**The Coin & Lost Boy (2 )**

The friends stared in disbelief, as the young babbling boy rushed towards the stone arch.

“You can’t believe what I’ve found over there,” Sid yelled excitedly but ten paces from the arch he came to an abrupt halt. People were staring at him. Instinctively, he retreated a few steps as though sensing danger, but oddly— they looked slightly familiar.

“Hi, Sid,” Vinnie shouted. Sid moved a few paces nearer, his sceptical eyes scrutinising their faces. “How do you know my name?” he asked looking past the people towards the car-park. “Have you seen my friends around here?” he added. “Sid— we are your friends,” Vinnie called. Sid gave an awkward half smile, shrugged and shook his head— he wasn’t entirely sure what was going on. “Sorry, but you’re old, my friends are the same age as me.”

Arnie turned to whisper to his friends. “Let's sit down, it’s less confrontational.” Crouching on the flagstones, Jacko released his hold on Vinnie as they sat next to each other.

Sid took the opportunity to edge closer a couple of steps, his anxiety increasing by the second. He couldn’t see or hear his friends but more importantly— why was it dark where the people were? But that thought vanished as the woman spoke. “Sid, come and sit down and tell us where you’ve been?” He did as he was asked but shook his head slightly as he responded. “I haven’t been anywhere. I was over there,” he added, pointing towards the car-park. “Then I ran through here to that big bush over there.”

He turned briefly and gestured to where he’d come from. “That’s where I found a foxhole big enough to stick my head in.”

He took a quick breath, then added with excitement, “That’s where I found these,” triumphantly holding out a hand full of coins.

“Wow, you have loads, but why have you been away so long?” asked Vinnie. Sid shook his head again. “I haven’t,” he stressed. “I’ve been ten or fifteen minutes. I wriggled into the hole because I wanted to make sure I’d got all the coins but I got stuck.”

With that, Sid got up and was about to cross the threshold to their side but Arnie yelled at him. “Sid, stop, don’t move,” he ordered. The aggressive tone startled the young boy and he backed away as though about to run off. “We need to explain important things to you,” Vinnie quickly added, gesturing for him to come and sit closer. The confused lad glanced cautiously at the men before choosing to sit opposite the woman, although still on his side of the arch. He leaned forward and stared inquisitively at her for a few seconds before whispering. “Do you have a daughter?” Vinnie smiled then laughed, which made him grin and relax a little.

“No, Sid, not yet.”

“I’ve a friend who looks a lot like you,” he offered. The pair gazed at one another in silence for a moment.

“Sid— something very odd has happened and we need to explain it but you must try and stay calm,” Vinnie said softly. “When you ran through the arch, we think you passed into a different time, a bit like what happens in movies,” she added as casually as she could but it still made Sid stare at her with big luminous eyes. “Really?” he spluttered with a touch of excitement. “You think I’m a time traveller?” he said with a bewildered face.

“But where are my friends? And why is it dark over there?” he added as tears filled his eyes. “I want to go home, please.”

Vinnie smiled broadly, trying to keep her young friend relaxed. “OK, that can happen very soon but you need to understand a few more things.” She paused and looked at the three guys beside her. Arnie raised an eyebrow.

“He’s taken a shine to you, probably best if you tell him what’s happened,” he said, inclining his head towards Sid, as the others nodded in agreement.

“Sid, you said you were by the bush for ten or fifteen minutes.” Sid nodded then wiped his eyes with the back of his hand as Vinnie continued. “Amazingly, it's been a lot longer than that,” she said excitedly, hoping her enthusiasm would reduce the shock of what she was about to reveal. “But can you remember the names of the friends you were here with?” Sid looked at her dumbstruck. “Yes, of course, how could I forget in— fifteen minutes?” he said, then proceeded to count their names off on his grubby fingers. As he finished, Vinnie nodded and smiled before pointing at the people next to her, “This is Arnie, Jacko, Stick and me— Vinnie,” she said.

The young boy’s face was colourless, his mouth dropped open in horror or amazement as he scrutinized each smiling face in turn. Then covering his glistening eyes, his head fell forward as he started to cry. “I want to go home,” he sobbed. “I don’t understand and I’m frightened.”

Vinnie turned to her friends and spread out her hands. “What do we do now, we can’t just sit here?” Arnie jumped to his feet, prompting Jacko to do the same.

“I know what you’re thinking, Arnie, but you can’t cross that threshold and neither can Sid, not until we find out what will change.”

“Look,” Arnie shouted, “this is our chance to get our mate back, we can’t lose him again.”

“I know, I know,” Jacko stressed. “But, we need to see what happens when something crosses that threshold, and something not as valuable as Sid.”

Without thinking, Stick tossed a coin to Sid but it bounced back, as though hitting an invisible screen. He shrugged and grimaced. “Well, that solves one problem.”

“Bloody hell, Stick, you could have blown everything,” Arnie muttered.

“No, there’s a reason for all of this and blowing it isn't one of them,” Stick added.

“So what's the answer, Brains?” asked Vinnie. “I have no idea but I think we need to test something other than this coin, it might be special,” Stick answered.

A moment later a few stones, a watch and a ring all failed to cross the divide. “OK, Sid, your turn. Find something to throw.” He was already holding a coin, so lobbed it straight at Vinnie, who caught it. Arnie pointed at a small stone. “See if that works too?” It did. “Well, there you go! It’s a one-way divide,” yelled Stick.

Before anyone could react, Sid jumped to his feet and dashed out; causing a huge shockwave that blew everyone over. Vinnie scrambled to her feet and ran to comfort Sid, who was hunched up and sobbing.

Stick sprinted off to the car-park. “I’ll be back in a minute,” he shouted.

The other two gazed at Sid, as Jacko whispered. “What the hell are we going to tell his family? His mum and dad will have heart failure,” he added, as Vinnie coaxed Sid to his feet. “You’re safe now; you’re back home where you belong. Let's go sit over there on the steps and sort out what to do next.”

Stick arrived back with a bottle of water, which he handed to Sid. “Welcome home, buddy,” he said with a big grin before adding, “I’ve just checked the BBC News on my phone. Thankfully we're still in the same time zone and year. After that frigging surge, I thought we might have been transported somewhere else. So you're still marrying Sid’s sister in a couple of days’,” he added, nudging Arnie with his elbow. Sid looked up wide-eyed. “You’re marrying my sister?”

§

Half an hour later, after Sid had cried, laughed, and put forward some valid points, the gang came to a consensus, due in part to the portal still being open. It was decided that fifteen minutes, fifteen years and fifteen coins held the answer to this puzzle. “If the portal put Sid’s life on hold, then each coin could represent a year. So maybe he should give them back,” Jacko paused and turned towards the arch.

“It seems like it’s waiting for us to do something,” he added in an uneasy voice.“That won't work,” Stick responded, “It didn’t accept the coin I threw.”

“True— but Sid throwing it, might be a different matter,” replied Vinnie.

 “It’s worth a try. What do you think Sid?” Jacko asked. Sid shrugged. “I’m only twelve. How am I supposed to know?”

Vinnie wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. “You’re a time traveller; you’re a very special person. Why not give it a go?”

Walking towards the arch, with its beautiful summer's day streaming through, Sid grabbed Vinnie’s hand. “I’ll do it— but you mustn’t let go of me, I don’t want to get sucked in there again,” he said, pointing a finger. She smiled back reassuringly. “We’ll all hold hands to make doubly sure then.” Sid took a coin from his pocket. “Ok, here goes,” he said before tossing it over the threshold. To their amazement, it passed over and disappeared with a slight pop. Everyone turned to look at Sid’s face.

“Anything happen with you, Sid?” asked Arnie. Sid shrugged and shook his head. “Well, that was a bit of an anti-climax,” Stick scoffed. “I thought we might have had some fireworks or something more dramatic than just a pop.”

As Sid rummaged for another coin, he felt an odd buzzing sensation in his head. He squeezed Vinnie’s hand, making her look down. Lying in his palm were three coins. “What do you think?” he asked. She smiled. “If the coins have relevance, those could give a better and stronger indication.” Sid’s eyes squinted at her. “Does that mean throw them?” He didn’t wait for a reply; he just flung them as hard as he could. A split second later Vinnie released the hands she was holding and stepped back from the group. “Oh! Gosh— now that was really weird,” she stammered rubbing her hands together. “Sid’s hand suddenly grew,” she added, making everyone gaze at him. “What are you guys staring at?” he asked in a croaky voice.

“You’re growing up, Sid,” they said excitedly, almost in unison, with Stick adding. “I think we’re going to have a problem with clothes.”

Minutes later, while Vinnie turned her back, Sid was undressed and put into a tracksuit Stick had retrieved from his car. With the arms and legs rolled up on Sid’s new outfit, the gang held hands again, as Sid began throwing one coin after another. But as the fourteenth coin disappeared, everyone jumped in fright, as a thunderclap shut down the portal.

It took several seconds for their eyes to adjust before realizing they were still stood next to the old oak door but, in the moonlight, it was easy to see what had happened to Sid. He was now a tall good looking guy with broad shoulders, his masculine figure filling Stick’s tracksuit admirably. His light coloured hair had lost its curl and was replaced by a slight wave that fell casually across his forehead. But what set him apart was the mischief that danced in his eyes, enhanced by a broad endearing smile that Vinnie thought rather cute.

“Welcome home, Sid,” she said softly; giving him a hug but their embrace was short-lived, as the rest barged in. “Wow, buddy, you turned out good,” Jacko joshed. “I like the moustache. Whose idea was that?” Stick asked.

Arnie held Sid at arm's length for a moment. “We were devastated when you vanished but you’ve never been out of our thoughts.” He stopped a moment, holding back tears. “It’s just amazing to have you back,” he managed to say before they hugged.

It took a few moments before both men relaxed their hold and with tear-filled eyes, they grinned at one another, as Arnie asked, “How the hell are we going to tell your mother?” This brought laughter from them all.

§

Parked outside Sid’s house at 5.30am, the Range Rover occupants were on a high, apart from Sid who was extremely nervous.

Arnie had called Ann, his fiancée, and given her a brief explanation of what had happened. “Get everyone out of bed and in the kitchen, we’ll be there shortly,” he’d added.

Ann was at the front door as Arnie walked towards her. “Where’s my brother?” she whispered “In the car and he’s as nervous as hell,” he said in a low voice, then received a quick kiss before Ann hurried to the car.

Arnie made a beeline for the kitchen and was greeted by pale, fully awake faces. Both Ann’s sisters were leant against the sink, wrapped in pink woolly bathrobes, with cups in their hands. Jack, their dad, was dressed as though he was going gardening. Mabel, the head of the household had several rollers in her hair and was wearing a dressing gown that he and Ann had brought back from Thailand. “What’s all the bloody fuss about?” Jack demanded as Arnie sat down. “You're not breaking the wedding off, are you?” Mabel blurted. “Ann’s not told you anything?” asked Arnie. “No— said you had something important to discuss.”

“Well, it’s now’t to do with the wedding, so don’t panic.” Mabel shook her head and sighed. “I told you, Jack, children are more of a worry when they get older.” Jack sipped his tea before shaking his head. “So what’s this all about, lad?”

Arnie reached across the table and held Mabel’s hands as he spoke. “It’s about your Sid,” he said in a half whisper, as if that would take the shock away. Her eyes widened and glistened as she gazed at Arnie before turning to her husband. “Jack, I don’t think we should hear this now.” The faces of Ann’s sisters turned paler as they put an arm around each other.

Jack gave Arnie a look of regret because deep down he knew what they had found. “It has to come out sometime, love,” he murmured, then added, “What’ve you found, lad?”

If a pin had dropped next door or across the street, it would have been heard in that small kitchen as all eyes were fixed on the early morning arrival.

“Hard to explain but something very odd has happened,” Arnie said, then added. “We found your Sid at the Abbey,” but instantly realized that could mean his remains, so quickly added, “And he’s fit and well.”

Mabel’s mouth was hung open, her eyes twice the size, Jack’s were full of tears and the girls stood with hands over their mouths. “You've found my little boy? How can that be, after all this time?” Mabel stuttered in a half whisper. “We’re not sure how or why but the Abbey’s arched door turned into some sort of wormhole or a time machine— anyway, it gave Sid back to us.”

“Where is the poor child?” Mabel cried as she got to her feet, but she was cut off by the noise of excited people entering the hall, followed quickly by Ann bursting through the kitchen door. Her grin was from ear to ear, her red puffy eyes glistened. “Mum, Dad,” she announced as Sid entered the room.

§

Hours later, after a great deal of hugging and cuddling, mixed with moments of crying and laughter in abundance, things started to calm down. It had been agreed the wedding would not be postponed. Sid would join Stick and Jacko as best man.

Shopping trips were scheduled to sort out his wardrobe, so everyone had to-do lists. One of the first jobs was to inform the police of Sid’s return.

That night Sid lay on his bed for the first time in— Part of his mind reasoned it was only a few hours, but much deeper, he felt it was almost a lifetime. After his arrival home, time had passed quickly through breakfast and lunch. Later that afternoon his mum had taken him upstairs to show him his room. It was an immaculate shrine she’d kept to strengthen her faith that her little boy had only become lost. As she held him tight in her arms, she poured out her heart. “I never gave up hope,” she sobbed. “Deep down, I knew you were safe somewhere in the world.”

Mabel had kept Sid’s room as clean as a new pin and sat in the middle of his bed was Patrick O'Flannelly, the dummy he’d been given last Christmas. Weeks before, the family had gone to a pantomime where a ventriloquist had fascinated the young Sid and captured his imagination.

O’Flannelly wore bright green trousers and a jacket with big brass buttons. Over his pink shirt, he had a red waistcoat, with a gold watch chain strung across his portly belly. His green top hat sat jauntily on his head, keeping most of his bright ginger sticky out hair away from his big eyes and below these was a swollen sausage-like nose. What enhanced the comical package was his long narrow face, prominent lips and big mouth, which looked hysterical when he laughed because his head almost fell in half.

A few days after Christmas, Sid had quickly learned how to operate the dummy’s inner workings.

Blinking, winking and with the aid of a short stick, he made movements like Pat was pointing his right hand. But the talking without opening his mouth was almost impossible. After hours and hours in front of a mirror, he’d made little headway in becoming the ventriloquist he so wanted to be. Over the following months, he’d continued to practise but Pat became less important and more of a fixture on his bedside table.

§

Sid plonked Pat on the dressing table before relaxing on his bed. Gazing at the ceiling, he noticed the tiny indent made by a slug from Jacko’s air pistol which had gone off accidentally and now—

Closing his eyes he clearly remembered that afternoon as if it was yesterday, but had it happened a few months or fifteen years ago? If it was that long, what was the point of losing time? What had he gained, apart from an adult body and a very old coin? But thankfully he was back with his family and friends. He smiled and stretched out.

He didn’t know the answer to the lost time but what made him confident he would, was the warmth the coin gave. And whenever he thought about the coin, as he just had, it radiated a tiny amount of heat, as if a reminder. But what was he supposed to remember?

“So, Patrick, have you missed me while I’ve been gone?” Sid whispered. Obviously, there was total silence.

Lying there, alone in his room, Sid was conscious of things he shouldn’t know. As they’d driven back from the abbey, he’d realized the coin in his pocket gave him insight— because Arnie had a tiny ulcer growing close to a wisdom tooth; Jacko’s hearing would give trouble in only a few years; Stick was gay but hadn’t come to terms with it and Vinnie, well, for the moment he had mixed messages he found hard to fathom. The most pressing was his mum— she had a benign tumour that would need attention in a couple of months. Which brought him to his sister Ann and that thought made him smile. Then there was Jack, his dad, who’d always been an active guy and was still as fit as a fiddle.

Rolling onto his side he gazed at the funny chap looking back at him. Intuitively he knew Pat was going to make people happy and laugh and the coin was all part of the plan. On cue, the warm glow in his pocket made him sit up, just as Pat chipped in.

“What you just said back there, young fella. I think you should be trying it again without moving your lips.”

“And why would I want to do that, Pat?”

“Well, you’re older now; you might be a lot bloody smarter.” This was followed by a chuckle, which sounded like someone laughing down a drainpipe.

Sid swung his legs off the bed and smiled at the dummy. “What makes you so bright all of a sudden, Pat?” As a colourful and eloquent response came flowing back, Sid caught sight of his reflection in the dressing table mirror and realized he was talking without moving his lips.

He quickly repeated what he’d said then sat grinning at the small figure but his brain was popping with scenes and locations that flashed through his mind.

There was Pat sat in front of an audience, ruefully shaking his head and saying.

“You can lead a horse to water,” before giving Sid an odd sideways look accompanied by ripples of laughter. A second later they were surrounded by grinning old people, most slumped in wheelchairs but eyes alive and shining. This was followed by children without hair laughing and giggling, sat on hospital beds, which opened a floodgate of ideas in Sid’s mind.

§

At the wedding reception, when the band took a break, several staff members quickly lined up rows of chairs in front of the stage. The front row was for family, the others for the rest.

As the lights dimmed, Sid walked towards the mic. He thanked his mum and dad, then started to tell everyone what had happened to him but after only a few words he stopped and lowered his gaze to the floor. Vinnie thought he was holding back tears but suddenly he looked up. “I apologise, I suddenly realize I can’t do this—” he said, which brought groans and moans and looks of concern from all. “But I do have a friend who I’m sure can explain just about everything,” he added softly.

On cue, a young waitress arrived carrying a pillowcase. As Sid adjusted a few things inside the case, there were mutterings, a squeal, an odd groan. A moment later the girl removed the pillowcase with a flourish, revealing Patrick O'Flannelly, bringing a roar of approval from the audience. It also brought a great deal of clattering, squeals and laughter as the children dashed to sit on the floor close to the stage.

Pat looked rather startled, his eyes blinking repeatedly due to the spotlight, but that didn’t stop him turning quickly to letch at the young assistant as she walked off.

“My dear friends, I’d like to intro—” but Sid was abruptly cut off. “Hold up, hold up there,” Pat shouted, his head quickly swivelling to glance at the multitude of faces grinning at him. Seconds later his animated head flicked back to stare at Sid but his voice had dropped three notches. “Now looky you here, young fella. I’m the star here, you're the just the assistant.” Everyone laughed; the kids giggled and squealed at the little green man.

While this was going on, Sid’s face was blank, his lips never moved, he appeared to be looking for an escape door, as his dummy oozed out an animated introduction.

“Ladies and gentle-men,” he exuded. “The name’s O’Flannelly,” he announced, looking wide-eyed at all the children. “So, my lovelies, you’ve decided to come and get a better look? Very wise indeed but did you eat all your dinner?” he asked. They all nodded and grinned. “Hands up who didn’t like the pudding?” he inquired while shaking his head frantically, making his top hat almost rotate.

Three children raised their hands. Pat’s head fell forward as though he’d died. A moment later he sat up and glared down at them opened mouthed. His hand waved about frantically as he shouted the same question, getting every tiny hand to be lifted high.

“Ha, as I thought,” he yelled triumphantly before giving a gargled drainpipe laugh, which had everyone in stitches. “Well look you here,” he whispered in a croaky voice as he leaned towards the kids.

“Now I want no questions or arguing. You see the man at the back of the room wearing the tall white chef's hat?” He broke off and turned to Sid as though ready to ask a question but shook his head and turned back to the kids. “Little people— is it true his head goes to the top of that hat?” Which brought shrieks of laughter as they all shouted, “No!”

“Are you sure now, you wouldn’t be joshing your uncle Pat?” Their heads all shook obediently, their wide eyes mesmerised by the little man.

He looked around furtively for a moment before leaning towards them as he whispered. “Very well then, hands up who’d be wanting ice cream?”

Moments later the adults were alone and Pat got into his stride. “Now, Mabel, my darling, they took your lad because puberty and adolescence were going to be bloody horrific— you didn’t miss a thing— but you might want to pay attention to what he gets up to at night— he’s been on his own for a while, if you get my meaning.” This was followed by more drainpipe laughter and hoots and whistles from Arnie and his buddies.

Pat made his hat wobble excitedly before pointing at Sid’s father.

“Jack, my old friend, did you ever get rid of that greenfly on the tomatoes?” This brought hoots of laughter, as everyone knew Jack’s precious garden was his world. “Oh, and by the way, Jack,” Pat added as if an afterthought, “They thought explaining the facts of life to your boy— well, you understand where I’m coming from here?”

As the laughter died down, O’Flannelly briefly told the tale about the coins and why Sid had been left with one. “It’s all due to the lad not being too bright,” Pat scoffed.

“It’s to help with that and give a deeper insight about life— I’m sure he won’t understand, so I’ve donated a piece of my mind to help things along. Well— you're not thinking he could do all this on his own, now are ya?”

As the laughter subsided, Pat’s arm reached out over the audience before his fickle finger of fate pointed at Ann.

“Does he know?” Pat whispered, gesturing to Arnie with a tilt of his head. Ann’s face flushed. O’Flannelly inclined his head knowingly, then gazed at her before giving a long deliberate wink. “Oh! He does,” Pat added nodding, which made his hat wobble comically. “Well, girl, don’t you be buying anything in pink, you’ll give the child a complex.” Then came another drainpipe laugh as his sister glared back at Sid, then started laughing.

This interaction was not lost on Mabel, who got up and stood in front of her daughter with a look as though she was about to slap her. A moment later she’d pulled her to her feet. “Are you pregnant?” she whispered. Ann grimaced. Her mother suddenly wrapped her arms around her and began to sob. “I’m going to be a grandmother,” she cried with joy, as everyone whistled and applauded. Then Mabel made everyone move seats so she could sit next to her daughter.

O’Flannelly wobbled his head jauntily as if he was thoroughly pleased with himself.  But a moment later, with a flourish of self-importance, his arm and finger shot towards the audience as though on a mission, making everyone laugh and duck as the finger of fate hunted for another victim.

When it finally came to rest, it was pointing at Jacko.

Arnie quickly dug him in the ribs with his elbow. “I hope he doesn’t know about you and that married woman from Bromley,” he whispered, which made his friend’s head shake in dismay, as Pat chipped in, “I’ve thoughts on that matter but not the time or place, methinks.” Jacko grimaced and dropped his head. “Oh my god, what’s the little bugger got hold of,” he muttered as Pat continued.

“It’s about your lovely mom and dad, who sadly died in an accident three years ago.” Jacko’s startled eyes flashed between Sid and Pat. His old friend’s face was almost expressionless apart from the hint of a gentle smile. But it was hard to fathom how a dummy could change its body language and expression from mischievous to sad and caring.

“Your mum says she and your father are very proud of what you’re doing with your life. They’re sad not being there with you but are always watching over you. Your father says, cut back on the bloody drinking and find yourself a good steady woman.” This brought applause and whistles.

Suddenly Pat’s body language switched, the mischief was back, his arm whirled about frantically again and ended up pointing straight at Stick. Arnie suddenly felt uncomfortable. He knew things about his old friend that were not common knowledge and he knew for a fact Sid couldn’t possibly know them either but, oddly, that realization didn’t reduce the tension that had welled up in his gut.

The little green man was staring at his victim with big ominous eyes, mouth slightly gaping as he tilted his head slowly until he was almost lying on his side.

The silence and anticipation that gripped that room could have been cut with a knife. It only lasted a few seconds but it felt a great deal longer, making many titter and giggle nervously, at what was brewing.

Suddenly the silence was shattered as Stick jumped to his feet and turned to face the audience. “Listen, everyone, I feel the time has come for me to free myself from my self-imposed prison.” He paused, his glistening eyes scanning the surprised faces around him. “I’m gay,” he said, a little louder than he meant to but now it was out, he felt suddenly relieved. What followed surprised the hell out of him. The room erupted ending in a standing ovation, as friends and family jostled to hug and kiss him. Arnie was gob-smacked and delighted at the reaction and Stick looked flushed but different— it was as though a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

The little green man was swaying back and forth as cocky as you like. Then suddenly his hand and arm shot into the air and began circling and circling again, chasing everyone laughing and giggling back to their seats as the finger final stopped at Vinnie.

Some in the crowded sniggered, the three boys whistled and whooped because Pat’s face had that knowing look again, which lingered, making everyone still and hush.

Pat tilted his head and gave a slow wink.  Stick and Jacko slapped their knees with their hands like a roll of drums, making a few giggle and others titter, but silence fell as Pat finally spoke in a low canny tone.

“I’m knowing what you’re thinking, lassie. I have to say— I’m in favour of the idea but be gentle, the lad has a lot to learn,” which made Vinnie's face flush.

Throughout the short performance, Sid’s face had shown little emotion, apart from the odd disapproving glance at Pat due to his remarks and dismayed shakes of his head after he’d been the butt end of a joke.  But suddenly Pat’s mouth dropped open and he turned to stare wide-eyed at his assistant, as Sid spoke directly to Vinnie. “I have to tell ya,” he said in a soft caring tone, “I’m very much looking forward to the experience.” Then he used Pat to blow an air kiss, making his close friends turn to look at Vinnie. Her bright glistening eyes were focused on Sid and the chemistry between them was obvious to all as she coyly returned his kiss.

“Ho, ho, what’s been going on while our backs were turned?” Jacko and Stick teased as they pulled Vinnie to her feet and started hugging her.

Stepping down from the stage, Sid gave a shy boyish grin, knowing he’d made the right choice— well, the old coin had agreed— But what excited and unnerved him, wasn’t the clairvoyance and insights that flashed through his mind like video clips. He knew categorically, the full potential of the coin would be understood and released by his beautiful daughter, who was yet to be conceived.

**Sadistic Pleasure ( 2 )**

A young boy burst into the school’s junior common room.

“Hey, Villie, there you are,” he shouted. “Dragon wants to see you in the library now.”

Hugo glanced up from his book. “What does he want?” The boy in grey short trousers and grubby white shirt shrugged, wide-eyed. “Dragon’s not going to tell me.”

“Well, Gomez— if you’d jumped into the Abyss the other day, instead of being a chicken shit, you might know— and by the way, Pleb, it’s DeVilliers in future,” he ordered, then punched him hard in the belly as he pushed past.

Outside the library, the small crowd of boys turned as Hugo ran up the stairs.

“DeVilliers, there you are, you took your time,” a tall boy said in a serious tone. “Is there a problem?” Hugo asked.

Marcos indicated for the other boys to leave before knocking on the library door, then gestured for DeVilliers to enter. Hugo’s footsteps faltered in the open door as a round of applause broke out but Marcos nudged him forward and closed the door behind them.

Stood around the small library was every member of their organization. Their leader, Dragon, was sitting down. He was dressed in a white shirt and grey flannel slacks, his blue blazer covered by a short black prefect’s gown, embellished with waist length gold tassels that hung from his shoulders.

The group fell quiet as he beckoned Hugo forward.

“Welcome, Hugo DeVilliers. In recognition of your successful inauguration into our organization and for your outstanding first jump of courage into the Abyss,” he paused as a short spontaneous round of applause broke out, “our brotherhood is honoured to bestow on you the order of ‘Oak Leaf first class’ and rank of Obersturmfuhrer— Senior Storm Leader,” he announced, then pinned a small gold coloured badge to Hugo’s lapel, as cheering and applause erupted again.

With formalities over, most boys dispersed but not before shaking Hugo’s hand, giving their own personal welcome to the organization. Dragon, Marco and Pongo, the group’s chosen ones, discussed Hugo’s role as SSL and the benefits this would bring.

Ten minutes later, the new recruit was dismissed, a little bewildered and surprised at his role within their group. For the remainder of this term, he was to look after Marco and Hugo would have Lopez as his JSL, Junior Storm Leader. This was one rank below Hugo, first rung on the ladder for all new recruits.

Going through his list of duties, Hugo realized that most entailed organizing Plebs to do specific jobs, like cleaning Marco’s room, polishing his shoes and basically making sure that everything Marco needed was close at hand.

“The trick is, DeVilliers, learn to organize your JSL and motivate a team of Plebs that you must build,” Dragon had explained.

What surprised Hugo about his new comrades was their quest for success in everything from sport to exams and their loyalty to each other in those endeavours.

This was potentially a difficult transition for a self-centred solitary boy, until he realized it was a means to an end. He could gain power and control by using those people around him.

In classroom studies, any member that couldn’t achieve straight A’s was helped by the brightest mind on that subject from within their group. In Hugo’s case, a fifth former gave him many hours of extra tuition on Algebra. He, in turn, was instructed to give extra help to two JSL’s who were finding chemistry extremely difficult, a subject Hugo sailed through.

In the grand scheme of things, the brotherhood achieved great success in individual triumphs and as a whole.

At the end of Hugo’s first term, he arrived home with a school report containing four A’s and three B’s, which delighted his parents. The following term he gained straight A’s, which earned him a trip to town for a new bicycle.

But all was not well at school. Several days after his inauguration, Hugo came into contact with two distinctly unpleasant senior boys. He was bullied and ridiculed, then on seeing his small gold badge, one boy attempted to remove it. The scuffle ended with Hugo in sickbay where Matron treated his black eye and a fat split lip. But what angered DeVilliers most was the rancid milk his assailants had poured over him. Its stench almost made him vomit.

“Boy, you need to report this attack to the headmaster,” Matron ordered. “I wasn’t attacked,” Hugo replied.

Quizzically she looked over her glasses at him but continued to clean his face, remembering the three or four hundred boys she’d treated over her twenty years of service.

Who’d all sat on the very same bed and given all sorts of tales and excuses.

“I suppose you slipped and fell?” she said offhandedly. “Yes, Matron,” he stated emphatically.

Downstairs Marco was waiting. “You OK, Villie?” Hugo nodded. “What triggered that outburst?” Marco asked. “They started on me for no reason and one tried to take my Oak Leaf’ badge.” The boy held out his open hand. “But the bastard’s didn’t get it,” he said defiantly.

Marco smiled at Hugo’s swollen face. “It came at a bit of a price, boy.” Hugo grinned but then grimaced, before resting a finger on his fat lip. “My first battle won,” he muttered. Marco nodded. “Forgot to tell you about members wearing brotherhood badges.

It can lead to trouble with a certain group— as you’ve just found out,” he said stepping away from Hugo. “I suggest you get your clothes washed off or you’ll stink for weeks! That milk was off.”

In the junior common room later that day, Santo, a boy from third-year, filled Hugo in on his attackers, who turned out to be part of Garcia’s gang.

“Several years ago a new intern called Garcia failed our inauguration. He was the son of a wealthy family, so tried to bribe his way in. The story goes that he and Dragon, or Rodriguez as he was then, were good friends before joining this school. At the Abyss, Garcia insisted he’d jump first but chickened out even though Dragon tried to encourage him. They say Dragon jumped to give his friend time and confidence, but even that didn’t help. Later that day Garcia approached the chosen ones and offered money; they had him thrown out on his ear,” Santo paused for a moment.

“Cutting a long story short, they say he’s been an asshole ever since and hates us with a vengeance. He’s totally opposed to Dragon and our flea-bitten army of wimps, as we’re called. So big G and his bunch of shits go out of their way to make trouble and with two of them being prefects, they have a good deal of power, as you’ll find out.”

Over the following weeks, months, DeVilliers’ sadistic nature grew unchecked as did his arrogance. His brutal ways matured quickly, inflicting pain and discomfort on any boy who was easy prey. He even managed to put powdered glass in the drink of one of his assailants, causing him a lot of pain and a trip to the hospital. This had given Hugo some satisfaction but as he couldn’t see the discomfort at close quarters, his enjoyment was a bit hollow.

A few months into his second year at the school, the urge to kill intensified beyond belief.

He’d watched many small things die; his pet spider quickly subdued small moths and flies he threw in its web.

A large praying mantis in the science lab was more horrific, eating its live pray from the head down.

Years before, he’d derived some enjoyment out of hanging his pet hamster. It had kicked a lot but died too quickly. Sometime later he’d drowned next door’s cat and this came close to giving him the reaction he’d hoped for. The traumatized cat’s front legs had thrashed frantically, as a large stone attached to its back legs pulled it below the surface. Its bulging eyes and pitiful squalling had gained it several reprieves until Hugo became bored.

His intention to kill a boy came together one afternoon while swimming.

Two classes were bussed to the local municipal pool. This exercise period ended with a ten minute free for all, due to the supervising teacher wandering off to buy a coffee.

On his return, he would usually blow a whistle signalling the conclusion but on this particular day, moments before he returned, a boy got into difficulties at the deep end. Another Pleb tried to help but was quickly overcome by the drowning boy.

DeVilliers was riveted, fascinated by the drama playing out before him. Fortunately for the school, both submerged boys were rescued by a fully clothed teacher, to rapturous applause and whistles from watching pupils.

In contrast, Hugo appeared traumatized; his glazed eyes stared vacantly at the shimmering water, his mind replaying vivid pictures of the drama. Those thrilling transitions that flashed across the victims’ contorted face, disbelief, fear, then frenzied panic that almost killed both boys.

A sinister smile curled Hugo’s lips as he realized his body was trembling with excitement. That inner rush he’d just experienced was a hundred times better than anything before. Still rooted to the spot, he continued to savour the buzz of euphoria.

He would kill at the Abyss very soon, he concluded.

It wasn’t so much the killing that made his adrenaline pump as his control over the outcome, escalating his excitement to fever pitch. In the warped convoluted recesses of his twisted mind, he craved that tantalizing elixir of torture and killing, because he knew it would energize him beyond his wildest dreams.

Maricota’s death turned the school on its head. Police and social workers were in abundance, interviewing everyone, but none could shed light on how the boy ended up face down in the cold waters of the quarry.

On a few occasions, Hugo had used ‘Cota’, as Maricota was called, to run errands for their organization, which most boys did without question. Then some months later he’d befriended him as part of his sinister plan.

Maricota was a solitary second-year pupil, with very few friends. A stamp collector and model builder who spent his free time building small models for his train set at home, which he talked of endlessly if given the chance. Cota’s Achilles’ heel was sport: he showed no sign of coordination, even running appeared to be difficult and he was a weak nervous swimmer. All this worked in Hugo’s favour, as did using the adjacent woods as his return route from the Abyss, allowing him to get back to school without being seen.

After the killing, the huge rush of adrenalin made him giddy and light headed. Entering the junior washroom, he’d quickly stripped off his wet running gear before taking a shower. As the warm water cascaded over his body, Hugo couldn’t believe how energized and alive he felt. He leaned back against the cold shower wall, as vivid pictures of Cota’s frantic struggle raced through his mind. His startled look that turned to fear, then abject terror. Those pleading eyes that grew large and luminous. But what aroused and energised Hugo was that incredible feeling of power.

Alone in the steam filled shower, Hugo looked down at his rigid erection. He hadn’t expected this but his intoxicated mind had conjured up an intense sexual stimulus.

Masturbating vigorously brought forth a quick and abundant release that drained him physically and mentally, making him slump to the floor.

The following day, Hugo was questioned about Cota’s death. He was extremely nervous and the man in plain clothes fixed his eyes on him as though he already knew the truth. But lady officer was relaxed and repeated similar questions to those she’d asked everyone else, which helped settle his anxieties— a little.

“Did you know Pablo Maricota very well?”

“No, not really,” replied Hugo.

The officer quickly thumbed through her notebook.

“A boy I’ve already interviewed indicated you were friends.”

“We talked a few times— but I wouldn’t say we were friends.”

“What did you talk about?”

Hugo shifted in his seat. He’d planned to say as little as possible but felt he was being drawn into talking too much, which was dangerous. In his young, twisted mind, the less said the better. “Maricota was an odd one— you know— didn’t seem to fit in— kept himself to himself.” Hugo paused but nobody spoke and the gap seemed endless, so he felt he had to fill it. “The stamp collector, train spotter type— he didn’t do sport.” The next pause seemed even longer and he wasn’t sure where to look. “Does it make you odd— if you collect stamps or make models?” asked his inquisitor.

Hugo shrugged. “I suppose not.” She stared at him for several seconds, which made Hugo feel awkward and self-conscious. “So the other boy was mistaken about you being friends with Pablo?” Hugo thought for a moment.

“I guess so— maybe he got the idea because Cota helped repair my model boat.” The officer was busy writing and when she eventually looked up, her smile was thin and brief. “Thank you for your help, Hugo. You can return to your class.”

The tension gripping his stomach relaxed a fraction. Smiling politely, he turned and walked towards the door but her words froze his hand on the doorknob. “Have you ever been to the Abyss?” Hugo’s eyes closed, he swallowed a hard dry lump that suddenly appeared in his throat, before turning slowly to face his interrogator.

“No, Miss— it’s out of bounds,” the killer replied in a steady measured voice. She gazed at him with an odd half-smile, her head nodded knowingly. “You haven’t been tempted to sail *your* boat there?”

Hugo’s mouth had dried, so shook his head in response. A cold chill enveloped his space, beads of sweat trickled down his spine as he glanced fleetingly at the man in plain clothes. He folded his arms as though the case was closed, his thin lips twitched towards a half smile but Hugo decided it was a sneer.

“So where do you sail *your* boat?” asked the woman.

He’d half expected this question, so it gave him time to slow the buzzing in his head.

“It’s a powerboat, Miss— so I use that small river down by the church.”

Her penetrating eyes never left his, as once again her deliberate pause dragged endlessly.

“Did you build *your* boat?” she asked pointedly, which had a patronizing ring.

He knew the game this bitch playing. “No, Miss, it came in a box already built.”

Nodding thoughtfully, she jotted something in her notebook. “Thank you— could you ask Jose Carlota to come in next?”

Back in the deserted corridor, Hugo took several deep breaths before walking to his class as he muttered, “I’d dangle that bitch by a rope. That would make her fucking eyes bulge.”

**To be continued**

**Recycled Truths & Lies**

**Chapter One**

Present-day

At that precise moment, Cameron’s life measured seconds— a minute at best.

He was busy cleaning his teeth. The tubes brightly coloured slogan proclaimed its *Minty Freshness and Maximum Protection.’*

Neither would enhance or protect this user.

The inserted poison was fast and deadly.

Giddiness startled him as he rinsed his mouth.

Blood in his spittle was nothing new.

His dentist had warned of brushing too vigorously.

But that was his undoing.

The delicate seal between inner and outer body had been breached.

Overwhelmed by dizziness, he stumbled.

Collapsing on his bed, panic chilled him like an arctic gale.

In those final moments, if he could’ve thought back— he would’ve recognized this event was inevitable— so could have avoided it.

Ω

Three weeks ago, he’d been at his desk writing notes for a book he and his friend Philip were intending to publish.

 A strange tale of happenings, they’d become involved in.

With the aid of hypnosis, his ex-flat mate Allan had established that years before he was born, he’d lived as Martin Bormann, Adolf Hitler’s right-hand man.

More information came via battered notebooks given to Allan by an old German soldier.

They revelled Doctor Hilda Muller had perfected a bizarre medical procedure that allowed Hitler and his cohorts to transfer their living essence into specially bred children, called *‘Shells.’* As the infants matured, the impregnated essence gradually took control, programming its host with years of accumulated knowledge.

What Hitler’s advisers didn’t know. Their subconscious held coordinates of a sunken treasure ship.

Months before the end of the war, the overloaded vessel had been dispatched to the Falklands, where it was scuttled.

It contained more than enough gold to fund Hitler’s future plans to destabilize the western world, at some point in the twentieth or following century— but why? More importantly, it appeared Allan could be the only surviving inner-circle member.

Ω

Cameron’s book relayed Allan’s revelations and what had subsequently taken place but the final part was a problem. The puzzle was close to being unravelled but their small group was robbed at gunpoint, which was still very vivid in Cameron’s mind.

The ‘*Men in Black*,’ as they were later dubbed, burst into Allan’s flat and stole everything they’d collected on Bormann. The leader informed Allan, that Olga his girlfriend had been working for him. Then threatened dire consequences, if they didn’t forget Bormann, Muller, and his visit.

Olga had been a driving force in Allan’s team but this revelation vindicated Philip’s long-held view. He’d never really trusted her.

However— months later Olga explained why she’d been forced to play the double role. Then proved loyal, by locating Bormann’s diamonds on the island of Crete.

But Phil still had misgivings, and Cameron’s recent remark about her fueled his suspicions. Allan said her mood swings were hard to understand, it was like living with two different people.

Cam had suggested hypnosis. Allan said there was no chance, due to what he was going through.

Ω

The afternoon before the fatal toothpaste moment. Cameron was at his desk when an odd feeling, made him shiver. Then noticed the magazine on his desk, was not how he’d left it, which stimulated other anomalies he’d registered briefly.

His front door mat was crocked. The door key was harder to insert and stiffer to turn. His TV was tuned to a different channel and when his computer booted up, it flashed a warning.

But all these were of no consequence.

Toxin boiled in Cam’s organs.

Pain exploded in raw nerves endings.

His body writhed and convulsing so violently, it vibrated across the floor.

Suddenly he stilled.

A final hoarse gasp purged from a constricted throat— just as his phone bust into life.

In that abrupt stillness, fluids seeped from every ruptured orifice of the inert carcass. Moments later, silence recaptured the room.

The gloved hand that had hung up the payphone, now opened the door of a black SUV.

The man sneered and uttered, “One Down.”

