice startled them both:

“*You!*”

Brenna and the man turned to see another figure approaching, moving slowly across what had recently been a movie theater parking lot. It was an old woman, they saw, walking with a cane and wearing a furious expression.

“You *bastard!*” the old woman screamed, her pace quickening. Brenna glanced at the young man, completely at a loss. Had that mysterious device summoned a troupe of weirdos to her dig?

“Brenna,” the man said. Brenna almost replied, but she realized that he had been talking to the old woman. She glanced over to where a couple of her colleagues were scrounging around beneath the earth’s surface, completely oblivious to the bizarre scene taking place under the tent.

“*No!*” the old woman cried. She had finally reached them, and she jabbed an accusing finger at the young man. “I’ve waited fifty-four years to see you again! You *abandoned me*, you *fucker!*”

Brenna took a step back, alarmed at the sheer hatred in the woman’s eyes. But there was something else that scared her: a familiarity, as if the woman was some unknown relative. Did she

maybe recognize her...?

"I do what I have to do," the young man replied calmly. "I broke the rules for you. You should be thankful."

"*Thankful?*" she screamed, her wrinkled face contorting in despair. "Thankful for *abandoning me in the past?* I had to live through the war! The war you *stopped me from preventing!*"

"Brenna," the man said, and this time he appeared to actually be talking to her.

"Uh...yeah?" Brenna replied. She had no idea what was going on – but she felt somehow involved, as if she had once known what this fight was about, as if the emotionally-charged dialogue was somehow her own.

"That machine you found?" He nodded backwards, his top hat dipping towards the red device. "It's a time machine."

Brenna felt her pulse quicken, and told herself that was stupid. "What?"

"And you're not allowed to change the past."

"What?" she said again. Her confused face was reflected in the man's goggles.

"You can go back to any point in history," he explained, "But you can't change anything. No trying to stop wars or alter history."

"Um...okay," Brenna replied. She was about to say something else, something that involved wondering who these strange people were, when the old woman seemed to realize what was going on.

"*No!*" she screamed, lunging for the young man. Her hands were outstretched, fingers curled like claws, and Brenna had no doubt that she meant to murder him.

She stepped back in surprise. The young man didn't move at all.

In the last instant before those ancient hands could wrap around his throat, the old woman vanished. Brenna felt her depth perception flail around wildly, searching for the human figure she had just been staring at.

"What the –" Brenna gasped.

The young man shrugged. "She didn't play the game right," he said. "The game of back-and-forth. It's like a seesaw. I keep going back, and I keep going forward. Nothing really changes."

Brenna just stared at him, any hope of rational thought disappearing alongside the old woman.

"It's not always easy, living with the shit I have to do," the man continued. He didn't seem to be talking to her at all. "But after all these years – more years than I could even count up if I tried – it's gotten a little less painful. I can watch people die and understand that they're only one among thousands – that there's infinite possibilities,

infinite timelines, and only one person who even comes close to understanding.” His goggles were trained on the ground, right where the old woman had stood. “I broke the rules, giving her what she wanted,” he said. “I can’t do that too often. But I did what she asked and it killed her. No – worse – it stopped her from existing. All to give you another chance.” He looked up at Brenna, and she saw herself again reflected in his goggles. This time, just for a fraction of a second, so insignificant that it couldn’t have been anything but a trick of the light, she thought she saw her face shifting into that of the old woman. “So,” he said, picking up the device. “Would you like another chance?”

Brenna allowed the young man to prompt her into trying out the device, though her fingers were operating completely separate of her brain. She turned the knobs a couple of times, watching the Rolodex numbers flip past as the green glass began to shine. When a black hole opened in the air, she felt herself being jolted back to reality and almost yelled for one of her colleagues; but before she could, she felt two strong hands on her back, and she was in a movie theater.

The room was dark, crowded, and full of cigarette smoke. The audience’s eyes were glued to the screen, which was playing something black-and-white. Brenna recognized the movie after a few minutes: it was *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

Brenna married, eventually, never telling her husband about having come from the future. It wasn’t difficult getting used to life in the Fifties – just more poodle skirts and less constitutional rights. The Number Four she kept hidden away in a wooden chest, one she’d had custom-made for the machine’s proportions. She told her husband not to open the chest exactly once, and he expressed his total lack of interest in opening the chest ever.

One day, two years after her appearance, Brenna took a day trip up to Manchester. With the help of a gas station map, she found her way to one very specific address. She purchased an additional map, just in case, but when she found the neighborhood she realized she still recognized every detail.

Brenna parked on the other side of the street and smoked a cigarette, looking completely nonchalant in her sunglasses and handkerchief. A three-year-old girl was sitting on the lawn across from her, tossing a ball between two chubby hands. She seemed completely engrossed in her play, as if that ball was the most complex element of the universe, as if with all the time travel and paradoxes and insanity, with everything that the human race had yet to learn about life, there was nothing half so important as the happiness of a child.

Finally, the little girl looked up and saw the woman, sitting parked

THE NUMBER FOUR

in her convertible, just across the street. They locked eyes, the girl's smile fading into something more coherent. Brenna removed her sunglasses and stared back, willing the girl to understand.

The moment was broken when the girl's mother called for her to come inside. Brenna wanted to hear more of that voice, to see more of that girl; but she drove away, away from Manchester, away from the past.

Brenna's daughter Evangeline was born in 1959, after which the family moved to the countryside. This had all been Brenna's idea, and she hadn't had any reasonable explanation; she just kept saying that London was bad luck.

In 1971, Brenna's husband gave in to the cancer that had been eating away at his system. Still in mourning, Brenna packed up her things and bought a plane ticket for both her and the twelve-year-old Evangeline. They flew to New York City soon after.

Brenna was never willing to discuss her past with Evangeline, neglecting even to explain their sudden move to America. She herself wasn't totally sure of much – she wasn't totally sure of *anything*, really – all she knew was that there were too many possibilities in London. Too many coincidences.

Evangeline grew up, went to school, had her own career. She and her mother continued to be close, though there was always the understanding that there were things about Brenna that she wasn't ready to discuss. Perhaps she never would be.

Evangeline's first marriage, initiated in her early thirties, ended in a messy divorce. At forty-six, when her mother took ill, Evangeline was alone again, childless and feeling the effects of the twenty-first century's stellar economy.

It was only on Brenna's deathbed that she finally told her daughter what she needed to hear.

"I've been selfish," Brenna croaked, her hand squeezed in both of her daughter's. "I should have told you sooner, but...I didn't want you to go."

"You're not selfish," Evangeline murmured through the tears. She had only just managed to clear the hospital room of personnel, and was feeling the emotional brunt of everything come down on her shoulders.

"Shh," Brenna said. "Do you...have it?"

Evangeline nodded and reached over to pick up the wooden chest her mother had requested. She recognized it as a permanent fixture in their homes, both England and America, but only now realized that she had never seen its contents.

"Open it," her mother whispered.

Slowly, reverently, Evangeline opened the lid, revealing a device of some kind, roughly the size of a book, made of scratched-up red metal. A gear protruded from its side. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's called the Number Four," Brenna murmured. "It can take you anywhere you'd like to go. It worked for me, and it worked for... so many others." She let out a deep sigh, feeling suddenly peaceful.

Evangeline stared down at her mother, tears running down both cheeks.

"And there's a little man," Brenna continued, "Who lives inside the Number Four. He can look like anyone you like. Sometimes he gets lonely, when nobody uses the machine. Sometimes...he likes to talk." She reached out with a frail hand and Brenna grasped it. "The past can't be changed," she murmured. Her eyes, glassy and lifeless, stared at the ceiling. "But the future can, my love. The future can be changed, because the future is nothing. It's like smoke...in the wind. Like sand, at the bottom of the ocean."

Evangeline leaned forward, laying her head against her mother's chest, just as she had done so often as a child. Her tears stained the thin fabric of Brenna's hospital gown.

"This is your time now," Brenna murmured, as her soul slipped away. "Don't let it go to waste."